The Pathway to Inclusive Education in Ethiopia: Perspectives of System- and School-Level Stakeholders

Louise Yorke, Belay Hagos Hailu, Pauline Rose, and Tirussew Tefera

Abstract

In Ethiopia, commitment to promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities has remained high on the government's agenda, yet challenges remain in achieving this goal. Since 2018, the government's large-scale education reform programme, the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E), has had a specific focus on promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities through the provision of additional school grants, and the promotion of Inclusive Education Resource Centres. In this paper, we draw on data from the Research for Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia, to explore the perspectives of system- and school-level stakeholders involved in supporting education for children with disabilities as part of the GEQIP-E programme. We explore the progress and challenges in this area, and highlight some of the factors that limit the implementation of strategies intended to support inclusive education at the system and school level. We show how children with disabilities continue to face significant challenges in accessing and benefiting from education. Based on our analysis, we put forward a number of recommendations including the need for better data and evidence on education for children with disabilities —including their wellbeing and experiences within the school context—and the need for more resources to address and support inclusive education.

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SUMMARY

Promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities has been a consistent priority of the government in Ethiopia, and while progress has been made in this area, many challenges remain. The third phase of the government's large-scale education reform programme – the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E) – introduced in 2018, has an increased focus on inclusive education for children with disabilities. GEQIP-E seeks to promote inclusive education for these children through the provision of additional school grants, and by increasing the number of Inclusive Education Resource Centres (IERCs). In this paper, we explore the progress that has been made in promoting inclusive education in recent decades, as well as the challenges that persist. Within this context, we consider the contribution of different phases of the GEQIP programme – including the implementation and perceived impact of the previous phase of the programme (GEQIP II) – and the factors influencing the design of the current phase (GEQIP-E), and its potential contribution. Our research is guided by three main questions:

1. What are the existing policies, plans and programmes for promoting inclusive education, and how are they implemented?
2. What is the status of education for children with disabilities in relation to their access, enrolment, and progression?
3. How is the policy of inclusive education implemented at the school level?

We draw on data from the Research for Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia research study. RISE Ethiopia is a large-scale, longitudinal mixed-methods study that is researching the design, implementation, and impact of the GEQIP-E programme. In this paper, we explore data from two complementary strands of RISE research, which include:

i) data from our system diagnostic (Feb-Dec 2018), conducted during the initial year of GEQIP-E, which involved the analysis of policy and plans, actor mapping and interviews with donor and government stakeholders; and

ii) data from qualitative research conducted at the school level (March 2020), during the second year of GEQIP-E, which included interviews with school principals and IERC co-ordinators.

The integration of these two sources of data provides insights into some of the factors influencing inclusive education for children with disabilities at different levels of the system (federal, regional, *woreda* (district), and school). Overall, our research provides a better understanding of: the progress that has been made towards supporting inclusive education; some of the challenges and shortcomings that remain; and importantly, the potential contribution of the GEQIP-E programme. Some of the key insights that emerged though our analysis are shown below.

Promoting inclusive education has been an important focus of government policy and plans, but the implementation of these strategies has faced challenges.

- Inclusive education for children with disabilities has been a consistent priority of government plans and programmes since the founding of its education policy, and this has received further impetus from international agendas and actors. The third phase of the GEQIP programme is viewed as doing much more than previous phases to support an inclusive education approach, which is welcomed by many participants in this study.

- The top-down manner in which strategies for inclusive education have been designed, is criticised by participants, particularly at the regional, *woreda* and school level. This means that local knowledge is not incorporated into their design, which some participants view as insufficiently flexible to take account of local contexts.

- The implementation of these strategies is viewed as limited by participants due to: the limited attention given to inclusive education by those working within the education; the shortage of trained professionals to support inclusive education; and the limited availability of funds and resources, which are viewed as insufficient, given the scale of what is required for promoting inclusive education.

- While the government estimates that approximately five million school age children (4-18 years old) have a disability, data is limited, and the exact number is currently unknown. This has presented challenges in understanding and supporting their needs. Some school-level participants have criticised the government's over-emphasis on enrolment data.

Children with disabilities are one of the most disadvantaged groups who face challenges in accessing education due to several interrelated challenges.

- Children with disabilities are the most disadvantaged group in terms of accessing and benefitting from education; and they face different challenges depending on the type and severity of their disability, as well as their gender and socio-economic status.

- Difficulties in accessing education for this group arise due to: poor physical infrastructure on the journey to school; the fact that the physical school environments are not disability friendly; the lack of trained teachers and professionals to support children with disabilities in school; and the negative attitudes of family, school, and community members.

- Formal processes for identifying children with disabilities are limited, and schools tend to rely on an informal process of visual observation. This is viewed as ineffective, and means that students with less visible disabilities are likely to be missed.

Schools are moving towards a "form of integration", whereby children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classes. However, they do not receive the support they require, and as a result, they are not benefitting from inclusive education.

- Once enrolled, children with disabilities often have good attendance levels; however, their learning remains low and many drop out after they transition to the upper primary level.

- Many schools follow a mixed modality approach for supporting inclusive education, whereby children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms after Grade 5. However, while teachers try to accommodate them, they are unable to support their learning, and this has a negative impact on these students' education and wellbeing.

- According to IERC coordinators included in our study, despite their motivation for supporting children with disabilities, their ability to support inclusive education is limited due to: a lack of funds and resources; the insufficient training they receive; and the limited support and guidance available from the government.

- Participants agree that supporting children with disabilities to access and benefit from education is imperative, and that support should be provided according to their needs and circumstances.

BACKGROUND

Overview

The aim of this paper is to explore the progress and challenges of promoting primary education for children with disabilities in Ethiopia, and to consider the potential of the General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (GEQIP-E) programme to support inclusive education. To set the context for this study, this section considers some of the existing evidence on education for children with disabilities. First, we outline the status of education for these children, and identify some of the existing inequalities and key challenges they face. We then consider the wider policy context, which includes outlining the focus on education for children with disabilities in government policy and plans, before moving on to discuss the contribution of the GEQIP-E programme to supporting inclusive education.

As outlined, our focus in this paper is on inclusive education for children with disabilities, rather than on special needs education more generally. This is in line with the focus of the RISE Ethiopia programme on children with disabilities. As set out by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), we define persons with disabilities as, "…*those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others"* (p.4). We adopt the government's definition of inclusive education as the: *"...process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners*", and of, "…*addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children*" (Ministry of Education, 2016). We recognise that the government refers to both *special needs education* and education for *children with disabilities* in official documentation, but that in practice, inclusive education in Ethiopia particularly refers to education for children and youth with disabilities (omitting learners with temporary learning difficulties and specially gifted and skilled children), as noted in the government's *Master Plan for Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education* (p.5).
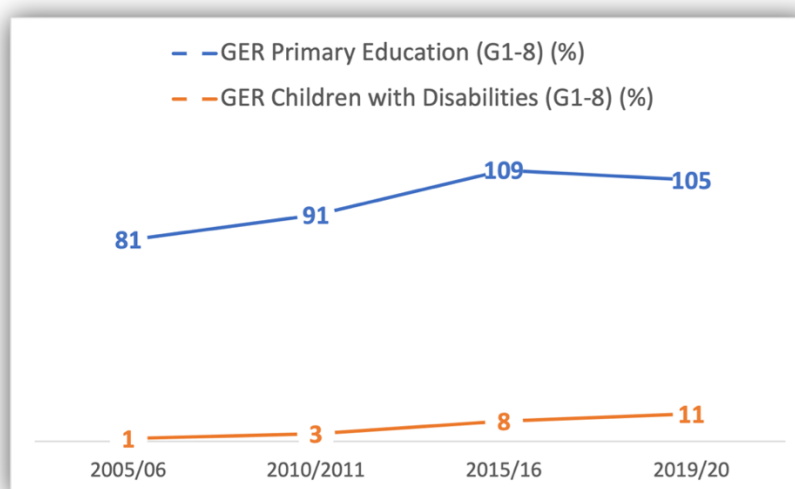
The status of education for children with disabilities

In this section, we first consider the enrolment of children with disabilities and some of the inequalities they face, while also noting the challenges faced by those with different types of disabilities. We then explore some of the challenges faced by the government and schools in supporting their education and wellbeing.

Enrolment of children with disabilities

Over the past two decades, access to education in general has increased rapidly in Ethiopia; and while less than half of all children were enrolled in 2000, almost all children now can access and attend school (MoE, 2020). This expansion of education has also seen improvements in the provision of education for groups who have been historically excluded from the system, such as girls, and children with disabilities. However, improvements in the quality of education have not kept pace, as reflected in students' low learning levels, many of whom fail to acquire even basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy, and leave school without completing a full cycle of education (Iyer, Rolleston, Rose & Woldehanna, 2020). In addition, there are serious inequities within the system, and improvement has been slowest for girls, children from low-income families, and those living in rural and remote areas; and children with disabilities have been recognised as one of the most marginalised groups (Iyer et al., 2020; Tefera, Admas & Mulatie, 2015; Yorke, Rose & Pankhurst, 2021).

In Ethiopia, as in many other Sub-Saharan African countries, data related to the prevalence and experiences of people with disabilities is limited. As a result, the exact number of children with disabilities remains unknown, and current figures are believed to be a significant underestimation (Tefera, Admas & Mulatie, 2015). For planning purposes, the government uses the World Health Organisation's (WHO, 2011) estimate, which suggests that 15% of people in any population have a disability. It is therefore estimated that approximately five million school-age children (4-18 years old) in Ethiopia have a disability. According to the government's most recent data, an estimated 11% of children with disabilities are currently enrolled in school (MoE, 2020). This is considerably lower than the enrolment target of 75% by 2020, set by the government (MoE, 2020). As illustrated in Figure 1, while overall enrolment has increased in recent years, progress in the enrolment of children with disabilities is much more limited. Furthermore, for the small minority who do access education, they often experience low learning levels and high drop-out rates (Tefera, Admas & Mulatie, 2015).

In addition to the slow progress that has been made over time in enrolling children with disabilities, there are considerable variations across gender, level of education, and location (region, rural/urban). Higher proportions of these children are enrolled at the primary level than at the pre-primary or secondary level. However, in primary school they are often concentrated at the lower primary level (i.e. grades 1-4), and many drop out by the time they reach upper primary school (i.e. grades 5-8). Gender disparities are also notable, with more male students with disabilities enrolled than their female counterparts at all levels of education. In addition to the disadvantages in education, girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable: they are less likely to be able to access the scarce resources that are available, and are more likely to be at risk of physical, sexual, and psychological violence (Tefera, Admas & Mulatie, 2015). Inequalities in enrolment are also found across locations in Ethiopia where an urban bias is evident; and while relatively high numbers of students with disabilities are enrolled in schools in Addis Ababa (over one third of all students with disabilities), the numbers are significantly lower in rural areas, with some of the lowest levels found in Ethiopia's so-called emerging regions[1] (Lewis, 2009; Tefera, Admas & Mulatie, 2015).

Supporting students with disabilities in schools

Education provision for children with disabilities follows a mixed modalities approach, involving a combination of special schools, special classes in mainstream schools, or inclusive schools where students with disabilities are included in mainstream classrooms. Generally, children who attend special classes are placed in inclusive classes after they complete lower primary and transition to upper primary levels. The success of including children with disabilities in regular classrooms depends on a range of factors, including whether the classroom provides a conducive learning environment, as well as the readiness of the individual child to enter the mainstream classroom. Yet, it seems that within mainstream schools and classrooms, children with disabilities do not get sufficient support. Evidence from our RISE Ethiopia quantitative research – collected from school principals in 166 schools across seven different locations in Ethiopia – has identified several challenges at the school and community level (Tiruneh, Sabates & Woldehanna, 2021). First, while all schools in Ethiopia are required to undertake disability-sensitive planning – whereby the needs of students with disabilities are identified and integrated into the design of school-level plans and programmes – just over two-thirds of principals

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[1] The emerging regions include Afar, Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella, whose development performance is significantly lower than the rest of the country.

in schools included in the RISE Ethiopia study, reported undertaking such planning. Furthermore, less than one-third of these school principals reported providing teaching and learning materials specifically for students with disabilities. Second, in terms of identifying children with disabilities – where identification was taking place – most schools were using untrained teachers or staff members, while only 15% were using trained staff or teachers. Third, in terms of strategies for teaching children with disabilities, while approximately half the schools included in the sample were integrating them into mainstream classrooms, less than half (40%) of the teachers had received training to support these children. The authors conclude that most schools – whether rural or urban – do not offer the required support for children with disabilities, particularly in relation to providing specially designed teaching and learning materials, and training teachers to teach such students (Tiruneh, Sabates & Woldehanna, 2021).

Summary

Overall, despite the rapid expansion in access to education in Ethiopia, large proportions of children with disabilities are estimated to be out of school, while inequalities exist across gender and location (region, rural-urban). Simultaneously, children who are enrolled face several challenges related to the physical environment within schools and classrooms, meaning that there is no provision for their needs. Unsurprisingly, many students with disabilities drop out by the time they reach upper primary school. Evidently, more effort is needed to address the barriers to enrolment for most children with disabilities – especially those who are most marginalised – while more support is needed for those who are already enrolled in primary schools.

Policy Context

Having considered the status of education for children with disabilities, we now turn to the policy context. First, we provide a brief overview of the inclusion of education for children with disabilities in government policy and plans over time, before then turning to consider the contribution of the GEQIP programme in supporting inclusive education.

Education for children with disabilities in government policy and plans

The inclusion of children with disabilities in education has been an important government priority for over three decades. An overview of a range of government policies, plans, and programmes, alongside international policy focused on education for children with disabilities is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected national policies, plans and programmes

	National Policies, Plans and Programmes	International Policy

1994- 2005	The Ethiopian Federal Constitution (1995) Education and Training Policy (ETP) (1994) Education Sector Development Programme I (1997) Education Sector Development Programme II (2000)	Education for All (2000) Salamanca Statement (2004)
2005- 2010	Education Sector Development Programme III (2005) Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy (2005) General Education Quality Improvement Project I (2008)	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (ratified in Ethiopia in 2008)
2010- 2015	Education Sector Development Programme IV (2010) Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy (2012) General Education Quality Improvement Project II (2013)	Sustainable Development Goals (2015)
2015- 2020	Education Sector Development Programme V (2015) Master Plan for Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education ((2016) General Education Quality Improvement Programme for Equity (2018)	

The Ethiopian Federal Constitution (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995), set out the rights of people with disabilities, which were also included in the Education and Training Policy (ETP, 1994), which stated that, '…*special education and training will be provided for people with special needs'* (p.17). The ETP is implemented through a series of five-year Education Sector Development Plans (ESDPs), which have also consistently focused on education for children with disabilities. Over time, attention paid to this issue increased, and the agenda for the education of children with disabilities began to take shape during ESDP III (2005-2010). It recognised that providing access to students with special needs would be necessary to achieve the goal of Education for All, and during this time, the government's Special Needs Education Strategy (MoE, 2005) was published. It set out to provide education for students with disabilities through a range of integrated modalities including mainstream schools, cluster schools[2], itinerant teachers, special units/classes, and special schools (Franck & Joshi, 2017). This was considered a pragmatic rather than a purely inclusive approach (Lewis, 2009).

Education for children with disabilities received greater impetus during ESDP IV (2010-2015), which sought to: increase the number of students with disabilities; increase school capacity including the percentage of trained teachers to support the needs of these children; and to increase the number of IERCs to 500 by 2014/15. While many of these targets were missed, ESDP IV helped to consolidate focus on the issue of education for children with disabilities. The second iteration of the government's

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[2] A school cluster is a grouping of schools within a geographical location for economic, pedagogic, administrative, and political purposes (Bray, 1987). In Ethiopia, a school cluster usually consists of one cluster school and a number (usually five) of satellite schools which the cluster school supports.

Special Needs Education Strategy published in 2012, sought to address some of the ongoing challenges including: poor identification methods; unclear budgeting guidelines; insufficient attention to girls with disabilities; unprepared physical school environments; and the prevalence of negative attitudes among parents, teachers, and educational leaders (Franck & Joshi, 2017). A key strategy was to establish IERCs to support these students through the provision of necessary resources and materials and trained professionals to staff these centres, and to ensure a disability-friendly physical school environment (MoE, 2012, 2015). Although the concept of IERCs originated in the Global North and are relatively new to the Global South (MoE, 2015), their goal was to ensure the inclusion of children with special education needs alongside their peers in mainstream schools (MoE, 2012). However, despite the ambitious target to establish 5,000 IERCs, only 113 were established by 2018.

Education for children with disabilities received the greatest attention in ESDP V (2015-2020), where it was included as a cross-cutting issue, to ensure that it would become the joint responsibility of all implementing bodies. The Ministry of Education launched a 10-year *Master Plan for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Ethiopia* (2016-2025). The Plan has six pillars, which include: i) the creation of a policy framework; ii) ensuring an autonomous organisational structure; iii) developing human resources (such as experts, teachers & leaders); iv) providing access and quality education; v) creating dependable reporting mechanisms; and vi) allocating a budget to run the activities set out in the plan (MoE, 2016).

The GEQIP-E Programme

The General Education Quality Improvement Programme (GEQIP) is the government's large-scale, flagship education reform package, which was introduced in 2008, with the aim of improving education quality. The ongoing GEQIP programme is implemented by, and aligned closely with the government's existing policies and plans, and the programme is funded by donors including: the World Bank, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Embassy of Finland, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), UNICEF, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The first phase of GEQIP included a focus on training teachers to support children with disabilities. This was followed by GEQIP II, which included additional school grants to support the needs of children with disabilities. All regions received 1% of their total allocation amount to provide school facilities and resources for children with disabilities, and this was distributed to *woredas* and schools based on the enrolment figures of children with disabilities. During the course of GEQIP II, the amount was increased from 1% to 2% and then later, to 4%.

Building on these previous two phases of the programme, the current phase – GEQIP-E – seeks to promote inclusive education through the provision of IERCs, which will be located at cluster schools,

and will serve between 4-16 satellite schools. Certified itinerant teachers in the cluster schools will be trained to provide inclusive education in the cluster and satellite schools; and they will also be expected to visit the satellite schools at least once a week. It is planned that the IERCs will undertake awareness raising and training events, purchase essential resources, and ensure an accessible learning environment. The development of the IERCs will be based on the existing guidelines set out in the government's *Master Plan for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Ethiopia*. GEQIP-E aims to increase the number of IERCs from 113 to 800 to promote the inclusion of children with special needs in selected mainstream schools. Progress in this area will be measured by improvements in the enrolment of children with disabilities in cluster and satellite schools which benefit from the services of resourced and staffed IERCs. The associated activities/inputs, outputs, intermediate results, and outcomes are outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results Area 2 from the GEQIP-E programme

Results areas (RA)	Activities/Inputs	Outputs	Intermediate Results	Disbursement-linked indicators (DLI)	Key performance indicator (KPI)
RA2: Improved equitable access	Timely distribution of grants to schools in emerging regions and for IERCs. Transform the cluster centre schools to IERCs.	Number of adequately resourced IERCs. Number of teachers trained in special needs provision.	Increase in the enrolment of students with special needs.	DLI4: Improved availability of basic school grants and additional school grants in emerging regions.	KPI4: Improvement in the gross enrolment ratio of Grades 1-8 in Afar, Ethiopia Somali and Benishangul Gumuz (disaggregated by gender).

Summary

Overall, the government has consistently focused on education for children with disabilities, which has increased over time, driven by a combination of international agendas and the realisation that strategies outlined for supporting these children were not having their intended impact. However, a number of challenges remain in implementing strategies for supporting children with disabilities. The GEQIP-E programme seeks to promote inclusive education through the provision of IERCs, although it is yet unclear whether the GEQIP-E programme will achieve its goals.

This paper

Overall, this section has demonstrated how inclusive education has been an important priority of the government for many years; but progress has been limited, with many children with disabilities remaining out of school, especially those who are most disadvantaged. Data on children with disabilities is limited, which is a major shortcoming, as this information is essential for strategies, policy formulation, and programme planning to support them. Having provided an overview of the background and context, in the remainder of this paper we consider the progress, challenges, and shortcomings of efforts to promote inclusive education in primary schools in Ethiopia, and the potential contribution of the GEQIP-E programme from the perspectives of system- and school-level stakeholders. We draw on data from the RISE Ethiopia research programme, which includes interviews with a range of stakeholders at multiple levels of the system (federal, regional, and local), and across different locations (regions, rural-urban). We consider the progress and challenges facing education for children with disabilities at different levels of the education system (federal, regional, *woreda*, and school) and the potential contribution of the GEQIP-E programme in supporting education for children with disabilities. Our analysis will provide insights into the system- and school-level factors that affect progress, and will highlight the importance of paying attention to the contextual realities when trying to implement inclusive education in the Global South. The next section outlines the methods used in our study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Overview

This paper draws on work undertaken as part of the RISE Ethiopia study, led by an international team of researchers across three organisations: the Institute of Education Research (IER), Addis Ababa University (AAU), the Policy Studies Institute (PSI); and the REAL Centre at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Since 2018, the research team has been exploring the design, uptake, implementation, and impact of the GEQIP-E programme, using several different research methods. The data analysed in this paper comes from two complementary strands of the research study: a system diagnostic, and an in-depth, qualitative study in five schools and community sites (Table 3).

Table 3: RISE Ethiopia system diagnostic and qualitative study

	Aims	Participants	Methods
System diagnostic	To understand how the GEQIP-E reforms were designed and implemented according to official policy and plans.	• Donors providing financial and/or technical assistance as part of GEQIP-E • Government stakeholders at the federal, regional and *woreda* level involved in its design and/or implementation.	• Analysis of government policy and plans. • Actor mapping to identify the key stakeholders involved in the design and implementation of the reforms. • Key informant interviews to understand the perspectives of stakeholders in relation to the design and implementation of the GEQIP-E reforms.
Qualitative study	To understand the implementation and impact of GEQIP-E in improving equitable learning outcomes in Ethiopia from the perspectives of school and community-level stakeholders.	• School principals and IERC co-ordinators in five school and community sites.	• Semi-structured interviews.

The system diagnostic involved actor mapping, the analysis of policy and plans, and key informant interviews, to provide an overview of the functioning of the education system at the federal, regional, *woreda* and school level, and to understand how the GEQIP-E reforms were designed and implemented. The interviews with donors and government stakeholders were undertaken in an iterative fashion, with one stage of the interviews informing the next, whereby the emerging findings from the system diagnostic informed the design of the qualitative study. The system diagnostic was carried out in the first year (Year 0) of the GEQIP-E programme (2018/19) and the qualitative study was carried out in the second year (Year 1) (2019/2020), providing valuable insights into the initial stages of this programme across time. The integration of data from these different sources helped to provide a comprehensive understanding of the education system and of the GEQIP-E programme, and enhanced the validity of the findings.

Participants

The system diagnostic included donors who were providing financial and/or technical assistance as part of GEQIP-E, and government stakeholders involved in its design and/or implementation in both rural and urban locations, across seven regions: Addis Ababa, Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Southern Nations and Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP), Somali and Tigray. The selection of regions was related to the wider RISE Ethiopia research approach (Hoddinott, Iyer, Sabates & Woldehanna 2019).

The qualitative study included school principals and IERC co-ordinators from five schools in four locations – Addis Ababa, Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia and Tigray – which were selected from the wider RISE Ethiopia quantitative sample (see Hoddinot et al., 2019). In selecting the locations and schools, we sought to maximise geographical diversity, and to take account of the extent to which schools had been implementing the ongoing GEQIP reforms, especially in relation to the implementation of strategies for supporting children with disabilities. In terms of geographical diversity, the sample featured both rural and urban sites, including the capital Addis Ababa, one so-called 'emerging' region (Benishangul Gumuz), and a northern and southern region (Tigray and Oromia) respectively (Table 4).

Table 4: School and community sites in the qualitative study

Region	Location	GEQIP Phase 1	IERC	Disability-Sensitive Planning
Addis Ababa	Urban	No	Yes	Yes
Ben. Gumuz	Urban	No	No	Yes
Ben. Gumuz	Rural	No	No	Yes
Oromia	Rural	Yes	Yes	No
Tigray	Rural	Yes	No	No

Given the nature of the GEQIP-E reforms, we sought to identify schools that had access to an IERC and that also indicated that they were undertaking disability-sensitive planning as identified through the quantitative data. Our sample was also influenced by logistical concerns, and while we had originally sought to include a site from the Somali region, this was not possible due to security concerns. Special schools were not considered as they were outside the remit of the RISE Ethiopia study, which focused on the implementation of GEQIP-E reforms in government primary schools.

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from 101 individual, semi-structured interviews with donors, government officials (federal, regional and *woreda*), and school-level stakeholders (principals and IERC coordinators), who participated in the system diagnostic and/or qualitative study. The individuals

in this sub-sample were selected as they had information on, and knowledge of education for children with disabilities (Table 5). Although we recognised the importance of including the perspectives of children with disabilities, and had included them in the RISE Ethiopia qualitative research study, we have not analysed that data in this paper, which focuses on the system and school. A challenge encountered by the RISE Ethiopia research was the fact that children with less severe disabilities (particularly vision and hearing difficulties) were more likely to be enrolled in school than children with more severe disabilities; and as such, much of our discussion with stakeholders on the experiences of students with disabilities in schools relates to those with less severe forms of disabilities.

Table 5: Selected participants from the System Diagnostic and Qualitative Studies

	Donor	MoE	Regional	Zonal	*Woreda*	School	Total
Addis Ababa	3	4	5	-	10	2	24
Amhara	-	-	4	-	-	7	11
Ben. Gumuz	-	-	5	-	-	2	7
Oromia	-	-	4	-	7	7	18
SNNP	-	-	7	1	9	3	20
Somali	-	-	2	-	3	2	7
Tigray	-	-	6	-	6	2	14
Grand Total	3	4	33	1	35	25	101

Methods

Key stakeholder interviews were conducted by RISE Ethiopia team members from the IER, Addis Ababa University, and the REAL Centre at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge (who are the co-authors of this paper). School-level interviews were carried out by a trained team of 10 experienced fieldworkers (two per site), who first received in-depth training that covered: the purposes of the RISE Ethiopia research; ethical considerations; and practical guidelines. They were also required to sign a code of conduct document. Topics explored during the interviews varied, depending on the expertise and background of the interviewee. Donors and government stakeholders at the federal and regional level responded to general questions related to disadvantaged groups. *Woreda*-level stakeholders answered more specific questions which explored the challenges facing children with disabilities in that *woreda*, and how education for children with disabilities was supported. Topics discussed at the school level included: i) participants' understanding of inclusive education; ii) training or support they may have received to support the education of children with disabilities; iii) processes at the school level for identifying children with disabilities; iv) how the physical school environment

catered for the needs of these children; v) how teachers supported children with disabilities; vi) and how the IERC centre operated and supported the needs of these children.

Fully informed consent was obtained from all research participants prior to the commencement of the study. Compensation of 300 ETB (£5 approx.) was provided to school principals and IERC coordinators, to cover the time they spent in the interviews, which took place outside normal school hours. We took steps to ensure that our approach to compensation was culturally appropriate and reflected local realities; and we followed procedures adopted by other qualitative research projects, e.g. Young Lives. Furthermore, to ensure there was no hint of coercion, we only informed participants of the compensation after fully informed consent had been obtained (Morrow, 2009). Compensation was not provided for donors or government officials. All interviews were conducted in the preferred language of the interviewees where possible, and were recorded (audio only) with their permission. The interviews were then translated into English (where necessary) and transcribed. Dual-site ethical approval was obtained separately from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and Addis Ababa University, for both the system diagnostic and the qualitative research study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was facilitated by NVivo Software, and thematic analysis was used to code the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). One of the challenges of the study was the large amount of data generated from interviews with stakeholders at multiple levels of the system and across different regional states, however the software helped to navigate this. Thematic analysis was the preferred approach, given that it involved a flexible approach that could be modified depending on the needs of the study. Using thematic analysis, we generated initial codes and then focused codes, through an inductive process; and these were then categorised into possible themes corresponding with each of the three research questions. Following team discussions, we identified nine specific themes, which are outlined in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Themes emerging from the data in relation to corresponding research questions

Research Questions	Themes emerging from analysis
What are the existing policies, plans and programmes for promoting inclusive education and how are they implemented?	1. The goals of inclusive education
	2. Implementation of policy and plans
	3. Capacity at different levels of the system
	4. The contribution of the GEQIP programme
What is the status of education for children with disabilities in relation to their access,	5. Intersecting challenges facing children with disabilities
	6. Accessing, learning and dropout
	7. Attitudes towards, and awareness of children with disabilities

enrolment, and progression?	
How is the policy of inclusive education implemented at the school level?	8. Identification processes for children with disabilities
	9. School environment
	10. Teacher capacity
	11. Data collection
	12. Additional school grants
	13. GEQIP-E support

In the section that follows, we discuss the main themes that emerged through our analysis. To help preserve the anonymity of the participants, we removed any identifiable information, and refer to them according to type, i.e. donor, government, etc; and we use federal, regional and *woreda* to indicate the level of the system at which they were working at the time of the interviews.

FINDINGS

In this section, we explore the main research findings in relation to each of our three research questions. First, from the perspectives of the participants, we examine the move towards inclusive education in government policy, plans and programmes, including the GEQIP programme. Second, we consider the access, enrolment, and progress of children with disabilities, and some of the challenges faced by this group. Third, we explore the status of inclusive education for children with disabilities in selected primary schools included in our study. Based on our findings, we offer recommendations for future progress in this area.

The move towards inclusive education

In taking account of the move towards inclusive education, we review the focus on inclusive education in terms of: government policy, plans and programmes; the factors affecting implementation; and the specific role of the GEQIP programme.

Inclusive education in government policy, plans and programmes

According to participants, the goal of inclusive education set forth by the government is to enable children with disabilities to acquire basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and to participate in the life of their school and community, while also helping to change attitudes towards them. Stakeholders held mixed views as to where the impetus for the focus on inclusive education originated, with some participants suggesting that international agreements – such as the Sustainable Development Goals – had driven the focus in this area; and others suggested that inclusive education had always been an important priority for the government. In terms of the government's commitment to this area, one participant from the Ministry of Education identified how the founding education policy set out the importance of education for children with disabilities, to enable them to enter employment and contribute to the country's development:

> "*The Education Training Policy stated that education should help to provide the workforce needed for the country…including children with disabilities…so* [children with disabilities] *must get the necessary education and enter the work force to support the development of the economy of this country this is the goal which envisioned in the strategy*."

Thus, while it seems that inclusive education had been a priority of the government from the beginning, international agreements may have helped provide further impetus to ongoing efforts.

The GEQIP-E programme, in particular, was viewed by participants as doing much more to support an inclusive education approach; and a key focus of the third phase of the programme was on expanding the number of IERCs. Although the provision of inclusive education through these organisations had been a key strategy of the government prior to GEQIP-E, donors included in our interviews emphasised that they had driven the specific focus on inclusive education under this programme. Several participants viewed the Embassy of Finland

as having a strong influencing role, while other donors also noted that they too, had also helped to shape this focus, as captured in the following excerpt:

> "*Equity of course, access to education has by and large improved. But the most marginalised communities, such as people with disabilities, girls in various parts of the community and the like do not have good access to quality education. So, we are committed to tackling this challenge, working in collaboration with the government and with other donors as well. We have strongly influenced GEQIP-E to be inclusion and learning oriented, including the disbursement linked indicators.*"

Therefore, it may be said that donors played an important role – which many participants welcomed – in further stimulating and strengthening the government's existing agenda on inclusive education, through a process of collaboration between these stakeholder groups.

However, despite the increase in government focus through policy, plans and programmes, some participants criticised the fact that these had been developed in a top-down manner. At the federal level, a number of government officials felt that they had not been sufficiently involved in the design of the GEQIP-E programme, including in relation to strategies for inclusive education. For those who had been included, they viewed their participation as limited, and discussed how there had been disagreements between donors and government officials with regard to the number of children the IERCs would serve, and how many teachers would be trained. Similarly, at the regional and *woreda* level, participants criticised the fact that the plans and strategies had been developed at the federal level, without inputs from local-level stakeholders. As a result, the plans and strategies did not take account of important knowledge at the local level, which may have been particularly valuable in the context of limited data and evidence on the needs of children with disabilities. For this reason, the plans that did exist were viewed as too rigid and failing to take account of the needs of children with disabilities across regions, or the varying capacity and resources available to provide support for inclusive education. Overall, participants believed a more collaborative and comprehensive approach to inclusive education under GEQIP-E was needed to bring about meaningful progress in this area.

The implementation of government policy and plans

Apart from the challenges discussed in relation to the design of plans and strategies for supporting inclusive education, issues in relation to their implementation were also mentioned. Participants discussed how the implementation of strategies was slow, and that insufficient attention was given to the issue at different levels of the government. In Oromia, a *woreda*-level official said, "…. *There is a gap in education for children with disabilities*" – a sentiment shared by other stakeholders across different regions. In Addis Ababa, a regional-level stakeholder explained that the strategy for inclusive and special needs education was developed but then shelved, meaning that the policy had not been implemented. In the Somali region, a regional official explained that while a lot of focus had been given to girls' education, similar attention had not been given to the issue of education for children with disabilities:

> "*Regarding special needs students, there is still a gap. I can say we did not do enough regarding special need students…a lot was done regarding gender related issues, but there is still a gap in the situation of special need students.*"

Although both gender equality and disability had been priority areas for the government, more attention was given to the former than the latter.

In addition to the limited attention given to the issue of inclusive education for children with disabilities, the lack of resources to implement these policies was another challenge mentioned by stakeholders. It resulted in considerable gaps in efforts to support inclusive education, examples of which included insufficient assistive devices or learning materials for children with disabilities, and limited teacher training to support the needs of these children. This was explained by a regional-level official in the Tigray region:

> "*The policy is open. The policy is really written to accommodate* [students with disabilities] *…but, in reality it is a challenge. Why? Because, to accommodate the disabilities, we need resources, the reading materials should be available in Braille. There should also be hearing aids, wheelchairs, crunches* [crutches]*, and other materials. Even, the teachers should know how to read and write in braille….* [children with disabilities] *come to school, but they are not properly supported*".

The reflections offered by this stakeholder highlighted the sheer scale of what is needed in supporting inclusive education, and how insufficient resources greatly limited progress in this area.

Another challenge was that the capacity for implementing government strategies for inclusive education was perceived to be limited, both within the education system and at the school level. Capacity was also identified as varying across regions, with some that were more effective in supporting education for children with disabilities than others. Through our data collection, we found that in some regional and *woreda* offices, no focal person had been appointed to support education for students with disabilities; while in others, individuals had been appointed without having any expertise in the area. This is captured by one school-level stakeholder who explained that government officials at different levels of the education system were not fulfilling their responsibilities:

> "*I am doing my responsibility as much as I can…. When you come to others, they are not properly doing their duties. There is no mechanism for penalizing people who are not responsible for that teamwork…he may be a politician and doesn't have the required knowledge. But a professional must be assigned in the hierarchy. If there is a professional at a higher level in my field of study, it could have been better. So far, there are no people of such kind in the Education Bureau. Even at the Ministry of Education level.*"

Thus, while upwards modes of accountability existed – through which schools were required to report on the enrolment of students with disabilities – there were no accountability mechanisms in place to ensure that stakeholders fulfilled their responsibilities. Perhaps due to the appointment of individuals who lacked training in this area, some government officials were described as having an incorrect understanding of inclusive education, and instead of working to include children in mainstream schools, they were sending them to special schools:

> "… [the *Woreda* Education Office] *has still a serious misunderstanding. They don't understand the meaning of inclusive education. They insist, mostly, to send* [children with disabilities] *to special schools for disabilities…so much is remaining even among woreda leaders*."

Overall, it seems that a failure to implement existing policy and strategies was due to: a combination of limited motivation and attention given to this area; the lack of appropriate resources for implementing these strategies; and the shortage of trained professionals within the system. For these reasons, it was suggested that awareness raising, training, the allocation of sufficient resources, and the introduction of appropriate accountability mechanisms, were all necessary for the successful implementation of strategies for promoting inclusive education.

The contribution of the GEQIP programme

According to participants, the GEQIP programme had made an important contribution to education for children with disabilities. Specifically, it had helped bring attention to the issue of education for these children – who had previously been excluded – through the provision of essential resources.

The introduction of additional school grants during the second phase of the programme (GEQIP-II, 2013-3018), which were allocated to schools based on the number of children with disabilities who were enrolled, had helped increase their access to education. Participants were of the opinion that these additional grants had helped motivate school-level stakeholders to encourage children with disabilities to enrol, as explained by a *woreda* official in Addis Ababa:

> "*I think it is directly related to it because these students are getting access to education as the result of the home-to-home registration during the supervision campaigns and 2% of the GEQIP fund is allocated for these children with special needs which the schools are utilizing*."

Over the course of the GEQIP-II programme, the additional school grant increased from the initial 1% of the total amount allocated to regions (and then disbursed to *woredas* and schools) to 2%, and then later to 4%, reflecting the sheer volume of resources schools needed to make suitable provisions for children with disabilities. The contribution of these additional grants was captured by a regional official in the Amhara region:

> "*Frankly speaking, the involvement of students with special needs education in the teaching and*

learning process has been improved since the launching of GEQIP. It has helped to provide educational access for students with special needs education. It has also created awareness about the special needs and inclusive education among school communities. Special needs education was overlooked before the launching of GEQIP…. Before the launching of GEQIP, schools and students were suffering from shortage of materials for students with special needs education… we can say that the programme contributed a lot to disability students to join schools."

It was thus the view of several participants that these additional grants had enabled schools to provide essential resources to students with disabilities, including glasses (spectacles), wheelchairs, and enlarged print or Braille textbooks, which helped them participate in schools.

Yet, despite their importance, school-level stakeholders in particular, discussed some of the challenges that they faced in utilising these additional funds:

"*The grant for special needs, within the programme it was designated at 2% and now it is 4%. There have been challenges in how to implement this grant. The reason was that the money was little and special needs are expensive. Even if you have just one* [student with a visual disability]*, materials are nearly 10 times more expensive than those the other children are utilizing. So, the regions faced a dilemma in how to spend this small percentage.*"

Specifically, the amount provided through these additional grants was insufficient to meet the demand within schools, because special education resources were so expensive. In the Somali region, one stakeholder explained that the school grant had only allowed them to purchase five hearing aids, although they had a total of 30 students with hearing impairments. Similar views are shared by a *woreda* official in Addis Ababa, who suggested that an alternative funding mechanism was needed:

"*The money given is terms of number of special needs students and we have few students and the money amounts to insufficient. They give us 50 Birr per student and if we have 10 students that gives 500 birr which cannot buy one braille book. To solve this* [problem]*, I think a different funding mechanism must be sought.*"

Given the limited amounts provided by the grants compared with the high level of need, schools faced dilemmas in how best to utilise them. Another challenge mentioned by participants was the fact that *woredas* and schools often faced difficulties in accessing these grants because of disbursement delays or poor infrastructure and facilities in rural and remote areas.

Overall, despite their importance, the additional school grants were insufficient to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and there were challenges around maximising benefits from minimal funding.

Summary

Promoting inclusive education has been a key priority in government policy and plans, one that has received further impetus from international agendas and actors. The GEQIP-E programme in particular is viewed as doing much more to support an inclusive education approach, with strong support from government partners. Nevertheless, the top-down manner in which strategies for inclusive education have been developed has been criticised at the federal, regional, *woreda* and school level. This has meant that local knowledge has not been incorporated – which may have helped to address some of the shortcomings in data and information – and that strategies have not sufficiently taken account of local contexts. The implementation of strategies for promoting inclusive education approaches has been restricted by a combination of factors including limited attention, a shortage of resources, and a lack of capacity. While the GEQIP programme has helped bring attention to the issue of inclusive education, and has sought to provide essential resources, these have been insufficient compared with the scale of need. Going forward, awareness raising, training, the allocation of sufficient resources, and the introduction of appropriate accountability mechanisms, have all been highlighted as critical for making progress in this area.

The access, enrolment, and progress of children with disabilities

In exploring the status of education for children with disabilities, in this section, we consider the intersecting challenges these children encounter, and the barriers they face in accessing and benefitting from education.

Intersecting challenges facing children with disabilities

A significant challenge highlighted by participants was the fact that the exact number of children with disabilities in the country was unknown, and some believed that existing government figures grossly underestimated their actual number. This in turn meant that understanding and responding to the needs of these children was challenging. Nevertheless, all participants included in our study – including donors, government officials and school-level stakeholders – agreed that children with disabilities were the most disadvantaged group in terms of accessing and benefitting from education. Participants also discussed the fact that the challenges faced by these children differed, depending on the type and severity of their disability. For example, in the SNNP region, one *woreda* official indicated that students with severe physical disabilities were more disadvantaged because they were hidden in the community; while another *woreda* official in the same region believed that students with visual disabilities faced the greatest challenges. In the Somali region, one principal suggested that students with intellectual disabilities faced greater challenges: "*I think students with intellectual disabilities are most marginalized students due to the lack of support, lack of trained teachers, and lack of parent support to their children*".

Many interviewees agreed that in order to achieve inclusive education, it will be essential for schools to be able to support students with different types of disabilities, according to their needs.

Participants also noted the intersecting challenges that many children with disabilities faced, especially girls, children from low-income families, and those living in rural and remote areas. A vicious cycle between poverty and disability was identified, whereby higher rates of disability were found among children living in poverty and those from low-income households, due to limited access to medical care and health services. Girls with disabilities were identified as being particularly vulnerable, and were less likely to access resources than their male counterparts. They were also believed to be more at risk of physical, sexual, and psychological violence from family members, neighbours, and others in the community, as a school principal in Benishangul Gumuz stated:

> "*The female* [students with disabilities] *are more vulnerable. In the community, they are vulnerable to rape and other problems. Even when there is a chance of support, we will give priority to females. We will try to fill the gap regarding the food they eat; we will cover most of their expense. Female students are more vulnerable.*"

Given these additional challenges, girls with disabilities required even higher prioritisation. Overall, while children with disabilities have been identified as one of the most disadvantaged groups, the range of challenges they face, based on their differing disabilities has been emphasised, and so also the importance of prioritising and supporting these students based on their varying needs.

Access to primary education

Reflecting the low enrolment of children with disabilities, based on the estimated overall number of children with disabilities, the participants in this study discussed the limited opportunities such children had to access education, as a regional official from Tigray explained:

> "*I think the most disadvantaged students in this region are…the blind, the deaf, and the* [children with intellectual disabilities] *…especially if you go to the remote areas. The problem is not access of education but also quality of education. Even the parents are not sending their children to school.*"

While children with disabilities faced challenges in accessing education, they were especially disadvantaged in the so-called emerging regions. For example, in the Somali region, one *woreda* stakeholder explained that less than ten percent of children with disabilities were enrolled in school; while in rural Benishangul Gumuz, a principal indicated that there were many children with disabilities who were not attending school as they were unable to support them:

"*I know that there are many children with disabilities in the community; and we have mobilized the community to send the children to school. However, we don't have sufficient facility to serve them, we don't have trained staff to handle them.*"

According to this participant, the school was not equipped with the necessary staff or resources to accommodate their needs, which appear to be the main barriers to education for children with disabilities.

According to the participants, another barrier children with disabilities faced in accessing education was the physical challenge in travelling to school. In many cases, schools were located a considerable distance from their homes, and the topography on the journey to school was judged to be very difficult to navigate for children with disabilities. This was found to be the case both in rural and remote areas, but also in urban areas. For example, in Addis Ababa, a *woreda* official discussed how the road was unsuitable for wheelchairs. Similar challenges were reported by school-level stakeholders in the Amhara, Oromia and SNNP regions.

Negative attitudes towards children with disabilities and their families were also cited by many participants as limiting the education of children with disabilities. While they described how some efforts had been made to address these, participants believed that insufficient progress had been made as these negative attitudes persisted, particularly in rural and remote locations. For example, in the Somali region, a regional-level official discussed how limited progress in addressing these negative attitudes had been made, resulting in more children with disabilities were coming to school:

"*...before negative attitudes toward disadvantaged students were dominating the culture of the community. For instance, before, some members of the community gave different nicknames to the disadvantaged students based on the type of their disabilities. However, after conducting different awareness creation, it seems that there is improvement. If you also see the number of disadvantaged students attending schools year after a year you will see the progress although it is not very large.*"

While acknowledging this progress – although insufficient – participants also discussed the persistence of negative attitudes towards children with disabilities, which has meant that some parents were hiding their children and refusing to send them to school. In Tigray, a regional-level official explained:

"*One of the reasons* [children with disabilities] *couldn't go to school is because of lack of appropriate awareness of their family…* [families] *don't feel that they are not good enough for education, they are not born for education…some sort of awareness rising is needed for those who need special support.*"

Going forward, awareness raising was identified as an important strategy to help address negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. Participants also suggested that increasing the enrolment of children with disabilities could create a virtuous cycle through which the presence of children with disabilities in schools would help mitigate negative attitudes within families and communities.

Enrolment, learning and progression

Despite these challenges, a small minority of children with disabilities were able to access education. However, although the enrolment of children with disabilities was low across our sample, those with mild-to-moderate disabilities were enrolled in school, while school-level stakeholders reported being unable to support children with more severe disabilities. This suggests that certain types and levels of disability had differing levels of access to education. In Addis Ababa, a *woreda* official explained that usually, children with visual, hearing, or motor disabilities were supported in school, while those with more severe intellectual disabilities were unable to learn in school. A *woreda* official in Oromia expressed a similar opinion: "*Only children with minor disability come to schools. When we conducted home-to-home visit, we found many children with different disabilities* [who were not in school]." It seems that schools were only able to accommodate the needs of some children with disabilities, while those with more severe disabilities were kept at home.

Overall, very few children with disabilities had access to education, while the environment within schools was not considered to be 'disability friendly'. Those who were able to access education reportedly had good levels of attendance, although their learning levels were low compared to their peers. In Addis Ababa, an IERC coordinator discussed how children with disabilities had lower academic performance than their peers, due to the limited support they received whilst in school. In many schools, there was a policy of automatic promotion for children with disabilities, through which they moved up automatically from year to the next, without having to pass an examination. A school principal explained that this policy was to allow children with disabilities to continue education alongside their peers, and to encourage them to stay in school. It seems that many school-level stakeholders prioritised access and progression over learning and achievement, which was linked to the fact that resources for supporting their learning were limited. However, despite the policy of automatic promotion, many stakeholders reported that the dropout rates of children with disabilities were high, especially as they transitioned from lower to upper primary levels.

Summary

Although information on children with disabilities is limited, our research has found that they are the most disadvantaged group in terms of accessing and benefitting from education. The challenges they face differ, depending on the type and severity of their disability and their wider environment. The inequalities faced by children with disabilities interact with other inequalities, including their gender and socio-economic status. There is a vicious cycle between poverty and disability, in which girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. Due to a number of challenges, including poor physical infrastructure, the inaccessibility of the school, and negative attitudes amongst family, school and community members, very few children with disabilities have been able to access education. For those who do, support is limited, and as a result, learning levels are low. Although the progression of children with disabilities is prioritised through a policy of automatic promotion, they often drop out when they reach the upper primary level. The evidence highlights the urgency

with which support must be provided to these children according to their need, to ensure that the necessary resources are available so that they can not only access, but also benefit from education.

The implementation of inclusive education approaches in schools

In discussing the school-level factors that facilitate or hinder inclusive education for children with disabilities, we consider the challenges in identifying these children, the difficulties in integrating them into mainstream classrooms, and teacher capacity for supporting their needs.

The identification of children with disabilities

In schools, formal processes for identifying children with disabilities do not exist, and the system has relied on an informal process, involving the visual observation of disabilities. In Addis Ababa, an IERC coordinator explained that the reason for this was because of a lack of government support: "*We use only observation. We do not use any assessment tools…. There is nothing from the government for this purpose*". The same IERC coordinator went on to say:

"*We identify* [children with disabilities] *using different methods. When they enter the school, physically, you can observe. If he is deaf, that is deaf. If he is blind, that is blind. If he is using a wheelchair, he is physically disabled. If they are partially disabled,* [the teacher] *can observe their activities in the classroom and …give us information. Sometimes, students also give us information. The appropriate way is to conduct a medical examination…. Then, we classify as severe, moderate, and low…To some extent, this is a personal effort. There is no budget allocated for this purpose.*"

The absence of support from the government – whether financial or in terms of resources, guidance, and training – has meant that the process was neither formal nor objective. Many participants agreed that the current system was ineffective, particularly as less visible forms of disability could be missed, as an IERC coordinator in Oromia explained:

"*I don't believe* [visual] *ways of identification are effective. Because teachers are only able to identify children with disabilities whose disability is visible or if children able to talk about their problem, therefore this is not effective to address all types of disabilities. For instance, children are partially affected by hearing and sight* [impairments] *if they didn't identify themselves, teachers may not give attention to those students.*"

Therefore, unless children had a visible disability, or if students or family members were willing to disclose that information, it was likely to pass unidentified. As noted earlier, negative attitudes towards disability suggest that children with 'hidden' forms of disability were unlikely to come forward, as a principal in Benishangul Gumuz pointed out: "*There is a problem of transparency. Some of the parents are ashamed of telling their*

children are disabled. We do face such problems". Therefore, negative attitudes within the wider community toward children with disabilities limited their identification, and ultimately, the support they received.

In some locations, *woreda* and school-level stakeholders undertook household visits to try to identify children with disabilities, and encourage them to enrol in school; however, in other locations, interviewees explained that they lacked the resources to do so. Thus, while the school grant provided through GEQIP II may have motivated and facilitated school-level stakeholders in some locations to identify and encourage out-of-school children with disabilities to enrol, there was no official allocation for this purpose. Ultimately, the ability of school and community-level stakeholders to identify students with disabilities depended on available financial resources as well as support and guidance.

Although priority was not given to their identification, schools were, however, required to collect data and information on the enrolment of children with disabilities for reporting purposes. A template – developed by the Ministry of Education and supported by donors – was provided to schools to record information on the type and severity of disabilities students had, at different grades. However, it was unclear if, and how, this tool was being used. One of the challenges was that certain terms did not always translate accurately across languages. Some federal-level stakeholders mentioned there was uncertainty around the capacity of school-level stakeholders to use these tools correctly, which in turn meant a lack of confidence in the reliability of the data that was collected. At the school level, some criticised the fact that the government prioritised collecting enrolment data for reporting purposes, rather than to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the needs of students based on the context within which they were located.

A disability-friendly school environment

Our research found that many schools were not disability-friendly – including the inaccessibility of the physical school environment and the limited resources and supports provided to children with disabilities – which limited their access and participation. In several schools, there was limited access to infrastructure such as water and electricity, which was particularly challenging for supporting the needs of children with disabilities. Furthermore, according to regional and *woreda* officials across Addis Ababa, Amhara, and Oromia, there were limited or no ramps; the toilet facilities were unsuitable for children with disabilities; and the classrooms were not accessible. For example, in Addis Ababa, one *woreda* official reported that: "*The school is not conducive. Children with crunches* [crutches] *are obliged to learn upstairs. As the result of all these, their educational results decline.*"

The inability to accommodate the needs of these students was attributed to the shortage of resources and funds to adapt the physical school environment and classrooms, which in turn meant that many children didn't attend. Furthermore, negative attitudes towards children with disabilities were also rife, with a school-level stakeholder suggesting that students, teachers and even school principals often had negative attitudes towards these children,

with the added belief that children with disabilities couldn't learn alongside their peers. Therefore, awareness raising to address negative attitudes was required not only in communities, but also within schools.

Furthermore, there were limited numbers of trained teachers and other professionals to support inclusive education. They were available most often in urban rather than rural areas, and this shortage was noted by a number of participants at all levels, including across different regions (e.g. Oromia, SNNP, Tigray). A school principal in the Oromia region said: "*If there are competent teachers who can support such children, students can come to school. ... We do not have trained teachers. If we had teachers, enrolment of children with disability will increase. At least, we could provide basic education*". Where they did exist, the high turnover of qualified professionals with special needs training was said to be another challenge. One donor suggested that teachers who had received specialised training were not putting this knowledge into practice appropriately:

> "*And, the teachers that are really trained in special needs, where are they now? Are they really being used appropriately? We have found that these kinds of teachers are doing something else. They are teaching any other subject, rather than just helping these children with special needs. According to the EMIS [Education Management Information Systems] data…about 28,000 plus* [teachers] *have received training with special needs education*."

This suggests that although the number of teachers who had received training had increased, they were being assigned to other subjects, and the data that did exist on the number of trained professionals, did not reflect the reality in schools.

The role of Inclusive Education Resource Centres

While one of the goals of the GEQIP-E programme was to increase the number of IERCs to support inclusive education, we found that the support the IERCs provided was limited, due to a lack of resources to support the functioning of the IERCs, and the lack of training and support for IERC coordinators. Out of the five schools included in our (qualitative) study only two had an IERC – one of which was well-established (Addis Ababa) with the support of the Embassy of Finland, and one which was not functioning well (Oromia). In Addis Ababa, the IERC supported 12 satellite schools, and the IERC coordinator faced numerous demands in trying to support all of them. The activities for which he was responsible included: coordinating the activities teachers, school principals and professionals in the 12 satellite schools; helping schools identify children with special needs; and providing support to teachers. However, due to high demand and limited resources, he was constrained in the support he could provide. Furthermore, although he had received training in special needs education, and described himself as highly motivated to support the education of children with disabilities, he viewed the training as insufficient for his role. In Oromia, the IERC did not make any provision for children with disabilities due to a lack of guidance and assistance from the *woreda* education office, the absence of financial support, and limited access to the appropriate teaching materials. He described some of the challenges he faced:

"Nothing I haven't received any training at all. Because of a lack of support in terms of finance, materials, and human power who trained in special needs, etc. I didn't engage in the activities to support children with disabilities so far. Besides this, there is no manual or guideline which helps me to do some activities to support children with disabilities in this school…. I don't provide any report to the woreda because I didn't do any IERC activities."

Overall, although IERCs have been a key part of the strategy to support inclusive education as outlined in the GEQIP-E programme, they have faced a number of challenges, including limited or no access to resources, a lack of support and guidance, and a lack of training. These challenges manifested themselves differently in Addis Ababa and Oromia: in Addis Ababa the IERC was not able to meet the level of demand from all the schools that required support; while in Oromia, no support was provided at all. This has highlighted the need for more attention to be given to the functionality of IERCs rather than simply increasing their number.

Integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms

The government's focus on inclusive education meant that more schools were moving towards a mixed modality approach, whereby children with disabilities were taught separately in lower primary education (Grades 1-4) and later integrated into mainstream classes in upper primary school (Grades 5-8). According to a few stakeholders, their integration into mainstream schools and classrooms meant that inclusive education had been achieved, as captured by a *woreda* official in Addis Abba: "*Our schools are inclusive and children with disabilities are learning together with those children who don't have those limitations*".

This highlighted a limited understanding of the goal of inclusive education and what it entailed, among some stakeholders.

However, other participants had a better understanding of the realities of inclusive approaches, with some explaining that although these children were now being included in mainstream classes, they were not benefitting from this move. A key challenge was the availability and capacity of teachers and trained professionals to support their needs. The training that teachers received as part of their general, pre-service training and continuous professional development was broadly understood as inadequate; and in general, teachers were unable to support the needs of children with disabilities effectively. Although they did their best to make accommodations for them within the classroom, the support that they were able to provide beyond this, was limited, as a *woreda* official in the Tigray region explained:

"We don't have a teacher who is trained with special need. The children attend being mixed with the other students. But we made consultations on how to help students with disabilities. We provide them more of accommodations what the school normally has like allowing them to seat in the front line for those who have visually and hearing impairment, arranging individual support sessions, and

discussions to make the teacher sympathy or understanding the limitations of the children."

Similar strategies were discussed by other participants across the different regions, (e.g. Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia). As this evidence highlights, accommodations within the classroom for children with disabilities mostly involved allowing those with visual and hearing difficulties to sit at the front of the class, and assigning other students to assist them with their schoolwork. Despite these efforts, many participants recognised that students with disabilities were not receiving the support they needed in mainstream classrooms.

A number of participants spoke of the detrimental effects of moving towards this form of integration, without sufficient resources for, and support on, the education and wellbeing of students with disabilities, as a federal-level government official explained:

> "*The biggest problem is you see, from Grade 1-4 there is no problem,* [children with disabilities] *will stay in school because in most of the schools there are teachers who write Braille…and there are teachers who have a knowledge of sign language, but after Grade 5, in the name of inclusion, they integrate them in the mainstream classroom, but there is no interpreter there. There is no person who can support them in Braille. Due to this, from Grade 5-8 the number of students with disabilities who dropout is large.*"

According to this participant, children were being integrated into mainstream classrooms in the name of inclusion, without a formal assessment of their needs and the support they required. Similar views were expressed at other levels, in Oromia, for example, where a *woreda* official said: "*From Grade 1-4, they learn separately in special class. From Grade 5 onwards, they join regular class in a form of integration. The problem is here. They fail to benefit from regular class*". In Addis Ababa, another *woreda* official discussed the negative impact of integration into mainstream classes on their mental health and wellbeing:

> "*It is very difficult to say that a student with partial hearing capacity can grasp the lesson equal to those who can hear. Similarly, those with partial sight they can't write*[as] *fast* [as other students] *…* [students with disabilities] *have psychological problems because of the way their teachers treat them is a way that make them self-conscious of their limitations.*"

As such, the "*form of integration*" that was being pursued in schools was having detrimental effects on the education and wellbeing of students with disabilities. Rather than supporting students according to their need, those with disabilities were expected to adapt and keep up with other students, and there was an emphasis on their progression rather than learning. Therefore, while some participants suggested that inclusive education had been achieved merely because these children had been integrated into mainstream classes, many others recognised that the move towards inclusive education, without the appropriate support, was of little or no benefit to students with disabilities.

Summary

Overall, while schools are integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classes (at the upper primary level), they do not receive the support they require and thus do not benefit from inclusive education. The identification of children with disabilities relies on an informal process of visual observation, meaning that students with less visible disabilities are likely to be missed. Schools are required to report on enrolment numbers for children with disabilities, and school-level stakeholders have criticised this over-emphasis on enrolment rates without providing support for children with disabilities within schools. Many physical school environments are not disability friendly and there is a lack of trained teachers and professionals to support inclusive education, especially in rural areas. The support provided through the IERCs is limited due to a lack of both resources, and training and support for IERC coordinators. Many schools follow a mixed-modality approach whereby children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms after Grade 5; however, with insufficient support this approach has a negative impact on their education and wellbeing as well as on their learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored the progress of, challenges to, and shortcomings of education policies for children with disabilities in Ethiopia, drawing on data from our RISE Ethiopia research project. Specifically, we focused on the following three research questions:

1. What are the existing policies, plans and programmes for promoting inclusive education, and how are they implemented?
2. What is the status of education for children with disabilities in relation to their access, enrolment, and progression?
3. How is the policy of inclusive education implemented at the school level?

We analysed data from a sub-sample of 101 donor, government and school-level stakeholders who had information and knowledge on the issue of education for children with disabilities, across seven different regions, and rural-urban locations in Ethiopia. Our analysis reveals several important findings.

First, we have found that the promotion of inclusive education for children with disabilities has been a consistent priority of the government – as outlined in its policies, plans and programmes – with further impetus from international actors and agreements, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. However, their implementation has been described as poor, and progress in this area has remained slow. At the design stage, the views and perspectives of local-level stakeholders are often missing, which is a major shortcoming, as they have important information on what is taking place in schools and communities. In this way, local knowledge may help to fill some of the evidence gaps on the lives and experiences of children with disabilities. In terms of the implementation of strategies for inclusive education, perceived challenges include a lack of motivation and attention by stakeholders working within the education system, and limited resources especially at the local level. While the GEQIP programme has helped bring greater attention to education for children with disabilities, and provided some essential resources, much more investment is needed.

A second important finding is that children with disabilities are one of the most disadvantaged groups, facing significant challenges in both accessing and benefitting from education. The challenges vary according to the type and severity of their disability, the availability of resources and support in their environment, as well as the intersection with other forms of inequalities including poverty and gender. Access to education for children with disabilities is limited by a range of factors, including poor physical infrastructure and the negative attitudes of family, school, and community members. This highlights the need to prioritise support for these children, based on their individual needs and circumstances.

Third, we find that while schools are moving towards a "form of integration", where children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classes (at the upper primary level), they do not receive the support they require, and as a result, do not benefit from efforts to provide inclusive education. In school, learning levels of children with disabilities are low, and their access and progression is prioritised over their learning. Although teachers and other professionals attempt to provide support for these children – mainly through adaptations in the classroom – they are unable to sufficiently support their learning. Moreover, while IERCs are intended to provide vital support for children with disabilities, the actual support provided is limited, due to a lack of resources, training and support for IERC coordinators.

Overall, our analysis identifies a number of important recommendations for supporting inclusive education. First, better evidence and data on the lives and experiences of children with disabilities are needed. This includes greater efforts to identify all children with disabilities and to take account of their specific needs, recognising that this may vary according to the type and severity of their disability; the intersection of other inequalities; and the physical and socio-cultural environment in which they are located. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are required, and the perspectives of local-level stakeholders should also be prioritised. Second, the approach to inclusive education should move from focusing on mere access, to enabling students to benefit from education, and promoting their wellbeing and inclusion, according to their specific needs. All stakeholders must be committed to, and engaged in this process within the education system – particularly at the local level – and appropriate training must be provided on a continuous basis for all professionals. Third, moving towards inclusive education requires significant financial investment to help establish formal identification processes; to ensure that children with disabilities can access schools; to make schools and classrooms disability-friendly; and to ensure that IERCs have sufficient resources to provide the appropriate support.

Finally, while our study had a number of advantages – such as the integration of data from multiple sources – including the perspectives of children with disabilities was beyond the remit of this paper. Future outputs from RISE Ethiopia research will focus on the perspectives of children with disabilities themselves, as well as their parents and caregivers.

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