

Working in Partnership with Multiple Stakeholders on Global Policy Processes: Disability and Inclusive Education



Figure 1: Visualisation of the online discussion focusing on disability and inclusive education. Image: ©Jorge Martin 2020

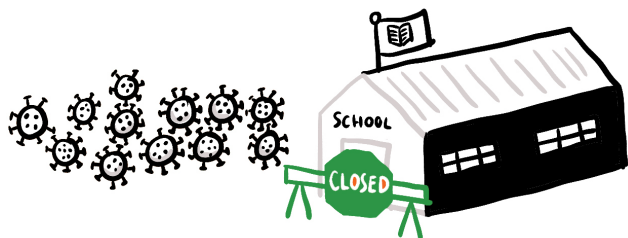
THE IMPACT INITIATIVE PROGRAMME

The Impact Initiative programme, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the former UK Department for International Development (DFID), which merged with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on 2 September 2020 to become the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), aims to increase the uptake and impact of research from two research programmes jointly funded by ESRC-FCDO: the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research and the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Research Programme. The Initiative achieves this through a process of identifying synergies between the programmes and grant holders, and supporting them collectively and individually to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities. As well as facilitating knowledge exchange and policy engagement on behalf of the two programmes, the Initiative develops programme-level research communication outputs in order to ensure each programme's research is effectively communicated and shared.

BACKGROUND

An 'inclusive and equitable' education is at the core of Sustainable Development Goal 4. After years of oversight, disability has been finally recognised in global declarations and is explicitly mentioned in

five of the 17 SDGs. The importance of focusing on disabilities cannot be underestimated: evidence suggests that there are approximately one billion persons with disabilities globally – roughly 15 per cent



DURING THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC, MANY SCHOOLS WERE SHUT, POTENTIALLY PUSHING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES INTO FURTHER MARGINALISATION

of the world's population, with nearly 80 per cent living in the Global South.¹ Of these, it is estimated that between 93 million and 150 million are children. Despite their significant number, persons with disabilities remain the most excluded group from mainstream participation, such as in education, workforce opportunities, and so on, especially when available resources are limited amid an emergency (including the current Covid-19 pandemic) and often overlooked in humanitarian action, when their needs might be the highest.

Exclusion from, and within education has been of considerable focus in recent years and there is growing evidence that for children with disabilities, educational exclusion has profound implications in terms of future (few) life choices and (limited) opportunities being available to them. Investing in the education of children with disabilities, through disability inclusive development, is likely to lead to significant economic outcomes including increased earnings, labour productivity, and revenue.

The guiding principles of the SDGs to leave no one behind has garnered support from a number of organisations, including the FCDO, which in [DFID's Strategy for Disability Inclusive Development 2018–23](#) stated its vision of a 'world where all people with disabilities, women, men, girls and boys, in all stages of their lives, are engaged, empowered and able to exercise and enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others, contributing to poverty reduction, peace and stability' (p. 5). In order to achieve this, it prioritised four strategic pillars for action: (i) inclusive education, (ii) social protection, (iii) economic empowerment, and (iv) humanitarian action. Underpinning these is a clear need for generating 'Evidence-based understanding of the scale and nature of disability-related exclusion and what works to improve outcomes for people with disabilities' (p. 9).

This lack of evidence has been a significant challenge in the development of the field. Among other things, the lack of data has become a reason for political inaction. One of the biggest challenges that persist with children with disabilities is that we know too little about too few of them. Unsurprisingly, the Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG) report [A World That Counts](#) noted: 'No one should be invisible. To the extent possible and with due safeguards for individual

privacy and data quality, data should be disaggregated across many dimensions, such as geography, wealth, disability, sex and age... Disaggregated data can provide a better comparative picture of what works, and help inform and promote evidence based policy making at every level' (p. 22).

However, this kind of evidence is vital but not enough in itself: a more [nuanced understanding of narratives accompanying these numbers](#) is also needed. While large-scale quantitative survey-based data can tell us how many children with disabilities are not attending school in a given context, they are unable to inform us of the factors which enable them to reach school, or the most common barriers that prevent their participation. Numbers can tell us how well children are performing on tests, but they do not tell us what factors are influencing and shaping their learning. Neither do they provide us with any understanding of the experiences of children in school. Thus, evidence being gathered in the field of disability and education needs to provide important insights for both action at the micro level (e.g. effective inclusive teaching practices) and advocacy at the macro level (e.g. to shape national policies and legislations which are inclusive of the needs of persons with disabilities).

Given that policies, programmes, and research focusing on disability in relation to other forms of disadvantage has never been higher on the agenda, it is an opportune moment to identify how new evidence being generated can inform policy and practices locally, nationally, and internationally. The role of the Impact Initiative in bringing these different dimensions together has been significant.

Enhancing uptake and impact through multiple modalities of engagement

The Impact Initiative, since its inception, has been committed to focusing on children with disabilities, recognising that there is a significant need for evidence-based policymaking. Collections of evidence on disability across continents from the ESRC–FCDO Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (RLO) Research Programme have been synthesised by the Initiative to meet policy interest and demand, providing new evidence on what governments might consider in order to ensure that children with disabilities benefit from quality education.

The '[Establishing a Dialogue on Disability for Higher Impact](#)' workshop in 2016 included 25 researchers from seven projects funded under the ESRC–FCDO portfolio, with participants from India, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, and the UK, joined by representatives of disabled people's organisations (DPOs), donor agencies, and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Spanning ten countries, the workshop had a wide focus on disability issues – such as training community health workers, increasing access to and quality of early childhood education, enhancing teacher effectiveness to raise learning outcomes, and literacy development. Its central aim was to generate a shared understanding around questions such as: What is impact? What counts as evidence? What are the best ways to communicate messages from researchers

¹ [World Report on Disability](#), WHO (2011).

to policymakers and other stakeholders? What is the relationship between research and advocacy? And rather importantly, how to harness the collective strength of the different projects on disability for greater impact. This was a significant event as it formed the cornerstone of continuing a collective agenda and provided opportunities for researchers to network not only with each other but also with the policymakers and other key stakeholders present.

This workshop was followed by other engagement opportunities to which researchers working on disability issues were invited: the Impact Initiative-organised international conference [‘Putting Children First’](#), in October 2017, aimed to engage policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in identifying solutions for fighting child poverty and inequality in Africa; and the [two-day event in March 2018](#), hosted by Leonard Cheshire Disability and partners, showcased findings from the ESRC–FCDO-funded research project ‘Bridging the Gap: Examining Disability and Development in Four African Countries’. These opportunities were central in integrating disability focus within the more mainstream research discussions.

The Impact Initiative’s long-standing work on disability and inclusive education came to a climax in 2018 with direct involvement of ESRC–FCDO grant holders in the Global Disability Summit hosted by the governments of the UK and Kenya and the International Disability Alliance. [An Impact Initiative-facilitated workshop in Cambridge in April 2018](#) enabled researchers to engage directly with FCDO, INGOs, and multilateral officials to inform preparation for the Summit that was due to take place just three months later. It successfully created an opportunity for ESRC–FCDO research projects to share their knowledge around inclusive education with policy professionals and consider how the research could contribute to policy principles ahead of the Summit. The 42 participants (including seven ESRC–FCDO grant holders) developed a [Statement of Action on inclusive education](#), which emphasised the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice. The participants also contributed to the framing of the FCDO/NORAD/World Bank’s new Inclusive Education Initiative that has an emphasis on the importance of better evidence and data to inform policy and practice, and was launched at the Summit.

‘It was good to hear different views and the mix of participants was excellent. Having researchers at the event was valuable because in this field, we are usually influenced by anecdotal evidence. The workshop was structured in such a way that the framework for thinking and responding ensured it was constructive.’

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

This Statement of Action was subsequently endorsed by 31 organisations and networks – including the United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK, a federation of organisations for persons with disabilities in Kenya), the Global Partnership

for Education (GPE), and World Bank Group – and was widely distributed at the Global Disability Summit (23–24 July 2018). This statement outlined five interlinking actions to help transform education for children and youth with disabilities, namely to:

- Generate and use robust data and evidence for inclusive planning, programming, and for ensuring accountability;
- Develop, train, and support a professional education workforce that responds to inclusive education and encourages teachers with disabilities into the profession;
- Achieve targeted financing and ensure national systems promote the implementation of inclusive education;
- Reduce barriers to inclusion by adopting a cross-sectoral and life course approach; and
- Involve persons with disabilities, their families and DPOs, in partnership with development actors to further the inclusive education agenda.

Principles underpinning the Statement of Action have contributed to the [Global Disability Summit 2018 Charter for Change](#).

‘It was great to work with researchers and so many others to develop the Statement of Action in the run-up to the Global Disabilities Summit.’

Ian Attfield, Senior Education Director, FCDO

A year later (in 2019), continuing the Impact Initiative’s commitment to supporting policy dialogue, the Initiative co-hosted an [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) on Global Education: Quality Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities](#). Bringing together more than 60 researchers, bilateral and multilateral donors, and representatives of DPOs and various INGOs, discussions led by a panel of experts outlined the need to adopt a more strategic approach in supporting children with disabilities. Here Professor Nidhi Singal reiterated the need for strategically promoting efforts directed at the [three ‘Rs’: Rights, Resources, and Research](#). This multi-pronged approach was argued as being central to promoting a rights agenda (committed to both rights to and rights in education), alongside a pledge towards investment in human and material resources; with a central role of research which is inclusive of the voices of children/young persons with disabilities. These efforts need to be accompanied by a strong commitment to exchange of ideas and approaches among different stakeholders, across different national contexts.

This paper is a reflection on the lessons learned from the work on disability and education issues under the aegis of the Impact Initiative. It also captures insights and quotes from education policy actors and researchers who came together in a webinar in September 2020 (see Appendix) to discuss what it means to work in partnership with multiple stakeholders on global policy processes related to disability and inclusive education.



1. Recognising the power of the collective

The Impact Initiative by its very design seeks to work across stakeholder groups, acting as a knowledge broker. It has offered a safe space to bring diverse actors together, namely: DPOs, INGOs, individuals from bilateral and multilateral organisations, donor agencies, and other policy actors and academics, who are all contributing in different ways to the field, but do not have the space to engage as a collective.

Recognising that considerable work in the field of disability and inclusive education has largely been led by civil society organisations, the disability strand in the Impact Initiative developed strong links with this sector, both with national DPOs and INGOs. Civil society, especially in the area of disability and inclusive education, as Nafisa Baboo, Director of Inclusive Education for Light for the World points out:

Civil society plays a crucial role in multiple ways including: (1) shaping the research agenda, through advocacy; (2) assisting in generating data on what works and what doesn't, and its effectiveness; and (3) supporting the building of capacity for researchers and enumerators and thereby serving as a knowledge broker.

'Having discussions and relationships with DPOs who absorb the information and can influence [policy] is really important.'

Charlotte V. McClain-Nhlapo, Global Disability Advisor of the World Bank Group

Even though individuals belonged to different stakeholder groups, there was considerable consensus early on that evidence was key to increasing access and quality of education for children with disabilities. Additionally, there was a shared understanding that for debates to move forward, i.e. beyond a focus on access to quality of educational provision, it is necessary to emphasise the *how* of inclusive education. This collective garnering around a common vision, early in the timeline of the Impact Initiative, was important in ensuring that the focus of activities over the next few years is underpinned with the principles of using evidence for action. This collective vision was revisited, but more importantly, it was built upon in the aforementioned different yearly events. Working with a strong core group of stakeholders helped with continuity of the vision, while also making space for new voices.



Additionally, sustained conversations which extended beyond these yearly disability-focused events were essential in building new networks for researchers working in the field. For example, the '[Power of Partnership: Research to Alleviate Poverty](#)' conference, which took place in Delhi, India in December 2018, provided an opportunity for participants to reflect, forge new connections, and build a shared vision for the future of development-related social science research emerging from the ESRC-FCDO Strategic Partnership. The bringing together of academics, practitioners, knowledge brokers, policy actors, and donors from the international community enabled learning of how the research presented had been co-constructed and co-delivered through innovative local and global partnerships committed to inclusivity and engagement with policy and practice.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while efforts were aimed at being inclusive to diverse perspectives, in efforts to support a collective vision there were times when these discussions inadvertently excluded some. Also, it is important to acknowledge that partnerships, by their very nature, are political and problematic, especially when composed of such varied stakeholder groups where people occupy different positions; for example, those who hold and those who receive funds; and partnerships composed of people who inhabit different geopolitical spaces such as those in positions of power in the Global North and those who are practitioners in Southern contexts.

It also raises questions about how we continue to work together on the dissemination of findings beyond the life cycle of the funded research projects.

Dr Paul Lynch, Senior Lecturer in Inclusive Education at the University of Birmingham, highlighted:

My concern is how to bring together the knowledge which has been collectively generated? Research studies have now finished, we've written some papers and are still writing others. How do we bring these different research strands together, and reflect on what we learned? What sort of learnings can we get from the different types of studies? And how do we share those moving forward?

Thus, when reflecting on the role of evidence in global policy processes in the area of disability and education, one needs to continually and critically consider aspects such as *what* evidence counts? *whose* evidence counts? and *who* is involved in generating this evidence?

Nonetheless, it remains crucial to acknowledge what Tom Shakespeare, Co-Director of the Programme for Evidence to Inform Disability Action (PENDA), said that for the field to move forward:

We need evidence and advocacy, together with political leadership: that's a really winning combination.



2. Creating, but also making the most of opportunities

The success of the disability and education work under the Impact Initiative has also been concerned with making the most of opportunities that were presented in the larger policy landscape. Policy windows were central in the planning of events, the most significant being the Global Disability Summit, which offered an immense opportunity not only to showcase the work being undertaken by different projects under the ESRC-FCDO partnership, but also to garner wider support in the field.

The key here was flexibility and the willingness to act and adapt at short notice, which was possible only because there was a network of people to easily draw on (as discussed in Point 1) to contribute at events. Additionally, this was feasible because there was both financial and technical support. The latter was crucial, as it entailed individuals with a specific set of skills, who were actively supporting the writing of policy briefs and other such dissemination outputs, being responsible for engaging with mainstream media outlets, and eventually, as part of their job descriptions they held responsibility for arranging different events.

'The research needs to make a difference and the only way it can do this is if you engage with global policy processes. The users need to tell us what they need, and we need to fill the gaps – we need a symbiotic process.'

Tom Shakespeare, Co-Director of the Programme for Evidence to Inform Disability Action (PENDA)

Whilst working with policy windows is key, it must be recognised that these opportunities are fleeting, and considerable effort is required to make sure that pathways which support the uptake of evidence remain open and that there is momentum to continue the work. Windows close, but the work is never finished; thus, the challenge faced is how one continues to collectively nurture pathways of impact which can be the stimulus for ongoing change.

3. Communicating to be heard

As part of the Impact Initiative's work, a small project was undertaken to understand how civil society and policy actors access, use, and would like research to be communicated. Based on analysis of 19 interviews (participants from nine policy organisations and ten INGOs), some important issues were highlighted. Interestingly, while participants acknowledged that there had been an increase in demand for evidence to justify work being undertaken on disability and education, they noted significant barriers to accessing it. Thus, not only is there a lack of robust evidence in the field of disability and education, but the small amount which does exist is hidden away in journal articles and behind journal paid walls. Ironically, some participants noted that there was 'too much' out there, pointing to the significant (and in most cases unsubstantiated) amount of information that is available through 'Google searches', a common strategy used by many people in these organisations.

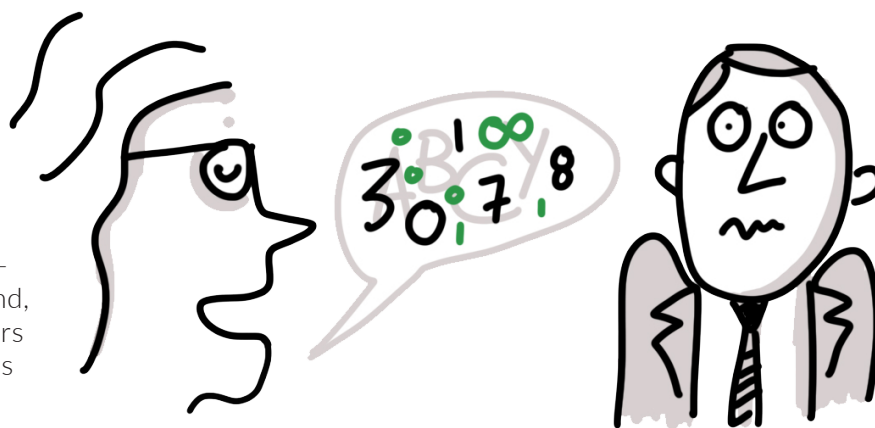
Thus, what emerged strongly from the many discussions with stakeholders is the need for a robust evidence base, as well as the necessity to communicate the evidence in



an effective manner. Simple but effective strategies that were identified include: (1) keeping evidence succinct; (2) making evidence accessible, such as issuing publications in multiple communication modalities; and (3) organising knowledge-sharing events at regional level and, for increased buy-in, researchers connecting with stakeholder groups from a project's conception, rather than at the end of a project cycle.

While these are powerful strategies, it is important to acknowledge that communicating empirical evidence in multiple modalities – such as writing blogs, tweets, and policy briefs – requires significant time and effort, and the rewards for making these additional investments are sometimes less obvious to those with busy academic lives. Additionally, not all researchers are necessarily conversant in communicating evidence in multiple ways and require development of additional skills, opportunities for which are not equally available to all.

The webinar participants were aware of some of these challenges. Some reflected on the lack of time: Paul Lynch said that 'as an academic, it's incredibly challenging, because now that we have finished one project, we're on to the next one'. This reflection holds true for all project cycles and raises concerns about how to communicate results beyond the funding cycle. Others highlighted



**HOW ARE YOU SHARING YOUR RESEARCH?
CAN A POLICY MAKER UNDERSTAND IT?
MINISTRY OFFICIALS WHO ARE NOT FAMILIAR
WITH DISABILITY ISSUES NEED AN
UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES**

the challenges emerging in terms of disseminating these outputs at the national level, within contexts.

Reflecting on The World Bank's Inclusive Education Initiative (IEI) Issues Paper: [Pivoting to Inclusion: Leveraging Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities](#), Charlotte V. McClain-Nhlapo shared the efforts made to disseminate the paper as widely as possible:

We've made the paper available in plain language. It's also available in accessible formats. We're thinking about translating it into the languages of [the] countries that we focus on. So, we're really trying to do everything to really get the message out there.

SUMMARY

To continue to deliver on the global commitments outlined for persons with disabilities, particularly SDG 4, it is important that different stakeholder groups continue to function as a collective, acknowledging different standpoints but appreciating the power of 'coming together' in pushing forward reform efforts. It is crucial that these efforts are underpinned by rigorous evidence, which is

generated in collaboration with persons with disabilities and communicated widely in diverse forms.

However, there is a need to be continually mindful of the fact that in order to influence global policies, partnerships at local and national levels are paramount. These partnerships, with both individuals and organisations, need to be forged in a respectful manner.

Webinar – Working in partnership with multiple stakeholders on global policy processes: Disability and Inclusive education

From May through to October 2020, the [Impact Initiative](#) convened a number of online discussions which drew on some stand-out examples of particular impact pathways and strategies that have emerged over the course of the programme. The webinars were designed to stimulate and discuss reflections on the opportunities and challenges of working on a portfolio of research in different ways to maximise impact.

In September, the Initiative convened a discussion with researchers to explore the engagement between the Impact Initiative and multiple stakeholders on global policy processes in relation to disability and inclusive education. The event also created a space for the sharing of other experiences of working with evidence-informed national and international policy discussions focused on achieving change in policy and practice.

Approximately 40 participants joined the virtual meeting. After describing the collaboration between the Impact Initiative and multiple stakeholders in relation to disability and inclusive education, Professor Nidhi Singal (Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge) moderated a panel of disability and education experts who shared their thoughts on the benefits and challenges of bringing together different stakeholder groups. The panel included:

- Charlotte V. McClain-Nhlapo, Global Disability Advisor of the World Bank Group;
- Nafisa Baboo, Director of Inclusive Education for Light for the World; and
- Tom Shakespeare, Co-Director of the Programme for Evidence to Inform Disability Action (PENDA).

Issues that the panellists and grant holders were asked to reflect on included: What are the barriers you experience when trying to connect research with potential users of research in the field of disability? What is the added value of working with multiple research projects and partners in the field of disability? What are some of the challenges? What are the benefits of engaging research with global policy processes? What are some of the risks? How can global policy actors shape the research agenda on disability in ways that are most beneficial to their work?

The panel presentations were followed by a rich discussion session with grant holders, collectively generating a lot of practical lessons on working across varied stakeholder groups. The key challenges and opportunities from the discussion are summarised in Figure 1, a graphic illustration by Jorge Martin.

Credits

This Working Paper was written by Professor Nidhi Singal, Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

The direct quotes incorporated in this paper are sourced from the webinar recording and transcription notes and are included with kind permission from the individuals concerned

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The Impact Initiative seeks to connect policymakers and practitioners with world-class social science research supported by the ESRC–FCDO Strategic Partnership, maximising the uptake and impact of research from: (i) the Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research, and (ii) the Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems Programme. The Impact Initiative endeavours to identify synergies between these programmes and their grant holders, support them to exploit influencing and engagement opportunities and facilitate mutual learning.

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