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Perspectives on Inclusive Education of Organisations of Persons with Disabilites, Nepal

Background

Article 24 of the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)** underpins the fundamental right of children with disabilities to education. It urges states to establish inclusive educational systems across all levels, free from discrimination, and to ensure equal opportunities for all.

The Government of Nepal has developed legal frameworks on Inclusive Education (IE) and Disability Rights to provide children with disabilities access to quality education. However, significant gaps exist in the implementation of these frameworks and in resource allocation. These gaps include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and limited availability of inclusive learning materials.

Disability Inclusive Development - Inclusive Futures is part of the global movement to transform inclusive education for children with disabilities in line with the UNCRPD. We are working with OPDs, government stakeholders, schools, community leaders and parents to open up education systems - and children's future opportunities.

Organisation of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in Nepal

Nepal has yet to adopt a formal definition of **Organizations of People with Disabilities (OPDs)**. The National Federation of the Disabled Nepal (NFDN) has created a widely accepted definition: an OPD is an organization where most decision-making body members (such as the working or central committee, executive committee or board) are persons with disabilities. In the case of persons with intellectual disabilities, autism, and deaf blindness, parents' associations are also considered OPDs.

The OPDs movement in Nepal has made significant progress in raising awareness about the issues of persons with disabilities, including education, and in getting the government to recognize these issues. However, there are **differing opinions on how to improve education for children with disabilities**. Some OPDs advocate for a complete overhaul of the curriculum and school system, while others suggest specialized education for children with disabilities. OPDs play a crucial role in identifying gaps and advocating for inclusive plans policies and their implementation.

The Study

Humanity & Inclusion (HI) in partnership with Autism Chitwan Care Society (ACCS), Sense International (SI), and the National Deaf Association Nepal (NDFN), conducted a study to capture the perspectives of OPDs across Nepal on Inclusive Education within its project *"Strengthening Inclusive Education in Nepal,"* **Disability Inclusive Development - Inclusive Futures** [1].

Objectives:

* To assess the understanding of OPDs regarding inclusive education, its concepts, principles, definitions, and practices.
* To capture OPDs' perspectives on the processes and models for educating children with disabilities in inclusive settings.
* To identify gaps to recommend interventions and programs that support OPDs in their advocacy work and facilitate systemic changes in inclusive education

Methodology:

* Quantitative Survey: Interviewed to 269 OPDs across all seven provinces in Nepal, selected from a list provided by the NFDN.
* Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Conducted with eight national and province level OPD representatives
* Focused Group Discussions (FGDs): Held with three groups, including national and province-level OPDs and parent's associations in Bagmati and Madhesh Province

Limitations:

As most of the survey respondents were decision-makers within their respective OPDs the perspectives expressed by the respondents might not fully represent the entire spectrum of OPD members or persons with disabilities, particularly for intellectual disabilities, autism, deaf blindness, or psychosocial disabilities, where parents or primary caregivers were the respondents.

Key Findings and Discussions

a) Perception of Disability and Barriers to Education:

The study indicates a greater influence of the medical and charity models among OPD respondents

Familiarity with disability models

- 20% described disability as a mental, physical and sensory limitation that hinders daily tasks
- 56% were unfamiliar with the medical, human rights and social models of disability.
- Only 24% were aware of social and human rights models.

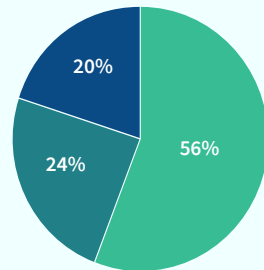⬤ Social Media ⬤ Medical Model ⬤ Unaware

Fig. 1 Familiarity with disability models

Barriers to Education

All respondents were clear about the barriers to education and their impact on children with disabilities. They discussed several types of barriers:

Physical Barriers: Inaccessible infrastructures in schools, including playgrounds, classrooms, WASH facilities, libraries, and labs.

Communication Barriers: Inadequate communication methods for children with hearing impairments (deaf and hard of hearing), visual impairments, learning disabilities, deafblindness, autism and intellectual disabilities.

> *"The focus must be given to reasonable classroom management. For example, if a low-vision child study in the same classroom, they should be placed on the first bench to quickly see what's written on the board. Also, proper lighting should be there in the inclusive classroom."*
> *Organizations of Persons with Disabilities*

Attitudinal Barriers: Negative attitudes of teachers, the community and families towards children with disabilities.

> *people with developmental disabilities experience various difficulties because their guardians don't expect their kids to do well or progress in their socialization. Despite a vast range of abilities, even schools with appropriate learning settings find it challenging to educate children with autism. Hence, in my opinion, barriers are present everywhere because teachers and parents cannot recognize the strengths and learning needs of such children." (Participant of FGD in Chitwan, Month 2023)*

Institutional barriers: Low participation of persons with disabilities in designing and implementing the policies.

> *In one municipality of Sarlahi district, we were invited to put our view on forming an education committee. We strongly demand that you ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in the committee. They listened to us and included the representative of our organization in the committee. But we have yet to be invited by other municipalities to the meeting. Organization of Persons with Disabilities, Madhesh Province*

They also noted contextual challenges such as distance to school, lack of transportation, poor classroom acoustics, and absence of qualified teachers.

> *" The children may have to walk a long distance to reach the school, but due to their functional limitations, they may need help to walk that distance. The parents or family members usually don't support or may be unable to provide support regularly, creating a barrier to reaching the school. "(Participant of FGD in Kathmandu, Month 2023)*

b) Perceptions of Inclusive versus special education for children with disabilities:

The study shows a consistent understanding among OPD respondents surrounding inclusive education. OPD respondents feel that an inclusive educational environment should have the following characteristics:

- **Accessible physical environment** where all students can learn in a fully accessible space.

- **Equal Learning Opportunities:** where students of all diversities can learn together and have equal opportunities to learn as per their needs. This includes children from different cultures, languages, castes, ethnicities, and disabilities.

- **Reasonable Accommodation:** where the education system and teaching are adapted and address specific needs. (Ex: Teachers and students know primary sign language, Braille, children receive individualized support.

The study further highlights that 75% of respondents felt that **a) accessible learning materials, b) inclusive teaching strategies, c) accessible physical infrastructure, and d) assistive devices** are all essential for an inclusive learning environment. However, significant variance remains in the perceived importance of each of the metrics mentioned above. For example, 54% of respondents felt Assistive Devices were most important, while for others Accessibility of Teaching-Learning Materials was more important.

> *"It is a process that empowers schools to adopt methods and technology to address the diverse learning needs of children with and without disabilities. …it is not unique. Instead, adopting alternative methods, techniques and technology to make the learning process easier and inclusive for all." Organization of Persons with Disabilities*

Despite consistency on the overall concept, the study identifies **significant variability in perception among respondents about whether children with disabilities can learn in inclusive settings or special classes.**

There is high confidence among OPD respondents **(87%)** that children with physical disabilities can learn in inclusive settings.
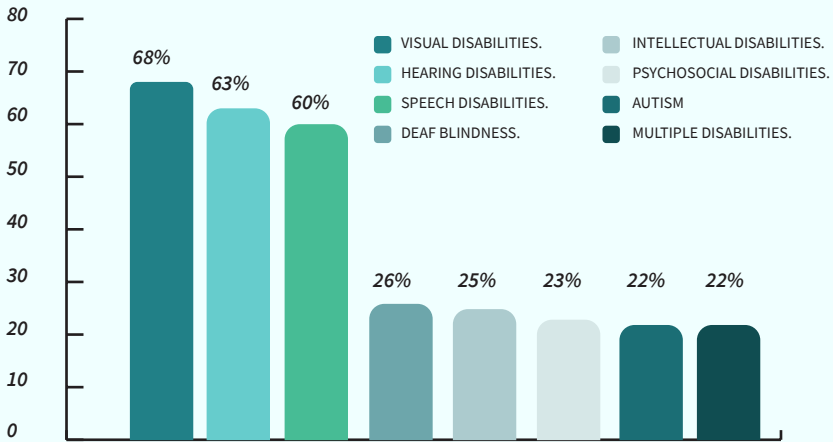
Fig. 2 Confidence of OPD representatives on learning capacity of children according to disability type

The study shows that:
- **75%** believe special classes are most needed for children with intellectual disabilities.
- Only **13%** think special classes are needed for children with physical disabilities.
- A small percentage of respondents advocated for inclusive education across all disability categories, highlighting a divide in opinions.

c) OPD Engagement in Inclusive Education:

Despite the long history of the OPD movement in Nepal, there is low participation of OPDs in conversations and actions around inclusive education. The study reveals that only 29% of OPDs, are involved in inclusive education-related work. The low participation may be attributed, in part, to gaps in knowledge among OPDs regarding key concepts, and terminologies related to inclusive education.

- **54%** had not received any formal or informal training on Inclusive Education.
- **47%** feel that "children with disabilities" and "children with adaditional learning needs" are the same.
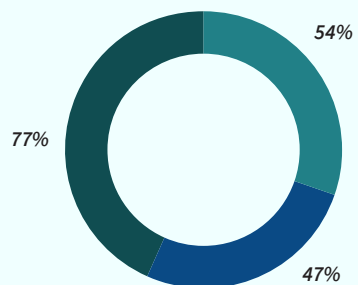- **77%** had not heard of the Universal Design of Learning (UDL) concept.

Fig. 2 Understanding of OPDs on inclusive education

> *"The inclusive education policy was dismissed, and issued National Education Policy, but this couldn't address the essence of inclusive Education from the perspective of disability. Before designing their policy, wasn't it important for policymakers to consult with stakeholders like us? But they didn't consult on how to make schools inclusive and how to assimilate Inclusive Education into the entire education act. They don't have any prior practice idea-guiding materials and need clarity on the concept of inclusive Education. So, there is a significant challenge at the policy level."Organization of Persons with Disabilities*

Conclusion: The study reveals gaps in the understanding and engagement in inclusive education among OPDs in Nepal. Despite some awareness of inclusive education principles, there is a strong influence of outdated medical and charity models. Barriers to education for children with disabilities remain prevalent, including physical, communication, attitudinal, and institutional challenges. While there is high confidence in the ability of children with physical disabilities to learn in inclusive settings, this confidence wanes for children with more complex disabilities. The study underscores the need for enhanced training and engagement of OPDs in inclusive education initiatives to bridge these knowledge gaps, establish a shared understanding among OPDs and support a strong and unified advocacy.

Recommendations:

Promote the social and Human Rights Models of Disability

- Prioritize the social and human rights models in concepts and definitions used by OPDs, disability federations, INGOs and other stakeholders.
- Run joint disability awareness programmes based on the human rights model and UNCRPD.
- Promote universal accessibility standards

Facilitate Dialogue & engagement on Inclusive Education

- Identify national OPD or federation to lead the dialogue and training.
- Organize national, provincial and local dialogues among OPDs, teachers, disability rights activists and education specialists.
- Support engagement of local OPDs promote inclusive education in mainstream schools (government/non-government)

Conduct Training and Awareness Programmes

- Develop and roll out comprehensive Training on Inclusive education and advocacy for OPDs.
- Produce and Disseminate accessible Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials focused on these models.
- Challenge attitudes around inclusive education through disability inclusion training

Research, data collection and monitoring

- Generate data and evidence on the impact of inclusive education on the life and well-being of persons with disabilities to support advocacy.
- Disaggregate data by disability, gender, and age for monitoring inclusion.

Glossary:

Disability	*Disability is an **evolving** concept, and that disability results from the **interaction** between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'*. *'Persons with disabilities **include** 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'.2*
Inclusive Education	*Inclusive education is about bringing all children, including those with disabilities, together in mainstream classrooms. It aims to remove any barriers so every student has an equal chance to learn and succeed.*
Charity model	The charity model of disability focuses on the individual and tends to view people with disabilities as passive victims – objects of pity who need care, and whose impairment is their main identifier (Al Ju'beh, 2015, p. 20).
Medical model	The medical (or biomedical) model of disability considers 'disability a problem of the individual that is directly caused by a disease, an injury, or some other health condition and requires medical care in the form of treatment and rehabilitation' (Mitra, 2006, p. 237). It assumes that addressing the medical ailment will solve the 'problem' – that disability needs to be fixed or cured (Al Ju'beh, 2015, p. 20). This model is widely criticised on different grounds, including for not considering the important roles of environmental and social barriers (Mitra, 2006, p. 237; 82; Rimmerman, 2013, p. 27).
Social model	The social model of disability developed as a reaction to the individualistic approaches of the charitable and medical models (Al Ju'beh, 2015, p. 20; Rimmerman, 2013, p. 28). It is human rights driven and socially constructed (Woodburn, 2013, p. 85). It sees disability as created by the social environment, which excludes people with impairments from full participation in society as a result of attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers (Mitra, 2006, p. 237). It places emphasis on society adapting to include people with disabilities by changing attitudes, practice and policies to remove barriers to participation, but also acknowledges the role of medical professionals (DFID, 2000, p. 8; Al Ju'beh, 2015, pp. 20-21, 83).
Human rights model	This model of disability is based on the social model and also seeks to transform unjust systems and practices. It takes the UNCRPD as its main reference point and sees people with disabilities as the 'central actors in their own lives as decision makers, citizens and rights holders' (Al Ju'beh, 2015, pp. 20-21, 87).

This briefing paper summarizes the findings and recommendations from a study conducted to understand the perspectives of OPDs across Nepal on inclusive educaiton. It aims to support decision-makers in taking action and to provide evidence for OPDs. to use in advocacy efforts.

For more information about HI's work in Inclusive Education, please visit HI website. Nepal Contact : s.nepali@hi.org