



# AFRICAN FEDERATION OF THE DEAF BLIND (AFDB)

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## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, THE MEANINGFUL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

### June 27<sup>th</sup>: A historic day to acknowledge the rights of persons with deafblindness.

Today Saturday June 27<sup>th</sup>, the African Federation of the Deafblind (AFDB) a constituent branch of the World Federation of the DeafBlind join the rest of the world in commemorating the International Day of DeafBlindness under the theme inclusive education the meaningful development for all.

Deafblindness is a distinct disability arising from a dual sensory impairment of a severity that makes it hard for the impaired senses to compensate for each other. In interaction with barriers in the environment, it affects social life, communication, access to information, orientation and mobility. Enabling inclusion and participation requires accessibility measures and access to specific support services, such as interpreter-guides, among others.

The day is commemorated in honour of Hellen Keller who was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1880. Helen Keller became deafblind when she was 19 months old due to an illness and with time, became the pioneer of self-advocacy for persons with deafblindness. At a time when higher education was scarcely available, and only accessible to a few, she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Harvard.

Helen Keller did not just oppose and overcome the barriers in society but devoted her life to advocate for disability rights. She was also an advocate for civil rights also for black people in the United States. Regretfully, on June 1<sup>st</sup>1968 Helen Keller passed away, at the age of 87, her memory though, lives on and serves as a source of inspiration.

In a world in turmoil, Helen Keller has showed the world what can be achieved if only gaps are bridged and inclusive education, work and culture are provided. She has demonstrated that persons with deafblindness can be fully integrated in society on equal terms. Knowing that people with deafblindness group represents between 0.2% and 2.0% of the global population, the stories shared by disability advocates like Helen Keller show us that the key factor for success is to receive adequate support according to the individual and specific needs of persons with deafblindness.

The Sustainable Development Goals, goal number 4, stresses that governments should ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasises that state parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, state parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning.

This years celebrations have been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic which has great impact on the education system. In order to counter the pandemic, governments have stressed

on the need to continue providing education through internet. This has posed serious challenges to people with deafblindness in the whole world and Africa is no exception.

Discussions that took place during the 2018 Helen Keller World Conference highlighted several issues:

- a. In many countries, a lack of awareness about deafblindness results in both families and institutions failing to recognise the right of children with deafblindness to go to school, and that education obligations apply to all children, regardless of disability.
- b. A lack of early identification and intervention programmes means that parents do not learn to communicate with their children. This makes it more difficult for parents to understand and accept their child's disability, as well as to access support. This, in turn, impacts on a child's development.
- c. In the majority of countries, there is limited data on the numbers of children with deafblindness in or out of school.
- d. In many countries, there are no specific educational support programmes for children and young people with deafblindness. Indeed, the majority of support initiatives are either only for deaf or blind children. Teachers are not adequately trained and there is no adaptation of curricula. Members referenced numerous education policies that did not consider children with deafblindness. Existing schools for blind or deaf children may or may not support children with deafblindness; however, there is no systematic approach.
- e. While specific support services might be available in some high-income countries, these opportunities are unlikely to be available in the majority of low and middle-income countries. There are also discrepancies within countries, with services predominantly concentrated in the capital or major cities, but not in rural areas or smaller towns.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- a. Ensure that the requirements of persons with deafblindness are taken into account in inclusive education laws, policies and programmes, and efforts are made to adapt curricula, train teachers and provide support to students.
- b. Ensure the availability of resource centres that support mainstream schools, children with deafblindness and their families.
- c. Ensure the adequate provision of interpreter-guides.

Signed:

**Ezekiel Kumwenda**

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