

## **SADC Youth Parliament Regional Report on Youth with Disabilities.**

### **Written by the Representative of Persons with Disabilities in the 3rd SADC Youth Parliament (Malawi).**

Hon Hilda Macheso- Disability Rights, Gender and Young Women Development. Committee.

#### **1. Introduction.**

The inclusion and empowerment of youth with disabilities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) is more than just a social obligation, it is a human rights issue. With its 16 member countries, the SADC region is home to diverse cultures, but one thing remains clear, that young people with disabilities, who are often marginalized, are an untapped force for change. Despite facing unique challenges, they possess the potential to transform their communities, drive innovation, and challenge societal perceptions. By focusing on this group, we unlock a future of equal opportunities, social cohesion, and sustainable development for all.

#### **2. Youth Demographics.**

The youth population with disabilities across the SADC region represents a significant yet often overlooked demographic. Approximately 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, and in Africa, this statistic holds true. In a region with a predominantly youth population, (60% of the population under the age of 25), estimates suggest that 10-15% of youth aged 15-24 in the SADC region experience a form of disability. (whether it be a physical, sensory, intellectual disability etc.) One-fourth of the total youth population can have quite the positive impact when empowered, and the inclusion of youth with disabilities critical for regional growth.

#### **3. Report on some of these Youth Issues and Challenges**

For one, access to quality education remains a significant barrier for youth with disabilities in the SADC region, with only a small fraction completing secondary and tertiary education. Similarly, employment opportunities are limited due to discrimination and the lack of necessary accommodations. As a result, even fewer youth with disabilities are employed in the formal sector, as highlighted in the 2014 report by the International Centre for Evidence in Disability. Most end up working in the informal sector, where conditions are often less stable and supportive. Research from epidemiological studies conducted in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) has found that 80% of studies show a clear link between economic poverty and disability, further exacerbating the cycle of exclusion.

To address these challenges, the SADC region has implemented a number of policies aimed at improving the conditions for youth with disabilities in its member states. For instance, Zambia's National Vocational Rehabilitation Centre, which aims to provide vocational training and rehabilitation services to youth with disabilities, aligns with the 2009 SADC Regional Strategy on Disability. Similarly, Mozambique's National Program for the Integration of People with Disabilities, which seeks to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities in

education, employment, and society at large, is in line with the 2016 SADC Gender and Development Protocol. These initiatives aim to bridge gaps in inclusive education, address the skills mismatch in employment, and tackle various other barriers faced by youth with disabilities.

However, the challenges persist despite these efforts, such that even when they are amended, the core challenges are still present. Key challenges within the region include inadequate funding, the absence of effective monitoring mechanisms for disability-related projects and strategies, and deeply ingrained negative attitudes towards disability. These factors contribute to the stigma surrounding disability, making it even harder for youth with disabilities to fully participate in education, employment, and other areas of life. Lastly, accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date data on youth with disabilities is often scarce or incomplete. In many SADC countries, there are gaps in the collection and analysis of disability-related data, making it difficult to assess the true needs and challenges faced by youth with disabilities.

#### **4. Recommendations**

The recommendations include, but are not limited to:

- 1) Setting robust/ improve monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms to assess if policies are being put to practice, and the impact of policies and programs targeting youth with disabilities. This can be done at national level. These systems should involve persons with disabilities in the evaluation process to ensure their voices are being heard, and that the policies are meeting their needs.
- 2) Investing in research, as well as robust data collection systems that gather accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date data on youth with disabilities throughout the SADC region. This is essential as it helps inform future policies and ensure that the needs of youth with disabilities are adequately addressed.
- 3) Governments and development partners should allocate more funds specifically for programs that target youth with disabilities. This includes educational programs, vocational training, and social protection services. Establish dedicated disability inclusion funds at both national and regional levels to ensure sustainable support for youth with disabilities, ensuring that these funds are used effectively to implement and scale up existing initiatives.
- 4) Strengthening collaboration between SADC member states to share best practices, lessons learned, and resources related to disability inclusion. This encourages learning from each other, and gives room for reflection on aspects that negatively affect a given policy/strategy as a whole.
- 5) Governments within the SADC region should not only enact disability-inclusive policies but also ensure their rigorous enforcement at all levels.

#### **5. Conclusion**

As established, the inclusion and empowerment of youth with disabilities within the SADC region is not just an ethical or social responsibility but a critical human rights issue that

requiring urgent attention. The challenges faced by these youth continue to limit their potential and hinder regional growth. While some positive steps have been taken through policies and programs aimed at addressing these issues, the persistent gaps need to be tackled comprehensively. By investing in better data collection, strengthening collaboration across member states, and ensuring the robust enforcement of disability-inclusive policies, the SADC region can foster a more inclusive and equitable future.