



Refugee Law Project

School of Law, Makerere University
A Centre for Justice and Forced Migrants



COMMEMORATING THE DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD 2021

Education for refugees and host children living with disabilities and/or special needs;

as we aspire for an Africa fit for children

Refugee Law Project (RLP) joins the global community to commemorate the Day of the African child, today 16th June 2021 under the theme: “**30 years after the adoption of the Charter: accelerate implementation of Agenda 2040 for an Africa fit for children**”. The day of the African Child was first established by then Organization of African Unity, now African Union, in 1991. It aims at raising awareness on the plight of children in Africa and across the globe, and the need to promote children’s rights and a safer environment for their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. This day presents an opportunity for all stakeholders to reflect on children’s potential and the nature of hindrances the African child continue to grapple with.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), adopted in 1990, states that children are tomorrow’s nation builders and carry the hopes of the future. The charter recognizes the child’s unique and privileged place in the African society and the need for protection and care. Nonetheless, many children in Africa have yet to enjoy these in their fullest sense.

Relatedly, the African Union’s **Agenda 2040** has 10 aspirations; as an organization we choose to highlight here the education for children with special needs as enshrined under Aspiration VI. Aspiration VI stipulates that every child benefit fully from quality education. The value of education as a foundation for child development and a better future for all and for refugees and other vulnerable children cannot be over-emphasized; indeed, it may be the only hope they have for a better future. And yet we see that despite government efforts many children, particularly refugee children with special needs and various forms of disability, are still excluded from accessing education.

According to the Ministry of Gender's situation analysis of children in Uganda (2015), only 5% of an estimated 2.5 million children living with disabilities in Uganda access education within an inclusive setting. The hindrances are many but major ones include a limited recognition of disability and special needs, and a tendency to highlight some forms of disability while ignoring others.

While the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 2020 looks at disability as a substantial functional limitation of daily life activities caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment and environmental barriers resulting in limited participation, gaps still exist in practice. In our work with refugees and hosts, we have realized that visible physical disabilities are more recognized and prioritized, while the invisible (often psychological) ones are not noticed at all. Inclusive education is rarely prioritized due to a general belief that children with disabilities cannot study in mainstream school and therefore less accommodation is made to support them.

For refugee children living with disability, having a disability is just one of the special needs that is compounded by their experiences of forced migration including trauma, both for themselves and their caretakers. What does it take for example for a teacher to teach a child whose concentration is repeatedly interrupted due to bad memories? Educating such a child requires recognition of their unique challenges if we are to address them. If we collectively fail to address such challenges, we risk children dropping out from school and thereby experiencing aggravated disability.

To ensure that all children benefit from quality education we must;

1. Recognise that each child is unique and comes to school with different needs that require understanding and appropriate support from teachers, caretakers and other professionals.
2. Recognise that some disabilities may not be immediately visible; school staff and all stakeholders working with children should be equipped with the skills and knowledge both to identify hidden disabilities and to support children with such disabilities to fit into school

3. Recognise that due to their experiences of violence in conflict, the majority of refugee children come to school with many other underlying needs that require understanding and support if they are not to result in hidden disabilities
4. Recognise that inclusive education is feasible and is the best option for the majority of children with disabilities and special needs.
5. Raise awareness among all stakeholders; family, school, community and service providers to promote positive attitudes that foster resilience building and eliminate all forms of stigma and discrimination that impede access to education.
6. Support schools to create an enabling environment that promotes inclusion by cultivating reasonable accommodation/s for children with disabilities and children with special needs.
7. Call on Government of Uganda to expedite the enactment of the inclusive education policy, currently in its draft form, which is a springboard for building safer schools.

With support from Comic Relief, RLP is working towards improving access to quality inclusive education for refugee children with disabilities and their hosts.

As we mark the Day of the African child, let us break the barriers by continuing to design strategies that promote inclusion of all children. We are all responsible for an African fit for children, hence creating an Africa fit for all'

Wishing you colorful celebrations as we observe the Day of the African Child 2021.

