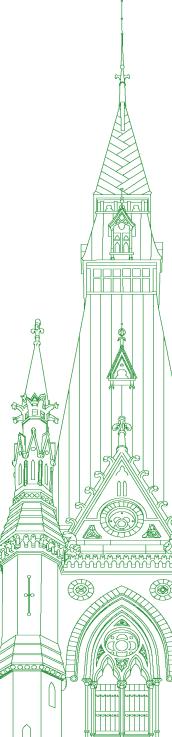44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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● (1105)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): Good morning to all of you.

I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 41 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*Translation*]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. The members can attend in person in the room or remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure that the meeting runs smoothly, I want to give the witnesses and members some instructions.

[*English*]

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and please mute your microphone when you are not speaking.

Regarding interpretation, for those on Zoom, you have the choice at the bottom of your screen of floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[*Translation*]

The members in the room who wish to speak must raise their hand. The members on Zoom must use the "raise hand" function. The clerk of the committee and I will manage the speaking order as best we can.

We appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[*English*]

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witness, I'm informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

Now, please join me in welcoming the witnesses, who are appearing this morning as we continue our study of international disability-inclusive education.

From the University of Ottawa, we have Madam Mona Paré, professor.

● (1110)

[*Translation*]

From the International Development Research Centre, we're joined by Naser Faruqui, program director, education and science.

[*English*]

From Light for the World, we have Ms. Nafisa Baboo, director inclusive education. She is attending this meeting by video conference.

From the International Disability Alliance, we have Mr. José Viera, director of advocacy; and Ms. Dorodi Sharma, senior adviser, advocacy and engagement, both by video conference.

Thank you for being with us today.

You will have a maximum of five minutes for your remarks, after which we will move on to questions from members of the subcommittee.

I will let you know when you have one minute left.

[*Translation*]

We'll start with you, Ms. Paré.

Thank you for agreeing to speak with us.

You have the floor for five minutes.

Ms. Mona Paré (Full Professor, University of Ottawa, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and subcommittee members, for your invitation to contribute to your vital work on human rights.

Canada has obligations for inclusive education under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Canada must uphold the rights of children with disabilities at the national level and through international co-operation.

By "children with disabilities," I mean children who have physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, as defined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In the internal school context, for example in Ontario, this means students with behavioural, communication, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities. This creates a heterogeneous group, which presents a major challenge for inclusive education.

At the international level, inclusive education has been promoted for about thirty years. In Canada, the provinces have also shifted the focus towards education in the regular school environment. However, one ongoing issue is the lack of a definition of inclusive education. In addition, for children with disabilities, the focus is often on integration into the regular classroom rather than on inclusion.

The inclusive education philosophy focuses on education in a school system where all children can learn together, where children feel included and where the needs of all children are taken into account to enable them to participate in society. This is about more than disability. Inclusive education targets all minority communities and groups that have traditionally been segregated or overlooked in schools, such as language, religious and racial minority groups; newcomers; and so on.

Integration isn't necessarily part of this philosophy. The emphasis is solely on the child's placement. The model involves the student in the regular classroom adapting to the school, rather than the other way around. The idea is to help the student adapt through reasonable accommodation.

Even though inclusive education is the ideal, in practice, many families prefer to keep their children in separate classrooms so that they can receive the appropriate services. This often applies to children with severe learning disabilities. Parents want to ensure optimal learning conditions for their children so that they can reach their full potential. Other families prefer integration, even when the inclusive model isn't strictly implemented. They consider social participation more important than educational achievement. This often applies to children with intellectual disabilities.

In terms of inclusive education, it's important to remember the heterogeneous nature of disability and the wide variety of needs, not only among children, but also across the types of impairment. The educational needs of children and the expectations of families are different. It depends on whether the child has a physical or intellectual disability, a learning disability such as dyslexia, or deafness, for example. It should be noted that representatives of the deaf community have ensured that the convention doesn't prohibit separate education for sign language users.

Education for children with disabilities is a matter of applying the principle of the child's best interests. There's now some consensus, including among Canadian courts, that inclusion is a benchmark, but not an absolute standard, and that each case should be considered on an individual basis.

Of course, resources are a major issue. Given the lack of staff, equipment and services in regular schools and classrooms, it's easy to say that segregated education serves the child's best interests. If the resources were available to meet the educational needs of all children, it would become clear that inclusion in the regular classroom serves the child's best interests.

In closing, in keeping with our international obligations, it's important to invest in education. Inclusive education can help meet a number of educational objectives, such as the development of a spirit of understanding, equality and tolerance; participation in society; and so on.

● (1115)

However, with a rights-based approach, it's important to avoid standardized approaches. Every child is a subject of the law. They each have their own unique identity, needs and interests.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Paré.

[*English*]

I would like to invite Mr. Faruqui to take the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Naser Faruqui (Program Director, Education and Science, International Development Research Centre): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the subcommittee, I'm pleased to be here.

[*English*]

Thanks so much for the invitation to appear.

My name is Naser Faruqui. I'm the director of education and science for the International Development Research Centre, or IDRC.

IDRC is a Crown corporation that was established in 1970. It reports to Parliament through the Minister of International Development. We support research and innovation in low- and middle-income countries as part of Canada's official development assistance.

Two principles underpin our support to local actors. The first is that those closest to development problems are best placed to develop innovative solutions to solve them. The second is the importance of sharing what works across regions and internationally.

Previous witnesses have made clear the need for action on disability-inclusive education. We are working with many of those organizations.

What IDRC would like to bring to this discussion is the need for and the power of research and evidence to effectively respond to the educational needs of people with disabilities. There is a genuine demand in the global south for evidence on the most effective ways to strengthen education for all learners. IDRC's work is responding to this demand and looking to scale what works.

Complementary to Canada's important investments in the Global Partnership for Education, IDRC hosts the research and evidence arm of this international fund. We call it the knowledge and innovation exchange, or KIX for short. KIX builds evidence on how proven innovations can improve education systems in low- and middle-income countries.

To optimize the limited resources available to national education systems in these countries, our approach identifies innovations that work and builds evidence on how to scale them. These innovations cover a broad spectrum, from educational technology solutions to cost-effective, community-based early learning models.

I'd like to share four of the areas where IDRC is strengthening the evidence that is critical to advancing disability-inclusive education.

First is gaining a better understanding of the realities of children learning with disabilities to improve their education access and learning. Without clear data on disabilities, including baselines and gaps, we are unable to respond to all children's needs. IDRC is supporting countries to strengthen their education data systems, including integrating data on disabilities to provide schools with the information they need to plan for inclusive education.

Second, inclusive education in the early years is critical to identifying disabilities and paving the way for success throughout a child's education. IDRC is supporting community-based pre-primary centres to identify and include children with multiple types of disabilities early on, especially in rural communities where these children often fall through the cracks.

Third is harnessing the potential of technologies in the classroom, ensuring that they're inclusive and ensuring that teachers know how to support those technologies. Artificial intelligence technologies hold promise, but often are not accessible in local languages. For example, we're supporting the development of an assistive technology that translates spoken English to Kenyan sign language using virtual signing characters. This will help Kenyans with hearing disabilities access education more easily, as there are few qualified Kenyan sign language interpreters in the country.

Last, it's clear that disability-inclusive initiatives cannot be isolated from the overall system. We're learning how to integrate inclusive education into public education systems that are adapted to local contexts. For instance, we're helping to equip teachers, school leaders and parents with the skills they need to integrate learners with disabilities into education systems, including empowering school principals to support greater disability inclusion in their schools.

A recent UNICEF study shows that half of the kids with disabilities in low-income and middle-income countries don't finish school, with girls facing disproportionate challenges. This timely study by the subcommittee can help address the need for practical solutions.

I'd like to conclude by reinforcing the critical importance of building evidence on what works to ensure that no one is left behind in education.

Thank you very much.

● (1120)

The Chair: Thank you. That was great timing, Mr. Faruqui.

I would like to invite Ms. Nafisa Baboo to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo (Director, Inclusive Education, Light for the World): Good morning, honourable members of Parliament.

As a person with a visual impairment, I would not be where I am today if it were not for technology. My father, who was blind, insisted I do computer science as an additional subject in high school. He was convinced that technology was the key to opening possibilities for girls and boys with disabilities beyond those stereotypical career paths, such as if you're visually impaired, becoming a teacher or a lawyer, or if you have a hearing impairment or intellectual disability, becoming a caterer or a painter.

Access to appropriate quality technologies can mean the difference between enabling and denying education for a child, enabling and denying participation in the workforce for a young adult, or enabling and denying self-reliance and social inclusion.

In sub-Saharan Africa, a staggering number of school-age children remain out of school and are denied their right to quality education due to system-level challenges, such as there not being enough schools or qualified or motivated teachers, or their schooling is disrupted due to conflict or climate change.

The situation is even more dire for children with disabilities. Compared to children without disabilities, children with disabilities are, according to UNICEF, 49% more likely to have never attended school, and they are 42% less likely to have the foundational reading and numeracy schools that are needed. They are also most often excluded from science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, hindering their ability to be skilled for the 21st century and attain dignified work.

Technology offers a real lifeline for millions of learners with disabilities. Through accessible technology, barriers such as not having an accessible textbook or a physical textbook that needs to be transported and printed can be overcome. It's very heartening to see how major tech producers are embracing universal design, acknowledging that accessibility is not just a necessity for some, but is useful for everyone. Accessibility regulations enacted by legislators like yourselves can have a big impact at scale in developing countries.

Let me tell you about a groundbreaking initiative in Burkina Faso spearheaded by Light for the World and its partners. This visionary project harnesses technology to operationalize the Marrakesh Treaty, which is a pact that loosens copyright restraints for visually impaired and print-disabled people. The goal is really simple, yet very profound. It is to ensure seamless access to learning materials through technology. If we can succeed in one of the world's least resourced countries, there is no doubt in my mind that this can be replicated globally.

In Burkina Faso, most students with visual impairments are actually in mainstream schools, and they are supported by a school and resource centre established by the organization for persons with visual impairment in that country. Through the project, we have upskilled the centre to use more efficient methods to convert handouts and assessments into accessible formats. To lighten the load on the resource centre, we trained up both teachers and students to create accessible content and access more books using their Android devices. Tablets, laptops and affordable devices with solar chargers were distributed and accompanied by the creation of multimedia training material that meets the UNESCO ICT teacher competency framework requirements. However, more time and resources are needed to take this to scale, as well as more research for the proof of concept.

We recognize that it's really difficult for teachers, especially those who have large classes and are confined to a very rigid curriculum, to support students with disabilities. However, universal design for learning is a very creative teaching strategy that responds to diversity from the outset by offering multiple ways of engaging and expressing learning. Students with disabilities really thrive when lessons follow those UDL principles and when their disability accommodations are met. Universal design for learning, accessible ed tech and technologies can offer a unique solution for teachers, students with disabilities and those who are unable to attend school regularly.

Really, making disability inclusion mandatory in all education programs funded by the Government of Canada, particularly in this emerging field of technology, can change the life trajectory of millions of girls and boys with disabilities.

● (1125)

I appeal to the committee to take action and make this happen.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Baboo.

Now I would like to invite Madam Dorodi Sharma to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma (Senior Advisor, Advocacy and Engagement, International Disability Alliance): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Dorodi, and I am joining all of you from India.

I represent the International Disability Alliance. I am joined by my colleague and our director, Mr. José Viera, who was supposed to present this testimony, but unfortunately, due to technical issues is not able to present this himself.

IDA is a global alliance of 14 global and regional organizations of persons with disabilities, or OPDs. We have been at the forefront of global advocacy on advancing the rights of all persons with disabilities. Through our membership, we have an outreach in 182 countries across the world.

For all our members, education is a core area of work and continues to be a priority. While our understanding of disability-inclusive education has evolved over the past several decades, especially with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the reality on the ground continues to be dismal.

This is especially true for countries of the global south. My own experience, based on the situation in India, and that of my director, Mr. Viera, who is from Argentina, speak to the immense challenges that still prevent millions of children with disabilities from even getting to a classroom, let alone getting any kind of education.

It is unfortunate that Mr. Viera is unable to share his own experience of the growing numbers of blind persons in Argentina. I hope the committee will provide an opportunity for him to share his personal testimony as well in the foreseeable future.

Honourable members of the committee, as Ms. Baboo said, UNICEF's data from 2022 shows that 49% of the world's 240 million children with disabilities are likely to have never attended school. This is a matter of shame, as well as a huge tragedy of our times, I would say. At IDA, together with the members, we have worked on articulating what disability-inclusive education truly means through the IDA global report on inclusive education.

All jurisprudence and the testimony of leaders on inclusive education now unequivocally says that all children must learn together in their communities, and this includes children with disabilities— and all kinds of disabilities.

At IDA we have also taken steps to train community organizations on disability-inclusive education. Together with Education Cannot Wait and our member organization Inclusion International, we are currently implementing a project on access to education for children with disabilities in situations of emergency and protracted crises.

Together with the World Bank and UNICEF, we have also supported a study on understanding the struggles of and the costs entailed by learners with disabilities and their families to access education. Families often bear the additional costs, which are those of transport, personal assistance, assistive technology or rehabilitation, etc., on their own, which further adds to the barriers that keep these children with disabilities, especially those with high-support needs, away from the schools.

Our work clearly shows that countries and governments have yet to meaningfully invest in transforming education systems for disability inclusion, especially those with intellectual and development disabilities. We cannot be doing patchwork on systems that are inherently discriminatory, and the COVID-19 pandemic proved that, when under pressure, our education systems have miserably failed to prevent discrimination and the exclusion of learners with disabilities.

In fact, in many places, we have actually regressed and have created even more segregated learning cases where children with disabilities are isolated and provided with poor-quality education, if at all. We need much more investment to actively change our education systems and build a culture of inclusion.

However, evidence shows that investment, in particular, development assistance, to promote disability inclusion has been significantly low. Data from before the pandemic shows that aid projects actively targeting disability inclusion were as low as 0.05% of all international aid. This figure potentially is even lower now, given the economic downturn and budget cuts.

In this context, we are extremely encouraged by the House of Commons taking up our issue. We urge Canada to play a leading role globally on the issue of the disability-inclusive transformation of education systems that are accessible and equitable for all learners with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

To do that, we need to work on many fronts. We have to progressively increase budgetary allocations for disability-inclusive education towards being at least 5% of education budgets. We should also apply for ODA and development grants. Countries must set medium- and long-term targets to ensure all learners with disabilities are reached in all education programs. Above all, we must work on supporting and strengthening community-based organizations of persons with disabilities, including their families, to understand their rights and to understand what they must demand from their governments.

● (1130)

True change will only happen when people themselves are empowered to drive the change that they would like to see in their own communities.

Members of this esteemed committee, the International Disability Alliance stands ready to support this House in its efforts to advance disability-inclusive education for all learners with disabilities.

Thank you so much for the opportunity, and thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sharma.

Excuse me, but now I have to suspend for a few seconds in order to do a sound test. We have a new witness who just joined us.

● (1130)

_____(Pause)_____

● (1130)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order, please.

I would like to invite Madam Ola Abualghaib to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Ola Abualghaib (Manager, Technical Secretariat, United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities): Thank you, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to participate in this important discussion.

My name is Ola Abualghaib. I am the technical lead for the fund on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Our fund is unique, because it provides funding to governments to move ahead in terms of their commitments on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including article 24 on education, and SDG4 on ensuring inclusive education and equality of education for all learners across their life cycle.

Our fund has already been implementing programs in 87 countries. Our approach to providing funding is making sure that national level program systems and policies are inclusive of rights of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities.

The CRPD is very clear about what must be done to achieve quality, inclusive education for all. Children with disabilities must be included in the general education system and have access to reasonable accommodation and the support services and measures they require.

Member states must take action to ensure that all children with disabilities can access the skills they need to be included, including through the provision of Braille, sign language interpretation and availability of appropriately trained teachers and staff.

We understand from our work across the globe that there is a lot of commitment to inclusive education. However, there are still very significant challenges on the ground for children with disabilities to access education. We have heard colleagues regarding the existing statistics that are, unfortunately, showcasing that the reality on the ground is not meeting the ambition that the global world has committed to around access to education for children with disabilities.

We know that fundamental changes are required to achieve inclusive education. This is why UNPRPD programs focus on delivering system change at national level. For example, the UNPRPD fund is currently working to revise legislation to ensure non-discrimination, accessibility, the provision of support services and building the capacity of the education system across the education systems in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Vietnam. We are also delivering a multi-country program in Mozambique, Namibia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe to develop understanding of stigma and discrimination in technical and vocational education and training institutions, and among employers as well.

As the subcommittee will be aware, it's also vital to consider how broader issues impact education. It should be tackling disability equally. As world leaders have been convening at COP28, we must also consider how climate change threatens education systems and specifically its implication on children with disabilities.

We know that climate disasters disrupt access to education and damage education infrastructure. Unfortunately, we have already witnessed on the ground that many children with disabilities are impacted by this situation.

Building connections between climate action and education is vital for achieving transformative change. However, it is vital to remember that children and adults with disabilities are usually impacted by climate change and the mitigation measures designed to minimize the impacts, so their rights must be prioritized within that space as well.

Finally, as colleagues heard from fellow witnesses last week, there is a major issue around underinvestment in education and inclusive education specifically. This is not related only to education. This reflects chronic underinvestment in disability and development more broadly. According to OECD's DAC markers, 90% of development aid does not consider persons with disabilities, and zero to 27% have disabilities as their main focus.

● (1135)

Awareness of disability rights has grown since 2006, but this has not been backed up by finance or action. Sustained investment is required to achieve lasting change—

The Chair: Can you please wrap it up? The time is up.

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: Government must urgently translate their commitments to concrete actions and investment. That's why today's discussion is very vital for us all.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Abualghaib. It's nice to welcome you. Even if you came late, we are lucky to have you today.

Witnesses, thanks for your good comments this morning.

Now we would like to go to questions and answers with the members of the subcommittee.

I would like to start by inviting Mr. Lake to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

● (1140)

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for the testimony.

I'm going to start with Dorodi and Nafisa.

It's a fairly basic question. Almost everybody mentioned the UNICEF stats that talk about how unincluded kids are. Forty-nine per cent are more likely to have never attended school. When you think of those populations, young kids who are seven, eight, nine years old, we just take for granted here in Canada that all kids at that age would be included in school. It's hard for us to understand a circumstance where that might not be the case.

Why in different parts of the world, particularly the parts of the world that you referenced, would kids with disabilities not be included in school at six, seven, eight years old? What factors would lead to that?

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Nafisa, would you like to go first? Then maybe I can add.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: Okay, I'll do that.

Thank you, Mike, for that question.

The reality is there's a lot of stigma and shame around disability, and families still hide their children. They're not really aware that their kids have the right to go to school. I think that is one of the main reasons.

We also see that schools are not very accepting of children who are different. Often, they would reject the child or say that they need additional support. It's not uncommon for us to even see children who are 19 and in their twenties going to school for the first time. That's often students with intellectual disabilities or a hearing or vision impairment in very rural communities.

The reality is that it's about information. Information doesn't reach them. There hasn't been enough sensitization around this in that community, but this can change with social behavioural change initiatives.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thanks.

Dorodi.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you.

To what Nafisa said, I think there are a multitude of factors that really affect children—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The interpreter is telling me that the room's microphones must be switched off to allow for interpretation—

[*English*]

The Chair: If any member has their mic on, please mute it.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you.

Perhaps I may go ahead and answer Mr. Lake's question. I come from a very small town in the northeastern part of India, so I can talk to you about my own experiences and that of my family members who have children with disabilities.

Like Nafisa said, most of the time people are not even aware that their child has a right to education. A child goes to school at four years of age, but between zero to four years there's hardly any intervention available for most families to even understand how their child can be prepared to attend regular schools.

Children without disabilities have access to going to a playground, a prep school, or the resources and knowledge of access to rehabilitation. However, getting ready for school programs does not exist in many countries, and people are not really aware of the importance of that.

Even if you overcome all of those challenges and reach the school, schools either ask you to not come or ask you to provide for all the additional costs. Families have lost income. Families have had to build ramps. Families have had to beg and plead to make sure the classrooms are never changed for children with disabilities. I'm not even talking about those with intellectual and development disabilities here, because children with those disabilities are not even accorded that opportunity. Where there is the small sliding door that is open for others, I don't think that even opens for children with intellectual disabilities, in our part of the country at least. I think that's an important issue to consider.

Global leaders like Canada really have a role to play in ensuring that when we are supporting education programs in such countries, that we ensure we are doing no harm by reinforcing those barriers.

Thank you so much.

● (1145)

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you.

Ola, do you want to weigh in on this as well?

What are the causes of kids not being included at ages like six, seven and eight?

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: Thank you.

I can relate to that from so many of the countries that we are working in.

The main issue is the failure of the system to respond the rights of children with disabilities. It's a quite complex, interconnected issue that we are facing because access to education doesn't only entail being able to enrol in a school and go to school. It's all about the infrastructure being ready. In many places, there is no accessible transport. There is also the issue of access to assistive technology. Many children do not have the proper assistive devices to allow them to move around, to communicate or to function like other students.

There is access to the health system, as well, to enable them to be healthy and productive whenever they are in the schools.

For teacher education, all the support systems of the education is lacking in many countries. It's about awareness. It's about the acknowledgement by the governments that children with disabilities have an equal right to access education.

It's also the other support services around those children. Many families are struggling to afford it, but in many countries it does not exist. We are talking about simple measures that are still not in place, unfortunately. That's why children with disabilities are still paying the price.

I can briefly give you an example, where we operate in a humanitarian context. Unfortunately, even with the immediate measures that are usually put in place for children in general to get back to the education system, whether that's in the same country or the displaced country, we are now witnessing in Ukraine that families who decided to flee to other countries are not able to connect their children with disabilities to the education system. We need to have that comprehensive understanding of the failure and why the system is still not working.

Confirming what my colleague, Dorodi, said, Canada has a major role to play to be one of the pioneers of the countries collaborating with governments as well. That is the centre of the discussion: It is governments making that genuine commitment to those changes happening, with new commitments around a development or a humanitarian context.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lake.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Zuberi now has the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today.

[*English*]

This is a really important study around disability. It's also a timely study.

I'd like to ask some questions around what is in the news today, in particular around conflict, to deepen our understanding of disability education with the nexus of conflict.

I'd like to start with the witness who finished her remarks last, Ms. Abualghaib.

I know that you have expertise in different parts of the world. You have worked amid several countries—70-odd countries.

Currently with the conflict in Gaza, according to UN agencies, over 15,000 people have lost their lives and many others are missing, 75% of whom are women and children. We are hearing reports about crush wounds and people being pulled out from under rubble and destroyed buildings. There's an intense need for medical care.

In this type of situation, where there is urban warfare and civilians are within the urban areas, what do you expect the outcomes will be with respect to children with disabilities? You can touch upon education, too.

What do you expect the future outcomes to be as we, hopefully, exit this conflict?

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: Thank you so much for this question.

As you rightly said, and in following the news, unfortunately, the situation happening in Gaza right now is appalling, in terms of loss of life and impact on the well-being of thousands of people over there, including children and children with disabilities. From our work in Palestine, as defined before the crisis.... Unfortunately, children and adults with disabilities are usually the most impacted, whether by the onset of the crisis we are facing now.... As you can see, people are requested to move around. They are being evacuated or forced into situations where, in many cases, basic human needs aren't met. For children and adults with disabilities, of course, this massively impacts their access to health and basic services. Without these, their lives are under threat.

When it comes to looking beyond this overwhelming situation, in this context, we, as a fund, are already starting to think about what can be done to ensure the basic services provided to those populations are inclusive, in terms of the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, including children.

When it comes to education, we have witnessed in the past in the UN action collectively.... When there is the rebuilding of schools, for example it needs to be attentive to ensuring those school environments are inclusive for children with disabilities. When it comes to health systems and rehabilitation, we know—and as you rightly said—many children, unfortunately, lost their lives. Many are now ending up with permanent disabilities that will impact their functionality, well-being and access to education.

The whole system around health, rehabilitation and assistive technoloy is essential. At this moment, it's about thinking things through to ensure that children, when ready to go back to school, are able to access the support services they need. We are hopeful that, once the moment is there for us to intervene, we will be able to respond and act.

Unfortunately, our hands are tied right now, because the situation is quite complex. However, we are starting discussions to see what we can do once things are ready, in order to re-establish a supportive system and environment for all kids and adults with disabilities.

● (1150)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Could I follow up?

Would you say that UNRRA will be a key actor in ensuring children with disabilities are receiving proper education in the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank?

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: Definitely. UNRRA plays a major role, in terms of its support for the education system.

Other agencies also play a role, such as UNICEF and UNESCO. They were usually key in previous years, in terms of providing that support. Also, I must confirm the role of other agencies, such as the WHO, which makes sure rehabilitation and access to health services are in place. UNDP also plays a major role in ensuring infrastructure work is inclusive and available to those children.

What we do as a fund is make sure there is one collective effort of UN approaches to respond to the crisis. We have already done the same in Ukraine, and it has been showing a lot of—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Sorry to interrupt you, Ms. Abualghaib.

When the room's microphones are switched on, it's very hard for the interpreters to do their job, especially when a number of people are taking part in the meeting through Zoom. We have to be careful. It's a matter of workplace health and safety.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Please pay attention to this matter—all of us.

Thanks.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

I assume my time was paused, so I still have at least a minute left.

The Chair: You have 40 seconds left.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'd like to ask a question about the obligation of occupying powers.

There are many instances in which regions of the world, including the occupied Palestinian territories, Ukraine, etc.... There are obligations occupying powers have with respect to the occupied.

When it comes to covenants around children and disability, what are those obligations?

This is for Madam Paré, or perhaps any other witness.

● (1155)

The Chair: Excuse me, Madam Paré. I will give you a chance next time, because the time is over for Mr. Zuberi. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe now has the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all the witnesses taking part in this vital study. We hope that it will make a real difference for children with disabilities around the world.

Ms. Paré, if we want to establish credibility on the international stage, I imagine that the first step would be to accomplish the work at home. A number of witnesses, including you, have rightly told us that children with disabilities aren't a homogeneous group.

Let's go back in time a bit to a 2006 report entitled "Ottawa Francophones with a Disability." This report was published by the francophone assembly and inter-agency committee of the social planning council of Ottawa, in partnership with the group of francophone partners. In this study, focus group participants reported that, while services for francophone youth with severe learning disabilities seemed excellent, access to these services was less straightforward for francophone children.

In your opinion, has the situation changed since 2006?

Ms. Mona Paré: You're talking specifically about—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: —access to services for francophone children outside Quebec.

Ms. Mona Paré: Are you talking specifically about children with learning disabilities?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In particular, yes. I imagine that this group of children includes some children with disabilities.

Ms. Mona Paré: I've spoken with many families that have children in these situations. I gather that the situation hasn't improved. They have a major issue with access to services. Many families turn to the private sector or head to Quebec. Families living in areas such as northern Ontario come to Ottawa because there are more resources. It's very difficult to access these resources in their areas. Many families turn to highly specialized services. In Ottawa, the Consortium Centre Jules-Léger is for children with severe learning disabilities. It can accommodate only 40 students, so the admission process is quite extensive. Not all children who need these services can access them. There's still an issue with access to services.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Aren't there about twenty service centres for children with physical disabilities or severe developmental disabilities in Ontario?

Ms. Mona Paré: Yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As part of the research that you and your colleagues carried out and published in 2017, you visited the centre serving the greater capital region. It was running six classes at the time. Of these six classes, how many were francophone?

Was there only one francophone class?

Ms. Mona Paré: Yes. I think so.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Was the service provided because a parent had filed a complaint?

Ms. Mona Paré: Yes indeed. That was the case.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. In the rest of Canada, you have to file a complaint to ensure French-language services for children with physical or developmental disabilities.

Ms. Mona Paré: Unfortunately, in general, when it comes to special education and education for children with disabilities, complaints play a major role. That's how families receive services. Not everyone has easy and direct access. This is at odds with inclusive education.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You said as much in your opening remarks.

How will this affect francophone children in the rest of Canada who need these services over the long term?

Ms. Mona Paré: Over the long term, they won't have the same access to education as all other children. The objectives of provincial legislation aren't being met for all children.

● (1200)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Let's talk about the situation at the international level. You caught my attention when you said that the approach should definitely not be standardized. Obviously, the groups are neither standardized nor homogeneous.

Could you elaborate on this matter, by giving examples of good and bad approaches?

Ms. Mona Paré: Inclusive education is an excellent philosophy, if it can be implemented.

The issue is the lack of services and resources to make it work. I've heard of situations where children with intellectual disabilities, for example, end up in regular classes. However, they spend time in the school hallways, or they're made to do photocopies. They don't receive the same quality of education, even though they're in a regular class.

This education is called "inclusive," but it isn't.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Given the country's issues, is Canada a major player on the international stage? Should it become one? If it is a major player, why can't it accomplish the work at home?

Ms. Mona Paré: On the international stage, Canada has two obligations. It must implement the conventions at home and play a major role in international co-operation. Canada can be a major player in the field of human rights, for the most part.

Here's what I see. There are resources for international development, which include specific resources for education. I see that the figures are quite low.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I wasn't headed that way, but I'll go there.

I've met with representatives from a number of international development organizations. I often hear that Canada has good policies, particularly its feminist policy on the international stage. However, funding for international aid is only 0.29% or 0.30% of the gross domestic product, or GDP. The United Nations, or UN, wants countries such as Canada to contribute 0.7% of the GDP. At the same time, the average for countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, or OECD, is around 0.42% or 0.43% of the GDP.

Under the current Liberal government, the figures are actually lower. They're lower than under Stephen Harper's Conservative government, which is saying something.

How much does the underfunding of international aid affect Canadian programs at the international level?

Ms. Mona Paré: I think that we're still—

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me. His time is finished, so could you give a quick answer, please?

I will give you 25 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Mona Paré: Canada has never given the equivalent of 0.7% of its GDP in international aid. Obviously, the fewer resources that we provide, the less we can implement the programs that we'd like to create.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now I will invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for seven minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for being here today, and thank you for sharing your expertise with us for this very important study.

I'm going to follow up on some of the questions that my colleague from the Bloc just asked with regard to development dollars. There are two things I'm interested in that I'd like some information on. One is data and data collection and the other is how we are allocating resources, because I think what we heard from everyone is that there needs to be more commitment and more resources allocated to inclusive education and, I would argue, to development writ large.

Similar to what my colleague just mentioned, Canada's commitment to 0.7% actually came from Lester B. Pearson. It is a Canadian commitment that we have never met under any government. We are very far from it right now. The impacts of COVID on our international development funding mean that this year there was, in fact, a 15% cut to our ODA, so we are not even heading in the right direction.

I would really like to hear perhaps from you, Ms. Paré, but also from our colleagues from the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and from the Light for the World representatives, on how we start this conversation and get the Canadian government to recognize that there needs to be a bigger investment in development dollars for education, for inclusive education and for development writ large.

Perhaps I'll start in the room with you, Ms. Paré.

Ms. Mona Paré: Thank you.

I think there are two things. There's the number. How much of the GNP goes to international development and how much of that goes to education? From what I saw, the part that goes to education is number six out of eight sectors. We know that education should really be the number one investment. I think everybody agrees that

it is the most important thing for children to be able to build successful societies and to be successful in life.

Maybe I missed part of your question.

● (1205)

Ms. Heather McPherson: No. I would just highlight, too, that we do have a feminist international systems policy and we have been told that we have a feminist foreign policy, but nobody has seen it yet. Maybe you'd like to comment on the idea that these are core principles but we know that women and girls are disproportionately impacted.

Ms. Mona Paré: Yes. I think Canada does play a great role, especially with gender-based analysis, which is now mainstream. We have also seen how it is important in terms of the education of children with disabilities, with intersectionalities and so on.

I would say that it's also important to bring other human rights aspects into that analysis to make it more intersectional and to include disability. I would say we should use human rights-based tools to make sure the programs we put in place and finance everywhere are inclusive of children with disabilities as well as others.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Part of the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act that is law in this country is that we are meant to use human rights as the lens through which we look at our development work.

Perhaps I can pass the microphone off to those online, if anyone else would like to contribute to those comments.

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: Thank you so much for this very vital question.

There is definitely an opportunity for Canada to stand out in terms of pioneering what is meant in terms of investment in inclusive development and inclusive education. What we see from working towards increased investment on disability more broadly is that the main issue with government investment is that it has this specific small allocation of pots of money that go into disability, which is vitally needed; however, it's not the case across its broader investment. That is what we need on disability. It's been very clear that we need to adopt this cross approach where we are looking into mainstreaming investments to be inclusive. There is a lot of learning on Canada's approach on that and on gender more broadly. We need to see that happening.

As I was indicating, investments in climate change, investments in the care agenda and investments in gender equality more broadly need to see where disability is embedded into that, because that's the only way we can transform the whole development thinking to be inclusive. As I indicated earlier, inclusive education, to be foreseen in many countries across the globe, needs to be looked at more broadly. It's a cross-sectoral approach, so the broader the investment to be inclusive, the more we see children with disabilities enjoying their rights and access to education as others in those countries.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. McPherson, I have Ms. Sharma. It seems she would like to intervene on your question.

Ms. Sharma, you have the floor.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to reiterate that human rights are indivisible, so we cannot really distinguish human rights among different identity groups. As Ola already said, we have to look at intersectionality. We commend Canada for having a feminist approach towards foreign policy. A feminist approach towards foreign policy cannot exclude women and girls with disabilities. I think that's important for all of us to really take note of.

I also would like to draw the attention of the honourable members of this committee and the House to the commitments that Canada made at the Global Disability Summit in 2022, where it committed to providing greater assistance to persons with disabilities in developing countries, including through international development assistance programming.

I think that Canada is a leader in international development programming that works on human rights and works on intersectionality. We would really like to see that continue, and we would like to see Canada being a champion of disability inclusion across the world.

Thank you so much.

The Chair: Ms. McPherson, I have Ms. Baboo.

You have 35 seconds.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes, that would be wonderful.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: Thank you.

I want to add that we really need to make sure that disability inclusion is a core criteria for access in development assistance for any program, be it education or health. This needs to be institutionalized. I think it's really important to take inspiration from USAID and other countries that have really got champions internally to focus on disability inclusion to spearhead intelligently to ensure institutional transformation around this and create awareness. I think that is one of the key steps to take to ensure that people are aware and champion this cause across all development assistance programs.

● (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Baboo.

Mr. Faruqui, you have the floor. I'll give you one minute.

Mr. Naser Faruqui: On the question of feminist assistance policy and the importance of girls' education, I want to intervene briefly on that, because we know that some girls are out of school. On the challenge of getting them back into school, I want to point to one of our programs in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, which is sort of a boot camp for girls who are out of school to get them foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

We're doing that at a fraction of the cost of achieving numeracy and literacy in the formal school system. In fact, when they get back into school, they do better than the kids that were in the formal school system. It's being scaled up.

Mr. Chair, if you would allow me, I have a couple of observations on some of the previous questions. Do I have any time to respond?

The Chair: You may have another minute, please, but we are limited.

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Thank you so much.

Mr. Lake, to your question about why so many kids who are seven or eight are not being helped when they have disabilities, the point about early interventions is so important because sometimes you don't know, early on, that they have disabilities, and by the time they're seven or eight, it's too late, and they've dropped out of the system.

I want to come back to my point about the importance of pre-primary. We don't normally have JK in developing countries, but one of our innovations is scaling a 10-week program in the summer that gets the benefits of JK. As I said, it helps these community centres identify kids with disabilities early on so that they can be supported. I think that's really important. In Uganda, in fact, the government is using that set of community-based preschools as their data collection point, holistically as well as for kids with disabilities.

On the point about refugee populations, I want to say, briefly, that one part of the solution is tech, but it's not just tech. We have a program we profiled for International Women's Day at the UN last year, which is game-based learning. It works without Internet. We found that the scores for math increased by 50% and that girls caught up to boys within five months.

The real importance—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Yes.

The real importance there is that when the kids are out of school, referring to the kind of programs that I did before—because often in refugee environments, they're not in school—then relying on those innovations that can get them back in school and using game-based learning can be very effective.

I'll stop there. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paré, go ahead. We have to be fair, since you didn't get a chance to answer Mr. Zuberi's question.

You have the floor for one minute.

Ms. Mona Paré: Thank you.

[*English*]

Your question was about occupying powers. In international law, any group that has the effective control of a territory has the same obligations to the territory as does a legitimate government, or the state itself, that would normally control the territory. That means international human rights law would apply, as well as, obviously, international humanitarian law.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Paré.

[*English*]

I would like to invite Mr. Ehsassi to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to start off by thanking all the witnesses for their time and for their expertise. It's been very helpful hearing from each of you.

I want to start off with an issue where obviously there are many gaps. There are no questions about that. One thing I found very alarming was a study by UNESCO in 2020, which said that to the extent that countries have adopted laws to allow for inclusive education, only 3% of those countries have made provisions for training teachers. It would seem to me that it's a very important and significant aspect of this.

I'll start off with Professor Paré.

Are there legal impediments getting in the way of allowing countries to include teacher training as part of their strategy to pave the way for inclusive education?

● (1215)

Ms. Mona Paré: I don't believe there are legal impediments. I could talk simply about what's happening in Ontario. We have, right now, close to a third of the students in classrooms, who have what we call individual education plans—a third of the students. However, nothing has changed in the classroom, so you still have one teacher with 30 students.

The teachers have growing obligations there to cater to the very individual needs of every student, but the training hasn't changed.

The teachers don't feel they have the training to do that, which means a lot of children would then just fall through the cracks, even though they do have the plan. On paper it looks good, but in practice, it doesn't.

I believe the situation must be very similar in countries that do have legislation, because legislation, we have it, but then the practice is different, and the practice includes lack of training.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: For sure, absolutely.

Mr. Faruqui, I believe in your opening remarks you were talking about how you do work with teachers. How difficult is it to interface with teachers? Does your organization generally first interface with national authorities and then, through them, are you allowed to interface with teachers? How does that process work and how difficult has it proven to be?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Actually, on a program that we're funding, which is called the knowledge and innovation exchange, we bring together stakeholders in countries, the ministries of education, teacher-training institutes, teacher unions and that sort of thing. We work with the important stakeholders, with the researchers and innovators to identify together what the problems are to ensure that whatever the solutions are, they're quickly taken up.

We're not actually finding it difficult in that sense. It's a formal approach.

Right now, I saw a statistic that there are 62 million teachers worldwide who don't have enough training. The challenge is not just training them; it's training them at scale in a way that's cost-effective and efficient. We have a program called teacher professional development at scale, which is using online systems, but also adapting them to the local context and then preparing open educational resources that are available to all.

We're finding that to be quite effective. However, as Mona said, the challenges are great because there's all this technology, so how do I teach tech? You can't just give one laptop per child if you don't teach the teachers how to teach it to the kids. How do you support kids with IEPs? That's another issue.

This is probably the single critical success factor for improving disability-inclusive education.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

This is open to any of the witnesses.

To the extent that we are talking about the need to scale expertise and train teachers, is there any particular jurisdiction around the world that sticks out for their ability to actually make the necessary investments and devote the resources to have teachers at the forefront of this? Is there any jurisdiction that sticks out in the opinion of any of you?

The Chair: Ms. Baboo, please.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: Thank you.

I'm not sure what jurisdiction was meant by that, but what I do think is really vital is that teachers are the bedrock in disability-inclusive education. We really need to invest in, not just developing a teacher training curriculum that speaks to universal design for learning, but gets teachers to understand that you can teach all the children in the classroom and you have to prepare for that at the outset. I think that's really vital, that general education teachers get this training and that it's part of their continuous professional development, it's embedded into the pre-service training of teachers.

Often I find that teacher-training institutions are often still stuck in old ways of working and the question or the ask is often for some special needs department to now lead on disability-inclusive education. I think it's quite a big turn for them to take, from this belief that students should be treated in a special way, in special classes, to say they should be in an inclusive setting.

I think there really needs to be a—

● (1220)

The Chair: Can you please wrap it up? We have exceeded the time.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: —lot of work and coaching and investment in teacher training trying to make it all-inclusive and also invest in specializations for teachers so specialized teachers can support other teachers, in particular in developing countries.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Lake to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's a great conversation, but I find that the conversation today is similar to many conversations around disability-inclusive education. We get talking about intersectionality, which is really important, but intersectionality can't mean solving every problem in the world as we're trying to have a conversation around disability-inclusive education. When we start throwing in climate change and talking about the intersectionality around climate change, yes, fair enough, there's an impact there, but we can't wait to deal with disability-inclusive education until we solve climate change.

I want to get back to what we do now in a world where kids are not included in school, in many cases because of some of the issues we've talked about, for example, stigma and those kinds of issues. I take a look at that and say that there are things we can do right now to help deal with stigma.

The call to action on disability-inclusive education talks about supporting education systems to use the Washington Group child functioning module.

I know, Dorodi and Nafisa, that you are involved in conversations around the call to action. This is a functioning module that allows people, experts on the ground, to cost-effectively go out and assess disability. Once you've assessed disability and functioning, you can actually give families a neurodevelopmental explanation for what that disability is. You start to explain it, so you reduce stigma, because there's an explanation for the community. Now you can start to find ways to include...whether it's training teachers on

inclusion methods for the kids who are affected, or whatever the case may be.

This is specifically for you, Dorodi and Nafisa, because I know you were intimately involved in the creation of the call to action. Can I just ask you about those first steps that we can take? If we really want to impatiently take action on disability inclusion in schools, maybe speak to what that call to action would point us to.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you, Mr. Lake.

Thank you, also, for referring to the call to action. It was launched last year at the Transforming Education Summit.

Before I get into some of the actions we can take right now, I would really urge Canada to endorse this, and also parliamentarians in Canada to be champions for this call to action. It's truly a document that lays out a direction, a path, for advancing disability-inclusive education.

As you rightly pointed out, data has been an issue. We still don't have reliable and comparable data on disability and on disability disaggregation, which is why many of my interventions are often not adequate on the ground, because data informs those policies. To that point, I can speak to the international development context. Canada's development assistance on education must therefore include data, disaggregation and targets for reaching learners with disabilities through those programs that they support.

We would also really call on Canada to adopt a twin-track approach. This also speaks to the point that Mr. Lake made just now as he began his remarks. The twin-track approach really says that we not only need to invest in making the overall education system inclusive, but we also have to invest in specialized services that are required for learners with disabilities to be able to come to school and access education on an equal basis to others.

I think setting criteria, setting indicators and targets that are monitored and tracked over time and ensuring that reliable and comparable data is collected are two steps that Canada can definitely take in its international development assistance programs.

Additionally, I think there is also a need for awareness generation, and we need to talk more and more about disability in the transformation. We need champions, and we need Canada to be a leader on this.

Thank you very much.

● (1225)

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you.

Nafisa, do you want to weigh in on that as well?

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: Thank you, Mike—

The Chair: Nafisa, please be quick. We only have 25 seconds.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: It is really important to set a target and put that in a policy and a strategy. If the Government of Canada can continue that as a starting point and then track progress towards it with set goals, annual and biannual goals, I think we can really make a step change. I really challenge the Government of Canada to take that first bold step with the policy and the strategy and sit down and talk about disability inclusion based on the call to action.

Thank you.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe has the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Paré, I'll quickly finish up where I left off earlier.

I want to understand something. When francophone parents don't have access to French-language services, do they ever turn to English-language services?

Ms. Mona Paré: Francophone families often turn to English-language services. Obviously, this results in comprehension issues. Poor comprehension leads to poor service. The service may not necessarily provide exactly what the family wanted for their child.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In contrast, do people in Quebec's anglophone community face the same challenges, as far as you know? This question may come out of left field.

Ms. Mona Paré: I can't answer that question.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Faruqui, I'll now turn to the international scene. Canada funds programs for children living with disabilities from all over the world.

Are there any data on the percentage of these programs that are aimed at French-speaking children abroad?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: I don't know if I have the exact figures, but the International Development Research Centre has been supporting French-speaking countries for a long time.

At our Dakar office, we can respond to needs and see trends in this region. We also support a number of projects there. Around 50% of our budget goes to sub-Saharan Africa, and the West African region is well represented.

On the education front, we support projects related to teacher training. This training focuses on gender, equity and inclusion, and, above all, on issues related to teaching in bilingual and multilingual environments.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Cameroon could be a good example.

In Cameroon, several languages are spoken, other than French and English, but there are two official languages. I guess this is a good example to demonstrate how to work—

Mr. Naser Faruqui: It's a good example, yes, because it presents more challenges for students and, especially, for teachers. In addition, there's a kind of exchange hub to encourage educators to talk with parent groups and teachers, among others, to pass on their knowledge and feedback on what's working and what's not in terms of improving education. There are 21 West African countries participating in this program.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There's no right or wrong answer, because we're here to take an honest look at the situation and try to make things better. Perhaps you won't have the answer to my question.

I'm thinking of the northern region. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, near Rwanda and Burundi, how difficult is it for organizations like yours to set up programs for children living with disabilities? Some territories are dangerous, and the safety of your employees and those working for your organization may be at risk.

Mr. Naser Faruqui: This is a very good question.

Our Knowledge and Innovation Exchange, the KIX program, is offered in 80 countries. A large percentage of the countries where there are such problems are threatened by war. Among the programs that are working well are those offered in Chad and Uganda, for example, countries where there are problems.

We do everything we can. Sometimes, researchers from another region or country study the situation in the neighbouring country, in order to ensure their safety as they conduct their research.

● (1230)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Now I would like to invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair

Thank you again to all the witnesses.

I'd like to dig a little bit deeper into how data is collected. We have already heard from witnesses on this study that the failure of good data has impacted the ability to implement good programming.

I will start with you, Mr. Faruqui.

What are the ways we can ensure that data is happening better and that it is more effectively being gathered? What are the barriers to that data being collected? What is stopping us from being able to gather that data?

I'll throw on one more as well. I've recently been reading about how women don't often appear in data. They're invisible in data, oftentimes. How can we ensure that it's not the case as we collect data with regard to this issue?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: It goes beyond the education field. Data is one of those things that just doesn't seem as sexy to focus on, but it's critical. When we're talking about kids with disabilities, just like you said with women, violence against women and other topics, if you're not collecting data on it, then the issue is invisible.

We have a specific focus, and some of our calls have focused on this issue of data around educational management information systems. Right now, as I mentioned, we're supporting UNICEF to integrate data on kids with disabilities into the broader data systems that they have on education. We're working to link things like health and education data. For instance, during COVID-19, doing that enabled you to identify where you might need to make specific interventions, where schools are closed and so forth, because of the data.

What's stopping it? I think part of it is a tendency that we all like big ribbon-cutting ceremonies with projects that have infrastructure where it's very visible what you're doing. Indeed, as I said, it's less sexy, but it's critical. I think that that's one of the things that's stopping it. It may be that some of the systems themselves, the actual software and so forth, need to be better integrated and made more efficient so you have open systems that are transparent that people can access and so forth. Those are some of the obstacles, but it's an absolutely critical issue.

Ms. Heather McPherson: When we are looking at a situation where we have very limited funds available, collecting data is a resource that requires resources. If you have limited funds, perhaps organizations choose to devote those funds to that inclusive education rather than the data. Is that possible?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: I think that's possible, but for a long time we've had open data for development programs. One of the benefits of all of these technological changes that we're seeing is that it's a lot cheaper to set up systems for collecting data using innovative methods. The idea of doing these big surveys and doing everything by hand and getting them into the systems, I think, is not as challenging as it was before. That's maybe a hopeful sign for better use of our scarce dollars for education.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's wonderful. Thank you very much.

I see that we have some colleagues online who would like to contribute.

The Chair: Ms. Abualghaib, go ahead, please.

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: On the data element, it's really very critical to understand that there are two sets of data that we really need from the country level to give us an understanding of the landscape on disability and access to inclusive education. We know that things

are improving quite a bit at national levels from the programs we're supporting across the globe when it comes to formal national data, which is the national census.

The use of the Washington Group questions has been taken on board more now with many governments. However, we are still lacking that administrative data, which is the school system data that gives us an understanding of the annual performance and what we are missing in terms of the inclusion of children with disabilities within that.

There is also the risk in many countries that there is another set of data that's completely missing, which is special education schools. Unfortunately, I would say that the biggest failure of the system is that we are not capturing that in the more mainstream data.

To your point about investment versus reality, the only thing we see working at the country level is collaborative effort. Usually working on data and disability and education and other access to services is a sketchy approach and usually goes in silos. We need to make sure that Canada's support is highly recommended on data more broadly and make sure that it is captured collectively at national levels so there is a deeper understanding of the reality on the ground for children with disabilities.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Abualghaib.

I would like to invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

Witnesses, I'd like to ask if you can elaborate a bit upon how poverty accents the challenges around disability and education.

I'll open it up to any witness who can give us some detail on this question, so feel free to jump in.

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: It's definitely very essential. The point I was making at the beginning about looking at disability from a comprehensive cross-sectoral approach is that the impact of poverty is highly influential in terms of families' decisions of where resources should go. Unfortunately, in many cases, the drop of opportunities for their children with disabilities to go to school is the one to be prioritized.

The reason is that we know that in many countries the social protection systems are not inclusive to disability more broadly. The benefits system is not adjusted when there are members with disabilities or children with disabilities in the household who need those additional funds; disability is never considered. The high cost of transport of assistive devices is not covered by the benefits system in the country. All of that is considered and, unfortunately, has a high impact on parents' choice of whether to bring their children to school or not, especially in remote areas or in situations of conflict.

Thank you.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: In addition, just as a follow-up, aside from poverty, would you say there are one or two key issues that accentuate the problems when it comes to this study?

Ms. Ola Abualghaib: One key thing is to know that we know what needs to happen at the national level in order for systems to be inclusive of children with disabilities. Article 24 was clear. There was a clear, technical global understanding of what is needed.

What we are missing are three elements. One is the political commitments from governments towards it. I believe that Canada can play a major role on that. The second one is the investment. The third one is increasing the capacities of all stakeholders, including teachers, ministers and officials who work in the system. Without those three things, unfortunately, all that we are discussing today we continue to lack.

We know that evidence is still missing, but we know that we have enough knowledge that the system is failing children with disabilities. As I said, with no further investment, with no looking at it from a comprehensive approach, and with delay, no matter what commitment comes on board in development or humanitarian contexts—looking at the well-being and access to services of those children with disabilities, specifically education—we will, unfortunately, come back to this discussion again a few years from now not having achieved the thing that we are all here today to achieve.

● (1240)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

If you don't mind, Ms. Sharma would like to respond to your question.

Ms. Sharma, you have the floor.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I won't repeat what Ola has already said about social protection, but I do want to bring to the notice of this House a study that UNICEF and the World Bank conducted on the additional costs of accessing education for children with disabilities. I think that we have countries that have not taken those costs into account. If you look at the data that is coming out from different countries—because similar research is going on—you will see that it is evident that to be able to afford the kinds of additional costs that families with children with disabilities face, they would have to be in the top percentile of earners in the country. That is not the case because persons with disabilities and their families comprise 20% of the world's poorest. That huge gap is very evident.

I also want to flag the point about the lack of availability and accessibility of assistive technology here. Only 5% to 15% of those who need assistive technology actually have it. It's not just about availability; it's also about affordability. We don't have quality assistive technology available, which also really impacts and builds on the cycle of poverty and how all these multi-dimensional factors prevent children with disabilities from going to school.

The Chair: Mr. Faruqui, you have the floor for one minute, maximum, please.

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

One of the other speakers spoke about the choices that people with scarce resources have to make and choices about which kids go to school—ones with disabilities, and maybe boys instead of girls—and that challenge.

The other challenge I want to talk about in terms of poverty, which is kind of the subject of this committee overall.... One aspect of poverty is a lack of understanding and awareness of the challenges that different groups face and seeing them as part of a neuro-diverse paradigm, rather than as disabilities, something that's sort of backward, or a gap and so forth.

I think the response is education, and it is overall, even in this country.... My son has a learning disability. In grade 6, I remember the teacher saying to me that I really should not be putting him into the college preparation programs because he wasn't going to succeed. I think it's education that changes that mindset in Canada, as well as in developing countries, and that's an aspect of poverty we need to address. He's in his second year of his grad school in international affairs now, and he did the college programs.

I think that aspect is really critical for us to see this not as something that's special, or as special needs on the side, but as people who have the same capabilities as everybody else but need some level of support to succeed in society.

The Chair: Now I would like to invite Mr. Lake to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you.

To that point, when I think about my son, I often talk about the idea of mitigating challenges to unlock potential, just like we all have our challenges and want help to deal with our challenges so that we can recognize our full potential.

As I think about inclusive education and action steps that we've talked about.... I'll throw forward a brainstorming idea. You have this Washington Group tool that helps to assess.

Naser, I'm going to come to you on this.

Let's say we put a lot of money into community health workers with World Vision, Plan, Save the Children, UNICEF and other organizations that are out there on the ground, meeting families and meeting kids all around the world...already funded by taxpayers and organizations from around the world.

Imagine if, potentially, we could teach those community health workers to understand what physical, intellectual or developmental disability might look like and give them the tool to help do some assessment of some of these families, so that you can give the families or the individuals, to some degree, an explanation of what's happening. Of course, it's not too much of a stretch to then imagine what school or some form of inclusion might look like, once you've generated some data at that individual level—and then the aggregate level, of course.

From my understanding, StatsCan is a part of the Washington Group. I think they are coming to the committee next week, so we'll get a chance to ask about the tool.

When I think about IDRC and the function that IDRC has, it's a research function, an information function and an evidence function. Therefore, as you listen to that kind of brainstorming, it's not a stretch to imagine a place where you put a research function on top of that to gather and assess that evidence, and see what incremental next steps could be taken quickly to generate meaningful action right now, or is it?

● (1245)

Mr. Naser Faruqui: No. The Washington tool sounds fantastic to me. A lot of the innovations we're testing were developed by community-based organizations like World Vision. If there really is a proven innovation that can have an impact, that's the sort of thing....

We do these calls. What is working? Where is it working? Prove it's working. As you said, let's test it and scale it in different contexts, because you have to adapt it to the different contexts and train people in those up to 80 countries we're working in, seeking to scale it so that it's sustainable.

It sounds fantastic. We'd have to look at it carefully. There's a certain way we operate in terms of competitive calls and making sure that the research is really quality and so forth. However, on the surface of what you're describing, Mr. Lake, it sounds like a really interesting initiative.

Hon. Mike Lake: I have a minute and a half left in my time.

Nafisa and Dorodi, I would be interested in hearing your thoughts on that.

I will let you know that in the last committee meeting, I think we got three organizations to commit to looking at the call to action and potentially signing on. We're still focusing on the call to action that you worked so hard on.

Do you have thoughts on that?

Nafisa has her hand up.

The Chair: You can have an extra minute so that it's fair for everyone.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: Thank you.

I want to add something on the importance of data. I think it's really important to generate the data, but not just about where the people with disabilities are and what their functional issues are. I think it's also really important to create data on what works and what's not working in terms of practices and approaches to support students with disabilities. I think that's really vital, as is a kind of mediated understanding of the data.

We've been working with the governments of South Sudan, Mozambique, Burkina Faso and Ethiopia to really understand and interpret the data. This is actually a challenge. Now that you have the data, what do you do with it? How do you organize your interventions to be most impactful in supporting students, based on the data you've collected? This is where support is really required.

I'm fully with you that if we can get all development and community-based organizations to collect data and to sit down and analyze it and, in a participatory way, to design programs that respond to the needs, I think we will make a big step change.

Again, on the call to action, I really feel that this is a wonderful opportunity, with the disability summit coming up soon, for Canada to champion it, to take action around it, to endorse the call to action and to understand what this means among education advisers who are based in countries representing the Government of Canada. They need to understand what disability inclusion is, what disability-inclusive education is, what they can do and how they can advise the governments they are working with. I think these are practical things that need to happen. Guidance notes need to be created around teacher education and all these different subtopics so that people are equipped to provide technical support and leadership on this topic of disability-inclusive education.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Lake.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you may take the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Paré, can you tell us about the disparities within the minority group of children living with disabilities when it comes to academic success?

You said it's not a homogeneous group, but how much disparity is there in terms of success within this group?

● (1250)

Ms. Mona Paré: I don't have statistics to give you for different groups of children living with disabilities. What I do see, in Canada anyway, is that a good proportion of children with disabilities are not succeeding, and I'm sure it's the same internationally. In Canada, they're at least in school, but in Quebec, for example, a quarter of the students we call students living with disabilities or students with learning or adjustment difficulties, or EHDAA, leave without a diploma. That's a huge proportion, compared to the rest of the population.

That's where we need to do some research, among other things, to find out if there's a particular group that makes the statistics what they are. Is it easier for others? Certainly, since there is a wide variety of children living with disabilities. Even within the same group, the severity of disability can vary widely. The autism spectrum, for example, is very broad. So it's important to know which children are graduating, but also where they're going next. We're pushing kids down certain paths that don't give them as many options in life after school to find a job, be independent, etc.

That's why research is important, but unfortunately I don't have any figures to give you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In short, I conclude that we need data.

Mr. Faruqui, I think you'll find my question interesting, at least, I hope so.

How important is it to ensure that the funding criteria for programs are flexible in order to adapt to the mores and cultural particularities of the countries in which these programs are set up?

I imagine that we don't proceed in the same way in India and Chad, for example. Am I wrong?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Thank you very much.

Of course, we have to adapt to the local contexts and local cultures of each country we work in.

Did I understand your question correctly?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is it a challenge to convince the people in the department who implement programs? Is it ever a challenge for you to get them to be flexible? Normally, one doesn't interact in one country in the same way as in another. Do you see this as a problem or not?

Mr. Naser Faruqui: There are also sometimes differences within the same country, because culture varies from region to region.

That said, I don't think it's a big challenge. It's more a matter of how we work.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So it's just the training of your people that is different from country to country. Okay, I understand that.

Ms. Paré, to draw a parallel, there are cultural differences here in Canada when it comes to dealing with children living with disabilities. Do we work the same way with everyone, no matter who they are?

Ms. Mona Paré: What difference are you talking about, between what and who?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When we set up a program focused on children living with disabilities, do we take into account their cultural differences? I don't know, I'm just asking.

Do we work differently from one community to another, with francophones or anglophones, or perhaps with first nations people?

Are there cultural differences? If so, do we adjust well to these differences? Do we need to make any improvements when it comes to adapting to the cultural particularities of the children we work with?

Ms. Mona Paré: It's important to be aware of differences and realize that there are cultural and linguistic differences. Do we really do this in the field? I haven't seen it.

On the other hand, we can say that there really are cultural differences, differences in culture and education, differences from one school to another, from one region to another, from one province to another. It depends a lot on the people who work with them: the teacher, the school principal, the person who provides the service. It also comes back to the question of training. Depending on what you say, it's important to take cultural and other differences into account.

● (1255)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When you work with parents, among others, I imagine you don't work the same way as with—

The Chair: You must conclude, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, of course.

When working with parents, among others, I imagine you don't work the same way with parents from different cultures. Is this an important thing to take into account for the child's well-being and to take them further on their journey?

Ms. Mona Paré: Of course. In Canada especially, you have to take into account that there are a lot of newcomers, new Canadians, and that these people have a lot of difficulty with the education system, which, all the same, is a bit rigid with its procedures. Newly arrived parents feel very intimidated by this system.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. McPherson, you have the floor for five minutes please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all our guests.

One thing we've heard today is that there is a need for better data, but there are solutions being done.

Mr. Faruqui, I think you were speaking about examples of what works, how it works and how it can be very cost-effective if it is done properly.

What it's making me think about is.... I assume that what's happening in Canada and the way we are talking about using our development dollars for inclusive education is happening in other countries as well.

How are we making sure that there is data, that we are sharing the data we are getting with other countries and that lessons learned, best practices and all of those things are being shared across the world? How are we are informing donor countries, but also using that to increase the effectiveness of the programming on the ground?

I'll start with you, Mr. Faruqui.

Mr. Naser Faruqui: Thanks.

That's kind of, in a nutshell, the purpose of this large initiative we have on education.

It does work sort of at the country level in terms of scale-improving innovations and adapting them to the local context. Often they are multi-country projects. There are three or four countries that we're working on. We're trying to scale things in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, for example. There's that knowledge sharing within the region.

As I said, we have these four regional hubs—one for each...sort of way we carve out the world; two in Africa, one in Asia and one in Latin America. We have up to 20 countries that come together to identify what their pain points are when it comes to education. What do they need to know? Where don't they have evidence? What works? They share it with the neighbouring countries.

In addition to that, we have some programs that are what we call global projects, which sort of ensure that we're capturing global public goods on education knowledge and education, and infuse that back into the local systems.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I would assume that even country-wide, the diversity of needs would be very.... I think about some of the work I have done in Nicaragua, where what's needed in Managua is very different from what's needed in the northern regions of the Mosquito territory. Even within a country, it can be very diverse.

I wonder if anyone online would have any other comments they'd like to make.

The Chair: We have Ms. Sharma, please.

Ms. Dorodi Sharma: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To respond to the question around knowledge sharing, I do want to again bring to the notice of the members here that Canada is a member of the Global Action Disability Network, the GLAD Network, which is a body that brings together governments, donors and multilateral organizations on their common commitment to advance disability inclusion.

Knowledge sharing is one of the main objectives of this network as well. We have good examples, as Nafisa already alluded to, from the United States, the U.K., Australia and many of the Scandinavian countries. I think that Canada's role in contributing to that global public good in terms of knowledge is important.

I also want to flag the importance of working with the missions in countries, in plugging that gap of what is happening at the global level—what missions are doing at the national level is still quite significant—and also flag the importance of working with community-based organizations.

This also speaks to an earlier question about how you reach children with disabilities in far-flung areas, in remote areas of countries in Africa, in francophone countries. For example, in Niger, our members work extremely committedly on inclusive education. They have different projects that have been running, and currently we are working with the members in Niger to support the implementation of projects on education in emergencies for learners with disabilities.

The importance of working with community-based organizations and sharing the knowledge with them is quite critical.

● (1300)

The Chair: We will give the closing comments to Ms. Baboo.

You have one minute, please.

Ms. Nafisa Baboo: I would like to add to that.

It's really important to bring people along. Co-designing with experts in the country and co-designing capacity development programs is really vital, as is making sure that it also ensures there's ownership and there's transfer of skills. I think that is a really important investment moving forward: to ensure that we do work together with people in countries to make sure the products are culturally sensitive and that we are aware of some of the barriers that could exist in the rolling out of a particular program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Baboo.

Thanks to our witnesses for their presentations, participation, sharing ideas and helping us in our important study for international disability-inclusive education for persons with disabilities.

We appreciate that you took the time to meet with us to share ideas, given your great and important expertise in this important subject. If you feel that some interesting additional information is needed, please feel free to contact or write to the subcommittee or directly to our clerk. I can assure you that we have an excellent clerk working with us.

On behalf of all members of the committee and the staff, we thank you very much for your presence, and we wish you a wonderful day.

That's all the time we have.

The meeting is adjourned.