

Lived experiences, aspirations and engagement in livelihoods of young people with disabilities in Kenya: a peer-led participatory research

**Youth Futures Kenya
Research summary
October 2023**

Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines livelihoods as “the capabilities, materials and social resources required for a means of living”. These include educational and training services, social capital services and economic strengthening services. For many people living with disabilities in low-and middle-income settings, access to these resources remains limited and many people continue to live in poverty with little access to healthcare services, education, suitable housing, and employment. In addition, people with disabilities often experience stigma and discrimination which excludes them from full participation in economic and social activities. People with particular impairment types, multiple or severe disabilities, and other characteristics, for example women, may be especially likely to experience poor livelihoods outcomes.

Since 2018, Sightsavers has been leading the Inclusive Futures programme which works with other international NGOs, local government bodies and line ministries, local civil society organisation, employers, and organisations of disabled persons to change policies and systems to improve how people with disabilities are included in formal and informal employment. This study, funded by the British Academy’s Youth Future’s programme, was designed to leverage these existing partnerships to recruit peer researchers and engage with policy makers.

The study sought to build the evidence base around the lived experiences, aspirations, and challenges faced by youths with disabilities in accessing livelihood opportunities in Kenya. It considered the lives that these young people envision and aspire to, and the barriers and vulnerabilities which they believe are likely to stop them from realising those aspirations. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of youths with disabilities and how are they currently engaged in livelihoods?
2. What are the aspirations of youth with disabilities in relation to access to livelihoods and what barriers prevent them from realizing these aspirations?
3. How can youths with disabilities be included in policy dialogues around the implementation of SDG8: decent work and economic growth?

Why is this study important?

This study provides vital empirical evidence on how young women and men with different disabilities in different settings, envision and aspire to live, and the barriers they experience that they believe are likely to stop them realising their aspirations. Understanding their ambitions and expectations, particularly in relation to livelihood– and how they are mediated through barriers and vulnerabilities related to disability, gender, and other issues – are vital for policy makers who desire to develop inclusive education and livelihood policies and allocate resources accordingly.

The study also leverages existing partnerships to promote the inclusion of young men and women with disabilities into local and national policy dialogues around the implementation of SDG 8: decent work and economic growth. Youth’s engagement in evidence generation policy dialogues will contribute towards Kenya’s vision, specifically in the areas of service provision and access to employment aim at enabling youth with disabilities to actively participate in social-economic life, a key plank in the achievement of Kenya’s Vision 2030 agenda.

How did we conduct the research?

This study was conducted in informal settlements in Nairobi city, and rural parts of Homa Bay county (Image 1).

The research followed a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology to data collection and analysis. We recruited 20 youths with diverse impairments who worked as peer researchers and led data collection for this study. They were taken through a one-week training on research methodology, research ethics, and safeguarding.

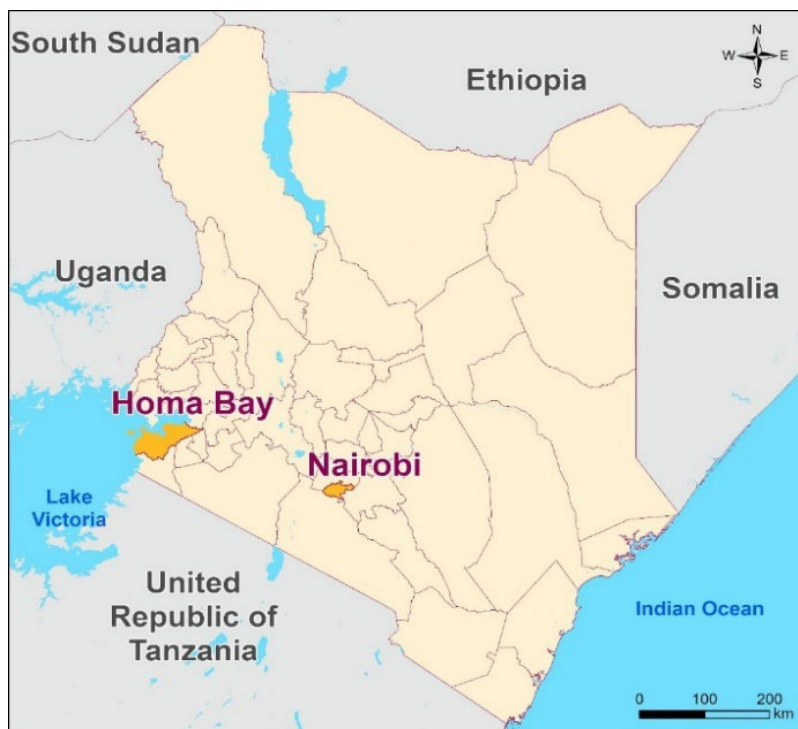


Figure 1. Map of study location

Qualitative data was generated through in-depth interviews with youth with disabilities and documentary photography while quantitative data were collected through geographic information system (GIS). Drawing on from the themes that emerged from analysis, we created a simple survey including GPS (global positioning system) coordinates which we uploaded to an online survey tool (CommCare) and deployed on mobile devices. This mapping exercise identified locations where youths reported barriers or enablers to accessing their livelihoods.

Key messages

- Youths with disabilities have diverse livelihoods experiences and aspirations.
- The desire for self-reliance is a key motivating factor that drives many individuals' hopes and dreams.
- While individuals' impairments are an important factor in the challenges they experience, it's the limited education opportunities, gender inequalities, restricted financial resources, and inaccessible infrastructure that prove to be the insurmountable barriers to achieving their aspirations.
- The findings provide suggestions for changes that could be made to reduce the barriers preventing young people with disabilities from achieving their dreams

Study findings

We conducted 50 in-depth interviews with youths with various types of impairments. Fourteen out of the fifty youths interviewed had multiple impairments. Almost half (22) of youths with disabilities interviewed did not have secondary level education.

Goals and aspirations

Youths reported diverse aspirations, highlighting a strong desire for self-reliance, and to contribute towards developing their communities. Their aspirations were highlighted as an important step on the pathways to successful livelihoods.

- While more education was a goal for most, young people with secondary education or above were particularly keen to garner further educational qualifications. The ultimate goal of these individuals was to obtain a position of leadership in order to help other youths with disabilities, either practically or through acting as a role model.
- A second group, many of whom left school early and remained unemployed, voiced a desire to gain practical skills through vocational training (Image 2). Ultimately, they wanted to become self-reliant, mainly through running their own small business, or finding a skilled mid-level role in employment.
- A third group often included females living in rural areas, whose main aspiration was to get married, have children and run a farm. They described this in terms of living a 'normal' life and fulfilling the expectations of society.



Figure 2: Hairdressing is an example of a skill mentioned by participants as an aspiration and pathway to financial independence

Lived experiences and barriers to aspirations

The majority of youths participating in the study reported not yet having achieved their aspirations. They discussed their current situations and the barriers preventing them from achieving their desires and dreams.

- Only seven study participants were formally employed, but even for the barriers existed, mainly linked to discriminatory attitudes and practices and unadjusted environment at the workplace. Participants described not being given interviews; once interviewed, not being given the job; being given a different, lower status job; or else repeated experiences of being fired soon after being hired. Not only did this affect individuals' employment, but it also affected their self-esteem and led to strong feelings of resentment.
- Fourteen participants were self-employed but faced numerous challenges such as lack of capital, and inadequate access to credit facilities. Many participants were unaware of the existence of loans and grants available to marginalised groups, including youths with disabilities, and among those who were aware, they described a number of challenges with the processes of acquiring them.

Further challenges included:

- Lack of access to disability-inclusive education, undermining young people's ability to acquire the skills and qualifications required for certain roles.
- Despite the existence of grants and support mechanisms to help young people with disabilities with access to education, many participants were unaware of or could not access them. The few participants who had used them reported them as being very slow and difficult to navigate.

- Employers' misconceptions about people with disabilities having high health needs and requiring a lot of time off work. Participants described that many employers lacked awareness and confidence to employ a person with a disability, and to make the appropriate adaptations to accommodate them to work effectively.
- Environmental barriers such as inaccessible public transport (Image 3) and buildings including public offices were consistently cited as being significant to the exclusion of youth with disabilities in livelihoods. Women faced additional challenges with taking public transport, where sexual assault can be common.
- Despite the many barriers described facilitators for engagement in livelihoods included: disability inclusive education, accessible and accommodative work environment, and access to government social protection programs for people with disabilities.



Figure 3: Example of inaccessible public transport, a challenge faced by youths with disabilities in commuting to livelihood activities

Engaging in policy dialogues around decent work and economic growth

Through the collection and analysis of data, and conversations occurring during dissemination events with policy makers, peer researchers identified recommendations for policy change across diverse areas.

Disability legislation implementation and public sector accountability: strengthen accountability mechanisms hold institutions to account for their shortcomings. This may also include ensuring independent commissions and quasi government structures create accountability on disability inclusion and examining hiring practices within the public sector.

Policy and legislation around formal employment: The public and private sector should make deliberate efforts to employ youth with disabilities not only in compliance with, but over and above the relevant Kenyan employment policies. Furthermore, they should promote implementation and progressive realisation of the 5% employment quota for persons with disabilities (which is still at the formative stages) which many organizations were yet to adhere to.

Government grants and loans: Government procurement system for disbursing grants and loans needs to be made more inclusive and accessible.

Policy and legislation around inclusive education: Government commitments around inclusive education need to be met and upheld.

Public infrastructure and transport: In addition to enforcing the building code and ensuring accessible public spaces, the government needs to review regulation of the public transport sector. A focus on accessibility for people with diverse needs, and safety – particularly for women – needs to be ensured.

Learn more about this study

Read the full report here in early 2024:

research.sightsavers.org/project/youth-with-disabilities-livelihoods/

For more information, contact:

Sapana Basnet, Senior Research Associate: Qualitative Methods

sbasnet@sightsavers.org