



Disability and school attendance in 15 low- and middle-income countries

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ABSTRACT

Out of school children are a critical issue in education and development. Very little is known as to whether a disability is associated with a higher risk of being out of school for children in developing countries. This paper presents and analyzes the gap in enrolment in both primary and secondary education between children with and without disabilities using for the first time an internationally tested and comparable measure of functional difficulties (e.g. seeing, hearing, and walking). Using nationally representative datasets from 15 developing countries, this paper finds a consistent and statistically significant disability gap in both primary and secondary school attendance. The paper econometrically examines potential explanations for this disability gap using several specifications. A household fixed effect model shows that disability reduces the probability of school attendance by a median 30.9 percentage points, and that neither individual characteristics nor their socio-economic and unobserved household characteristics explain the disability gap. While general poverty reduction policies through for instance social transfers to the poor may improve school attendance in general, they seem unlikely to close the disability gap in schooling. The disability gap for primary-age children follows an inverted U-shape relationship with GNI per capita. This suggests that, as GNI per capita rises and more resources become available for improving access to education in middle-income countries, children without disabilities increasingly attend school, whereas the situation of children with disabilities may improve more slowly. Despite the adoption of an inclusive education agenda globally, this paper shows that more research and policy attention is needed to make schooling disability-inclusive in developing countries. More attention is also necessary regarding the functional difficulties experienced by children, as some may be preventable and the schooling inequalities associated with them may thus be avoidable.

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1. Introduction

Out-of-school children remain one of the most critical issues in education today. It is estimated that a total of 264 million primary and secondary school-age children worldwide were out-of-school in 2015 (UNESCO, 2017). Are children with disabilities a sizeable share of out of school children? Are there significant gaps in out of school rates between children with and without disabilities? To what extent are children with disabilities out of school due to their socioeconomic status or other factors such as barriers to schooling in their communities? This study attempts to answer such questions.

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Disability continues to be a neglected issue in education especially in developing countries (UNESCO, 2015, p. 181), despite the growth of the inclusive education policy movement. The inclusive education movement originated as a response to segregation in education of children with disabilities into separate institutions. There is not a single globally agreed upon definition of inclusive education, it generally refers to the philosophy and practice of education that allows children with disabilities access to schooling services and resources so that they get an appropriate education (O'Rourke-Lang and Levy, 2016). Examples of the growth of this movement through policy developments include UNESCO's 'Education for All' declaration (1990) and Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, and the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD Article 24) which guarantees children with disabilities equal rights to education (UN, 2006). More recently,

the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Goal 4 adopted in 2015 proposes to build and enhance existing education systems across member countries in such a way that would allow children with disabilities to access educational institutions with greater ease by 2030, and to provide support to developing countries to produce reliable and high quality data on disability by 2020.

The development of sound policies to promote inclusion in education is hindered by the paucity of reliable information on the numbers and educational status of children with disabilities, due to a lack of standardized and detailed questions on disability in household surveys (Mont, 2007). As follows in the absence of internationally comparable data, the efforts to evaluate the impact of disability on key educational parameters such as attendance are disrupted and governments rarely possess the necessary evidence required to design appropriate policy adaptations and enhancements to improve the situation of children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2014).

This study contributes to the small literature on schooling and disability in developing countries. The study uses nationally representative data from 15 low- to middle-income countries which collected information on educational status and administered the short set of disability screening questions developed and tested by the Washington City Group on Disability Statistics (WG) (Altman, 2016). This study asks two research questions: are there consistent disparities in school attendance based on disability in developing countries; and if yes, what explains such disparities? In brief, we find consistent and large disparities based on disability in the developing countries under study. These disparities are neither the result of a poorer socioeconomic status, nor other individual and family characteristics of children with disabilities. They are likely the results of environmental factors that are unobserved in household surveys. These results suggest that disability can no longer be ignored in studies and policies that try to explain or boost school attendance.

2. Background: literature, framework and hypotheses

2.1. Literature

There is a large body of evidence showing that in developing countries, adults with disabilities have lower educational attainment than adults without disabilities (e.g. Hoogeveen, 2005; Loeb, Eide, Jelsma, Ka Toni, & Maart, 2008; Mete, 2008; Mitra, 2018; Mitra, Posarac, & Vick, 2013; Mont & Nguyen, 2011; Rischewski et al., 2008; Trani, Babulal, & Bakhshi, 2015; Trani & Loeb, 2010; World Bank, 2009; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011; reports on living conditions among people with disabilities in eight developing countries published by SINTEF¹). This association consistently found among adults may result from lower school attendance among children with disabilities, but may also be due to more frequent onsets of disability among adults with limited educational attainment via for instance malnutrition, lack of access to health care, and risky working conditions.

There is a small but growing literature on school attendance and disability in developing countries. Much of this literature is descriptive and documents the extent of the gap in school attendance across disability status (e.g. Filmer, 2008; Trani &

Cannings, 2013; UNICEF, 2008, 2012). For instance, Filmer (2008) documents gaps in school attendance across disability status in 13 developing countries over the years 1992–2005, ranging from 10% to 60% in younger children (ages 6–11), and 15–58% in older children (ages 12–17), although the measures of disability vary substantially between countries. In Kyrgyzstan, only 55% of children with disabilities are found to have attended school in 2007, while the national primary and secondary gross enrolment rates were 97.9% and 86.9% respectively (UNICEF, 2008). The literature that attempts to isolate the determinants of schooling in developing countries is typically silent with respect to disability. Few studies consider disability as a potential cause of attendance, probably due to a dearth of data on disability so far. Lamichhane and Kawakatsu (2015) show that disability is negatively associated with school attendance in Bangladesh. Mont and Nguyen (2013) find that the disability of a parent has a significant negative effect on their children's attendance rates in Vietnam. Most of these papers analyze a single country but Filmer (2008) comprehensively carries out an international comparison on the linkage between school attendance and disabilities, and finds that disability is a significant determinant of school attendance, more so than gender, rural/urban location and socioeconomic status. However, the disability data in Filmer (2008) is of limited quality. First, it is not internationally comparable because the 14 data sets had different questions to get at disability: for instance, some asked about physical disabilities only, while others covered physical and mental ones. Second, the data sets have impairment questions (e.g. blindness, deafness, paralysis), which are known to lead to reporting bias (Mont, 2007). Respondents are expected to underreport disabilities given the stigma associated with some impairments. Instead of using impairments, recent international research and tests have recommended to collect data on functional difficulties (e.g. difficulty seeing, hearing, walking) (Altman, 2016). Worded in a neutral language, questions on functional difficulties, as used in this paper, are less likely to suffer from measurement bias. Third, impairment questions are known to get at very severe disabilities only and thus lead to very small sample size and to imprecision. This study has larger samples of children with disabilities. Finally, the data sets under use in Filmer (2008) are from the 1990s and early 2000s. Most were collected before the MDGs and Education For All frameworks were adopted. As disability-inclusion in school settings might have improved since, more research is needed.

This paper contributes to the literature on the determinants of schooling and the role of disability in parents' decision to send their children to school in developing countries.

2.2. Conceptual frameworks

Education for children with disabilities can be considered as a human right and equity issue. It is a human right issue under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities signed by the 15 countries under study and ratified by all countries except Saint Lucia. Using the capability approach (Sen, 2009), the equity objective is to deliver practical opportunities for schooling for all children, whatever their disability status. Making education real for all persons with disabilities may require additional or different resources. The right to 'equal' education may leave many children with disabilities with a limited opportunity to attend or learn, if for instance accommodations are not provided or teachers are not trained. The capability approach (Sen, 2009) points out the possibility that giving the same resources to people is not necessarily a good idea for them to achieve the same level of opportunities (capabilities). This is Sen's notion of 'conversion handicap', which broadly refers to the limited ability to convert a given income into

¹ SINTEF (Stiftelsen for industriell og teknisk forskning), a Norwegian independent research institute, has conducted researches on living conditions among people with disabilities in eight developing countries (Eide, Nhwathiwa, Muderredzi, & Loeb, 2003a (Zimbabwe), Eide, van Rooy, & Loeb, 2003b (Namibia), Eide & Loeb, 2016 (Nepal), Eide & Kamaleri, 2009 (Mozambique), Eide & Loeb, 2006 (Zambia), Eide & Jele, 2011 (Swaziland), Kamaleri & Eide, 2010 (Lesotho), Loeb & Eide, 2004 (Malawi)). For more details, please refer to the website of SINTEF.

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