Disability, Poverty, and Schooling in Developing Countries

Children with disabilities are less likely to acquire the education they need to earn high incomes and avoid poverty

The target of universal education remains elusive: worldwide, around 100 million children of primary school age are not in school. Children with disabilities face particular hurdles in attending, and completing, school in developing countries.

While there has been policy discussion about interventions to increase access to schooling for children with disabilities, there has been little systematic empirical analysis on which to base this policy. A large part of the reason for this is the lack of appropriate and comparable data. A new study by Filmer aims to start filling some gaps in knowledge using existing Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, and other Integrated Household Surveys. The 14 surveys—the earliest from 1992 and the most recent from 2004—provide data on the prevalence of disability and its association with poverty and schooling in 1 transition and 12 developing economies.

Defining disability is complicated—and controversial. Purely medical definitions are giving way to definitions that incorporate continuous measures of the activities that people can undertake, the extent of participation in society and social and civic life, and the role of adaptive technologies. The definitions of disability in the data sets used in the analysis are most closely consistent with a focus on impairment—such as having a missing limb or limited or no sight.

But there is much variation across the surveys. In the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey, for example, the disability question includes a detailed list of potential cases: “amputation of one limb; amputation of more than one limb; unable to use one limb; unable to use more than one limb; paralyzed lower limbs only; paralyzed all four limbs.” In the Jamaica survey, by contrast, there is one category, defined simply as a household member having a “physical or mental disability.” The Mongolia survey describes sight and hearing problems as seeing or hearing “with difficulty,” while others typically characterize such problems as “blind” and “deaf.”

Despite these limitations the data are revealing. Consistent with similar surveys, the 14 surveys identify around 1–2 percent of the population as having a disability. Data for Cambodia, with two surveys and varying definitions, suggest that the percentage is not always sensitive to the exact definition: different definitions can give similar prevalence rates, and vice versa. In addition, other aspects of the surveys, such as the training of enumerators or the use to which interviewees expect the survey to be put, might affect estimated prevalence rates.

The surveys provide little evidence to suggest that youth with disabilities are generally more or less likely to live in richer or poorer households. Adults with disabilities, however, typically live in poorer households—though much of this association comes from the fact that adults with disabilities have lower educational attainment, which leads to lower economic status.

Given this finding, it is particularly worrisome that youth with disabilities are almost always substantially less likely to participate in schooling. Children with disabilities are less likely to start school and in some countries have lower transition rates, resulting in lower schooling attainment.

The deficit in school participation associated with disability is typically larger than those associated with other characteristics, such as gender, rural residence, or economic status (see figure).
This analysis suggests that disability is associated with long-run poverty: children with disabilities are less likely to acquire the human capital that will allow them to earn higher incomes. In all countries the schooling gap between children with a disability and those without one starts at grade 1. That suggests that efforts to boost the enrollment of children with disabilities are needed at the earliest grades. And the finding that the disability deficit widens from grade to grade in countries that have achieved high enrollment among children without a disability suggests that special effort may be needed to keep youth with disabilities in school—once they have started attending—in all countries.

The findings of the analysis should be treated as tentative. The goal was to exploit existing data to help orient policy, but the clearest message is that better data are needed. Establishing clear and consistent measures of disability for household surveys and national censuses would be a start. A recent review suggests that questions focusing on functionality, limited to a core set of activities, and allowing for variation in the degree of functional limitation (rather than simply the presence or absence of a limitation) should be preferred.

Implementing these questions in samples with sufficient observations to allow detailed analysis will be needed to build the quantitative evidence base for empirically grounded policies. An important complement to that analysis would be evaluations of the impact of alternative interventions to increase the enrollment of children with disabilities.

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