

EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR

Case Study Report



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THE SCIENCE OF IMPROVING LIVES

Experiences Implementing Inclusive Education in West Africa and Madagascar

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FOREWORD

Educate A Child (EAC), a global programme of the Education Above All Foundation, has a particular focus on enabling the hardest-to-reach children to fulfil their fundamental right to education. In many places today, children with disabilities and other vulnerabilities continue to be denied an education due to misconceptions and beliefs that can lead to severe stigmatisation, harmful practices, and even concealment of the children. When the very existence of these children is hidden, there is little question about their ability to access the services or education that can provide them with the skills needed to have agency over their lives and contribute in meaningful ways to society.

In 2016, Humanity and Inclusion (HI) partnered with EAC to implement *the Towards a universal access of vulnerable girls and boys to a quality primary education project*, a ten-country inclusive education programme aimed at improving the access, enrolment, and retention of vulnerable girls and boys in quality primary education, particularly girls and boys with disabilities. The project drew on 18 years of experience that Humanity and Inclusion has in implementing inclusive education programmes and worked to bring children out of the shadows and help them gain the skills and competencies needed to be change agents for their own lives.

Our partnership with HI reflects EAC's principle of building on existing work and taking it to scale. This project expanded HI's regional West Africa Inclusive Education programme to new countries and regions within those countries. With the support of EAC, HI was able to pilot new and creative strategies to address the needs of children with disabilities and other vulnerable children while also replicating innovative approaches in new countries. This case study allows us to examine the impact and effectiveness of these strategies and reflect on the lessons learned.

The case study is full of valuable findings, some of which are:

- Holistic support to vulnerable children, especially those with disabilities, and their families, as an essential good practice.
- Longstanding relationships are fundamental to successful implementation of complex and multisectoral project approaches.
- Multilevel efforts are important for cultivating support and ownership at both institutional and grassroots levels.
- One size does not fit all. Contextualisation of approaches is necessary. Even when using the same or similar approaches across regions and countries. .
- Inclusive education requires dedicated trained human resources within both schools and the community.
- Better resourcing schools is necessary for inclusion.

A key outcome is that the project was able to influence institutionalisation of inclusive education practices in West Africa and Madagascar.

EAC is pleased to share this publication with you. We hope that it will provide you an opportunity to reflect on how to improve efforts to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential through a quality education.

Mary Joy Pigozzi, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Educate A Child

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DISCLAIMER

The project discussed in this case study was implemented prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus the implications for disruption in education for disabled and vulnerable children are not addressed.

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ACRONYMS

CWD	Children with Disabilities
DPO	Disabled People's Organisation
EAC	Educate A Child
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HI	Humanity & Inclusion
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organisation
OOSC	Out Of School Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



To garner insights into successes and challenges in building inclusive education approaches in sub-Saharan Africa, this study examines experiences implementing a project aimed at improving educational opportunities for children with disabilities and other vulnerable children. This project, which was implemented by Humanity & Inclusion in partnership with Educate A Child (EAC) from September 2016 to November 2019, was designed to adapt and contextualise cross-national approaches to inclusion and promote innovative approaches aligned with local priorities and systems. The project was implemented in ten Sub-Saharan African countries and included goals to improve the access to and retention in primary school for vulnerable children, especially children with disabilities. The project goal was exceeded in enrolment of vulnerable children, ultimately enrolling 32,525 out-of-school children (OOSC) and meeting 116% of the initial target of 28,011, with a 78% survival rate.

This case study describes implementation strategies and experiences from the project. The inclusive education approaches used in each country; policy and systems changes attributed at least in part to the programme; the role of contextual factors in the successes and challenges faced within each country; and the influence of EAC contributions on the project are examined. The case study includes special attention to the innovative approaches pursued in some project countries, i.e., itinerant teacher schemes used in Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sierra Leone; the use of school life assistants to support inclusion in Senegal; and the role of bridging classes in Madagascar. Specifically, the following research questions are pursued, drawing on a desk review of project documents, qualitative survey responses, and key informant interviews.

1. What are the characteristics of the universal approaches HI used across countries? What are the characteristics of the country-specific innovative approaches that evolved during the project?
2. What systems strengthening around policy and practice occurred in the areas targeted by the project?
3. What major milestones, especially policies and strategies for inclusion, did the HI programmes contribute to?
4. What do programme actors identify as contextual factors that enabled or constrained implementation?
5. How did key stakeholders believe EAC contributions enabled or hindered the HI inclusive education project?

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH STRATEGY

Research Question 1 concerns the characteristics of the universal and innovative approaches HI used across countries. To answer this research question, activities were grouped under six universal approaches that broadly describe the activities implemented during the project. These universal approaches are: (a) sensitisation and advocacy for inclusive education, (b) identification of individual needs, (c) provision of personalised support to children and families, (d) teacher training, (e) creating more accessible school and learning environments, and (f) support to local parent and community initiatives. Because of project staff efforts to contextualise these approaches, specific activities varied from country to country.

To improve enrolment, access, and school survival rates of vulnerable boys and girls, especially of children with disabilities, the project staff championed inclusion in mainstream schools wherever possible and sought to build bridges to support successful participation. The innovative approaches helped to build these bridges, facilitating more specialised support in mainstream school settings for children with moderate to severe disabilities. This case study review includes the different innovative approaches pursued under the project, starting with the itinerant teacher approach, where a teacher with expertise on inclusive education and support strategies for specific types of disability, travels among a network of schools providing specialised support in inclusive classrooms and homes. The school life assistant approach was outlined, a strategy similar to the itinerant teacher approach, but with assistants remaining in a single school rather than traveling to

different schools. Another approach, the bridging classes, help to prepare children with disabilities to enter inclusive classrooms after they graduate from specialised support classes located in the same schools.

For Research Questions 2 and 3, the systems strengthening around policy and practice that occurred in areas targeted by the project were examined. In particular, information was collected on the major milestones, especially policies and strategies for inclusion, to which HI activities contributed. To answer these research questions, a description was provided for how the project staff contributed to milestones, including the adoption of inclusive education policies, the addition of inclusive education modules into pre-service teacher training, and incorporation of disability data into national data collection activities, such as EMIS and censuses. Some countries, like Burkina Faso and Madagascar, achieved greater success in this area than others.

Research Question 4 focussed on the contextual factors that programme actors identified as enabling or constraining to implementation. Project documents and survey and interview responses point to broad contextual factors that impacted the success of implementation. These include the need for political will, grassroots support, and engaged human resources. Furthermore, project staff and partners noted several features of the project approach as enabling, especially its multisectoral nature, the provision of holistic support, and HI's longstanding presence in the region.

Research Question 5 examined how key stakeholders perceived EAC contributions as enabling and hindering the HI inclusive education project. The findings for HI experiences with the EAC partnership were mixed. Respondents nearly universally praised the partnership with EAC as positive, and many enthusiastically commended the strong engagement and technical support received from the EAC team. Some noted that the partnership pushed the project, productively, to expand its focus to other vulnerable children beyond those with disabilities. However, some of the same respondents construed specific requirements as

challenging. In particular, some respondents worried that the quality of service-delivery and support was sometimes sacrificed to fulfil requirements related to monitoring and beneficiary targets. Discussions of partnership experiences sometimes attributed these frustrations with requirements to cultural differences between the organisations, with HI described as a “qualitative” organisation and “EAC as a “quantitative” organisation.

LESSONS LEARNED

The findings from this case study point to a number of lessons learned under the West Africa and Madagascar inclusive education project. These findings are detailed below. While many of the insights are common to interventions and likely not surprising to readers, their perceived influence on implementation warrants consideration for future projects.

The project staff sought to provide sustained, holistic support to vulnerable children, especially those with disabilities, and their families, highlighting a good practice. The provision of ongoing support to children and families with health, education, social participation, protection, and other needs was perceived as a core pillar of project quality, one reported as essential to meaningful, lasting shifts in inclusivity. The ecosystem of support the project staff aimed to develop was an element in both the project's universal and innovative approaches. Holistic support under the project meant an emphasis on teams and on facilitating connections among services. The project staff emphasised and sought to cultivate collaboration among disability specialists, mainstream school teachers, school staff, parents, health professionals, community-based rehabilitation volunteers, and other community members. At the institutional level, holistic support for children translated into an emphasis on multisectoral engagement, especially involving education and health sectors.

HI's longstanding relationships enabled implementation of project approaches. Respondents recognised HI's longstanding presence in the region as fundamental to success, especially given the complex, multisectoral nature

of the intervention. Some explained that HI's regional experience allowed the staff to capitalise on established relationships with a variety of stakeholders, helping to influence national and local systems. Notably, countries where HI had longer-term experience, such as Burkina Faso and Togo where HI has worked since 2002, made achievements institutionalising the innovative approaches supported by the project.

The project staff maintained an important multilevel focus, cultivating support and ownership both at institutional and grassroots levels. Project personnel sought to develop all major project approaches at both institutional and local levels to promote sustainability of the interventions. Notable strides were made institutionalising some approaches in certain contexts, with support substantiated through national or local funding in some cases. At the same time, staff turnover at all levels sometimes frustrated efforts to foster conditions conducive to implementation and institutionalisation.

One size does not fit all, contextualisation of approaches is necessary. Although the project's overarching approaches were consistent across contexts, specific activities varied from country to country as the project staff sought to contextualise the intervention and, by doing so, build compatibility with existing systems. The process of contextualisation is well-exemplified through the innovative approaches, which all seek to build bridges for children with disabilities to participate in mainstream schools but do so in different, contextually appropriate ways. For example, in Madagascar, bridging classes build on a tradition of catch-up classes used to support re-entry for OOSC. Even where countries adopted the same approach, as with the itinerant teacher approach in Togo and Burkina Faso, the approach was adapted to each context through collaborations with local governments and stakeholders.

Inclusive education requires dedicated, trained human resources. The training of teachers, community-based rehabilitation volunteers, parents, and others, in inclusive approaches was an important element of the project. As to innovative

approaches, the project staff developed both generalist and specialist capacity for supporting disability and inclusion, with training for specialists particularly apparent. In order to deliver substantial capacity building efficiently, the project staff provided intensive initial training on fundamentals followed by regular coaching and support. However, institutionalising the expertise needed to provide these trainings has presented an ongoing challenge in some countries. Ultimately, as in so many development projects, creating and maintaining a cadre of trained human resources is a long-term endeavour.

As an additional human resource lesson, ensuring that local school staff capacity aligns with local child needs sometimes creates supply and demand challenges, especially where specialist support is being developed within communities. This was especially true for the school life assistant and bridging classes approaches where specialised expertise is held in some schools or communities but not others. The itinerant teacher approach overcomes this challenge by having teacher experts travel from school to school providing tailored support.

Better resourcing of schools would help with inclusion efforts. Equipping schools and classrooms with teaching and learning materials that facilitate inclusion of children with a variety of needs is resource intensive. Although adapted materials can be collected and developed locally—and the project staff provided training to support schools in doing this—some respondents felt that better resourcing would improve learning environments. Even if more funding were provided, many adapted materials are not available in local markets.

Instability and natural disasters present substantial challenges to implementation. Political instability, conflict, and natural disasters emerged as significant barriers to project implementation. Teacher strikes led to school closures in many project contexts and often recurred over multiple years of the project. Government turnover following political instability made maintaining government capacity and support for inclusive education difficult. Ultimately, these

factors constrained implementation, though some countries that experienced such challenges, such as Togo and Burkina Faso, overcame them and made progress institutionalising inclusion.

Some contexts made greater strides institutionalising inclusive education than others. Although the information collected during this case study does not allow for in-depth comparisons of achievements across project contexts, some countries, such as Burkina Faso, Togo, and Madagascar, reported more policy changes and greater success institutionalising some project approaches than others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are countries where HI has had a longstanding presence. Generally, the presence of strong political will for inclusive education and established support from communities, civil society, and governments enables successes. Conversely, the presence of challenges such as instability or weak community support sometimes made implementation more difficult.

Some respondents reported a disconnect between organisational cultures at HI and EAC, especially around preparations to fulfil partnership

requirements. As a rule, EAC provides training and capacity building with partners around requirements, and HI staff praised the strong engagement and technical support received from EAC in this area. Nevertheless, some HI staff perceived partnership requirements as challenging, with some believing that the time and resources involved in fulfilling requirements, especially related to monitoring, detracted from implementation. It could be that the large, multi-country nature of the project further complicated dynamics around partnership requirements both in terms of (a) the need to ensure support extends to country offices as well as regional levels and headquarters levels; (b) difficulties planning for requirements across multiple contexts; and (c) sharing multi-country information in EAC systems.

In sum, the project approaches enabled children with disabilities and other vulnerable children to participate in education through the provision of holistic, sustained, individualised support. Building on longstanding relationships and cultivating local ownership, the project staff were able to make strides in institutionalising inclusive education practices in West Africa and Madagascar.



The World Health Organisation estimates that one billion people have a disability, and that 6.4% of children under the age of 14 in low and middle-income African countries, experience a moderate to severe disability. Despite the prevalence of disability, children with disabilities (CwDs) are often among the most educationally marginalised and are particularly likely to be excluded from education, especially mainstream schools (UIS, 2017). Not only do inclusive education practices have the potential to ensure these children access quality education, but such practices benefit the education of all children in classrooms, not only CwDs. Many countries, including several in Sub-Saharan Africa, are in the early stages of integrating inclusive approaches into education policy and planning (GPE, 2018). To garner insights into successes and challenges in building inclusive approaches in sub-Saharan Africa, this purpose of this study is to examine experiences implementing a project aimed at improving educational opportunities for CwDs and other vulnerable children.

This project, which was implemented by Humanity & Inclusion in partnership with Educate A Child (EAC) from September 2016 to November 2019, was adapted and contextualised as cross-national approaches to inclusion; and staff promoted innovative approaches aligned with local priorities and systems. In the context of this project, inclusive education is “a process that aims to increase participation and reduce exclusion of marginalised children in education by responding to the individual and different needs of all learners in an effective and appropriate way.”^[8] The project was implemented in ten Sub-Saharan African countries and was designed to improve the access to and retention in primary school for out of school children (OOSC). This especially included children with disabilities (CwDs), but also other vulnerable, marginalised children, including orphans, children with HIV or other chronic diseases, and girls exposed to female circumcision. The project goal was exceeded in enrolment of vulnerable children, ultimately enrolling 32,525 OOSC and meeting 116% of the target of 28,011, with a 78% survival rate. The case study includes a description of project

implementation strategies and experiences. The inclusive education approaches used in each country are examined, along with policy and systems changes attributed at least in part to the programme, the role of contextual factors in the successes and challenges faced within each country, and the influence of EAC contributions on the project. The case study includes special attention to the “innovative approaches” pursued in some project countries, i.e., itinerant teacher schemes used in Togo, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sierra Leone; the use of school life assistants to support inclusion in Senegal, and the role of bridging classes in Madagascar.

To explore the successes and challenges the HI project faced in promoting inclusive practices, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the “universal” approaches HI used across countries? What are the characteristics of the country-specific “innovative” approaches that evolved during the project?
2. What systems strengthening around policy and practice occurred in the areas targeted by the project?
3. What major milestones, especially policies and strategies for inclusion, did the HI programmes contribute to?
4. What do programme actors identify as contextual factors that enabled or constrained implementation?
5. How did key stakeholders believe EAC contributions enabled or hindered the HI inclusive education project?

The first section provides an overview of the case study methodology. Then the universal approaches to inclusive education used across project contexts (Research Question 1) and the related achievements and milestones made in institutionalising these approaches are identified and described. Specifically, project activities, which varied by context, are grouped under six universal approaches related to: (a) sensitisation and advocacy for inclusive education, (b) identification of individual

¹ Throughout the case study, bracketed numbers are used to cite documents included in the desk review of project documents. The corresponding list of documents can be found in the Desk review resources section. Please note that many of the references are from internal project documents.



Photo Credit: Julie Carclay/HI



needs, (c) provision of personalised support to children and families, (d) teacher training, (e) increasing the accessibility of school and learning environments, and (f) support to local parent and community initiatives. For each approach, the common activities associated and related policy milestones and achievements institutionalising the approach are documented (Research Question 2 and 3). The role of each approach in supporting two dimensions of project design are mapped: (i) a joint focus at grassroots and institutional levels and (ii) a “twin-track” strategy that provides targeted support to individual children and their families, while simultaneously transforming schools and communities into more enabling environments for children with disabilities and other needs.

In the next section, factors that influenced project performance are reported, examining how different contextual factors (Research Question 4) and experiences partnering with EAC (Research Question 5) enabled and challenged the project. Three broad factors that impacted the project are identified—local attitudes and support for inclusive approaches, instability and natural disaster, and the availability of human and material resources. The presence or absence of these factors in shaping implementation experiences in different project contexts is described. Respondents interviewed during the case study also identified several features of the project approach that were enabling, especially the multisectoral nature of the project strategy. In examining project partnership experiences, EAC was lauded for its dedication, engagement, and the quality and depth of technical support. At the same time, some reported that they perceived specific requirements, especially related to monitoring and beneficiary targets, as onerous. Some worried that the time and resources involved in meeting requirements constrained provision of the holistic support HI sees as fundamental to quality service delivery.² Finally, key takeaways from the case study are provided.

² EAC notes that it met several times and worked extensively with HI during the proposal process. This included sharing EAC reporting (monitoring and evaluation) and target requirements.

This case study applied an iterative qualitative approach, which included a desk review of project documents, a qualitative online survey, and interviews with key informants to answer case study questions. Below, the process for each of these phases as well as an analysis of the approach is described.

DESK REVIEW

During a desk review of HI project documents, common (“universal”) and country-specific approaches used in the project were mapped, with results summarised in this report and country-level results provided in an Appendix available at [\(digital link\)*](#). In keeping with the project design, work was tracked at two levels: the institutional or policy level and the grassroots level. Also tracked were information on policy milestones, enabling factors, barriers, and other study themes. To gather this information, project documents were uploaded into qualitative analysis software and then coded. A French speaker coded all French language project documents. Where a detailed summary of a document was available to code, sometimes the summary was coded and then the full-text version was read without coding to check that relevant information had not been overlooked. This abbreviated review process was also adopted when an additional document was provided after data synthesis and report writing was underway, adding pertinent information directly to the case study text in these situations.

ONLINE SURVEY

To supplement the desk review, the perspectives of key informants were gathered through a self-

completion survey. Respondents responded to the survey via Google Forms at their convenience between October 23 and November 3, 2020. The survey was designed primarily to collect qualitative data on project achievements, implementation strategies, policy and system changes, challenges and enabling factors, and experiences with the EAC-HI partnership. The survey was offered in English and French. French responses were translated into English using DeepL translation software, which a French speaker checked for accuracy. The same procedure was followed for a response received in Portuguese. All responses were coded using qualitative analysis software, specifically Nvivo for the desk review and Dedoose for the online survey analysis.

A total of 57 current or former HI staff, government partners, and civil society partners familiar with the project were invited by email to participate in the survey. With the exception of Liberia,³ where no recommended contacts were available, between three and eight staff and partners from each of other nine project countries were invited to participate, as well as regional and headquarters staff at HI (with both henceforth referred to with the umbrella term of regional staff). HI staff supplied the list of recommended 57 contacts.

After three email reminders, 37 completed surveys were received—a response rate of 65% representing regional staff and all 9 project countries targeted. As shown in Table 1, 49% of survey responses came from current or former HI staff, 27% came from government officials, and 24% came from civil society representatives.

Table 1. Survey responses

Relationship of respondent to the project	Total	Percent
Current or former HI staff	18	49%
Government official	10	27%
Civil society representative ⁴	9	24%
Total	37	100%

³ At the end of 2017, HI’s intervention in Liberia ended and Liberia no longer participated in the project. This made it difficult to identify appropriate contacts there and ultimately meant that information on Liberia in this case study is largely limited to early project documents.

⁴ Category includes disabled people’s organizations (DPOs)

* <https://educationaboveall.org/uploads/library/file/Inclusive%20education%20project%20approaches%20mapping.xlsx>

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants to deepen insights into the partnership experience. Specifically, the focus centred on the adoption, adaptation, and institutionalisation of three main “innovative” approaches: the itinerant teacher approach in Togo and Burkina Faso, the school life assistant approach in Senegal, and the bridging classes approach in Madagascar. HI staff familiar with the targeted topics and contexts recommended the interview respondents.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype, in English or French depending on the interviewee’s preference. Comprehensive notes were taken during interviews and, with permission, audio recordings made whenever possible. The subsequent analysis drew primarily from interview notes, followed by a review of transcripts from available audio recordings to ensure integrity. French notes were translated into English with DeepL software and then reviewed for accuracy by a French speaker. Given the length of transcripts and the typically high quality of

the translation, a French speaker reviewed the translations for transcripts only for direct quotations cited in the case study report. Portuguese transcripts were also translated with DeepL.

Overall, 11 key informant interviews⁵ were conducted with a total of 12 interviewees (two participants were interviewed together in one case). These included regional perspectives and representatives from Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Senegal, and Togo. Of the 12 total interviews, 10 occurred with current or former HI staff, 1 with a government official, and 1 with a teacher.

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to code documents, with notes representing high-level themes aligned with topics of interest to the case study, such as enabling factors, challenges, and itinerant teacher approach. Broad nodes were reviewed to identify specific themes (e.g., specific challenges), approaching this second phase without a priori coding scheme.

⁵ Count includes one informal interview conducted before semi-structured interview protocol was finalised.

PRESENTATION OF KEY FINDINGS

UNIVERSAL AND INNOVATIVE PROJECT APPROACHES AND ASSOCIATED MILESTONES

To improve enrolment, access, and school survival rates of vulnerable boys and girls—especially for children with disabilities—in schools, the HI project was designed to champion inclusion in mainstream schools wherever possible, and to build “bridges” to support successful participation. While the nature of these bridges differed from context to context, in all settings the project pursued this goal by mobilising and training families, communities, and teachers to improve the learning and social environment for all students.^[7] In service of this goal, project activities targeted four results:

Result 1: Institutional actors and those from civil society are able to implement policies, strategies and inclusive education action plans defined in a comprehensive manner.

Result 2: Local stakeholders (families, community members, parents’ associations and school committee members, members of civil society organisations, social, health and education actors) promote social participation of out of school children, including children with disabilities.

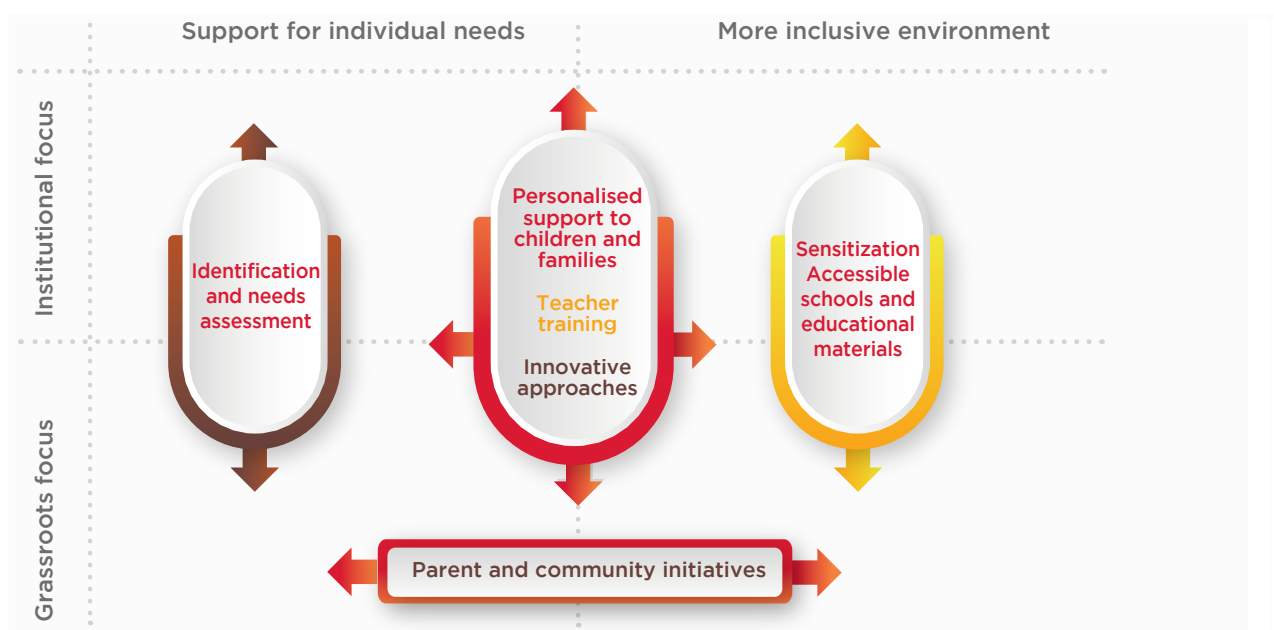
Result 3: Vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, are enrolled in inclusive primary

schools where they are more likely to stay due to an inclusive pedagogic approach and more inclusive environment.

Result 4: Children with intellectual or sensory impairments have access to quality education through innovative and appropriate educational approaches.

Based on our analysis of project documents and survey results, we group related approaches under several umbrella categories, some universal across the project contexts and others unique to specific contexts, i.e., the project’s innovative approaches. In Figure 1, these different approaches are mapped against two core dimensions of project design emphasised in survey responses: (a) a multilevel focus looking to ground inclusive practices at the grassroots levels in homes, communities, and schools; and institutionalise these practices nationally and sub-nationally; and (b) a twin-track approach that both addresses the individual needs of vulnerable children and removes societal, environmental, economic and political barriers to inclusion. The mapping prioritises what are viewed as the primary impact(s) of each approach, but it is acknowledged that the impacts of different approaches are complex and, arguably, most approaches benefit both tracks.

Figure 1: Map of Project Approaches Against Core Dimensions of Project Design



As shown in Figure 1, an identification and needs assessment approach primarily supports identification of individual needs (or, at the national level, an aggregate picture of student needs). Approaches related to personalised support to children and families, teacher training, and the innovative inclusive education approaches are designed both to address individual needs and build more enabling home, community, and school environments. These three approaches are applied at the grassroots level and, to some extent, institutionalised. A sensitisation and advocacy approach as well as an approach that seeks to make the school and learning environment more accessible, largely contribute to building more inclusive settings, and these efforts were focussed at both grassroots and institutional levels. Finally, support to parent and community initiatives cuts across the twin-tracks and, by design, is focussed mainly at the grassroots level.⁶

In this section, the characteristics of approaches are described in more detail, starting with universal approaches and then moving to three innovative ones: the itinerant teacher approach, the school life assistant approach, and the bridging/transitory classes approach (Research Question 1). Key policy achievements and institutional milestones associated with each approach are documented (Research Question 2 and 3). Progress towards some policy achievements began under the project but were adopted by governments after EAC support ended. See the Appendix ([digital link](#))* for a more detailed mapping of activities in different countries under each approach.

SENSITISATION CAMPAIGNS AND ADVOCACY

Survey respondents recognised advocacy and sensitisation at the grassroots (n=18) and institutional level (n=21) as a fundamental project approach. At the grassroots level, advocacy and sensitisation sought to shift negative community attitudes towards disability and opposition to inclusion. Once built through regular sensitisation campaigns, survey respondents often framed community support as an enabling factor or

precondition for progress with other approaches. Campaigns targeted parents, teachers and other school staff, religious leaders, and other community members through home visits, public events, media messaging, and other strategies. [13] In the words of one survey respondent, sensitisation campaigns strove to convey that “children with disabilities are first and foremost children, and that they have abilities to learn on an equal basis with other children” (Participant 56). They also raised awareness of children’s rights to education and the benefits of inclusive education for all children. These rights include fostering greater tolerance of differences and improved learning due to more tailored, differentiated instructional strategies suited to a range of learning needs. In an example of the effectiveness of these campaigns, one survey respondent explained that sensitisation campaigns enabled stakeholders to establish community by-laws that fostered greater inclusion where national legislation had previously failed. In an example of project successes in this area, one regional survey respondent reported that “the parents of Disabled Children have also become widely involved in the project, for example by providing transportation for [sic] the children in school, by committing themselves more resolutely to their child’s medical care and follow-up, or by monitoring their child’s progress in school,” as a result of awareness-raising activities (Participant 52).

At the institutional level, advocacy for inclusion and sensitisation on project activities engendered collaboration and support from government, civil society partners, and other stakeholders. As documented in Table 1, these efforts yielded shifts in government policy and planning for inclusive education. More specifically, the project influenced new or revised inclusive education policies in Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Madagascar, Niger, and Sierra Leone, with work towards policies in Mali and Senegal initiated.^[7] The project also contributed to education sector plans and strategy developments in Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, and Senegal. The project staff also helped develop UN country reports on disability and inclusive education handbooks in several countries. Moreover, new institutional arrangements

⁶ Please note that these groupings are presented for analytical purposes; they are not official groupings associated with HI’s model

in project countries including a directorate for inclusive education in Burkina Faso demonstrate an expanded commitment to inclusive education in project countries. HI's advocacy, bolstered by longstanding relationships with government and other partners predating the project, also led to a number of other achievements laid out in Table 2, which are discussed in subsequent sections on other approaches.

Table 2. Key institutional achievements and policy milestones influenced by the project (letters and bracketed numbers indicate source, see table notes below for details)

	BEN	BFA	GNB	LBR	MDG	MLI	NER	SEN	SLE	TGO
Advocacy										
New or revised inclusive or special education policies		[3]	[3]	[3]	S	[7]	[1]	[7]	[3]	
Support to education sector plans and strategies	[4]	[5]	[2]			[2]	[6]	[5]		
Country report on disability submitted to the UN General Assembly								[5]	[6]	
Inclusive education handbook	[5]						[5]		S	
Identifying needs										
Inclusion of disability statistics in EMIS or other government surveys	[5]	[3]								I
Personalised support to children and families										
School fees and/or tuition exemption for children with disabilities			S	[2]						
Manual for supporting social participation (e.g., inclusive through sport)		[3]			[6]					
Teacher training										
Inclusive education integrated into pre-service training	[5]	[7]	[4]		[5]	[6]	[2]	[7]	[5]	S
Training manual on sign language approved		[3]					[2]			I
Training manual on braille approved							[2]			I
Training manual on intellectual disability approved		[3]								
National or subnational teams of inclusive education trainers established					[4]	S		[6]		
Accessible school environments and teaching and learning materials										
Policy or legislation supporting adapted assessments					[4]					[16]
National policy mandating school accessibility									S	

Table notes: **Yellow** indicates progress towards achievement; **Green** indicates realisation of achievement; **I** = interview response, **S** = survey response, bracketed numbers note source document; **BEN** = Benin, **BFA** = Burkina Faso, **GNB** = Guinea-Bissau, **LBR** = Liberia, **MDG** = Madagascar, **MLI** = Mali, **NER** = Niger, **SEN** = Senegal, **SLE** = Sierra Leone, **TGO** = Togo

IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS

An identification and assessment approach, ongoing through the life of the project, led to the selection of beneficiaries and assessments of their individual needs, with grassroots work in this area largely contributing to Project Result 2, Local stakeholders (families, community members, parents' associations and school committee members, members of civil society organisations, social, health and education actors) promote social participation of out of school children, including children with disabilities.

In communities, this process typically flowed as follows:

1. OOSC were mapped by community actors,
 2. Identification of OOSC with HI tool and selection of beneficiaries (involved identifying children who might be disabled using the WG [Washington Group screening] tool to assess child functioning).
 3. OOSC beneficiaries referred to education services depending on what educational options (mainstream schools, specialised schools, etc.) are available in different contexts. At this stage, children with specific needs were directed to specific support mechanisms (often innovative approaches).
- 3b. Medical assessment of children with functional limitations.^[7]

To achieve this, the project staff trained facilitators, including community based rehabilitation volunteers, social workers, community members, and civil society organisations, to conduct screenings.^{[4][5][12]} Facilitators also led community awareness activities, such as radio spots and public meetings, to encourage participation in screening events and door-to-door identification campaigns.^[3]
^[2] In addition to disability, the project staff screened for different vulnerabilities and health issues, including HIV.^[2] Because screening processes yield only information about suspected impairments or health issues, referral for medical examinations after positive screening results was essential. Once an

accurate diagnosis was made, the project staff could facilitate referrals to appropriate services and, as discussed more in the next section, help children and families meet their individual needs.

At the institutional level, the project staff advocated for greater national monitoring of need, especially of children with disabilities, in service of Project Result 1: Institutional actors and those from civil society are able to implement policies, strategies and inclusive education action plans defined in a comprehensive manner.



IN TOGO, “THE [PROJECT’S] WORK ON STATISTICAL DATA AT THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL WITH THE EDUCATION AUTHORITIES HAS MADE IT POSSIBLE TO BETTER IDENTIFY CHILDREN’S NEEDS AND TO REPORT EASILY TO THE NATIONAL LEVEL”

(PARTICIPANT 8).

In Togo “the work on statistical data at the grassroots level with the education authorities has made it possible to better identify children’s needs and to report easily to the national level” (Participant 8). The success of the project monitoring activities led to adoption of disability measurement into EMIS and the national census (survey and interview responses). Additionally, HI shared its data tools and data collection strategy with the ministry of education and advocated for disability-disaggregated EMIS data in Burkina Faso.^[3] Education sector plans commit to new mapping and census activities in Guinea-Bissau (survey response). Finally, the project was also tapped to support government research activities around inclusive education, including the completion of two studies in Togo (survey response) and one in Guinea-Bissau.^[4]

PERSONALISED SUPPORT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Following the identification process, the project staff supported the healthcare or rehabilitation needs of vulnerable children to address individual barriers at home and societal barriers more broadly (including school barriers). As such, personalised support efforts address both elements of the project's twin-track approach, with efforts at the grassroots level largely aligned with Project Results 2 and 4.

The project staff provided personalised support for a range of needs for children, some specific to children with disabilities and others supporting additional vulnerable groups. These included health and rehabilitation needs, which, as one survey respondent explained, could include “appropriate individual support to ensure the maximum level of mobility, such as assessments, assistive devices, physiotherapy, and occupational therapy” (Participant 52). Specific examples from project documents include provision of mobility devices for children with physical impairments,^[2] orthotics and physiotherapy to improve autonomy and facilitate school attendance,^[5] and training for parents on the personal hygiene and other health needs of their children (survey response). To improve the accessibility of children's home environments, the project conducted home visits with personalised suggestions for changes based on their child's individual needs (survey response). Additionally, some parents of children with severe disabilities were trained in braille, strategies for supporting intellectual disabilities, or sign language.^{[1][4]}

Additionally, the project provided psychosocial support to children and training for parents in child protection.^[2] To address economic barriers to education, the project staff employed a variety of strategies, including paying school fees for the most vulnerable children,^[2] supplying school kits,^[6] facilitating enrolment by helping families obtain birth certificates for their children,^[6] and supporting income generating activities for families to improve economic autonomy.^{[4][5]} To enhance social participation, confidence, and self-esteem, the project staff helped organise different opportunities,

such as holiday camps for deaf children, where they could learn sign language and skills to integrate into school;^[5] and extracurricular activities—like sports, student councils, and inclusive drama—for children with disabilities.^{[1][2]} One regional survey respondent noted the particular effectiveness of camps and activities in Guinea-Bissau, where they “attract parents of disabled children from adjoining territories not covered by the project (Participant 52).” Personalised support services also linked families, schools, and health services to promote holistic support. In Mali, for example, community relays involving community leaders, local government, school directors, DPOs, and others, facilitate holistic support for families in target communities.^[1]

Table 2 documents key institutional achievements under the project related to personalised support strategies. Specifically, Liberia's education sector plan included plans for school fee exemptions for children with disabilities, and in Guinea Bissau the ministry of education ordered exemptions from monthly and periodic tuition fees to public schools for children with disabilities (survey response). A manual on inclusive sport, a topic aligned with social participation goals, was also developed and approved in Burkina Faso. Similarly, Madagascar developed a methodological guide for the ministry of education on social participation, apprenticeships, and school survival rates for children with specific education needs.^[6] Given the range of needs and barriers to inclusion for different children, the project's advocacy for greater holistic, multisectoral collaboration at all levels was an important element of this approach.

TEACHER TRAINING

Survey respondents (n=25) regularly identified capacity building for teachers, pedagogical supervisors, inspectors, and other school staff in inclusive education as a core universal approach for enrolling and retaining vulnerable children in quality education and a key achievement for the project. As survey respondents explained, training focussed on promoting respect for diversity and equal opportunities and general inclusive pedagogies—

such as child-friendly methods, differentiated instruction, and child-to-child support—that carry benefits to all learners (primarily associated with Project Result 3). The project staff also provided more specific training in methodologies for teaching children sensory, intellectual, and physical disabilities (primarily associated with Project Result 4).^[7] By aiming to build more welcoming, inclusive schools environments as well as equip teachers with tools to support individualised needs, this approach addresses the twin-tracks. The more specific trainings, which sometimes included braille and sign language instruction, were tailored to teachers of children with disabilities in their classes and sought to build teachers' ownership of content (interview response). Trainings targeted both in-service teachers and pre-service trainees, and were sometimes tailored to specific subjects, such as adapted mathematics or computer science instruction.^[4]

As project documents attest and survey respondents discussed, the project staff encouraged continuous learning, including refresher trainings and coaching from pedagogical supervisors. This helped to reinforce and grow understanding of inclusive education and associated practices, with one survey respondent noting this was especially

important given challenges with low initial levels of teacher training.

Institutionalisation efforts related to teacher training involved integrating inclusive education modules into national pre-service training; developing government-validated training manuals in sign language, braille, and to support students with intellectual disabilities.^{[2][3]} Additionally, the project helped establish national or subnational teams of trainers for in-service education, as in Madagascar,^[4] Mali (survey response), and Senegal.^[6] National training materials promoted broad definitions of inclusion, sometimes incorporating a new focus on gender,^[4] which one survey response reported was an important achievement. As shown in Table 2, inclusive education was also integrated into pre-service training in Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, and Togo. Additionally, sign language manuals, braille manuals, and training manuals on intellectual disability were validated in several countries. Lastly, Senegal established pedagogical support cells to bring together teachers, inspectors, and experts for continuing education on specific topics, such as language disorders, on an ad hoc basis.^[2]





Photo Credit: Education Above All

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION	
per 100g	
Energy	1500 kJ
Protein	15g
Carbohydrate	70g
Fat	5g
Fiber	2g
Sodium	100mg
Iron	10mg
Calcium	100mg
Vitamin A	1000 IU
Vitamin B1	0.5mg
Vitamin B2	0.5mg
Vitamin B3	5mg
Vitamin B6	0.5mg
Vitamin B12	0.5mcg
Vitamin C	100mg
Vitamin E	10mg
Vitamin K	100mcg



ACCESSIBLE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

To improve the physical accessibility of learning environments, the project helped refurbish schools. After accessibility assessments, the project supported the addition of a variety of accommodations, sometimes including ramps to school entrances and classrooms, new pathways, improved lighting in classrooms, whitewashing walls, and lowering the level of blackboards in classrooms.^{[6][8]} The project also worked to improve sanitation and hygiene facilities, for example making latrines accessible,^[2] and to supply adapted furniture.^[1] As one survey respondent explained, accessibility of schools (and homes) was carried out “according to the principles of universal design, creating an ‘unbreakable chain of movement’ whereby a person can move freely from their home to any public space (Participant 52).”

The project staff also equipped schools with adapted teaching and learning materials and provided training on their use. The specific materials provided were varied by context and need, with some targeted at mainstream classrooms and the differentiated needs of both children with and without disabilities.^[2] For example, adapted materials distributed in Togo—which included

“UNDER THE PROJECT, IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY OF SCHOOLS AND HOMES WAS CARRIED OUT “ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPLES OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN, CREATING AN ‘UNBREAKABLE CHAIN OF MOVEMENT’ WHEREBY A PERSON CAN MOVE FREELY FROM THEIR HOME TO ANY PUBLIC SPACE

(PARTICIPANT 52)”

a relief map, wooden polygons, abacuses, and pictures—supported learning for different subjects and were designed to stimulate psychological, cognitive, and motor skills development in children^[9] In other situations, materials were

designed for children with specific impairments, including adapted materials tailored to specific subjects as well as more generalised equipment, such as braille typewriters,^[3] computers adapted for blind users,^[2] and transcription tools.^[8] In at least one country, the project helped specialised schools build resource centres for greater inclusion of children with disabilities.^[3] As with all approaches, the project also sought to raise awareness of the need to ensure accessibility, educating authorities through advocacy work and, in at least one case, showcasing the accessibility of model schools to ministries of education.^{[1][4]} These activities related to physical accessibility and adapted materials primarily to support Project Result 3 and 4. At the institutional level, in addition to advocacy work on this topic, the project reported achievements related to adapted assessments, with a ministerial order signed on adapted assessments for students with disabilities in Madagascar and a similar initiative underway in Togo.^{[4][9]} According to a survey respondent in Sierra Leone, a new national policy mandates the accessibility of schools there.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Through another approach, the project provided technical support and funding to parent and community initiatives at the grassroots level. These locally defined projects, according to one regional survey respondent, reinforced sensitisation and advocacy activities. They provided several examples, such as “support for the development of income-generating activities (IGAs) to help with the schooling of the most vulnerable children (e.g., Mali, Guinea Bissau),^[13] encouraging exchanges between parents of children enrolled in Transitional School Integration Classes (Burkina Faso), and developing action plans for the conduct of activities in favour of the educational care of children with disabilities (Senegal)” (Participant 52). In an illustration from the same survey respondent, “other communities are finding original solutions, such as in Burkina Faso, for example, where families close to the schools have opened their doors, welcoming some of the

blind children as host families so that they can be educated in an establishment sometimes 80 or 100 kilometres away from their initial home (Participant 52).” Another survey respondent pointed to a variety of community-led projects in Togo, including the founding of community-supported schools and the cultivation of school gardens to generate funds to finance local education. Project documents detail many other examples of these micro projects, including improving the physical accessibility of schools, establishing microcredit groups, supplying electricity and water facilities to schools, tree planting efforts, creating conviviality spaces that bring together children with and without disabilities to socialise, construction of a footbridge to enable pupils to reach school even when water levels rise, and creating learning corners so children can study outside of class.^{[3][7][14]} Ultimately, these locally defined projects align with other project approaches, fostering innovation and ownership of inclusion in households and communities.

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

In this next section, the focus is on the main innovative approaches cultivated by the project. It begins with a discussion of the itinerant teacher approach, focussing on implementation of the approach in Togo and Burkina Faso, where the approach has been most institutionalised. Then the school life assistant approach introduced in Senegal and the bridging classes approach developed in Madagascar are examined. For each approach, the model is described, along with how that model evolved during and after the life of the project, and efforts to institutionalise the approach.

Itinerant teacher approach⁷

Description of the approach

The project staff piloted the itinerant teacher (enseignant itinérant) approach to varying degrees in Burkina Faso, Mali, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Below are insights primarily from Togo and Burkina Faso, where the approach has made greater strides towards institutionalisation. The approach centres on the training of itinerant teachers, i.e., teachers

⁷ Unless otherwise noted, data for this section are drawn from key informant interviews.

specialised in instruction for children with moderate to severe disabilities who travel among a network of schools providing support to targeted children. In Togo, itinerant teachers specialise in support for physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and/or sensory disabilities; in Burkina Faso, itinerant teachers support children with visual impairments, though there is interest in expanding the approach to serve other types of disabilities.

The role of itinerant teachers. Depending on a child's needs, itinerant teacher support includes additional explanation of lesson content, sign language or braille assistance, help with homework, and transcribing student responses to exercises and exams.^[18] An itinerant teacher's typical caseload is roughly 25 children, though they will intervene to support other children they observe to need help whenever time allows. Itinerant teachers also support the lead classroom teacher, coaching the teacher on inclusion strategies, collaborating to plan inclusive lessons, and providing instructional support, though the mainstream school teacher remains the primary facilitator of inclusive instruction for targeted children.^{[10][18]}

Support to children. The involvement of children begins with the general community sensitisation and identification campaigns that are a cornerstone of the project approach.^[19] Some children with moderate to severe disabilities are then paired with itinerant teachers. In Togo, for example, information about children with disabilities is submitted to local orientation committees, who determine where a child's needs can best be met—in inclusive settings in mainstream schools, in specialised schools, or through special activities in their home. For those children with disabilities assigned to mainstream schools, individualised education plans are developed that target specific needs established during prior assessment, and itinerant teachers are assigned, though itinerant teachers may later determine that a child (or their mainstream school teacher) does not need sustained support. Additionally, itinerant teachers also provide support to children outside of school hours. In Togo, this additional support occurs through home visits whereas in Burkina Faso the itinerant teacher

organises extracurricular activities in the school environment.

Support to families. Itinerant teachers in Togo also provide direct home support to parents of participating children. They sensitise parents on the importance of education for children with disabilities, follow up on absenteeism, and train parents on interacting with their child, such as providing sign language training to parents of hearing-impaired children. Recognising that poverty is another prominent barrier to education, the project staff also provided school kits, facilitated travel to school, and paid school fees for participating children.

Benefits

Benefits to children. Respondents reported a number of benefits from the itinerant teacher approach to children, teachers, and families. As one interviewee explained, this system unlike training ordinary teachers and pedagogical supervisors alone helps to get as close as possible to the learners, each of whom has unique needs that itinerant teachers must be prepared to address. As a result, the approach expands education options for children with disabilities, which have traditionally been limited because of a dearth of specialised schools, especially outside urban areas. Not only does the approach increase educational access, but participating children demonstrate improved academic performance and survival through the education system. At the same time, depending on the severity of a child's needs, the goal of support may not be mastery of the curriculum but rather increased independence for the child. The approach also encourages greater confidence, improved social skills, the opportunity to interact with other children, and better behaviour. Moreover, the use of inclusive instructional strategies carries benefits to all children in classrooms served by itinerant teachers, not only targeted children.

Benefits to teachers and parents. For ordinary teachers, who often have large class sizes, the additional instructional support from an itinerant teacher is perceived to be an important benefit, even if it comes only every couple of weeks.^[19] For

parents, one interviewee noted that the approach helped alleviate poverty by freeing up parent's time, time that otherwise would have been spent caring for a child with disabilities at home to engage in income-generating activities. The training parents receive on interacting with and supporting their child means that itinerant teachers also see parents learning to love their child in new ways.

Adopting and expanding the pilot approach in Togo

Special schools first experimented with a version of the current approach in Togo in 2010. In this early model, specialised schools sent two or three staff around the region to support children in mainstream schools, especially with attendance issues. Recognising that early iterations of the itinerant teacher approach addressed this important need to support children with disabilities in schools close to their homes, HI chose to test a version of the approach in mainstream schools. Laying the groundwork for ministry of education involvement and institutionalisation early, HI piloted the approach on the condition that the ministry of education second government teachers to serve as itinerant teachers, with HI providing training to


the itinerant teacher approach, spreading it to additional regions with technical support from HI. The government has since assumed leadership of the approach. The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy in Togo has adopted the itinerant teacher approach as part of its national model, and the approach has also been integrated into the country's education sector plan. Consistent with the project's agreement with the government, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy continues to pay the salaries of itinerant teachers.^[16]

As further evidence of government commitment, the 2020-2030 Education Sector Plan, validated in June 2020, embeds the approach in its education strategy. The ministry of education has also adopted HI's braille, sign language, and inclusive education training manuals for use nationwide, which support training needs. Respondents in Togo felt optimistic about the longevity of the approach, with one noting that a government deputy for inclusive engagement has made this her mission, meeting with teachers and endeavouring to ensure sustainability. This indicates the importance of government involvement and leadership to successfully scale-up an intervention.

Adopting and expanding the pilot approach in Burkina Faso

The itinerant teacher approach is newer to Burkina Faso, introduced by the project in 2017 following a learning exchange trip to Togo. As in Togo, the approach was not wholly new: other NGOs, such as Light for the World, had already been implementing a version of the approach in the country. The project staff believed that starting small and focussing initially on students with visual impairments in a few schools before progressively expanding would help the approach take root. Further, it would allow time to mobilise resources, educate families and communities about the approach, and generate support for expansion.

HI involved state and civil society actors in adapting the approach for Burkina Faso. When planning to pilot the adapted approach, this team sought to integrate the approach with existing educational structures in Burkina Faso, designing an approach adapted to local realities. One



THE ITINERANT TEACHER APPROACH HAS NOW BEEN REPLICATED ACROSS TOGO, AND THE MINISTRY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION AND LITERACY HAS ADOPTED THE APPROACH AS PART OF ITS NATIONAL MODEL.

teachers and other staff involved with supporting children in mainstream schools. With EAC funding, HI was able to expand the approach, ultimately training 14 itinerant teachers. These teachers, in turn, assisted roughly 300 children in 200 (of 650) project schools during the EAC project.

As the pilot project progressed, other stakeholders such as Plan International, UNICEF, and the national Education For All Coalition also adopted

interviewee noted that the project staff familiarity with the pilot communities, including the teachers and pedagogical supervisors and organisations working there, enabled implementation. Drawing on this contextual knowledge, the pilot project staff provided training to additional relevant actors: school education advisors, who ensure children receive the follow-up they need and liaise with administrators about student needs; families fostering children with disabilities; and other students, who are trained on how to help blind peers. Another feature of the Burkina Faso model is the strong linkages between the mainstream school where a blind child attends and a specialised school equipped with the resources and Braille equipment that child needs. The specialised school provides Braille transcriptions of learning materials and decodes the child's work, with the itinerant teacher ensuring that this linkage functions smoothly. Although the itinerant teacher pilot project in Burkina Faso remains in its early phases, HI now supports 39 students, which is more than twice the number of students at the start of the pilot project. They intend to expand the approach to focus on new areas of disability. One interviewee spoke of strong government support for the approach, crediting this to greater institutionalisation of inclusive education, generally, in Burkina Faso, especially having a dedicated department for inclusive education at the Ministry of Education and strong community structures for inclusion. Ultimately, despite a relatively small scope of implementation at present, one interviewee felt optimistic about institutionalisation given the government's interest and capacity to support the approach.

Adaptations and lessons learned during implementation from Togo and Burkina Faso

In both Togo and Burkina Faso, the implementation model has evolved and yielded several lessons. Some of these lessons centre on how to maximise the impact of itinerant teachers given their limited availability to provide support due to time constraints. To address this, the project staff adopted a peer-to-peer approach, where some responsibilities such as helping targeted students understand instructions, take notes, and move around are performed by peers, with oversight from

the head teacher. Additionally, the project staff learned that itinerant teachers struggled to travel to their schools and so they began to provide teachers with motorcycles, a heavy resource investment, but one emphasised as effective. Nevertheless distance between schools remains a challenge, with longer travel times reducing the time available for supporting students.^[19]

Interviewees also recommended anticipating resistance to the approach, noting that enthusiasm grew as the approach took root and benefits become more apparent. In Togo, regular teachers initially feared that itinerant teachers would function as inspectors. However, they grew to recognise itinerant teachers as collaborators and value the additional support provided, including capacity building for which regular teachers would not otherwise be eligible. Over time, mainstream schools also came to see the benefit of inclusive approaches in improving academic performance of all learners, not just targeted students. Initially, specialised schools also resisted, perceiving the approach as an encroachment on their responsibility to educate children with disabilities, though, ultimately, they have come to support the approach. Additionally, the scope of the approach has been adapted to meet different needs in each context.



AS A LESSON LEARNED ON THE ITINERANT TEACHER APPROACH, ONE INTERVIEWEE EMPHASIZED THAT THE PROJECT HAS REALISED THAT EMPOWERING PARTICIPATING TEACHERS TO BE INNOVATIVE IS A FUNDAMENTAL INGREDIENT OF THE MODEL'S SUCCESS, AS IS INVOLVING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN THE COMMUNITY SENSITISATION AND IDENTIFICATION PROCESS.

In Togo, the model targets not just children with moderate to severe disabilities but also talibé children, children sent away from their families to study the Koran with religious teachers near the border of Burkina Faso. In Togo and Burkina

Faso, the itinerant teacher approach is applied to the full primary cycle and post-primary grades to help children with special needs beyond early grades. Supporting the more specialised topics taught in secondary school has required preparing itinerant teachers with the content knowledge and pedagogical skills to support learning in the specific subjects that are most challenging to an individual student. As final lessons learned, one interviewee emphasised that the project has realised that empowering participating teachers to be innovative is a fundamental ingredient of the model's success, as is involving people with disabilities in the community sensitisation and identification process.

Remaining challenges for Togo and Burkina Faso

As the model continues to be implemented, several challenges have emerged. These challenges remain unresolved, though HI has pursued solutions to some. First, interviewees point to the need for greater resource investment (a) to better equip classrooms with tablets, pencils, paper, and other materials, and (b) for sensitisation and identification work. One interviewee suggested that a stronger budget for the latter ideally including development of a database documenting children's needs and/or regular inspections at schools would better ensure that the children who need help receive appropriate resources and support.

Second, better benefit packages would bolster teacher well-being and professional development opportunities. Specifically, HI recognised a need to incentivise the itinerant teacher career path in Togo, as ordinary teachers have the option for promotion to school principals there, but itinerant teachers do not. To address this, HI continues to work with the government to gain status recognition for the itinerant teacher profession. One interviewee also called for stronger support for teacher well-being in Togo, including more time off: "Emotionally, this job is hard, and sometimes [itinerant teachers] need breaks" (Participant 57). Itinerant teachers would also benefit from health care coverage.

A final outstanding challenge relates to capacity building. Itinerant teachers encounter a multitude

of different situations during classroom visits, and continuous capacity building is essential to develop the skills needed to provide support in these complex, varied situations. This is even more evident as the approach expands to support additional types of disability and more advanced academic content. While government education inspectors have been trained to monitor and support itinerant teachers in Togo,^[16] one interviewee reported that fully transitioning training expertise from HI trainers to the state remains a challenge. The interviewee proposed that allowing more experienced itinerant teachers to become trainers would address this need, a solution that would also provide professional development opportunities for itinerant teachers.

School life assistant approach ⁸

Description of the approach

The project developed the school life assistant (assistant de vie scolaire) approach in Senegal. Under the approach, school life assistants support up to six deaf children enrolled in mainstream schools to meet individualised education plan targets. These assistants are students or other community members usually with at least a baccalauréat degree⁹ and two additional years of education.^[21] They accompany children in the classroom part-time, providing sign language translation and pedagogical support to them as needed, allowing the lead teacher to focus on whole class instruction. The assistant also offers direct help to the lead teacher, who receive basic training in sign language and pedagogy for the instruction of deaf children.

Collaboration between teachers and school life assistants. To avoid territorial disputes, the teacher and school life assistant have clearly delineated roles. The teacher maintains authority over general instruction in the classroom and uses the main signs for the lesson to the entire class. The assistant provides targeted support, stepping in where the lead teacher needs technical signing support and where a deaf child needs additional explanation. Both collaborate to try to improve the inclusivity of teaching and learning materials. For example, they tailor instruction to make difficult concepts more accessible to deaf children, such as providing

⁸ Data in this section comes from key informant interviews.

⁹ A baccalauréat degree signifies successful completion of secondary education.

additional explanation on the difference between upper and lower case letters, a distinction not made in sign language.

Support to families. As with many project activities, including the itinerant teacher approach, the school life assistant approach also seeks to bolster inclusivity in deaf children's homes.^[21] To do so, the project staff trained parents in sign language to enable communication and opportunities to progress with sign language through practice at home. Parents also receive training in deafness so they better understand the challenges their children encounter. Acknowledging that many households with deaf children face extreme poverty and that the inclusivity of home and school environments is not the only barrier to education, the project also provided parent groups with money to fund their action plans. Examples include investments in collective income-generating activities so parents can continue to afford to send their children to school.

Ongoing capacity building. Given the reliance on sign language, continuous training is essential. Teachers and school life assistants receive 14-days of basic training on sign language and deafness, which affords them a command of basic signs that they can begin to use in their classroom settings.

Given the brevity of this initial training, their sign language training prioritises the signs needed to deliver specific curriculum content rather than general fluency in sign language. Follow-up visits with school life assistants and teachers as well as evaluation of student knowledge helps to identify additional training needs, which then inform the development of additional refresher courses and teacher professional exchanges that recur throughout the year. An expert consultant contracted with the project developed videos demonstrating the signs needed for each lesson, an important reference given the nascent sign language skills of participants.

Adopting the pilot project approach

HI began implementing the school life assistant approach in Senegal in 2017 in the middle of the project, opening four classes with school life assistants in their first year and an additional two the following year. The project defined the approach together with the Ministry of Education from the outset as one with the potential to benefit children with severe visual or hearing impairments. Because another initiative in Senegal supported children with visual impairments, the project and the ministry elected to focus on school life assistants for deaf children during the pilot project.



Photo Credit: HI

$$\begin{aligned} &= 79 \\ &= 73 \\ &= 74 \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} 4 &= 79 \\ 6 &= 73 \\ 8 &= 74 \end{aligned}$$



Adapting the pilot project approach in response to challenges

During implementation, the project staff identified the need to adjust the model. Initially, deaf children began the school life assistant programme without knowing sign language, expecting they would learn sign language in their classes. However, the need to simultaneously learn sign language and French proved a challenge, prompting the project staff to introduce 15-day sign language training camps for deaf children before the start of the school year. In some areas, schools and disabled people's organisations also host special classes to allow children more sign language instruction and practice.

As additional changes, the project staff started to incorporate teacher exchanges, after recognising a need to deepen continuous professional development opportunities for school life assistants and teachers, and to develop collaborative support networks for them. Finally, in the early pilot project stages, the project staff recognised that the trainings provided were appropriate for the early grades but not higher grades, which require more experienced teachers to deliver advanced content. They have since begun to expand training for some teachers to equip them with the more advanced skills they need for higher primary school grades.

Institutionalising the pilot project school life assistant approach

Interviewees felt that the groundwork had been laid for successful institutionalisation of the school life assistant approach that could be sustained. At the grassroots level, school life assistants continue to be paid by HI, though the vision is for local schools and communities to finance positions in the future. One interviewee explained that this willingness of schools and local committees to fund school life assistant positions means that the value of the approach has been validated at the grassroots level. The government has also expressed interest in evaluating and scaling the approach, including an intention to prepare school life assistants as part of pre-service training. However, institutionalising this training will first require recognition of the school life assistant role.

Bridging classes approach¹⁰

Description of the approach

In Madagascar, the project introduced bridging or transitory classes (*Classes passerelles*). Located in mainstream schools, bridging classes serve small numbers of students typically 5 to 10 per class – with severe disabilities. The term bridging refers to “the possibility for the student to participate in activities of other inclusive classes depending on their abilities or the nature of the activity, and even join an inclusive class”^[20, p.1]. According to an interviewee, even after joining an inclusive class, the bridging class remained a resource to students, and children can re-join the bridging class whenever they benefit from additional support. The approach allows children who could otherwise only be accommodated within specialised schools to participate in mainstream, inclusive schools closer to home.

All children in a bridging class share the same disability and have a teacher with expertise in pedagogical support strategies appropriate for that particular disability, as well as in general inclusive education practices. The pilot project was focussed on bridging classes for deaf children.

The process of establishing a bridging class

Needs identification. Bridging classes are created through a multi-step process. First, child needs are identified and mapped as part of the general community sensitisation campaigns and door-to-door home visits organised by the project staff. As always, a medical examination is critical to the identification process in order to accurately map individual needs and, ultimately, determine community demand for bridging classes supporting a certain type of disability. The importance of this step was exemplified in Madagascar when, while setting up bridging classes for deaf students, audiometric testing revealed that some prospective students were not, in fact, deaf but rather experiencing communication disorders stemming from cerebral palsy and intellectual disability.^[6] At the start of each academic year, parents, the bridging class teacher, and the school principal collaborate to determine an individualised education plan for each student, as is standard practice with all the innovative approaches. Depending on a

child’s needs, this personalised plan may aim to help transition the child from the bridging class to the inclusive classroom. For deaf children, this transition would typically not happen until the child’s fourth year in school at the earliest, as their first two years are focussed on learning sign language and their third year on foundational skills in reading, writing, and math, according to an interviewee.

Preparation of school environments. Following this step, schools are selected, pending government approval, to host bridging classes based on, (a) available classroom space, and (b) reasonable proximity to the homes of children with the same disability. The classroom should be equipped with adapted teaching and learning materials, including general materials (e.g. coloured pencils, paper, puzzles, and magnetic letters and numbers) and materials specific to a type of disability (e.g., a sign language dictionary). Because of the difficulty of securing many recommended materials in local markets, schools are encouraged to develop their own low-cost materials.

Teacher preparation. After establishing criteria to guide teacher selection, a teacher is appointed for the class, with the position funded by parent associations, as is common in Madagascar, or the government. All teachers receive trainings on the basics of inclusive education as well as trainings related to more specific pedagogy, such as the use of augmentative communication techniques, like the use of gestures and pictures; the use of assistive devices; and the use of disability-specific supports. As a starting point, teachers of deaf students receive sign language training typically about 50 hours of explicit instruction in signing plus ongoing coaching in sign language and pedagogical training in reading, writing, and mathematics instruction for deaf children. Principals and pedagogical advisors also receive training so that this small team the teacher, principal, and pedagogical advisor can support one other. Specialised centres serve as a resource for these trainings, and schools are encouraged to develop ongoing relationships with these specialised schools or resource centres, even if that involves partnering with a school or centres in another region.

¹⁰ Except where noted, data in this section come from Fiche technique: Classe Passerelle, ^[20] a draft guidance note on implementing the bridging class approach.

Continuous capacity building. A final element of the approach is ongoing monitoring, coaching, and support once classes are operational. School principals, local pedagogical advisors, and pedagogical staff of the partner resource centre or specialised school should observe and support physical accessibility of the general school environment and the appropriateness and accessibility of materials in the bridging class itself. This team also coaches bridging class teachers on their classroom pedagogical practices as well as the teacher's role fostering inclusion in sports, art activities, and other areas. Finally, this team observes participating students, monitoring their progress on their personalised schooling plans, academic achievements, attendance, and integration into school life.

Adopting, adapting, and institutionalising the pilot project approach¹¹

The project staff introduced bridging classes to Madagascar in the 2017-18 school year, ultimately opening two classes in the Northern region and two in the Eastern region during the life of the project. While a novel approach in Madagascar, interviewees felt bridging classes were, importantly, well-suited to the context. They aligned with catch-up class approaches used in the education system to support re-entry for OOSC, and similar programmes had been implemented both in specialised schools and in HI's integrated classes for children with intellectual disabilities. The bridging classes approach, helped children with severe disabilities to reach grade level and enter inclusive, mainstream classrooms. In short, the bridging classes approach addressed a gap in a novel way but its conceptual proximity to existing approaches gave it a foundation to build on, and enabled greater resonance with communities, although parents still needed to be sensitised to the approach.

Challenges and adaptations to the pilot project approach

Despite the appropriateness of the approach for the context, the project staff encountered a range of challenges during implementation, some of which required adaptations to the original approach. Several issues arose related to identification. First, medical examination of the children identified as

deaf is critical to accurate identification of needs. However, a dearth of specialists or multidisciplinary teams near project communities meant that children needed to travel all the way to the capital city for evaluation. Furthermore, several children with the same severe disability within a reasonable distance from a host school must be identified for a bridging class to operate. This creates the need to regularly negotiate supply and demand issues. Adding to this, once community awareness about the classes spread, parents of children with other severe disabilities, especially cerebral palsy and intellectual disabilities, sought to enrol their children in bridging classes. HI has since helped develop bridging classes for children with these disabilities as well. While this community demand suggests that the approach resonates locally, it can be resource-intensive to equip classrooms and train teachers appropriately, and thus, difficult or at least slow for supply to catch up with demand. Relatedly, the project initially identified host schools before community sensitisation and identification campaigns, leading to mismatches in supply and demand. As a result, schools are now identified later in the process, once there is a better sense of community demand for a specific bridging class.

Resource challenges arose as another theme. Even with appeals to teachers to make their own classroom materials or to use common objects, like twigs and pebbles when possible, supplying bridging classes with adequate materials is very costly, with classes supporting intellectual disability or cerebral palsy particularly resource intensive. [20] Relatedly, while establishing bridging classes is resource intensive, they are, as a result, better-resourced than many of the other classrooms in a school. One interviewer explained that this led teachers in mainstream classrooms to resent bridging class teachers the more manageable pupil teacher ratios, with bridging classes capped at 10 students per teacher compared to often 60 or 70 students per teacher in mainstream classrooms.

The project staff also struggled to keep bridging classes supplied with trained teachers, a particular challenge for classes with government-funded (as opposed to parent association-funded) positions. As civil servants, those teachers are regularly

¹¹ Unless indicated otherwise, information on the bridging classes approach in this and subsequent subsections is drawn from key informant interview data

reassigned by the government. Yet the heavy training investment for bridging class teachers to build their skills with inclusive education and approaches specific to a particular disability means they are difficult to replace. HI has worked directly with the Ministry of Education to prevent inappropriate teacher reassignment.

Institutionalising the pilot approach

Although the bridging classes pilot started as a small grassroots pilot, HI has sought to institutionalise the approach. After sensitisation campaigns targeting the Ministry of Education, a new department of inclusive education within the ministry oversees the process of establishing bridging classes and plans to implement the approach in new regions. Since the closure of the project, HI has developed a guide for implementing bridging classes in Madagascar for the ministry and has continued to support teacher training. Repeated restructuring at the Ministry of Education has slowed the process of institutionalisation, requiring renewed advocacy and retraining of ministry staff. One interviewee likened this experience to taking three steps forward and two steps back, highlighting both the challenges that ministry turnover presents and the slow progress made on the approach.

Contextual and partnership factors influencing implementation

In this section, contextual factors that enabled or constrained project implementation are documented (Research Question 4). The following factors that arose repeatedly in project documents and survey responses are described: socio-political attitudes towards disability and inclusive education, instability and natural disasters, human and material resource factors, and the appropriateness of project design features. HI experiences partnering with EAC, and the ways in which survey and interview respondents felt it enabled or hindered the project, are also discussed (Research Question 5).

SOCIO-POLITICAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS DISABILITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Political will and support from government and other partners

Numerous survey respondents (n=30) emphasised

political will for inclusive education and active engagement from government and civil society partners as an important enabler for project implementation. Not only did respondents feel that political will supported institutionalisation of the inclusive education approaches cultivated during the project, but they also pointed to its crucial role in legitimising project activities across the region. This included leveraging government support to help shift community attitudes towards disability and inclusion, and ensuring the project staff could quickly relay expectations to the highest decision-makers. As some respondents emphasised, proactive, continuous collaboration with supportive governments, such as establishing an official HI-Ministry of Education coordination team for the project in Senegal, is an important practice. Others added that government support must come from all levels, including local government.

While most comments centered on government interest in and support to the project, some respondents mentioned the importance of involved religious or civil society partners. These partners include civil society organisations, disabled people's organisations, chiefdom education committees, media, and religious leaders such as imams.

Across project countries, political will for inclusive education has grown, with a strategic shift towards inclusive approaches seeking to educate vulnerable children in mainstream schools whenever possible. This has been especially the case in Burkina Faso and Togo, as evidenced by strong government ownership of inclusive education approaches tested by the project staff in those settings, as well as in Sierra Leone, Mali and Senegal.^[5] Survey respondents from Benin and Togo attributed the increasingly favourable socio-political climate for inclusive education to Sustainable Development Goal 4 and its emphasis on inclusion. Several others mentioned HI's longstanding relationships with these governments as positively influencing the socio-political climate, or at least allowing the project to channel political will to enable project activities. One respondent cautioned that government support was not automatic, but needed to be nurtured through sensitisation efforts, in the case of Madagascar.

Many survey respondents (n=16) flagged new policy, legislation, planning frameworks and the appointment of official focal points for inclusive



“PARENTS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO SEND THEIR CHILD TO SCHOOL AND THE COMMUNITY ALSO HAS A ROLE TO PLAY IN ACCEPTING THE DISABLED CHILD’S PLACE ALONGSIDE OTHER CHILDREN

(PARTICIPANT 56).”

education all of which substantiate political will as significant enabling factors for project activities. For example, one survey respondent from Sierra Leone explained that the “existence of legal and policy instruments (Education Act, Education policy, Child Right Act, Teachers’ Code of Conduct, etc.) provided a basis upon which tools/empowerment materials for project beneficiaries were developed and delivered (Participant 51).” Another explained that government documents provided inclusive education stakeholders with the mandate to convene, which facilitated implementation of inclusive activities. Survey respondents from several countries noted that having a dedicated official or department for inclusive education, which provided a coordination point and a potential institutional home for inclusive education interventions, advanced project efforts.

Attitudes towards disability and inclusive education

While political will was typically discussed in positive terms as present (or at least growing) and enabling the project, community buy-in at the grassroots level was more often framed negatively as a substantial barrier (n=14). However, some respondents (n=5) from Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, and Niger cited strong support from schools, community members, and parents.

Negative beliefs about disability and vulnerability impeded project efforts to identify beneficiaries.

Survey respondents from Togo reported that some community members refused to accept their children’s disability, with one respondent explaining that they treated disability as a myth. Other respondents noted that parents and community members would hide children with disabilities as well as talibé children sent away from their families to study the Koran with religious teachers from workers facilitating identification campaigns. A respondent from Guinea-Bissau explained that, “even with the [advocacy] information received through the neighbours, they prefer to hide or keep this child in order not to have contact with the community and not to be seen by someone; there is still great taboo (Participant 32).”

Following identification, prevailing attitudes also hampered efforts to enrol and retain vulnerable children, especially those with disabilities, in school. According to one survey respondent, scepticism both about the capability of children with disabilities to learn and their right to do so undermines greater inclusivity at the grassroots level. As another survey respondent explained, these beliefs must be (and often are not) jointly held by families and the surrounding communities to enable inclusive education: “Parents have an important role to play in deciding whether or not to send their child to school and the community also has a role to play in accepting the disabled child’s place alongside other children (Participant 56).” Grassroots opposition to inclusive education sometimes extended to the school environment itself. Indeed, some teachers in Madagascar resisted inclusive education, believing inclusive practices created a surplus of unremunerated work for them, a challenge that may suggest a need for greater incentives for teachers. As project documents indicate, weak parental and community support for inclusion sometimes also limited mobilisation for local community initiatives supporting inclusion.^[7]

As these insights suggest, grassroots support from community members and parents was rarely present and needed to be cultivated through advocacy and sensitisation work. These beliefs change slowly and persisted as a barrier in some contexts throughout the project.



Photo Credit: W.Sare/HI



INSTABILITY AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Project documents and survey responses identified political instability, conflict, and natural disasters, such as a hurricane and plague outbreak in Madagascar,^[3] as significant project barriers. Teacher strikes led to school closures in many project contexts, including Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, and Niger, and often recurred over multiple years of the project.^{[1][2][3][4][5]} One survey respondent from Guinea-Bissau attributed increased dropout by children with disabilities to these repeated strikes. Schools in Burkina Faso held data hostage during the strikes, refusing to report data and undermining monitoring activities.^[3] Conflict in Burkina Faso and Mali limited access to some project locations and resulted in psychosocial trauma among teachers, community workers, and children. As one survey respondent explained, supporting these needs in crisis zones, unanticipated at the time of project design, was a substantial challenge.^{[2][7]} In Guinea-Bissau, Mali, and Madagascar, for example, government turnover following political instability made sustaining government capacity and support for inclusive education very difficult (survey response).^[3] In Mali and Guinea-Bissau, the project focussed on relationships with communities and local officials to help mitigate this challenge (survey response).^[3] Ultimately, these factors prevented access to some project locations and interrupted project activities, because they limited opportunities for children to attend school, required adaptations to programming, and slowed monitoring activities.

AVAILABILITY OF HUMAN AND MATERIAL RESOURCES

A few survey respondents (n=4) reported that poverty in communities and school environments made implementation of quality inclusive education difficult. In particular, a lack of assistive devices and adapted teaching and learning materials meant that “some children are penalised in the teaching/learning process, which leads to a drop in their academic performance.”^[17] Household poverty was also a challenge, with families choosing not to enrol or withdrawing their children from schools


because of associated costs. As a result, survey respondents explained that the project needed to provide material support and incentives to families, including tuition costs and school kits. While poverty and resource concerns may be unsurprising barriers considering the project's focus on very vulnerable children, it is nevertheless important to keep in mind, especially given the resources required to accommodate a range of child needs and abilities in schools. Across the region, progress securing local and national government funding for inclusive education has been mixed,^{[15][16]} presumably impacting the sustainability of project activities.

Beyond material resources, survey respondents named availability (n=8), or not (n=13), of dedicated human resources at all levels as an important influence on implementation. Regarding government actors, survey respondents from Mali and Madagascar stressed the mobility of state actors following political shifts and instability as fundamental barriers. In Madagascar, the project had to keep going back to the starting point, with new ministry officials following government transitions, and engaging ministry staff in sensitisation sessions, which the majority of staff did not attend. In Mali, turnover among state actors made securing support for scale-up efforts difficult, though the ability of the project to rely on more decentralised support from local commune authorities and community leaders helped to mitigate this challenge to some extent. More positively, survey and interview respondents praised the commitment of institutional actors in Togo and linked that support to strides made in institutionalising inclusive education approaches.

Across the region, survey respondents pointed to the critical role that skilled, mobilised civil society actors, including disabled people's organisations and NGOs involved in the protection and promotion of persons with disabilities, played in advocating for quality inclusive education at the national and local level. Survey respondents felt that the presence of functional rehabilitation centres, such as in Togo and Benin, enabled the project. Like with government, Mali's experiences with civil society organisations at the national level were fraught: one survey respondent felt that limited advocacy by civil society organisations curtailed the project's

ability to effect policy or strategy changes, though significant technical and financial support for such activities led to improvements in this area. In contrast, another survey respondent from Mali noted the effectiveness of grassroots support from civil society organisations, especially in creating school environments aligned with the project's vision of inclusion. One respondent from Guinea-Bissau also noted challenges with civil society organisations related to the timeliness of their responses and actions; the capacity and resourcing of civil society organisations was also raised as a challenge there.^[13]

Among educators, high turnover and demobilisation of teachers and pedagogical supervisors that had been trained by the project in inclusive practices arose as challenges, according to several respondents. To deal with this, frequent trainings were required to ensure the availability of trained educators. In Burkina Faso, the project staff sought an institutional solution to this problem, ultimately integrating the inclusive education training into pre-



SURVEY RESPONDENTS AS WELL AS INTERVIEWEES OBSERVED HI'S LONGSTANDING PRESENCE IN PROJECT COUNTRIES AS A KEY ENABLING FACTOR, ONE THAT YIELDED STRONG, ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY THAT FACILITATED DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONALISATION OF SOME INCLUSIVE EDUCATION APPROACHES

service teacher training. In another example, Mali established a team of trainers who could provide additional training as needed in the project's intervention zones. Large class sizes^[8] and low levels of teacher training, generally, also presented a more basic challenge to building the ranks of teachers trained in inclusive practices. As one survey respondent explained: "we must work to improve teachers' pedagogical practices, provide them with

tools to enable them to implement teaching that takes into account diversity and the specific needs of certain children and young people. This work is made difficult if teachers do not have the basics of training (Participant 56).” How and to what extent this impacted the project depended on the context, because the quality of education systems varied across participating countries, as one survey respondent explained. In Burkina Faso, for example, quality served as a school survival factor, with parents reportedly more likely to keep children in quality schools.^[1]

One interviewee added that turnover among HI staff, where this happened, was a substantial barrier to implementation. This was particularly a challenge in Niger, Guinea-Bissau, and Sierra Leone.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Survey respondents identified a range of strategies and project design features that helped or hindered effective implementation. Most prominently, survey respondents (n=6) as well as interviewees observed HI’s longstanding presence in project countries as a key enabling factor. It yielded strong, established relationships with government and civil society that facilitated development and institutionalisation of some inclusive education approaches. This was especially the case in Burkina Faso and Togo, where HI has worked since 2002, and in Madagascar, where they have worked since 2006.^[6] Perhaps unsurprisingly, interviewees reported that these same countries made some of the greatest strides institutionalising innovative inclusive education approaches during the life of the project. Like several of the following factors, the value of well-established relationships is one that EAC recognises during its application review process.

The project’s efforts to facilitate sharing and exchange were also highlighted as enabling. Examples from survey respondents (n=4) include within-country sharing, such as exchanges among school networks in Sierra Leone, Niger^[5], and Liberia^[2] and exchanges in Togo,^[10] which were used to discuss and collectively troubleshoot implementation challenges. There were also examples of cross-national sharing, such as the

spread of the itinerant teacher approach from Togo to other contexts, the adaptation (and ministry validation) of a sign language training manual from Togo to Burkina Faso, and regional workshops.^[1] ^{[4][5]} Although sharing is a standard good practice, one respondent attributed cross-national exchange opportunities to the unique regional nature of the project made possible by partnership with EAC.

Survey respondents (n=3) and an interviewee lauded the multisectoral nature of the project. One explained the importance of other sectors, especially health and social protection sectors, to inclusive education: “For some children with disabilities, access to appropriate health care and social wellbeing support is fundamental to ensure their access to education” (Participant 52). Additionally, respondents noted the importance of the project’s multilevel focus, attending to both grassroots and institutional partnerships in implementation to foster ownership of approaches at different levels. Furthermore, survey respondents (n=6) hailed provision of carefully tailored, locally relevant support as essential to project successes, with one interviewee adding that such qualitative emphasis is a hallmark of HI’s approach. For some respondents, tailored support meant based on evidence-based planning or alignment with government priorities. For others it meant identifying and building on approaches that have already shown local promise, such as an integrated class piloted in Madagascar that HI helped evolve into the bridging class approach.

In a final design-related theme, survey respondents (n=5) lamented the (too small) scope and the (too short) duration of the project given the large unmet need. One noted that there was limited budget for staffing, leading to the need to recruit volunteers. In another example, a government official explained that the “duration of the project is too short, which does not allow sufficient accompaniment of the enlisted children” and that “after the project, these children risk dropping out due to lack of support” though they also noted that the project’s support to parents may help mitigate this challenge (Participant 43). Another survey respondent agreed that the project should support children for longer, ideally through the end of the primary school

cycle. In Sierra Leone, the project wrestled with the success of its model schools, where high transfer rates into those schools resulted in “not only [an] accommodation problem in the Model Schools but also conflict between school administrators for the depopulation of Non-Model Schools” (Participant 51). The same respondent also shared that non-project schools expressed interest in adopting the project’s model approaches, citing this as an example of unmet demand.

EAC PARTNERSHIP AND REQUIREMENTS

In this section, HI perceptions of the experience partnering with EAC on this project is explored, drawing on survey and interview responses from HI staff. Feedback on the partnership was mixed. When asked to select a statement describing their overall opinion of HI’s partnership with EAC, responses from 16 HI staff were nearly all positive, with 14 (or 88%) stating that the partnership had helped. Explanations from qualitative responses to this and other survey questions show that, on the partnership generally, staff felt that the project had been a success, with some noting that EAC funding had been essential. Some lauded the project’s focus not only on children with disabilities but on other vulnerable children, including talibé children, girls exposed to female circumcision, children of disabled parents, orphans, children with HIV, children with chronic diseases and excluded children. They suggested this was an expansion of HI’s typical beneficiary targets, with a few attributing the broadened focus directly to the EAC partnership. Interviewees praised interactions with EAC staff, noting their dedication and the quality and responsiveness of their technical support.

On the other hand, when asked about overall opinion of the partnership, one respondent noted the partnership hindered the project and another answered neutrally. As explanation, one stated that the project was not hindered per se but that the complexity of requirements for the project challenged implementation. This theme arises repeatedly in comments about specific partnership requirements, elaborated in the next section.

Monitoring and evaluation requirements

In a survey question, HI staff selected a statement describing their overall opinion of EAC’s monitoring and evaluation requirements. Nearly all responses, 15 of 16 (or 94%), affirmed that the monitoring and evaluation requirements helped the project. One positive theme that arose from these comments held that the EAC requirements—widely viewed as more rigorous than HI’s routine monitoring approach—led to stronger, more reliable monitoring insights and project adjustments, ultimately helping HI meet its project targets. As one survey respondent noted, “[t]he data collection tools and indicators requested by EAC have fostered rigor and proactivity in the management of project activities” (Participant 17). In particular, the project staff cited harmonisation of tools, for example the adoption of the UNICEF and Washington Group Module on Child Functioning, as an important accomplishment in improving the consistency of identification processes and comparability of data across project contexts.^[7] Additionally, respondents felt that EAC’s strong technical support for monitoring built staff capacity in monitoring and evaluation, which many appreciated as contributing to personal and organisational development. One interviewee explained that “it really helped reinforce our capacities of working with statisticians and how we manage databases” (Participant 8).

At the same time, other comments from the survey and interviews provide a more mixed picture of how the M&E requirement was received. While some respondents recognised the value of time spent on capacity building, others felt that the time and resources needed to comply with requirements detracted from supporting implementation in other ways. Moreover, one respondent thought that the data requirements were not always well-aligned with government data systems, ultimately creating additional work for HI staff and already overburdened government staff, without necessarily yielding sustainable improvements in government data systems (though, in Togo, the project ultimately did positively impact the EMIS system as reported in Table 2). As an additional EAC recommendation, one respondent advised that EAC’s online platform for submitting data was cumbersome and labour

intensive to use, suggesting that a redesigned platform would help.

Some interviewees also reported perceived differences in organisational cultures differences between quantitative and qualitative cultures or between Anglophone and Francophone aligned international development traditions, especially related to monitoring and evaluation practices. One suggested that, in retrospect, recognition and discussion of these cross-cultural differences early on in the partnership could have helped avoid subsequent challenges.¹²

Beneficiary requirement

When asked to reflect on EAC's requirement to reach a minimum number of beneficiaries per year, 9 of 14 respondents (64%) felt it helped the project, 3 responded neutrally, and 2 reported that it hindered the project. Some felt that the ambitious target pushed the project staff, constructively, to reach more children. As one respondent explained, pursuing this target "obliged the project to strengthen the awareness and capacity building activities of teachers on the care of vulnerable children apart from children with disabilities (Participant 35)."

However, adding nuance to the quantitative responses, qualitative comments stressed the perception of some that pursuing high targets risked compromising the quality of support. One survey respondent believed that "[t]he very ambitious number of beneficiaries to be targeted did not allow us to deploy the entire package of activities following a child-centred approach" (Participant 56). Another added, "sometimes difficulties related to the complexity of the target audience have arisen, as the inclusive and holistic approach requires time and resources to ensure that quality is guaranteed and inclusion is real and not fictitious" (Participant 52). An interviewee echoed this challenge, expressing frustration about pressure to achieve targets: "We don't want to invent and lie. And we are going to be honest about what we do and not lie or make larger numbers." The same interviewee posited: "They love numbers. They want

big numbers. And this made us suffer. We work on quality not quantity" (Participant 8).¹³

As a final theme, some respondents noted that relatively low rates of OOSC in some project contexts made the beneficiary targets difficult to meet. A survey respondent noted that in one country most six-year-olds enrol, meaning there are few OOSC eligible as beneficiaries. Instead, more children struggled to stay in school once enrolled, and wished they could have focussed more on supporting quality education for those at-risk children. These same concerns were shared from some interviewees as well, with one observing that targets might have been more manageable had HI had more staff in-country.

Co-funding requirement

The survey also solicited perceptions of EAC's requirement for 50% co-funding. Most respondents (7 of 8) felt neutral about this requirement or thought it impacted the project negatively. Having achieved this requirement on the project, respondents mainly saw the requirement as limiting to future projects. Some commented that the co-financing rate was quite high or too high and might mean valuable projects go unfunded. Another added that the high co-financing rate sometimes necessitates multi-country projects, since some countries might need to compensate for countries with no-financing available.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

This case study examined the inclusive education approaches used in the recent HI project implemented in West Africa and Madagascar, identifying overarching approaches, associated policy and systems changes, and factors influencing implementation. The study devoted special attention to the project's innovative approaches: the itinerant teacher approach, the school life assistant approach, and the bridging classes approach. The study explored four research questions, which are reviewed below followed with lessons learned.

¹² EAC notes that it met several times and worked extensively with HI during the proposal process. This included sharing and discussing EAC reporting (monitoring and evaluation) and target requirements.evaluation) and target requirements.

¹³ EAC notes that it invests in quality projects and the implementing partner commits to taking them to scale. In this way EAC links quantity with quality. Every culture values quality. EAC believes quality education is the right of all and that for too long "quality" has been a reason to deny the hardest-to-reach this right.

Research Question 1 considers the characteristics of the universal and innovative approaches HI used across countries. To answer this research question, activities were grouped under six universal approaches that broadly describe the activities implemented during the project. These universal approaches are: (a) sensitisation and advocacy for inclusive education, (b) identification of individual needs, (c) provision of personalised support to children and families, (d) teacher training, (e) creating more accessible school and learning environments, and (f) support to local parent and community initiatives. Because of the project staff efforts to contextualise these approaches, specific activities varied from country to country.

To improve enrolment, access, and school survival rates of vulnerable boys and girls, especially of children with disabilities, the project staff championed inclusion in mainstream schools wherever possible and sought to build “bridges” to support successful participation. The project innovative approaches helped to build these bridges, facilitating more specialised support in mainstream school settings for children with moderate to severe disabilities. This case study is a review of the different innovative approaches pursued under the project, starting with the itinerant teacher approach. This involves a teacher with expertise on inclusive education and support strategies for specific types of disability who travel among a network of schools providing specialised support in inclusive classrooms. The school life assistant approach was outlined, which is similar to the itinerant teacher approach but with assistants remaining in a single school rather than traveling. In a third approach, bridging classes were described, which help to prepare children with disabilities to enter inclusive classrooms after they graduate from specialised support classes located in the same schools.

For **Research Question 2 and 3**, systems strengthening around policy and practice that occurred in areas targeted by the project were investigated. In particular, information was collected on the major milestones, especially policies and strategies for inclusion to which HI activities contributed. To answer this research question, the

project contributions to milestones were examined, including the adoption of inclusive education policies, the addition of inclusive education modules into pre-service teacher training, and the incorporation of disability data into national data collection activities, such as EMIS and censuses. Some countries, like Burkina Faso and Madagascar, achieved greater success in this area than others.

Research Question 4 focussed on the contextual factors that programme actors identified as enabling or constraining to implementation. Project documents and survey and interview responses point to broad contextual factors that impacted the success of implementation: the need for political will, grassroots support, and engaged human resources. Furthermore, project staff and partners noted several features of the project approach as enabling, especially its multi-sectoral nature, the provision of holistic support, and HI’s longstanding presence in the region.

Under **Research Question 5** key stakeholder perceptions of EAC contributions as enabling or hindering the HI inclusive education project were sought. HI experiences with the EAC partnership were mixed. Respondents nearly universally praised the partnership with EAC as positive, and many enthusiastically commended the strong engagement and technical support received from the EAC team. Some noted that the partnership pushed the project, productively, to expand its focus to other vulnerable children beyond those with disabilities. However, some of the same respondents construed specific requirements as challenging. In particular, some respondents worried that the quality of service delivery and support was sometimes sacrificed to fulfil requirements related to monitoring and beneficiary targets. Discussions of partnership experiences sometimes attributed these frustrations with requirements to cultural differences between the organisations, with HI described as a qualitative organisation and EAC as a quantitative organisation.

Lessons learned

The findings from this case study point to a number of lessons learned under the West Africa and Madagascar inclusive education project. While many

of the insights below are common to interventions and likely not surprising to readers, their perceived influence on implementation warrants consideration for future projects.

The project staff sought to provide sustained, holistic support to vulnerable children, especially those with disabilities, and their families, highlighting a good practice. The provision of ongoing support to children and families with health, education, social participation, protection, and other needs was perceived as a core pillar of project quality; and one reported as essential to meaningful, lasting shifts in inclusivity. The ecosystem of support the project staff aimed to develop was an element in both the project's universal and innovative approaches. Holistic support under the project meant an emphasis on teams and on facilitating connections among services. The project staff emphasised and sought to cultivate collaboration among disability specialists, ordinary teachers, school staff, parents, health professionals, community based rehabilitation volunteers, and other community members. At the institutional level, holistic support for children translated into an emphasis on multi-sectoral engagement, especially involving education and health sectors.

HI's longstanding relationships enabled implementation of project approaches.

Respondents recognised HI's longstanding presence in the region as fundamental to success especially given the complex, multi-sectoral nature of the intervention. Some explained that HI's regional experience allowed the project to capitalise on established relationships with a variety of stakeholders, helping the project influence national and local systems. Notably, countries where HI had longer-term experience, such as Burkina Faso and Togo, where HI has worked since 2002, made achievements institutionalising the innovative approaches supported under the project.

The project maintained an important multilevel focus, cultivating support and ownership both at institutional and grassroots levels. The project sought to develop all major project approaches at both institutional and local levels to promote sustainability of the interventions. The project staff made notable strides institutionalising some

approaches in certain contexts, with support substantiated through national or local funding in some cases. At the same time, staff turnover at all levels sometimes frustrated efforts to foster conditions conducive to implementation and institutionalisation.

One size does not fit all, contextualisation of approaches is necessary. Although the project's overarching approaches were consistent across contexts, specific activities varied from country to country as the project staff sought to contextualise the intervention and build compatibility with existing systems. The process of contextualisation is well-exemplified through the innovative approaches, which all seek to build bridges for children with disabilities to participate in mainstream schools but in different, contextually appropriate ways. For example, in Madagascar, bridging classes build on a tradition of catch-up classes and used support re-entry for OOSC. Even where countries adopted the same approach, as with the itinerant teacher approach in Togo and Burkina Faso, the approach was adapted to each context through collaborations with local governments and stakeholders.

Inclusive education requires dedicated, trained human resources. The training of teachers, community-based rehabilitation volunteers, parents, and others in inclusive approaches was an important element of the project. In the case of the innovative approaches, the project developed both generalist and specialist capacity for supporting disability and inclusion, with training for specialists particularly involved. In order to deliver substantial capacity building efficiently, the project provided intensive initial training on fundamentals followed by regular coaching and support, though institutionalising the expertise needed to provide these trainings presented an ongoing challenge in some countries. Ultimately, like in so many development projects, developing and maintaining a cadre of trained human resources is a long-term endeavour.

As an additional human resource lesson, ensuring that local school staff capacity aligns with local child needs sometimes creates supply and demand challenges, especially where specialist support is being developed within communities. This was

especially true for the school life assistant and bridging classes approaches where specialised expertise is held in some schools or communities but not others. The itinerant teacher approach overcomes this challenge by having teacher experts travel from school to school providing tailored support.

Better resourcing schools would help with inclusion efforts.

Equipping schools and classrooms with teaching and learning materials that facilitate inclusion of children with a variety of needs is resource intensive. Although adapted materials can be collected and developed locally and the project provided training to support schools in doing this some respondents felt that better resourcing would improve learning environments. Even if more funding were provided, many adapted materials are not available in local markets.

Instability and natural disasters present substantial challenges to implementation.

Political instability, conflict, and natural disasters emerged as significant project barriers. Teacher strikes led to school closures in many project contexts and often recurred over multiple years of the project. Government turnover following political instability made maintaining government capacity and support for inclusive education difficult. Ultimately, these factors constrained implementation, though some countries that experienced such challenges, such as Togo and Burkina Faso, overcame them and made progress institutionalising inclusion.

Some contexts made greater strides institutionalising inclusive education than others.

Although the information collected during this case study does not allow for in-depth comparisons of achievements across project contexts, some countries, such as Burkina Faso, Togo, and

Madagascar, reported more policy changes and greater success institutionalising project approaches than others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these are countries where HI has had a longstanding presence. Generally, the presence of strong political will for inclusive education and established support from communities, civil society, and governments enables successes. Conversely, the presence of challenges such as instability or weak community support sometimes made implementation more difficult. Some respondents reported a disconnect between organisational cultures at HI and EAC, especially around preparedness to fulfil partnership requirements. As a rule, EAC provides training and capacity building with partners around requirements, and HI staff praised the strong engagement and technical support received from EAC in this area. Nevertheless, some HI staff perceived partnership requirements as challenging, with some believing that the time and resources involved in fulfilling requirements, especially related to monitoring, detracted from implementation. It could be that the large, multi-country nature of the project further complicated dynamics around partnership requirements both in terms of: (a) the need to ensure support extends to country offices as well as headquarters and regional levels; and (b) difficulties planning for requirements across multiple contexts as well as sharing multi-country information in EAC systems.

In sum, the project's approaches enabled children with disabilities and other vulnerable children to participate in education through the provision of holistic, sustained, individualised support. Building on longstanding relationships and cultivating local ownership, the project staff were able to make strides in institutionalising inclusive education practices in West Africa and Madagascar.

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APPENDIX

See Excel appendix “Inclusive education project approaches mapping. xlsx” for a mapping of approaches across project countries. The mapping provides illustrative lists of activities implemented in each country under different approaches.

<https://educationaboveall.org/uploads/library/file/Inclusive%20education%20project%20approaches%20mapping.xlsx>



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