

Children and Young People with Disabilities in Lesotho

Brief
Lesotho 2023

In Lesotho, people with disabilities constitute 3% of the population, of which 59% are women. Many people living with disabilities have limited access to basic services, education, healthcare, transportation and other social services. Another challenge is the lack of experts on disability matters, both in the public and private sectors. As a result, children and young people with disabilities lack well-trained teachers and specialized devices, and have lower school attendance rates than their peers without disabilities, even at the pre-primary education level.² Persons with disabilities also have limited opportunities to participate in society, as they are not typically included in the labour force, decision-making processes, governance, politics or the private sector. According to the Lesotho National Federal Organizations of the Disabled, only 3% of people with disabilities have full employment.³

Although Lesotho ratified the CRPD in 2008, the rights of persons with disabilities was only recently defined as a key priority of the government when the Parliament enacted the Persons with Disability Equity Act of 2021, which establishes the Persons with Disability Advisory Council to provide for equal opportunities and recognition of rights of persons with disabilities.⁴ The Persons with Disability Equity Act of 2021 maintains that the government take the necessary steps to ensure

that persons with disabilities are able to fully realize their rights to live independently, to mobility and to access employment, education, health, public transport, justice, and sports and recreation, as well as to vote and communicate. The government also need to ensure that persons with disabilities have equitable protection from harm and in situations of risk, and are able to reside at and access services in residential care facilities. The Act also establishes that the Ministry of Finance (MoF) shall establish a Disability Public Fund to support the implementation of disability programmes and services, including disabilities grants for persons with severe disabilities.⁵ In 2020, the GoL piloted the Disability Grant in Butha Buthe, which was supporting 222 persons with disabilities (i.e., persons with disabilities received LSL 400 on a quarterly basis from the grant). The pilot was set to expand to other provinces with the aim of providing support to persons with disabilities who are unable to work.⁶

Disability is a cross-cutting issue, which has implications for coordination to ensure that persons with disabilities can have personal independence and access assistance devices, and to attain economic independence and social inclusion. Although the Persons with Disability Advisory Council is now the focal point on disability matters, other relevant ministries (i.e., health, education, social

protection, infrastructure, transport, communication, justice and youth and sports) should coordinate to address the needs of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities. Challenges remain, however, when it comes to multi-sectoral coordination to address the needs of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities. Moreover, there is a lack of harmonization across sectors and institutions when it comes to reporting on the situation or status of persons with disabilities, as there is a lack of consensus among institutions as to the definition of disability and categorizations for disabilities; this contributes to data and services gaps for persons with disabilities.⁷

Challenges and Barriers Experienced by Children and Young People with Disabilities

Consultations with staff from a centre for children with disabilities in Lesotho revealed that there are few, if any services or support for children with disabilities. For this reason, among others, children and young people with disabilities are at increased risk of experiencing neglect, abuse, bullying and harassment with their families and communities. Parents often have a difficult time accepting a child with disabilities, given the stigmatization of having a child with disabilities. Thus, children with disabilities are often *“hidden and locked inside the house, while parents go on with their lives.”* This same respondent went on to explain that *“because parents are ashamed of them [their child with disabilities], they are denied a right to play, eat and live freely when they are at home.”* For these reasons, some parents abandon their children at this centre for children with disabilities.

I think the major challenge is that parents do not accept the fact that they have a child with disability, they hide this child and it gets difficult for such a child to be protected. It is so sad, we have had incidents of children who we literally fight for to come out of the households where they are not loved and cared for. (Centre staff)

Centre staff explained that there are parents who “do not care about their children.” They went on to explain that *“They [parents] are happier when their children are away from them, and they care less about their safety and wellbeing.”* In fact, when schools close, some *“parents never show up for their children and they do not provide them with basic needs, such as clothes or shoes, and that puts the children at-risk of being used for those needs.”* Some children even *“get so miserable when they are supposed to go home, they do not like going back to their communities.”* Because some families live in poverty, food, clothes and other basic needs are a problem when the children return home.

Lack of access to mobility aids is also a challenge for persons with disabilities. Centre staff explained that parents can request a wheelchair from the Department of Social Development, but the Department’s do not always have wheelchairs available. Centre staff wanted to see more walking aids provided to children with disabilities, because some children with disabilities are injured when their walking aids do not work properly or become worn out (e.g., the rubber on the bottom of their mobility aids are worn out). Centre staff pointed out that local leaders, such as community councillors and chiefs, are not necessarily interested in children with disabilities or their needs.

It is heart breaking to see children with wheelchairs struggling to move around because the roads to and from school are not accommodating. Even here around the center they cannot easily access everywhere they need because there are no ramps [to access the office, dining hall and toilet]. Their wheelchairs are constantly broken, they need to be fixed and we do not have spare wheelchairs.

Children with Disabilities in Primary and Secondary Schools

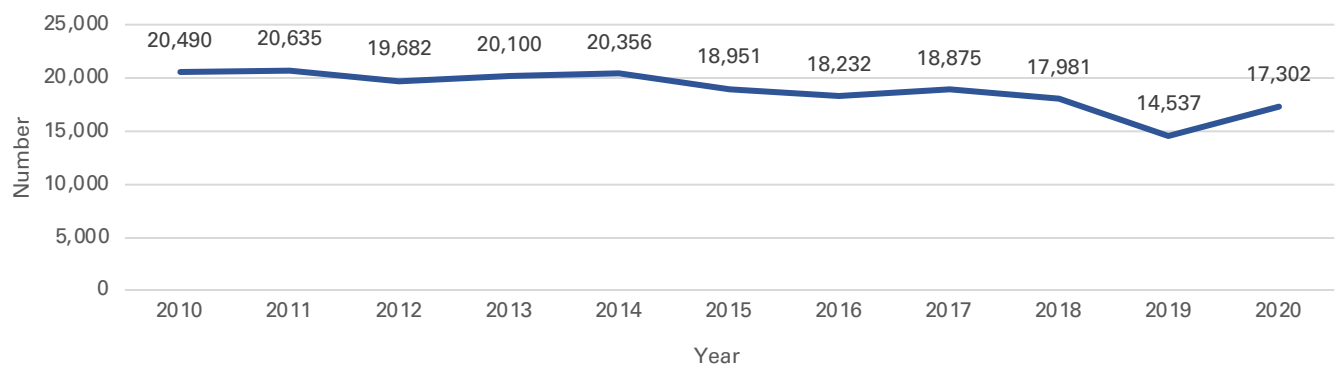
Children with special educational needs are particularly vulnerable to being excluded from the educational system and have a difficult time accessing quality education. In 2022, according to an unofficial list of special and inclusive schools, there are six special schools (including one resource centre) and 15 inclusive

schools operating in Lesotho; thus, many children with disabilities likely remain out-of-school or in schools that cannot appropriately accommodate their special educational needs.⁸

In 2020, there were a total of 323,034 children enrolled in primary schools, of which 17,302 (5.4%) were learners with special education needs or had some form of

disability; this is up from 14,537 children in 2019 (4% of learners). It is not clear from the data what is driving this notable increase in the number of children with disabilities registered in primary schools. On average, however, the proportion of students enrolled in primary schools with special education needs has remained at 5%.⁹

Number of children with special education registered in primary school, 2010-2020



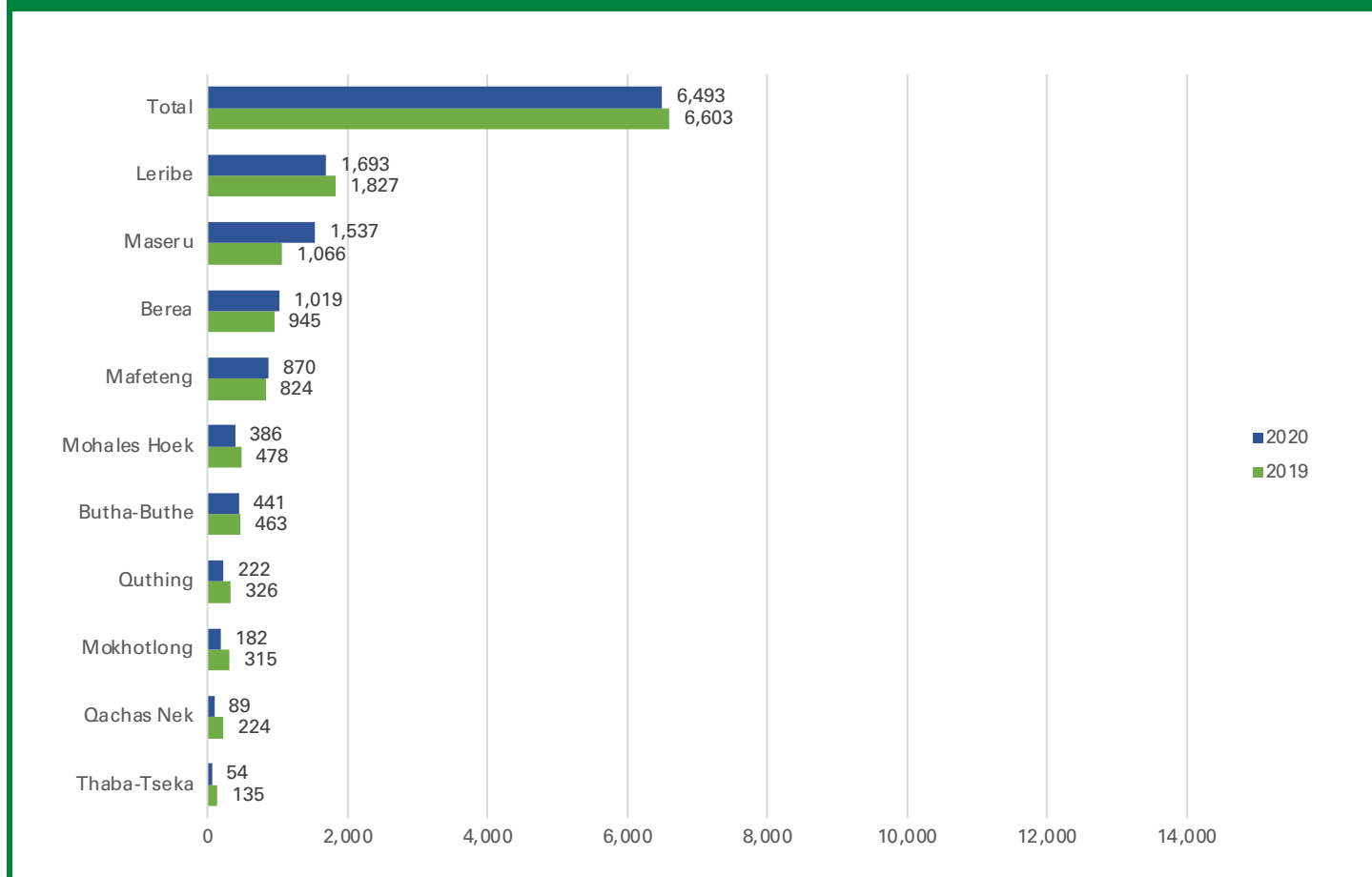
Source: Lesotho Government Education Statistics Bulletin, 2019 and 2020; See Annex Table 40.

The number of children with special needs registered in secondary schools dropped by less than 2% from 6,603 in 2019 to 6,493 in 2020. The number of children with special needs registered in secondary school

varies by districts, but a large proportion of children with special needs are enrolled in secondary schools in Leribe, Maseru and Berea.



Number of students with disabilities registered secondary schools by district (%), 2019-2020

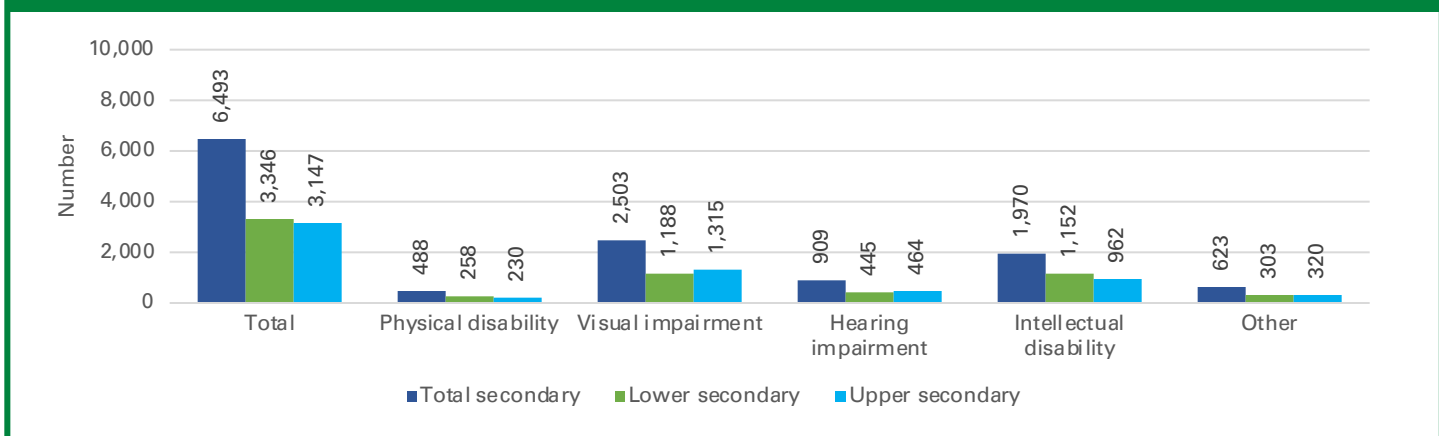


Source: Lesotho Government Education Statistics Bulletin, 2019 and 2020.

In 2020, among children with disabilities registered in secondary schools, 38.5% had a visual impairment and 30.3% had an intellectual disability. Students with

physical disabilities accounted for 7.5% of children with disabilities registered in secondary schools.

Number of students with disabilities in registered schools by type of disability, 2020



Source: Lesotho Government Education Statistics Bulletin, 2020.

Parents/guardians often struggle to get their children with disabilities into a school that can accommodate their child's special needs or disabilities, and to support them to remain in school. Also, the quality of education received by children with disabilities, at both inclusive and special schools, whether public or private, falls below the requirements of Lesotho's national laws on education, and international law and standards. In terms of national laws, the Constitution of Lesotho prohibits discrimination against persons with disabilities and includes provisions of education as a principle State policy. Lesotho has translated international obligations into national legislation by enacting a variety of laws that address persons and children with disabilities. These laws include the Disability Equity Act, the Education Act and the Children's Protection and Welfare Act. The GoL also adopted an Inclusive Education Policy designed to ensure that it fully addresses the needs of children with disabilities; yet, little progress has been made at implementing this policy due to the absence of an implementation framework, coupled with a lack of staffing and resources to support MoET's Special Education Unit, and inadequate capacities to monitor implementation of the Inclusive Education Policy.¹⁰

In 2022, International Commission of Jurists conducted a review of Lesotho's Inclusive Education Policy and concluded:¹¹

- Fewer than 20 of the estimated 4,000 pre-primary, primary and secondary schools in Lesotho are able to accommodate learners with disabilities. Children with disabilities are excluded from a majority of schools; thus, it is highly likely that a large number of children with disabilities do not go to school.
- Persons with disabilities face stigma and social exclusion; thus, children with disabilities are likely to be considered ineducable and to be kept at home.
- Although a significant proportion of the government's budget is allocated to education, little funding is allocated or spent on inclusive education. Government allocations for special and inclusive schools do not account for the costs associated with providing the educational support required for children with disabilities; thus, schools sometimes ask parents for contributions or seek external donors to bridge funding gaps.
- There are legislative inconsistencies and gaps in the education system. For instance, the Education Act permits a learner's non-enrolment in school or

discontinuation of their attendance at school on the basis of their disability. Existing laws need to be amended to ensure the regulation of special and inclusive schools, hostels and boarding facilities, and private actors involved in the provision of education.

- The government and donor partners provide assistive devices to schools on an ad hoc basis, yet special and inclusive schools report inadequate access to basic assistive devices for children with disabilities (e.g., glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs). In addition, limited learning materials are provided to schools for children with disabilities, and the curriculum has not been fully adapted to ensure it is accessible to children with disabilities.
- School infrastructures are often inadequate to ensure children with disabilities are able to access schools.
- Teacher skills training and professional development on inclusive education are highly inadequate in Lesotho, which causes gaps in effective adaptation and modification of teaching and learning environments for students/learners with disabilities. Without proper pre-service training on inclusive education, teachers are unable to provide children with disabilities with the support and accommodations they require.



Education and skills development challenges facing children and young people with disabilities^a

Consultations with staff from one centre for children with disabilities in Lesotho revealed that children with disabilities often fall behind in their education because they are slow to learn and teachers do not pay attention to them because they are slow, compared to children without disabilities. Also, children with disabilities need differentiated instruction (i.e., a pedagogy for teaching students with different learning styles and capabilities) to ensure that they are not left behind in the classroom. Children with disabilities are more likely to be visual learners (i.e., learn by seeing and observing things, such as pictures and diagrams), audio learners (i.e., learn by sounds and listening), reading/writing learners (i.e., learn through written words by reading and writing and) and kinaesthetic learners (i.e., learn through experience or doing things). Because children with disabilities can be slow learners and require different learning styles that are not typically used in schools, they *“are scared to ask for help from teachers.”*

“It gets very challenging when we talk to children, they need to see more than listen in class, they are easily taught when they do with their own hands. Children differ a lot and they need specific activities that suit their evolving capacity, we just lack human resource.”

“I think that it would be nice if there are mind games that they are taught, such as chess, so that they can be able to be more critical and open-minded.”

Staff at the centre for children with disabilities try to provide TVET to young people with disabilities, but they lack the equipment and tools needed to teach TVET (e.g., computers, garden equipment and sewing materials). As they explained, there is *“not much support for the vocational activities [for young people with disabilities], but we are now supported by volunteers who teach children agriculture, sewing and carpentry.”*

Centre staff also pointed out that *“children [with disabilities] struggle a lot with accepting themselves. They can be brilliant and smart, but they are afraid to be out there and be seen. I think it would be great if they get counselling because we do not have a social worker in our centre and they go through a lot.”* For these reasons, *“these children need a daily reminder that they are human beings, as much as those who seem not to have any disabilities. They need to be loved and cared for so that they can reach their full potential.”* Given these realities, centre staff requested having a social worker at the centre who is able to attend to the psychological needs of children. Centre staff try to talk to the children about their feelings and issues, but, they recognized that they are not trained psychologists or social workers.

^a Information presented were gathered during consultation with staff at a centre for children with disabilities conducted by the Lesotho Red Cross Society.

Children with Disabilities Lack of Access to Health Services

Consultations with staff from one centre for children with disabilities in Lesotho revealed that not all the children in the centre have access to the health service they need. In fact, on some days local health clinic does not even have the medications that children may need for an illness, in which case centre staff have to use their personal money to buy necessary medications from a pharmacist. Also, centre staff are not trained on first aid and lack basic knowledge of first aid; thus, when a child falls ill in the evening/night time staff do not know what to do.

For children with disabilities who are HIV positive, centre staff are skilled at making sure that the children feel comfortable taking ART and that they take their ART on time, and not to feel ashamed for being HIV positive and receiving ART. One staff member pointed out, *“I was actually very happy because the other day as one of them [HIV positive children] asked for water during class so that she can drink her medication; that gave me so much comfort and I realized that they really care about their health, as much as we do.”*

Centre staff also revealed that they have had a few challenges related to sexual and reproductive health (SRH), particularly when they had a child with disabilities who became pregnant. As they explained, *“We once had a child who got pregnant, but these are challenges*

of adolescence, and we try our best to guide them to understand the changes in their bodies and how to react to such.” In recognition of the need for SRH education for children with disabilities, the Karabo Ea Bophelo Project has helped staff to talk to the children about SRH. Centre staff try to discuss SRH with the children, but they recognize that children in the centre are not always comfortable talking honestly with staff about SRH; thus, having trained professionals who come from outside the centre to talk with the children is important. Yet, centre staff recognized that the Karabo Ea Bophelo Project “*will not be going on forever.*”

Conclusions

There is a real need to strengthen cooperation around the rights of children and young people with disabilities in Lesotho. The government and development partners would benefit from a much deeper dive into understanding how to build better partnerships for smart planning, problem-solving and innovation to accelerate results for children, adolescent and youth when it comes to addressing issues facing children, adolescent and youth with disabilities. This requires a focus on strengthening the capacities of the government to respond to the diverse needs of children, adolescent and youth with disabilities, which are a highly diverse group with a wide-range of functional difficulties (e.g., seeing, walking, communicating, caring for oneself and making friend) and life experiences.¹²

The extent to which children, adolescent and youth with disabilities are able to function, participate in

society and lead fulfilling lives depends on the extent to which they are accommodated and included.¹³ To address the needs of children, adolescent and youth with disabilities, the Government of Lesotho needs to bring together specialized expertise to promote inclusive education for children with disabilities. This requires accessible infrastructure, adapted teaching and learning materials, and improved capacity of teachers to make it possible for all children, including children with disabilities, to learn and develop knowledge and skills needed to achieve their full potential.¹⁴

Children, adolescent and youth with disabilities often require special equipment and home health care, prescription medications, and medical specialists and special therapists (e.g., occupational, physical and speech therapists). Health and speciality services often vary as children with disabilities age (e.g., sexual health education for adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities). Regardless of age, early identification and coordination of services are instrumental to improve the health of children, adolescent and youth with disabilities.

There are numerous data gaps that remain as it relates to the situation of children, adolescent and youth with disabilities, including data gaps related to health and well-being, access to and completion of education, learning outcomes and skills development, labour force participation, and child protection and social assistance. Data and information are also needed to promote the involvement of children, adolescents and youth in disaster risk reduction initiatives.¹⁵

For more data and information see: UNICEF (2024). Situation Analysis on Children, Adolescents and Youth in the Kingdom of Lesotho. UNICEF: Maseru: Lesotho.



Endnotes

¹ This research brief was written by Dr. Robin Haarr, PhD, UNICEF Senior Consultant, and is based upon UNICEF's 2023 Situation Analysis of Children, Adolescents and Youth in the Kingdom of Lesotho.

² UN (2020). *Lesotho Common Country Analysis*. UN Residence Coordinator Office (RCO): Maseru, Lesotho.

³ In recent years, the GoL included the Washington Questions in the Population and Housing Census to enable more inclusive data collection and data on persons with disabilities. UN (2020). *Lesotho Common Country Analysis*. UN Residence Coordinator Office (RCO): Maseru, Lesotho.

⁴ Lesotho Persons with Disability Equity Act, 2021 (Act 2 of 2021). Published in Government Gazette no. 24 on 12 March 2021. Retrieved on 11 January 2023 from: [Persons with Disability Equity Act, 2021 \(Act 2 of 2021\) | LesothoLII](#)

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ UNICEF (2020). *Social Protection in Lesotho Sector Review*. UNICEF: Maseru, Lesotho

⁷ UN (2020). *Lesotho Common Country Analysis*. UN Residence Coordinator Office (RCO): Maseru, Lesotho.

⁸ International Commission of Jurists (2023). *Failed Implementation: Lesotho's Inclusive Education Policy and the continued exclusion of children with disabilities*. International Commission of Jurists: Geneva, Switzerland.

⁹ *Lesotho Government Education Statistics Bulletin, 2019 and 2020*

¹⁰ International Commission of Jurists (2023). *Failed Implementation: Lesotho's Inclusive Education Policy and the continued exclusion of children with disabilities*. International Commission of Jurists: Geneva, Switzerland, pp 5-8.

¹¹ Ibid, 2023, pp. 5-8.

¹² Children with disabilities. Retrieved on 20 October 2023 from: [Children with disabilities | UNICEF](#)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Promoting inclusive education for all children in Lesotho. UNICEF, 6 October 2022. Retrieved on 20 October 2023 from: [Promoting inclusive education for all children in Lesotho | UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa](#)

¹⁵ Ronoh, S., J.C. Gaillard & J. Marlowe (2015). Children with disabilities and Disaster Risk Reduction: a review. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, Vol. 6, pp. 38-48.

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