



Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights  
United Nations Office in Geneva (UNOG)  
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**SUBJECT:** NGO submission - *Human Rights Council Resolution 22/3 – “The work and employment of persons with disabilities”*

Geneva, 19 September 2013

Dear Sir, Dear Madam,

Plan International, Inc. is a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 1981 and in special consultative status with the ECOSOC since 2011. Founded over 75 years ago, Plan is one of the oldest and largest rights-based children's development organisations in the world. We work in more than 50 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas to promote child rights and lift millions of children out of poverty. In 2012, Plan worked with 84 million children in 90,131 communities. Plan is independent, with no religious, political or governmental affiliations.

In response to the call for contributions to the OHCHR study on the right to education of persons with disabilities, requested by Human Rights Council resolution 22/3, Plan International would like to share this recent report on the access to education and protection for children with disabilities in West-Africa. The report is based on a qualitative study carried out in Niger, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Togo, conducted by the University of Toronto.

The letter from OHCHR dated 7<sup>th</sup> August 2013 calls for organisations to contribute with information on issues relevant to the study, and outlines some key questions.

This study sheds particular light on question 1 from the letter: *“Are you aware of any restrictions for persons with disabilities to attend to regular schools? Please detail whether they exist in laws or policy, or if they exist only as a result of social barriers”*.



According to the study, the major restrictions to participation in education include:

- **Stigma and negative attitudes.**  
Great resistance at all levels to including children with disabilities in mainstream schools – from parents, teachers, peers, community members and education leaders. This resistance is related to the high levels of prejudice and stigma towards persons with disabilities. The attitudes towards children with disabilities, and language used to describe them, are overwhelmingly negative and based on false assumptions and beliefs regarding why they have a disability, as well as underestimation of their abilities. The study further found that the depth of stigma experienced was based on type of impairment, severity of impairment and gender. Children with sensory, intellectual and mental disabilities experience greater stigma than those with physical disabilities, and girls consistently faced a greater lack of opportunities and more marginalisation than boys.
- **Lack of accessibility of mainstream schools.**  
Regular schools were found to have unsuitable and inaccessible infrastructure, a lack of teachers trained in inclusive education methods, limited pedagogic materials and resources to facilitate inclusive education, and lack of accessible transport. However, the study also found that even when mainstream schools have addressed those accessibility barriers, the impact is limited unless positive attitudes towards children with disabilities exist.
- **Preference for “special” schools rather than inclusive education.**  
Great resistance to inclusive education was found. This was based partly on the lack of accessibility of mainstream schools, but also on a belief that children with disabilities cannot understand the course content at the same rate as children without a disability. Further, there was a perception that children with disabilities would display “problematic” behaviour in the classroom which could disturb abled children in their learning progress. In contrast, many of the reservations of parents of children with disabilities, Disabled Persons Organisations and the disabled children themselves were related to their fears of the mistreatment and stigmatisation in the mainstream schools by other children, their parents and the teachers.
- **Lack of implementation of legal commitments.**  
The legal commitments taken by all West African countries have yet to be translated into practical plans including sufficient financial and human resource allocations to deliver the obligations within Conventions and legislation. Efforts to include children with disabilities in community based work in the four country studies were found to have been largely delegated and/or left to non-state actors, International NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).



- **Lack of reliable data.**

Data on disability is generally unreliable for multiple reasons including low birth registration of children with disabilities, stigma, the phrasing of survey questions and flaws in data collection processes. Underreported data on children with disabilities has led to under-investment in services and support for them, such as inclusive education.

The study also includes several examples of good practices for overcoming these barriers to education for children with disabilities.

Digital copies of the report and the Executive Summary, including an audio version, are available to view, listen to and download on [www.plan-international.org/publications](http://www.plan-international.org/publications).

We hope this will provide a useful contribution to this important thematic study. In Plan International, we anticipate the final report from OHCHR, and will share it throughout the organisation to support our programme work and advocacy to ensure access to education for all children, especially those who experience exclusion and marginalisation, such as children with disabilities. If further information is required, such as the full country studies from the four countries, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Anne-Sophie Lois".

Anne-Sophie Lois

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