

# Day of Persons with Disabilities

Uganda joins the world to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities but the thorn in the side in poor inclusion.

BY EMMY ODOCH

As Uganda joins the world to commemorate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, one message continues to echo loudly: inclusion without accountability is merely symbolic.

Celebrated this year under the theme: "Wealth creation programmes: a key to socio-economic empowerment of persons with disabilities," the day has prompted renewed scrutiny into how far Uganda has gone—and how far it still needs to go—in ensuring genuine disability inclusion.

According to the contested 2024 Uganda Bureau of Statistics census, Uganda is home to 5.5 million persons with disabilities (PWDs), up from 4.4 million in 2014, with the Lango sub-region registering the highest prevalence. These figures underscore the urgency of ensuring that national efforts, particularly in service delivery and economic empowerment, genuinely reflect the needs of PWDs.

Yet disability rights advocates warn that progress remains fragile and could easily slide backwards if accountability, leadership, and follow-through are not woven into every sector.

## Policies without practice

Brian Enyimu, a disability rights advocate and social worker at UGANET says inclusion must be understood as a continuous, evolving process rather than a one-time action.

"Inclusion is a journey, not an end," he says, emphasising that many of the most persistent barriers stem from beautifully written policies that break down at the point of implementation. "We must learn from being accountable to the people. That strengthens our urge for inclusion."

Enyimu argues that inclusion collapses when it lacks systems to measure results, identify gaps, and adjust accordingly. Policies exist, he notes, but without monitoring and feedback loops, progress inevitably loses momentum.

In the education sector, for instance, Uganda has made significant steps towards inclusive classrooms, such as promoting universal design and improving communication support. Yet it remains unclear how much of this has translated into real progress.

"There's no clear reporting mechanism to show milestones," he explains, adding that the new national curriculum has not been adequately adapted for learners with disabilities. As a result, many students continue to struggle, especially during national assessments where their specific learning needs go unmet.

Forward-thinking organisations continue to push for a national inclusive education policy that legally

# Inclusion without accountability means nothing



A disabled man makes shoes. Many PWDs long to make such strides but are inhibited by several discriminatory practices. PHOTO/COURTESY

binds schools to uphold inclusive learning standards rather than treating them merely as optional improvements.

## Gains at risk in the banking sector

The banking sector is another area where early strides in disability inclusion appear to be shrinking. Enyimu notes that despite a period of improvement—particularly in customer care and accessibility—these gains have been eroded by staffing changes and inconsistent training.

"Over time, due to staffing changes, they completely don't understand anything about inclusion," he says.

Some have attributed the decline to rapid technological changes across the sector, but Enyimu disagrees.

"Behind technology are human beings who should support it and ensure it works for everyone. The human beings themselves are not taking this into account."

He believes that technology alone cannot create inclusion; it relies on the competence, awareness, and empathy of the people implementing and managing it.

## The leadership gap

At the heart of Uganda's inclusion challenge, Enyimu believes, lies a glaring deficit in inclusive leadership. Real inclusion, he ar-

gues, cannot happen without people who understand disability, are committed to inclusive values, and embody these values within their organisations.

"You can't stay inclusive when you don't have anybody with disabilities in there or somebody with expertise in inclusion to guide you," he says.

Representation, he argues, is not a favour—it is a fundamental requirement for accountability. Without PWDs or trained inclusion specialists contributing to decision-making, policies risk becoming empty formalities.

## Restoring dignity

For Flavia Lanyero, the General Secretary of the Gulu Disabled Persons Union, inclusion must begin with restoring the dignity and humanity of persons with disabilities. She notes that while infrastructure remains important, Uganda's understanding of inclusion must go far beyond ramps, rails, or widened doorways.

"Inclusion is not just about physical accessibility," she explains. "It is about treating people with dignity and respect. It is about doing things the right way, not out of pity or sympathy, because it is what we would want for ourselves if we were in their shoes."

From her experience, the most transformative changes are often simple and inexpensive: providing

reading materials in braille or large print; ensuring buildings are accessible for wheelchair users; or offering flexible work arrangements that reflect the diverse abilities of employees.

These measures, she stresses, are not favours but essential steps towards equality.

Yet stigma, stereotypes, and the lack of meaningful opportunities continue to shut many PWDs out of Uganda's workforce, limiting their potential and economic contribution.

"We must educate ourselves about different disabilities and needs, speak up and advocate for change, create accessible spaces and materials, focus on abilities rather than limitations, and involve people with disabilities in decision-making processes," Lanyero urges.

## Awareness begins with understanding

Despite years of advocacy, Enyimu believes awareness remains painfully limited—even among senior leaders. He recalls a recent incident during the World AIDS Day commemoration that underscored the gaps.

"A senior delegate couldn't properly guide a blind person; she thought you hold the hand and pull them. That shows how new inclusion still is for many."

For him, inclusion requires pa-

tience, consistency, and a willingness to unlearn misconceptions. He offers a vivid metaphor:

"Inclusion is like warming water for a child; you do it gradually until the environment feels natural. Let's make the environment conducive; let's make them our friends before they become convicts."

## Inclusion demands accountability

Both advocates agree on one point: inclusion must not be reduced to an annual commemoration, a public declaration, or a line tucked into policy documents. It must become a lived reality embedded in the daily operations of every institution.

Lanyero describes inclusion as a simple but profound act of humanity.

"Let us strive to create a world where inclusion is not just a buzzword, but a reality."

She believes Uganda can achieve meaningful progress if people work together to dismantle barriers and cultivate a society where everyone—regardless of ability—has the opportunity to thrive.

Enyimu, however, offers a sharp reminder that good intentions alone are not enough.

"Accountability and inclusive leadership are the keys to ensuring that policies translate into real change," he insists.

Without them, even the most impressive policy frameworks will remain empty promises.

## A call for true participation

Ultimately, advocates warn that inclusion will remain hollow unless it is anchored in transparent systems, measurable commitments, and leadership that actively seeks to involve persons with disabilities at every level.

No matter how well-written a policy may be, without accountability and representation, it cannot deliver genuine participation or equality.

Uganda's path towards disability inclusion, they argue, must now shift from rhetoric to responsibility—because dignity, access, and opportunity are not privileges but rights.

## PWD PREVALENCE

- The National Population and Housing Census of 2014 estimated a disability prevalence rate of 12.4 percent among the population aged 5 years and above (males 49.3%; females 50.7%). The highest forms of disability estimated are: difficulties in seeing (6.5%), difficulties in remembering (5.4%), difficulties in walking (4.5%) and difficulties in hearing (3.1%) (UBOS, 2016).
- The 2017 functional disability survey found prevalence of 16.5% and prevalence among 2-4 years was at 3.5 percent, 7.5% among 5-17 years and 16.5% for adults (18 and above).
- 1.3% of the formal sector workforce have people with disabilities (2016/2017 Manpower Survey disaggregated by disability).