

DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES RWANDA



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About this report

This report was developed by the International Centre for Evidence in Disability at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and Lifetime Consulting & Partners, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation.

The report aims to inform Mastercard Foundation's disability and inclusion programming and strategy development. It draws on in-depth qualitative interviews with young men and women with disabilities, exploring their lived experiences related to education and employment in Rwanda. This report is a part of a series developed for each of the seven countries for this project *Disability-Inclusive Education & Employment: (1) Country brief: Rwanda; and (2) Understanding the context: Rwanda.*

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The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) is a world-leading centre for research and postgraduate education in public and global health.

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The Mastercard Foundation is a registered Canadian charity and one of the largest foundations in the world. It works with visionary organizations to advance education and financial inclusion to enable young people in Africa and Indigenous youth in Canada to access dignified and fulfilling work. Established in 2006 through the generosity of Mastercard when it became a public company, the Foundation is an independent organization separate from the company, with offices in Toronto, Kigali, Accra, Nairobi, Kampala, Lagos, Dakar, and Addis Ababa. Its policies, operations, and program decisions are determined by the Foundation's Board of Directors and leadership.

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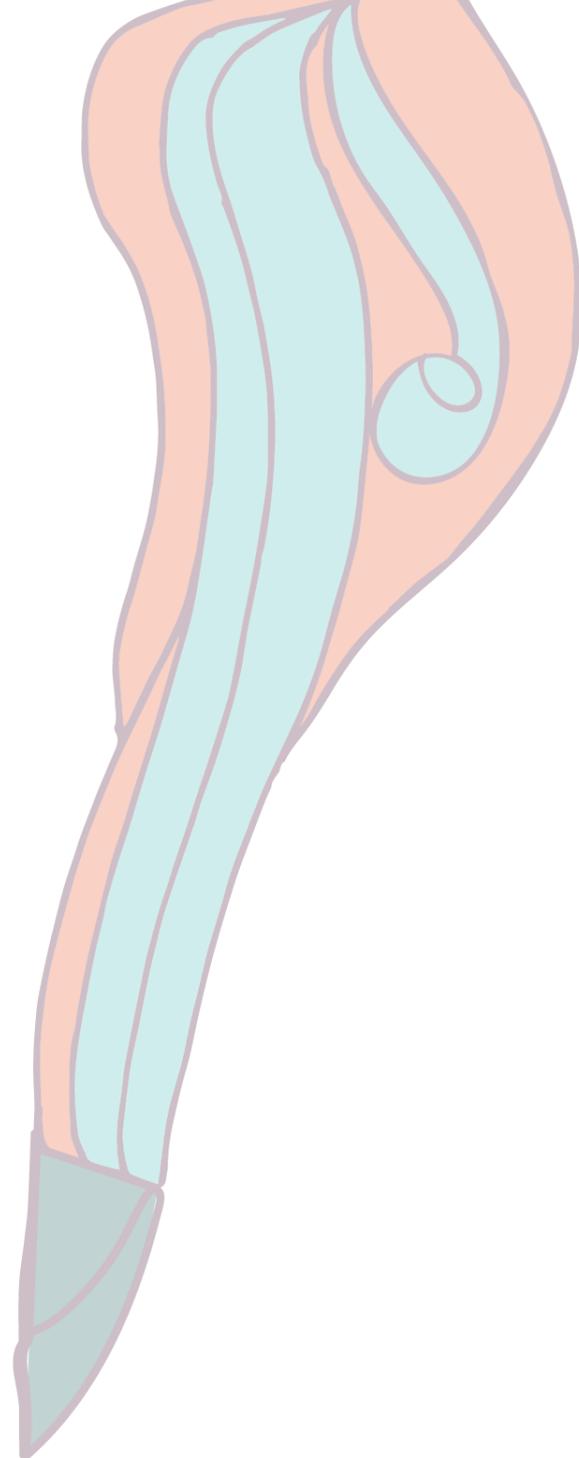
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Contents

Executive summary	7
-------------------	---

Introduction	9
--------------	---

About Disability	9
Disability in Rwanda	9
Disability policy context in Rwanda	9
Education in Rwanda	10
Employment in Rwanda	10

About this study	11
------------------	----

Findings	12
----------	----

Education	12
Access to education	13
Experiences during education	17
Transition to employment	22
Vocational training	24
Placements and apprenticeships	24
Experiences in the agricultural sector	25
Challenges related to type of impairment	26
Challenges due to attitudes	28
Training needs	29
Experiences in the tourism sector	31
Challenges due to limited opportunities	31
Discriminatory practices	32
Need for reasonable accommodations	32
Reflections	34
Assistive products	34
Digital skills	38
Stigma	41
Support structures	46
Intersectionality	48

Voice and agency	51
Aspirations and opportunities	52

<u>Recommendations</u>	<u>54</u>
------------------------	-----------

<u>References</u>	<u>55</u>
-------------------	-----------

<u>Appendix</u>	<u>56</u>
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Disability-Inclusive Education and Employment: Understanding the experiences of young men and women Rwanda

Executive Summary

- This research explored the lived experiences of young men and women with disabilities in Rwanda through in-depth interviews with 30 young persons with disabilities. The study included a mix of participants with various disabilities (including physical, visual, hearing, psychosocial, and intellectual impairments), aged between 15-35 years, based in urban and rural parts of Rwanda. Participants were purposively selected to reflect varied access to education and vocational training, employment in the agricultural and the tourism sectors.
- The experiences of youth with disabilities who attended special needs schools varied greatly from those who attended mainstream schools. These contrasting experiences are shaped by several interlinked factors such as inclusive teaching practices as well as availability, proximity, and affordability of special needs schools.
- Experiences of youth with disabilities during education were mainly shaped by inaccessibility and lack of accommodations. Some of these difficulties were countered by support from peers.
- Despite being skilled and educated, many young people with disabilities faced challenges securing employment for reasons that included discriminatory hiring practices. During this transitional period, some young people engaged in vocational training and work placements.
- Youth with disabilities engaged in work in the agricultural sector faced challenges including difficulties related to type of impairment, and those stemming from negative attitudes. Participants reported needing training in several aspects related to agriculture.
- Young people with disabilities faced many challenges in finding work in the tourism sector, including limited availability of training, and discriminatory practices among employers.

Source: Flickr/GPE/Sarah Beeching



- Access to assistive products and to digital skills training were noted as facilitating factors in education and employment. Support from family members, friends, peers, and community members were also strong enablers of participation and attainment.
- Many youth participants had experienced stigma including negative attitudes and stereotypes, bullying, violence and abuse, and discrimination and exclusion in education and employment settings. Drivers of stigma included a lack of awareness of the capabilities of youth with disabilities, and misconceptions around disability.
- This study also explored the intersectionality of other factors with disability in shaping youth experiences. The visibility of a person's impairment can influence how they are perceived and treated by the community. Women with disabilities experience compounded discrimination as both disability and gender carry forms of marginalisation and stigma.
- The evidence indicates a gap between young people's aspirations and opportunities available to them. These were most influenced by discriminatory attitudes and financial barriers.
- Recommendations included stronger policy implementation and enactment of laws to increase inclusiveness of persons with disabilities; improved support and funding to educational institutions to strengthen inclusive practices; more efforts to create awareness and sensitise employers and communities to address drivers of stigma; wider availability of assistive products and digital skills; and wider range of interventions and financial support options to better match the aspirations of young people with disabilities with opportunities.

Source: UPHLS



Introduction

About disability

According to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) people with disabilities include those who have *“long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”* [1]

Estimates suggest that there are 1 billion people (15% of the world’s population) living with a disability globally [2]. People with disabilities often experience barriers to accessing education and employment and this can cement cycles of poverty and exclusion [2, 3]. Globally, people with disabilities also face marginalisation in other aspects of society [2].

Research in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that with the right support, people with disabilities can achieve economic success. Investing in education and employment for people with disabilities should be part of development efforts, based on an economic rationale, as well as social justice [4].

Disability in Rwanda

The 2019-20 Demographic and Health Survey estimated the prevalence of disability to be 5.9% (5 years and over) in Rwanda [5]. This ranged from 2.2% (in the age group 10-14 years) to 2.7% (in the age group 20-29 years) for youth. However, this is likely an underestimate, given that the World Report on Disability estimated a global disability prevalence of 15% [2].¹

Evidence suggests that people with disabilities in Rwanda experience barriers to employment and education, including stigma, inadequate teacher knowledge of disability and limited training in inclusive education, lack of accessible teaching and learning material and inaccessible built environments at educational facilities [6-9].

Disability policy context in Rwanda

In light of these challenges, recent policy developments in the country have made significant steps towards disability inclusion. The Government of Rwanda ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010 and recently developed the National Policy of Persons with Disabilities and the associated Four-Year Strategic Plan (2021-24). This National Policy acknowledges the historical, physical, social, cultural, attitudinal, and systemic barriers that have excluded persons with disabilities from participating fully in society. The National Policy of Persons with Disabilities and Four-Year Strategic Plan (2021-24) includes objectives to improve school enrolment and employment opportunities, provide assistive products, promote digital inclusion, and participate in agriculture and income support programmes.

Research done for Phase 1 of this project involving interviews with key stakeholders (including government agencies, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, educators, and employers) revealed that while these consensus documents usher in a notable recognition of disability as a policy priority, it is unclear to what degree they have or are improving access to education or employment [10]. People with disabilities continue to experience exclusion from education and employment. Gaps in implementing, enforcing, and monitoring policy and programmes contribute to this exclusion [10]. (See our Phase 1 report [here](#) for an in-depth analysis).

¹Disability is complex to measure. Differences in the way disability is measured and defined in different surveys may explain some of the variation in prevalence estimates. This includes the questions used, how they are asked and thresholds applied to define disability for the purposes of disability statistics. For more discussion on this, please see Box 1 in our Phase 1 reports.

Introduction

Education in Rwanda

The right to education for all citizens is guaranteed in the Rwandan Constitution. The 2018 Revised Special Needs and Inclusive Education Policy promotes the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education. The Ministry of Education in the country defines inclusive education as the process of addressing all learners' educational needs in a mainstream education setting. However, there are gaps in the implementation of these education policies. The Phase 1 research revealed that these were mostly due to lack of guidance on how best to implement inclusive education, limited knowledge about disability inclusion among education providers, and challenges sourcing and financing assistive technologies and inclusive learning materials to support reasonable accommodations [10].

According to our secondary analysis of the 2019-2020 DHS data, youth with disabilities were less likely to have completed primary education (41%) compared to their peers without disabilities (58%) [10]. A lower proportion of youth with disabilities had also completed secondary school (14% versus 20%). Our analysis also showed that young people (13-18 years) with disabilities were more likely to be out of school (39%) compared to their peers without disabilities (26%). Overall, secondary school attendance (i.e. attending secondary school out of those of secondary school age) was lower (22%) for youth with disabilities compared to youth without disabilities (36%) [5,10].

Employment in Rwanda

Policies such as the National Social Protection Strategy 2011 and the National Policy of Persons with Disabilities and associated Four-Year Strategic Plan (2021-24) included specific provisions for people with disabilities in employment, promoting the role of youth with disabilities. Stakeholders interviewed for Phase 1 research were unaware of specific policies or national programmes to promote the employment of young persons with disabilities in the key sectors of agriculture or tourism. The National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) and the National Union of Disability Organizations of Rwanda (NUDOR) were reported institutions working well to support people with disabilities in employment. NUDOR, an umbrella organisation of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), has experienced increased support from the government in recent years [10].

The ILOSTAT data [11] suggest a large disability gap; 47% youth with disabilities were not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to 21% for people without disabilities (21%). The ILOSTAT data also indicate that monthly earnings for people with disabilities are lower (80%) [12].

About this study

This study explored the lived experiences of young men and women with disabilities in Rwanda, highlighting barriers, facilitators, gaps, and opportunities regarding their inclusion in education and employment. The research involved in-depth interviews with 30 young people with various disabilities (including physical, visual, hearing, psychosocial, and intellectual impairments), aged between 15-35 years, based in urban and rural parts of Rwanda.

Regarding education, we collected data from youth with disabilities currently in formal education (secondary, tertiary, vocational), those who had received some formal education but were not working, and those not in education and not working. In terms of employment, the research focus for Rwanda included disabled youth engaged in the agriculture and tourism sectors, as they are aligned with the Mastercard Foundation's priority sectors under the Young Africa Works strategy in Rwanda.

Further details of methods and a breakdown of participant characteristics are provided in the Appendix.

Source: UPHLS



Source: Light for the World

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in five parts: (1) education; (2) experiences in the agricultural sector; (3) experiences in the tourism sector; (4) reflections on cross-cutting issues that shape the experiences of young people with disabilities in Rwanda. Case studies are provided throughout each section to portray stories of selected youth participants (all names and identifiers have been replaced to preserve confidentiality and privacy).

EDUCATION

If people with disabilities are to have the best future chances, it all starts with getting a good education. Education is one of the key national priorities for children and youth in Rwanda, and support for education for children and young persons with disabilities is increasing. Research from UNICEF suggested growing government support for education for children with disabilities, including a commitment to new accessible facilities, although implementation challenges persist [7].

Out of the 30 interview participants, five had never attended school, six had stopped in primary school, and 19 had attained secondary or tertiary education. A few young people reported having dropped out of school. Participants were purposively sampled to reflect experiences from each gender, different ages, socioeconomic class, urban/semi-urban/rural and impairment type (physical, hearing, visual, intellectual, psychosocial, and multiple).

Karori

Karori is a 26-year-old man living in an urban area of Rwanda. He is blind. As a child, Karori was happy to be admitted to a special needs school for persons with disabilities, as it had been challenging for him to get accessible reading materials in braille when he was in a mainstream primary school.

Karori is now studying at university and hopes to finish his degree. He receives support from classmates and has a white cane that helps him move around safely. Nonetheless, Karori still faces challenges getting reading materials in addition to what is provided by his lectures. He always needs some help with writing, which is often easier with another person guiding him. He recently received assistive products including an audio recorder, a computer with an accessibility application and a white cane from donors. He hopes to finish his university degree and get a job that he can use to support himself and his family.

Access to education

Findings in this section will be presented according to key stages along the journey to access education, including (i) identifying and enrolling in schools and other educational institutions; (ii) paying for education; and (iii) reaching schools and other educational institutions.

Identification and enrolment

The analysis indicates that one of the most significant factors, in the education of young disabled people, was their access to special education schools. Special education is where learners with disabilities may attend some or all classes separate from non-disabled learners. This differs from inclusive education is where learners with disabilities are in in classes together with learners without disabilities in mainstream schools. Typical issues with special education schools are that they may be of poorer quality, while for inclusive education, if not implemented well, teaching materials or methods may not be well-adapted to suit a learner's impairment [8]. Comparisons made by participants who had experienced both mainstream and special needs schools particularly highlighted key gaps in disability inclusion in mainstream systems.

"In primary school, there was no specific challenge. They were general challenges related to everyday life, not because of my disability. We all had a hearing disability, and they taught us sign language, so it was easy to communicate among us, and the whole staff, including teachers and leaders, knew sign language. But in secondary that is where I felt terrible. I was admitted to a school where there was no one with a hearing disability, no teacher, school leader, or student who knew sign language." (Female, 18-24 years, has a hearing impairment)

Those who went to mainstream school were sometimes the only student with disabilities, and the school, teachers, and peers were unprepared to help the disabled student learn:

"Learning was a big challenge... finding someone who could explain to me was tough. I had a teacher who took care of me and explained to me all the lessons for four years, but sadly, I left when I was in Primary Five. And I had to stop going to school as no one could explain to me what was being taught, neither the teachers nor the students." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Evidently, choosing - and being able to choose - special needs schools had positive and lasting impacts on the trajectory of the participants interviewed. This contrast between the experiences of those in special needs schools and mainstream schools are shaped by several interlinked factors such as accessibility of teaching as well as availability, proximity, and affordability of special needs schools.

Source: Flickr

Paying for education

Difficulties paying for school was a key factor that impacted young people's access to educational opportunities. Not being able to pay for school (e.g., enrolment, school materials) led many to drop out or interrupt schooling, creating lasting impacts.

I: Why have you dropped out of school?*

P: I suffered from serious illness from my impairment, and it took me two years to recover. When I came back home from the hospital, my father was in jail, so it was not easy for my mother to pay school fees for my brother and me and, in that difficult situation, feed us and other home needs. Moreover, I refused to return to school because I didn't want to be in the same class as young children. Now, it has been nine years out of school.*

I: Would you like to return to school when you get an opportunity? If it is not, explain.

P: No, I can't go back to school because, as I have told you, it is now almost nine years ago without going to school; so, I think I can neglect it and feel the shame of being in the same class with the student who is significantly younger than me.

(Male, 25 - 35 years, has a physical impairment)

The quote below exemplifies the perpetuating cycle of disability and poverty. Poverty is a common challenge in general, but particularly for people with disabilities who are, on average, poorer than people without disabilities [3]. This is, in part, because people with disabilities often incur extra costs related to their impairment, such as procurement of assistive products to aid their functioning (see 'Reflections'). As a result, they typically require additional financial support to participate in education and work on an equal basis as non-disabled people [3].

I: Did you attend school?

P: I studied up to the 4th year of primary school

I: Why did you stop?

P: The problem was poverty. We were raised by our mother, who also had a disability. So, the possibility of buying notebooks, clothes, and other materials was not easy.

(Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

In some cases, if resources were scarce, a choice was taken within the family about whose education would be prioritised. This is exemplified in the quote below, where a young man with a disability described his parent's choice to continue his non-disabled sibling's education, and terminate his:

"One day, we were at home, and our mother asked me: 'Between you and your sister, who do you think can continue university?'" (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Date: 17/02/14
Addition

$$1 =$$

$$3 =$$

$$+ 4 =$$

$$+ 2 =$$

$$2 + 5 =$$



As described earlier, the difficulties with paying for and enrolling in special needs schools drastically changed their educational experiences and life trajectories.

“About my education, I started in mainstream schools till Primary Four because my family had no [financial] capacity to take me to [detail removed] special school. [...] We were in a school with different types of disabilities, which meant those with disabilities and those with no disabilities. This was a barrier because I wanted special attention, which I could not get. I told my parents I was not getting anything, and they took me to a salon to learn how to make hair, where I spent a year.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Dropping out led to lasting effects, limiting opportunities to learn key skills in communication and literacy that would enable them to succeed in later life.

“I could be at school, but I dropped out because it was difficult for me to study in public schools, and my parents had no money to pay for a special school. Communication is the main challenge for me. Let’s say when I am with other young people, they talk, they laugh when I can’t hear what they are talking about or what made them laugh; I feel very bad. Again, when I need a service from different people, including local leaders or employers, it is hard to communicate with them, and they end up not giving me that opportunity.” (Female, 18-24 years, has a hearing impairment)

Some participants managed to get sponsorships, often facilitated through churches and OPDs. However, this type of support may not be sufficient to cover all costs related to education.

“The sponsor was to pay school fees, and my family paid other transport and school materials costs. [...] When I was in secondary school, my father was alive [...] Even though he was not paying school fees, it was still hard to get me transport fees and the required materials. After him passing away, I lost hope of thinking about continuing with my studies because I and my sister could not get what we needed. Daily school needs, even getting school registration fees at university was not possible, that is why I did not even want to think about continuing to university.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

It is clear that the availability of comprehensive financial support is key to improving access to education for young people with disabilities.

Accessing schools or other educational institutions

Environmental and infrastructural barriers (e.g., inaccessible buildings and toilets, lack of accessible transport, difficult terrain) are widely recognised as limiting access to education for people with disabilities; this was echoed by several participants in this study.

“There are many [challenges]. The first was to reach school because walking and sitting were difficult, and I couldn’t stand on the way for an hour. About studying, I had no problem except for the illness I told you about. The main challenge was going to school and returning home; hilling is okay if it’s downhill, but going up is not easy.” (Female, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Distance from the school posed difficulties in reaching and added challenges throughout the day. Combined, these contribute to the decision to drop out of school.

P: ...the school was too far because it used to take me like two and a half hours to reach school. Then in the afternoon I couldn't come back home to eat, so I was supposed to stay the whole day at school without eating.

[...]

I: This was the problem of long-distance walking. What other difficulties did you meet in your social life at school?

P: Not eating on time because of the long distance between the school and my home. And due to the problem of not being able to pay for the school meals, I was supposed to eat at home only.

(Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Our interview data indicates that youth with disabilities face a range of interlinked challenges in accessing education, suggesting a need for interventions that support with transport, affordability of special needs schools, and inclusive practices in mainstream schools.

Experiences during education

For youth with disabilities in Rwanda who successfully navigated access to educational institutions, their experiences during education were shaped by three main factors: (i) accessibility and accommodations, (ii) teaching practices; and (iii) inclusive environments. These are in addition to the other cross-cutting enablers and challenges reported under Reflections.

Accessibility and accommodations

Accessibility and reasonable accommodations are an essential component of inclusive education, as well as a fundamental human right for people with disabilities, yet they are often inadequate, inappropriate, or entirely non-existent. Experiences varied by type of impairment because this determined the support that was required. For example, those with psychosocial impairments mostly struggled with stigma. Students with sensory or mobility impairments experienced barriers related to inaccessible environments, including a lack of ramps and difficult terrains, which made their educational experience different from students without disabilities.

"...there were other difficulties. When I was at school, I lived outside campus, there were no dormitories inside the school. In the rainy season, I used to miss classes because I could not walk in a slippery area due to my limb... you understand I used to miss courses." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

In some cases, infrastructural inaccessibility led to limited participation in school activities, but in other cases it was unsafe and dangerous. Here, a participant describes his experience joining his classmates in cleaning the classroom:

"... it was difficult to, let's say like, clean the class; someone could fall and get injured, but we had no other option. [...] It happened to me many times. You can check here on my arm; there are signs of the accidents that occurred when we cleaned a classroom." (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Source: Flickr/GPE/Sarah Beeching



For youth with visual impairments, navigating around institutions presented challenges. Although these are the responsibility of the education provider, these barriers are sometimes overcome with support from peers.

“Moving around in the school was not difficult because it was a special school, and I knew every corner. [...] But in university, when I got here, it was terrible. I did not know the place well, and everyone here was busy. It was not easy to find someone to go with me each time I wanted to move. But it is fine now that I know the place and have many friends.” (Male, 25 - 35 years, has a visual impairment)

A key feature of inclusive educational practices is making reasonable accommodations so that learners with disabilities can learn and participate on par with their non-disabled peers. For students with hearing impairments, this may include the provision of sign language interpreters. Below is one positive example where a school facilitated these:

“The first time I went to secondary school, we were two students with disabilities: both with hearing impairment. At that time, we did not have sign language interpreters. No one at school knew what to do for us to help us. So, they advocated for us to the Head Teacher that some teachers could not communicate with us and that we could only observe and look at what the teacher was writing. But after the teacher’s advocacy, we got sign language interpreters. Getting sign language interpreters was the most interesting thing that happened to us. It helped us to feel integrated in society.” (Female, 25 -35 years, has a hearing impairment)

This quote also highlights how, when accommodations are not made, students with disabilities must fend for themselves- for example, having to learn only through observations and reading, as they could not hear what was verbally taught.

In contrast, some with experience in special needs schools described services and support being made available.

“It is a school for special needs students, I mean, children with disabilities, especially with vision impairment. There is primary and secondary level; materials and machines help us print braille.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

“I can say that being admitted to the school was the first help to me. They challenged me to braille writing, and now I can read, write, and help others to know braille. We get materials from the school, and they support us in everything, including attending competitions.” (Female, 18-24 years, has a visual impairment)

Teaching practices

Youth with disabilities described more negative experiences of attending mainstream schools, and much of this is shaped by teaching practices that are not inclusive. Several participants reported barely being able to follow the lessons in mainstream schools, leading some to drop out. In some instances, they were helped by their peers.

“When I got into Primary Five at our school, one deaf person joined our school. He was from another school that I don’t remember the name of, and he knew sign language and was very intelligent. We immediately became friends, and he started teaching me sign language and other courses, mostly mathematics. I can say that all I got from school, 90%, was because of him. Otherwise, I was going to get out of school with nothing.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

It is important to acknowledge that although peer support can enhance a disabled learner’s experience by helping address lapses in accessibility and teaching practices, the responsibility of ensuring inclusivity lies with the education providers.

Inclusive environments

Experiences in special needs schools highlighted the profound positive impact of accessible, enabling learning environments on the trajectory of young people’s lives. The most significant benefit, as reported by participants who attended special needs schools, was the sense of acceptance and support, particularly from teachers.

“At school it is different, we are all people with disabilities [...] there are teachers who are well trained in disability and inclusion, they cannot judge you [...] it is like we are in a family [...] there are no bad experiences there.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Many participants reported feeling a greater sense of belonging and care, which helped them achieve more in their studies.

“Because we are there together [with other persons with visual impairments], almost everyone cares about us, and we succeed. I can tell you that since I started in [detail removed] school, I never scored lower than 90% marks in all exams.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

For most participants, this was their earliest experience of participation in education, and many described how much they gained by being able to participate in extracurricular activities. The variety of activities described in these quotes is typically not found among students with disabilities in schools where they did not experience inclusion.

“I am an artist. Last time, there was a ‘Write Rwanda’ competition for all schools to write songs, poems, and stories. I participated at the school, sector- and district-levels until I was awarded the 2nd place at the national level” (Female, 18-24 years, has a visual impairment)

“I was a football player. It is a special football for people with visual impairments. And I started playing in secondary school. We also have a team at university, and I am a player.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Many participants felt that their self-confidence improved by being among other students with disabilities, making them more resilient to future challenges.

“Going to school increased my self-confidence because before I went to school, I used to think that I was the only person with a visual impairment; it changed when I went to school and met many people who have a visual impairment and other disabilities. I started to cherish life and realised everyone has their burden; we must love ourselves the way we are. We learn lessons, but also, we have been taught that we are persons like others” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Overall, the data highlighted that the educational experiences of young people may be enhanced by improvements to accessibility and accommodation measures, better adherence to inclusive teaching practices, and promoting inclusive environments in schools and other educational institutions.

Source: Flickr/GPE/Alexandra Humme



TRANSITION TO EMPLOYMENT

The youth participants shared various experiences of transitioning from education to employment with most expressing difficulties.

Challenges securing employment

Key challenges identified in youth narratives included discriminatory practices, lack of preparation for careers, and inaccessible work environments. Many young people with disabilities reported discriminatory practices and negative attitudes from employers (elaborated under Reflections), with assumptions made about their capabilities.

“Look, I finished my studies in 2015, which means it is now seven years of being jobless; I tried to look for a job in different places I did not get and in most cases I could not get one because of my disability...” (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Young people with disabilities were also keenly aware of the competitive job market and were unsure if their educational backgrounds had prepared them to compete or meet the job criteria.

“I cannot ask for a job like others because of requirements that are set and qualifications that are precise under the requirements. It is the same case even in other activities in the society around me. As persons with disability, we are not at the same level as others.” (Male, 25-35 years, has an intellectual impairment)

Berwa

Berwa is a 33-year-old man with a hearing impairment. He is married and lives with his wife in rural Southern Rwanda. Due to communication barriers, Berwa needed help to continue his studies after primary school. His teachers and fellow students could not communicate with him because they did not know sign language.

Berwa has tried vocational trainings such as masonry and once tried to be a mechanic, but was not admitted, again because of communication barriers. However, he recently got the opportunity to train in a welding company owned by a person with a hearing impairment. During this training, communication was smooth. As a result, he excelled and joined the organisation as an employee. Berwa is now saving money to start his own business on animal husbandry (rearing pigs and chickens), from which he will buy a motor-bike and later upgrade to a car.

Even for those who are appropriately skilled and educated, inaccessible work environments (including infrastructure or communication barriers) led to losses in employment opportunities for young people with disabilities.

“Once I went somewhere for a job request, it was in a salon, I wanted to ask for a job cleaning so that I can also learn how to make hair, pedicure, manicure. And it was someone who referred me there and she was sure that the job was available. But when I got there, we failed to communicate and they told me to come back the next day, but they asked me the number of my sister. In the evening, they called her telling her that they did not want to make me angry, but they can't give me a job because they can't communicate with me. I was shocked by that and hated salon jobs from that day. I also spoke to one of my friends, telling her that I wanted to go to the bar or the hotel to request a job of being a waiter, but she discouraged me saying that in that sector to work there you must be speaking.” (Female, 18-24 years, has a hearing impairment)

Many young people described frustration and losing motivation after experiencing unwillingness from potential employers to accommodate their needs or give them chances to prove their skills.

“In school, I was okay, but when the time to look for a job came, it was a problem. I studied masonry and I'm confident with my technical capacity in building. However, each time I went to apply for a job, they could not believe I was capable of delivering, and with the communication barrier, I had no means of convincing them. So, I had to look for someone to help me with communication. This main challenge affected me and made me not continue doing masonry jobs.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Given these difficulties securing suitable employment, young people with disabilities engaged in a range of activities to increase their chances of employment, including vocational training, and internships.



Vocational Training

The data suggests that youth moving to vocational training were largely those who were not progressing in education due to lack of school fees, having attained poor grades, or because they were not suited to the classes that they were enrolled in. For many in this situation, vocational training presented an appealing alternative to higher education, mainly because the inaccessibility of school environments had made it difficult to gain foundational skills.

I: Do you feel like you can go back to school now? Can you accept if someone tells you they want to take you back to school?

P: I tried many times to go back to school, but because of my intellectual disability, I forget very quickly; even when I say something after a short time, I forget it

I: Do you want to go back to school?

P: Not a regular school, if it's a centre of people with the same disability as me and if they want to train us about things like reading or things that will generate income.

I: If I got you well, you can't attend school, but which kind of school can you attend? Vocational training? What kind of vocation do you feel you can learn?

P: Things like welding, if the centre wants to teach us only reading and writing, can help me because I have many things inside me.

I: The main challenge to you is that you can't read.

P: Exactly, if I know how to read, I can do business also

(Male, 25-35 years, has an intellectual impairment)

Placements and apprenticeships

Given the limited opportunities, some participants took positions where they were given the opportunity to immediately enter the working world through work placement programmes. Although these were framed as 'work placements' or 'apprenticeships', there were instances in which they appeared to be exploitative as employers placed emphasis on people with disabilities being lucky to receive a chance to work, rather than on appropriately remunerating them for their labour.

"I used to have a neighbour who had a bakery. [...] I asked that madam to allow me to learn, and she accepted. I accepted, and because I wanted to know. Within a month, she started trusting me and allowing me to make for customers. At that time, I had no contract; she sometimes gave me 1000 RWF [approximately 1 USD] or 500 RWF [50 cents] at the end of the day. (Female, 25 - 35 years, has a physical impairment)

The pathway from education to employment was challenging for young people with disabilities, indicating a need for wider availability of work experience opportunities with appropriate remuneration, strengthened guidance for employers about inclusive hiring practices, and structures to support youth with disabilities' retention in the workplace.

EXPERIENCES IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

Agriculture is the main economic activity in Rwanda, accounting for 33% of the national GDP [14]. The sector is critical in absorbing the working-age population, including youth. More than 60% of young people report agriculture as their primary source of income [14]. Reports indicate the Government's commitment to the agriculture sector development and its considerable investments in infrastructure, responsive institutions, inclusive markets, and innovative practices [15].

Seven participants were sampled to provide deeper insight on experiences of people with disabilities working in the agricultural sector in Rwanda. Although it cannot be generalised to all youth with disabilities there was limited interest in agriculture among the participants, all of whom were involved in subsistence farming. A few participants reflected that joining agriculture was not their ideal choice of work, but a result of not getting the jobs they preferred.

"It is a difficult job for someone with a disability [...] I had no other option besides agriculture; that is how I got involved. But I also respect agriculture because it helps me provide for my child." (Female, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

"I would say that my mother taught me how to cultivate. It wasn't easy at all, but I had no choice [...] Doing so was that I had no other choice. I could not get another profession except going into agriculture." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Despite respect for the profession, agriculture was sometimes presented to young people with disabilities as the only jobs they could do, to support their families. It is likely that this contributed to the lack of interest.

"When I was working in VSO, when I was training people about sign language we used to talk about agriculture and people were talking about the challenges they face like drought and lack of rain. [...] Another thing is that their parents were sending them to cultivate because they were thinking that they could not do anything else with their lives." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

The analysis highlighted two types of challenges faced by young people with disabilities engaged in agriculture; challenges related to types of impairment and attitudes of others.

Uwera

Uwera is a 35-year-old woman with a physical impairment. Near her home is an urban marshland area of Kigali. She uses some of the space to grow vegetables and works with her mother to sell them. She guides people working for her and decides how land is used, even if she cannot cultivate it herself.

Even though Uwera still faces challenges related to her disability, she has hope for the future. She would really like to receive more training in agriculture, particularly in upgrading her farming to a greenhouse. She hopes this would multiply her profits. Uwera plans to continue farming and selling vegetables and grow her business.

Challenges related to type of impairment

The types of challenges faced by youth with disabilities varied by impairment type. Most of the interview participants with experience in agriculture were young people with physical impairments. For them, some laborious tasks in agriculture were difficult. For some, this meant discontinuation of work:

"There are some places where I can manage to cultivate, but I can't go to fetch water and carry the gallon by myself. Sometimes I am incapable of seeding beans even though the land is already prepared, no! [...] Because the arm that I use to dig is the one that I'm supposed to use for seeding (I only have one arm that is supposed to do the whole job), and sometimes it is very difficult in my life." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

For others who managed to continue despite difficulties, it affected productivity:

"The reason why it does not happen many times [planting regularly] is because of my effort and energy. Because of my disability, it is not easy. If it happens once per week, it is just for getting money to buy soap or something else small, then it is enough." (Male, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

However, much like non-disabled people working in agriculture, young people with disabilities just required people to assist them with certain tasks. The quote below is from one participant who was successful in her work in agriculture:

"I cultivate vegetables in a nearby marshland and I sell them. I told you that it is not easy for me to do it on my own as I have lower limbs impairment, but I pay other people and they cultivate. I go there to do a kind of supervision." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

People with other impairment types echoed similar points about having to allocate some tasks for others.

"I do (cultivate) with the support of someone around me to guide me and tell me where I did not do well. But in agriculture, not all work I can do, work like planting, sprouting, and others that need vision, I leave them for others." (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)



Source: Flickr/GPE/Alexandra Humme

Challenges because of attitudes

Some barriers to inclusion were related to the attitudes of others. For example, struggling to convince non-disabled agricultural employers to give them opportunities to prove themselves.

I: Did you meet some people who refuse to give such jobs like planting beans, because of your disabilities?

P: Yeah, most of the time, it happens. [...] Once I spoke to someone that I need a job, then he said that it is not possible, I asked him why is not possible as if I cannot work like others and get paid. Then he said he could not give me a job since I would not manage to do that. And he said that with bad emotion.

(Male, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Among those who manage to secure work in agriculture, some report being paid low or no wages. The participant below is one such example:

I: So, do you cultivate for private persons or any company?

P: It is just for people with money who want to cultivate and then hire you for a daily job in a short-term period to work for them.

I: How much do you get paid?

P: Daily, I get paid 1000 RWF [approximately 1 USD], from 6 am to 11 am.

I: How much money can you gain in 1 month?

P: I would say 30000 RWF [30 USD] in a month, but it depends on the season. For example, we had jobs this September, but sometimes I can even get less than 10000 RWF [10 USD] in a month.

[...]

I: What do you dislike in your job of cultivation?

P: The things I dislike in my job, I'm saying on both sides, first is when I cultivate and don't grow my crops. Or when I cultivate for someone, and he doesn't pay me.

(Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Training needs

The findings revealed limited formal training in agriculture for young persons with disabilities, which may have also contributed to their disinterest in the sector. Most participants had learnt the skills from their parents, helping them on family farms, or through small workshops conducted by community members.

“Apart from a talk organised by our local leaders who taught us how to grow bananas and other different crops, how to use fertilizers, there was no special training prepared by the government that I received on agriculture.” (Male, 18-24 years, has a visual impairment)

Some others had sought training on their own, which came with financial barriers:

“I went to an individual who has a business of training people on how to start rearing chicken for business, and I had to pay.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

As with other educational opportunities, people with disabilities faced challenges in attending or enrolling in trainings, including difficulties paying for them and reaching training venues.

“We used to learn theory at Kicukiro (outskirts of the city) and practice in town (city centre), and we had to find our means of transport, and it was challenging for me to attend the training as I did not have money to pay for transport and I am not able to walk long distances.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

As the quote above indicates, wider availability of affordable and accessible trainings would greatly benefit young people engaged in agriculture. Many wanted to learn how they could scale up their agricultural activities and generate better returns for their efforts:

“I need training in agriculture so that I can do it professionally. I wish I could do agricultural activities in a greenhouse because I learnt that that business generates more crops and more money, but I also learnt that to do it requires so much money and training. I also need to know different kinds of vegetables and the way to cultivate them professionally.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Youth narratives indicate that receiving training would be a step towards credibility, and being considered professionals, which may counter negative attitudes.

“I wish to receive training and visit other farmers who did it to learn from them, especially about tomato farming or mushroom farming. It is important to support people with disability, especially me who do not have a family who can get my back and I see that it is a common challenge to people with disability out there; it is good to teach and provide training to them, but again it is not sufficient without start-up capital. [...] What I need to improve in agriculture is the training and the way of irrigation to be able to cultivate professionally.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

Some described wanting to learn how they could expand their agricultural ventures and diversify their produce and stock.

"I like to do chicken and pig farming. But I do not have enough knowledge on how to take care of them, how to feed them, and other care they need. So, if I get a chance of being trained in those two farming, I will love it." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

These training needs described by youth with disabilities highlight clear gaps to which programmes could respond, to promote their interest and engagement in the agricultural sector.

Source: UPHLS



EXPERIENCES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

For Rwanda, the travel and tourism sector represents a priority employment sector, contributing significantly to National Income. Steady growth was seen over recent years; total overnight visitation to Rwanda doubled from 2010 to 2019 [16]. In 2019, the sector represented 10% of the real GDP and supported nearly 338,000 employment (1 in 11 working adults).

Some interviews were conducted with disabled youth working in the tourism sector in Rwanda. However, we struggled to identify young people with disabilities active in this sector, perhaps highlighting an important aspect of the sector's readiness and openness to people with disabilities. Although these reflections are from just three interviews, they shed light on important elements about their access to training and employment in this sector.

Challenges due to limited opportunities

Mutesi

Mutesi is a 24 year-year-old woman with a physical impairment. She currently works in tourism and is also studying more on tourism at the tertiary level. Mutesi got interested in tourism during secondary school, and her teachers encouraged her to join and pursue further studies in tourism. She works in a hotel offering services and guidance to clients, and she enjoys the job.

Although Mutesi received trainings related to tourism, (including one on historical and tourism sites in Rwanda), she faced struggles, related to her disability, to find jobs such as guiding tourists. She recently started an organisation to promote the inclusion of young people with disabilities in the tourism sector and hopes to own a tourism company and be self-employed.

All study participants were asked whether they had received any training related to the tourism sector. However, only those currently working in the sector reported any experience of trainings regarding tourism, and these were in preparation for their jobs.

For some, these trainings came with challenges typical to all other opportunities such as high costs and inaccessibility.

I: How much money did you have to pay to be able to attend the [barista] training?

P: I paid 250,000 Rwandan Francs.

[...]

I: As someone with a disability, did you face some challenges during the trainings?

P: I had some challenges...I had to walk long distances from here to Kicukiro and you see that it is far away, and I could not find money to take transportation every day and I used to miss some sessions because when I walk long distance, I had pain on the following week.

(Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Discriminatory practices

Exclusion and discriminatory practice from employers seemed to contribute to preventing young persons with disabilities from entering the tourism job market.

“Once I went into town (Kigali) in one of the companies which offer tourism services, they wanted to recruit guide workers; I did the writing exam and passed it very well. I went for an interview, and I could see that they were happy for me, but at the end, I was not called for the job. When I asked someone who works for that company, they told me that in that company, the first criteria are physical appearance not intellectual capacity, so I knew that they did not take me because I have a disability.” (Female, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Need for reasonable accommodations

Given the scarcity of job opportunities for people with disabilities, employees with disabilities may be reluctant to request adjustments to alleviate impairment-related difficulties, as evidenced by this quote:

“I like the mood at work because most of my workmates are young. I do not have much that I dislike, but there are challenges. For instance, I have to lift heavy things like dishes and food, but I have to do it to earn a living, but I wish I could have another job that is a bit easier compared to this.” (Male, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

The evidence indicates that much remains to be done to promote the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the tourism sector, including providing industry-ready skills training and addressing employer attitudes and hiring practices.



REFLECTIONS

Described below are reflections on cross-cutting factors that shape the experiences of young people with disabilities in Rwanda when it came to accessing both education and employment.

Ntore

Ntore is a 27-year-old man who is blind. He is in Year Five of secondary school in an urban area of Rwanda. Ntore depends on his mother and friends for help progressing with his studies. He is very focused on his studies at school, where there is access to computers with accessibility software for visually impaired people like him.

Some of the biggest challenges Ntore faces are revising and looking for support resources at home, as he needs a laptop or smartphone to help him. Access to assistive products has been challenging. He has had to rely on donors to get a white cane for everyday use. Ntore hopes to complete his studies, get employed, and start a family.

Assistive products

Assistive products are equipment or devices that enhance an individual's functioning in education, work, and daily life. The table below shows the type of assistive products used by the study participants, noting that this study did not involve assessing the need (or unmet need) for assistive products.

Impairment type	Number of participants	Assistive products used
 Physical	11 (All 11 had mobility difficulties of varying degrees)	Wheelchair = 1 Prosthesis = 3 Crutches = 2 Walking stick = 2
 Visual	8 (Of these, 6 could not see at all)	White cane = 4
 Hearing	7 (Of these, 6 could not hear at all)	Hearing aid = 1

The analysis of narratives on assistive products revealed three aspects about access for young people: (i) access varied greatly and was often tied to other opportunities; (ii) discontinued access and (iii) ill-fitting devices have meant short-lived benefits.

Variation in access

Several participants reported having been provided with assistive products as part of their admission to certain schools. Most often, these were through donations facilitated by the school.

“The school was also providing some assistive products for students who needed them. Like me, I was given crutches.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

“All [white canes] were donations, the first one I did as [detail removed] donation when I was in [detail removed]. The second one was also a donation; there is a lady born in [detail removed] who lives in Germany; she came with some sticks at school; because they were few, we had to do the lottery, and I was among those with the chance to get them. That is how I've got them.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Some participants reported acquiring multiple assistive products without much difficulty, while others struggle to obtain one:

P: Yes, I use this white cane. It helps me when I am moving around so that I don't hit things that can make me fall.

I: How did you get it, and was that easy for you?

P: No. It was not because I had to beg a medical doctor who followed up with me as my family could not afford it. Though it is this damaged, it is not easy for me to change it to be able to get a new one due to lack of means.

(Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

These findings highlight a crucial issue in access to assistive products. Most participants who reported having received them did so through school or membership in an organisation. Thus, people without the opportunity or the means to go to special needs schools or connections with organisations are likely excluded from accessing assistive products. This may mean that those most in need (of opportunities and support) are not receiving assistive products. These young people often face financial barriers in obtaining suitable assistive products:

“Also getting assistive products is not easy, my brother's wheelchair is very old and uncomfortable compared to his age. This one he was given when he was about eight years old, and now, he is 17 years old. He has grown, so it is no longer comfortable for his age. He needs another one, but it is not easy to afford it.” (Male, under 18, has an intellectual impairment)

Assistive products are one of several extra costs faced often by people with disabilities that contribute to the poverty and disability cycle. It means that achieving the same level of success in education or work often comes at a much greater cost compared to people without disabilities. This is evident in our findings; in some cases, obtaining assistive products, cost household assets.

I: Do you use any assistive products?

P: Yes, I have a prothesis

I: How did you get it?

P: I got it from [detail removed] Hospital and my parents had to sell a piece of land to be able to afford medical bills and the prothesis cost .

(Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Discontinued access

Participants who had had opportunities to use assistive products and accessible learning materials during education reported significant impacts of losing access to these after graduation. For example, no longer having access to material in accessible formats, led to reduction in skills they had acquired:

“Yes, they (materials) were all suitable for me. The problem is that when you leave school, you never get a chance to use them again. Like for me, it has been a long time without reading braille documents, I am not even sure if I still remember them well, the same goes for some other programs that were on the school computers because I used them when I was there and now it has been about seven years.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

For those entering further education (e.g., universities), this resulted in feelings of exclusion when mainstream institutions did not provide assistive products or accessible learning materials:

“By the time we reached [University], we had found that the school did not have machines to print braille to help us in our studies. They told us that it had a puncture and we had to wait almost six months. And it was the first time persons with visual disabilities came into the journalism and communication faculty.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)



In some cases, lacking the means or the knowledge in the upkeep of assistive products also meant that the benefits of receiving this support at an early age were short-lived.

P: I used to have assistive products to help me hear a few words from [detail removed], but they got old, starting with their power. We used to be called in from [detail removed] to get them, but it's been two years without getting them, and the device has become old. I think they can't work anymore.

I: How did you get those devices? Was it easy to get them?

P: I got them when I was a student from [detail removed], and they were a donation by sponsors who come to school and provide them to us for free.

I: How helpful were they?

P: I can say they were helpful somehow, even though I couldn't hear properly, but when I was using them, I could hear some words. They were helpful then...

(Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Inappropriate or ill-fitting products

Receiving assistive products that were ill-fitting or not suitable also limited its benefits or risked causing harm.

"There is a time I went to [detail removed] and they gave me a shoe because as I grow my leg got deformed more and those shoes were not helping me, so I decided to remove them." (Female, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

"Yes, I use a crutch, but because it's one and tends to bend me, I stopped using it in March this year; because of that, I can't walk long distances." (Female, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Taken together, limited access to, and high cost of assistive products, created barriers to participation in education and work for youth with disabilities.

Digital Skills

Several participants reported having received digital skills training in school, and all described the benefits of this training and exposure, particularly for work.

"It was part of the curriculum...and as you know nowadays it is very essential to learn digital skills as many things especially in work environment are getting digitalised." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

A few reported having received short training after having left school. The participant below described their experience of a disability-targeted training concerning internet skills' development:

"I received a one-week training on how to use the internet, even though it was too short because I had no other knowledge of how to use a computer before, but it was helpful I learned how I can write an email and send it and they helped us to open our email. [...] were many, the fact that it was my first time to touch a computer that was amazing for me..." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

As shown by the quote above, any level of training was of great value to youth with disabilities. However, some participants reported exclusion from these opportunities.

I: Okay, did you learn about technology in class?

P: No

I: Not even ICT?

P: I didn't get the chance to [even] sit in front of a computer because it was for the strong ones.

I: Why didn't you?

P: Like when I was in O' level it was just the demonstration only.

I: Is it because you only use one arm?

P: No, if I get the chance to learn about the computer, I know that I can use it. You see, I use a smartphone, but I cannot handle using buttons.

(Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Reasons behind this exclusion appeared similar to other educational opportunities: assumptions made about the capabilities of people with disabilities, and unwillingness or unpreparedness among trainers to accommodate people with specific impairments.

"Once, we were invited to training, but when we got there, another young person and I were told that it couldn't be possible because we couldn't hear or speak. They wanted those who could hear them at a mild level, so that is why we were told that it was not possible for us two." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

It is also worth noting that although access to computers and digital skills in secondary education is improving, it is still limited in rural areas. Thus, it is likely that learners without disabilities are being prioritised for the limited available resources over those with disabilities.

The analysis indicated that for most participants, it was not that they lacked the digital skills but rather that they lacked access to computers and devices. For many, this was a challenge in their educational endeavours.

“Also, studying requires a laptop, which requires financial means. Otherwise, I am forced to wait for the school’s computer, which is a problem because many need to use them. It has become a challenge for me to be able to study as I want.” (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

In most cases, participants relied on smartphones for digital connectivity, though this was also not universal, as several described not having access to those either.

“I sometimes use my sister’s phone to check the new style for tailoring, and then I draw it in my notebook to show my teacher and ask her how I can do it. For now, my phone is small. It doesn’t access social media.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

It should be noted that most participants who mentioned having had access to digital skills or devices tended to be based in urban areas.



Source: Marcel Crozet/ILO

Stigma

Stigma remains a significant issue for young people with disabilities in Rwanda. Participants described experiencing stigma in many aspects of their lives, including from family members, peers, teachers, prospective employers, and the community at large. Below, we outline how stigma affects education and employment, highlighting key forms of stigma that young people with disabilities often experience including (i) negative attitudes and stereotypes; (ii) bullying, physical violence, and sexual violence; and (iii) discrimination and exclusion.

Negative attitudes and stereotypes

Several participants described experiencing negative attitudes from their family members, including refusal to take them to school.

“When I was 12 years old, one day other children from my village asked me to join them at school. I told my parents I wanted to go to school, and they refused to take me. One of my friends come and took me to school and I registered myself and that is when I started school.” (Male, 18-24 years, has a visual impairment)

This also extended to peers and community members.

“I have many challenges because my neighbours don’t feel free to talk to me, if I try to approach them some may even run away from me because they say that they do not know how to talk to me.” (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

There were numerous accounts of being mistreated in school, which negatively impacted their wellbeing and in turn, led to challenges in progressing in education.

“It was difficult to be loved by other students, it was like I was not like them, sitting with them was not easy some could refuse to share a desk with me, and some of them did not love talking to me because of how they were seeing me, so many things that were discriminating happened every day. So, you understand that it was not easy, I always felt ashamed among other students.” (Male, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Hirwa

Hirwa is a 35-year-old man with a psychosocial impairment who lives in rural Rwanda. Despite difficulties related to his disability, Hirwa completed his education degree and is currently looking for employment.

Hirwa has encountered multiple incidents of disability related discrimination and is often called names that shame him. The situation worsens when he is going through his mental health episodes during which he must take prescribed psychotic drugs. He relies on his family (parents and siblings) for care and support. Hirwa hopes to get employment in education to develop and improve his livelihood.

The same participant also experienced negative stereotyping from community members who considered people with disabilities to be incapable:

"They [community members] do not even think it is possible. They think that I cannot even be able to do that. I even tell someone that I do farming activities, and they tell me that it is impossible - that I cannot cultivate or even handle a hoe. People don't understand it." (Male, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

As one participant noted, this type of negative attitude has extended to her children too, which might then impact their child's educations and chances of success as well.

"It is the same in society; when I pass by and hear people calling me nicknames referring to my disability...it affects the brain so much...it extends even to my kid because people refer my kid to my disability..." (Female, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

Bullying, violence, and abuse

The young people interviewed also experienced bullying, (i.e., derogatory language, harassment, being demeaned by peers); physical abuse (i.e., being beaten), and sexual violence (i.e., sexual assault, rape, and threat of sexual violence). Some attributed this to being the only person with disabilities in the school.

"I had many difficulties there (in secondary school) because I was the only student with a disability and often discriminated against. I used to miss classes due to the bullying [...] It was tough to be the only person with a disability." (Female, 25-35 years, has psychosocial impairment).

However, it was not only localised in school:

"I can give you an example, sometimes when I have my friends who came to visit me, some of my neighbours say that they don't understand how these "things" can communicate as if we were animals..." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Participants reported how painful this bullying and abuse is and how it can also impact their self-esteem, ultimately impacting their resilience to stay in school.

I: Can you please tell me why you did not complete your studies?

P: I can tell you that I was depressed...at a certain point, I did not want to be among people without disabilities... it was like I could not hold for long being with them due to the stigma I have undergone while I was at school, I decided to take a short break and think another thing to do which is not being surrounded by people without disabilities [...]

I: How was your relationship with other students and teachers?

P: It was not good...I felt I was alone. No one wanted to be with me. They used to laugh at me and nicknamed me relating to my disability. I have always been subject of discussion and teachers could not punish students who insulted me... it was very hurtful, and I don't even remember how I managed to hold on for three years.

(Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)



Discrimination and exclusion

Discrimination and exclusion based on disability is a pervasive form of stigma highlighted by many participants. In the interviews, young people cited examples such as exclusion from family activities or even communication:

"It is different when I am here at home; everyone is doing something outside the home, leaving me alone, which I do not like. As for my choice, I prefer to be at school rather than at home." (Female, 18-21 years, has a visual impairment)

"Yes, many times...I have been stigmatised by my own family. I remember a few days after I had this problem I could only communicate with my young brother. When he was not around, even my parents could not communicate with me. I had to wait for my little brother to come back and help me communicate with them, no one was interested in learning to communicate with me." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

The young people also reported discrimination in their pursuit of employment including being denied a job because of assumptions that the young people with disabilities are not capable of performing the work.

"Yes, sometimes when I seek a job, we were two, one had no disability, and it is that one they chose. They were looking at me as if I was not real. They did not want to offer me the opportunity because they were thinking that I will not be able to do the work correctly." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Drivers of stigma

Understanding the drivers of stigma towards people with disabilities can highlight ways to address it, to better include young people with disabilities in education and employment.

Lack of awareness about disabilities continues to frame it as contagious, or punishment, attaching shame to people with disabilities. Several participants described the practice of families hiding their children with disabilities, while others described their own experience of being excluded based on these fears.

"Yes, I went to school, but because of that illness, I fell. When it started happening, teachers discontinued me and said I should stay at home not to contaminate other students; they even closed class. (Male, 25-35 years, has intellectual impairment)

Lack of awareness of capabilities of people with disabilities to get an education, engage in work, and contribute to the community plays a key role in limiting opportunities.

"I think that there is a need to educate the society; starting from families because it is there that discrimination begins...If parents understand that a child with disability has their potential like others, it is a good move which will also help the society to change." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

So how can these be addressed? The young people interviewed suggest that sensitisation to disability may be an important path forward. One noted positive changes over the years, and attribute it to awareness-raising efforts:

“Some neighbours still call me bad names, but many people have changed their minds because it is always said on the radio, TVs and sometimes in community meetings or events. Before I used to have serious problems where other kids could put something in my way just to see how I will fall, but nowadays this has reduced.” (Female, 25–35 years, has a visual impairment)

Another participant described how showing their capabilities through education, skills attainment, and employment allowed them to combat and resist negative attitudes and assumptions.

“Ten years ago, someone could put a tree or something else on my way walking to make me fall. Still, now this is over, they were calling us nasty names, insulting our parents or us. But now it is different. Because like in my village, not many people went to school till university, which means that no parent could tease my parents that they have a blind child while I am in university when their children are there in the village with a bad life, and they did not even finish primary. This doesn't mean that these bad attitudes are not there; they are there still, even though a lot has been done.” (Male, 25–35 years, has a visual impairment)



Source: Marcel Crozet/ILO

Support structures

Despite the pervasive stigma and discrimination people with disabilities continue to face, the young people also described examples of support from family, friends, teachers, and community members.

Family

Positive attitudes and support within the family was not common among the participants. However, for those who did have at least one supportive family member, it was apparent this can have a significant impact on young people's self-esteem, and belief in their capabilities.

"...but on my side, I was lucky to have a family that cared for my studies. My uncle, who adopted me, used to advise, and direct me in my choice. While I was about to go to university, he asked me whether I should go to a university for those with disabilities or if I should manage to learn with others at the [detail removed]. Then I told him that it might challenge me, but I said, 'let me go to the [detail removed of mainstream university].'" (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Friends and peers

Unlike family, there were several examples of support from peers and friends that built the resilience and improved inclusion of young people with disabilities. For example, the quote below is a stark contrast from an earlier quote from a young person whose family members were not interested in learning sign language to communicate with them.

I: Do all your friends know sign language?

P: There are some whom we cannot communicate well as I want, but all those I ask for help try even though it is not perfectly done but they try.

(Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Peer support was often why many young people with disabilities persevered with education.

"But in secondary school, I am unsure if I enjoyed anything. I only had two friends who encouraged me to keep studying. Even though we could not communicate well, they were my true friends, and they were visiting me at home, trying to help me with my studies. This is what I can say that I enjoyed. Otherwise, there was nothing to motivate me. I can say that without those friends and my family, especially my father, who always pushed me to go to school, I could not have finished even one term." (Female, 18-24 years, has a hearing impairment)

Source: Marcel Crozet/ILO

Belonging with other persons with disabilities

Some of the young people with hearing impairment are actively involved with OPDs and report the positive impact of engaging with other people with disabilities, encouraging one another, and working to be role models for others.

"I am a member of [detail removed]. I participate in different activities organised by the organisation. Most recently, I participated in an activity they had organised to explain the rights of children with hearing impairment to the parents. I even offered some karate sessions that I organised on my own to children with disabilities to help them get out of the stigma." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Participants working or volunteering with OPDs also described the positive impact of engaging with people who understand disability and the challenges they face, and building relationships that are encouraging and empowering.

"Yes, we have a connection. Typically, people with disabilities love people, especially those with the same problem. When I see a person with hearing impairment, I always feel like talking to them, visiting them, and asking them to visit me because they are people with whom I speak the same language and who understand my condition more. I understand theirs, so I feel much more connected with them." (Female, 25-35 years, has hearing impairment)

Self-belief

The data shows that stigma can have a powerful impact on self-esteem, belief in one's capabilities, and internalised stigma.

"...looking at myself, I saw an incapable young man [for] whom the future would be begging on the streets of Kigali because I had no confidence in myself... all of that was fuelled by all those bad things that people used to say about me." (Male, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

Similarly, positive attitudes can contribute to self-acceptance, improved self-esteem, and confidence in pursuing opportunities in education and employment.

I: Do you feel you can get opportunities matching your skills and preferences?

P: 100%

I: Why 100%?

P: Being among the 30 young people [that] you selected to participate in your study and [that you] came all the way to talk to me, gives me hope. [...] My confidence and my ideas also give me hope for a good future, studying at [detail removed] also will help me to get the necessary skills to work in the tourism sector which is my dream.

(Female, 18-24 years, has a physical impairment)

Intersectionality

How, where, and in what ways young people with disabilities are included or can participate in education and employment varies greatly based on factors like gender, location, severity and type of impairment, and other aspects of identity. It is important to examine this intersectionality, to better support their inclusion.

Type of impairment

The type and severity of impairment can impact a young person's experiences. Those with more severe impairments likely experience disproportionate discrimination, and more barriers to participation in education and work. Moreover, the visibility of a person's impairment can influence how they are perceived and treated by the community. Some struggled with not being believed if their impairment is not visible or does not match other people's expectation of what that impairment should look like. As a result, they tend not to receive the support they need:

"...but once I was in a community meeting and I asked someone to write [for] me. And she refused, saying that I should write my name since I am an educated person. I told you that I have a low vision, so some people do not consider me as a person with visual impairment. They just say that I can see even when I need support from them to guide me. They refused, saying that I can do it myself." (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)

People with mental disorders and psychosocial impairments reported attempts to hide this, but are then particularly stigmatised when found out, often thought of as 'mad':

"The challenge was losing friends, even if they were all not aware of my illness. [...] other students were not aware. [Once] they made a circle around me, shouting that I was a fool and other words such as "this man is a fool; he used to go to [detail removed]." (Male, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

Source: Marcel Crozet/ILO



Gender

Women with disabilities experience compounded discrimination as both disability and gender carry forms of marginalisation and stigma. The data highlighted that young women with disabilities face unique challenges such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health concerns, and socio-cultural expectations that differ based on gender.

"I always experience those negative attitudes; for example, there are some clothes that I put on, and when I pass to people, they say, 'She has a nice face, she is beautiful, but her disability deforms her'. Sometimes other men may say 'I can't marry such woman with that type of disability'. Even my husband's family. At the beginning they told him not to marry me, but because he does love me, and he never showed me bad attitude because of my disability I always feel okay." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Gender-based violence including sexual harassment, assault, and rape is often a major concern for many young women with disabilities. As one young man describes, these risks drastically limit educational and employment opportunities for women:

"It is not the same. The way I can look for a job and the way a girl can look for a job are different because many of these girls didn't go to school and don't know sign language. Most of time they are raped, and they stay home to raise their children. They don't have any information and don't know how and where to look for a job. At least boys can face life, but girls have many more challenges than us" (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Urban/rural differences

The differences between youth with disabilities based in urban versus rural areas are mainly related to opportunities, stigma, and feelings of belonging. In rural areas or villages, where they are one of few people with disabilities, they often must deal with being singled out for bullying and other forms of stigmatisation.

"It was not easy; imagine being among one thousand students and the only one with a disability...I used to hide my disability and hide my arms in my pockets...I could not play with others for fear of being bullied..." (Female, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

The data also indicates that there are more opportunities for young people with disabilities in urban areas, in terms of engaging with other people with disabilities, as well as presence of special needs schools or inclusive workplaces. Below is a quote from a young person reflecting on the difference in having lived in an urban area for school, and later moving to a rural village, and the implications of these:

"In school, we were many with visual impairment and it was easy to meet and talk, share challenges, difficulties and help each other to find solutions. But after finishing school, a new chapter starts. As you can see, I am in a very far village and there are not many events that gather us [persons with disabilities]. Most activities take place in Kigali or [detail removed] and it is not financially easy to get there. So, for now, I do not feel fully connected with other people with disabilities." (Female, 25-35 years, has a visual impairment)



Voice and agency

Voice, or the ability to express their opinions and in being heard, varied among the young people with disabilities. Again, this varied by impairment type and people's perception of their capabilities.

P: ...even in the church, you can have an idea on a subject, but because they know your disability, they will not give you time to express yourself, which frustrates us. By chance, they let you speak. Your idea is the best one.

I: It means they don't value your ideas?

P: No, they don't because you can start talking, and someone asks you to shut up.

(Male, 25-35 years, has an intellectual impairment)

This was felt not only within the community but also within families:

"...so, before going to school or at the beginning, when I use to say that 'I can do this', many people, including my parents and family members, used to ask me to keep quiet just because I have a disability. And say, 'how can you do this when you can't even see?'" (Male, 18-24 years, has a visual impairment)

Some people with disabilities attributed this to communication barriers, for example, for people with hearing impairments who need to use sign language.

"It depends on disability [type], but with hearing, because our communication is difficult, we are not involved." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

Teta

Teta is a 21-year-old woman who is blind. She lives with her family at home and receives support and care from her family and neighbours. She is now in her second year of secondary school in rural Rwanda. She enjoys her time at school with her friends.

She has no interest in attending community events and has not heard much about programs for persons with disabilities. However, Teta is part of a village savings group for persons with disabilities and enjoys attending meetings for persons with disabilities in her community. She suggests that all programmes for people with disabilities be implemented at the village level.

However, it should be noted that there were several examples of young people feeling heard when they give their opinions and this was mostly the case for young people who were supported by their families early on and were able to get educated.

"When I am with other agents or colleagues in [detail removed] groups, at church, or in the community, they listen and value my opinions." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

"I am lucky that I am among the village's leaders committee, I express my ideas and views, but on behalf of people with disability in general, it is not easy for them to be able to express their ideas and opinions." (Female, 25-35 years, has a psychosocial impairment)

As the second quote shows, there were also examples of young people with disabilities in leadership roles. This type of visibility is an important motivator to their peers with disabilities.

Aspirations and opportunities

The data indicated a gap between young people's aspirations and opportunities available to them. These were often financial barriers, such as needing funding as start-up capital or expanding their work. While this may be a common barrier to the non-disabled population too, it is likely to be particularly challenging for people with disabilities who face extra costs of disability and are on average poorer [3].

As one participant pointed out, a lot of things they would like to pursue require funding support:

"I need financial support because all I need will require money, except if I get a job... otherwise as I think of starting my own business, I need money to do so. Also, to be back to school requires money." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Several described wanting more training opportunities and education, which were again related to funding.

"I need start-up capital and have some sign language courses to communicate with as many people as possible." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

"I want more knowledge, the equipment to use in saloon and capital to invest in it. If I got all those, I could develop myself. About tailoring, I need a sewing machine because I don't have one. If I got chance to get it, I can train myself slowly and later expand my business so that I can help others." (Female, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

In nearly all cases, being given these opportunities were steps towards being self-sufficient and productive members of society. Some who had been excluded from education wanted to return to it, knowing it could be the way to productive and decent work.

"I think [detail removed] and [detail removed] have centres for people with intellectual disabilities. I can go there and try. Because I was looking for a job but don't know how to read it will be difficult. If I can't even read my name, it means I am blocked in many activities." (Male, 25-35 years, has an intellectual impairment)

For those who have been educated but felt excluded from job opportunities, they wanted training to improve their employability or to be given a chance to prove themselves:

"I need more trainings and practice [...] I believe that when I can get a chance to receive trainings and practice, it can equip me with knowledge that can facilitate me to perform in any job." (Male, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

It is notable that several participants who expressed a desire to start their businesses also reported this as a way to help others like them:

"I like business or farming activities, that is the ones I like but also if I could have a platform to advocate for people with hearing impairment, it could be good to be able to reduce unemployment rates among people with disabilities." (Male, 25-35 years, has a hearing impairment)

"I don't think that I can do anything more on education because my age is advancing but in employment, I think that I will own a company and I think that I will be able to help other people with disabilities fulfilling their dreams." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)

Despite experiencing numerous challenges, several participants expressed hope that opportunities for education and employment were improving for people with disabilities.

"I hope we are heading to a better future looking back at where we came from. There were days when people with disabilities were hidden like cannabis inside the homes of their parents but nowadays, people are trying to facilitate them attend schools, access medical care and so on. Basing on this, I think that one day, I will be able to get opportunities matching my preferences." (Female, 25-35 years, has a physical impairment)



Recommendations

This study has built on findings from past phases of this research, highlighting several areas for change to promote inclusive education and employment for young people with disabilities in Rwanda. These include:

Improving access to education and vocational training

- Provide additional support to both special and mainstream schools in aspects including human resources, teaching, and learning materials, and technological resources.
- Training opportunities for teachers in mainstream schools and other tertiary institutions on disability inclusion, inclusive teaching practices, and understanding the rights of persons with disabilities.
- Provide support to young persons with disabilities in identifying potential and feasible career pathways responsive to their needs and aspirations

Improving access to employment

- Better guidance for employers on policies and legislation related to disability-inclusive employment to ensure that disability inclusion is streamlined in activities like agriculture and tourism initiatives.
- To support the transition from work to employment, provide sensitisation and training for employers on the value of disability diversity within the workplace and on providing accessible workplaces and reasonable accommodation.
- Portray successful young persons with disabilities who have succeeded in overcoming barriers to employment as role models to sensitise other young people and their families about their capabilities

For general programmes and policies

- Develop clearer implementation plans on how government policies and provisions encouraging the involvement of persons with disabilities in education and employment are realised in practice.

For researchers

- Conduct more research to explore the choices, preferences, and options available for young persons with disabilities seeking employment, in Rwanda.
- Generate evidence on 'what works' for strengthening inclusion in education and work and reducing disability related stigma. Rigorous evaluations of programmes and interventions in these areas are needed.

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Appendix: Methodology

This report is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 young men and women with disabilities in Rwanda to explore lived experiences of education and employment. On education, we collected data from youth currently in education (secondary, tertiary, vocational), those who were educated but not working, and those not in education and not working. The research focus for Rwanda was the agriculture and tourism sector, selected in discussion with the Mastercard Foundation.

Qualitative data collection

In Rwanda, the interviews were conducted by five research assistants (Hosiane Mushimiyimana, Pontien Uwamungu, Theogene Iyakaremye, Pierre Irunga, and Betty Uwizeye), among whom three are young people with disabilities. They were led by Gatera Fiston Kitema and David J Musendo from Lifetime Consulting & Partners. Before data collection, the research team participated in training workshops (jointly with other country teams) facilitated by LSHTM that covered ethical protocols, interview techniques, maintaining data quality, and in-depth discussion of topic guides. Draft topic guides were pilot-tested, and research teams participated in feedback workshops after conducting at pilot interviews.

Topic guides for the interviews were developed in discussion with the broader project team, Mastercard Foundation and Youth Advisory Groups comprising youth with disabilities based in Uganda and Ghana. Interviews were conducted in English, Luganda, and Ugandan sign language between September to December 2022.

Ethical approvals for the study were obtained from the Research Ethics Committees at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of Rwanda. All participants were provided information about the study and written informed consent was obtained before the interview. Interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and were audio-recorded after the participant gave informed consent. Interview recordings were transcribed in Kinyarwanda and translated into English by Pierre Irunga and Betty Uwizeye for analysis.

After data collection and transcription, the research team participated in a data analysis workshop held in Uganda with other East African country teams to discuss approaches to coding and analysis. A coding scheme and codebook were developed based on the study objectives and emerging themes. Transcripts were coded using the ATLAS.ti software and analysed thematically.

Participants were identified in collaboration with the Umbrella of Organisation of Persons with Disabilities in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS and for Health Promotion (UPHLS), other local OPDs in Rwanda, and through snowball sampling.

Table 1. Breakdown of participant characteristics

		Male	Female
Age	15-17 years	1	0
	18-24 years	3	5
	25-35 years	10	11
Impairment type (Note: Some participants had multiple impairments, therefore these totals are different from actual total)	Physical	4	7
	Visual	3	4
	Hearing	4	4
	Psychosocial	2	1
	Intellectual	1	1
Education	Currently in education	3	3
	Educated but not working	5	3
	Not in education, not working	0	2
Employment	Working in Agriculture	3	3
	Working in Tourism	1	2
	Working in other sectors	0	0
Location	Urban	9	7
	Rural	5	9
Total		14	16

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