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*Disability Inclusion in ECOWAS's Peace,
Security and Prosperity Agenda*

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This paper is part of the ECOWAS Policy Analysis Series (EPAS)—a flagship initiative that highlights the perspectives of African thought leaders and researchers on ECOWAS. EPAS aims to critically examine the evolution of ECOWAS over the past five decades, from the viewpoint of scholars and citizens alike, and to contribute to a forward-looking vision for regional integration in West Africa. The series is coordinated by the Africa Policy Research Institute as part of the Support to the ECOWAS Commission on Organisational Development project. This project is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

INTRODUCTION

A range of interconnected crises across Africa such as a worsening security landscape, climate-driven displacement, a weakening of global multilateralism and a resurgence of military rule in significant parts of the continent, are straining the resilience of Africa's regional institutions. These developments underline the urgent need for ECOWAS to prioritize inclusive, people-centered governance, particularly as regards marginalized groups in West Africa. One such group that an invigorated ECOWAS must place at the heart of its drive for a more inclusive governance is persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Disability stems from the interaction between individuals with impairments and the attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full participation in society. Disability inclusion refers to the systemic integration of PWDs across all sectors of society, by ensuring that they have equal rights, equitable access to services and meaningful participation in collective decision-making across society. It involves a shift from the traditional view of disability as a shortcoming that requires treatment or pity, and towards a rights-based model that emphasizes the elimination of societal barriers to the equal participation of PWDs.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 and has been ratified by the 12 members of ECOWAS, establishes a normative framework for disability rights that emphasizes non-discrimination, accessibility and the comprehensive participation of PWDs in all aspects of society. The CRPD's alignment with the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ADP) creates a framework for disability policy that promotes policy coherence and is tailored to Africa's distinctive circumstances. For ECOWAS, aligning its disability frameworks with the CRPD and the ADP — which was adopted in 2018 and entered into force in 2024 — is both a legal obligation as well as an opportunity to strengthen the coherence of disability policy in West Africa, advance equitable development and improving public trust in the regional bloc. The achievement of these objectives would mark a significant step towards realizing the goal of creating a “fully integrated community of peoples,” as laid out in the ECOWAS Vision 2050.

THE LACK OF DATA FOR DISABILITY INCLUSION IN WEST AFRICA

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West Africa. Disability in the region is shaped by factors like entrenched poverty, communicable diseases like meningitis and river blindness, climate-related disasters and armed conflict. Civil wars in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, mass displacement caused by insurgencies in the Central Sahel and weak healthcare systems (UNICEF, 2020) may have contributed to rising rates of disability in Africa. While ECOWAS has played a commendable role in peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization in West Africa, particularly through the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), disability inclusion has been largely absent from the bloc’s peacebuilding efforts.

ECOWAS currently lacks the data infrastructure to keep track of contemporary trends in disability or mount an effective policy response to its prevalence. Despite the fact that 15 percent of the world’s population lives with a disability, there is no harmonised database or reporting mechanism for disability in West Africa. This reporting gap hinders ECOWAS’ ability to design inclusive policies, monitor progress in disability inclusion and ensure an equitable distribution of societal resources to PWDs.

Some ECOWAS member states like Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone have made substantial efforts to collect more information about their disabled populations, by designing standardized questions in censuses and national surveys that are specially designed for PWDs. They typically gather this information using tools like the Washington Group Short Set, a group of six questions intended to identify people with functional difficulties in core domains like vision, hearing, walking, memory, self-care and a person’s ability to communicate. However, these efforts in individual countries are inconsistent and fragmented, given the limited coordination and lack of a standardised approach to data collection across the region. Without reliable data on disability prevalence, early warning systems designed to detect and respond to societal threats run the risk of excluding PWDs, while post-crisis plans may overlook opportunities to rebuild from emergencies with equity and resilience.

The humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel has fundamentally transformed the disability landscape in West Africa, by creating a complex intersection of vulnerability, mobility and human rights (World Bank, 2021). While ECOWAS has protocols that guarantee the free movement of people across regional borders in theory, PWDs regularly encounter discrimination at border crossings where poorly trained officials subject them to heightened scrutiny. This discrimination stems from entrenched misconceptions about the perceived economic value and healthcare needs of PWDs (IFRC & UNHCR, 2024). In addition, the biometric identification systems that are used at border points across the region pose challenges of accessibility for individuals with certain impairments, effectively nullifying their right to free mobility (Adeniran, 2024).

DISABILITY AND REGIONAL SECURITY FRAMEWORK

The ECOWAS Vision 2050 document lays out an ambitious strategy for transforming West Africa into a “community of peoples” that is united in peace, regional solidarity and inclusive development . This vision is undergirded by legal instruments such as the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security (ECOWAS, 1999) and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) (ECOWAS, 2008), both of which identify good governance, human rights and inclusive development as vital to securing peace and stability in West Africa.

These initiatives have a troubling blind spot when it comes to PWDs. While they refer to a range of vulnerable populations like children, women, rural dwellers and indigenous communities, the instruments do not sufficiently consider people living with disabilities. This gap has had noticeable and devastating consequences during times of crises like conflict, public health emergencies and disaster risk prevention. During the 2010s West African Ebola virus epidemic, the COVID-19 pandemic and in ongoing humanitarian theatres in the Sahel, PWDs were consistently left out of emergency planning, public health messaging and service delivery systems due to the design of emergency response measures that failed to accommodate their specific needs. This shortcoming resulted in the inability of PWDs to access critical information and services during crises. To live up to its billing as a pillar of peacebuilding and economic self-sufficiency in West Africa, ECOWAS designed effective disability policies as part of its effort to create a more resilient, cohesive and people-centered organization.

The ECOWAS Regional Action Plan on Disability Inclusion (2022-2030) is a comprehensive framework to improve the living conditions and ensure the rights and full participation of PWDs in West Africa. It aims to remedy problems such as the insufficient mainstreaming of disability into ECOWAS’ broader agenda, its limited institutional capacity and the inadequate financing of the organisation’s disability initiatives. Despite its ambitious scope, the Regional Action Plan on Disability Inclusion largely depends on funding from external donors, which undermines the regional ownership and sustainability of the initiative (ECOWAS, 2024). By the same token, disability rights have gained currency among regional institutions, as their member states have adopted ostensibly progressive policies on disability rights to conform with global standards even while the implementation of those measures at home is inadequate (European Disability Forum, UKaid & International Disability Alliance, 2019).

GAPS AND CHALLENGES IN ECOWAS REGIONAL PLAN ON DISABILITY INCLUSION

Despite the adoption of the Regional Action Plan on Disability Inclusion, disability has not been insufficiently mainstreamed into ECOWAS’s broader agenda for security cooperation, humanitarian affairs and inclusive development. The region’s broader disability framework faces significant challenges related to policy coherence, institutional capacity, implementation and funding.

Core ECOWAS instruments like the Conflict Prevention Mechanism and Humanitarian Framework lack explicit reference to the specific needs of PWDs, creating room for their exclusion from humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding initiatives. The Regional Action Plan on Disability Inclusion has not been properly integrated into regional frameworks on conflict prevention, humanitarian response and economic development. Instead, it exists in isolation to the ECOWAS Vision 2050's five pillars (peace and security; governance and the rule of law; economic integration and interconnectivity; transformation and inclusive development; and social inclusion). This means disability considerations were not systematically built into these critical areas from the outset.

In addition, ECOWAS currently lacks a centralised mechanism to coordinate disability policies across different sectors. Amid the humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel that has caused the displacement crisis of more than 4 million people, ECOWAS has implemented interventions that have excluded PWDs (World Bank, 2021). Facilities such as emergency shelters, distribution points and other infrastructure are not easily accessible to them. Humanitarian assessment exercises excluded PWDs by designing assessment methodologies without designing specific questions about disability, selecting physical locations without ramps or other accommodations, failing to include sign language and other alternative communication formats, employing data collection and analysis methods that do not capture the complexity of disabled populations and insufficient engagement with organisations representing PWDs.

ECOWAS' Department of Human Development and Social Affairs, which is tasked with promoting social inclusion, protecting vulnerable groups and improving the quality of life of citizens in West Africa, is responsible for advancing disability inclusion in the region by coordinating disability policies, supporting efforts by the bloc's members to align domestic frameworks with the CRPD and promoting the equitable access of PWDs in West Africa to social services. However, the department lacks the institutional capacity to fulfill its broad mandate due to its limited powers and legitimacy within the ECOWAS Commission to coordinate disability policy, as well as a lack of sufficient funding to implement inclusion programs in the region. Broadly speaking, disability is still viewed as a welfare issue rather than a concept of human rights and governance. This siloed approach makes it difficult for policymakers to integrate domestic policies on disability into security and regional frameworks for peacebuilding, crisis response and economic development, resulting in a persistent gap between ECOWAS' stated commitment to disability inclusion and the practical implementation of its policies.

RECOMMENDATION

This paper makes the following recommendations in line with the ECOWAS Commission's mandate, and in alignment with the pillars of ECOWAS Vision 2050.

- **The creation of a regional Disability Data Initiative.** ECOWAS should establish a regional Disability Data Initiative to serve as a centralised platform for collecting, analyzing and disseminating disability-related data among the bloc's members. This platform would consolidate data on disabled communities in West Africa, map geographic disparities in the region and identify systemic barriers to disability inclusion. It should standardize data collection using the Washington Group short set on functioning (WG-SS) which was used in nine West African countries as of 2023. National statistics offices could form technical partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) to improve data collection.
- **Establish a disability-inclusive crisis framework.** In order to ensure that PWDs can be properly safeguarded during emergencies, ECOWAS should implement a Disability-Inclusive Crisis Framework. This initiative, which would be rooted in accessibility, non-discrimination, equal participation and resilience, would provide the bloc's members with clear guidelines for disability-inclusive crisis preparedness, response and recovery.
- **A Regional Disability-Inclusive Crisis Task Force would be tasked with coordinating the planning, monitoring and evaluation of disability-inclusive emergency operations.** This task force, which would include organizations representing PWDs, should serve as the institutional home of ECOWAS' disability inclusion efforts. Going forward, the bloc must engage CSOs and women's organizations to design accessible evacuation plans and information systems, while emergency responders must be trained to deliver disability-inclusive response protocols.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hussain Zandam is a global health and disability policy researcher whose work bridges data, equity, and impact on inclusive development and health equity. He currently serves as a Research Analyst at the Human Services Research Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and has previously worked as a Research Scientist at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University. Dr. Zandam's research examines how disability inclusion shapes health outcomes, social protection, and development policy across diverse settings—from U.S. health systems to Sub-Saharan Africa.

A recipient of the Switzer Research Fellowship from the U.S. National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), Dr. Zandam has authored several peer-reviewed publications and contributed to global and regional policy dialogues on inclusion and sustainable development.

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