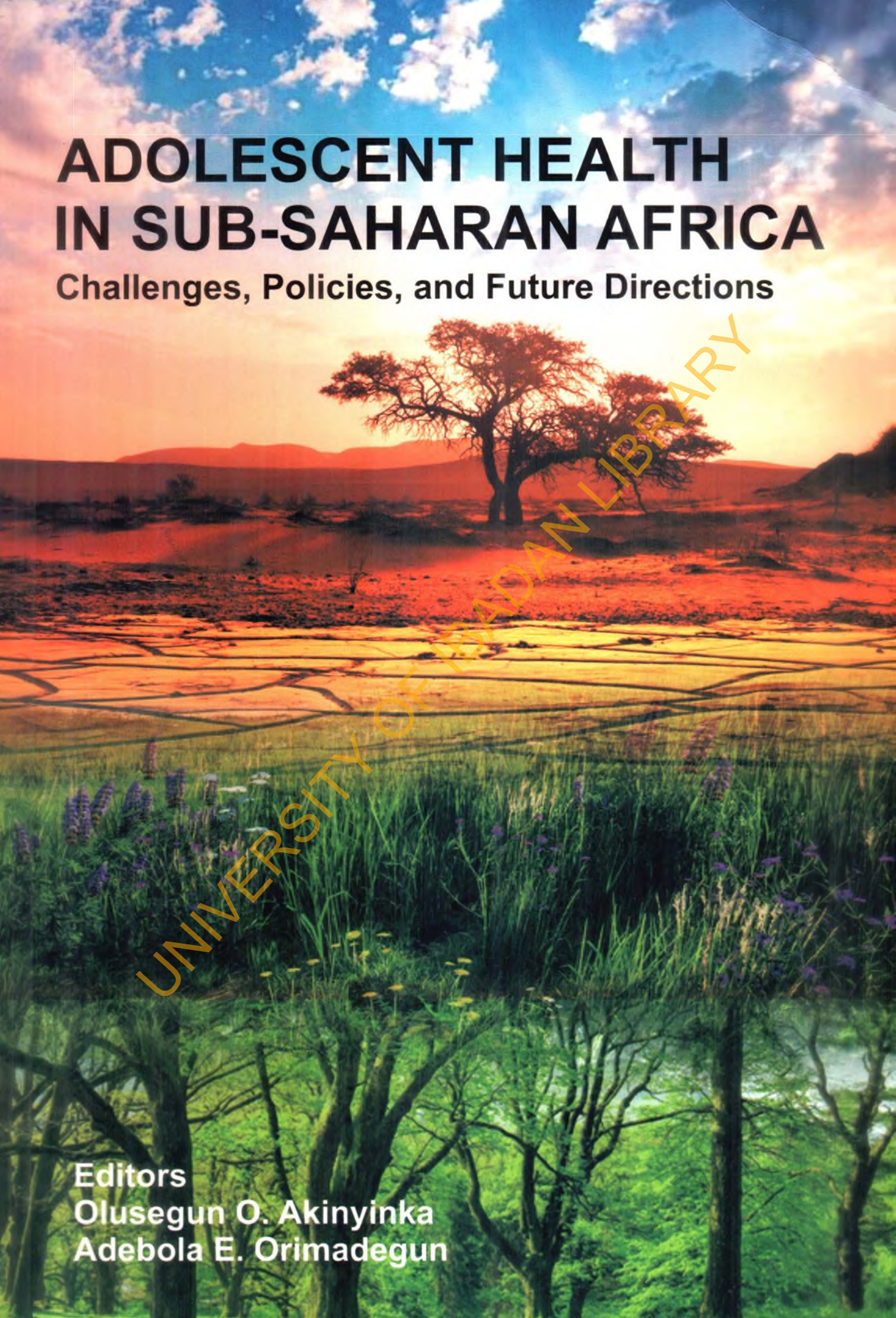

ADOLESCENT HEALTH IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Challenges, Polices, and Future Directions

Editors

Olusegun O. Akinyinka

Adebola E. Orimadegun

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33 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: PROMOTING EQUITY AND ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Kola Babarinde, Ayo Osisanya, Abiodun T. Adewunmi, A. B. Adeoti

Introduction

Individuals with diverse disabilities face numerous challenges in Nigeria, which affect their ability to fully engage in community life. Natural and accidental factors have reduced their functional capacities, requiring them to exert extra effort to complete everyday tasks. These challenges extend beyond physical limitations, encompassing social issues such as stigma, marginalisation, poor access to health facilities, inadequate policies, loneliness, and limited employment opportunities. Such barriers often lead to mental health challenges like depression among individuals with special needs.

Research highlights that some disabilities are congenital, while others develop over a person's lifetime. Disabilities vary widely in type, severity, causes, and management. Common conditions include blindness, deafness, mental illness, mobility impairments, and muscular and sensory disorders. This chapter considers people with special needs as those who experience such impairments, which hinder their ability to function optimally in society.

The broader context of equity and access to education, healthcare, and other social services ties closely to the principles of democratisation. Past scholarly efforts have extensively examined this issue, recognising the importance of ensuring equitable opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Conceptual Clarification on Persons Living with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities exist in every society and at all socio-economic levels worldwide. Disabilities are often characterised by long-term impairments that hinder daily activities and vary widely in causes and effects. Differences in socio-economic conditions and government provisions for citizens' welfare influence the prevalence and impact of disabilities globally. Environmental, technical, and behavioural barriers, coupled with social isolation, limit the ability of individuals with physical challenges to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities. However, with adequate education and rehabilitation, these individuals can become productive members of society and contribute to national development.

While all human beings are born equal and entitled to rights such as education, healthcare, and social participation, people with physical, mental, or social impairments often face exclusion. It is essential to distinguish between impairment, disability, and handicap. Impairment refers to abnormalities in body structure or function. Disability arises when impairments limit functional performance or activity, while handicap reflects the societal barriers that restrict an individual's adaptation to their environment. These distinctions underscore the complexities of addressing the needs of people with disabilities.

The World Health Organization defines disability as any restriction or inability to perform activities typically considered normal for a human being. Disabilities can result from sensory impairments, mobility limitations, or health conditions requiring specialised services, equipment, or facilities. Common physical disabilities include mobility challenges such as clubfoot, amputations, or contractures caused by burns or fractures. Disabilities are multifaceted, encompassing impairments, activity limitationand participation restrictions. This interaction between individuals and their environments shapes the challenges they face.

The medical and social models of disability offer distinct perspectives. The medical model views disability as a health issue requiring treatment, while the social model emphasises societal barriers that disable individuals. Both approaches are relevant, as people with disabilities may encounter health-related challenges alongside societal

obstacles. Recognising disability as an interaction between individuals and their environments highlights the importance of addressing these barriers to enhance social participation.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) categorises barriers into three interconnected areas: impairments in body function or structure, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Disabilities may arise in any or all these areas. For example, impairments like blindness affect body functions, activity limitations hinder tasks such as walking or eating, and participation restrictions limit job opportunities or transportation access. The ICF framework encourages a holistic understanding of disability, emphasising the role of environmental factors and the need for inclusive policies and practices.

Through this lens, disability is not a static characteristic but a dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of medical, social, and structural approaches to remove barriers and creat opportunities for full societal participation. By fostering inclusivity and equity, societies can empower individuals with disabilities to realise their potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The Nature and Features of Disabilities Among Individuals

Disabilities encompass a broad range of physical, cognitive, and sensory conditions, including cerebral palsy, spina bifida, amputations, and muscular dystrophy. Each condition presents unique physiological and functional challenges, which can vary in severity and permanence. Disabilities may be transient, intermittent, chronic, progressive, or terminal, depending on the underlying condition and the individual's environment.

A common feature among individuals with mobility challenges is their reliance on assistive devices such as wheelchairs. These conditions may result from congenital defects, age-related factors, or accidents, including polio. Vision-related disabilities range from complete blindness to partial sight, where individuals rely heavily on other senses for information. Similarly, hearing impairments affect the ability to perceive sound, with terms such as "deaf" referring to profound hearing loss and "hard-of-hearing" indicating lesser degrees of impairment. Speech and language disabilities, often linked to brain injuries or developmental disorders, can affect communication, including fluency, voice volume, and comprehension.

Understanding the nature and features of these disabilities is essential for addressing the barriers faced by individuals and providing tailored support to enhance their quality of life.

Promotion of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has emerged as a cornerstone of global best practices, aiming to provide equitable access to education and health services for individuals with special needs. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the WHO Global Disability Action Plan underline the importance of creating educational systems that are inclusive and accessible to all learners, regardless of their abilities or needs.

Inclusive education is defined as a system that accommodates students of all abilities and requirements at every level of learning, from pre-school to lifelong education. It is not merely about physical access but also about adapting teaching methods, curricula, and school environments to meet diverse needs. This approach benefits all students, fostering a sense of community and mutual respect while reducing societal discrimination.

To implement inclusive education effectively, educational systems must undergo significant transformations. This involves adapting policies, infrastructure, curricula, and teaching methodologies to eliminate barriers that prevent full participation. It als o requires the active involvement of learners, families, educators, and communities to ensure the sustainability and success of these initiatives.

Inclusive education aims to respect diversity and address the unique needs of all learners, promoting equal opportunities for education and societal participation. For instance, it ensures that students with disabilities have access to reasonable accommodations, such as assistive technologies, modified teaching strategies, and alternative assessment methods. This framework also supports the development of individual education plans to provide targeted support and monitor progress.

Ensuring Access and Equity

To achieve truly inclusive education, systemic changes must address legal, social, and financial barriers. Education must promote the full potential of students with disabilities, enabling them to contribute

meaningfully to society. Schools must be equipped with accessible infrastructure, such as ramps and adaptive technologies, and provide resources tailored to the needs of students with different impairments.

Non-discrimination policies are central to inclusive education. All barriers, whether legal, physical, or attitudinal, must be removed to ensure that students with disabilities can participate equally. Schools must also provide general support, including trained teachers, counsellors, and access to financial aid.

Specialised services are necessary for specific groups of learners. For example, visually impaired students benefit from learning Braille and mobility skills, while those with hearing impairments require access to sign language and speech therapy. Students with intellectual or communication challenges need structured learning environments and tailored materials to enhance their educational experience.

Provisions and Practices of Inclusive Education Across Regions of the World

Inclusive education has gained recognition globally as a cornerstone of equitable education systems, aimed at catering to the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities. This approach is based on principles that promote the acceptance and valuing of individual differences, the adoption of inclusive policies, collaboration among stakeholders, and the provision of tailored support services. Inclusive education systems ensure access to curricula, professional training for educators, and the adaptation of physical and instructional environments to meet diverse needs.

Globally, the implementation of inclusive education varies widely. While some nations have codified inclusive education into their laws, many others still operate within frameworks that mix inclusion with integration or segregation. For example, only a handful of countries such as Chile, Portugal, and Luxembourg have officially established inclusive education as the system addressing the needs of all children. In contrast, many countries continue to face challenges in transitioning from segregated or partially segregated systems to fully inclusive models.

Global Overview of Inclusive Education Policies

Inclusive education practices vary significantly across regions. In Oceania and Europe, a substantial proportion of policies advocate for inclusion, yet there remains a disparity between policy intentions and actual practices. For example, despite strong policies supporting inclusion in Europe, over a third of students with special educational needs are still educated in segregated settings.

Portugal stands out as a leader in inclusive education. Since 2009, the country has repurposed special schools into resource centres and integrated students with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms. The passage of Decree-Law 54/2018 further strengthened Portugal's commitment by introducing a tailored approach that considers the unique academic, behavioural, social, and emotional needs of each student. Educators in Portugal report a high level of comfort in adapting teaching strategies to diverse classroom needs, reflecting the success of this policy.

In Armenia, inclusive education gained momentum through the advocacy of non-governmental organisations like the Bridge of Hope. Amendments to the general education law in 2014 established inclusive education as the norm. An action plan was developed to transition all schools to an inclusive education system by 2025. Although challenges persist, such as resource constraints and reliance on NGOs for implementation, Armenia's progressive policy serves as a model for other nations.

Inclusive Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa faces unique challenges in implementing inclusive education. Only 17% of laws codify inclusive education, although 42% of policies support it. The African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities advocates for inclusive education and skill development, but the pace of ratification and implementation remains slow. Countries like Kenya, Mali, and Rwanda have taken initial steps, but more robust frameworks are needed.

South Africa provides an illustrative example of progress and challenges. Post apartheid education reforms aimed to establish an inclusive education system through the Education White Paper 6 in 2001. This framework envisioned a system that accommodates students with varying support needs across mainstream, full service, and special schools. While South Africa has exceeded its goal for establishing full-service schools, the implementation has been hampered by resource limitations,

insufficient teacher training, and inconsistent practices.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region

The MENA region lags in inclusive education, with only 9% of laws and 27% of policies advocating inclusion. Children with disabilities in the region are significantly less likely to attend school, and dropout rates increase sharply after the age of 14. For instance, in Egypt, teens with disabilities are four times more likely to be out of school compared to their peers without disabilities. Notably, private associations and NGOs, rather than governments, drive inclusive education initiatives in this region. In Morocco, organisations such as Humanity & Inclusion and UNICEF have played critical roles in implementing inclusive education projects.

Challenges and Opportunities

Globally, the transition to inclusive education faces significant barriers, including limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and inconsistent policy implementation. However, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation and collaboration. The success stories of Portugal and Armenia demonstrate that tailored, well-funded, and collaborative approaches can lead to meaningful progress.

A Case Study of Morocco

Morocco's education system has historically leaned towards segregation, where children with special needs were placed in specialised institutions with simplified curricula, often limiting their opportunities for meaningful learning. In 2014, a collaborative initiative involving Morocco's Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training (MNEVT), UNICEF, and Humanity & Inclusion piloted an inclusive education project in the Souss-Massa-Drâa region. This project increased enrolment rates for children with special needs in participating schools by over 31%. However, this remains a small proportion when compared to national statistics, where only 15% of children with special needs reached the primary school level, and 73% had no formal education.

In 2015, Morocco launched its 2015–2030 national education sector vision, including a section on ensuring the right to education for children with disabilities. However, the implementation heavily focused on integration rather than true inclusion, with integrated classes often being segregated settings within mainstream schools. After three years in such environments, students with disabilities may transition to general education classrooms but must begin at the first grade regardless of their age. Challenges such as limited capacity in segregated special schools and insufficient support systems have led many children with disabilities to drop out.

Efforts to address these gaps have been spearheaded by organisations such as UNICEF, which supported Morocco in developing a national plan to implement inclusive education in 700 schools between 2019 and 2021. Additionally, teacher training and localised initiatives in several regions contributed to more than doubling the number of children with disabilities in primary schools from 10,200 in 2019 to 22,240 in 2020.

A Case Study of the United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has institutionalised inclusion as a national priority since 2006, recognising the rights of individuals with disabilities, referred to as "People of Determination." Federal Act No. 29 of 2006 emphasises the importance of quality education for all students, regardless of their abilities. Dubai's Inclusive Education Policy Framework, introduced in 2017, ensures curriculum adjustments and school environments that support the diverse needs of all students.

Teachers in the UAE demonstrate a high level of adaptation in accommodating students' diverse needs, with UNESCO surveys showing that nearly all educators frequently modify their teaching strategies. This reflects a significant commitment to inclusivity, supported by strong financial and political backing from the UAE government.

A Case Study of the Arabic Republic of Egypt

Egypt's commitment to inclusive education dates to its ratification of the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education in 1962. Subsequent policies and constitutional provisions have strengthened this commitment, including the Education Law of 1981 and Article 19 of the 2014 Constitution, which guarantees equal educational opportunities. The 2018 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further mandates equality in public and private education institutions, placing Egypt in a leadership position in inclusive education.

The Ministry of Education's 2014–2030 Strategic Plan for Pre-University Education

aims to integrate children with simple or basic disabilities into mainstream education while enhancing specialised services in existing special education schools. Despite these frameworks, implementation challenges remain, particularly in ensuring adequate resources and teacher training to support inclusive education.

Region 4: Central and South Asia

Countries in Central and South Asia face systemic barriers to inclusive education, with no legal provisions explicitly supporting it in most national laws. Challenges include a lack of official data on children with disabilities, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of infrastructure to support inclusive teaching. Policies often fail to align with international frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The absence of assistive technologies, integrated support services, and enabling environments further exacerbates the exclusion of children with disabilities from formal education.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion of Adolescents with Special Needs in Nigeria

In Nigeria, diversity in education recognises and accommodates cultural, socio-economic, gender, and ethnic differences among students, including those with disabilities. Equity and inclusion aim to provide all learners with the resources, support, and opportunities needed to thrive. However, over 10.5 million children in Nigeria are out of school, with a significant proportion likely being children with disabilities. Contributing factors include inaccessible schools, low public awareness, inadequate resources, and weak implementation of inclusive education policies.

Despite these challenges, Nigeria has taken steps to promote inclusive education through its National Policy on Education, which emphasises the inclusion of children with special needs. The Universal Basic Education Act of 2004 guarantees free and compulsory basic education for all children, and Nigeria's commitment to international frameworks, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Sustainable Development Goals, reflects its intent to improve educational access.

However, implementation remains a significant barrier. Practical measures to realise the promises of these policies are lacking. Addressing systemic disparities, providing tailored support, and ensuring access to quality education are critical to advancing equitable education in Nigeria.

Progress and Challenges of Equity and Inclusive Educational Service Delivery

Adolescents with special needs in many educational systems continue to face systemic inequities, underrepresentation, and social barriers that impede their full inclusion. Research indicates that inclusive education systems often struggle to adequately accommodate students with disabilities, with many schools lacking the necessary resources and expertise to address their unique needs.

In Nigeria, persons with special needs often remain institutionalised in segregated settings, where they receive informal or limited formal instruction. These institutions frequently lack inclusivity and perpetuate social deprivation. Despite legal frameworks that mandate free education for persons with disabilities up to the tertiary level, significant gaps remain in implementation. Many schools refuse to admit students with disabilities, leading to low enrolment in mainstream education. Vocational training and employment opportunities are limited, with most persons with disabilities confined to low-paying or unsustainable occupations. Additionally, poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, and limited government support exacerbate these challenges.

Stigmatisation and alienation of persons with disabilities remain pervasive, with many individuals experiencing abandonment by their families and marginalisation in society. Accessibility challenges are also widespread, including inadequate transportation systems, non-disability-friendly infrastructure, and limited access to healthcare. Political participation remains constrained, with persons with disabilities often disenfranchised due to inaccessible voting processes.

Efforts to address these challenges must prioritise comprehensive policy implementation, capacity building, and fostering societal attitudes that promote inclusion. Integrating inclusive education into mainstream schools, enhancing teacher training, and ensuring accessibility in infrastructure are critical steps toward achieving equity and inclusivity.

Promoting the Rights of People Living with Disabilities in Nigeria

The international and regional human rights systems have made significant strides in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. These systems aim to ensure that individuals with disabilities enjoy the same legal protections and opportunities as other

citizens. Historically, policies addressing disability focused on welfare and assistance, but contemporary approaches emphasise equal protection under the law and full societal integration.

In Nigeria, the rights of persons with disabilities have gained increasing recognition, although significant challenges persist. With an estimated 22 million Nigerians living with disabilities, stigma and discrimination continue to affect all aspects of their lives. Family members of persons with disabilities often face prejudice, and societal attitudes towards disability frequently result in exclusion and marginalisation.

Discrimination against persons with disabilities manifests in poor access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Many individuals face barriers to social participation, which leads to isolation, unemployment, and poverty. Anticipation of rejection further exacerbates these issues, causing individuals to limit their social networks and avoid seeking assistance.

Nigeria has made efforts to align its legal frameworks with international standards, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, implementation gaps remain a significant barrier to achieving tangible progress. The country must address systemic inequities by promoting inclusive policies, enforcing anti-discrimination laws, and fostering societal acceptance.

Investing in inclusive education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities is essential for promoting equity and social cohesion. Governments, non-governmental organisations, and communities must collaborate to ensure that persons with disabilities are recognised and valued as active contributors to society. By addressing these challenges, Nigeria can build a more inclusive and equitable future for all its citizens.

Promoting the Rights of People Living with Disabilities to Healthcare Services

Access to healthcare services is a fundamental right and a prerequisite for ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals. The United Nations has emphasised the importance of equitable healthcare as a cornerstone of societal respect and productivity. However, in Nigeria, persons living with disabilities often encounter significant obstacles when seeking healthcare services. These challenges include physical inaccessibility, discriminatory attitudes from healthcare providers, and inadequate training for medical staff on addressing the unique needs of individuals with disabilities, particularly those with hearing or visual impairments.

The absence of equitable healthcare spans various aspects, from health promotion and disease prevention to the lack of insurance coverage for essential services such as specialised care, chronic disease management, and assistive technologies. The segregatory behaviour of some healthcare workers reflects broader societal biases, highlighting the need for comprehensive training programmes that equip medical staff to provide inclusive care.

In some nations, policies have been developed to address these challenges. For instance, South Africa's core health policy includes provisions for prevention, rehabilitation, and legislative reforms to support people with disabilities. Also, Nigeria's 1993 Decree on Disability mandates free medical services for persons with disabilities, although implementation has been inconsistent. Comprehensive measures, such as free healthcare, permanent disability certification, and tax exemptions for disability-related materials, have been proposed to enhance service delivery for this vulnerable group.

Efforts to improve healthcare services for persons with disabilities must address the systemic inequalities and interconnected challenges that perpetuate these disparities. Government agencies, particularly health ministries, must prioritise the development of inclusive policies and programmes to ensure that persons with disabilities receive the care and support they need. By doing so, nations can significantly improve the quality of life, productivity, and well-being of this population.

Agencies Assisting People with Disabilities

Numerous agencies in Nigeria and globally aim to support persons with disabilities. However, many adopt a charity-based approach rather than advocating for the rights and social inclusion of individuals with disabilities. This has undermined advocacy efforts and creates representation challenges. Some agencies focus exclusively on specific impairments, limiting their reach and impact.

In Nigeria, two major national agencies serve as representatives for persons with disabilities: the Joint National Association of

Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD) and the Association for the Comprehensive Empowerment of Nigerians with Disabilities (ASCEND). While JONAPWD is recognised as an official channel for advocating the rights of persons with disabilities, concerns about its transparency and direction persist. Similarly, ASCEND, initially a local movement, faces challenges in addressing systemic issues effectively.

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a crucial role in delivering disability services, but their impact is often limited to specific regions. The Coalition of Disability Organisations (CODO) has been instrumental in supporting disability rights, yet gaps in service provision remain, particularly in rural areas where access to support is minimal.

Efforts to strengthen these agencies and promote effective advocacy are essential for addressing the needs of persons with disabilities comprehensively.

Obstacles Confronting People with Disabilities in Accessing Healthcare Services

Persons with disabilities face numerous challenges when accessing healthcare services. These obstacles include behavioural, physical, communicative, financial, and societal barriers.

Behavioural Problems

Healthcare providers often exhibit discriminatory attitudes and lack training in disability-inclusive practices. Women with disabilities, in particular, face biases regarding their reproductive health and parenting capabilities. Additionally, persons with disabilities are rarely involved in decision-making processes about their care.

Physical Barriers

Healthcare facilities are frequently inaccessible, with inadequate infrastructure such as stairs, narrow doorways, and fixed-height furniture. Poorly lit areas and unclear signage further complicate navigation for individuals with visual or mobility impairments.

Communication Barriers

The absence of sign language interpreters and materials in accessible formats, such as Braille or large print, limits access to vital health information for persons with hearing or visual impairments. Simplified communication methods are often unavailable for individuals with cognitive challenges.

Financial Constraints

Many persons with disabilities cannot afford healthcare costs, including transportation to medical facilities, medication, and consultation fees. This economic barrier exacerbates health disparities.

Stigmatisation

Social stigma and isolation often discourage persons with disabilities from seeking healthcare services. Parents of children with disabilities may also face societal prejudice, further marginalising this population.

Addressing these barriers requires systemic changes, including the training of healthcare providers, the development of accessible infrastructure, and the implementation of inclusive health policies.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the complex realities faced by adolescents with special needs, particularly in accessing inclusive education and equitable healthcare services. It emphasises the urgent need for structural and policy reforms to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate fully in society and realise their potential.

Globally, the implementation of inclusive education has demonstrated that adapting teaching methods, curricula, and infrastructure can foster a sense of belonging and improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Countries like Portugal and the UAE provide compelling examples of how dedicated policies, funding, and training can create inclusive systems that benefit all learners. However, in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, systemic challenges such as inadequate resources, limited teacher training, and weak policy enforcement continue to hinder progress.

In Nigeria, despite commitments to international frameworks and the introduction of inclusive education policies, substantial gaps remain. Stigma, inadequate infrastructure, and limited vocational opportunities perpetuate inequality for persons with disabilities. Additionally, healthcare access is constrained by financial barriers, physical inaccessibility, and discriminatory attitudes, underscoring the need for systemic reform in service delivery.

Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from governments, non-governmental organisations, and communities. Investment in inclusive education and healthcare systems, alongside societal shifts in attitudes towards disability, is vital for achieving equity and inclusion. By fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated and supported, societies can empower individuals with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to national development and enjoy lives of dignity and purpose.

Take-Home Message

Inclusive education and equitable access to healthcare services for adolescents with special needs are essential pillars for fostering a fair and just society. The chapter underscores the transformative power of inclusive policies in creating opportunities for adolescents with disabilities to thrive academically, socially, and economically. It highlights the challenges faced by this group, including systemic discrimination, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to tailored healthcare services. By embracing inclusive education systems and equitable healthcare frameworks, nations can dismantle the barriers that hinder the full participation of persons with disabilities in societal development. The chapter emphasises the need for collaborative efforts between governments, non-governmental organisations, and communities to address these challenges effectively. Ultimately, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is not only a moral obligation but also a catalyst for sustainable development, ensuring that no adolescent is left behind in achieving their full potential.

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