

Breaking down Barriers

photo: Ronnie Dankelman

PROJECT
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Advocating for inclusive education in North-West Cameroon

Realising behavioural change in a resource scarce environment¹

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Executive summary

In Cameroon, most children with disabilities do not attend (mainstream) schools. Prevailing social views are unfavourable with respect to investing in these children. This study examines the persuasion strategy of a local civil society organisation, the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services, in a campaign to promote inclusive education in the North-Western part of the country. Although it is too soon to establish whether inclusive education will become the new norm in the North-West, it is clear that key stakeholders are now sure of its importance. Three elements in the persuasion strategy appeared key for winning over stakeholders. The persuasion strategy (1) challenged the broader negative social views on disability as opposed to solely focusing on educational issues; (2) offered tailored rationales regarding investing in schooling for children with disabilities, which resonated with the specific values, beliefs and feelings of different stakeholders; (3) presented inclusive education as the most appropriate solution to the problem of low school enrolment rates among children with disabilities. The study also shows that in the resource-scarce environment of North-West Cameroon, winning over stakeholders is insufficient for behavioural change to occur. Stakeholders may be 'won over' but may still lack the resources to act. Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services addressed this issue by supplementing its persuasion strategy with the strategic provision of key resources.

Introduction

While reliable statistics are absent, it is clear that children with disabilities in the global South are at a considerable disadvantage in terms of school enrolment, educational attainment, and learning.

The consequences of non-attendance are enormous. Besides limiting these children in their ability to decide who to be, what to do and how to live, the lack of schooling also has an adverse economic impact on the family, community and even the country.

Fortunately, global awareness of the need for Inclusive Education (IE) is increasing. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for full inclusion of persons with disabilities in society. Several targets in the Sustainable Development Goals are related to disability and IE. However, in many countries, including those in Sub-Saharan Africa, the political will and resources for implementation are often lacking.

This paper examines the advocacy programme of Liliane Foundation's strategic partner organisation in Cameroon: the Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services (CBCHS), a local civil society organisation from the North-West of Cameroon. CBCHS has achieved a considerable degree of success in convincing key stakeholders to champion IE. More specifically, the study zooms in on the organisation's persuasion strategy and teases out those elements that were key to 'winning over' target audiences.

The study

In 2009, CBCHS started implementing the Socio Economic Empowerment of People with Disabilities (SEEPD) programme in North-West Cameroon.³

SEEPD was born out of the observation that few children with disabilities in Cameroon attend mainstream schools. Moreover, those that did attend mainstream schools faced additional constraints, such as an examination policy that did not take the diverse needs of children with disabilities into account. SEEPD aims to address this situation by promoting the participation of children with disabilities in government schools and convincing the government to make IE standard-practice in Cameroon.

Since its inception in 2009, CBCHS has targeted a number of audiences including government officials, local government authorities, religious and community leaders, school authorities and teachers, parents of children with disabilities and the general population. CBCHS used different strategies for different audiences. Government officials, community leaders and religious authorities were engaged in personal meetings, consultative discussions and workshops. Headmasters and school personnel learned about inclusive education through workshops. Parents of children with disabilities received knowledge through personal and community meetings organised by community-based rehabilitation workers. Finally, the general population was sensitised with regard

to the importance of IE for children with disabilities through different media outlets such as television, radio and newspapers.

While it was too early at the time of research to establish whether IE will become standard practice in North-West Cameroon, it is clear that CBCHS has been successful in mobilising key stakeholders to champion the concept. As a result of their effort:

- Regional government officials supported the piloting of IE in the North-West region;
- Seventeen school authorities implemented IE in their respective schools. At the time of research, preparations were being made to extend the programme to additional schools in the Northwest and West regions;
- Community and church leaders provided support in helping to persuade parents of children with a disability to send their children to school;
- Parents were persuaded to send their disabled children to school;
- The Cameroon General Certificate of Education Board revised its examination policy to take the special needs of disabled children into account;
- Municipal councils signed action plans for making municipal policy disability inclusive.

To clarify how CBCHS managed to win over these stakeholders, research was carried out in the North-West of Cameroon over a period of two months in 2017. The study used a combination of semi-structured interviews (36 in total), two focus group discussions and participatory observation. Interviews targeted a range of respondents and informants, including staff of CBCHS, community and religious leaders, school headmasters, teachers, regional government officials, mayors and parents of children with disabilities.

Challenging prevailing views

In Cameroon, persons with disabilities are often stigmatised and discriminated against. Traditional beliefs play an important role in the stigma attached to disability and the discrimination resulting from it. A prevailing notion is that disability is caused by people failing to show due respect to supernatural and spiritual forces, such as ancestors. Such beliefs go hand in hand with a widespread lack of understanding of the medical causes of disability. Further-



Voliet a role model shares her educational experience as a woman with disability to encourage her peers with disability.



photo: CBCHS

Strategic meeting to mainstream IE in the CBC Education system.

more, persons with disabilities are widely viewed as helpless, unable, and as a burden upon society. There is a strong belief that impaired children cannot fulfil the roles that children are supposed to fulfil, which is taking care of their parents when they are old and supporting the family.

Given the above, the persuasion strategy did not focus specifically on schooling for children with disabilities, but on disability in general. CBCHS realised that before they could convince different audiences to embrace IE, they would first have to challenge the broader negative views on disability in the North-West region. As long as these negative views remained unchallenged, people would not consider the limited (mainstream) school attendance of disabled children as a pressing problem in need of addressing. CBCHS subsequently regarded the sensitisation of the general public with respect to disability as a precondition for promoting the 'solution' of IE.

CBCHS used a variety of communication channels to encourage people to rethink their existing views on disability. The information that was provided explained, amongst other things, that disability does not come from witchcraft, but has medical causes instead. It then becomes clear that many forms of disability, like other medical conditions, can be prevented, addressed or even cured.

Furthermore, CBCHS explained that people with impairments are disabled by the society in which they live. In other words, that disability results from barriers and attitudes in the community that limit participation. These constraints result in many persons with disabilities suffering as a result of poor education, poverty, lower social standing, and ending up in a vicious cycle in which poverty and disability reinforce one another. In this context, CBCHS tried to drive home the idea that the responsibility for dealing with disability also lies in the community.

Finally, CBCHS went to great lengths to explain and demonstrate that if persons with disabilities are supported and offered opportunities just like other people, they are capable of achieving great successes. In communicating this point, CBCHS tried to provide concrete evidence by letting role models tell their own stories on radio shows and during meetings. Many respondents cited these concrete 'success stories' as particularly eye-opening.

Rationales for investing in schooling

Another important element of the persuasion strategy consisted of providing tailored rationales to different target audiences as to why they should invest in the schooling of children with disabilities. These rationales were carefully crafted messages seeking to resonate with the specific values, beliefs and feelings of different stakeholders. Firstly, CBCHS tried to make things personal by pointing out that disability is something that could affect anyone. Traffic accidents, for example, are very common in the area and people are left disabled by these incidents on a fairly regular basis. The argument raised is then; *"if disability affected you or your children, you would want to be included and offered opportunities"*.

Secondly, CBCHS argued that children with disabilities can also provide social security to parents in their old age, by emphasising that they can be economically productive when given the opportunity. A widely held view in Cameroon is that education for children is crucial because it increases the opportunities for getting a good job, securing an income and becoming the future care providers for their parents. CBCHS built upon these ideas by explaining that children with disabilities, just like other children, can work and earn a living when properly schooled. Consequently, CBCHS argued that it makes sense to invest in the schooling of children with disabilities as they also have the potential to become future care providers.

Thirdly, CBCHS appealed to religious norms and values and pointed out that investing in the schooling of children with disabilities is the morally right thing to do. They particularly emphasised the notion that everybody is created equal in the eyes of God, and the idea that *"we are all brothers and sisters"*. The argument here is that as good Christians or Muslims, people should treat children with disabilities with love and care, just like they should treat their other brothers and sisters.

Fourthly, CBCHS emphasised the duties of different stakeholders, which relate to their role or formal position in society. To government officials, they pointed out that it is the formal duty of the government to take care of its citizens, and that children with disabilities are part of the population. To school personnel, CBCHS emphasised that the law states that all learners, including

children with disabilities, should have access to schooling. Towards parents, CBCHS stressed that it is their parental responsibility to take care of their children, even if they have a disability, and that a failure to do so could attract legal sanctions.

Presenting IE as the solution

Besides convincing different audiences that the low school enrolment rates of children with disabilities are an urgent problem in need of being addressed, CBCHS went to great lengths to present IE as the most appropriate solution. Here, the organisation built on its earlier explanation that disability results from barriers and attitudes in the community that limit participation. If disabled people are disabled not by their impairments but by society's failure to take their needs into account, society must adapt instead of the other way around. This means that education must be made inclusive so that children with disabilities can access the full range of educational opportunities, just like everyone else. Moreover, being part of a mixed classroom enables children with disabilities to experience a sense of inclusion, form a wide circle of friends and get support from non-disabled learners. At the same time, non-disabled peers will realise that persons with disabilities also have talents enabling them to revise their views and move beyond prevailing stereotypes.

While presenting IE as the solution, CBCHS also provided concrete



Training of teachers on brail to enable them include learners with visual impairment in their class lessons.

knowledge which enabled stakeholders to take action. After all, stakeholders can only embrace IE if they know what to do. By offering knowledge on how to move forward, CBCHS effectively eliminated potential reasons stakeholders might have for not doing anything. In workshops, teachers learned how to teach classes consisting of both disabled and non-disabled learners. Church and community leaders learned how they could identify children with disabilities and convince their respective parents to send their children to school. Parents learned about the possibilities for inclusive education at public schools while receiving practical advice on how to better take care of their disabled child. Municipal civil servants learned how to incorporate ramps into future building plans so that children with disabilities can access new schools.

Resource support

In debates on advocacy, the emphasis usually lies on influencing the views of target audiences and creating 'political will'. A key assumption here is that once these audiences have changed their mind, they will change their behaviour. This study challenges this assumption.

CBCHS realised that in the resource-scarce environment of North-West Cameroon, convincing target audiences of the importance of IE in itself would be insufficient. People may be persuaded but may still lack the capacity or resources to actually do something. Consequently, CBCHS made the strategic provision of resources part of its persuasion strategy. For each type of audience, CBCHS carefully assessed whether specific materials or finances would be needed to get things moving. For example, certain poor families received financial support enabling parents to pay school fees and send their disabled child to school. CBCHS also supported schools with teaching materials and in some cases financial support. Several schools, for example, received computers and funds to pay the wages of sign language teachers, interpreters and braille transcribers. Finally, CBCH donated an embosser to the Cameroon General Certificate of Education Board and trained its staff in brailing exams.

The strategy of carefully providing key resources to remove bottlenecks is clearly a practical solution to get things done in a resource scarce environment. It does raise questions, however, about whether the results achieved in the SEEPD programme can be sustained and up-scaled in the long term. CBCHS is aware of this issue and is in dialogue with the Ministry of Education to look for a structural solution.

Further reading

Custers T. (2017). *Opening up for Inclusive Education in Cameroon. Understanding frame resonance in NGO advocacy*. MA-thesis. Wageningen University & Research. See www.barriersfree.org

Notes

- ¹ We would like to acknowledge the support of CBM in conducting this study and sharing the lessons learned from the SEEPD-programme.
- ² Willem Elbers is academic project-leader of 'Breaking Down Barriers' at the African Studies Centre Leiden (Netherlands).
- ³ The programme is funded by CBM, an international NGO seeking to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities in impoverished communities.