



Caregivers of children with disabilities engage in inclusive parenting sessions in Luanshya, Zambia, to gain tools and support for effective caregiving. Photo by Dooshima Tsee/ CRS

Building Support and Acceptance for Children with Disabilities:



ASSESSMENT RESULTS FROM A SOCIAL COHESION APPROACH IN ZAMBIA

INTRODUCTION

An estimated 34% of children in Africa have a disability, a prevalence more than twice the global average (WHO, UNICEF 2023). Children with disabilities are more likely to be neglected, marginalized, and kept behind closed doors. They are also more likely to be separated from their families and placed in residential care. Caregivers of children with disability are likewise stigmatized and socially isolated. Often lacking the resources they need to provide appropriate care, caregivers experience high

levels of stress and struggle to care for themselves and their children.

In 2020, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Catholic Sister congregations engaged parents on the Copperbelt and Luapula provinces in Zambia, where child disability is the highest in the country, to co-design a holistic program to:

-  Improve the wellbeing of children with disabilities, and
-  Keep all children in family care.

The **Inclusive Family Strengthening** (IFS) project was tailored to meet the identified needs of children with disabilities and their household. At baseline, 618 children with disabilities were enrolled in the project. By the end of the project, 1045 were enrolled. The Inclusive Family Strengthening project was deliberate about building on each community's unique assets to shift social norms and improve the rights-based care and support for children with disabilities. The project enrolled 70% (731) of children with disabilities in school for the first time. All children gained access to the health and social services they had previously been marginalized from and began participating in community events.

BUILDING SOCIAL COHESION

CRS has decades of experience bringing people together for psychosocial support, peacebuilding and conflict resolution. To mitigate social isolation and stigma experienced by families of children with disabilities in Zambia, the Inclusive Family Strengthening project adapted CRS' proven tools to create a highly participatory **social cohesion** intervention that brought together (1) caregivers of children with disabilities and (2) influential community leaders, such as educators, social workers and healthcare workers. People with disabilities facilitated a series of sessions to (1) educate caregivers and influential leaders on disability rights, (2) improve caregivers' self-care practices and (3) build relationships between and among caregivers and influential leaders. These sessions reduced caregiver stress, increased community acceptance and support for children with disabilities and created lasting networks for social support and pro-inclusion activism. As a result, caregivers reported they felt more supported by community members and some service providers began providing inclusive services for the first time.

“ I made friends with a caregiver who I shared the lessons with. They encouraged me to put into practice what we were learning in the sessions, and we encouraged each other about lessons”

— CAREGIVER, LUAPULA

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

More than 5% of children on the Copperbelt province and 7.3% of children in Luapula province have a disability which limits their community participation, school attendance and socialization (Zambia National Disability Survey, 2015), although global statistics suggest these may be underestimates of true prevalence. Through social cohesion interventions, participants learned that all children, including those with disabilities, have a right to health, education, mobility, privacy, access to information and participation in their community.¹ They explored how barriers to inclusion—for example, a lack of accessible buildings, discriminatory policies, or stigma - prevent children with disabilities from realizing their rights. The project also sensitized influential leaders and families to the responsibility of “duty-bearers,” for example, social services, to ensure that the rights of all children are respected and fulfilled.

“ We came to know that people with disabilities also have rights like any other person.”

— TEACHER, COPPERBELT



Parents walk their children to Mpelembe Annex, a new school for children with disabilities in Luanshya, overcoming challenges like long dirt-road journeys with wheelchairs.

Photo by Dooshima Tsee/ CRS

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>



Community leaders and volunteers gather after a social cohesion activity in Luanshya, aimed at raising disability awareness and reducing stigma. Photo by Dooshima Tsee/ CRS

COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT

The Inclusive Family Strengthening project was built on the fundamental principle that all children and their caregivers are deserving of community acceptance and support. Social cohesion sessions were carefully designed and implemented to encourage caregivers' self-love and self-care, increase the community's empathy for children with disabilities and their caregivers and provide opportunities for influential leaders in the community to build their professional commitment to, and social relationships with, families of children with disabilities. A total of 29 cohorts went through the social cohesion workshops with 870 people participating.

“When I underwent this training, I began to understand and it brought me closer to these people. To understand their feelings. To understand what they go through. To understand the problems of the families who have these people with disabilities what they go through. It was an eye opener. So now it has helped me to be closer to these people. To understand them. That's why I said even in the Community Action Welfare Committee, we went out and identified these people and recommended that they be put on social cash transfer.”

— COMMUNITY ACTION WELFARE COMMITTEE MEMBER, LUANSHYA

“Before, they used to victimize my child with disability, laughing at my child's condition. But when we started social cohesion lessons, I also started educating them on how to coexist with people with disabilities. Eventually they accepted my child. Now I even leave my child with my neighbors whenever I am going somewhere, and they have no problem.”

— CAREGIVER, LUAPULA

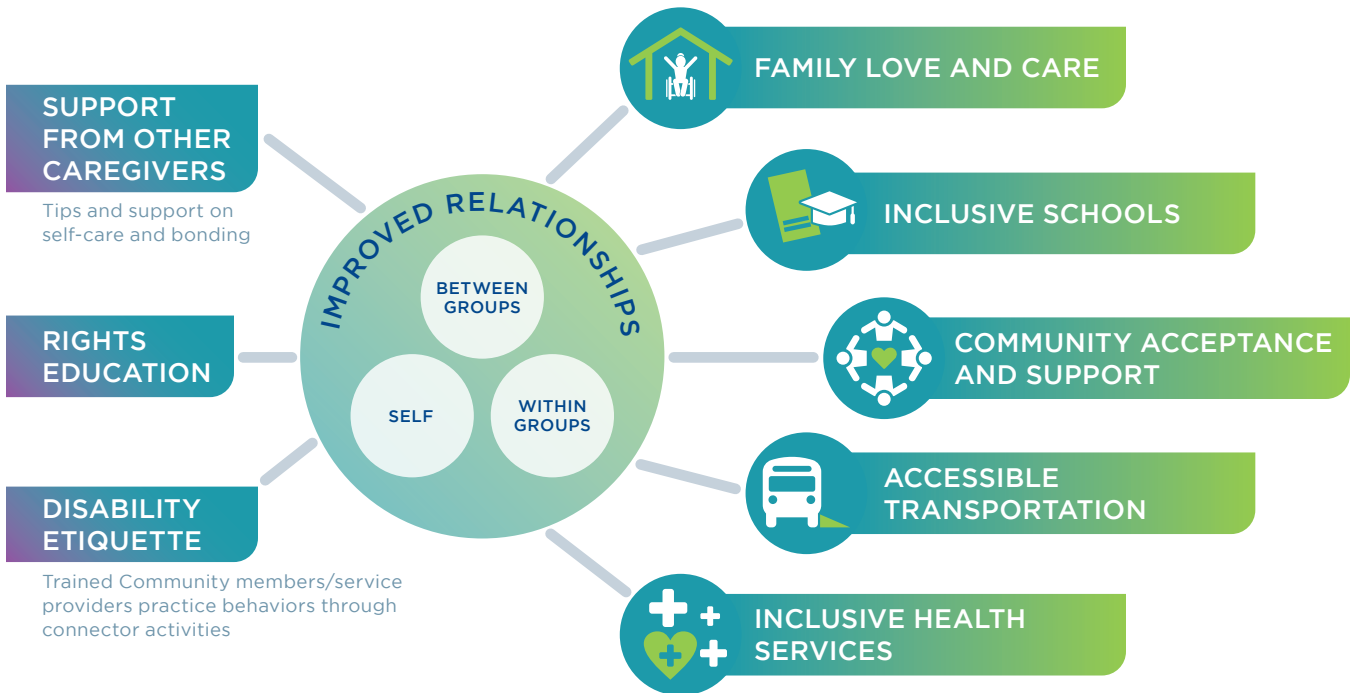
HIGH RETURN ON INVESTMENT

These investments were *catalytic*. With new understanding about their child's rights, caregivers began seeking out and collectively demanding access to services while influential leaders took action to change social norms regarding disability. Initial activities grew into a wide-ranging, self-sustaining social movement. Caregivers and influential leaders joined forces to *change exclusionary social norms* and *make community spaces accessible* to people with disabilities. Together, they built ramps for schools and churches, educated bus drivers, passed provincial laws to prohibit discriminatory practices on public transportation, hosted radio programs about disability rights, changed clinic waiting rooms to be more inclusive, intervened in cases of mistreatment, fueled support for a national law supporting inclusive education and publicly spoke out in support of children's rights.

AN OPPORTUNITY

The Inclusive Family Strengthening project demonstrated how strategic, targeted investments in social capital can have wide-ranging, long-lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities.

As one mother in Copperbelt phrased it, *“Before social cohesion, I did not want to accept the situation of my child. But after the training, I was encouraged...we saw that our children are also counted and are part of the community as well. The child was very shy, but after mingling with the friends, the child is no longer shy, and the child can dance after learning.”*



For more information about the Inclusive Family Strengthening project, please contact Mbiliya Luhanga Mbiliya.luhanga@crs.org (Program Manager, CRS Zambia) or Bridget Kimball Bridget.kimball@crs.org (Technical Advisor, CRS HQ).

Sources Cited:

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