Wilton Park

Report: Disability inclusive education

Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 February 2026

In association with
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; International Disability Alliance

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The Wilton Park dialogue on 'Disability Inclusive Education' gathered together over 50 leading academics, governments, research institutes, representative organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and industry representatives to explore how to effectively include learners with disabilities in fully inclusive education systems. The Dialogue was held in the midst of a global crisis in education with reduced funding, poor learning outcomes and increasing numbers out of school. The meeting was designed to build on commitments to Inclusive Education at the 2025 Global Disability Summit (GDS) and develop a roadmap leading to the 2028 GDS to translate evidence into policy changes. This report is a summary of important points raised during the dialogue.

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Executive summary

This Wilton Park dialogue explored the current state of the evidence, remaining gaps and the opportunities that now exist for effective and cost-efficient implementation approaches for inclusive education. Often, funding to improve general education and learning is done in parallel with investments made to support learners with disabilities, creating inefficiencies, and a failure to effectively transform systems to improve learning for all children. Inclusive Education transforms school systems to cater to all students, including children with disabilities, by eliminating segregation and ensuring accessibility in environments, curricula, teaching practices, and cultures. Genuine inclusion can only be achieved by transforming the mainstream system, not by adapting parts of it to integrate learners with disabilities. Reasonable accommodation is an immediate, not a progressive, obligation and no child should be refused access on the basis of disability whilst the system transitions. The existence of special schools or integrated programmes does not comply with the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

A central message which reoccurred throughout the dialogue was that Inclusive Education is not about adapting mainstream schools to accommodate children with disabilities, but about transforming entire systems so that all children learn on an equal basis. Despite a legal obligation under the UN CRPD to improve education quality for every learner, children with disabilities remain among the most excluded, facing barriers ranging from inaccessible infrastructure and undertrained teachers to deep-rooted stigma and a lack of visibility in national data systems. The most common arguments used to delay reform (including insufficient funding, system complexity, and the need for specialist provision) must be confronted rather than continually accommodated.

The Dialogue identified several interlocking areas where urgent action is needed. Teacher preparedness is a critical systemic gap, with inclusive pedagogy still among the least covered topics in pre-service training. Data systems routinely fail to identify or track children with disabilities, meaning they rarely influence planning or financing decisions. In humanitarian and crisis settings, disability is almost entirely absent from education response planning despite crises actively increasing disability prevalence. Financing remains structurally inadequate, although co-financing models, Results-Based Financing tied to inclusion indicators, and the upcoming replenishment cycles for GPE and Education Cannot Wait represent real opportunities. EdTech and Assistive Technology hold promise but currently tend to reinforce segregation rather than

inclusion. Across all of these areas, the gap is the same: disability is treated as a peripheral concern rather than a core design issue. The dialogue's roadmap calls for a single agreed definition of Inclusive Education, broader coalitions beyond the disability sector, better-coordinated financing, and disability inclusion embedded from the outset in every education reform, research agenda, and funding decision.

Setting out the arguments

There have been decades of global intentions and commitments around the inclusion of learners with disabilities in education. The Salamanca Framework for Action (1994) explicitly recognised the need to stop segregated educational provision for children with special educational needs and to ensure schools 'accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other condition'.[1] Article 24 of the CRPD mandates inclusive education systems, ensuring persons with disabilities access quality education on an equal basis with others. It is also embedded in Goal 4 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. General Comment No. 4 (2016) makes explicit that attempts to provide education through integrated or special education provision is not 'inclusive education'.

Yet children with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to accessing quality, inclusive education and are less likely to attend school, advance in education, or achieve foundational skills compared to children without disabilities.[2] In low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are significantly less likely to attend early childhood education, achieve foundational skills, or attend school at all. Barriers include inaccessible school infrastructure, lack of inclusive teaching practices, discrimination, insufficient teacher training, stigma, and lack of access to assistive technology. Girls with disabilities face additional discrimination with lower primary school completion rates tied in with higher risks of child marriage and gender-based violence. Humanitarian crises exacerbate barriers to education for children with disabilities, disrupting Inclusive Education services with alternative options like remote teaching often inaccessible. Broad education reforms frequently happen in parallel with disability inclusion efforts which further entrenches exclusion. Disability focused

[1] Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, p.6; original highlights
[2] United Nations Children's Fund, Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities, UNICEF, New York, 2021.

programmes are mostly small scale, short-term and isolated from national priorities, making them unsustainable.

In a background paper for the Dialogue, designed to stimulate early discussions, Carew and Shakespeare prompted attendees to consider both the "rational" and "irrational" arguments that dominate discourse in favour of continued segregation that require consideration.[3] On the "rational" side, the most common arguments put forward focus on the complexity of inclusion and the need for wholesale change which are beyond the capacity of the current context, pushing the intent to include into the future. The prerequisites for inclusion like trained teachers, accessible environment, Assistive Technology (AT), flexible curricula, assessments and data are not in place and the financial investments required are too significant for policymakers to take seriously.

Whilst, ideologically, Inclusive Education makes sense, it is often not seen as being the right time to pursue disability inclusive education. Children with complex needs are regarded as always requiring specialist provision which cannot be provided in mainstream settings without compromising the learning of others, contrary to General Comment 4 of the CRPD. However, there is no research to support these arguments.

There are also other, "more irrational", excuses made against Inclusive Education, including that children with disabilities are unsuited to mainstream education, that there is overdiagnosis of conditions (e.g. neurodiversity, anxiety) and attempts to use diagnoses to gain advantages, or that diversity and inclusion is not desirable and simply represents bureaucratic overreach. Much of this is linked to stigma, negative beliefs and assumptions that children with disabilities are disruptive, not capable of learning, and are best served in segregated settings. Inclusive Education for children with disabilities is not a desired outcome because education writ large is not suitable.

Attendees were reminded that these are uncomfortable arguments which nevertheless require confronting. Disability inclusion cannot be a specialist concern; it needs to be core to system strengthening, sector planning, financing, teacher education, assessments, infrastructure, EdTech and data collection. It requires political leadership and a breaking down of silos to enable ministries of education, health, finance, donors, OPDs, researchers and implementing partners to align. Inclusive Education is not about adapting schools so that learners with disabilities can be included, it is about transforming systems so that everyone can learn on an equal

[3] Carew, M. & Shakespeare, T. (2026) *Why do people fail to implement Inclusive Education?* International Centre for Evidence in Disability, LSHTM

basis. It recognises that having one inclusive system is simply better, more cost effective and more likely to result in reduced stigma, greater tolerance and social cohesion.

Framing of Inclusive Education

The current global socio-economic and political environment is making the argument for disability inclusive education increasingly challenging because of shifts in tolerance for difference, and a move away from identity politics and inclusion generally. What is needed to move the debate on in such a climate is to broaden it out from its current narrow focus on the difference Inclusive Education makes to children with disabilities, to its impact on the quality of general education, broader social cohesion, peaceful communities and the sustainability of systems. The constant focus on ways to adapt the system to accommodate children with disabilities should make way for how to build inclusion into systems from first principles. It should be about transformation, so learning is done on an equal basis for all, in one cohesive system.

Discussions around Inclusive Education are widely articulated as an approach to include children with disabilities, but this has always missed its broader principles. There may now be an opportunity to shift this dialogue more towards one of pluralism. Most Inclusive Education frameworks start with the preservation of the norm, the mainstream classroom, the standard curriculum, and the typical developmental pathway for example, and then consider how children who deviate from the norm can be brought into it. A pluralist approach inverts this logic. Rather than asking how children with disabilities can access a pre-existing system, it challenges whether the system itself can be designed to reflect the diversity of the way children learn and interact. Difference is not a problem to be accommodated; it is the starting point from which education should be designed. This shifts the ideological framing from charity to justice, and from integration to transformation.

Working applications of this exist in approaches like Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL is an educational framework that promotes the need for flexible curricula from the outset to meet the needs of all learners, rather than looking to make individual accommodations to existing systems. Portugal centred UDL as the pedagogical basis for Inclusive Education in its 2018 Inclusive Education Act. Critical to the change has been its assumption that 85% of children will have their learning needs met through accessible schools, curricula and pedagogy. Where learning needs are not supported

by universal measures, additional, specialist resources can be accessed, but crucially, the pre-identification or diagnosis of children is not required before interventions start (in effect reducing the stigma associated with labelling). All students can achieve a common profile of competencies through different learning pathways.

UDL can't happen at classroom level without significant changes to the system, which requires considerable political backing. In Portugal, this happened because the government recognised the need for significant education reforms but had limited finances. So, this was not only about how to include children with disabilities, it was a much broader education reform issue which may have contributed to the political support for UDL.

There have been issues with the implementation of UDL in Portugal which are worth learning from. There is critical need for buy-in from teachers across the system, so significant reforms like this require broad consultations. There were issues with teachers not feeling sufficiently prepared to work in inclusive environments with such a diverse range of learning needs. Many did not feel able to work with children with disabilities and whilst special needs teachers were tasked with helping train and support their mainstream peers, they too felt ill-prepared as teacher educators.

Another example of trying to work to break the norm comes from Sierra Leone. In 2023, the National Policy on Radical Inclusion in Schools became the legal basis for Inclusive Education. They deliberately titled this 'radical inclusion' because of a genuine intention to take a 'last first' approach (i.e. those who are most marginalised which includes children with disabilities). It has been kept deliberately broad, so this inclusion policy does not put the focus on disability but rather on dismantling previous exclusionary practices. It has been co-created with representatives from marginalised communities which included children with disabilities alongside many other education stakeholders.

The effect has been to strengthen the legislative framework for inclusion to make it easier to focus resources on where they are most needed. This has led to greater inputs around teaching resources, training, and Assistive Technology. As with Portugal, implementation has come up against some significant limitations as highlighted by some recent research on progress (2023-2025). There are still issues with teacher skills, substandard facilities, poor data and high levels of stigma in relation to children with disabilities, although there has been a lot more success in relation to enrolment and retention of young mothers and pregnant girls. This offers a good

example of how having a strong legal basis for Inclusive Education is critical, but that skills and infrastructure require sustained investments.

Is the right evidence available

There is a growing volume of evidence coming from practitioners around the types of interventions that can make a difference to individual outcomes, but there are gaps in the data because most rigorous impact evaluations focus on programme and school level interventions, not on system wide processes. It is also predominately evidence gathered from the global north or by those from the global north. The medical model continues to be reflected in evaluations of projects that focus on the steps required for specific groups of children (often meaning children with sensory and physical impairments) to be included rather than on the barriers and system biases that exclude. There is an over-reliance on learning from pilots and small-scale interventions (inputs to teacher training, accessible learning materials or Assistive Technology for example) which are standalone projects, often targeting the easiest to accommodate (probably the greatest volume) and not taking into consideration those who have the most complex needs (who are often excluded by design). Context is also important because the location, timing or background conditions (emergency, crisis, rural etc) can impact on whether or not the evidence and 'what works' are genuinely transferable. More contextualisation of the learning offered to governments or implementing partners is needed to ensure that it appears more immediately applicable.

Despite there being a lot of evidence, there is a significant gap in learning in relation to what works to stimulate system level transformation. UNICEF is currently synthesising global evidence on system level interventions across seven countries which is starting to identify important themes. However, more direct alignment between qualitative and quantitative data is needed to understand the nuances required for including children with disabilities at scale.

Are children with disabilities visible enough to influence decision making?

Some current learning has been focusing on the challenges of identifying children with disabilities and ensuring they are visible enough to influence decision-making. Tools for the identification of children with disabilities have mostly been medical model based,

emphasising the diagnosis of impairments, administered locally often by classroom teachers. Teacher education has mirrored this process to a large extent, with Inclusive Education training predominantly focusing on the causes of specific impairments and how they present. In this sense, the identification of children with disabilities has not really had an impact on improving classroom practices because the identification process pays no attention to how children learn and what environments and pedagogy is required to provide positive learning environments.

Some improvements are coming from uptake of the Washington Group (WG) question sets possibly because their focus on measuring levels of functioning (not specific impairments) helps focus efforts on implementing accommodations rather than medical based interventions. There are some concerns with the efficacy of WG questions used in this way, although most of these can be attributed to inappropriate application by researchers, evaluators and programme personnel. That can mean that the way the WG questions are being administered and analysed is affecting the quality of the information available. The WG Short Set questions for example were not designed to assess prevalence rates amongst children which is why, if they are used in the context of education, they will tend to underreport numbers. The Child Functioning questions were created to fill this gap (although even these are inappropriate for use with children under two years) and provide more accurate numbers, but the fact that it takes quite a bit longer to administer, and requires more enumerator training, has discouraged take up.

Pakistan has been using WG questions (4 out of 6 short set) in their annual school census since 2023 but continues to record very low numbers of children with disabilities. A study undertaken by Sightsavers found there were methodological issues which were likely resulting in persistent low numbers. For example, relying on teachers as proxy respondents to undertake the survey (but with no training or time set aside) and families keeping children with disabilities home during the census to avoid the stigma and shame of labelling. It means that at national level, despite a degree of effort, the system continues to rely on data that has low validity.

Another significant tool coming from the Washington Group is the Inclusive Education module. This measures barriers in the school environment rather than focusing on individual children in isolation and may also be helpful in shifting the focus to the needs at system level.

Introducing disability data collection can impact positively on local level implementation. The Girls Education Challenge programme introduced collection and use of disability data into their Leave No Girl Behind evaluation process. Despite the limitations, many programmes began to pay more attention to disability as an intersecting issue alongside gender and poverty in affecting girls learning outcomes. Raised awareness helped prompt some adaptions towards more inclusive environments and pedagogy. This resulted in some improvements in learning outcomes, especially around literacy, with girls with disabilities from the poorest backgrounds making the greatest gains. Internal research found this to be the result of flexible learning pathways that considered gender, poverty and disability.

Data collection may be moving towards greater accuracy, with the introduction of tools like WG questions, which are increasingly becoming embedded in school census processes like Education Management Information Systems (EMIS). However, this is only a part of the process. So far, the data itself has not made significant impacts on planning and financing decisions, nor on the ability of governments to track the progress of children with disabilities through the education system. So, children with disabilities remain invisible to education systems which continue to struggle to demonstrate educational outcomes for learners with disabilities.

Cost effectiveness as a measure

Another key consideration in pushing for Inclusive Education has been the issue of cost. When investment in inclusion is seen as an add-on to existing costs, rather than a reallocation of existing costs for segregated programmes, it is hard to gain political traction. But this may be the result of current cost effectiveness measures being biased in how they are formulated. The tools used to measure literacy and numeracy are not designed specifically for use by learners with disabilities, and whilst they can be adapted or children's needs can be accommodated, this requires additional processes to be in place which are familiar to the learners and assessors.

Broader research around quality education has not paid explicit attention to what this means in practice for learners with disabilities. An example of this is the Transforming Education Summit. Whilst the 2022 Summit covered lots of highly relevant issues for children with disabilities like pedagogy, teacher training, and the involvement of families, learners with disabilities were not embedded into these discussions. Considerable pressure was placed on the Summit from civil society to have the

international community commit to ensuring disability-inclusive quality education and a Call to Action was launched. However, by 2024, Save the Children (amongst others) were reporting that very little had changed.[4]

There are also calls to broaden cost effectiveness measures to include more of a focus on social cohesion, participation, sense of belonging and identity that are present in all children as measures of success. That is, how does the inclusion of children with disabilities into schools bring positive impact to the whole school and the community and not just how well do children with disabilities do in relation to literacy and numeracy scores. This could mean finding out the extent to which both disabled and non-disabled children express a sense of belonging, of identification with the school community, and of having a broad network of friends for example. One example raised during the dialogue was in relation to Deaf students present in mainstream schools. Providing sign language interpreters will help in providing access to the curriculum but Deaf students sense of belonging could also be influenced by the extent to which they see their identity reflected in learning materials and activities.

A **key message** is Inclusive Education should be at the core of all education programmes; disability inclusion should not be approached as a separate consideration. This indicates that disability expertise needs to be central to all education programmes, especially What Works programmes where generating evidence on disability inclusion should be core to research outcomes.

Teacher preparedness

For Inclusive Education to be effective, as highlighted by examples from places like Portugal, teachers need to feel they are prepared and supported. This means paying attention to what is happening in teacher education, especially pre-service. Inclusive Education and teaching children with disabilities is one of the least covered topics in pre-service training, despite significant demand from the teaching profession. Teachers are fully aware of what their capacity limitations are, and there is demand for more support and training.

[4] For more information see https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2024/what-progress-has-been-made-since-the-2022-transforming-educatio#:~:text=Six%20reflections%20from%20the%20TES%20stocktake.&text=Save%20the%20Children%20has%20consistently%20called%20for%20the%20inclusion%20of

This puts the emphasis on the quality of teacher education. Good UDL or inclusive pedagogy training improves classroom practice and helps teachers reduce barriers to learning, although not when delivered as one-off in-service level training. A current key systemic barrier to improved pedagogy is the extent to which teacher training institutions are preparing teachers adequately for inclusive education.

A key difficulty in this respect has been the lack of attention paid to pre-service teacher education from donors that invest in education programmes. Over the longer term the impacts of investments in higher education can be substantive, but there are not yet strong evidence pathways that can be used to demonstrate how investing in teacher educators impacts learning outcomes for children with disabilities in classrooms.

One area that could help fill this gap is getting more evidence and feedback from teachers, so it is possible to understand what kinds of investments work for them. So, where there are large-scale investments happening in teachers, such as increased salaries, professional development and pre-service training, it would be good to centre the voice of teachers more so that tools that really improve practice can be designed. There is genuine appeal here for investment because relatively small inputs, co-financed with large scale public expenditure, can have significant impacts.

Another potential area which could be developed further is in relation to the hiring and retention of more teachers with disabilities. This can have a positive impact on all children, and such teachers can be important role models for children with disabilities. Schools that hire teachers with disabilities and support them are more likely to be able to reduce barriers and improve learning opportunities. Staff with disabilities help identify barriers and reduce negative attitudes if they are fully supported in their teaching.

Situations of conflict, crisis or displacement

Challenges to implementing Inclusive Education also arise in the humanitarian sector. Many of these mirror the challenges in education systems more broadly in that children with disabilities remain largely unseen in humanitarian responses. There are significant ongoing crises in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan for example, as well as climate induced emergencies (flooding, droughts), which are creating large numbers of children and adults with disabilities. Prolonged hunger, psychological trauma (affecting child development), bombs and drones, along with displacement from home communities,

and the collapse of health and rehabilitation services, increase the prevalence and severity of impairments. Entire education systems may be disrupted by damage or destruction of infrastructure or the need to repurpose buildings.

This creates large scale loss of learning across whole communities and populations. Even if schools reopen, damaged infrastructure can lack accessibility, leading to high drop-out rates and low enrolment amongst children with disabilities. Having a higher prevalence of disability amongst children and teaching staff during such crises suggest that inclusion should be built into crisis responses. Yet disability and trauma are not seen as central to reconstruction planning discussions. This was illustrated recently at the Global Disability Summit in 2025 where there were only 21 commitments (2.5%) focused on conflict and crisis interventions. Moreover, accelerated learning programmes, which are a popular intervention in post crisis situations, are designed without consideration of impairments and they continue to be implemented with only limited data on how they impact learning in children with disabilities.

In refugee response situations, a lack of data from screening, along with a homogenised approach to disability more generally, means children with disabilities go unnoticed. Children with disabilities miss out on inaccessible mainstream interventions aimed at children in general, with most disability specific interventions designed for adults. Refugee camps and camp infrastructure often have significant environmental barriers (for example hilly and muddy terrain prone to flooding). Temporary school structures may have poor access to classrooms and sanitation facilities, and class sizes may at times exceed 100 children. For girls with disabilities there may be added vulnerabilities and safeguarding considerations which make caregivers reluctant to enrol them.

Lots of post-crisis disability focused interventions are focused on Assistive Technology (AT), the provision of learning material and teacher education. These are important, but such one-off, ad hoc inputs do not create inclusive classrooms. There is still very little evidence on the impact of AT on learning for children with disabilities, especially over time and when it happens without addressing the systemic need for reforms in schools.

There is opportunity here though. Refugee camps offer the chance to set up interim arrangements like resource rooms or buddying up teachers with support staff and learning assistants to help manage large class sizes and inaccessible classrooms. More can be done to utilise home-school liaison staff to work with families on reducing

stigma and encouraging positive parenting techniques. The reduced proximity of camps can expedite greater integration of services between health, education and social protection, for example, and Early Childhood Development Education (ECDE) can be easily integrated with disability assessment units if there is sufficient expertise and political will. Innovations like play-based therapy for children experiencing trauma is also useful for children who are non-verbal and for working with parents or children who don't speak local languages.

The **key message** here is that the lack of embedded disability expertise in education system response planning means Inclusive Education does not feature in discussions at a high enough level. This is compounded by the fact that education itself is not regarded as a priority generally in humanitarian situations because it is not seen as life-saving. The lack of Inclusive Education expertise at the core of programme design, implementation, and evaluations means interventions tend to be ad hoc, one-off actions created in response to specific demands rather than being systemic.

Financing issues and models

A significant issue with getting political buy-in for investing in inclusive education that works for children with disabilities is that national education budgets are generally quite limited, at an average of $55 per child per year in low-income countries, which cannot support quality education for all learners.[5] Allocations have to increase, but to achieve this requires a way to incentivise equitable distributions so that, even when overall allocations are limited, it is still possible to account for diversity. Funding priorities are a good reflection of intent, much more so than global commitment statements, and there are opportunities here for new and innovative financing which are more deliberately focused on inclusion and better coordinated to achieve the significant levels required to effect real systemic change.

In part, the education sector has lacked awareness and engagement around financial instruments and how to leverage funding in the way health and climate resilience have been able to do. But with falling levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA), increasing interest in education is now coming from foundations and private equity facilities looking to make a real impact. For Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), the Education

[5] See World Bank's Education Finance Watch 2024 https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099102824144527868/pdf/P50097819250a00ce1812018168df2deaa3.pdf

Cannot Wait (ECW) initiative was a big influence on helping them make inclusion an explicit internal policy. ECW, established during the World Humanitarian Summit 2016, is the first global fund dedicated to education in emergencies and protracted crises. It has been an important mechanism for keeping education on the humanitarian radar and helping bridge gaps between financing for immediate needs and longer-term sustainable programmes. It is administered by UNICEF but has its own governance structure and is a collaborative of humanitarian, development, public and private donors. In 2022, partly influenced by the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), it produced the first Policy and Accountability Framework on Disability Inclusion, which is being implemented in parallel to its 2023-26 Strategic Plan. It now commits to having 5% of its funding going to support equitable access, participation and achievement of people with disabilities, and commits to reach 10% of children with disabilities across its investment portfolio, through both mainstreaming and with specific interventions to support inclusion needs.

Global Partnership for Education (GPE) 2030 is also significant in that, for the first time, it will link future grants to holistic learning outcomes for learners with and without disabilities. Foundations and private equity investors are interested to see how this might translate into improved outcomes and not just focus on outputs. GPE2030 is a clear route through which foundations can make investments and leverage further capital to work more effectively. Since GPE is hosted by the World Bank (WB), there is potential for these funds to leverage resources for programmes at scale.

There are examples of funds which can be leveraged for more financial investment in system transformations. A key current financing mechanism is the International Development Association. This is the part of the World Bank that is specific to aiding low-income countries. The International Development Association has 175 member countries and provides grants and low interest loans which help governments to make investments in programmes and plans. It is one of the largest sources of assistance for 78 low-income countries and the single largest source of donor funds for support to essential social services. The International Development Association gets its funds from contributions made by government member countries. Donor countries meet every three years to replenish International Development Association resources and review the policy framework. Around $93 billion was generated during the last replenishment (2022-2025) with the current cycle aiming to leverage up to $100 billion in total financing by 2028. The next round of negotiations will happen in 2027.

Around 25% of investments go toward human capital in education, health and social protection and it is an important leverage point for disability inclusion. But this depends on the extent to which Inclusive Education is prioritised as an issue within International Development Association financing, and this can be a point at which backsliding happens. The WB is demand driven, so countries have to express interest in Inclusive Education investments which means there may need to be a lot more done at national level to win political attention.

A significant reality is that very few heads of state pay much attention to education. Sometimes, framing this too much in relation to a learning crisis can create issues because it is difficult for a Minister for Education to argue for more funding if the system is deemed to be failing. In this sense, talking about how Inclusive Education can improve education for all, and by making education systems a better fit for the modern world, could see increased political support. Being able to use improved outcomes as a measure of success to show what differences spending on Inclusive Education is going to make may prove more engaging.

A **key message** here is that for Inclusive Education to be successful it requires both a technical and a political focus.

Co-financing, whilst not new, can help avoid fragmentation and create more opportunities for coordination and lower transactional costs. It can also make it easier to fund work at scale and with a cross-section of stakeholders, especially in relation to different ministries.

A useful example of co-financing is the Disability Inclusive Education in Africa Trust Fund, established by the WB and USAID in 2017, where a $3 million investment was able to leverage much larger existing WB financed education projects in seven sub-Saharan Africa countries. The layering of small inputs within larger operations and co-financing created real opportunities for more significant systemic impact. This also generated evidence at scale because the numbers of children involved meant that it was possible to start seeing where gaps in outcomes exist. Research showed that primary school completion rates for children with disabilities across Africa are 10-13% lower than for their peers without disabilities.[6]

[6] Wodon, Q., Male, C., Montenegro, C., & Nayihouba, A. (2018). "The Challenge of Inclusive Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Price of Exclusion, Disability and Education." World Bank, Washington, D.C

And at country level, a small investment of $200k in Gambia, co-financed by a longer-standing WB programme, enabled system level changes to happen beyond the initial funding. A partnership with UNICEF enabled the project to cost-share technical assistance and training on Inclusive Education that was able to reach WB and UNICEF staff and ministry representatives from seven African countries.

The **key message** here is that collaborations help reduce transaction costs and enable small, targeted investments to have broader impact and produce evidence at scale. The main challenge remains that, whilst these initiatives have existed for some time, the broader landscape is changing only very slowly.

Opportunities at national level

Working to broaden what gets included in Results Based Financing is showing potential for changing how domestic financing can be incentivised towards inclusive outcomes. GPE country partners have been using an equity-based formula for the allocation of school grants and subsidies which, whilst not new, are a mechanism that can be used to get resources to schools to support learners with disabilities. This has ensured more resources are available at the school level for children with disabilities, and teachers with specific skills are allocated to areas with higher numbers of students with disabilities.

In Tanzania, they have been linking disbursements to social inclusion assessment indicators. Whilst designed with the primary intention of increasing the participation of girls, it has had additional benefits and may prove to be workable as an intervention with more deliberate targeting of children with disabilities. The context is positive because Tanzania has a harmonised system for tracking data on children with disabilities which means local districts can be incentivised to do more on inclusion.

The impact of such initiatives can be a powerful way to change a policy on inclusion into something tangible by building equity into the accountability structures that govern how funding is released. This has incentivised improvements to the skills of teachers, as well as the up-skilling of municipal and local authorities to conduct identification processes. Whilst in this case the incentives for districts are still indirect for children with disabilities, it could be strengthened by including explicit triggers for the enrolment or retention of children with disabilities in their own right. In many respects, stigma against children with disabilities is still a significant issue at local level

from communities, teaching staff and local decision-makers. So, targeted financing may be needed to provide localised incentives for inclusion.

The **key messages** here are that, in Results Based Financing mechanisms, it is important to get explicit mention of Inclusive Education in outcome documents to encourage investment in actions that promote inclusion (especially collecting and tracking data). Local government is also an important target for stimulating political will because this is where funding decisions are put into practice. Local level officials need skills and expertise to be able to support schools to implement Inclusive Education.

Technology opportunities

Further innovations that could help progress Inclusive Education come from Educational Technology (EdTech) and Assistive Technology (AT). EdTech is the application of digital tools, platforms, and resources such as learning management systems, interactive software, and online content, to enhance teaching and learning experiences. These have the potential to make education more engaging, flexible, and accessible for all learners. Assistive Technology (AT) are any device, software, or tools specifically designed to support learners with disabilities or those with additional learning needs, such as screen readers, speech-to-text software, or alternative communication devices. When used appropriately, they can facilitate access to, and participation in, the learning environment.

An important consideration with AT and EdTech is that there is a need to ensure effective implementation. Simply providing AT for example is not Inclusive Education, and available research indicates that for technology to work, learners require significant support to learn how to use tools before they can work effectively. This is also true of teachers who generally lack the skills and training to feel confident to incorporate EdTech or AT into their classroom practice. Teacher education programmes still do not incorporate digital skills training at sufficient levels to enable teachers to develop their practice confidently. Moreover, a significant barrier to more general implementation of EdTech and AT in low- and middle-income contexts is the relatively high cost of both EdTech / AT.[7]

[7] Assistive Products Market Report 2025. Geneva: ATscale, The Global Partnership for Assistive Technology and Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI); 2025.

Currently, there is not a lot of evidence as to the effectiveness of EdTech and AT in improving learning outcomes for children with disabilities in education. Most studies that have been done focus on how EdTech and AT facilitate entry into school rather than on their impact on learning, participation and engagement. There is also a significant bias in research on children with sensory impairments, and much of this evidence comes from its application in special education not in relation to Inclusive Education. This means that, to a large extent, interventions to date have reinforced segregation because of the focus on impairment specific AT rather than on the use of AT to assist learning needs within the broader curriculum.[8] So again, this is about how to frame interventions that promote Inclusive Education and education for all, rather than continuing to support interventions that work only for children with disabilities. But there are indications that AT and EdTech do have the potential to improve self-confidence and facilitate positive interactions with peers. With the right levels of investment and research there is the potential for EdTech and AT innovations to significantly support Inclusive Education.

There are resources available which can help ensure AT is being implemented effectively. The Global Report on Assistive Technology uses the 5AQ framework (accessibility, adaptability, acceptance, affordability, availability and quality) which can help any programme to ensure investments in AT are being properly applied.[9] The WHO tool - Rapid Assistive Technology Assessment Questionnaire (rATA), can be used to collect self-reported data on AT needs in population-based household surveys.[10] This is helping national governments to understand gaps in provision and to develop policy responses. However, its main limitation is that it cannot collect data in relation to children who are under the age of five.

The Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology (GATE) has done considerable amounts to build momentum around the availability of quality, affordable, assistive

[8] Paul Lynch, Nidhi Singal & Gill Althia Francis (04 Apr 2022): Educational technology for learners with disabilities in primary school settings in low and middle-income countries: a systematic literature review, Educational Review, DOI:10.1080/00131911.2022.2035685
[9] Global report on assistive technology. Geneva: World Health Organization and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049451
[10] See https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f61f74d-9e87-48cf-bf57-d0c468328257/content

products.[11] It has a Priority Assistive Products list (APL) with 50 essential high-impact devices covering mobility, hearing, vision, communication, cognition and self-care.[12]

The gaps, however, are in relation to the AT needs of children in the global south and in relation to psychosocial and intellectual domains of functioning. Much AT is not suitable for young children. So, communication boards for example are not designed in age-appropriate ways for children and not for specific contexts such as playing. There is exclusion too of learners with complex needs who are not generally considered in the development of EdTech or AT. Taken together, many learners with disabilities are likely to be excluded from the benefits of EdTech and AT. Most devices and software are too expensive for families or schools to purchase, and procurement processes are specialist, making it more cost effective if done at scale. Interventions related to EdTech tend to be small, one-off projects that are not supported by knowledge infrastructure, training, and maintenance. So, the long-term viability is difficult to measure. Without a strong evidence base and alignment with local curricula it will be difficult to get political will to support large scale procurement.

Similar concerns also face Artificial Intelligence (AI). At the moment, there are challenges in limited connectivity and device access, a shortage of trained teachers, a lack of opportunities for teachers to train and the fact that most AI enabled EdTech has been developed for a global north audience. If it is to make an impact on Inclusive Education opportunities in the global south, then it will need to focus on accessibility, data equity, skills training and ongoing support. That means working to strengthen local technology ecosystems, not trying to fit existing solutions into novel contexts.

A good example of how this can be done is illustrated by the Centre for Digital Language Inclusion's (CDLI) flagship initiative. This develops AI-driven speech recognition models for people with non-standard speech in a number of African languages. It is collecting speech samples from a broad selection of people (for example those with cerebral palsy, Down Syndrome, head and neck trauma, stroke or are Deaf) which it is using to train AI-driven Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) models. These models then make it easier for people to interact with voice recognition software and provides ways to caption their speech in real time. The basic idea is that any child with disabilities who has impaired speech can have their voice captioned or

[11] See https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-cooperation-on-assistive-technology-(gate)
[12] See https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/priority-assistive-products-list

have synthetic speech recognition which is audible to the listener in order to strengthen their communication in the classroom.

Key factors in the process have been to make the data open source and to train and support local technicians in AI coding so that they can co-design technology-based solutions with people with disabilities that are locally applicable. Some recent examples of this included a speech recognition tool for women and girls with speech differences who have experienced sexual violence to report crimes to the police, and speech recognition technology to support speech and language therapist programmes in places where therapists are scarce.

Putting together a Roadmap

A number of suggestions have been put forward as to how to take this agenda forward more effectively.

- Agree on a single definition of Inclusive Education, with core principles which can be widely communicated. This should encourage the conversation to be about the inclusion of all learners without losing the very real need to ensure that those with disabilities are part of the design. This should broaden the current narrative away from disability to emphasise the wider benefits of Inclusive Education and make sure it fits with broader debates around economic empowerment, quality, improvements to health etc. It should be made very clear that all children benefit from Inclusive Education and that all children, including those with complex needs, should be educated through Inclusive Education.
- There is continued need for research, investment and empowerment at the local level. A focus on what works in context is important as well as that research on quality should not be predetermined by those from the global north. Furthermore, whilst a lot of discussion draws attention to the global or regional level, there is need to involve more local actors. Proposals, research or investments should account more for those at the local level, including educators, families and people with disabilities. This is also about making sure research is communicated in ways that are contextually relevant and accessible to non-specialists. This may involve communications that demonstrate mutual benefits, involve younger voices, or are innovative (sports events, influencers, pop stars).

- There is need for building and strengthening partnerships with and beyond the disability sector so that, whilst we retain a strong focus on disability, other broader education and human rights initiatives can become collaborators. It is crucial to reach out to form a much broader coalition of partners.
- This also speaks to better coordination and collaboration of current partners. There is a need to stop working in silos and do a better job of joining up initiatives and learning. Partly so that we can increase opportunities for learners but also to stop duplication.
- Despite the volume of research available, there are still significant research gaps. This includes in AI, where there is need for greater safeguarding that pays attention to disability.
- In relation to financing specifically, there are the replenishment of both GPE and ECW coming up which have new strategies with a focus on inclusion, so these are moments that can be used for amplifying any messages around equity and inclusion.
- Clear call too to try and ensure disability expertise is included from the start and that we are not trying to influence broader education sector reforms from the sidelines or in separate discussions.

Conclusion

This Wilton Park dialogue, involving over 50 representatives, explored the current state of the evidence, remaining gaps and the opportunities that now exist for effective and cost-efficient implementation of Inclusive Education that works for children with disabilities. It repeatedly noted that funding to improve general education and learning continues to be done in parallel to investments made to support learners with disabilities, creating inefficiencies, as well as failing to effectively transform systems to improve learning for all children. The dialogue was keen to promote that Inclusive Education transforms school systems to cater to all students, including children with disabilities, by eliminating segregation and ensuring accessibility in environments, curricula, teaching practices, and cultures. Genuine inclusion is only achieved by transforming mainstream systems, not by adapting parts of it to integrate learners with disabilities.

The dialogue identified several interlocking areas for urgent attention. Teacher preparedness is critical, with the need to increase the focus on inclusive pedagogy, especially during pre-service training. Data systems need to be improved so that they

can more accurately track children with disabilities and better influence education reforms, plans and financing. Disability needs to become a key factor in education response planning within humanitarian and crisis settings and not sidelined to a small number of ad hoc specialist interventions. Financing for Inclusive Education remains structurally inadequate though co-financing models, Results-Based Financing tied to inclusion indicators, and the upcoming replenishment cycles for GPE and Education Cannot Wait represent real opportunities for shifts in approaches. EdTech and Assistive Technology hold promise but the continued lack of engagement with disability expertise in the creation of new designs is reinforcing segregation rather than inclusion. Across all these areas, the issue is the same: disability is treated as a peripheral concern rather than a core design issue. The Dialogue's roadmap calls for a single agreed definition of Inclusive Education, broader coalitions beyond the disability sector, better-coordinated financing, and disability inclusion embedded from the outset in every education reform, research agenda, and funding decision.

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