

June 2009 action:

## The Missing Millions: education for the world's disabled children

**RESULTS**  
the power to end hunger and poverty

### TAKE ACTION:

Write a letter to the Hendrik Van Der Pol, Director of the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, asking for the Institute to take a lead role in developing an international system of statistical monitoring on access to education for the disabled. Include the recommendations at the end of this action sheet, and remember to ask for a reply. Send the letter to:

Mr Hendrik Van Der Pol  
Director, UNESCO Institute of Statistics  
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### Introduction

All children are entitled to an education, and children with disabilities are no exception. However, in practice millions of disabled children throughout the world are still denied the fundamental opportunity to go to school. Although exact figures are difficult to verify, it is estimated by UNESCO that more than 90 per cent of children with disabilities in Africa do not go to school, and that disabled children constitute up to one-third of all out-of-school children worldwide. This equates to approximately 25 million out-of-school disabled children of primary school age.

### Access for All

There is almost universal consensus on the need to provide equitable access to education, including for children with disabilities. This right has been recognised internationally in numerous international declarations and resolutions, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and as part of the Dakar Framework for Action produced by the World Educational Forum. Despite this, only piecemeal, small-scale projects have been implemented, which have so far made little difference to the lives of millions of disabled children throughout the world. The gap in participation rates for disabled children is larger than that for female children, those living in rural areas or the poor, all of which are prominent issues receiving a large amount of dedicated resources.

Even though the majority of countries have plans in place to improve access to education for children with disabilities, they are rarely fully implemented. A recent World Bank study concluded that 67 per cent of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (documents required by the IMF and World Bank before a country can be considered for investment and debt relief) had commitments on education for disabled children, but only 20 per cent had the necessary finances in place to

put the plans into practice. This situation cannot continue if real progress is ever to be made. Countries must develop well thought-through and comprehensive plans for getting their disabled children into schools, and these plans must be backed with sufficient financing to ensure their success.

Getting disabled children into schools is only the first step; ensuring that they receive a good quality education once they are in school is vitally important. They often face inappropriately designed curricula and teachers ill-equipped to deal with special needs. School buildings are frequently inaccessible and further contribute to the segregation and exclusion of disabled students from the education system. Education systems need to take into account these elements of exclusion if the children who are currently excluded and underachieving are to be truly included in the Education for All promises.

### Missing data

One of the major barriers to producing credible and fully-financed plans to enable disabled children to access a quality education is the lack of data available about the problems that keep them out of, or underachieving at, school. In fact, governments commonly do not even know how many disabled children there are in the country, where they are, or what disability or disabilities they face. Disabled children are often 'invisible' on a national level, as stigma and fear may prevent parents from registering births or even from allowing disabled children to mix with their local community.

Without information about the prevalence of disability and about access to education it is difficult to make a political case for investment in inclusive education, and nearly impossible to actually implement an effective programme for putting inclusive education into practice. We need to bring the sheer number of disabled children who are not in school to the attention of policy-makers.

## Barriers to data availability

In 2004 UNESCO created the 'UNESCO Flagship on Education for All and the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities', which aims to act as a catalyst to ensure that the right to education and the goals of the Dakar Framework are realised for disabled individuals. One of the stated aims of the Flagship is to 'Seek to ensure that the EFA Monitoring Process includes specific quantitative and qualitative statistics and indicators related to persons with disabilities and documentation of resources allocated to the implementation of EFA for these individuals.'

Despite the Flagship's work, progress toward producing workable statistics on access to education for the disabled has been virtually non-existent. One of the big problems is that there is little agreement on definitions of disability, and where countries do gather statistics on disability and education they are not consistent or internationally comparable. Some data are even contradictory.

While UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report (GMR), set up to monitor progress toward the EFA goals, aims to provide a comprehensive overview of progress, the 2009 report contained fewer than two pages on disability out of 460 pages. The GMR gathers its statistics from countries, and the data is simply not available at a country level currently.

However, this is not to say that it would not be possible to gather workable data. International efforts to create a monitoring system for Education for All in relation to disability have historically been frustrated by controversy over 'social' versus 'medical' definitions of disability, making it very difficult to agree on a comprehensive monitoring system. While it is true that a comprehensive monitoring system that addresses all aspects of disability is the best-case scenario, it is possible to gather basic statistics on access to education using more basic tools such as the WHO 'Ten Questions Screen', which has been used in a number of developing countries. These statistics could provide a vital starting point for developing countries' attempts to create inclusive education systems in time to scale up for

the 2015 Millennium Development Goal on universal primary education.

## International momentum

The entry into force of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in May 2008 provided a vital stimulus for changing this situation, as it includes an article requiring signatories to 'collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the present Convention.' The 57 countries that have ratified the protocol, including numerous developing nations, are therefore legally required to develop their statistical capacity on disability issues.

This is a seemingly impossible burden for developing nations without outside assistance. The international community must support the development of capacity to gather workable disability statistics in the developing world, and must generate the momentum for data gathering. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (which was established in July 1999 to meet the growing needs of UNESCO Member States and the international community for a wider range of policy-relevant, timely, and reliable statistics in the fields of education, science and technology, culture and communication) is the ideal body to provide a leadership role on this issue.

## Recommendations

- The UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) should provide global leadership on the generation of disability statistics and monitoring of the disability component of Education for All
- UIS should mainstream disability into their annual Education survey to ensure that countries are motivated to gather disability statistics on a long-term sustainable basis
- UIS should provide technical assistance to help countries to develop the human and information system resources needed to monitor disability statistics
- UIS should create a taskforce on disability to ensure that all UIS activities are designed and implemented taking into account people with disabilities, and in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.