Learning Through Crisis: Access to Education in Emergencies for Children with Disabilities

Inclusion international

IDA International Disability Alliance

Asdown COLOMBIA

FÉDÉRATION NIGÉRIENNE DES PERSONNES HANDICAPÉES

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Education Cannot Wait (ECW) is the global fund for education in emergencies and protracted crises in the United Nations. ECW works through the multilateral system to both increase the speed of responses in crises and connect immediate relief and longer-term interventions through multi-year programming. ECW works in close partnership with governments, public and private donors, UN agencies, civil society organisations, and other humanitarian and development aid actors to increase efficiencies and end siloed responses.

This report is a publication developed through joint work by Inclusion International, the International Disability Alliance (IDA), Asdown Colombia, and the Fédération Nigerienne des Personnes Handicapées (FNPH).

Inclusion International is the global network of people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

For more information or for copies of this report, please contact:

Inclusion International
20 Garrett Street
London EC1Y 0TW
United Kingdom

Email: info@inclusion-international.org
www.inclusion-international.org

Executive Summary

Children with disabilities are being systemically excluded from education in crisis situations.

Around the world, children and young people with disabilities living through humanitarian crises are being left out of education in emergencies (EiE) - not because inclusion in emergency settings is not possible, but because education systems and humanitarian response systems fail to consider them.

Children with disabilities are absent from many of the data sources that both governments and humanitarian organisations rely on to identify needs, and what goes uncounted remains unaddressed. Humanitarian actors then go on to design EiE programming that excludes children with disabilities, violating their right to inclusive education.

This report responds to gaps in the data about the experiences of children with disabilities in EiE, presenting both the barriers children with disabilities face accessing education in a crisis, and their calls for change - in their own words. Experiences were collected through interviews with a diverse group of children with disabilities and their family members from three conflict-affected regions in Colombia and two conflict-affected regions in Niger.

The way that children with disabilities and their families experienced displacement was consistent across Colombia and Niger, with three key trends emerging:

1. Loss and disruption are heightened for families with a child with a disability.
2. Fear and safety concerns dominate the experiences of daily life.
3. Education is a lifeline for children with disabilities living through emergencies.

Despite children with disabilities envisioning school as a sanctuary in otherwise unstable and disrupted lives, none of these children were accessing their right to an inclusive education as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The barriers that children with disabilities and their families reported generally occurred at one of three points on the journey to inclusive education:

- In the enrolment process, displaced families of children with disabilities struggle to navigate confusing new systems, come up against discriminatory enrolment policies that exclude their children, and encounter financial barriers that prevent them from ensuring their child’s access to education.

- **While getting to school**, children with disabilities face poor infrastructure that creates inaccessible routes to school, a lack of safe and accessible transportation, and inaccessibility in school buildings that keep children out of the classroom.

- **In the classroom**, children with disabilities encounter a lack of accessible learning materials, untrained teachers, and discrimination from peers and school staff which means that while children with disabilities may be present, they are not learning or being meaningfully included.

At each bottleneck, fewer and fewer children with disabilities and their families are able to overcome the systemic barriers in place, losing faith in the system and no longer pursuing their right to inclusive education. The children with disabilities that are overcoming these barriers are only able to do so through the advocacy and action of their family members, who educate teachers, pay for support, and accompany children to school - filling gaps in broken systems.

These barriers children with disabilities and their families are facing are systemic. Issues from discriminatory school policies to financial barriers impacting families, from untrained teachers to the broader lack of investment in inclusion in EiE programming, from inaccessible spaces to the lack of support for families are policy and budget choices.

A system-wide response that engages schools, humanitarian organisations, governments, organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and children with disabilities and their families is necessary to move from exclusion to inclusive EiE.

Inclusive education in emergencies for children with disabilities is possible – but it requires political will, investment, and coordinated action.

Children with disabilities and their families living in emergency settings identified a minimum set of actions that stakeholders in the EiE sector need to take in order to address systemic exclusion. They call on schools, humanitarian organisations and governments to:

1. Train teachers and school staff on how to adopt inclusive practices
2. Treat families as a core partner, and provide them with real support
3. Invest in inclusion
4. Strengthen schools by strengthening communities
5. Prioritise understanding the needs of children with disabilities and their families in data collection
6. Coordinate more effectively, including with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)

Safeguarding the right to inclusive EiE cannot continue to be shouldered by the families of children with disabilities fighting against broken systems.

Armed with an understanding of the real experiences of children with disabilities and their families in crisis, EiE stakeholders have the evidence they need to take real action.

The EiE sector must take accountability for ensuring that children with disabilities are not left out of EiE or risk the continuation of a failing to protect children with disabilities and uphold their rights.

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Introduction

Each morning, Amina waits at home as all but one of her children walk to school. Amina is from Nigeria. She and her family were displaced, and they now live in Maradi, Niger. Amina's son, Ibrahim, is blind. He doesn't go to school. When Amina went to their local school and asked that Ibrahim be enrolled, the staff told Amina that this isn't a school for children with disabilities - she must take him elsewhere. Though Amina knows that this is not right, she doesn't know where to turn for support, so each morning as his siblings walk to school together, Ibrahim must stay at home.

Ibrahim is one of many children with disabilities around the world who are denied their right to an education - and children like Ibrahim who are living in emergency contexts are among the most likely to be excluded.

The data that humanitarian organisations operating in Maradi have access to will be able to tell them that Ibrahim is one of many children not in school. The data might tell us that Ibrahim has a disability, that he has siblings, or that his mother Amina never attended school herself. But what the data cannot tell us is why Ibrahim is excluded. It will not reveal that he was excluded at the point of enrolment, or that had he been allowed through the door, his first task would have been to copy a passage of text from the blackboard that he cannot see.

Across the world, the barriers facing children with disabilities go uncounted in data about access to education during and following crisis situations. Children with disabilities are absent from many of the data sources that humanitarian organisations rely on - in many countries, children and adults with disabilities are less likely to have been registered at birth, and are less likely to appear in census data. Children with disabilities are also less likely to be enrolled in schools, so are often absent from pre-crisis school enrolment data that humanitarian organisations use to identify populations. Stigma associated with disability also results in families hiding their children with disabilities from humanitarian organisations out of fear of discrimination.

These gaps mean that data about populations in emergencies do not fully capture the experiences of children with disabilities and their families - and sometimes do not capture them at all.

When humanitarian organisations lack data about children with disabilities, they are unable to identify their needs or understand the barriers they face. What goes uncounted remains unaddressed - data about populations is essential for humanitarian organisations to be able to deliver support and services in crisis situations. In a 2024 survey of humanitarian actors conducted by Inclusion International, just 49.9% of humanitarian organisations surveyed reported that they believed that the education services that they provide are accessible to children with disabilities. This percentage was lower for children with intellectual disabilities (42.5%) and sensory disabilities (33.3%). Simply knowing how many children with disabilities live in a community is important, but is not sufficient to ensure their inclusion. Developing programming without a nuanced understanding of the specific barriers children with disabilities face results in policies and programmes that fail to respond to their needs, when they are already most at risk of exclusion from schools.

For children with disabilities this particularly matters for education in emergencies (EiE) programming. Children with disabilities face real barriers to accessing and progressing through the school system during peacetime, and the often low-resource environments in emergency contexts exacerbate the barriers to education they face. Humanitarian organisations move quickly to ensure that children are continuing to access education in emergency situations, but without understanding the barriers that children with disabilities face, this often means that previously existing barriers to education are reproduced and new barriers are created.

Erasure from data has the greatest impact on children facing multiple forms of marginalisation, including but not limited to, children with intellectual disabilities, children with complex needs, girls with disabilities, children with disabilities not enrolled in schools pre-crisis, and children with disabilities whose parent(s) are persons with disabilities themselves. These groups of children often need additional support to be fully included in the classroom, which is difficult for humanitarian organisations and schools to understand when they lack information about the barriers children face.

Ultimately, the result of the lack of data about the barriers that children with disabilities face is EiE programmes that fail to meaningfully include children with disabilities - violating their right to inclusive education.

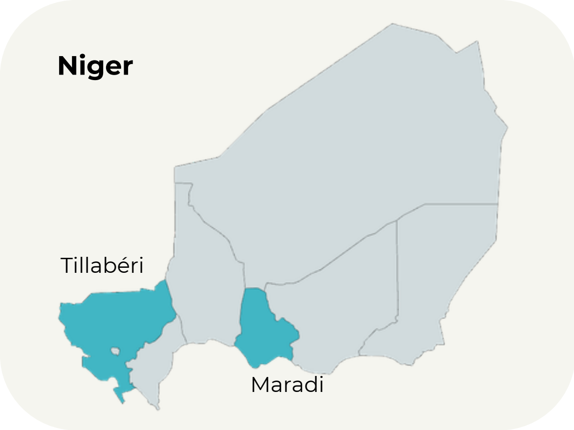
The right to inclusive education does not stop in a crisis. Children with disabilities have the right to be included in education under Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Article 11 of the CRPD also mandates that States ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities during crises. Though there is a clear mandate for the delivery of inclusive education, including during crisis situations, children with disabilities continue to have their rights violated by being left behind by EiE programming - and being left behind has lifelong impacts for children with disabilities.

In response to this gap in information about the nuanced experiences of children with disabilities and their families in crisis, this report aims to document the experiences of children with disabilities and their families in their own words. It shares stories, like Amina and Ibrahim's, that are not visible in available data about education during emergencies, sharing the barriers faced by children and their families and their recommendations for change.

To ensure that the right to inclusive education is fulfilled for children with disabilities living through emergency situations, humanitarian actors need better information about how to include them. Until humanitarian actors tasked with the design, delivery and evaluation of EiE interventions have a clear picture of the real experiences of children with disabilities and their families, they will continue to be left behind.

Methodology

This report is informed by interviews with children with disabilities and their family members conducted in five crisis-impacted regions - Norte De Santander, Arauca and Chocó in Colombia, and Maradi and Tillabéri in Niger.



This data collection was conducted as part of project work funded by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) being delivered in Colombia and Niger, limiting data collection to these two emergency contexts.

Through these interviews, we sought to collect stories that do not appear in data about access to education during crises. To do this, we first identified overarching questions that are unaddressed by existing data:

- What has the experience been of children with disabilities and their families in accessing education in emergency contexts? How has this experience changed while they live through a crisis situation?

- What barriers are there for children with disabilities in accessing EiE?

- What challenges do family members face when trying to support their child to access EiE?

- From the perspective of children with disabilities and family members, what do they think humanitarian actors don't understand about access to education for children with disabilities? What do they think humanitarian actors can do better to secure inclusive EiE?

These overarching questions informed the development of the interview guides for interviews with children and family members.

These interview guides were used by local organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) working in the five crisis-impacted regions, where persons with disabilities from OPDs facilitated the interviews. This OPD-led data collection model ensured that children with disabilities and their families were being interviewed by an adult with a disability who understood their perspective and their experiences. Data collectors associated with the partner OPDs were supported to prepare for the interviews with training on facilitation, data protection, safeguarding, informed consent, and other key concepts for inclusive and accessible data collection. Additional information about the preparation for and the methodologies used in the interviews can be found in this case study on the data collection process.

The interview guide for children was designed to provide different ways for children to communicate their thoughts and feelings - ranging from verbal communication to visual arts to song. The interview for children was also framed around vignettes which follow a child, Juan in Colombia and Moussa in Niger, who is going to school in a new place. The child uses a wheelchair, and faces a new barrier to inclusion in each of the four vignettes. The vignettes provided several children with a framework to articulate broader recommendations about inclusion, even when they could not directly relate to the specific scenario. In contrast, some children found it difficult to connect their own experiences to those outlined in the vignettes, frequently because they were from a different impairment group. The full text of the interview guide for interviews with children and with parents can be accessed as an Annex to the data collection case study.

Children with disabilities and their families were identified as interview respondents in collaboration with local schools, and by OPDs and local leaders with disabilities living in the crisis-impacted regions.

This report includes the experiences of 48 children from five crisis-impacted regions in Colombia and Niger. Participants were evenly split between girls and boys, and were from a mixture of different impairment groups, including children with physical disabilities, children with sensory disabilities including visual and auditory impairments, children with intellectual disabilities, and children with psychosocial disabilities. Though the children interviewed experience disability and barriers in different ways, they shared many common experiences accessing education in emergency contexts. Where an experience was reported more or less frequently by children from specific impairment groups and their family members, this is indicated within the text of the report.

48 family members took part in the family interviews. These participants were primarily parents of children with disabilities, along with a few grandparents and other extended family members. The vast majority of family members interviewed were women, reflecting the reality of the disproportionate responsibility of care that falls on female family members. Throughout the duration of the report ‘family members’ and ‘families’ will be used to refer to this group.

Quotes and stories shared by children with disabilities and their family members are shared throughout this report. Names of participants have been changed and any identifying details have been removed or changed to ensure that the experiences of the participants remain anonymous.

A child with a disability takes part in an interview in Niger.

What is living through a crisis like for children with disabilities and their families?

Crises, such as armed conflict and climate disasters, are shaping the lives of tens of millions of children across the world. For some, this means staying in place while their home community changes radically around them. For many others, this means being forced to leave their homes. Between 2010 and 2024, the global number of displaced children nearly tripled, from around 17.0 million to 48.8 million (UNICEF, 2025).

To understand what displacement means for children with disabilities and their families living in a new place, we spoke to children about what life looks like during and after a crisis.

Three key themes emerged about how day to day life is characterised for children with disabilities living through emergency situations:

Loss and disruption are heightened for families with a child with a disability.

Fear and safety concerns dominate the experiences of daily life.

Education is a lifeline for children with disabilities living through emergencies.

Loss and disruption

For any person living through a crisis, loss and disruption dominates day-to-day life. Living through an emergency can mean losing homes, family members, communities, and routines that give children a sense of safety and belonging. For children with disabilities, these losses are particularly profound, and the routines and support systems that they depend on are the hardest to rebuild.

Families often spend years fighting for their child to be understood - advocating for support, building relationships with teachers and service providers, and pushing for adjustments. When they are displaced, these years of labour are erased. In a new place, families reported finding themselves back at the beginning, having to prove their child's needs all over again to people who did not know them.

At the moment when families are already at their most stretched, trying to find safety, rebuild routines, and make sense of an unfamiliar place, they must also build new support systems while often navigating new needs that may emerge as a result of the experience of crisis.

Across the interviews, a clear picture emerged of families navigating unfamiliar systems, facing stigma and discrimination, and fighting for their child's right to get support and learn - largely unsupported. Displacement is profoundly disruptive, and it is families who bear the weight of rebuilding what it takes away.

Fear and safety concerns

After being displaced, families must navigate not only the practical challenges of rebuilding their lives, but the constant, exhausting work of keeping their children safe in unfamiliar places that are frequently inaccessible, unsafe, and often hostile to people with disabilities and their families.

Many family members are deeply concerned that children are exposed to risks from conflict and violence on their journey to school. These risks are significant - the majority of children we interviewed travel to school on foot, and for many this is not by choice. Family members talked about barriers to accessing suitable transportation such as that options are not physically accessible and the cost of transportation is too high. Others worry about the condition of the roads and paths that children use to travel to school. For many children, routes to school are unsafe, uneven, or blocked by physical obstacles. This is of particular concern for family members of children with sensory and mobility impairments.

Stories from families
Ana is the mother of two children with disabilities. One of her children has a hearing impairment, and another has a physical disability. Ana and her family were displaced from Norte De Santander, Colombia, to Venezuela 14 years ago. They have now returned to their home Norte De Santander, which still experiences armed conflict. Ana and her husband are very concerned about their children's safety. Ana's child with a physical disability travels to school by bus, which she finds reassuring. Her child with a hearing impairment walks to school, so Ana video calls him twice a day - while he walks to and from school - so that she can be sure that he is safe.

> "I really get stressed when I can't take her [to school] because of the difficulty of the neighbourhood, if I can't find someone I can trust to take her, because it's a dangerous neighbourhood."
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia*

> “[It] worries me, because I will only feel good when he comes [home] from school."
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Tillabéri, Niger*

For many families, these fears are further intensified by the stigma and discrimination their children face within their own communities - a source of danger that follows children, and also their families, outside of the school.

> "There were a couple of neighbours who were mean to him. Adults. There's a lady living next to the main road, close to us, and one time she said some ugly stuff to him, so we had a fight. [...] I felt that I had to defend my child, because she can not just stand on the street and start yelling that I should put the child in a cage. I told her he wasn't a dog or a chicken. He's a human being like any other, the fact that he has Down Syndrome, doesn't mean he's not human."
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia*

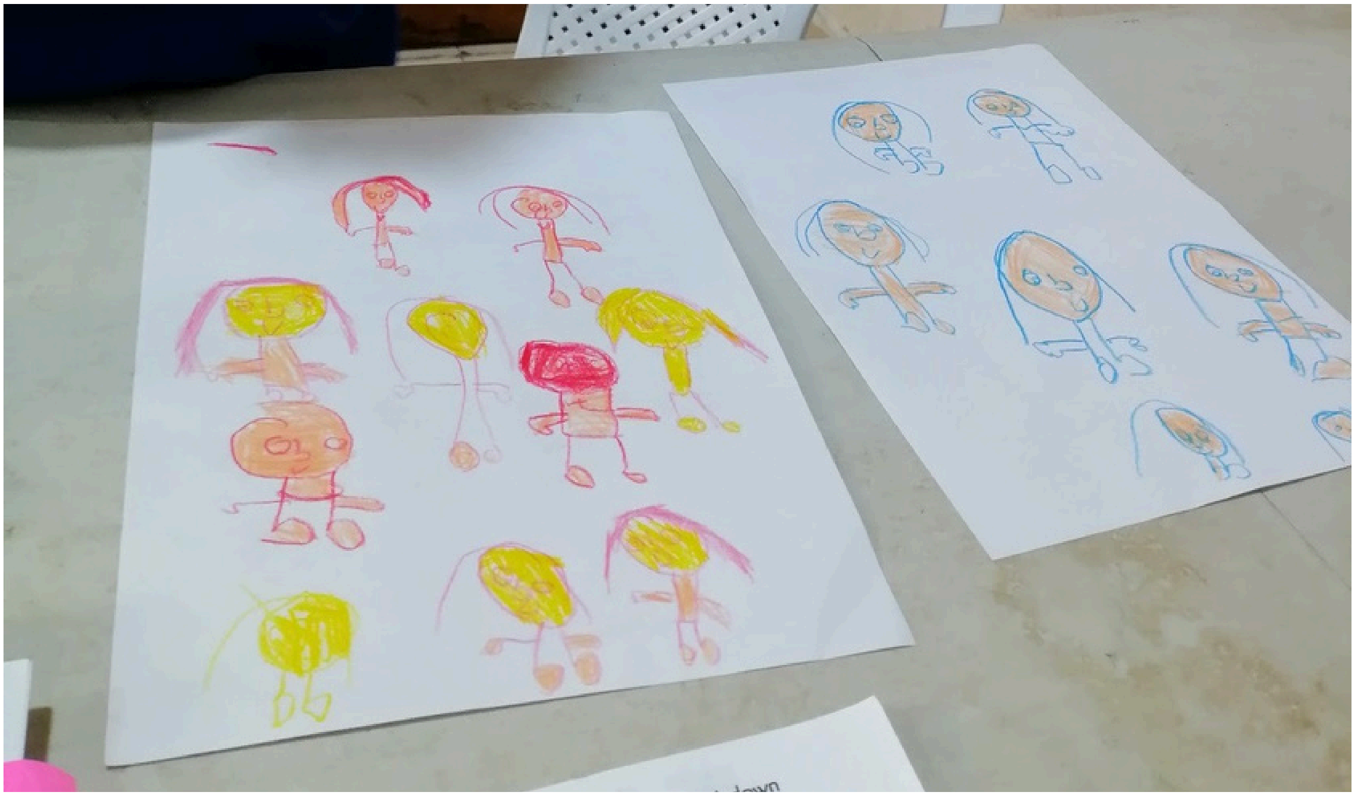
> “Other children hit him on the road, it’s a real problem for him to go to school.”
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Tillabéri, Niger*

Education as a lifeline

For children with disabilities living in emergency contexts, access to education is a lifeline. Not only is continuity in education important for academic progress and social development, it also provides children with safety and routine - stability when the world around them is unstable.

When children spoke during the interview about what had changed in their lives following their displacement, school was a key trend that emerged. Children spoke about what was different at their new school, and many spoke about the friends and teachers they had left behind. For children who took part in the interviews, participation at school was central to their daily routine, the place where many of their friendships and connections in the community began, and a key part of how they expressed their sense of belonging.

During the interviews, some children chose to draw a picture to illustrate their experiences at school. The majority of these were happy images showing them at their new schools featuring friends playing together and smiling teachers.



A child with a disability's drawing of their positive experience at school in Chocó, Colombia.

Many shared that they like going to school, talking excitedly about favourite subjects and describing close friendships with peers. For the children we interviewed, schools and classrooms were not just places for learning, but also places of belonging.

Living in settings where they experience instability, conflict, and disruption in their daily lives, many children described school as a form of sanctuary. For children with disabilities, education is one of the first places where they feel the impacts of displacement and is closely tied to their sense of identity and belonging. Ensuring that children with disabilities living through crisis can continue to access education is essential.

Educational Experiences of Children with Disabilities in Crisis

The majority of children with disabilities interviewed had memories both of attending school prior to the crisis, and of attending school during a protracted crisis - for most, this was attending school in a new place after displacement.

Children with disabilities and their parents shared some of the challenges they faced navigating education in a new place - including the process of re-enrolment and navigating new systems, facing new challenges getting to school, and experiences of children being in classrooms but not being meaningfully included.

Children with disabilities and their families reported encountering a wide ranging set of barriers, which were consistent across contexts in Colombia and Niger - ranging from physical barriers and other barriers to access, institutional barriers and a lack of resources, attitudinal barriers, and barriers to progression and learning.

This section reflects on both the challenges that children with disabilities and their families face, and the systemic barriers in place in the education system, humanitarian ecosystem, and community that create exclusion from EiE.

Navigating new systems and rules

For many children with disabilities, their new school after displacement was a very different environment than what they had previously experienced. For some, this looked like moving from a school in one community to another, for others this looked like a transition from a brick-and-mortar school to taking classes in informal structures like tents. Families shared their experiences navigating entirely new education systems, which had new rules and policies they had not encountered before and created a set of institutional barriers for families to overcome.

When families of children with disabilities encounter a school for the first time after moving to a new place, the first barrier they face is often at the school administration level. Families reported that the first challenge is often the attitudes from leadership figures such as principals and school board officials, or other school administrators whose support can be vital for ensuring children with disabilities are included in schools.

Some families shared their experiences being turned away when they went to register their child in school. Several family members, particularly those in Niger, reported that schools refused to recognise that children with disabilities have the right to education at all, and refused to enroll them on these grounds. Many families told us that when schools refused to enroll their children, the school explained to them that this was because they were not equipped to provide support. School administrators tell parents that they do not have support staff or interpreters, adapted buildings, classrooms and learning materials, or teachers with appropriate training, and therefore they cannot accommodate the child. These institutional barriers are among the reasons why children with disabilities are nearly 50% more likely to have never attended school than their peers (UNICEF, 2024). In the context of displacement, where the systems and relationships that might otherwise support a child's access to education have been stripped away, this gap widens further.

Other families who have been displaced also shared their experience dealing with the bureaucratic barriers to enrolment. Families report that displacement often leads to a loss or seizure of identification documents, without which children are then unable to enrol in school. For families of children with disabilities, these bureaucratic hurdles are often higher. Families reported that school administrations told them that in order to enroll, children with disabilities need further documentation, such as a record of a formal diagnosis or something to ‘prove’ that their child has the right to attend.

> "I suffered a humiliation that was very sad for me, it was very sad, I cried for more than two hours there on that bench, because I knocked on the door [of the school] with my daughter's folder in my hand, a nun came out, she was the mother superior, and I gave her my daughter's folder she told me that I was in the wrong place and closed the door on my face. She literally said: "You're in the wrong place, this is no rehabilitation centre for people with disabilities."
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia*

> "[The school told me] a deaf person has no right to learn."
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Maradi, Niger*

For families navigating unfamiliar systems, it can seem impossible to collate the information that schools request. It is also a challenge to discern whether certain documents are really necessary, or if those requests are being used as justification to reject their child because of their disability.


Families in Nariño visit this school building to speak to administrators as their first step in the enrolment process.

> **"Basically documentation, because when we migrants arrive, until we obtained permission, we were denied access to education."**
> Family member of a child with a disability living in Arauca, Colombia

> **"I'm tired of going to the town hall and talking to those people. I've talked to the Municipal legal representative, to the Sisbén officer, etc. I think they're all tired of me at the town hall. I've been trying for a month to talk to the mayor, but they say she's traveling. And even if she's there, they'll say she's not."**
> *Family member of a child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia*

For families who have been displaced and may be navigating a foreign school system in a new language without identity documents, these barriers can be insurmountable. This type of barrier to access can be either formal, as in the case of documented policies, or informal, as in the case of schools without formal enrolment policies that make it challenging for children with disabilities to enroll in other ways. These barriers within institutions are discrimination by another name - whereby schools use bureaucracy as an excuse to perpetuate exclusion of children with disabilities.

In contrast, some families did report positive experiences navigating new systems. Some family members expressed that the quality of education available in their new host community was an improvement on what was available to their children prior to displacement. This sentiment was particularly strong among families from Venezuela who had been displaced to Colombia. While Venezuela's education system tends to educate children with disabilities exclusively in segregated schools, Colombia's system focuses on inclusive education in mainstream schools. For many children and parents interviewed in Colombia, after displacement they were accessing education alongside peers without disabilities for the first time. For other children, moving to a new place opened a door that had previously been closed - a small number had not been able to attend school at all before displacement, and were able to attend school in their new host community.

Financial Barriers to Access

Across both Colombia and Niger, many family members reported that cost was also a barrier to enrolment or continued attendance, with costs including school fees, uniforms, supplies, and transportation presenting significant financial challenges. Families of children with disabilities are among the most likely to be living in poverty, and these costs can be the difference between a child attending school and staying at home. The financial strain facing many of these families is severe. Almost all of the family members interviewed in Niger described significant food insecurity - for some, the need to keep children at home to contribute to the family's survival made the question of school attendance feel almost beside the point.

> **Interviewer: “Is it difficult for your child to access education here?”**
> **Parent: “Sometimes, because of hunger.”**
> Family member of a child with a disability living in Tillabéri, Niger

Some family members shared that schools would only enroll their children with disabilities on the condition that the family would be financially responsible for support and adaptations in the classroom.

In practice, this means that families must effectively pay a fee for their child’s participation because they have a disability - an additional charge levied on the families least able to pay it.

> "They have told the teacher to print the guides with a larger font for him, which is good for him, but not for us, because we have to pay more for a guide with a larger font."
> Family member of a child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

> "The teacher made me a proposal where I had to pay one hundred thousand pesos to an intern who was with him. So that the intern would dedicate time to the child, since she didn't have enough time to give it to the child. It was very difficult for me"
> Family member of a child with a disability living in Arauca, Colombia

> "I thought my son wasn't going to be able to study, because I was looking into schools in the neighbourhoods, and he wasn't accepted because he was deaf, because he needed to have a shadow [teacher]. They said he needed a shadow and that I had to pay for that, that the government didn't do that, this and that, so, I thought that he wasn't going to study."
> Family member of a child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

Financial barriers to access are among the most penalising for families of children with disabilities. While many families are able to advocate for change and fight for the removal of institutional barriers, for most families, strong advocacy is not enough to remove financial barriers. In emergency settings where resources are constrained, the failure of governments and organisations to adequately fund EiE programming is pushed onto parents, who are expected to fill financial gaps themselves. This reinforces the misconception that inclusion is resource-intensive and unattainable in emergency contexts, presenting inclusion as a luxury only for wealthy families.

New challenges getting to school

As noted by many families who shared their concerns and fears about their children going to school in an area of protracted crisis, the journey to school is itself often a barrier to access - one that falls disproportionately on children with disabilities and the families who support them.

Many of the children we spoke to who are attending school travel there on foot. For many, this is not a straightforward journey. Family members described routes that are long and physically demanding - uneven roads, obstructed pathways, and in some cases routes that pass through areas affected by conflict or insecurity. For children with disabilities, particularly those with mobility or sensory impairments, these routes present challenges that go beyond inconvenience. For some, they make independent travel impossible.

Children in Nariño travel up this steep, uneven, unpaved path to get to school.

> "We must have an accessible road, an assistant."
> A child with a disability living in Tillabéri, Niger, talking about the importance of having a safe way to get to school.

Where transportation is available, it is frequently unaffordable or physically inaccessible, leaving families to find their own solutions. A few family members described children walking to school with siblings or friends, which eased some of their safety concerns and provided a degree of companionship and security on the journey. But this relies on families having built connections within their communities, and is not an option for every family.

Stories from Families
Carmen is the mother of a son who has a physical disability. She also identifies as a person with a disability herself. Carmen struggles to take her son to school because her partner recently passed away and she does not have family members around to support them. Now that her son is older, he is too heavy to lift alone, so she needs help to get him into an autorickshaw.

Stories from Families
Rosa is the single mother of a 10 year old daughter who has an intellectual disability. Rosa and her daughter were displaced five years ago, and now they live in Chocó, Colombia. They are now further away from family members who used to support them. Rosa is anxious about her daughter travelling to school because she doesn't see the neighbourhood to be safe.

Some families provide transport themselves, but this too comes with significant challenges, particularly for families already stretched by displacement, poverty, and the loss of support networks.

> **"When his dad was still alive, we would share duties, but now I have to do everything. It's a big change. For him too. If anything happened, we would solve it together, if one couldn't be there, the other one would fill in. We supported each other. But now I have to do most things alone, because when my other son isn't around, I have to do it alone."**
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia

Physical barriers persist once children arrive at the school gates - for many children with disabilities, the built environment of the school itself presents a further set of obstacles.

Stories from Children with Disabilities
Abdou is 15 years old. He feels happy at school, and has good friends. Abdou moved to Maradi from Nigeria with his mother when he was 10 years old. Abdou has a physical disability and uses crutches to move around. It is difficult for him to get to school, because he needs to walk a long distance along an uneven road. He says that it is difficult for him to move around at school, and he wishes that the classroom was more accessible.

Around school buildings, children reported encountering obstructed or uneven pathways, narrow doorways and corridors, and inadequate lighting - barriers that limit their ability to move safely and independently through the spaces they are supposed to learn in. Inside classrooms, insufficient space, rigid furniture layouts, and standard desks that cannot accommodate wheelchairs mean that some children are unable to position themselves to participate fully in lessons. For children with sensitivities to noise, the busy and often loud environment of a classroom can itself become a barrier to concentration and participation.

In these cases, poor infrastructure on the journey to school and at the school itself create not only physical barriers for children, but also a barrier to access when children with disabilities are not able to get to the classroom. Particularly in the case of areas experiencing armed conflict or natural disasters, infrastructure is often significantly impacted by crisis - and when governments do not prioritise rebuilding, children with disabilities are left behind.

Being present without being included

Though many children talked about their schools as places of belonging, as the interviews went on, the children talked about ways in which their experiences in the classroom diverge from those of their peers without disabilities. Children spoke about feeling left out, facing stigma and discrimination from peers and teachers, and a lack of support and reasonable adjustments - the unique barriers faced by children with disabilities that make the already challenging experience of going to school in a new place even more difficult.

Children and parents reported being excluded due to communication barriers, stigma and discrimination, and a lack of support in the classroom - including a lack of support to progress through grades.

Communication barriers were a key theme that emerged in the interviews - many children with visual or hearing impairments were excluded from participating in lessons because they are not given information in a format or language that they can understand.

Stories from Children with Disabilities
Santiago is 18 years old and he has a hearing impairment. Santiago moved from Venezuela to Norte De Santander in Colombia when he was 12 years old. This was a big adjustment - Colombian Sign Language is very different from the Venezuelan Sign Language that Santiago had been using before. There were times when he could not communicate with his teachers or peers, which made him feel sad. There is sometimes an interpreter in his classroom, but not always. When there is no interpretation, Santiago feels left behind, because teachers do not give him the same instructions as the rest of the class.

> "They are not qualified to educate my child because I have realised that they do not understand him. They do not have the teaching materials and they do not know the language of Braille."
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Arauca, Colombia

Stories from Families

Maria and her family live in Chocó, Colombia. Maria's daughter, Francisca, has a hearing impairment. Francisca uses speech to communicate with some difficulty, her family do not want her to use sign language for fear she will be discriminated against. The school was somewhat resistant to her enrolment, and once Francisca began attending, teachers and staff made limited attempts to include her. When Francisca started 10th grade, she was required to do a lot more presentations, which was challenging as the teachers could not understand her speech. This made her very anxious and upset.

In Niger, language presents a further barrier. Several family members reported that schools teach in French rather than in local languages, making it difficult for children, and their family members, to understand or engage with what is being taught. For children with disabilities who are already navigating significant barriers to participation, being taught in a language they do not fully understand adds yet another layer of exclusion.

Beyond communication barriers, many children and parents also reported other ways that they felt they were unsupported in the classroom. Many children and families reported that they felt teachers did not understand how to include them. Especially when faced with large class sizes, small classrooms and resource constraints, teachers often rely on ways of sharing information that can happen quickly and quietly, such as dictation exercises and tasks that require children to copy from a blackboard at the front of the class.

> "They write everything down and then erase it quickly. I tell [my child] to take a photo, but sometimes they don't let them because sometimes they take their phone away."
>
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

Family members and children talked about other specific examples of things that teachers do that create barriers to participation, like erasing boards with written instructions or lesson content quickly, and leaning on the use of dictation exercises, often without any repetition to make sure that all of the children are following.

Some family members went so far as to say that while their children are attending lessons with children without disabilities, a lack of efforts to include them means that they can only observe the lessons rather than participate. In fact, a few family members reported that their children did not understand what they were taught at school or were not learning anything at all.

Stories from Families

Sofia has an intellectual disability. In school, teachers are not patient with Sofia and often shout at her. Sofia does not get support to understand things during lessons, and learning materials are written in language that is not easy for Sofia to understand. Her mother, Valery, is worried that because her daughter is behind the other children in the class, she will not be able to progress to the next grade. Sofia is bullied at school, and the teachers do not intervene. In fact, they encourage the behaviour by telling other children that Sofia does not learn quickly.

> **"They don't understand the children, they don't know how to explain things to them."**
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia

> **"He goes to school, but he doesn't learn anything"**
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Tillabéri, Niger

Stories from Families

Umar's son, Sani, enjoyed attending school before the crisis and consistently achieved good grades, but a lot has changed for the family in the last few years. Umar and his family were displaced from Sokoto, Nigeria, four years ago, and they now live in Maradi in Niger. Sani acquired a psychosocial disability during the crisis, and Umar reports that his child needs quite a bit of support and feels that teachers at the school he now attends in Maradi do not understand how to provide this.

Recognising that teacher education programmes are not yet being designed to train future teachers on inclusive teaching methodologies, families of children with disabilities are often bridging this gap themselves by supporting teachers to understand how to support their child in the classroom. As some family members told us, this support sometimes extends as far as a family member physically attending school alongside their child. For some this is because they know that if they did not attend school alongside their child, they would not be able to participate. For others, the presence of a family member is a precondition for their child's enrolment and continued attendance. This is not sustainable, and unjustly places the responsibility for inclusive education onto families, rather than the schools.

Stories from Children with Disabilities

Adriana is a child with a hearing impairment who lives in Norte de Santander, Colombia. Adriana loves to attend school, largely because of her strong friendships. In the classroom, Adriana is often excluded because her teacher gives verbal instructions. Her mother is her primary support person at home, and often supports her in the classroom too. When Adriana's mother attends lessons the teacher often talks directly to her rather than to Adriana herself.

Several of the family members that participated in the interviews did not complete their own education, or did not attend school at all, meaning that they aren't able to act as their children's support person in the classroom or while they are completing homework. In many cases these families are not offered any alternative.

> "Completing assignments sometimes that they leave her, I didn't study, I don't have the ability to help her, sometimes I would like to help her, but it's impossible for me"
>
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

Stories from Families

Silvia and her family moved to Arauca, Colombia from Venezuela 2.5 years ago. One of her sons has an intellectual disability. Silvia feels that the schools in Colombia are better and more welcoming, but in practice her child's inclusion ultimately depends on his class teacher. Silvia's son's current teacher says that he is 'stupid' and insists he resit 1st grade. Silvia is frustrated that the school pledges to make change, but things never happen. The school has insisted that Silvia pay an intern to be her child's support person at school - which has been very financially challenging for the family.

The lack of support in the classroom also results in children with disabilities being prevented from progressing through education - many children and parents shared experiences of being held back to repeat grades. Several families reported that their children were placed in classrooms with children younger than them, which some children said made them feel strange, uncomfortable, or different.

Stories from Children with Disabilities
Jhon is 16 years old, and he lives in Arauca, Colombia, with his grandparents. Jhon has an intellectual disability. At school, Jhon likes studying history and art. Jhon is in the sixth grade, so he is much older than the other children in his class. Sometimes he feels included, but other times he finds it hard to get on with his classmates. He says that being the oldest in the class makes him feel strange and uncomfortable.

This also created a barrier to enrolment for some children when they moved to a new place, as schools refused to enroll them because they were 'behind' for their age group. Several family members expressed frustration that their children continue to be assessed in the same way as other children without disabilities, even though they are not afforded the same opportunities to participate in lessons.

> "In the countryside we didn't realise that she really had a disability, until she was in first grade, when she repeated, repeated and repeated. Then we came to the city and we wanted to get her to study, and it was very difficult because they said no, an eight-year-old girl in first year cannot be accepted [...] We went to several, several, several institutions and they said no, that because of the girl's age, it was clear that she had a learning disability."
> A family member of a child with a disability living in Arauca, Colombia

These gaps in the ability of teachers to teach students of diverse learning styles are treated as the individual failing of the child - not as a systemic issue of lack of training. This serves only to make children with disabilities and their families feel isolated and responsible for their own gaps in learning. By presenting these barriers to learning and progression as an individual failing, teachers and schools are able to avoid accountability and continue to ignore the need for comprehensive teacher training.

Discrimination and stigma at school

For many children, negative attitudes amongst their peer groups create a barrier to engaging fully in their school communities. Several children reported feeling lonely, or struggling to make friends at school, and others said that other children did not play with them or excluded them from activities. Many family members reported that their children experienced bullying at school, including name-calling, physical aggression, having belongings broken, being excluded, and peers trying to get them into trouble. In several cases, instead of challenging the behaviour, family members reported that teachers held attitudes that reinforced stigma, including calling children lazy, or bad students, and encouraging bullying.

> **"They made fun of me - Monday to Friday."**
> A child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia

> **"Well, the truth is that teachers didn't care about him. They complained that he didn't pay attention. They rejected him. They said he was a bad student."**
> A child with a disability living in Chocó, Colombia

These negative attitudes can be held by teachers and administrators as well. Within many communities and schools, it continues to be accepted that children with disabilities can and should only attend segregated or ‘special’ schools. As noted in several of the interviews with families in Niger, this assumption can also extend into a view that children with disabilities cannot attend any schools at all. Even when children with disabilities do attend schools that are not segregated, this perception that they are not capable of participating in the same way as their peers continues - the children themselves are regarded as ‘difficult’ or problematic, and are then treated as such by teachers.

The discrimination from teachers and tacit approval of bullying by schools is a function of broader stigma associated with disability in communities. Several family members reported facing discrimination and stigma within their communities, and many families reported that they felt they had no choice but to hide their children with disabilities in order to keep them safe. A few family members reported that they face discrimination even within their own families due to stigma surrounding their child’s disability.

For several children, these barriers make going to school so challenging that they have developed a negative perception of school and learning overall - not because they don't want to learn, but because going to school has become inseparable from the feeling of being left behind.

These attitudinal barriers not only prevent children from being fully included with their peers or in the classroom, they also have lasting impact on the self-worth and confidence of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities facing attitudinal barriers at school lose access to what for many children is a sanctuary in a disruptive period of their life, instead giving children with disabilities facing bullying and discrimination at school yet another experience of loss and isolation.

These individual experiences of exclusion that children with disabilities and their families are facing are not isolated, and are not accidental. These experiences of children and their families trying to access inclusive education in emergencies in Niger and Colombia are a predictable outcome of an exclusionary system - the product of decisions by policy makers, schools, and humanitarian actors making decisions that perpetuate exclusion. The experiences of children with disabilities and their families will not improve until these actors take action for genuinely inclusive EiE.

Removing Barriers to Education in Emergencies

The stories that children and families shared about the challenges they face trying to go to school after being displaced illustrate that these barriers do not occur in isolation. Exclusion from EiE does not happen only at a single barrier point - it is weaved through the system, with families experiencing challenges and moments of being turned away at every step of the process - from attitudes that denied their child's right to be in school at all, to financial pressures that made attendance impossible, to learning environments that exclude their children from taking part.

Barriers feed upon one another to create a system of exclusion. Physical barriers and attitudinal barriers build on one another to create new barriers to access, and institutional barriers and a lack of resources create more barriers to learning and progression. Individual barriers compound in the lives of children with disabilities and their families, revealing the extent to which education systems were not designed to include them.

This interconnected set of barriers needs to be addressed holistically. Addressing the experiences that children and families have shared requires a system-wide response that schools, humanitarian organisations, and governments need to work in partnership to address - in consultation with children with disabilities, their families, and the OPDs that represent them.

This section outlines some of the main systemic barriers to inclusive EiE and how stakeholders can begin to take action to remove them.

Discriminatory school policies

Families outlined how the negative attitudes of school administrators create a barrier to access for children with disabilities through discriminatory enrolment policies. This occurs both in the case of documented school policies to not accept children with disabilities, or de-facto enrolment policies whereby the administrative burden of collection documentation is so high for the family of a displaced child with a disability that the school has effectively prevented them from enrolling.

While it is frequently the case that schools in places impacted by emergencies are under-resourced, this does not exempt these schools from their obligation to provide children with disabilities access to education on an equal basis with their peers. All children, regardless of their circumstances, have the right to be welcomed to schools and included in the education systems. In opting not to enroll children with disabilities, schools reinforce negative attitudes and stigma about people with disabilities - painting the children themselves and their families as the problem rather than the barriers that stand in their way.

In all cases, whether children with disabilities are barred from enrolling in schools as an official school policy, informally or as justified though other enrolment policies, international human rights frameworks like the CRPD are clear - this is discrimination.

Schools have a responsibility to remove any barriers to enrolment for children with disabilities - this includes eliminating policies that require additional medical documentation for children with disabilities, eliminating requirements for additional school fees for children with disabilities, and adopting zero-rejection policies that welcome all children for enrolment.

Inaccessible spaces

Children with disabilities are frequently physically obstructed from attending school - both on the journey to school and within physical structures where teaching and learning take place.

On their way to school, many children shared that they experience physically demanding journeys, are exposed to safety risks as a result of surrounding violence and conflict, and need to navigate roads and paths in poor condition with obstacles along their routes. When safe, accessible, affordable and reliable transport is available, children are able to travel to school with a sense of safety and independence. When it is not, families already under pressure are forced to fill the gaps, or else their child is excluded from attending school before they even reach the front door.

In emergency situations, many children are attending school in physical spaces that were not designed with them in mind. These conditions affect all children, but the impact is greatest on children with disabilities - a narrow corridor is an inconvenience for one child, and an insurmountable obstacle for another child who has a disability. When schools are not designed to include children with disabilities, the message is clear - that they do not belong, that their learning is not important. For some children, these barriers mean that they cannot go to school at all.

Governments funding education systems and humanitarian organisations delivering EiE programming have a responsibility to ensure that all children can access schooling - this includes choosing accessible learning spaces, making funding available to remove physical barriers, providing safe transportation for children when needed.

Lack of teacher training

In many communities, teachers are not equipped with the knowledge or skills to teach using inclusive methods or to fully include children with disabilities in their classrooms. This is particularly true where segregated education systems are deeply entrenched. They may not understand how to adapt learning materials or assessment practices to meet diverse needs, and often attribute challenges to children and their families rather than identifying and addressing barriers in the classroom.

As outlined by children and family members during the interviews, this lack of trained personnel represents a major barrier to children with disabilities in enjoying their right to an inclusive education. Schools who do not employ teachers with sufficient training then have an excuse to turn away children with disabilities - not only are these schools not contributing to the drive towards realising inclusive education systems, they are actively fighting against it.

When schools do not support their teachers with training on inclusive practices, their knowledge gaps harm the children with disabilities in their classrooms directly.

Teachers working in emergency contexts need training on how to include children with disabilities in the classroom. And families of children with disabilities can be a key partner in supporting that training. The deep knowledge held by family members about how to support children with disabilities in schools and classrooms is incredibly valuable, and can be integrated into training for teachers and school staff. Training should be for all teachers - not an optional add on just for ‘special education’ teachers, and should not be delivered as a one-off. Continuous learning by teachers is necessary to remove barriers to learning and progression and to ensure that children with disabilities are not left behind.

> **"So, I think that, my recommendation [for teachers], is that empathy, right? Of putting themselves in our shoes, of, well, come on, there's a barrier and we have to slow down, I would recommend that they have that."**
> A child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

Financial barriers

Whether families are spending hours at school supporting their child, paying out-of-pocket for adaptations that should be provided for free, or keeping children at home because attendance has become unaffordable, the financial consequences compound over time. And for many families, the support that might ease this pressure is either inaccessible or does not exist at all.

Accessing education represents a greater financial barrier for families of children with disabilities. In addition to costs that apply to all such as school uniforms and stationary, families of children with disabilities are frequently expected to take on further costs to ensure their child’s inclusion - during the interviews, family members shared that they have been told that they must cover the cost of adapted learning materials and additional support staff, with some parents even being required to attend school alongside their children as support persons themselves.

A lack of access to education also presents a financial burden to parents - time that family members spend caring for school-aged children at home is time that they cannot spend working to support their families financially. During the interviews family members shared that they felt they were in need of financial or livelihood support, and many said where this was available it is hard to access - it is clear that the additional financial stress faced by families of children with disabilities is not reflected in availability of sufficient financial support.

Ensuring that families of children with disabilities not face extra costs associated with disability is a core part of an inclusive social protection system - and government benefits need to work in combination with schools to ensure that financial barriers do not prevent children with disabilities from accessing education.

Budgeting for the cost of inclusion

Children and family members highlighted a lack of reliable support from sign language interpreters, a lack of availability of learning materials in accessible formats such as braille or larger font size, and classrooms inaccessible to children with physical disabilities.

This lack of investment is then used as justification to exclude children with disabilities at the point of enrolment. The lack of enrolled students with disabilities then provides school administrations carte blanche to claim that it is not necessary to invest in resources and adaptations needed for children with disabilities, because they are not present in the school.

Thinking of inclusion in the classroom as an unaffordable extra is common among schools in low-resource environments, but is a misrepresentation of the reality. Investing in inclusion benefits all students, and many of the adaptations that students need can be delivered at low or no cost. This gap widens in low-resourced schools and in crisis situations, where there is even greater risk that inclusion will be regarded as a luxury to be addressed once more 'basic' needs are met. This only makes meaningful change harder and more costly to achieve further down the line. Families understand this, and inclusive schools should leverage their knowledge about how to support children with disabilities at low or no cost.

In fact, one child who took part in the interviews in Colombia directly referenced the value of flexibility and willingness to adapt where resources are not available:

> "So, in some spaces we don't have interpreters. So, what would I recommend? That we know that maybe it's not directly the teacher's fault, but that they should organise strategies to be able to explain a subject to us. Yes, maybe not do it the same way as the hearing students, who write quickly, erase and don't take us into account."
>
> A child with a disability living in Norte de Santander, Colombia

Lack of support for families

At the moment, gaps in implementation of inclusive education are primarily filled by families of children with disabilities, who experience barriers first hand and push back against them. These family members, in reality mostly mothers, are forced to prop up an education system that does not prioritise inclusion of all children, and they are doing so largely unsupported.

Family knowledge of and demand for inclusive education varies between communities. For families living in similar contexts, the difference between segregated education, integrated education, and inclusive education is not always clear. In many cases, if segregated education is all that a family knows is available, this may be what they advocate for, particularly where segregated education systems are deeply pervasive. To empower families to continue to push against barriers that they face in accessing EiE, families need support and resources to understand the rights of their children with disabilities and to counteract misinformation about their potential and ability to learn.

Families lack support to build spaces in which they can connect and work together, such as peer support and advocacy groups. The majority of the family members who participated in the interviews shared that they did not feel that they support or are supported by other families with similar experiences, and they are not connected to an OPD. OPDs or informal family groups provide spaces to connect with others who share similar experiences and develop understanding of their rights. Without these spaces for peer connection and collective organising, families are more vulnerable to misinformation, and less able to sustain advocacy over time - isolation reinforces low expectations. Governments and humanitarian actors rarely invest in supporting family organising and OPD development, yet this infrastructure is foundational to making progress towards inclusive education.

Recommendations

The education crisis for displaced children is growing. It is more important than ever that EiE actors understand the barriers facing children with disabilities, so that they can allocate limited resources more effectively to ensure their inclusion. When they do not, they risk impeding and even reversing progress made towards the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and human rights conventions such as the CRC and CRPD. Children with disabilities and their families cannot continue to bear the consequences of exclusion from EiE - governments, humanitarian actors, and schools need to take action.

The following recommendations section sets out the changes that must be made by different stakeholders - governments, humanitarian actors, schools, and OPDs - to ensure that children with disabilities are not left out of education in emergencies.

Children with disabilities and their families living in emergency settings are calling for change through six key recommendations:

1. Train teachers and school staff on how to adopt inclusive practices
2. Treat families as a core partner, and provide them with real support
3. Invest in inclusion
4. Strengthen schools by strengthening communities
5. Prioritise understanding the needs of children with disabilities and their families in data collection
6. Coordinate more effectively, including with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)

Recommendation 1:
Train teachers and school administrators on how to adopt inclusive practices

Children with disabilities and families feel that their teachers do not understand or know how to support them. Training schools and teachers on inclusive pedagogy and inclusive classroom practices is essential to removing barriers to progression and learning.

Governments must:

- ☑ Embed training on inclusive pedagogy and classroom management into the curriculum for pre-service teacher training for all future teachers - not only specialist or 'special education' teachers
- ☑ Mandate that schools eliminate exclusionary enrolment policies - including medical document or disability certificate requirements
- ☑ Monitor inclusion indicators when assessing performance of schools and EiE programming
- ☑ Consult with children with disabilities and their families about the gaps in inclusive practices

Humanitarian organisations must:

- ☑ Train all staff working on inclusive EiE - from the global level to the field level - on the rights of children with disability to inclusive education
- ☑ Partner with OPDs to ensure training includes the real perspectives and advice of children with disabilities and their family members

Schools must:

- ☑ Provide in-service teachers with continuous training on inclusive pedagogy and classroom management
- ☑ Deliver ongoing training to non-academic staff in schools about inclusion
- ☑ Evaluate teachers on their use of inclusive practices as a criterion in performance evaluations

Recommendation 2: Treat families as a core partner, and provide them with real support

From being asked to step into schools and play a support teacher role through to educating their children with disabilities at home when they've been excluded, families of children with disabilities are filling education in emergency gaps.

Families need to be recognised as key partners for inclusive education, and given real support to help them play that role. These actions are essential to remove barriers to access and learning.

Governments must:

- ☑ Consult families of children with disabilities on their needs
- ☑ Provide financial and livelihood support to families of children with disabilities living in emergency contexts
- ☑ Fund mechanisms through which families can learn about their child's educational rights, including investing in and resourcing the formation and strengthening of OPDs
- ☑ Commit to ensuring OPD and family representation in emergency response planning
- ☑ Mandate the inclusion of family representatives and OPDs in national and regional EiE working groups and policy design boards

Humanitarian organisations must:

- ☑ Consult families of children with disabilities about the barriers their child faces accessing EiE programming
- ☑ Work in partnership with OPDs to support programmes that teach families about their child's right to inclusive education
- ☑ Fund the development of peer support networks and advocacy groups for families of children with disabilities living in crisis-impacted communities

- ☑ Build support for families in as a core component of all EiE programming, not an optional add-on
- ☑ Consider the needs of parents from different backgrounds when designing programmes - for example, parents of children with disabilities who themselves have disability, or parents who did not attend school

Schools must:

- ☑ Train teachers on the role of families as key partners
- ☑ Document advice of the family regarding their child’s specific support needs and communication or learning styles.
- ☑ Prohibit teachers from requiring parents to provide in-classroom support
- ☑ Create mechanisms for teachers to consult families on support needs and accommodations
- ☑ Mandate engagement of families in decision-making about support for their child with a disability
- ☑ Create spaces for parents of children with disabilities on parent committees or other parent decision making groups within the school

Recommendation 3: Invest in Inclusion

Families feel that governments and schools do not provide the support and resources needed for their children to be included. Action is needed to remove access barriers, institutional barriers, and barriers associated with a lack of resources.

Governments, schools, and humanitarian organisations working on EiE need to invest in inclusion - stopgap solutions will not create inclusion for children with disabilities, but prioritising them and ensuring schools have the resources to support them and their families will.

Governments must:

- ☑ Consult with children with disabilities, their families, and their OPDs about what support and resources are needed for inclusive EiE
- ☑ Budget for inclusion and reasonable accommodation as part of every department’s work
- ☑ Invest in accessible physical infrastructure of school environments - this includes widening doorways, removing obstructions from pathways, and providing accessible classroom furniture and appropriate lighting
- ☑ Commit to funding minimum accessibility standards - this means full cost coverage for accessible learning materials (such as Braille, large fonts, etc.), sign language interpreters, and classroom support in all classrooms
- ☑ Fund appropriately trained support staff in annual education budgets - including budgeting for continuous training
- ☑ Fund affordable, physically accessible, and reliable transportation options for children with disabilities to get to school
- ☑ Embed financial support for the cost of education into social protection systems and emergency benefits

Humanitarian organisations must:

☑ Invest resources in training staff on inclusive practices

☑ Commit to embedding dedicated funding for including children with disabilities in EiE programming

Schools must:

☑ Prohibit practices that require families to pay out-of-pocket for “shadow teachers” or interns as a precondition for their child with a disability’s enrolment

☑ Prohibit the denial of enrolment based on a lack of financial resources for inclusion

Recommendation 4:
Strengthen schools by strengthening communities

Children with disabilities are often excluded from enrolment or excluded in the classroom due to stigma and discrimination. This stigma and discrimination in the education system is a symptom of broader stigma about people with disabilities in the community, and directly produces attitudinal barriers.

Buying into the goal of inclusive communities and prioritising reducing stigma in the community will also translate to more inclusive schools.

Governments must:

- ☑ Consult children with disabilities, their families, and their OPDs on stigma and how to respond to it
- ☑ Develop and robustly enforce anti-discrimination laws
- ☑ Develop and enforce laws that protect the right to inclusive education for all children
- ☑ Establish community-based inclusion committees consisting of local leaders, OPD representatives, families of children with disabilities, and school staff
- ☑ Fund and implement community-wide awareness and safety initiatives that specifically target street-level harassment that impacts children on the journey to school

Humanitarian organisations must:

- ☑ Work with OPDs to understand the contextual and intersectional stigma faced by children with disabilities and their families, and deliver programming that responds to their experiences
- ☑ Include facilitators with disabilities in community-led anti-stigma programming as part of EiE interventions
- ☑ Ensure safeguarding policies and procedures include measures to protect children with disabilities and their families from stigma and discrimination

- ☑ Ensure reporting mechanisms about bullying and discrimination are clear, confidential, and accessible to people with diverse communications needs (e.g., providing easy-read formats, visual aids, or alternative communications methods)
- ☑ Train community and religious leaders and school staff to be able to identify signs of abuse and discrimination facing children with disability

Schools must:

- ☑ Challenge stereotypes about children with disabilities amongst staff, students, and families
- ☑ Train teachers and staff to intervene immediately when children with disabilities face bullying, name-calling, or aggression from peers.
- ☑ End the stigmatising practice of forcing children with disabilities to repeatedly resit grades
- ☑ Actively promote the use of sign language and other accessible communication tools and practices within school and the broader community

Recommendation 5:
Prioritise understanding the needs of children with disabilities and their families in data collection

Children with disabilities and their parents are underserved by humanitarian programming. Not only are their needs not being met, many families feel they aren't counted by organisations that should support them - humanitarian organisations don't know where their children are, or how to reach them.

Effective data collection is a precursor to effective programming - for children with disabilities to be included in EiE programming and their barriers to access to be removed, they need to be reflected in data.

Governments must:

- ☑ Take measures to capture "hidden" children with disabilities in data collection
- ☑ Harmonise population datasets across government departments to ensure different stakeholders are working from the same information
- ☑ Collect information about disability that can be disaggregated in national censuses
- ☑ Implement accessible civil registration drives during emergencies to identify and officially document children with disabilities

Humanitarian organisations must:

- ☑ Identify out of school children not captured in education data collected by governments.
- ☑ Not rely solely on pre-crisis school rosters for EiE programme planning
- ☑ Use community-based identification methods to find children who were already excluded before the crisis
- ☑ Consult with OPDs and leaders with disabilities in the community to capture qualitative data about barriers to education in emergency

☑ Measure why children are excluded, not only if they are excluded

☑ Design data collection systems that uncover systemic barriers, such as discriminatory enrolment policies, a lack of necessary classroom adaptations, school drop-out as a result of discrimination, etc.

☑ Disaggregate data to understand the experiences of children facing multiple forms of marginalisation, such as girls with disabilities, children with high support needs, and children who are entirely out of the school system

☑ Shift monitoring and evaluation metrics away from simple output data (such as parent attendance at workshops) to outcome data (tracking continued attendance and learning).

☑ Engage OPDs as leaders and advisors for data collection

Schools must:

☑ Regularly review data about progression and attainment that is disaggregated by disability to identify barriers still in place

Recommendation 6:
Coordinate more effectively, including with OPDs

Children with disabilities and their families struggle to get access to the support they need in a crisis situation - a high number of actors involved in the provision of emergency support and the lack of single entry point mean that families have difficulty navigating complicated systems and don't know where to turn for support.

Families want to see coordination between governments, humanitarian actors, and other stakeholders that have their needs in mind - they are calling for actors involved in emergency response, including EiE, to work together more effectively for the benefit of families. Better coordination removes barriers to access.

Governments must:

☑ Consult children with disabilities and their families on the barriers to accessing support

☑ Streamline bureaucratic systems - create single entry points for families trying to access support from the government in a crisis.

☑ Coordinate between the civil registry and other departments to ensure missing identification or disability certificates are not a barrier to accessing services.

☑ Provide direct funding to local OPDs as formal advisory and referral partners in the emergency response system.

Humanitarian organisations must:

☑ Coordinate using the cluster system and other mechanisms to create single entry points for families trying to access support during a crisis.

☑ Partner with OPDs, who can connect isolated families and bring key insights about challenges of navigating disability services

☑ Coordinate cross-regional case-management systems that allow a child's support needs and successful learning strategies to travel with them, preventing families from starting from scratch every time they move.

Schools must:

- ☑ Be in dialogue with providers of services and programming in crisis situations to refer families in need of support
- ☑ Provide information to parents of children with disabilities about available support from humanitarian organisations they may not be aware of
- ☑ Coordinate “handovers” directly with previous schools, humanitarian agencies, or local OPDs to securely transfer information about a child’s accommodation and learning profile

Conclusion

Global legal frameworks, such as the CRPD, mandate that all children have the right to inclusive education - a right that holds even, and especially, during situations of crisis. However, as clearly illustrated in the experiences of children and their families in Colombia and Niger shared throughout this report, these policies are not translating into rights realised, and significant gaps remain which threaten to prevent or even reverse progress.

Global human rights frameworks in isolation do not translate to implementation of inclusive education because they are poorly enforced - segregated learning environments persist in many countries where the CRPD has been ratified, even when national laws have been aligned with the mandate for inclusive education. In reality, the existence of these legal frameworks means little without mechanisms to monitor compliance, identify violations, and hold schools accountable when they fail to meet their obligations.

Children with disabilities and their families living in Colombia and Niger shared their experiences navigating complex systems, challenging discrimination and advocating for the rights of their children largely without support. This is not accountability. A mother fighting to get her child enrolled in a mainstream school is not a substitute for a robust enforcement system that ensures no child is turned away in the first place. This gap widens further in situations of crisis during which monitoring and accountability is more difficult to sustain, so exclusion is more likely to go undocumented and unchallenged.

In emergency situations, compliance becomes even more challenging to monitor. The need to move quickly allows humanitarian organisations to justify leaving children with disabilities out. A lack of resources is used as an excuse to avoid delivering on inclusion. Emergencies create new barriers for children with disabilities that didn't exist previously. Children that require more support to include move to the back of the line. As a result, the right to education for children with disabilities is violated in emergency contexts.

These gaps in addressing the barriers identified by children and their families during the interviews are all interconnected and reinforce one another. Children with disabilities are not sufficiently considered in emergency situations. Discriminatory policies enable exclusion, teachers with insufficient training perpetuate low expectations, governments and schools continue to avoid investment in inclusion, and unsupported families are left to fill in the gaps and without reliable monitoring and enforcement, nothing changes.

Safeguarding the right to inclusive EiE cannot continue to be shouldered by the families of children with disabilities fighting against broken systems.

Armed with an understanding of the real experiences of accessing EiE in crisis and the 6 clear recommendations made by children with disabilities and their families, EiE stakeholders have the evidence they need to take real action.

The EiE sector must take accountability for ensuring that children with disabilities are not left out of inclusive education in emergencies, or risk the continuation of a failing to protect children with disabilities and uphold their rights.

Inclusion international

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