

Effective Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Open and Distance Learning at all Levels of Education

Key Note Speech delivered at the Educational Symposium on Equitable Access and Inclusive Learning in Open and Distance Education held at the University of Zambia in Lusaka on 13th and 14th June, 2024

By

Wamundila Waliuya

Founder and Director

Disability Rights Watch (DRW)

Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am really pleased to be here at the University of Zambia for the Educational Symposium on Equitable Access and Inclusive Learning in Open and Distance Education. I am grateful to the organising committee of this important symposium for inviting me, as Founder and Director of Disability Rights Watch (DRW) to be here and render this key note speech. My key note speech is on “Effective Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Open and Distance Learning at all Levels of Education”. I have chosen to deliver this key note speech from the activist perspective.

Before I proceed, it is essential to highlight what Disability Rights Watch focuses on when it comes to inclusion of persons with disabilities in education, especially the focus on effective inclusive education. In our quest for inclusive education, DRW believes that there is urgent need to effectively and efficiently use open and distance education and technologies to expand accessibility to quality education towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the Eight National Development Plan towards Vision 2030.

DRW, as an organisation that stands on the principle of dignity, equality and non-discrimination believes that inclusive education and participatory learning is the key to sustainable inclusive development that can be achieved through Community Based Inclusive Development as an intervention strategy.

DRW believes that inclusive learning must lead to three things: economic growth; social inclusion and environmental conservation. This aligns us with Goal 4 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4 aspires to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all by 2030. Inclusion and equity are central to this Goal towards the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in open and distance education at all levels. Without the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in open and distance education, it will be impossible to achieve this ambitious Goal.

In fact, two of the ten targets in SDG4 draw attention to the need to:

- i) eliminate disparities for persons with disabilities and
 - ii) to provide infrastructure and materials for improved access to education.
- If we are to achieve these ambitious targets, we need to adopt alternative and innovative approaches.

As we address the theme of "Equitable Access and Inclusive Learning in Open and Distance Education: Navigating Challenges, Embracing Innovation" I want from the onset stress the indication that Open and Distance Learning (ODL) should not only be perceived as a strategy for secondary and tertiary education but for all levels of education from early childhood education to tertiary and long-life education. We all learnt and experienced this during the COVID 19 pandemic. We had the experience that some learners were reached through digital technology when there was a shut down of all learning institutions. Many of the learners with disabilities were, however, left out due to absence of assistive technologies that would enhance access to learning. Assistive technologies are essential for effective inclusion of persons with disabilities in open and distance education at all levels.

In order to enhance effective inclusion of persons with disabilities, there is need to have real-time data and statistics on the numbers and educational needs of different categories of persons with disabilities. However, it has come to the realisation of DRW that there are no existing data and statistics on the participation of persons with disabilities in open and distance education from the current ODL programmes at secondary and tertiary levels. This is a concern from the inclusion and human rights perspective. This is compounded with the inadequacy of government sponsored and supported assistive technologies to enhance effective inclusion of persons with disabilities in open and distance learning.

In order to increase access and equity, lower costs and improve quality for the effective participation of persons with disabilities in education, the role of open and distance learning becomes more relevant than ever before.

Realising that distance education is the delivery of learning or training to learners who are separated, mostly by time and space, from those who are teaching and training some kind of technology or media must be used for communication between them. For persons with disabilities assistive technology is essential and a must. Assistive technologies include computer screen readers, voice recognition technologies, magnifiers for persons with visual impairments. Talking books are also required for persons with disabilities, especially those with visual impairments. Persons with hearing impairments would require sign language videos, computer based sign language and so on. Assistive technologies are individualised.

Online or virtual lessons or lectures should always be accompanied with a caption of a sign language interpreter paid by the learning institution.

In ODL, there are less restrictions in terms of entry qualifications, age, gender and disabilities. But in order to have real ODL with reduced restrictions and increased access the policy environment should make it compulsory for institutions to provide assistive technologies for persons with disabilities. The policy environment should provide for zero-rated importation of any assistive technology meant to increase access for persons with disabilities.

Peer support for learners with disabilities should be encouraged by the Government in order to enhance participation for those who require more intensive support. This includes learners with intellectual and mental impairments; learners with deaf-blindness and those with multiple disabilities. Since learning takes place away from the teacher or trainer, mostly at home, fees should be subsidised or completely waved off to offset the cost the sponsors of the learners with disabilities incur to pay any peer or assistant supporting their person.

I want to stress that united and together, with shared resources, knowledge and experience, let us drive a future where education is inclusive, accessible, and empowers all learners. Open and distance learning is key towards this drive.

End.