

The Sustainable Development Goals

Diffusion and Contestation in Asia
and Europe

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Introduction

This paper examines the process of diffusion of ‘inclusive education’ as an educational policy norm from the regional to the national level and subsequent reception at the local level. Inclusion is one of the key terms in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for all 17 goals while Goal 4, which focuses on education, aims to ‘ensure *inclusive* and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.

Qualitative and quantitative field data collected in Malawi are used to conduct two stages of analysis. The first stage analyses policy documents and interviews with officials from the Ministry of Education to clarify the process of adoption of inclusive education into educational policy. In stage two, class observations and results of a parent survey illuminate how inclusive education policies have been received in schools and communities. Data from these three categories of actors, ‘government officials’, ‘teachers’ and ‘parents’ yielded a wide variety of viewpoints, even within the same category. Thus, efforts were made to collect as much data as possible in an attempt to capture the diverse voices of the respondents.

Malawi is a landlocked country in central Southeast Africa with a per capita GDP of roughly 394USD (World Bank, 2021). As of 2010, external funds from 47 international aid agencies accounted for approximately 39% of state finance (JICA, 2011), heightening the influence of international policy trends on national policy, educational or otherwise. Further, Malawi is known for its responsible and transparent use of aid funding. Thus, while one would expect inclusive education to be easily integrated into Malawian society, this research finds that this is not the case. Instead, adoption, implementation and reception of inclusive education in Malawi is inconsistent, with deepening resistance observed at each layer of society.

Adoption of inclusive education policy in Malawi: from the regional to the national level

While many Southeast African countries have adopted inclusive education in their education policies, Malawi was one of the first to do so. This section elucidates

the process of adoption and implementation of inclusive education policy in Malawi by reviewing relevant policy documents.

Inclusive education in policy documents

Inclusive education policies in many countries have stemmed from measures aiming to support socially disadvantaged children and students, many of whom are disabled. In what follows, policies on education for persons with disabilities are reviewed to establish the context within which inclusive education emerged.

With the declaration of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 and subsequent Grant Aid Policy for Basic Education, student enrolment in Malawi skyrocketed. Yet while enrolment continued to increase, the problem of out-of-school children soon became apparent, particularly with the so-called 'last 5%, 10%' of students with special needs. The Government of Malawi Policy Investment Framework 2001 stated that by 2012, all inequalities within schools would be eliminated and measures would be taken to support students with special needs (Ministry of Education, 2001).

In 2004, the National Policy on People with Disabilities was established, recognising the need for access to basic social services for people with disabilities and marking the first such policy introduced on a nationwide scale (Ministry of Education, 2004). In 2006, the first policy guaranteeing the rights of all people with disabilities was established, and in 2007 the 'Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities' was signed.¹ As the convention was adopted by the United Nations in December 2006, Malawi was one of the first countries to sign it. In the same year, the government declared its adoption of 'inclusive education' in the National Policy on Special Needs Education (Ministry of Education, 2007), signalling an early policy shift from special and integrated education to inclusive education.

While special education involves the separation (or removal) of special needs children from general education classes, inclusive education aims to embrace all students and address their particular learning needs within the same physical space. Although integrated education is often confused with inclusive education due to its focus on bringing all students together to learn in the same space, they are in fact vastly different concepts. While integrated education aims to mainstream special needs children into general education classes, inclusive education seeks system-wide change by leveraging the unique characteristics of each school to design learning that meets student needs.

With inclusive education featured as a central concept in the 2007 National Policy on Special Needs Education, system-wide change should be a prominent theme in the policy. However, this is not the case. While the policy claims that the necessary public funds will be allocated to each relevant agency (Ministry of Education, 2007), no explicit mention is made of system-wide change. Further, in the 2008–2017 National Strategic Plan for Education, the narrative again shifted, this time to 'special needs education' and the 'Special Needs Education

Guideline' was published the same year. Special needs education was developed with special education as its foundation and is a concept distinct from inclusive education. In 2016, inclusive education returned to centre stage with the publication of the 'Inclusive Education Strategy 2017–2021'. However, the document is heavily conceptual, stating lofty goals with no financial backing or concrete implementation strategies.

These policy documents reveal that there has been no uniform policy vision toward education for students with special needs since the first mention of 'inclusive education' in 2007. Rather, multiple policy changes have occurred rapidly over a short period. Mr. M.Y. (50), formerly in charge of education for children with disabilities at the Malawi Ministry of Education, explains:

Project proposals by aid agencies in the education sector are tied to aid money, so it's difficult to express opposition to them (within the Ministry). Usually, whenever a new policy is introduced, potential negative impacts are analysed, but in the education sector, there is a tendency for proposals to be viewed favourably.

Indeed, at first glance it is difficult to detect any potential negative impacts of educational policy in comparison to environmental, economic or agricultural policy. Yet Malawi is a country in constant shortage of adequate supplies and facilities, a structural issue that makes it easy to fall into the trap of 'take all I can get' thinking. The manifestation of such thinking was plain to see during tours of Malawian schools with classrooms lined with educational supplies and equipment from aid agencies. Numerous braille kits and typewriters from European and North American aid agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are evidence of special education aid.

Yet, frequent policy shifts have complicated long-term efforts to improve special education quality, such as teacher training. In the following section, we examine how inclusive education policy has been implemented against the backdrop of such persistent policy shifts.

Adoption and development of inclusive education policy

As evidenced in the preceding section, government policy toward education for students with special needs shifted continuously prior to the introduction of inclusive education policies. With numerous international aid agencies active in Malawi, policy tends to fall in line with the agendas of the international aid community. Yet while policy documents and ratification of conventions have been readily adopted, the implementation of such policies has been less straightforward. Malawi's chronic shortage of finances creates significant barriers to implementation. While policies introduced by international organisations are tied to funding, this funding is not continuous. Even if the implementation and development of related projects is carried out by international organisations, it is the responsibility of the recipient country to develop and carry out the project. In

Malawi, however, resource and budgetary constraints often hinder any long-term or continuous policy development.

Thus, a closer look at the implementation of inclusive education policy since its introduction in 2016 is warranted. We focus on two key issues fundamental to the implementation of inclusive education policy: teacher training and the status of special education. Firstly, the introduction of inclusive education policy necessarily entails the training of teachers qualified to teach inclusively. Currently in Malawi, Montfort College, a private teacher training institution, offers training to teach students with visual, hearing or intellectual disabilities. The teacher training college for primary school teachers, however, had no programmes related to inclusive education across its six schools as of 2020. Thus, inclusive education policy has been introduced without securing teachers qualified to teach inclusively. As illustrated above, project-level teacher training programmes, for example those implemented by international organisations, do exist in Malawi. However, such programmes are often ad hoc rather than established, mainstreamed programmes.

Special education schools in Malawi are classified into those for students with visual impairment and those for students with hearing impairment. Prior to 2016 there were two public schools each for students with visual and hearing impairment. Yet with the introduction of inclusive education policy, the visual impairment schools were shut down. At the same time, schools for the hearing impaired continued to flourish and by 2021 had grown to six schools. This reflects a fundamental difference in the way education for the visual and hearing impaired is approached in Malawi. In line with the philosophy of integrated education, visual impairment is not considered a formidable barrier to integrating special needs students into general education schools. However, many feel that students with hearing impairment cannot be taught in general education schools. This tendency to consider hearing impairment as more acute than visual impairment stems in part from Malawi's deep oral traditions that far outvalue written traditions.

Analysis of contextual factors: Malawi in Southeast Africa

In the previous sections we have shown that inclusive education policy was transferred from the regional to the national level. To better understand this process, this section examines the contextual factors contributing to such movement.

Perhaps the most prominent African regional education conference on inclusive education was held in Yaounde, Cameroon in September 2008. The Preparatory Conference of the African region for the forty-eighth session of the International Conference on Education entitled 'Inclusive Education: Major Issues and Priorities in Africa' brought together representatives from Ministries of Education across the African region to discuss all aspects of inclusive education, from policy to implementation. However, the conference yielded no resolutions or debate on defining inclusive education as a transformation of the education system as a whole, effectively ignoring the gains made through the Salamanca Statement and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Inclusive Education Guidelines and further blurring

the lines between inclusive and integrative education (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2008). With such misunderstanding and deliberate misinterpretation of policy apparent in the transfer from the global to the regional level, it is not hard to imagine further distortion in the translation from regional to national policy.

Further, the Salamanca Statement asserts that inclusive education is an effective way to fight discriminatory attitudes and create a society in which all people are accepted. Yet discrimination in society can pose an obstacle to the construction of an inclusive educational environment. In their study examining discrimination against people with disabilities in African societies, Abosi and Koay (2008) found that in many African societies, discrimination, prejudice and neglect stem from the belief that disability is a divine punishment. Inclusive education requires the transformation of attitudes and values of all educational stakeholders and confronting the prejudice and discrimination that exists in traditional society; upholding diversity and promoting tolerance and understanding are the foundations of inclusive education. For these ideals to be realised, it is essential for policy makers to understand the precise meaning of inclusive education, ensuring that the concept's core principles can be articulated in different policy contexts.

Despite such misinterpretations, inclusive education in educational policy has been on the rise in the region, particularly in Southeast Africa. Although driven by many factors, one reason for this expansion is the traditional cultural belief in 'Harambee'. Existing in parallel with the more discriminatory traditional beliefs as described above, 'Harambee' is the notion that 'If you find someone in need you should help them'. This concept captures the essence of 'inclusion' in the Malawian context, thwarting the claim that traditional culture and custom relieve the necessity for inclusive education.

We now turn to the factors driving Malawi's early adoption of inclusive education policies. It is first important to understand the structural background. As a country highly dependent on sustained international aid, Malawi is susceptible to the policy agendas of aid organisations. While not particular to the education sector, NGOs and international organisations have significant influence over Malawian policy. For example, in the 2010s an average of 90% of Malawi's national education budget was allocated to operating costs while only 10% went to development (JICA, 2011). This reflects a lack of government freedom to develop and implement its own policies and budgets, instead having to rely on policy that will secure funding.

Further, there is the influence of national character. The national credo, 'Never speak ill of a person in front of others', underlies the difficulty of expressing critical views. Thus, the adoption of educational policy with a focus on the short term likely stems at least in part from a culture of silence within the Ministry of Education itself. With no critical debate over educational policies, especially those tied to aid budgets, such policies tend to be adopted with little resistance or thought for the future.

When it comes to implementation of inclusive education policy, there is minimal funding to invest, resulting in inadequate preparation and poor implementation. Thus, rather than building on existing policies by reinforcing budgets, policies are merely replaced as new policies come with aid money attached.

Teacher and parent reception of inclusive education policy: from national to local

This section examines the expansion of inclusive education from the national to the local level, focusing on reception in schools and local communities. As mentioned above, the introduction of inclusive education was based on a series of rapid and short-term policy shifts, and policy implementation did not lead to actual inclusion. At least the concept of inclusive education was adopted in Malawi. Yet, the actual practice is very far from the internationally defined inclusive education. According to Souza and Bacon (Chapter 2), this situation can be described as a failure in transition from ‘prescriptive status (phase 4)’ to ‘rule-consistent behaviour (phase 5)’.

Teacher evaluation of inclusive education policy

Within the local level, focus will first be put on schools to examine teacher reception of inclusive education policy. To this end, a questionnaire survey ($n = 113^*$) and interviews of Malawian teachers were conducted.

Results of the questionnaire survey

The questionnaire survey asked respondents to compare the efficacy of special classes versus inclusive education based on the following four perspectives: ‘human rights approach’, ‘access to school’, ‘contribution to society’ and ‘quality of education’. As shown in Figure 7.1 below, inclusive education was rated higher on all items. However, there was no significant difference in the quality of education between the two.

While the results shown in Figure 7.1 include all survey respondents, Figure 7.2 below shows the results for the subsection of teachers who specialise in special needs education. Compared to the results for all survey respondents, the difference in evaluation of special classes and inclusive education was smaller. In terms of ‘quality of education’, the ratings for special classes and inclusive education were reversed.

In other words, special education teachers perceive that inclusive education provides a lower quality of education than special class education. At the same time, however, it is also apparent that these teachers believe that inclusive education is effective in terms of human rights, politics and access.

In fact, when observing special needs education classes in Malawi, it is often the case that the quality of teaching is much higher than in general education

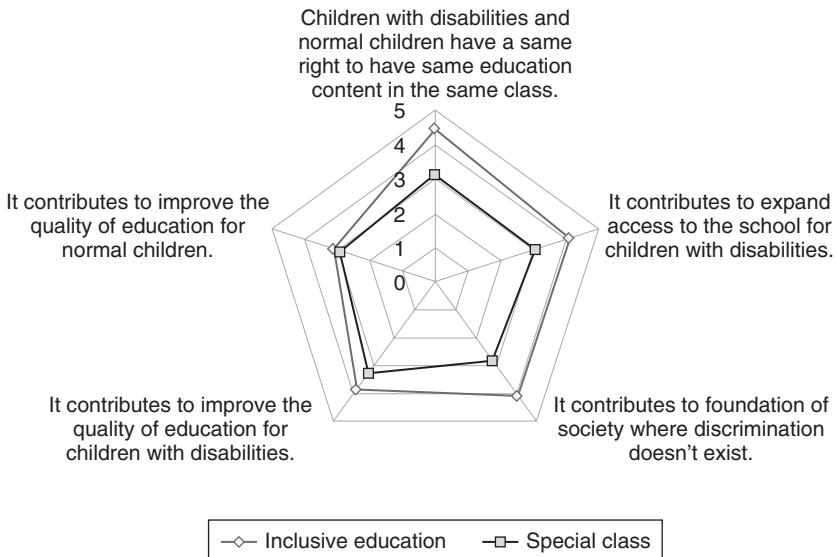


Figure 7.1 Teacher evaluation of special classes versus inclusive education based on four perspectives (human rights, politics, access and quality) [all respondents].

N = 113 *We collected 137 responses, but after cleaning the data, we could use 113 only. (5 Strongly agree, 4 Agree, 3 Fair, 2 Not agree, 1 Never agree).

Source: Kawaguchi and Kuroda (2013).

classes, which often serve large numbers of students. Even in classes with students with developmental disorders, teachers are able to control the class skilfully.

Results of interviews with teachers

The teachers interviewed ranged from lecturers at teacher training colleges to elementary school teachers, and a wide variety of opinions were heard. Through the interviews it became clear that there is a gap between the Ministry of Education staff and teachers in terms of perception and evaluation of inclusive education. The following opinion, expressed by a lecturer from a teacher training college, sums up the current situation:

Currently, it is too early to promote inclusive education in regular classes in Malawi. Few schools have adequate facilities and teachers, and in most schools, even though they claim to be inclusive, children with disabilities simply sit in the regular classroom. In primary schools in Malawi today, EFA is ridiculed as Enclosure for All. It is true that inclusive education is the best policy for cramming children into schools.

(Mr. D.M., lecturer, Montfort College, 40s)

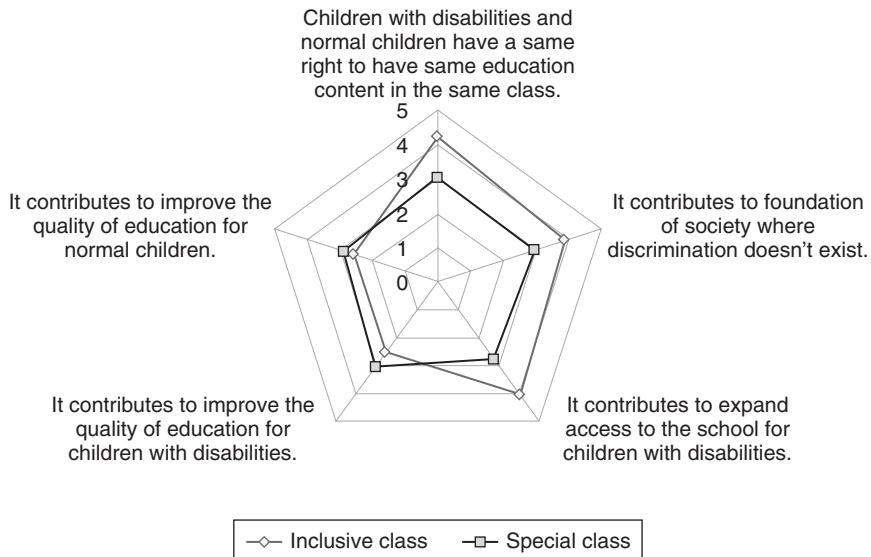


Figure 7.2 Teacher evaluation of special classes versus inclusive education based on four perspectives (human rights, politics, access and quality) [special education teachers who have completed a special needs education course].

N = 26

(5 Strongly agree, 4 Agree, 3 Fair, 2 Not agree, 1 Never agree).

Source: Kawaguchi and Kuroda (2013).

Further, there were many teachers who were clearly opposed to inclusive education in their schools. The following teacher's opinion is representative of the reality in school settings:

How can we care for children with disabilities when there are already too many children to fit into the classrooms? Without the support of parents and other children, it will have a negative impact not only on the children with disabilities but on all children, and it will place a heavy burden on the teachers. Won't this increase the teacher turnover rate? If there were special allowances for accepting children with disabilities, it might be different.

(Ms. D.Y., primary school teacher, age unspecified)

These teacher voices reveal a frank recognition that, practically speaking, the introduction of inclusive education will not have the desired effect given the current situation in Malawi's primary schools. The typical opinion of teachers was that there is already a great shortage of teachers and it is not realistic to impose greater burdens on them. Indeed, Malawian education already suffers from overcrowding in classrooms, so there is little incentive for teachers to accept new

'time-consuming' children. Thus, given the current reality of teacher burdens and teacher scarcity in Malawian primary education, introducing inclusive education systemically from the top down will only lead to teachers' negative opinions about inclusive education. With the perception and likely the reality that teacher burdens will increase with the introduction of inclusive education, it will be difficult to obtain the desired educational effects.

While the Ministry of Education staff basically had a good impression of inclusive education, teachers tended to give either conditionally positive or negative opinions as shown above. The following response is representative of and pertinent to the question of how schools should realistically accept children and inclusive education:

It is necessary for each school to recognise the type and degree of disability of the child in question, and then to make a comprehensive judgement based on the child's intentions, the wishes of the parents, the assignment of teachers and various other circumstances. In addition, the decision should ultimately be left to each school principal.

(Mr. P.K., primary school principal, 50s)

Thus, given Malawi's limited resources, it is not a matter of choosing between special needs education and inclusive education, but of choosing the type of education that best suits each individual student. This is the reality of the reception of inclusive education in Malawian schools. Observation of inclusive education classes confirmed that some inclusive education classes in fact employed pedagogy reminiscent of early integrated education while others conducted general education in parallel with special needs education by enlisting the help of parents and fellow teachers.

In practice, therefore, we can see that the norm of inclusive education undergoes a process of localisation, as local norm-takers adapt the reception of the norm to the reality of the local context. Localisation 'involves changing the formal shape and content of foreign ideas on the basis of the recipient's own prior beliefs and practices' (Acharya, 2018, p. 45).

Parent reception of inclusive education policy: the meaning of 'inclusivity' at the local level

Further examination of the reception of inclusive education at the local level focuses on the perspectives of parents. As seen above, there is no special preparation or budget allocation for inclusive education in Malawi, and the policy is to simply welcome children into school. As a result, visually impaired children who can understand what the teacher is saying can benefit from classroom instruction, but children with intellectual disabilities or emotional disorders just sit in the classroom, an example of so-called 'Dumping Education'.

In light of this situation, some parents prefer to send their children to other schools in the hope of receiving a proper education rather than forcing their

children to attend public schools offering ‘inclusive education’. Currently, Malawi is experiencing a rapid increase in the number of private and non-formal schools, causing a state of confusion with the many different types and qualities of schools. According to education statistics for 2020, about 40% of school-aged children in primary school do not attend public schools (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Even from this limited data snapshot, it is apparent that the number of children attending non-public schools is increasing every year, and many children with disabilities attend non-formal schools run by foundations and NGOs. Many expect that the implementation of diverse forms of education will promote the creation of inclusive education in Malawi. Yet on the other hand, there is concern that the previously described lack of preparation for inclusive education will deepen educational inequality between disability types as it expands. In other words, it is causing polarisation in which only children who can easily be included are included in public schools and those who cannot continue to be marginalised. This is an interesting example of how attempts at educational Capacity-building by external donors in fact serve to exacerbate existing and emerging polarisation dynamics that run counter to the ethos and practice of inclusive education. Further, given the general dynamics of teacher transfers, there is a possibility that knowledgeable, experienced and motivated teachers will leave public schools and move to non-formal schools where they will be paid more. While the government will benefit from budget cuts if education becomes more informalised, there is also concern that the government would be less involved in the content and management of education.

Findings and discussion

As we have seen, although the Malawi government has adopted inclusive education policy at the national level, implementation has been inadequate. Schools and teachers are left to enact the policy while facing the realities of the current educational situation, leading to various issues. While Malawi’s unique approach to disability and education suggest that a shared philosophy of inclusive education exists, the reality in the classroom is that inclusive education is not often practiced. Instead, educators faced with practical and structural barriers strive to provide the best education possible through a combination of special and integrative education.

This ‘Malawian-style inclusive education’ has been enabled in part by inadequate preparation of schools due to a lack of funding and support for teacher training at the national level. There have been no resolutions to issues of teacher training or the scale of inclusive education practice, such as who will be responsible for teaching inclusive education or whether a whole-school or classroom-based approach is appropriate. Further, a lack of continuous government funding for inclusive education initiatives means that public schools are unable to meet the needs of the community.

Therefore, the norm of ‘inclusive education’ as recognised at the global level is diluted at every layer of society until transformed into integrated education at

the local level, where only the students who can keep up with general education classes are included. For the rest, they are left to search for a school that can meet their needs.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is a focal point of international frameworks including the United Nations SDGs. This study has shown how the concept of inclusive education has been disseminated from the regional to the national level and subsequently, how it has been received at the local level.

By analysing field data from Malawi, the study reveals that the development of inclusive education has been ad hoc rather than deliberate or planned. Further, the study has illuminated the plight of the local schools and communities endeavouring to realise inclusive education despite endless barriers and few options. Yet, this situation cannot simply be dismissed as a policy translation failure. Instead, it reflects the reality of Malawi's openness to global education policy and offers a glimpse into the ingenuity of Malawian schools and communities. Rather than insisting on an idealised form of inclusive education, schools worked within their limited resources, utilising special and integrated education to try to meet student needs.

Yet, from the perspective of policy makers and international organisations, greater efforts are needed to ensure the intended philosophy of inclusive education policy is effectively implemented. With needs such as support for teacher training and system-wide educational transformation, there is a renewed urgency for international cooperation engaging a strategic, long-term approach.

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Note

1 The 'Convention on the Rights of Children with Disabilities' was ratified in Malawi in 2009 and the 'Disability Discrimination Act' was authorised in 2012. In comparison to other Southeast African countries, Malawi's signing and ratification of these conventions occurred at an early stage. The ratifications, however, were not tied to any new budget allocations, structural changes or staffing, resulting in so-called 'empty' ratification.

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