

A Social Business Case for Disability Inclusion in Development

Why disability inclusion is not only morally right, but also makes economic sense

1. Introduction

The principle of disability inclusion is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).¹ The CRPD forms a legal framework for the 162 governments that have ratified it and assures that (inter)national development programmes must be inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

The purpose of the UN Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent human dignity. It strongly affirms that each person with a disability has intrinsic value. All persons, independent of their economic or monetary contributions to society, belong and are of great value to our society. We should therefore make every effort to ensure all persons with disabilities are fully included in our societies.

It is estimated that one billion (1 in 7) of the world's population are persons living with a disability. According to the UN 80% of those people live in Lower- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) where 80% of persons with disabilities live below the poverty line.² It has become increasingly clear over the past decade that there is a close link between disability and poverty and therefore it will not be possible to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unless there is a direct focus on supporting persons with disabilities to achieve equitable access in all areas of life.³ Only this can drive progress towards the central promise of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind'.



Loreene is deaf and sells secondhand clothing at Muthurwa market, Nairobi, Kenya.

Fortunately, there already is an abundance of information available to make disability inclusion work in practice. Practical tools and expertise exist on disability inclusion in the design, implementation and monitoring of all public policies and programmes, ensuring full and equal participation. Key tools identified in achieving disability inclusion are: non-discrimination, accessibility, assistive technologies and support services. A plethora of practical guidance on the implementation of disability inclusion can be found in the literature used to produce this article (see references) and among Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs).

In short, we know it is right from a legal and moral perspective to include persons with disabilities and we know what tools to use to achieve disability inclusion. However, at the same time there is a strong assumption that disability inclusion is costly. What does the literature say about the costs of inclusion and the costs of exclusion? Could there be economic and social benefits of inclusion? Are investments in disability inclusion viable? This article will endeavour to find out what the literature has to say. It will focus on the benefits and costs of disability inclusion for a wide range of stakeholders. Included are the perspectives of persons with a disability, households, employers, education and health service providers and governments.

2. Perspectives of persons with a disability

The CRPD describes persons with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

The concept of disability inclusion and its benefits are first introduced through the eyes of persons who live with disabilities:

- *"We have one disability, but 99 abilities to build on."* Yetnebersh Nigussie, an Ethiopian human rights lawyer, is fearlessly pushing for women's and girls' rights, inclusive education and a vibrant civil society. She has changed perceptions on disability in her own society and internationally with the compelling message: "Focus on the person, not the disability. We have one disability, but 99 abilities to build on!"⁴
- *"I am using my knowledge and skills to help my family to live well."*
"I am Aline from Rwanda. I am 21 years old, and Deaf. A dream came true when I was able to enrol in a hairdressing course where teachers taught in sign language. After the training I started a job at Blessing Salon in Kigali City! My ambition was to help my family to live well using my knowledge and skills, even though I am hearing impaired. This objective has been achieved, and I am so proud of myself."⁵

The above stories demonstrate that, when persons with disabilities get the opportunity to use their talents and expertise, it increases self-confidence and participation in society. Access to education and a job also increases individual and household earnings.

Inclusion increases self-confidence and household earnings

3. Perspectives of stakeholders

A wide range of stakeholders will benefit from the inclusion of persons with disabilities, such as households or families, employers, societies, and the worldwide community.

As shown below, the benefits of disability inclusion are widely evidenced by research. Where research about the economic benefits of inclusion was unavailable but information about the costs of exclusion was available, then this has been presented instead. Because if persons with disabilities are not included, they and their stakeholders will incur the costs of their exclusion.

3.1 Benefits of disability inclusion to households or families

Disability related costs play a role in the poverty gap between persons with and without disabilities. Households that include a person with disabilities often have extra costs for medical care, assistive devices, personal support or transportation. Indirect costs include lost-benefits costs, such as the loss of income of persons with disabilities or their carers, usually women, who do not have the opportunity to work or work less. When those disability related costs are taken into account, the standard of living of many persons with disabilities is inferior to that of people who are considered poor.

The following research findings support the poverty gap for persons with disabilities:

- After taking into consideration the costs of disability in Vietnam, the poverty rate for persons with disabilities increased from some 17 to 23 per cent.⁶
- With less money to spend, households with a person with disabilities may even be forced to rely on negative coping mechanisms, like for example taking children out of school.³
- People with leprosy and their families experience income loss and unemployment because of visible impairments, leprosy-related stigma and high costs of leprosy. Consequently, many people affected with leprosy live in poverty. Socio-economic rehabilitation, vocational education, self-care groups and stigma reduction could help to alleviate poverty among people affected with leprosy.⁷

Mothers of children with disabilities pay a high cost - personally and economically – by becoming full-time carers. They have high levels of depression and anxiety, especially where their own extended families blame them for producing a ‘defective’ child.³ Young people with impairments require more care, which constrains parental work and household earnings, and, as highlighted above, it costs more to raise a child with a disability.³ For example, in Bangladesh, the estimated costs of lost labour productivity of adult carers are \$234 million a year and \$28 million a year for children who care for a family member with disabilities.³

Consequently, we can conclude that households with a family member with a disability would benefit significantly from disability inclusion in many areas. Employment that is

Household earnings increase if carers and persons with disabilities could access work

accessible to persons with disabilities would increase their household earnings and it would enable them to contribute to disability related cost. Inclusive education would enable children to attend school and carers would

be able to contribute to household earnings (see further below for more on inclusive education).

“I am now able to pay my son’s school fees”⁵

“My name is Catherine. I live in Nairobi with my son who is three. I am partially deaf-blind. I was able to get a certificate in International Computer Driving License (ICDL) at Techno Brain. I was one of the first deaf-blind persons doing the ICDL course. I really enjoyed interacting with my other classmates. The NGO project EmployAble not only supported Techno Brain to become inclusive, but also helped me learn how to use the screenreader programme JAWS and provided activities to build my self-confidence. Because of the training, I am now computer literate. This meant I now meet the requirements for working at the Kenya Revenue Authority. I applied for a job at customer care services and got it! I now have a steady job! I have bought my own laptop and managed to purchase a smartphone online. I love my new job; talking is one of my hobbies! I am doing something I am trained in, and I am earning a good salary to support my family. My son is going to start kindergarten next year, and I will be able to pay his school fees with no struggle.”

3.2 Benefits of disability inclusion to employers in the private sector

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in the workplace is no longer absent from the business agenda as the benefits

Inclusion gives access to talent and supports innovation drive

of a diverse workforce have been identified and promoted. Research has shown that inclusion of people with disabilities is a must for competitive business today: talent resourcing and social responsibility as well as

compliance with national legislation are important drivers for companies.⁸ Moreover, the following benefits of disability inclusion in the work place to employers have been identified:

- A positive effect on workforce morale.
- The benefits of a diverse workforce attracting talent and innovation.
- Improved service for disabled customers.
- Good levels of productivity linked to low levels of absenteeism and job rotation.
- Improvement in business practices to accommodate people with disabilities results in practices benefiting all employees.⁸

Reasonable workplace adjustments and supportive policies are often less costly than initially thought and can also benefit workers without disabilities as they promote more inclusive work environments. For instance, South African companies report that persons with disabilities are reliable and productive employees with low absenteeism rates when they are provided with reasonable accommodations.³

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that employing people with disabilities can have a positive impact on changing attitudes in the workplace and in society at large.³

“Differently-abled employees bring in a diversity of thought to the organisation, and hiring such persons is a business imperative for us, not a Corporate Social Responsibility activity.”
DP Singh, vice-president of HR India/South Asia at IBM.⁸

Bangladesh' garment industry opens up to employees with disabilities¹⁸

Since 2014 noteworthy progress has been made within the Ready-Made Garments (RMGs), textile and leather industries. Over 180 factories have taken measures to create accessible and disability-friendly workspaces. Over 2500 persons with a disability - mostly women - have benefitted so far from vocational education and have been supported towards finding employment within different departments of the factories, from production to administration and HR units. These successes were spurred by a collaborative project between the governments of Bangladesh and Germany, local disability organisations and the industry itself (i.e. manufacturers and exporter associations BGMEA and BKMEA). An Inclusive Job Centre was set up as a platform through which potential employees are matched with employers. There is also a Helpline, which provides answers to questions that employers as well as employees may have. The true drivers of the success are the local disability organisations providing relevant technical assistance and the persons with a disability themselves. By seeing these good practices, many employers are increasingly recognising the untapped potential that persons with a disability have to offer.

3.3 Benefits of inclusion to the public sector

Societies benefit economically from disability inclusion in the labour market.

The exclusion of persons with disabilities from the labour market comes at considerable costs to a country's economy. A study by the ILO of ten LMICs calculated that economic losses related to disability fall into a band between 3% and 7% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The calculated factors underlying the losses are: a disabling environment, unemployment, and inactivity.⁹ When persons with disabilities face barriers to participation, they are less likely to be able to work and thus contribute less to the economy. Even when they do work, they tend to earn less than their non-disabled peers. This is because of their more limited access to education (including higher education), to good quality jobs and loans to start businesses. Other country-level estimations by the World Bank back up the ILO findings and reveal huge losses of \$1 billion (2% of GDP) a year in Morocco and \$891 million a year in Bangladesh.³ In short, governments are losing out economically by not including persons with disabilities and would gain financially by including them.

The economic loss related to labour market exclusion is calculated at 3%-7% of national GDP



Garment factories in Bangladesh have taken accessibility measures.

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Ecuador's remarkable progress¹⁹

In 2007 an investigation was launched into the causes and incidence of people living with disability in Ecuador and their needs were documented. A response phase followed, in which the mission called 'Manuela Espejo' delivered rehabilitation support as well as housing assistance to more than 130.000 people. It also brought together 14 ministries and institutions to sign an agreement with the Vice-Presidency's office to develop policies for people with disabilities. These commitments were later included in the constitution of 2008. In just one decade, Ecuador managed to make remarkable progress, from exclusion to inclusion, both in policy and practice. Lenin Moreno, responsible as Vice-President for the progress made at that time, has said: "Solidarity - not as charity, but rather as the recognition of others as equals - is the basic pillar for initiating social inclusion."

The benefits of inclusive education are significant to both the individual and to society.

Half of the world's 65 million primary and lower secondary school-aged children with disabilities in developing countries are out of school and are therefore in need of equal, quality inclusive education.³ As children and youth with disabilities are less likely to attend or make progress in school, their opportunities for future employment will be affected.⁶ Educational exclusion leads to illiteracy, severely restricted access to labour markets, and low-paid employment.³ Subsequently, exclusion impacts national economic growth and generates significant costs for individuals and governments. For example, in Bangladesh, the exclusion of children with disabilities from education and their lower earnings as adults as well as lower earnings of their caregivers, is estimated to cost the Bangladesh economy about US\$ 1.2 billion annually, 1.74% of GDP.³ Evidence from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Nepal and the Philippines shows that the returns on investing in education for people with disabilities are two to three times higher than that of persons without disabilities.¹⁰ In the Philippines, research reported that higher earnings among people with disabilities associated with increased schooling generated returns of more than 25%.¹⁰ Moreover, there is evidence that the

In the Philippines, inclusive education raises future adult wages of a child, by more than 25%

earlier the investment in the child's life is made, the greater the return on investment. Each additional dollar invested in Early Childhood Care and Education brings a return of US\$ 6 to US\$ 17.¹⁰

In summary, inclusive education is an important tool to increase the income of persons with a disability and subsequently this has a positive impact on national economic growth.

Other benefits of inclusive education to the individual and society include: ^{2, 10}

- Increased tolerance in society.
- Protection against extreme poverty as adults, due to higher income and employment levels.
- Avoidance of future health risks and malnutrition.
- Inclusive early years education brings better social, academic, health and economic outcomes for all learners. The standards for all children are improved because of improved teacher education, more child friendly learning spaces, removal of barriers to learning, and a more tolerant school culture.

Inclusive health care is beneficial to the individual and to society. Persons with disabilities generally have poorer access to health care facilities. Lack of adequate health care can cause some forms of impairment and exacerbate other forms of Impairment by failing to identify the impairment in a timely manner – ruling out early treatment and intervention.³ Although accessibility will have some additional costs, in the long run the costs of accessibility is often less than the long-term costs of treatment. Therefore, significant savings could be realised through inclusive health programmes.¹⁰

UN AIDS has noted that persistent discrimination against and exclusion of people with disabilities, in particular women and girls with disabilities, increases their health risks, including their risk of HIV infection.¹¹

Many public health interventions, such as campaigns about HIV/AIDS or vaccination campaigns, will benefit from wider participation by including persons with disabilities which can result in better health outcomes for entire communities (e.g. disease prevention initiatives are more successful with a higher coverage).²

Inclusive health care improves health for entire communities

In summary, inclusive healthcare promotes economic as well as social gains at individual, community and national level.

4. Costs of disability inclusion

In our business case so far, the benefits of disability inclusion have been considered. We have found that disability inclusion is valuable to both the individual and to society. However, to fully assess the economic viability of disability inclusion we will also need to consider its costs.

Quantifying the costs of disability inclusion can assist policy makers and organisations in allocating sufficient and adequate resources in accordance with their obligations under national and international disability laws.

The costs of inclusion to take into consideration are the:

- Costs of removal or reduction of barriers to inclusion. For example, urban infrastructures, facilities and services, if designed and built following accessibility or inclusive “universal design” principles from initial stages of planning and design, is estimated to bear almost no or only 1 per cent of additional cost.¹²
- Costs of additional required measures that will allow persons with disabilities to equally participate in and benefit from the projects, i.e. making reasonable accommodations. For example, Light for the World has calculated that the cost of inclusion of persons with leprosy and disability in a food security project was only 6% of the total project budget.¹³
- Costs of disability specific activities where reasonable accommodations are not sufficient to enable participation of all persons with disabilities. For example, a project with a disability component or special needs education.

We have found limited information about the costs of inclusion. Therefore, additional research¹⁴ is needed, particularly in LMICs, because the costs of disability inclusion, the nature of barriers faced, and the availability of goods and services can be highly context specific.

Costs of disability inclusion are lower than expected.

The examples provided above are promising though as they highlight that the cost of disability inclusion appear to be lower than expected.

5. The economic viability of investments in disability inclusion

When we evaluate the economic case of disability inclusion, we need to consider the economic and social benefits and costs of disability inclusion. This also includes the intrinsic value of leaving no one behind, the value of diversity and the value of equitably distributing our wealth. Our current economic thinking has developed from a focus on pure economic growth to embracing the value of inclusive growth.¹⁵ This concept expands on traditional economic growth models to include a focus on the equity of health, human capital, environmental quality, social protection, and food security.¹⁶ The World Economic Forum states that ‘GDP growth is a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving broad-based progress in living standards on which policymakers ultimately judge their countries’ economic success.¹⁷ Others who are coming up with models of inclusive growth include Kate Raworth of the Donut Economy and Christian Felber of The Economy for the Common Good. Both are advocating a more ethical economic model, in which the well-being of people and the environment are the ultimate goal of economic activity.

Inclusive economic growth models value the well-being of all people.

Therefore, where economic inequality exists, this should be recognised. The currently existing inequality for persons with disabilities should be rectified with investments.

These investments, which prioritise participation of persons with disabilities, are needed to ensure their full and equal inclusion. The value of inclusive growth, which acknowledges the value of equity in income and wealth and health and well-being for all, should be considered when reviewing the return on these investments.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, pursuing equality for persons with disabilities is valuable from an inclusive economic perspective. The benefits of inclusion are significant, in terms of increased economic gains as well as in terms of social development. There is limited data available about the costs of inclusion but where available, these appear to be much lower than expected. Persons with disabilities still face many barriers to participation in society and investments are needed to rectify this.

When we invest in an inclusive economy, the well-being of all people, including persons with disabilities, is an important measure of economic success. Even more, we must always promote respect for the inherent dignity of persons with disabilities.

Considering this, the following recommendations are made. Governments, donors, non-governmental organisations and the private sector must:

- Use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), together with the UN CRPD, as the opportunity to ensure persons with disabilities are included in policy development and in all programming stages.
- Address the lack of (disaggregated) data. The Washington Group questions on disability are recommended to be used and offer an opportunity to start bridging the data gap.² Better data on participation, accessibility, support needs, costs and benefits will inform policy development and programming and enable the measurements of its success.

- Provide opportunities for meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all stages of policy development and programming stages. This is the best way to dispel myths about disability and achieve the desired impact of disability inclusion.
- Prioritise investments in disability inclusion. If more funding for accessibility, participation, support measures for persons with disabilities does not become available we risk losing the fight against poverty.

Driving the participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities will be our shared interest in sustainable development and inclusive economic growth. Persons with disabilities belong and are an essential part of our society and we will all benefit economically and socially from their participation. Governments and other stakeholders cannot afford to miss out on their contributions to society.

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For more information visit: www.dccd.nl*



Bridgete has a psychosocial disability and started a traineeship at Koola Waters, a water bottling company in Nairobi, Kenya.

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