

To the attention of:
European Commissioner Jutta Urpilanen

Brussels, 13/11/2020

Subject: Disability- Inclusive Education in the EU aid agenda

Dear Commissioner Urpilanen,

We as civil society organisations and organisations of persons with disabilities working in the field of education in many European Union partner countries, alongside vulnerable populations and persons with disabilities, would like to congratulate your leadership in **leveraging education onto the development agenda** and recall that efforts should - now more than ever - focus on 'leaving no one behind'.

We highlight here some key points that we feel are particularly poignant, share a few recommendations for the way forward, and kindly request to place the attention on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in education, on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3rd.

We very much welcome the recent announcement that the EU will increase funding for education up to 10% of its total development and cooperation budget. This commitment demonstrates the EU's ambition, as the largest donor for development, to put the right to education and the interest of the youngest generations at the core of its action.

As the European Union now paves the road ahead for a more prominent role of education in development and cooperation, we call on **making the inclusion of learners with disabilities a priority**, thus ensuring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and of the core principles of non-discrimination, equality and equity. Education is indeed the greatest equaliser: access to quality, inclusive education for all has the greatest potential to reduce inequalities, with the strongest impact on the individuals and groups who are at higher risk of marginalisation, including girls and boys with disabilities. Inclusive education also prevents family separation and is a key pillar of the transition from institutional to family and community-based care (also known as deinstitutionalisation), and thereby delivers on children's right to family life.

Yet, 50% of children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are excluded from education. To add to this, children with disabilities more often have poor levels of attendance and learning and are more likely to drop out of school compared to their peers without disabilities. Moreover, a significant proportion of children with disabilities across the world live in residential special schools, due to a lack of inclusive schools in the local community. Obstacles to access education become even more significant when **several factors of discrimination (such as gender, disability, sexual orientation, ethical or religious affiliation) intersect**. Girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable and even less likely to access quality education: only 42% of girls with disabilities completed primary school, compared to 51% of boys with disabilities. Unequal education opportunities have long-term consequences on the individuals' lives, families, communities and society at large.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities for education systems, communities and learners, including children with disabilities, on a hitherto unknown scale and speed. For school-going children with disabilities, this has included reduced access to learning both during and potentially after the pandemic, with great risk of dropping out of school permanently and of losing other important services normally provided through the school (such as health, nutrition, psychosocial support or protection). Children in residential special schools have been exposed to an increased risk of virus transmission due to the congregated nature of institutional settings.

Despite this setback, the global community is now in a unique position to learn from the pandemic and "build back better", through renewed and sustained commitments, efforts and resources. The European Union can set the example and inspire global action towards inclusive education systems that ensure **access to and quality learning opportunities for all learners**, by catering for specific needs, valuing diversity, and

eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education. Central to these efforts are those which prioritise a transformational approach towards inclusive education and which work across different sectors.

In this regard, we truly appreciate your initiative to revamp the concept of 'human development', as a pillar to sustainable and inclusive societies. We firmly believe that prioritising education implies, at the same time, prioritising essential services across the health, social protection, nutrition, and WASH sectors.

Comprehensive investments and interventions across these interconnected sectors have the potential to tackle multiple factors that perpetuate situations of poverty, exclusion, and vulnerability.

A decade away from the expiration of the Sustainable Development Goals, as a new EU programming cycle begins, a new European Disability Rights Strategy is due to be launched, and as the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic accentuates inequalities, **we call on your leadership to ensure that the EU development and cooperation:**

- **Does not allocate any ODA to education programs that do not promote inclusive education for girls and boys with disabilities.** This means prioritising funding to support public, free, quality education that enables all learners to fulfill their potential, and which fosters the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care.
- Continues implementing a **twin-track approach**, by allocating general funding to foster an inclusive learning environment for all learners, as well as targeted funding to follow the furthest behind, including learners with disabilities, as early as possible.
- Ensures systematic and consistent use of the OECD-DAC disability inclusion marker, adopted by the EU, which allows tracking funding for disability-inclusive education within the overall grant portfolio.
- Systematically engages in **consultations** with organisations of persons with disabilities, local organisations and NGOs with experience in inclusive education at all stages of the programming cycle, both across partner countries and at the EU head-quarters level.
- Builds on the commitment to dedicate 20% of the EU ODA to 'human development' and elaborates a more ambitious vision to **exceed this minimum target**, recognising that investments in human development have the greatest impact when a multi-sectoral approach is adopted.

On the occasion of the upcoming International Day of Persons with Disabilities on December 3rd, **we invite you to consider addressing and emphasising the role of quality, inclusive education for learners with disabilities** to build more cohesive and just societies.

We would welcome the chance to discuss the above issues during a meeting, at your convenience.

Yours sincerely,

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Dominic Haslam - Chair of the International Disability & Development Consortium

Nafisa Baboo - Director of Inclusive Education, Light for the World

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