



Overcoming Barriers to Food Security

A photonarrative by people with disabilities



The Hague Academy for local governance



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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Introduction to We Are Able!

We Are Able! is a five-year (2021 - 2025) programme implemented by ZOA in six countries including Uganda, Ethiopia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan.

In Uganda, the programme aims to empower, amplify voices, and create resilience among people with disabilities and other excluded groups, particularly those faced with food insecurity in areas of protracted crises. We are Able! also provides a platform where different actors have access to information on disability inclusion, including referrals, tools, resources, and opportunities; as well as have meaningful engagements and interactions on key issues affecting people with disabilities.

We Are Able! is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of the Power of Voices - Partnerships for Strengthening Civil Society.

Project Approach:



Pathway 1:

Community mobilization: Bringing people with disabilities together so that they have better information about their rights, with a focus on access to land, and the livelihoods opportunities that exist in the district. The program will reach out to persons with disabilities through existing grassroots self-help groups as well as through Village Savings and Loan groups. (VSLAs).



Pathway 2:

Strengthening Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) For effective lobbying and advocacy, women and men with disabilities need strong representative organisations to advocate on their behalf. The program will further work on building the capacity of mainstream civil society actors to include people with disabilities in their livelihood programming.



Pathway 3:

Engaged Public Authorities WeAreAble! promotes cooperation between public authorities and OPDs to improve access to basic resources and services that relate to food security. To make this happen, the program will increase the capacity of public authorities to engage with OPDs and persons with disabilities. This will result in the design and implementation of Local Inclusion Agendas.



Target Groups:

Vulnerable groups including people with disabilities; elderly; youths; marginalized ethnic groups, and internally displaced persons



Project Areas

West Nile region (Arua and Yumbe districts) Acholi subregion (Nwoya and Omoro districts)



Donor

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands



Project Partners

Light for the World (LFTW); VNG International (VNGI); Hague Academy for Local Governance (THA); and National Union for Disabled People in Uganda (NUDIPU), Africa Disability Forum (ADF)



Project Duration

January 2021 - December 2025

Background

Prior to this research, two baseline studies were conducted: Baseline I consisted of a quantitative study, gathering key information about food security, land ownership and public authority engagement in relation to persons with disabilities in the project areas. A qualitative assessment, Baseline II, expanded on these themes, providing a snapshot into the barriers faced by people with disabilities. The Baseline II report also added an element on the experiences of refugees.

While Baseline I and II unearthed broader themes as mentioned above, this report differentiates itself through its participatory, qualitative approach, and the centering of individual stories in the analysis of data. The focus lies primarily on micro level barriers, and the meaning given behind these barriers from the community. This report also aims at amplifying voices and unearthing local solutions that fall outside the scope of the prior studies.



Barrier Analysis and Sensemaking

The Barrier Analysis, as applied in this context, aimed at identifying specific barriers that individuals with disabilities face in accessing services or resources at community level with a strong focus on themes relating to food security, land rights, and local governance. Participation in Village Savings and Loan Associations, though not a principle focus of We Are Able! was also explored in the study as VSLAs are a key avenues for the spread of information, and the implementation of programme activities.

Sensemaking as a key component of Participatory Action Research, fostered a collective analysis of the experiences shared, gathering insight into deeper themes arising from the narratives and drawing conclusions to inform further actions and programmatic direction by different stakeholders. Sensemaking activities and methodologies were integrated into this process, and culminated with stakeholder workshops where findings shared led to higher-level discussions from a program's perspective. The methodology for this project was developed specifically to include people with disabilities in the process of data collection, analysis and understanding the findings of the baseline reports.

Why is it important to do this kind of research?

Conducting a barrier analysis and sensemaking enables program stakeholders to gain a better understanding of challenges faced at grassroots level. These findings can validate a program's interventions, form the basis of any adaptations, and ensure that a program adequately meets the needs, realities and priorities of its target group.

In the case of We Are Able! In addition to the above, it was also important to illustrate the findings of the baseline studies with real life examples of how people with disabilities navigate challenges relating to food security, accessing land rights, local governance and joining VSLAs; these findings also directly fed into the formulation of Inclusion Agendas and Action Plans by program stakeholders.

Methodology



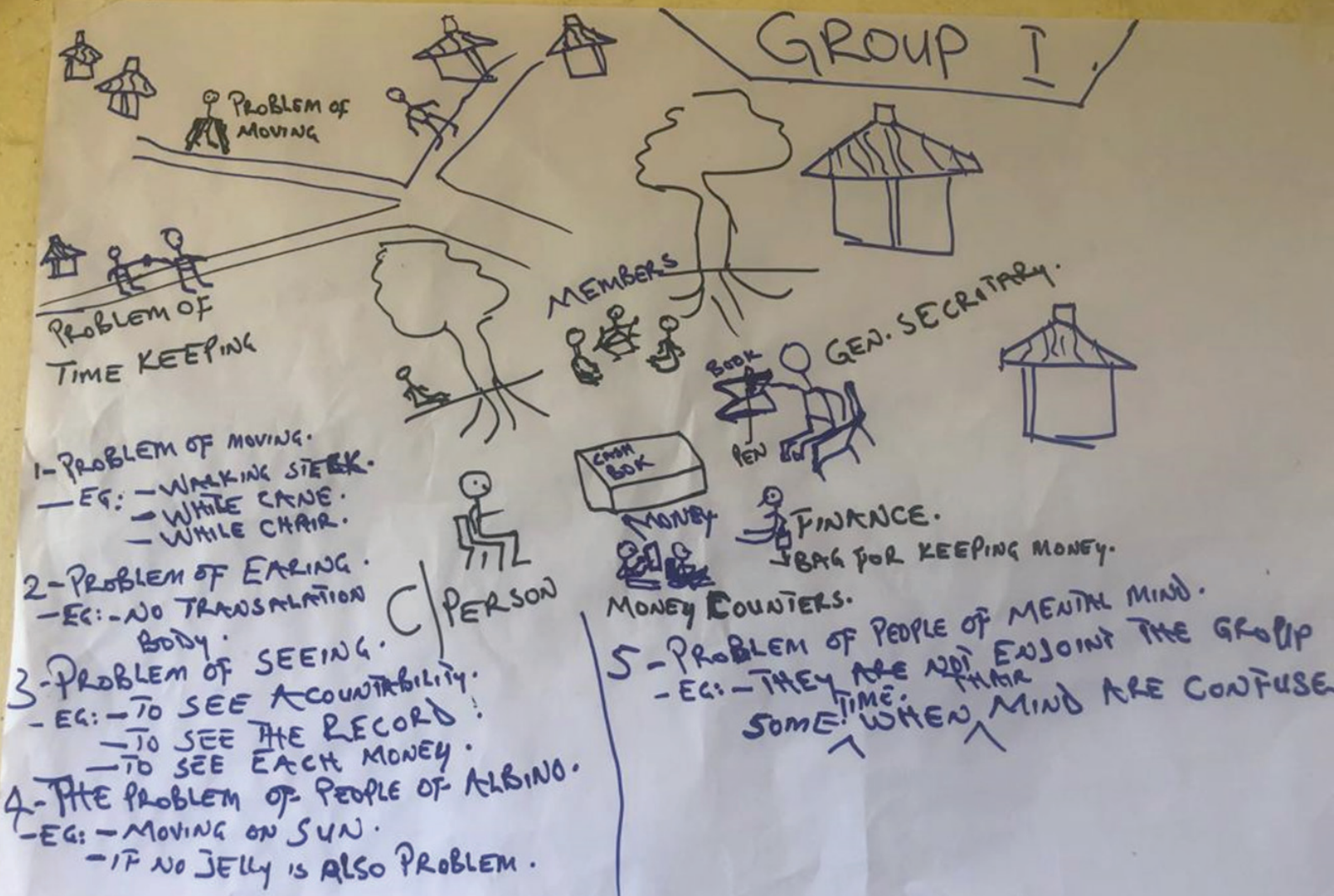
Focus Group Discussion

The study involved 64 participants in total; an average of 8 participants per group. 2 sessions were conducted in each of the four program districts, aiming at representation of urban and rural populations. Representation of women (approximately 50%) and different types of impairments was deliberately sought and considered throughout the study. Participants also varied in age, ranging from youth (18 - 35) to elderly (60+).

All activities under the Barrier Analysis and Sensemaking were implemented in close collaboration with disability structures in the project areas including Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and representatives for persons with disabilities in local government at community level. 20% of the participants in the focus groups were either current or former representatives of persons with disabilities in local government, and another 10% were active members of Organizations of People with Disabilities.

Disability Inclusion Facilitators¹, who are young people with disabilities themselves, led the process as primary data collectors and coordinators of the different activities.

¹A Disability Inclusion Facilitator (DIF) is a person that supports awareness and implementation of disability inclusion in mainstream programmes, services or workplaces.



Participatory Action Research

The focus group discussions mainly utilized Participatory Action Research methodologies. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a research approach that encourages equal involvement of researchers and participants in the research process, and use of the findings to drive solutions and actions towards issues researched and/or discovered during the research. PAR works to center the experiences of the communities affected by an issue in the methodologies and tools used. It also employs strategies that are open-ended in nature, allowing these communities to define what the research focuses on. The goal of this approach is to bring about collaborative social change.

User Journey Mapping and Actor Tables from the PAR Methodology toolkit were actively used during the focus group discussions.

User Journey Mapping

Participants discussed the themes of food security, land rights, local governance, and VSLAs and used their collective knowledge to draw maps outlining steps involved in accessing a resource/service related to the themes. In mapping the steps involved, participants delved into various challenges they faced at specific points of the process. These fed into a storytelling session where individual experiences of the barriers mentioned were shared.

Actor Tables

During the formulation of Actor Tables, participants made lists of actors they encountered or sought support from while accessing services and resources relating to the themes of food security, land rights, local governance, and VSLAs. Participants reflected on how accessible these actors were to them and shared individual experiences on the same.

Agree or Disagree

To share and validate some of the findings from Baseline I and II, participants were read a list of statements from the findings in the reports. Participants then reacted to each of the statements, stating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed. They also elaborated on their responses and shared their individual experiences through a range of follow-up questions asked by the facilitators.

Photovoice Research

Photovoice is a form of Feminist Participatory Action Research, that aims to put the power of storytelling back into the hands of the participant through participatory photography. Traditionally, participants are given basic photography training, and are given cameras to use to take photos of a specific theme that relates to the research question. Participants are given total freedom to interpret the themes through photos. The photos taken are then discussed as a group where a selection process takes place, and photos chosen are then captioned. The photo narratives created following this process aid a researcher in their given study.

During the Barrier Analysis, this methodology was adapted due to time and resource constraints. Selected participants worked with a Disability Inclusion Facilitator and primary researcher to frame narratives from their experiences and capture these through photographs. Feedback and suggestions were only given by the photographer when asked for, and were discussed and conceptualized fully with the participant. The narratives shared accompanying the photos were audio recorded and transcribed to form the captions for the photos.

Stakeholder Workshops

On 14th and 18th of March 2022, Light for the World Uganda hosted stakeholder workshops in Arua and Gul cities to present the findings of the Barrier Analysis, add nuance to the narratives gathered with information from a systems level, and enable stakeholders to jointly develop an inclusion advocacy agenda.

Participants included We Are Able! implementing partners, district local government representatives, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), and the media.





Making Participatory Action Research Disability Inclusive

Throughout the research process, a number of strategies were used to ensure the active and meaningful participation of people with disabilities, particularly those with physical, visual and hearing impairments.

In addition to the personal assistants and Sign Language interpreters engaged, group activities maximized the power of the collective, enabling limitations of some of the participants to be negated by the strengths of the abilities of others in the group. For example, during the User Journey Mapping and the Actor Table activities, participants worked in small groups and were asked to develop this information collectively. In asking people to work together, individuals who could easily draw and write were able to take on these tasks while others were able to engage through verbal communication.

To make the photovoice component inclusive for participants with visual

impairments, redefining photography for the participants was deemed necessary.

Re-defining Photography

While a global view on photography is looking through a camera and using it to document what an individual sees, from an artistic standpoint; photography involves first defining an end-result that one would like to accomplish through the photo(s) taken, and then carefully making a series of decisions on how to achieve the said result.

The photographer then thinks about what to include in their frames, what areas to emphasize, and the technical components that go into making a photograph.

Through thinking of, and explaining the concept of photography as a process of thought and careful execution, it becomes clearer as to how a person with a visual impairment can fully participate in the process.

On the next page is a step-process of how this was achieved:

Making Photovoice Inclusive for participants with visual impairments



Identify a story/topic

(What would you like to share? Why that particular story/topic?)



Frame the narrative

(What in this story/topic would you like to highlight? What would you like your audience to understand/pick from this story/topic?)



De-construct the narrative

(from X part of the story/topic; what item, object or place would highlight this part of the story the best? Where would you like to take this photo? What should be in the frame? What is the focus of the photo? Other technical aspects: Should the background be blurry or in focus?)



Taking the photo

A sighted assistant either takes the photo(s) or adjusts the setting on the camera based on what is to be photographed and Blind participant takes the photo(s). Sighted assistant described the image(s) in detail and the cycle continues till the full narrative is developed.

Ethical Considerations

Disability Inclusion Facilitators, as primary researchers and coordinators of the study, were given a refresher training on informed consent and data protection. The focus group discussions remained anonymous and the data was coded based on location, gender and type of impairment. Other personal identifiers were omitted. Participants of the photovoice activity were made aware of where their photos would be shared, and to whom, and were asked to sign consent forms permitting use of the photos taken. All of the participants felt comfortable with their faces and stories being shared.

Identifying Barriers

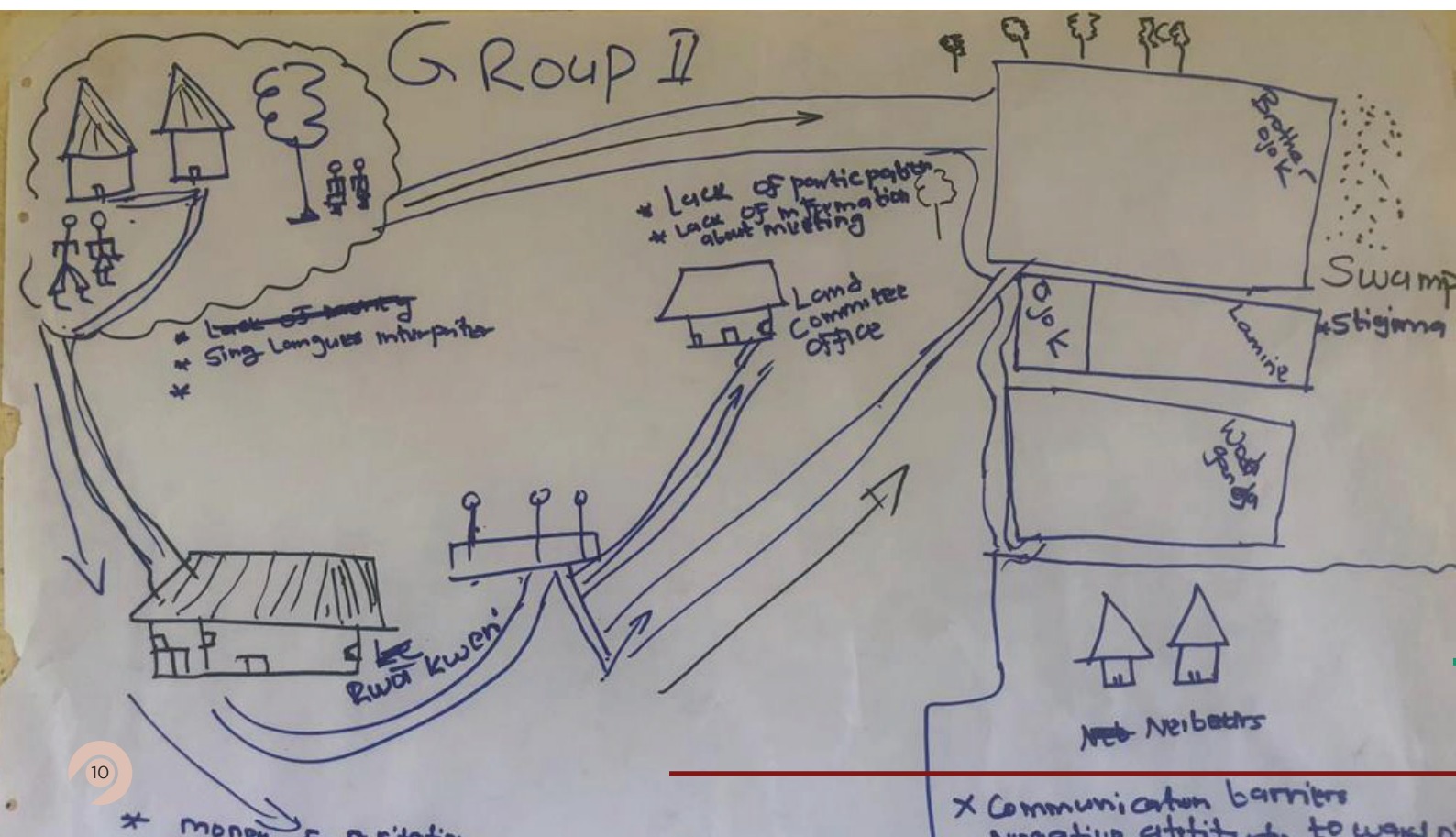
This section will break down the specific barriers that participants from the focus group discussion and the photovoice identified as preventing their full participation in We Are Able's thematic areas.

Land Rights and Food Security

Through the focus group discussions and photovoice storytelling exercise, participants reported that they did have some degree of land ownership, as documented by the findings of the Baseline I report, however what this meant on an individual level varied based on type and severity of impairments, economic status, level of disability awareness of family members, and the gender of the participants. This discrepancy became a key discussion point throughout all of the focus groups both on land rights and food security.

Across the user journey mapping exercises conducted, the formal processes of obtaining documentation of land ownership were often left out in the maps drawn, as most maps focused on obtaining land through traditional land tenure. It was noted by stakeholders that the overall bureaucratic process involved in accessing formal documentation created significant barriers for people with disabilities, especially those with limited mobility. The multiple visits required in this process, also posed as barriers for people who required personal assistance to reach the district and area land commission offices.

The omission of some of these formal processes during the mapping exercise, and the barriers identified by stakeholders points to an information gap surrounding the technicalities of the legal system, and begins to illustrate how these barriers intersect. When people with disabilities do not have the necessary knowledge of land rights to obtain land on their own accord, their only option becomes obtaining rights through traditional processes.





Traditional land distribution within the family was highlighted as a difficult way to access land. Data collected showed that although many people with disabilities are considered in family land distribution, they are often given less land than family members without impairments. Participants cited types and severity of impairments coupled with a lack of awareness, and the belief that people with disabilities lack capacity to dig and manage large plots as the primary reason for being given less land.



My parents only gave me a small piece of land, claiming that our capacity to farm was very low. They said that people with disabilities cannot manage large pieces of land. I took this photo to show the fruit trees I grow on my small plot”

In instances where participants were given equal portions of land to their family members, this was attributed to a heightened awareness level and a positive mindset towards disability of family members in charge of distribution.

I was given land by my father and the community didn't refuse, so they believe that it's within my rights to own land whether I have a disability or not. There's no problem."

Reports of people with disabilities receiving less land than their family members came up in every group with many participants explaining that they were only given enough land to build a small house for themselves, or to plant a small garden.

The discovery of barriers in the land distribution process for people with disabilities highlights the intrinsic link between land rights and food security. Access to land, enabling people with disabilities to engage in at least subsistence level agricultural activities, had a tangible impact on people's abilities to support themselves and their families. In instances where people with disabilities received less land from their families, participating in other income generating activities was necessary.

In explaining this link, one husband and wife, both with physical impairments recounted the strategies they used to ensure they had food security, because they received less land in family distributions.

I weave mats and also sell charcoal, and fry and sell ground nuts. These are the tools I use to make a mat. There are many materials. There are different ways of making these mats. The ones with colors and patterns are sold at 80,000 shillings and the more simple mats at 50,000 shillings, so the prices vary. It takes me one full month to make a mat. I learned this skill from my mother. I started this business to earn a living, so I did not need any external support. This business helps me to pay for my childrens' school fees, and to make sure I can get medical support when I need it."



The husband goes on to discuss the economic activities he is engaged in:

I make metallic boxes for keeping clothes. On the sides, I paint them with nice designs. For my business of making boxes, I have a workshop where I make the boxes in a group with people without disabilities. We then sell them and share the money equally. There are three members in the group and we share costs, and tools.”



The success and food security of this family can be attributed to two things that lie outside of their access to land. First, both of them are skilled in a trade, and they have used these skills to participate in livelihood activities to supplement their income where their small scale farming activities can not support them. Secondly, the husband has participated in inclusive cooperative groups to increase his production and access to markets, ultimately increasing their financial stability.

This family’s success story highlights the barriers faced by those with less knowledge and skills in a trade. One participant voiced concern for the lack of skills many people with disabilities have and how this can impact the way that they earn an income. When paired with the issue of lack of access to land, it is clear how this can be problematic.

Most people with disabilities are not educated so they are not engaged in gainful employment. This makes them rely on only farming for food.”

Furthermore, stigma from the greater community exacerbates a lack of access to food security and prevents people with disabilities from joining mainstream groups and cooperatives.

The community sees people with disabilities differently, those with severe disabilities are discriminated against more, and the most discriminated types of impairments are visual, epilepsy, psychosocial and hearing impairments”

Gender and Land Rights

Throughout all of the focus groups, it became clear that access to land rights and by association, food security, is a highly gendered issue. This gender component was seen most strongly through the stories shared in the focus group discussions in the Acholi region, but was echoed in all groups. The link between gender and land rights is present because traditionally, the primary way that women in their communities access land ownership is through marriage, as they are typically not considered when dividing family land. From a gender standpoint, this is a barrier on its own, but when the element of disability is added, accessing land becomes more complicated. Participants reported that it is more difficult for women with disabilities to find a husband.

It is hard for women with disabilities to get married, so it is hard for us to get land.”

This sentiment was echoed by the men in one group who all agreed that they would not be willing to marry a woman with disabilities.

I can't marry a woman with disabilities because how could she help me to support the family?”

Although women in the groups had been engaged in relationships with men, they had been either mistreated, or the men were not willing to formalize marriages; preventing these women from accessing their land rights. One woman illustrated this through a story of a past relationship.

I got a man and I thought he was the best until I realized that he had five women and I was the sixth one. The man started insulting me because of my disability. We were not formally married and I saw no future with him so I decided to leave. I realized if you are a woman with disabilities, you face a lot of challenges. Now my life is better than without the man.”

Participants shared that title holders of family land do not often include women in their allocations because of the belief that they would obtain land through marriage. This practice leaves women with disabilities to fall through the cracks of the system.

When I came back home after losing my husband, I was not allowed to own land. My brothers refused to give me land for cultivation and only gave me a small portion for a house. I think if I was not a woman with disabilities, at least I was going get something reasonable”

These gender specific barriers are not limited to women accessing land through inheritance and marriage. Barriers also exist for women with disabilities when it comes to purchasing land.

When I wanted to buy land, I had no husband. When I approached the land owner, he said no one without a husband can buy land and moreover no person with disabilities. The man who I was seeing said I could use him in order to get the land and I did. He took my money, but went and paid less than the full amount and kept the rest. There was no written agreement, so I had to pay again. The good thing is, I got my land. I stayed with the man for some time, but he was abusive, so I had to kick him out.”



Another set of barriers were faced by women after completing the purchase of land. Women lacking documentation reported instances of land grabbing as a result of the barriers noted above.

There is a lady living with disability who bought a plot of land at 3,500,000 shillings. She then started the construction of a humble residential house, but her land was taken. She was left with a very small portion that can only fit a house and a pit latrine. She tried to take the issue to the LC(Local Councilor) but could not pursue action due to lack of funds.”

While land grabbing is a cross cutting issue, it is worth noting that women with disabilities face higher levels of vulnerability in society at large due to the intersersectional barriers that they face. This unique set of challenges faced by women is important to note in project planning and implementation to ensure a fully inclusive approach.

Local Governance

Barriers to local governance participation were broken down by focus groups into three categories; running for an elected position, participating in government programming and voting. Running for an elected position was then further broken down into mainstream positions, and disability specific positions. In regards to running for a mainstream political position, group participants largely felt that although it was possible for a person with disabilities to have success in this space, it was unlikely due primarily to the financial requirements of winning an election.

If a person with a disability contests for office against a person without a disability, the community puts equal demand for money on both of them. Therefore it affects the person with disabilities since he may not have much money for the campaign.”

Participants also cite a general lack of community disability awareness as a key factor in why they don't believe that people with disabilities can successfully run for mainstream public office.

The best example is the former MP disability who came to contest for a seat in the mainstream election and failed to make it back to parliament simply because he is a person with disabilities. I think sensitizing people without disabilities should be carried out so they do not segregate us.”

When it came to running for disability specific positions, there were fewer barriers to participation. Accessibility of forms, and average education level of people with disabilities however, made it so that there was more representation of people with physical impairments that did not require wheelchairs, and were able to attend mainstream schools, holding these positions.

When discussing participation in government programming, focus group participants had good knowledge of government programming that existed in their areas, however they noted that this was not the case for all people with disabilities.

We (referring to focus group participants) know how to access any programme that supports people with disabilities from the government, but we all need to stay connected to help those who are not well informed get the necessary information.”

Further explaining this gap in knowledge of government programming, one participant pointed to a lack of data on people with disabilities in their community.

We don't have proper data on people with disabilities in our community. This makes it very hard for leaders to direct resources. That's why it's hard to support every person with disabilities, especially for those who do not socialize.”

Filling this data and information gap would allow for more efficient and effective dissemination of information regarding these programmes.

When voting, participants faced barriers, mainly relating to accessibility and policy. They reported the need to stand in long queues, and the requirement of casting their votes independently as the primary reasons for their lack of participation. These barriers make it especially difficult for people with physical impairments and those with visual impairments who require personal assistance to participate in the democratic process. Members of the Deaf community also reported that a lack of sign language interpreters at polling stations made it difficult for them to maneuver the system and understand where they should go to cast their votes.

Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs)

Although not officially cited as a thematic program area, inclusive VSLAs are an entry point at the grassroots level to raise awareness about the programme. They are a tool for delivering information about the rights of people with disabilities, building community awareness, access to skills development and agricultural support services within We Are Able!. It is vitally important to understand why people with disabilities do not participate in VSLAs, and what barriers exist in this space. Overall participants recognized the importance of saving and participating in VSLAs, however, this understanding alone was not enough to enable them to participate.

The most common barrier echoed in the focus groups was that people with disabilities lacked the funds to meet the weekly savings requirements of the groups in their areas. In many of the groups that they were familiar with, accommodations were not made to make the minimum savings more accessible.

People with disabilities do not have money to save in the groups”

This poses an interesting challenge in the implementation of We Are Able!, as without deliberate strategic methods to support the VSLAs to adopt fully inclusive practices, We Are Able! programming will only reach those with relative economic privilege, overlooking the people who may need this support the most.

Stigma from the community, and fear of being taken advantage of as a result of impairment type were also major barriers to participation in savings groups. This fear was especially prevalent in participants with visual impairments, as several had negative experiences with savings groups in the past. Participants were met with negative attitudes when trying to join groups, and cited being turned away from mainstream groups because of the widespread belief that people with disabilities are all dependent and lack the capital to save.

Most VSLAs have people who take advantage of people with disabilities. They take away the savings for people with disabilities and keep it aside and they don't give room for us to take up leadership positions.”

Distance was another significant barrier to participation in savings groups, specifically for people with mobility challenges and those who utilized personal assistant services. These individuals had limited options of where they could save. If the groups local to them were not inclusive, or lacked positive group management, they were unlikely to join a group at all. Some focus group participants who displayed high levels of self confidence took these challenges as opportunities and started their own savings groups.

This is a picture of the friends that I work with. All of them are members of the savings group we started together. First we started the workshop, then got an idea to keep the money in one group. We started the savings group ten years ago. Initially, there were fifteen members in the group and now there are sixty. Yesterday we distributed the money that the members had saved. It was 33,000,000 shillings. I am the treasurer of the group.”



It is important to note that most of the participants who started savings groups and served in the savings group management structures were at some point involved with either an OPD, or served as local councilor for people with disabilities. Their community standing allowed them to build trust, encouraging more people with disabilities to join the groups, and community members to choose to join inclusive VSLAs. This highlights how having role models with disabilities can support progress towards reaching the outcomes of We Are Able!.

Communication barriers in VSLAs were the greatest challenge discussed by people with hearing impairments.

The lack of community capacity for communication with Deaf individuals, paired with the complication that many people with hearing impairments do not speak Ugandan Sign Language, and have low literacy rates, made it very difficult for even inclusive groups to have members with hearing impairments. As a result, some members of the Deaf community have formed small groups so that they are able to participate in saving with those they can easily communicate with.

A major attitudinal barrier exists for the inclusion of people with psychosocial impairments and intellectual impairments even within inclusive groups founded by people with disabilities. Lack of awareness and stigma about these types of impairments makes it difficult for them to join these groups. In the instances where they did participate, inclusion happened through a caregiver, and individuals with these impairments did not have full control. While we acknowledge that using caregivers can be an effective inclusion strategy for those with severe impairments, applying this policy blanketly for all people with psychosocial and intellectual impairments can be a barrier to those with the capacity to participate independently with the right accommodations.

Eliminating Barriers

Community Engagement and Sensitization

Attitude is the single most significant barrier that people with disabilities face in accessing their rights to land, participation in local governance and VSLAs, thus impacting their overall food security. Throughout the focus group discussions and photovoice activities, the need to eliminate attitudinal barriers was crosscutting.

To ensure successful implementation of We Are Able! the gatekeepers to information and access need to be sensitized to the rights and needs of people with disabilities in all of the thematic programme areas. These include local government officials, land committee members, VSLA leadership and heads of families and clan structures. The need for strategically targeting these community gatekeepers particularly in regards to land rights was echoed by stakeholders.

Our land through this region primarily acquired is through the customary land tenure system. So that means land is inherited from the grandparents and the custodians of this land in the community are older persons. So, for that matter we need them in this engagement.”

In local government programming, specific examples of the need for greater awareness of those who manage development initiatives such as Community Development Officers specifically, was raised.

When I was a councilor, we would plan projects for people with disabilities, like the distribution of seeds and cows, but when they arrived at the office, they were diverted to other people. What upset me was especially the case of the cows. When it was time for people with disabilities to collect their cows, they found out that the cows were given to the youth



instead. When I asked about it, the local government officials said that people with disabilities did not have the ability to care for the cows. Recently the government was distributing hoes. This time, we were able to raise our voices and we were included! We raised the issue in the council and it made the Community Development Officers change their minds. Each person with disabilities got two hoes.”

This strong advocacy and sensitization is replicable within the We Are Able! programme through OPDs and other leaders in the disability community.

Although targeting gatekeepers in awareness raising exercises has the potential to create immediate results, the community at large also needs to be meaningfully engaged in awareness trainings to support sustainable change. Increased community awareness would support the general safety and food security of the disability community as well.

Goats have been stolen from me in the past, and it keeps happening because people take advantage of the fact that I cannot see. When these incidents happened I reported them to the area LC1 (Local Councilor 1) but the leaders did not act immediately. Sensitization on the rights of persons with disabilities has to be given to the local leaders and the communities so that theft doesn't happen, and when it does, it can be quickly responded to.”



Lack of community awareness has also contributed to people with disabilities receiving unfair pricing for the goods and services they provide.

People with disabilities in our community have been receiving unfair pricing for products. Some time back, the Uganda National Bureau of Standards came and tried to intervene. They confiscated many weight scales because traders used them to cheat farmers with disabilities. Some of us require a guide to prevent this from happening, and finding one to trust is difficult.”

These stories highlight how necessary community awareness interventions are, so that as programme participants gain increased financial stability they do not become targets of theft and discrimination.

In addition to sensitization about the rights of people with disabilities, there is a pressing need to also ensure that both these gatekeepers and the community at large are aware of the ways that gender and disability intersect and create a set of compounding barriers for women with different types of impairments. Without this knowledge of intersectionality, women with disabilities will continue to be left behind.

Aside from the wider community that can benefit from awareness trainings, people with disabilities themselves need greater awareness and sensitivity to the needs and rights of people with impairments different from their own. As a whole, group participants had the most information about how to include people with physical and visual impairments, but still lacked knowledge of how they can support those with hearing impairments, intellectual impairments, and psychosocial impairments as well as invisible impairments such as epilepsy. OPDs can support the building of this capacity and the creation of a wider disability community through increased collaboration across impairment groups. There is room for local representatives for people with disabilities and Disability Inclusion Facilitators to support this collaboration and capacity building as well.

Access to Information

Across all focus group discussions and photovoice narratives, access to information was a major barrier that people with disabilities faced. This came out strongly in the data specifically concerning local governance. Many group members reported hearing about disability inclusive programming, but were unsure of how to access these programmes and of the selection criteria for participation. The lack of clear communication about selection criteria left community members confused, and feeling like only a select few were able to benefit. For participants with hearing impairments, the lack of information tailored specifically to their inclusion needs caused Deaf individuals to feel unwelcome and assume no sign language interpreters would be available.

This is a photo of my friend who is also Deaf making the sign for the word “oppressed”. The Deaf community is tired of being oppressed and some of us are just staying at home. The local government never calls us for any programmes. We hear rumours that a programme has been planned for people with disabilities, but we are not called specifically to go and attend. There are no interpreters. We don’t feel happy because we don’t get information. That’s why we feel oppressed.”



The solution to this challenge is threefold. First, there is a pressing need for the deliberate mobilization of participants with certain impairments (ie. the Deaf community, people with psychosocial impairments) to participate in government programming. There is also a need for adequate reasonable accommodations to be made to ensure meaningful participation. Increasing the communications made surrounding the programming, implementation, and accommodations offered would allow community members to easily know if they qualify, and how their inclusion needs would be supported. Strong collaboration between OPDs and local government offices to ensure that government officials have complete and accurate lists of people with disabilities in the community would streamline the mobilization process. Developing lists of contact information of professional sign language interpreters and personal assistants would enable reasonable accommodations to be easily planned for.

Lack of information about how to campaign for mainstream government positions prevented people with disabilities from submitting their candidacy. Participants voiced belief that if they went to their local government offices and expressed interest in running for a mainstream position, they would be steered towards a disability specific position instead. In this instance, attitudinal barriers result in a communications and information barrier. In these cases, local government officials are acting as gatekeepers to needed information.

To eliminate this barrier, there is a need to make information about running for public office widespread and accessible. To do this, forms to submit candidacy for elected positions need to be dispersed and available to pick up across a wide geographical area, and those holding these forms need to be well versed in accessible communications so they can explain the process fully to those wishing to run. Forms and paperwork that need to be completed should be available in a wide range of accessible formats,

or have people on site who are knowledgeable in disability inclusion and willing to support people in submitting their candidacy.

An information gap also exists for people with disabilities in relation to land rights. Stakeholders discussed community wide confusion that they had witnessed, or felt themselves, when it came to understanding the different types of land tenure systems in Uganda.

Many people with disabilities don't know that there are laws in this country that give them rights to access land. Our data in Arua city shows that the average level of formal education among people with disabilities is actually P.4. (primary 4) So if you talk of land acts, they don't understand."

To overcome this barrier, there is a pressing need to develop simplified and accessible resources that can be understood by people with the most basic levels of education. Developing simplified resources also supports greater inclusion of people with intellectual impairments, for whom understanding these processes may be especially difficult.

Increasing access to information about fee structures and bureaucratic processes in all aspects of the land tenure system is also critical. Focus group participants faced general frustration when it came to knowing how much should be paid to whom, and at what time while obtaining formal documentation. This lack of knowledge about the fee structure was discouraging to people with disabilities, and resulted in people avoiding these procedures altogether, or abandoning them before documentation was received.

To fill this information gap, a concrete resource should be developed in partnership with Area and District Land Committees to identify all of the fees associated with obtaining official documentation of land ownership to be shared widely in the community. This type of documentation would protect the rights of people with disabilities and enable all stakeholders to have the information needed to save and budget to obtain these documents.

While improving access to information about land rights has the potential to support increased food security, these barriers alone are not the only information gaps present. One major information gap identified as a barrier to food security was a lack of information on food storage techniques and farming best practices.

We need to be trained on how to manage storage and bulking of the food we grow. In the traditional society, people used to not steal and most harvests from the farms were left out in the fresh air without anyone stealing it. Now we cannot practice that same habit because it's no longer safe to store farm products in that way."

Other participants in the groups raised questions about ways to maximize their yields, and expressed great interest in learning new farming techniques. A solution to this information gap related to both farming and food storage practices lies within ZOA's Integrated Farming Approach which encourages and supports farmers who have received training to share their skills with others, widening the spread of best practices. One farmer exemplified the success of this type of approach.

I have used my training to empower another person with a visual impairment. They now have 30 mango trees! I have now helped them to start farming chili peppers. I have also helped to empower one person without any impairments.”



Farmers within the community also are practicing successful food storage which can be shared through the Integrated Farming Approach .

After my harvest, I dry the product and I use ashes and pepper as storage remedies to preserve my harvest from weevils which damage the product. This method keeps my harvest fresh for a longer period of time.”

While these stories support and further validate the approach of We Are Able!, implementing partners with the collaboration of OPDs and local government can support this by continuing to encourage information exchanges on agricultural practices.

In order to support the elimination of all of these information and communication barriers it is critical to ensure that programme participants have access to information about inclusive savings groups. Many participants in the focus group discussions were already part of inclusive savings groups, however all types of impairments did not have the same ease of access to information about these groups. One participant for example started her own savings group because she had not heard of the inclusive groups running in the area, and did not know that these groups would have the capacity to support the inclusion needs of Deaf participants.

We started a savings group of three deaf women. It has been going on for over three years. If you want a loan, you can get one. Our savings depends on what we are earning, but it should be at least 1000 shillings per week. We did not join another savings group because they have no interpreters, so communications may be hard. One way of helping us to join a mainstream group is making sure there is an interpreter, or someone who knows local signs.”



Upon hearing that there was an inclusive savings group in her area that had the capacity to include her, she was surprised, and was still unsure if she would be able to fully participate.

This story highlights the need for clear and accessible communications, not just about the existence of savings groups, but about the reasonable accommodations that they have the capacity and willingness to provide. Having this information will enable potential participants to make informed decisions about joining these groups. This in turn provides access to information about the thematic elements of the We Are Able! programme and supports the financial stability of group members.

Clear information and transparency about savings practices and access to credit is also needed within these savings groups to keep people participating actively. Focus group participants shared that they had left inclusive groups because their practices were not transparent and they feared what was happening with their savings. Stigma against certain impairments, even from within the disability community also kept certain groups from participating in savings activities.

It is more difficult for persons with visual impairment and psychosocial impairment to get a loan compared to other types of impairment in savings groups”.

These barriers could be eliminated through the clear dissemination of information about savings practices, and access to credit within the groups. Simple information surrounding group policies and practices would protect the rights of group participants and increase the likelihood of them staying active.

Skills Development

Another major barrier people with disabilities face in accessing all of the rights and services We Are Able! is concerned with, is a skills gap. This lack of skills can be a prohibiting factor across all thematic areas. In rural areas, gaining farming skills was considered to be of high importance to focus group participants. Participants were highly aware of their need for training in this area, and there was a resounding request for programming to fill this knowledge gap across all groups.

Most of the people with disabilities who are farming don't produce much product. They only can get what sustains their family. We actually don't have knowledge of commercial farming."

People with disabilities are engaged in farming but we lack skills in farming."

Focus group participants felt like their impairments prohibited them from farming, especially at a commercial scale, necessitating the need for two types of skills development interventions; training in more accessible farming techniques and vocational skills that lie outside of the agricultural sector. This need was echoed by several participants.

"People with disabilities don't depend on farming for food because most of us cannot dig physically. People with disabilities instead depend on small scale business for food"

One participant explained how she overcame these challenges by sharing the agricultural activity that she participates in, which does not require high levels of mobility.

I earn income by making yeast. First you have to buy some millet and then put it in water in the morning. Then at around midday, you put it in a sack and tie it very tight. On the second day, you spread out the millet and cover it. On the third day, it will begin to germinate like the ones in this picture. I add some



water to it, and then I turn it so that the roots can grow. On the fifth day the yeast will be ready to sell and to use. I do this activity from home because it doesn't require much movement. People even come here to buy it. One bowl sells for 1000 shillings."

Encouraging the spread of accessible agricultural activities such as this, through the Integrated Farming Approach will enable people with disabilities to participate in farming activities to support their livelihoods. Sourcing these best practices from the disability community itself can support the development of knowledge of specific techniques and businesses that best fit the inclusion needs of people with different types of impairments.

To gain success in small scale business, many participants discussed the need for formal vocational training. Participants reported joining vocational training programs, but never receiving certification.

Most vocational schools in our area have not been giving certificates to people with disabilities. This happened to me. I learned tailoring but was not issued a certificate after completing my course. If I had my certificate, maybe I would have something to do."

I know of one man who is Deaf who finished P7 and went to a vocational training school but his certificate was not given. The school administrators said they do not have any capacity to certify the boy, so he can not get any job."

In these instances, the need for awareness-raising activities at formal training centers is highly needed so that people with disabilities can gain the skills they need to support a sustainable livelihood. OPDs and Disability Inclusion Facilitators can support these efforts by not only sensitizing vocational training centers to the rights of people with disabilities, but by also providing the technical support that they need to put disability inclusion into action.

These interventions would not only support food security initiatives, but would also serve as enabling elements in increasing participation in local governance, and supporting people in obtaining formal documentation of land ownership, as a lack of resources was reported as the key barrier in both of these areas. This financial barrier was especially prevalent when discussing campaigning for mainstream public office positions.

Money is a big problem to us when it comes to mainstream government activities.”

People with mobility challenges, or who require personal assistance services or a sign language interpreter could especially benefit from skills development activities to boost their earning potential as they face an additional financial barrier to running for mainstream positions. This is due to the extra costs incurred both for personal transport, and the transportation of assistants. This barrier also applies to obtaining land ownership documentation because of the long distances of travel both required to retrieve forms, and to participate in general campaigning.

People with disabilities participate in formal education at lower rates than the general population, increasing the need for skills training. This gap in education impacts people’s ability to run for public office and participate in programmes like the government’s Special Grant for Persons with Disabilities. People with disabilities with needs that require special schools are impacted more by this gap as the fees for special education programmes are out of reach for many in Uganda.

I feel sad because most Deaf people ended their education at Primary 7 because many secondary schools can’t accommodate us.”

This points to the need for additional skills development in two areas. First, supporting entrepreneurship skills training, which would enable those with lower levels of education to participate in government programming. Secondly, supporting soft skills development programming, emphasizing things like communications, and public speaking, which would enable members of the disability community to gain the prominence and required visibility to run for, and successfully hold public office positions in both disability-specific and mainstream positions alike.

Government stakeholders echoed this need especially in relation to programming as they noted that while efforts were made to inform and sensitize people with disabilities to participate in the Special Grant programme, very few people with disabilities actually had the education levels to form groups and put together viable proposals to receive the government funding.

Increasing the business skills of people with disabilities would also enable them to hold leadership positions in VSLAs, for without those skills, they may be overlooked.

Self Exclusion

Self exclusion by people with disabilities is another key factor that needs to be considered in order to ensure high levels of participation in We Are Able! programming, and in society at large. Fear of stigma, or the presumption that facilities and resources would not be available to accommodate needs kept people from participating in savings groups, local government programming and elections, and from exercising their land rights.

Individual instances of exclusion, even when isolated, were enough to damage the self esteem of potential programme participants, and cause them to self exclude from similar activities later on. Through discussion, it became clear that just one negative experience reported in the community was enough to prevent several others from making an attempt at participation.

This was highly prevalent in the discussions surrounding VSLAs and financial institutions, specifically for people with visual impairments. Hearing one negative savings group experience caused several other people with visual impairments to self exclude within a given community. One participant shared that he did not use any formal financial structures due to one story that he heard.

“One Blind man used to personally take money to the bank with his personal assistant. Each deposit he made was managed by his personal assistant, who would deposit less money than instructed and take the difference. When the Blind man discovered this, he stopped taking his money to the bank.”

Similar experiences were shared by people with visual impairments in all of the focus groups. Many participants reported that they would not participate in savings groups again because they had lost trust in financial structures and in the assistants they needed to fully participate in them.

Clear structures and policies to protect individuals from theft, as well as good communication of positive experiences to the community are needed to prevent this type of self exclusion from the iSave groups that are a part of We Are Able!.

Poor self esteem of people with disabilities, resulting in self exclusion was another prohibiting factor that came up across all thematic areas.

“We have a problem among people with disabilities that we are overtaken by poor self esteem. We fear to confront situations even if we have the skills for success.”

Low self esteem also keeps some people with disabilities in hiding, preventing them from being known by the mobilizers who could help them to participate in programmes like the Special Grant for Persons with Disabilities. Increasing the visibility of community role models for people with disabilities like OPD representatives and Disability Inclusion Facilitators could support these individuals in boosting their self esteem and becoming more present in the community.

Physical Accessibility



The physical accessibility of government offices, land offices, and markets posed a barrier for people with disabilities, specifically physical impairments. Through focus group discussions, it became clear that these infrastructural challenges kept people from accessing their rights and food security in a tangible way, in addition to creating a perceived attitudinal barrier to other members of the disability community, thus contributing to self exclusion.

Physical barriers like a lack of ramps and bad roads to reach offices, and the need to travel beyond walking distance kept people with physical impairments from trying to get documentation for their land, as well as prevented people from participating in government activities. Local governance

stakeholders corroborated these feelings by acknowledging their need for more accessible infrastructure as a key challenge when it comes to mobilizing people with disabilities to participate in programmes and accessing their rights in the democratic process.

In addition to the literal challenge of getting through the door, people felt unwelcome when they were greeted by these barriers. This feeling was echoed by people with all types of impairments, as people that did not require ramps across all focus groups were still highly vocal about inaccessible infrastructure.

Support needs to be given to local government and land offices to help them develop solutions to their accessibility challenges, and advertise their efforts made to the disability community so that people feel welcome and willing to participate. OPDs and Disability Inclusion Facilitators can support this process by helping local government and land offices develop solutions that will fit within their budgetary constraints.

Physical barriers also kept people with mobility challenges and those in need of personal assistance from engaging in some food security related activities such as buying seeds and selling their goods at the market. This can be attributed to the added transportation costs they face, cutting back on profit margins.

People overcame these barriers by saving seeds, and choosing strategic places to live where they can sell goods by the roadside.



My husband built this structure along the roadside for me so that people can buy things, and I do not need to travel. Sometimes in a day I can get 10,000 shillings from what I sell here.”



Physical distance is also a factor to consider when identifying inclusive VSLAs to partner with through We Are Able!. One participant shared her experience with needing to travel to participate in a farming and savings group, and the barriers that prevented her further involvement.

One thing that can support people with disabilities to become more empowered and independent is to work as a group for both farming and saving. I used to work in a team with three other farmers without disabilities, but I broke my leg and can no longer walk to help them.

The place where we meet is distant, so now it is very hard to go and participate.”



Accurate and detailed mapping of people with disabilities in the programme areas could enable implementing partners to choose the best locations for the non-iSave VSLAs partnered with.

Deliberate Mobilization

Another key takeaway from this research is the need to deliberately mobilize and engage people with different types of impairments in the We Are Able! project. To achieve this, setting targets for the inclusion of different impairment types within the iSave groups could support greater participation of people with intellectual impairments, psychosocial impairments, neurodivergent individuals and people with invisible impairments like epilepsy. Beyond target setting, deliberate mobilization will require actively searching for these individuals, as certain impairment types are less commonly understood within the communities that We Are Able! targets, and it is less likely that these individuals would have been identified in any of the existing databases.

Mobilization processes need to go hand-in-hand with community disability awareness activities; ensuring that communities are aware of certain types of impairments less known to them, and are able to identify those within their communities. People with disabilities themselves could be encouraged to disclose their disabilities and/or participate in a range of activities under We Are Able!

It is also important to deliberately mobilize participants with hearing impairments, especially those who do not speak Ugandan Sign Language, as the communication barrier has the potential to leave members of the Deaf community out, believing that they cannot be included in programming or that it is not an opportunity is not meant for them because they do not view being Deaf as a disability. In some areas, a gendered separation within the Deaf community highlights the need to deliberately target Deaf women as well, for their full inclusion and participation. As one participant explains:

We are not unified as the Deaf community. Some of the Deaf are a part of a community and some of them are separate because it depends on how people understand themselves. I do not feel like entering the community. The girls and boys in the Deaf community are separate too. There is some tension between us.”



To mitigate challenges with mobilization, there is a need to work closely with communities, including self-help groups, disability structures at community level and other informal networks within the disability fraternity. These may vary from community to community.

Conclusions and Action Planning

The findings of this report point to immediate actions that can be taken to move the disability inclusion agenda forward in the We Are Able! programme. These actions were developed collectively through the stakeholder meetings held in Arua and in Gulu. The priorities outlined in the action plans developed matched closely with the gaps identified throughout this report.

Improved collaboration and communications were emphasized and the need for more stakeholder meetings bringing together people from different sectors was highlighted. In addition to improving collaboration, stakeholders planned to improve the accessibility of their communications through organizing introductory Sign Language trainings and supporting media outlets by facilitating inclusive communications trainings.

Raising awareness on the rights of people with disabilities was also prioritized, specifically targeting both the community at large, and government actors. It was identified as crucial to raise awareness at skills development training centers to ensure that they have the knowledge and capacity to provide reasonable accommodations and fully integrate disability inclusion into their programming.

To address the issue of self exclusion within the disability community, stakeholders identified two key areas to address; skills development and the use of role models. Increasing access to inclusive skills development programming not only enhances the financial security of people with disabilities, but also builds confidence supporting greater participation in We Are Able! programming. Raising the visibility of role models with disabilities such as OPD representative and Disability Inclusion Facilitators, will support efforts to improve self-esteem within the disability community.

Action plans also addressed the need for people with disabilities to have adequate knowledge of the land rights they possess. Through training of people with disabilities and the creation of accessible resources, people will gain increased capacity to advocate for their inclusion.

In addition to these actions, local government officials particularly, highlighted the need to have accessibility audits conducted, and emphasized their need for support in developing solutions for infrastructural challenges.

Lastly, continuing to center the voices of people with disabilities from the grassroots level, through all stages of programme implementation, will allow the conversation on barriers to continue. It will support We Are Able! to make necessary adaptations and accommodations and successfully reach its outcomes by 2025.





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