



IMPACT OF DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: EVIDENCE FROM MAKWANGWALA, NTCHEU DISTRICT, MALAWI

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ABSTRACT :

This article examines the impact of disability-inclusive development programmes on the quality of life and socioeconomic participation of persons with disabilities in Traditional Authority Makwangwala, Ntcheu District, Malawi. Drawing on the original mixed-methods case study, it integrates evidence from six focus group discussions involving 126 participants and nine key informant interviews, together with field observations and descriptive summaries. The programmes considered included Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs), inclusive agriculture, nutrition and food security, disability advocacy, and local disability forums. Participants described improvements in savings, livelihood opportunities, participation and community recognition, especially through the VESA model. However, inadequate finance, inaccessible services, mobility constraints, limited assistive devices, social stigma and climate-related shocks continued to restrict equitable participation. The findings support an integrated approach combining disability mainstreaming, targeted support and participatory monitoring. As the evidence is principally descriptive and self-reported, reported improvements should not be interpreted as experimentally established causal effects. The article recommends stronger financing, accessible infrastructure, vocational skills, inclusive governance and longitudinal evaluation.

Keywords: *disability inclusion; persons with disabilities; Village Economic and Social Associations; livelihoods; Malawi; community development*

1. Introduction

All seventeen of the Sustainable Development Goals encouraged putting up policies and measures that would benefit all people regardless of their race, nature and background. For example, the SDG number one strived to reduce poverty, and SDG ten encouraged countries to prioritize inclusive development and participation of all persons in economic activities (UN 2015). Persons with disabilities were not supposed to be left behind because literature revealed that they face a lot of challenges such as poverty, inequalities, and discriminations, Agyei-Okyere et al (2019). For this reason, the international community thrived in initiating inclusive disability development programs worldwide with the aim of eliminating the poverty and inequality gap between persons with disabilities and those without.

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has highlighted the link between disability and poverty, stating that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and exclusion. In Malawi, many persons with disabilities live in rural areas and in poverty. According to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), persons with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty and exclusion than those without. They concluded to show the link between disability and poverty in Africa where disability can be a lead to poverty and on the other hand poverty can also increase the likelihood of disability.

Equity and inclusion are key principles in policy development and implementation. The UN Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRDP) encourages governments to implement laws, policies, and regulations that promote inclusion and safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is an international human rights treaty. Its purposes are to promote, protect, and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities (OHCHR.org). The Convention also encourages people to promote respect for their inherent dignity for all persons with disabilities.

2. Problem Statement

Most of the Malawi soils have lost fertility power and hence require to be complemented by manure or fertilizer and hence need to make fertilizer be available to farmers at reasonable price. Due to economic challenges Malawi is facing, most Malawian farmers (including farmers who are persons with disabilities) cannot be able to buy fertilizer which in 2025, was around MWK180 000.00. Therefore, there was need for Malawi government to find a solution to this problem. Malawi government was trying to implement Affordable Farm Inputs program, but this can only reach out to not more than one million farmers. There would be still other farmers who could not access this AFIP.

According to THP, Mbeya manure was the possible solution to this problem. With Mbeya, farmers could just buy a small quantity of fertilizer and process it with some waste organic products and produce more fertilizer which could be applied in farms and produce bumper harvest.

Village Economic and Social Association, (VESA) would help farmers to easily have access to funds which could support families in purchasing the little quantity of fertilizer for making Mbeya and their basic needs. VESAs were good entry points for all developmental activities for health, education, microfinance, disability mainstreaming and gender.

Despite the global commitment to disability-inclusive development, persons with disabilities (PWDs) in TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu district of Malawi continued to face significant barriers in accessing basic services and opportunities. As per the 2018 Malawi Population and Housing Census, 10.4% of the population aged 5 years and over were Persons with Disabilities. This significant portion of the population cannot be overlooked, and their inclusion in development programs was crucial for the overall progress of the nation.

Person with disabilities in Malawi face numerous challenges including high cost of living, high healthcare costs, insufficient healthcare resources, dependence on others, stigmatization and abuse, and barriers to education and employment. These challenges contribute to high levels of poverty among them and their exclusion from mainstream development programs and services. Despite increased awareness of disability issues, they continue to be a low priority in socio-economic integration, leading to significant macro-economic costs for Malawi. There is a need for more inclusive and accessible services and policies for persons with disabilities in Malawi.

While several disability-inclusive development programs in the study have been implemented by various NGOs such as The Hunger project, their impact on the lives of Persons with disabilities remains largely unknown. This research aims to study the impact of these programs in improving the quality of life and socio-economic status of persons with disabilities in Ntcheu district. The study will assess the extent to which these programs have been successful in promoting inclusivity, reducing stigma, and improving access to nutrition, food security, livelihood, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. The findings of this research could provide valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and stakeholders involved in disability-inclusive development in Malawi and similar contexts.

To identify the primary challenges faced by persons with disabilities prior to the implementation of the disability-inclusive programs in TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu district of Malawi.

To find out ways of implementing disability inclusive development programs and find out their components in the study area.

To evaluate the influence of disability inclusive development programs on the social economic status of PWDs in the study area

3. Literature Review, Including Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Poverty reduction is a process of increasing income and economic stability, which will lead to improved fulfillment of basic needs and services and developing a range of assets that will reduce household vulnerability to physical, social and economic shock (www.jstor.org). Poverty can also be understood as vulnerability to downward fluctuations in income. Vulnerability can be heightened by the lack of saleable or pawnable assets and debt obligations. Interventions which reduce such vulnerability and protect livelihoods also reduce poverty Social Indicators Research (2024).

In the context of this study, the poor are those who live in poverty (UN Global Compact.org). According to the United Nations, poverty is more than just a lack of income. It encompasses various socioeconomic dimensions, including the inability to access essential services, social protection, and opportunities for decent work. Poverty also involves a lack of power to express opinions and make choices, as well as social exclusion. The UN defines extreme poverty as living on less than \$2.15 per day in 2017 purchasing power parity. This definition highlights the multifaceted nature of poverty, which includes not only financial deprivation but also limited access to basic needs and rights. This means that the poor are those who live on less than \$2.15 per day. In Malawi, the poorest people live in rural areas. The 2018 Malawi National statistics also confirmed that that majority of the persons with disabilities live in rural areas and are poor.

In the context of microfinance, the definition of VESA is Village Economic and Social Association. This concept was developed by the GRAD (Graduation with Resilience to Achieve Sustainable Development) project, which is supported by CARE (www.care.org). A VESA is a group consisting of members from 15-25 households. These groups are formed to serve as the foundation for various economic and social activities within a community. VESAs provide training in financial literacy and business skills to their members. Members save together and can take small loans from these savings, which helps them gain practical financial experience.

This first chapter starts with an introduction. This section includes the international legal framework on disability inclusive programs, which is followed by a section on disability inclusion in Malawi, after this, follows background information, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, justification of the study, significance of the study and finally the definition of key terms.

Ebuenyi et al (2021) stated that equity and inclusion are important principles in policy development and implementation. They emphasized the need to ensure that there is the absence of systematic structural inequalities between people and groups. While acknowledging the challenges faced by persons with disabilities Ebuenyi et al outlined that despite adopting the recommendations of the CRDP that countries should safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities, many people and organizations consider disability inclusive programs as charity or goodwill but not obligation. In their study which explored the extent to which equity and inclusion were considered in the development of Malawi's National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and Implementation Plan. They reviewed the Malawi's National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and Implementation Plan using the EquIPP (Equity and Inclusion in Policy Processes) tool which assesses 17 Key Actions to explore the extent of equity and inclusion.

The results of their review indicated that the development of the Malawi National Disability Mainstreaming Strategy and Implementation Plan was informed by a desire to promote the rights, opportunities and wellbeing of persons with disability in Malawi. The majority (58%) of the Key Actions received a rating of three, indicating evidence of clear, but incomplete or only partial engagement of persons with disabilities in the policy process. Three (18%) of the Key Actions received a rating of four indicating that all reasonable steps to engage in the policy development process were observed. Four (23%) of the Key Actions received a score of five indicating a reference to Key Action in the core documents in the policy development process.

Ebuenyi et al concluded that development of disability policies and associated implementation strategies require equitable and inclusive processes that consider input from all stakeholders especially those whose wellbeing depends on such policies. They indicated the importance of government and organizations in the process of policy or strategy development and implementation, to involve stakeholders in a virtuous process of co-production – co-implementation – coevolution, which may strengthen both the sense of inclusion and the effectiveness of the policy life cycle.

Jiya et al (2021) confirmed that persons with disabilities live in very unacceptable conditions among persons with disabilities and emphasized the need to improve their living conditions. They acknowledged the efforts for international UN Sustainable Development goals in eradicating these deplorable living conditions by prioritizing inclusive development and participation of all persons with disabilities. SDGs recommend financial inclusion of all persons with disabilities. According to Jiya et al, financial inclusion for persons with disabilities has emerged a useful policy approach which can be an approach to bridge the gap between persons with and without disabilities. They conducted a study to explore the preparedness of financial institutions to extend their services to persons with disabilities. They interviewed managers from commercial banks in Malawi to understand their perspectives on extending financial services to persons with disabilities. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Although participants reiterated the need to provide persons with disabilities with financial services to improve their well-being, a few initiatives have been undertaken to improve their participation. Particularly, participants stated that barriers, such as a lack of financial literacy and adaptive technologies, communication barriers, and high rates of unemployment, explained the reluctance of commercial banks to extend financial services to persons with disabilities.

However, global awareness of disability-inclusive development is growing. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by 185 countries, advocates for the complete integration of individuals with disabilities into society. The CRPD emphasizes the importance of international development in upholding the rights of individuals with disabilities.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly states that disability should not be a barrier or criterion for access to development programs and the realization of human rights. The framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) includes seven targets specifically referring to individuals with disabilities and six additional targets related to individuals in vulnerable situations, which also encompass individuals with disabilities.

The disability community leaders, Mia Ives Rublee and Andraea LaVant, wrote and designed the Disability Inclusion tool kit to help social justice organizations advance disability inclusion in their work. (Disabilityphilanthropy.org). The Disability Inclusion Toolkit includes introductory disability definitions and language guidelines, by providing basic definitions related to disability and guidelines on appropriate language to use. It also creates accessible events by offering advice on making both in-person and virtual events accessible to people with disabilities. It provides tips on how to ensure social media content is accessible and guidance on creating inclusive employment practices, from recruitment to retention.

The Disability Inclusion toolkit was developed having identified inequalities faced by persons with disabilities and lack of experience of philanthropy organizations in implementing disability inclusion. This tool kit emphasized the need for reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities and the need to make deliberate efforts to welcoming persons with disabilities to participate throughout organizations activities and ensuring they can actively contribute. People with disabilities must be included in planning and leadership roles.

3.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in three key perspectives: the Social Model of Disability, the Capability Approach, and the Human Rights-Based Approach. These theories collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of how disability-inclusive development programs influence the lives of persons with disabilities by addressing structural barriers, expanding individual opportunities, and promoting equality and rights.

The Social Model of Disability provides a foundational lens for this study by emphasizing that disability is not inherent in the individual but arises from societal barriers such as inaccessible environments, negative attitudes, and discriminatory policies. This perspective shifts the focus from the limitations of persons with disabilities to the shortcomings of society in accommodating diversity. In relation to this study, disability-inclusive development programs are designed to remove these barriers and promote full participation. By improving accessibility, promoting inclusive education, and supporting equal employment opportunities, such programs directly respond to the concerns raised by the Social Model. Therefore, this theory is relevant because it explains how changes in the environment and social systems can significantly improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities.

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen, further strengthens this framework by focusing on individuals' real freedoms and opportunities to achieve well-being. Rather than concentrating solely on resources or services provided, this approach evaluates what persons with disabilities are actually able to do and become. Within the context of this study, disability-inclusive development programs aim to enhance capabilities by providing access to education, healthcare, assistive technologies, and economic opportunities. These interventions enable individuals to live independently, participate in society, and pursue their goals. The relevance of this theory lies in its ability to assess the true impact of development programs, not just in terms of provision, but in terms of meaningful improvements in people's lives.

The Human Rights-Based Approach complements the above theories by framing disability inclusion as a matter of rights rather than charity or welfare. It emphasizes principles such as equality, non-discrimination, participation, and accountability. This approach is strongly supported by international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities established by the United Nations. In relation to this study, disability-inclusive development programs are expected to uphold these rights by ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in decision-making processes and are treated as equal members of society. This theory is relevant because it provides a normative framework for evaluating whether such programs genuinely empower individuals and promote social justice.

In conclusion, these three theories are closely interconnected and highly relevant to the study. The Social Model of Disability explains the need to remove societal barriers, the Capability Approach focuses on expanding individuals' opportunities and freedoms, and the Human Rights-Based Approach ensures that inclusion is grounded in dignity and equality. Together, they offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing the impact of disability-inclusive development programs on persons with disabilities.

3.2 Conceptual framework

This section illustrates the twin track approach, which illustrate the combination of disability inclusive development programs (disability mainstreaming) with specific policies and development programs which ensure the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities of development (DFID 2020). This section is a presentation of theoretical debates that stated that adopting disability mainstreaming as the most cost-effective and efficient way of integrating disability sensitive measures into design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all development policies and programs which in return led to

achievement of the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society and development. Persons with disabilities could have access to food security, social participation, economic empowerment and poverty reduction.

In reference to the context of this study, combining disability mainstreaming programs (through ensuring active participation of persons with disabilities in sustainable agriculture, nutritional and food security), with the existing policies and procedures in agriculture, nutrition and food security, helped persons with disabilities achieve their rights to food security, participation, economic empowerment and reduction of poverty among persons with disabilities.

If disability inclusive development programs are embedded in all stages of the project lifecycle (formulation, design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and closure, there will be equal enjoyment of human rights by all persons with disabilities.

The twin-track conceptualisation links mainstreaming disability considerations throughout programme planning and delivery with targeted measures addressing disability-specific barriers. Participation, accessible inputs, savings and credit, agricultural training, and advocacy represent programme mechanisms; socioeconomic inclusion, food security, livelihood capabilities and quality of life are anticipated outcomes. Stigma, funding, climate exposure and accessibility condition these relationships.

4. Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to assess the impact of Disability-Inclusive Development Programs on Persons with Disabilities: A case study of Makwangwala in Ntcheu District, Malawi which has a population of 25,345 households (NSO 2020).

The study was conducted in the area, where The Hunger Project Malawi with funding from Christoffel-Blindenmission Christian Blind Mission e.V. (CBM) is implementing the 'Scaling Up Promoting Disability Mainstreaming in Food and Nutrition Security Project'. In the same area, organizations such as Malawi Council for the Disability Affairs, The Federation of Disability Organizations in Malawi, Save the Children, were implementing disability inclusive programs in education, healthy, livelihood and advocacy.

According to the THP Information Park report, the project registered 193 persons with disabilities in TA Makwangwala. The total population was 1400 households for farmers/persons with disabilities from selected Traditional Authority. These 1400 households included 193 households for persons with disabilities. The focus group in this study was with the VESA groups of farmers/persons with disabilities. In addition to these focus groups, interviews were conducted with THP/MACODA district managers, Project Field Officers and leaders /stakeholders from the study area.

This provided a plan that outlines how to obtain relevant information to test hypotheses (Saunders, 2023), addressed research questions, and provided decision-making insights. The researcher needed to consider the means of obtaining information, the availability and skills of the researcher and his staff, the time available for research, and the cost factor relating to research. The preparation of such a design facilitated research to be as efficient as possible yielding maximal information. In other words, the function of research design was to provide for the collection of relevant evidence with minimal expenditure of effort, time, and money. The research design allowed the researcher to sharpen the research methods suitable for the subject matter and frame-up successful studies.

This study took an inductive research approach. This approach is the research approach that develops new theories through focus groups, interviews and specific observations or real examples, identification of patterns or regularities in these observations, developing theories or hypotheses based on the identified patterns and make generalizations that can be applied to broader contexts (www.scribbr.com). However, another approach known as deductive approach concerned with developing a hypothesis based on existing theory and then designing a research strategy to test the hypothesis. Deductive reasoning works from the more general to the more specific. This uses numbers and figures Singh, (2006).

Research design help to plan, structure, execute the research, and maximize the validity of the findings Saunders, (2023). The study adopted a mixed research design, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of disability-inclusive development programs on persons with disabilities. This design allows the researcher to collect numerical data, such as participation rates, income levels, or access to services, alongside detailed qualitative insights from participants' life experiences. By combining these methods, the study is able to capture both measurable outcomes and the deeper social, emotional, and practical effects of the programs, thereby offering a more holistic analysis of their effectiveness.

The choice of a mixed research design is particularly relevant to this study because disability inclusion is a complex and multidimensional issue that cannot be fully understood through a single method. Quantitative data helps to identify trends and patterns, while qualitative data provides context and meaning behind those patterns, such as personal challenges, perceptions, and levels of satisfaction. This approach enhances the validity and reliability of the findings through triangulation, ensuring that conclusions are well-supported. Therefore, the mixed research design is appropriate as it enables a balanced and in-depth evaluation of how disability-inclusive development programs influence the lives of persons with disabilities.

In research, population refers to the entire study group that the researcher wants to draw conclusions about Saunders, (2023). It includes all relevant units that share common characteristics or attributes. The research topic and purpose helped to determine the study group. In the context of this study, the total population was 1400 households for farmers/persons with disabilities from TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu, district. This included the targeted population of the project. The population was chosen because it was where the project of 'Scaling Up Promoting Disability Mainstreaming in Food and Nutrition Security' was implemented. The focus groups that were planned in this study were with the farmers/persons with disabilities and were in groups of 20 to 25 people from VESA groups. In addition to these focus groups, key informant interviews were planned to be conducted with 2 THP/MACODA district managers, 2 Project Field Officers and 6 leaders /stakeholders from the study area. Key Informant Interviews are a qualitative research method used to gather in-depth information from individuals who have specialized knowledge or unique perspectives on a particular topic (www.betterevaluation.org). These interviews are typically conducted with a small number of people who are selected for their expertise and insights.

The researcher then chose a sample from the population, which was a specific group taken from the total population that the researcher collected data from. The size of the sample was always less than the total size of the population.

make statistical inferences from them and estimate the characteristics of the whole population Saunders, (2023). Singh noted that in research the concept of sampling cannot be overlooked because of the view of being economical and accurate. Another author who discussed similar themes in research

methodology, particularly the importance of sampling, was Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie his work often emphasized the significance of sampling in both qualitative and quantitative research, highlighting its role in ensuring the accuracy and credibility of research findings (www.files.eric.ed.gov). In this study, samples were used due to the cost consideration. The purposive and quota sampling was used to select the study area. The ‘Scaling Up Promoting Disability Mainstreaming in Food and Nutrition Security Project’ that THP was implementing was in three districts of Ntcheu- TA Makwangwala, Phalombe- TA Chiwallo, and Nsanje TA Mlolo. Considering distances of other two districts from the researcher’s place of residence and considering the available budget and timeframe of this study, TA Makwangwala was selected.

Purposive, snowball and convenient sampling was used for sample selection. Purposive Sampling involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics or qualities that are relevant to the research question (www.scribbr.com). For example, in the context of this study on the impact of disability inclusive development in the selected research area, the researcher specifically chose participants who were the implementors and beneficiaries of these programs. Snowball sampling is an non random sampling technique in which samples have no traits (www.questionpro.com). This method is useful when the population is hard to reach. This study was done on persons with disabilities who were vulnerable and sometimes hidden in communities. The researcher started with a few participants who met the criteria and then asked them to refer to others who also fit the study’s requirements. This study started with the few participants who were used to identifying other participants that were fit for this study. Convenience Sampling involves selecting participants who are easily accessible to the researcher. The researcher also selected participants that were convenient to reach.

In inductive research, particularly in qualitative studies, the sample size can vary significantly based on the research goals and methodology which consider saturation, available guidelines, flexibility of the research and the purpose of and scope of the study. Saturation is a crucial concept in qualitative research and is reached when gathering more data no longer provides new insights or information (www.link.springer.com). Although there is no one-size-fits-all answer, some guidelines suggested that for in-depth interviews, a sample size of around 20-30 participants is often sufficient to reach saturation (www.journals.plos.org). For focus groups, around 5-6 groups are typically enough (www.human.libretexts.org). Inductive research is usually flexible and emergent; the sample size might be adjusted as the study progresses. Researchers might start with a smaller sample and increase it if new themes continue to emerge. The purpose of the study and the scope of the research questions also influenced the sample size. Studies aiming for a deep understanding of a specific phenomenon might require fewer participants compared to those exploring broader topics.

This study used the flexibility approach of the sample section and aimed to start with a sample of size 6 focus discussions with VESA groups and key informants’ interviews for 10 participants. The sample size could be adjusted as the study progresses.

In inductive research, data collection is crucial as it helps in identifying patterns and developing theories. This involved the use interviews, one-on-one or group interviews to gather detailed insights from participants; observations through observing behaviors, events, or conditions in their natural settings; focus Groups through engaging a small group of people in discussions to explore their perceptions and opinions, field notes and analyzing existing documents, records, and archival data (www.questionpro.com). These methods helped the researcher gather rich, qualitative data, which was then analyzed to identify patterns and build theories.

This study used primary data from interviews on key informants, focus group discussions, observations of respondents and activities and analyzing of field notes as sources of data collection. Secondary data was retrieved from analyzing existing literature on disability inclusive programs.

To collect data for this study, interviews, focus group discussions, and observations of respondents and activities were used as data collection methods for primary data and literature reviews as data collection methods for secondary data (www.researchmethod.net).

Inductive research often involves collecting data to identify patterns and build theories (www.analyticsfordecisions.com). This study used interviews, observations and focus groups to collect primary data and documents analysis for the collection of secondary data.

Data needs to be analyzed to make it meaningful, to test null hypothesis, to obtain significant results and estimate parameters (www.us.sagepub.com). To achieve the research objectives, statistical packages especially, Microsoft Excell, were used in analyzing the data. Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data that was collected.

The goal of ethics in research is to make sure that no one suffers adverse consequences from research activities. For this reason, in this study all names of the respondents were treated with high confidentiality, and they were not revealed to the public. Labels/numbers were assigned to all participants and focus groups so that they should be anonymous. The ideas and viewpoints of the participants were honored, and no information that may be directly linked to or divulged about a specific person, groups, was disclosed. This helped to build mutual trust between the researcher and the respondents participating in the research.

In this study several ethical considerations to ensure the integrity and ethical soundness of the study were considered. Respondents were fully informed about the nature of the research, what it involved, and any potential risks. They were informed that this research is for academic purposes and their consent to participate in this study was requested before data was collected.

This study took all necessary steps to minimize any potential harm to respondent, whether physical, psychological, or social. The researcher was transparent about research methods and honest in reporting the findings to avoid any form of data manipulation or misrepresentation. Before starting the research, approval was requested from an institutional review board (IRB) or ethics committee to ensure that the study meets ethical standards.

5. Key Findings and Discussion

5.1 Study participants and evidence base

This chapter presents and discusses the data analysis, presentation and interpretation process. To provide answers to the research, questions raised and to meet the research objectives, relevant data was collected and analyzed to bring forward the underlying points for this research. The data analysis and interpretation were based on the results from focus group discussions, key informants’ interviews and observations. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis was conducted.

The study planned to conduct 6 focus group discussions and 10 key informants’ interviews with six Vesa groups and 10 key Informants from THP/MACODA district staff, community leaders /stakeholders from TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu district, Malawi. The Focus groups and the key

informants were selected because of their knowledge and participation in disability inclusive development programs in the study area (Jiya et al., 2021). All the six focus group discussions with the Vesa members were conducted as planned. 9 out of 10 planned key informants' interviews were conducted. The demographic details of the focus groups' participants included the gender, area of operation, disability component and the participation experience (years) in Disability inclusive development programs. The total number of participants who were present during all the six focus groups was 126 participants, 85 were female, 41 were male. 27 out of 126 focus groups' participants were persons with disabilities, 12 male and 15 female. All the groups were operating at the group village head's level. 3 groups are in operation for the period between 3 to 5 years, 2 groups between 0 to 2 years and 1 group over 5 years. Table 4.0.2 below shows the basic demographic information of the focus group discussions participants where total number of participants was 126.

The disaggregation profile details of the key informants' interviews participants included gender, disability, Informants' category/position, area of authority and the participation experience (years). The total number of key informants participated the interviews were 9 and 8 out of nine were male 1 was female. 1 participant, who was a male had disability. Based on the key informants group composition, 3 were VESA Coordinator/ Volunteers, 2 were NGO Staff, 1 was VESA Coordinator/ Volunteers/ Lead Farmer, 1 Govt Staff, 1 DDF and 1 Group Village Chief. 5 of the key informants were operating on the Group village level, 3 at the district level and one at the TA level. Table 4.0.3 below shows the basic demographic frequency and the percentage of the key informants' participants where total number of participants was 9.

Majority of participants were male (8 out of 9), indicating a gender imbalance. There was only one female participant, who was an NGO staff member. This showed that one of the nine respondents of key informants was a female and majority were men. Thus 11.11% of the key informants' participants was female. This indicated that few women take part in key positions in the community, government and NGO sector.

5.2 Programme components and delivery

Participants in the programs operated within multiple areas ranging from district to TA (Traditional Authority) up to group village and subgroup village levels thus demonstrating a broad reach yet demonstrating inconsistent effects across the study area.

Data collected during the key informants' interviews (KIIs) and the focus group discussions (FGDs) showed that most disability inclusive development programs which were being implemented in this study were disability mainstreaming, capacity building of DDFs and ADFs, advocacy and awareness raising, inclusive sustainable agriculture, inclusive microfinance/VESA (Village Savings and Loans Association).

"THP has supported persons with disabilities in establishing DDF and ADF structures in collaboration with FEDOMA and MACODA" (KII P1)

"We have been trained in farming businesses, VESA savings, Bee keeping, Maize and groundnuts production, we do fruit farming, soil conservation and every member received farm inputs using the food bank revolving fund."

"We have also participated in nutrition and food security programs which have help our families to eat well prepared food with the necessary food nutrients for our health and the health of our children". (FGD 1)

The interview results also showed how the implementation of these programs was done, and they also showed the components of each program. Below table 4.1.3.1 outlines these programs, their implementation strategies and their components.

Social inclusion programs aimed at integrating persons with disabilities (PWDs) into the mainstream economy encountered obstacles due to societal discrimination and physical barriers to participation.

Food security initiatives addressed hunger among PWDs by providing revolving funds for farm inputs, goat pass-on programs, and beekeeping projects. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives was challenged by their reliance on external financial support.

Training programs focused on developing leadership, business, and farming skills, but participants reported limited financial resources for gaining practical business experience.

The VESA Model programs became popular for their support of microfinance and savings, but the loan amounts provided were insufficient to significantly grow businesses.

"We have been involved in food security programs, nutrition program, sustainable agriculture and VESA programs. We have been trained in mind set change, Agribusiness, manure making, tree planting and to avoid discrimination of persons with disabilities." (FGD 3)

"I have been involved that activities that are being implemented in our area, these are farm inputs revolving fund, provision of assistive devices, goats pass on programs and trainings. I have been participating in training in modern agriculture, livestock's training and tree planting training." (KII 4)

5.3 Perceived effectiveness and socioeconomic changes

Participants received their interventions exactly when their benefits would be most advantageous since the programs were activated during agricultural seasons. According to the key informants' interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) results, not immediately, but still timely enough was a recurring theme. (KII P2) said that "Although these programs delayed but they started when we needed them most."

Many believed the programs would have been more beneficial if they had started earlier, but they were still considered timely and effective. This indicated that, although there was a consensus that an earlier start would have been advantageous, the timing was acceptable and had a positive impact on the participants.

The delayed schedule of these programs led to short-term effectiveness problems which reduced beneficiary belief in future government support initiatives.

The primary programs proved effective for their participants especially when they provided financial programs and vocational training services. The respondents stressed that better coordination with systematic follow-up processes would be essential to preserve program success.

Both KIIs and FGDs revealed two main categories of satisfaction: fully satisfied and partly satisfied.

Fully satisfied: Most participants expressed complete satisfaction with the programs, noticing significant benefits and improvements in their conditions.

Partly satisfied: A smaller group reported partial satisfaction, mentioning unmet needs and areas not reached, environmental challenges (climate change)

as well as ongoing resistance to the participation of persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Overall, most participants were fully satisfied, some highlighted the need for the programs to expand to more areas and reach more participants to address unmet needs.

“Fully satisfied, because there is improved economic status. Our cash out amount has increased every year from K750 000 in 2022 to K3 800 000 in December 2024. The maximum share in 2024 was K225 000 per person, and the lowest was K91,000. We managed to buy fertilizer and food” (FGD 4). There was a unanimous agreement that participants were consulted before the programs started, indicating good communication and involvement in the planning process. Participants consistently confirmed that yes, they were consulted before the programs started.

The key informant’ interviews and the focus group discussions revealed results on the assessment of life’s situations before and after the programs’ implementation.

Before the Programs: The results showed that life conditions were very challenging for the beneficiaries, with issues such as poverty, lack of resources, social isolation, and discrimination.

After the Programs: Results showed that there was a significant improvement in various areas, including economic status, living standards, social inclusion, and access to resources. Specific improvements mentioned include better harvests, access to farm inputs and loans, improved knowledge and skills, increased resilience and reduced discrimination.

Community members demonstrated lower discrimination practices toward Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) which helped PWDs to integrate better with their communities.

The financial system allowed people to build economic success by obtaining savings opportunities (using VESAs) together with income-generating activities, but financial expansion continued to be important.

“Before these programs our lives were in terrible poverty. We could not have enough food and there was no cooperation among us. Everyone was doing things on his/her own. But after being included in these programs and starting our own VESA, we have improved our knowledge in terms of mind-set change, inclusive food security, nutrition, sustainable agriculture, microfinance/ VESA, and disability mainstreaming. Our economic lives have improved through VESA, and we have also been linked to other organizations that can support us with their expertise” (FGD 4).

Some individuals with disabilities showed joint participation in their communities' leadership roles yet cultural prejudices against them still existed. The enhanced accessibility to health facilities and assistive devices had led to a remarkable improvement in mobility functions together with increased life quality standards. The advancement of resource access for PWDs, especially in business development and financial literacy, presented challenges regarding program scale-up.

Overall, there was a notable improvement in their lives after participating in the programs. There was improved economic status, people were able to buy fertilizer and family needs, there was better food security, enhanced nutrition, improved farming knowledge and harvests, increased ownership of goats and other livestock, improved soil fertility and conservation through tree planting, increased savings and share-outs from VESA and better mindset and business management skills.

5.4 Barriers and enabling factors

The key informant’ interviews and the focus group discussions results revealed several challenges which were faced by persons with disabilities and below is a list of some challenges which were mentioned.

Accessibility: There was a lack of Inclusion in public services, the results showed that persons with disabilities often faced exclusion from essential public services. (KII 1) said that “the most challenge that we face is accessibility. Public services are inaccessible. We also have challenges in accessing assistive devices, hearing aids and braille materials for those who are visually impaired.”

Cultural Challenges: There was also exclusion from government support programs, many PWDs were not included in government support initiatives. There were negative societal attitudes and mindsets towards PWDs, often viewing them as only needing charity.

Resources: There were also mobility challenges, the lack of assistive devices made mobility difficult. These were Issues with public infrastructure and mobility due to a lack of assistive devices. There were also issues of lack of financial support, vocational skills, and training.

Communication: PWDs face barriers in communication, affecting their ability to access information and services. There were challenges due to inadequate education and lack of assistive devices for hearing and visual impairments.

Discrimination: A persistent issue, with some areas still experiencing discrimination, especially those not reached by the programs.

Coordination: Lack of organized reporting mechanisms and coordination among organizations working with PWDs.

Isolation: Some PWDs remain hidden or not reached by the programs, leading to continued discrimination.

Financial constraints created obstacles for PWDs to completely utilize existing programs because they lack adequate resources. The problem of restrictive collateral needs hindered many PWDs from qualifying for microfinance loans.

The improved social inclusivity had not eradicated deep-seated prejudice that continued to hinder PWDs from gaining leadership positions together with financial services access.

Participation remained limited because there were not enough adequate assistive devices along with insufficient transportation options combined with inadequate infrastructure adjustments.

Several participants believed that inadequate outreach activities resulted in difficulty spreading awareness about the programs thus reducing their use across specific communities.

Sustainability and adaptation faced inefficiencies because the programs lack systematic procedures to track their enduring effects.

During the data collection process, there were several barriers to disability inclusive development programs. Below passage explained some of these barriers.

Lack of Commitment: Not all community members and stakeholders were fully committed to the programs.

Environmental Challenges: Floods, droughts, and other environmental factors such as weather changes patterns affected agricultural programs, leading

to low production.

Lack of Training and Awareness: Insufficient training in the Disability Act and limited awareness about disability inclusion hinder effective implementation.

Infrastructure Issues: Lack of proper office space for DDFs and mobility challenges for PWDs and staff.

Leadership Challenges: Local leaders and organizations sometimes lack effective leadership in implementing disability-inclusive programs.

Funding Constraints: Limited funding and capital for PWDs to start or expand their businesses. There were insufficient farm inputs and limited loan amounts in VESAs.

In summary, government funding instability and unpredictable oversight caused interventions to become unstable and disrupted service delivery continuity. The lack of proper training programs that taught entrepreneurship and digital skills restricted PWDs from adopting higher income-generating methods based on technology. The challenge of obtaining financial support through loans arose mainly because financial policies remain unyielding and there is no system of credit schemes specific to the needs of PWDs. Misunderstandings by society about disability result in PWDs being prevented from participating in economic activities and social events.

Despite the above-mentioned barriers, there were several enablers to Disability inclusive development programs that existed in the study area.

Participatory Structures: Engagement of PWDs in participatory structures and decision-making processes was seen as a success.

Stakeholder Collaboration: There was effective collaboration among disability partners, stakeholders, and government ministries (e.g., Health, Agriculture, Social Welfare).

Mindset Change: There was Improved mindset and willingness of stakeholders to support disability inclusion.

Provision of Assistive Devices: Assistive devices enabled PWDs to participate more actively in community activities.

Group Businesses and VESA: Group businesses and the VESA model promoted financial inclusion and economic empowerment.

The study area improved service accessibility when PWDs were engaged in comprehensive development programs. The provision of assistive equipment and vocational skills enabled PWDs to enhance their productivity independently. Awareness and advocacy campaigns began to shift public attitudes towards inclusive practices. Support from local authorities strengthened the delivery of programs through local staff.

5.5 Improving programme delivery and sustainability

The key informant' interviews and the focus group discussions results revealed several areas that needed improvement.

Establish Local Disability Organizations: There was a need to facilitate the establishment of local disability organizations for DDF members.

Promote Knowledge Sharing: There was a need to establish disability groups for knowledge sharing and promote market access.

Enhance Livelihood Activities: There was a need to promote livelihood activities and to provide vocational training for PWDs.

Improve Monitoring and Support: Government and other stakeholders should closely monitor and support the implementation of these programs.

Increase Funding: There was a need to lobby for more funding from different donors and provide sufficient capital to PWDs to support their initiatives.

Inclusive Education and Training: It was needed to provide inclusive education, business training, and vocational skills development for PWDs.

Government and NGOs needed to offer training in business management, vocational skills, and parental training for parents of PWDs.

Encourage Group Participation: It was required to encourage group participation and promote self-reliance among PWDs.

Inclusion in Developmental Activities: Ensure PWDs are included in all developmental activities.

The training program needed to be broadened its self-reliance content to encompass business and vocational skills that align with current market demands.

Achieving the program's long-term goals necessitates government investment in both financial support and monitoring resources, with full accountability.

Improving the availability of financial resources, including microfinance options for people with disabilities, required better lending terms and additional capital support. To prevent stigma, active educational campaigns were essential to foster better social conditions.

The VESA Model needed to be expanded in line with plans that include revisions to financial support, aiming for maximum effectiveness and sustainability. Implementing continuous impact assessment systems with established feedback mechanisms is crucial for streamlining program improvements.

Data collected from the KIIs and FDGs showed that all the participants had positive experience with the VESA model. They all explained some notable merits and demerits of the VESA model below are some of them.

Positive Impact: The VESA model has been highly effective in improving the financial and economic status of beneficiaries, including PWDs. It has facilitated access to loans, promoted group businesses, and increased income through participatory associations.

Environmental Challenges: Difficulties in loan repayment due to environmental changes was the main demerit of VESA.

Challenges: Most challenges of VESAs included environmental issues affecting agricultural production and repayment of loans, as well as the need for better training and awareness among participants.

Overall, the programs have significantly improved the socio-economic status of PWDs in the region. Continuous improvements, proper monitoring, and increased funding will further enhance their effectiveness and sustainability.

5.6 Synthesis by study objective

The primary challenges faced by persons with disabilities prior to the implementation of the disability-inclusive programs in TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu district of Malawi.

Regarding the first objective, the study established that persons with disabilities (PWDs) in TA Makwangwala faced numerous challenges prior to the implementation of disability-inclusive development programs. These challenges included high levels of poverty, limited access to education and healthcare, unemployment, stigma, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Participants also reported dependency on family members and lack of access to financial resources. These findings are consistent with earlier observations in the study area, which highlighted that PWDs experienced

barriers to basic services and socio-economic participation. Similarly, recent studies confirm that persons with disabilities in Malawi continue to face structural inequalities in education and employment due to both institutional and societal barriers (Wanggren et al., 2022). Furthermore, global evidence indicates that PWDs are more likely to experience poverty and limited access to opportunities compared to those without disabilities (World Bank, 2022), reinforcing the findings of this study.

The ways of implementing disability inclusive development programs and find out their components in the study area.

In relation to the second objective, the study found that disability-inclusive development programs in the study area were implemented through a multi-sectoral and community-based approach. Key components included inclusive agriculture initiatives, microfinance through Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs), nutrition programs, advocacy campaigns, and disability mainstreaming activities. The Hunger Project Malawi played a significant role in implementing these programs using the epicenter strategy, which integrates community mobilization, women empowerment, and local government engagement. These findings align with recent literature, which emphasizes that effective disability inclusion requires integrated approaches that combine economic empowerment, social inclusion, and institutional support. Studies have shown that inclusive development programs are most effective when they involve stakeholders at all levels and promote active participation of PWDs in program design and implementation (Ebuanyi et al., 2021; National Planning Commission, 2021).

The influence of disability inclusive development programs on the social economic status of PWDs in the study area

With regard to the third objective, the study revealed that disability-inclusive development programs had a significant positive influence on the socio-economic status of persons with disabilities. Participants reported improved income levels, increased savings through VESAs, enhanced food security, and greater participation in community activities. Additionally, there was evidence of reduced stigma and improved self-confidence among PWDs. These findings are supported by the study results, which showed that programs such as microfinance and inclusive agriculture contributed to economic empowerment and social inclusion. Recent literature also supports these outcomes, indicating that financial inclusion initiatives such as savings groups and microfinance significantly improve livelihoods and resilience among vulnerable populations, including PWDs (Jiya et al., 2021; World Bank, 2023). This demonstrates that disability-inclusive programs can effectively break the cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Concerning the fourth objective, the study identified several barriers and facilitators affecting the effective implementation of disability-inclusive programs. Key barriers included limited funding, inadequate assistive devices, persistent cultural stigma, lack of accessible infrastructure, and weak policy enforcement. On the other hand, facilitators included strong community participation, support from local leaders, involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities, and the use of inclusive models such as VESAs. These findings are consistent with recent studies, which highlight that while policies promoting disability inclusion exist, their implementation is often hindered by resource constraints and institutional weaknesses (UNICEF, 2023; National Planning Commission, 2021). At the same time, community-driven approaches and stakeholder collaboration are recognized as critical success factors in enhancing program effectiveness. The findings therefore suggest that addressing structural and attitudinal barriers while strengthening institutional support is essential for sustainable disability inclusion.

In summary, the study demonstrates that disability-inclusive development programs have the potential to significantly improve the lives of persons with disabilities, although their effectiveness depends on addressing existing barriers and strengthening enabling factors. These findings are consistent with both local evidence and recent global literature, confirming the importance of inclusive, participatory, and well-resourced development interventions.

6. Conclusions

The study set out to examine the impact of disability-inclusive development programs on persons with disabilities (PWDs) in TA Makwangwala, Ntcheu District, Malawi. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that disability-inclusive development programs have made significant contributions toward improving the socio-economic well-being and quality of life of PWDs in the study area. Prior to the implementation of these programs, PWDs faced multiple and intersecting challenges, including poverty, limited access to essential services, social exclusion, and stigma. These challenges reinforced their marginalization and hindered their active participation in development processes.

The introduction of disability-inclusive programs, particularly those implemented by The Hunger Project Malawi, has brought about notable positive changes. Through interventions such as inclusive agriculture, microfinance initiatives like Village Economic and Social Associations (VESAs), nutrition support, and advocacy for disability inclusion, PWDs have experienced improved access to resources, increased income levels, enhanced food security, and greater participation in community activities. These programs have also contributed to reducing stigma and promoting social inclusion, thereby empowering PWDs to become active contributors to their communities.

However, despite these positive outcomes, the study also revealed persistent challenges that limit the full effectiveness and sustainability of these programs. These include inadequate funding, limited access to assistive devices, infrastructural barriers, and deeply rooted cultural attitudes toward disability. Additionally, gaps in policy implementation and coordination among stakeholders continue to hinder progress. Therefore, while disability-inclusive development programs have demonstrated significant potential, their long-term success depends on addressing these structural and systemic barriers.

In conclusion, the study affirms that disability-inclusive development is a critical pathway toward achieving equitable and sustainable development. Strengthening these programs and ensuring their inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability will be essential in improving the lives of persons with disabilities not only in the study area but also in similar contexts.

7. Recommendations

Firstly, there is a need to strengthen policy implementation and enforcement of disability-inclusive frameworks. While policies exist, their practical application remains limited. Government institutions and stakeholders should ensure that disability inclusion is fully integrated into all development programs, with clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

Secondly, increased funding and resource allocation are essential to sustain and expand disability-inclusive programs. Development partners, government, and non-governmental organizations should invest more in inclusive initiatives, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that PWDs have access to necessary services, assistive technologies, and livelihood opportunities.

Thirdly, there is a need to improve accessibility in infrastructure and service delivery. Public facilities such as schools, health centers, and community buildings should be designed or modified to accommodate persons with disabilities. This will enhance their participation and inclusion in social and economic activities.

Fourthly, awareness campaigns and community sensitization programs should be intensified to address stigma and negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Changing societal perceptions is critical for fostering an inclusive environment where PWDs are respected and valued as equal members of society.

Fifthly, programs should promote capacity building and skills development for persons with disabilities. This includes vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and financial literacy programs to enhance their economic independence and resilience.

Furthermore, strengthening community-based approaches such as VESAs is highly recommended. These groups have proven effective in promoting financial inclusion, social cohesion, and empowerment among PWDs. Expanding and supporting such models can further enhance program impact.

Finally, there is a need for improved coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and organizations of persons with disabilities. A multi-sectoral approach will ensure that efforts are harmonized and that resources are used efficiently to maximize impact.

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