No Disabled Child Left Behind

Sightsavers is working to change social attitudes toward disabled children through community-centered education in Malawi.

BY MADALITSO WILLS KATETA

Ten-year-old Shelista Banda was born deaf. Bullied by other children because of her disability, she would often retaliate by throwing stones at them. Because of the bullying, Shelista’s mother, 29-year-old Rose Banda, refused to send her to school. Yet she worried about how her daughter would go through life without an education.

In 2017, she enrolled Shelista, then 6 years old, at the James Centre, a day care in the Ntcheu district of central Malawi that provides education to children with disabilities. There, Shelista underwent therapy to learn how to cope with her disability. The center also donated five goats to her family to boost their food security and economic stability.

Shelista’s education and treatments have changed her life. “My daughter used to live a lonely life. But now that has totally changed,” Rose Banda says. “She is now also able to help with some household chores and can socialize with other children.”

In Malawi, more than 1.7 million people ages 5 and up live with a disability, representing more than 11 percent of the total population. Worldwide, 240 million children live with a disability. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries either are kept out of school or receive substandard education. Their poor educational outcomes stymie their social development and inclusion.

The James Centre is one of the 49 childcare centers in Malawi supported by Sightsavers, an international NGO founded in 1950 by Sir John Wilson, a British public-health advocate best known for working to prevent blindness in developing countries.

Sightsavers works to end avoidable blindness and treat and eliminate tropical diseases in more than 30 low- and middle-income countries in Africa and Asia. Since 2015, the organization’s mission has expanded to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in health, education, employment, and governance through partnerships with governments and NGOs. One such partnership is with the NGO Catholic Health Commission (CHC), which manages the James Centre as part of Sightsavers’ Inclusive Early Childhood Development Education (IECDE) project. In collaboration with CHC, Parents for Disabled Children Association of Malawi (PODCAM), and the Ntcheu District Social Welfare office, Sightsavers launched IECDE in 2020 to establish equal education for disabled children to foster their social inclusion and belonging.

In Malawi, Sightsavers supports children who struggle with access to education, good nutrition, and health care. In a country where half of the population lives in poverty, disabled children face particularly dire circumstances. Superstitious beliefs fuel stigma against children with disabilities—it is not uncommon for them to be accused of witchcraft or being cursed.

Through IECDE, Sightsavers endeavors to break down these barriers to ensure that children with disabilities are not deprived of equal education and opportunity.

THE EMPowerment FRAMEWORK

IECDE emerged from the Sightsavers’ successful Leave No Child Behind program, which ran from June 2010 to May 2016 in 10 childcare centers offering nursery and preschool education in the Ntcheu district. The program partnered with local communities and the government to raise awareness of disabled children’s right to education,
to increase school enrollment of children with disabilities, and to train caregivers and teachers in inclusive practices.

With IECDE, Sightsavers scaled the program to 49 childcare centers and broadened the scope of its support to families and communities with disabled children. IECDE also expanded Leave No Child Behind’s school-enrollment efforts to primary schools, focusing on increasing disabled children’s enrollment in six primary schools in the Ntcheu district. The project is financed by Sightsavers and is supplemented by donations and grants, including a £475,000 ($594,000) grant from People’s Postcode Lottery (a subscription lottery that raises money for charities) in 2020.

IECDE’s empowerment framework seeks to provide families, communities, and caregivers with the financial and educational support they need to guarantee that disabled children receive high-quality education. Food support, for example, is a crucial factor in children’s education. A 2023 World Food Programme report indicated that school-lunch programs are the world’s most extensive noncontributory assistance to vulnerable families and can increase school-enrollment rates by 9 percent.

Since IECDE launched in 2020, the Ntcheu district has seen a 139 percent rise in school enrollment for disabled students—which Chikaipa attributes largely to the free lunch guaranteed to students. Civic education is the cornerstone of IECDE’s community empowerment efforts that aim to change harmful social attitudes about disabled people. The project hosts regular community-sensitization meetings on disability issues and trains community leaders in how to become advocates for disabled community members. John Banda, who is a local chief for Kawala village, says that this advocacy training also entails learning how to petition organizations for resources and services for disabled people.

“We are now able to mobilize resources from businesses in our area as one way of sustaining the project [if] Sightsavers ends its operations,” Banda says.

The empowerment framework also includes caregiver education, with Sightsavers offering free training to caregivers and teachers. Catherine Hawuya, who was born with a disability and experienced barriers to education as a child, decided to enroll in the training upon the recommendation of her village chief, in 2020. Thanks to the

Children with disabilities can now learn in the same class as nondisabled children without any discrimination.

Sightsavers donates goats to poor families like Shelista’s both for sustenance and to sell for the money that they need to send their children to school. Under the auspices of IECDE, it also created community gardens run by local volunteers that provide food for children’s lunches at the 49 childcare centers. The volunteers are trained in food preparation and nutrition to ensure that the food is not only nutritious but also hygienic.

“With the chronic food instability faced by the country and the increasingly erratic growing seasons due to climate change,” IECDE project coordinator Ben Chikaipa says, “the project’s agricultural component is important, as the children are attracted to class because they are assured that they will get food in school.”

“People previously used to associate disability with witchcraft and sins that could have been committed by parents, but after reading the handbook, they understand that a disabled child is just like any able bodied child,” Mwadzangati says.

**A Partnership Strategy for Growth**

IECDE initially struggled because it launched amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were closed during lockdown. Its early years were also hindered by three cyclones between 2020 and 2022 and Malawi’s longest cholera outbreak in history, from 2022 to 2023.

To navigate these challenges, Sightsavers and its partners—CHC, PODCAM, and the District Social Welfare office—developed a strategic approach in which each partner oversees a specific task based on their expertise. PODCAM manages disability rights, CHC is assigned to health issues, and the Social Welfare office runs IECDE’s social programs. Sightsavers provides childcare centers with preventive services such as handwashing facilities and chlorine for water purification.

In addition, Sightsavers has donated wheelchairs, standing frames, walking frames, and cerebral palsy chairs to 45 children. The organization also sends children in need of such assistive devices to health-care providers for assessment and treatment, and it pays for the cost of the devices and any associated treatment.

“This support is very important to achieving Sightsavers’ mission of ensuring that children with disabilities from underprivileged families have a right to live in an inclusive society,” Chikaipa says.

In April 2023, Sightsavers expanded IECDE to 18 primary schools in the Ntcheu district to better attend to the continuing education of the disabled children who graduated from the nursery and preschool centers. The expansion offers greater hope to children like Shelista that they, too, have a right to education just like their nondisabled peers.

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