

Special Needs Education in Ethiopian Higher Education as a Discipline

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Abstract: This review aims to discuss the three-decade process of developing a platform for special needs and inclusive education (SNIE) in Ethiopia's higher education institutions. Although the Education and Training Policy of 1994 recognized the rights of children with disabilities, it only focused on primary education, sidelining higher education and funding. The review focuses on the role of international collaborations with Finland and Norway in developing Ethiopia's first SNIE postgraduate programmes at Addis Ababa University (AAU). The development has since then expanded to other universities in the country, including Dilla University, Bahir Dar University, and Jimma University. Despite this development in SNIE in Ethiopia, there are still major barriers in the implementation of Inclusive Education. Using a systematic review of documents from 1990 to 2025, the author undertook an analysis of policy frameworks and practices. The results revealed that while there is a renewed commitment to inclusion in the 2023 Education and Training Policy, it is missing from the strategies for higher education and the recognition of Ethiopian Sign Language. The results of the review are that while capacity has improved as a result of professional development, systemic changes are necessary to ensure that quality higher education is accessible to all learners, regardless of their abilities.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Needs Education, Education Policy, Teacher Training, Capacity Building

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Background

The two terms, Special Needs Education and Inclusive Education, are related and share similarities in that they strive to provide equal learning opportunities for all students in the classroom, with special attention to students with learning barriers resulting from disability and other differences. Although with different focuses, they complement each other in modern education systems.

Special Needs Education is the branch of education that deals with issues related to meeting the unique and varying learning needs of students who might need extra assistance to ensure they benefit from education. It is based on modern concepts of disability, including the social model of disability, which is based on the removal of barriers to full participation in education. Instead of seeing disability as being caused by individuals, modern concepts of disability recognize that many barriers to education are caused by rigid education systems and school environments. Thus, Special Needs Education is based on changing teaching methods, materials, and school environments using concepts such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which are flexible enough to deal with the diversity of students' needs (Oliver, 2013; Terzi, 2005).

On the other hand, Inclusive Education is a broader educational process in which a school or learning institution seeks to change its culture, policies, and practices to ensure that all students, regardless of their ability, background, or difference, are able to learn together in the same educational environment. Inclusive Education is not about integrating students with special needs into a mainstream classroom; it is about transforming education systems to ensure that every student is able to succeed in a learning environment that is most suitable and beneficial to them. Inclusive Education is a unified pedagogical concept in which diversity is considered a normal and valued aspect of human development, and education institutions can respond to this diversity

effectively and efficiently (Ainscow, 2005; UNESCO, 1994; Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

In this regard, Special Needs Education offers the professional knowledge, strategies, and mechanisms required to meet learning diversity, while Inclusive Education offers the educational ideals and the educational system changes required to ensure the meaningful inclusion of all learners in the mainstream educational system. Thus, the two work hand in hand to ensure the development of equitable and accessible educational systems that embrace the diversity of all learners.

Development of Special Needs Education (SNE) in Ethiopian higher education has been sparse, recent, and unequal. The watershed moment was the 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP), which for the first time openly recognized the right of children with disabilities to learn (TGE, 1994). Though this policy largely focused on general and primary education with little regard for higher education, it introduced no definite policy or support mechanisms for inclusion. Therefore, universities were left without mandates, funds, or training programmes to adequately accommodate students with disabilities or prepare professionals in the skills of Inclusive Education until 1994.

Despite this disconnection, external collaborations were essential to early progress. The Government of Finland, for instance, via institutions like FINNIDA, and Norwegian collaborations like the NURAD programme supported capacity building for Inclusive Education in Ethiopia during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Johnsen, 2001; Tirussew, 2000). Addis Ababa University (AAU) was a pioneer with the introduction of Ethiopia's first postgraduate courses in Special Needs Education through curriculum development, research exchange, and capacity building for staff offering these courses. This contributed a great deal to SNE as an academic discipline and as a professional practice (Alemayehu, 2021).

Encouraged by Addis Ababa University's initial initiative, other universities, such as Dilla, Bahir Dar, Kotebe, Haramaya, Gondar, and Jimma, initiated the inclusion of special needs and Inclusive Education within their teacher training curricula, building their own resources progressively in this important field, utilizing the graduates from AAU. The project at Addis Ababa University was sponsored primarily by Nordic development organizations, which subsequently spurred expanding awareness and capacity for inclusion across the country (Belay, Daniel & Teka, 2025).

Despite such inspiring beginnings, in 1994 and 1998, SNE development in Ethiopian tertiary education remained irregular and project-dominated, at least for a period of time. There is no comprehensive national policy to ensure consistent quality, funding, or standardization of the universities. The majority of institutions even today lack affordable infrastructure, disability inclusion policies, and formal disability support services for students (Alemayehu, 2021; Belay et al., 2025). For example, AAU's research by Alemayehu captures systemic barriers in the form of physical inaccessibility, insufficient accessible learning materials, and poor academic accommodations that significantly impact students with disabilities in achieving full university life (Alemayehu, 2021). Moreover, the latest 2023 Education and Training Policy re-emphasizes Ethiopia's commitment to Inclusive Education under SDG 4, but fails to offer concrete strategies for inclusion in tertiary education. It significantly denies recognition of Ethiopian Sign Language and lacks provisions for universities to develop disability-sensitive pedagogical practices and facilities (MoE, 2023; Belay, Daniel & Teka, 2025). Despite all these problems, SNE programmes started as projects have become sustainable and have now become universities' programmes financed by the government since 2007. Now, many universities and colleges have started SNE programmes at the Diploma, Bachelor, Master, and PhD levels, with all the problems in higher education institutions.

Statement of the Problem

Despite Ethiopia's ongoing effort in advancing Inclusive Education through policy and programmes, there remain severe challenges in the successful implementation of these policies and programmes, especially in institutions of higher education. There is a considerable gap between policy rhetoric and realities on the ground, and a vast majority of students with disabilities and special needs still face obstacles in terms of access, participation, and attainment. Additionally, limited research and data on inclusive higher education practices hinder the development of targeted strategies for addressing these challenges. Further, stakeholder coordination and resource constraints continue to delay progress toward truly inclusive learning environments. This gap makes evident the urgency for a detailed review that investigates historical development, policy frameworks, implementation practice, and existing research for examining strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for supporting Inclusive Education at every level, and more specifically in higher education, with the following particular objectives:

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the historical development and the current status of inclusive and Special Needs Education policy and practice in Ethiopia, particularly in higher education institutions.
2. To analyze key policy documents, reports, and research studies that have informed Inclusive Education, identifying successes, challenges, and gaps in implementation across all levels of education.
3. To assess the contribution and role of national and international stakeholders, including government agencies, universities, and international organizations, in facilitating Inclusive Education in Ethiopia's education system, specifically in higher education institutions.

4. To determine gaps in practice and research over time, and provide informed recommendations to help improve policy, practice, and research for Inclusive Education, including higher education, in the future.

Methodology

A systematic review was designed to extensively analyze the evolution and implementation of inclusive and Special Needs Education policy and practice in Ethiopia in the last several decades. To acquire a comprehensive understanding, primary and secondary sources of data were employed.

Sampling

The review sought to select relevant documents, studies, policy papers, reports, and scholarly articles from the start of the 1994 to 2025. The inclusion criteria for the sampling are those that focus on Special Needs and Inclusive Education between the aforementioned years. As a result, purposive sampling was utilized in the sampling design so as to gather significant government publications (e.g., Ministry of Education strategic plans and policies), international agency reports (UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank), and Ethiopian and international university scholarly research. Attention was given to identifying key documents and research that affected Special Needs and Inclusive Education policy and practice during this period. Totally, 50 references were used.

Data Collection Instruments

Information was collected through a systematic search of online databases, such as IERIC academic libraries, government websites, and databases of international organizations such as UNESCO. Interview and questionnaire data from previous empirical studies of

Inclusive Education were also examined. A data extraction form with a fixed template was used to record significant facts such as orientation of the study, methodology, findings, and cited problems or gaps.

Data Analysis

Data collected were processed thematically to identify dominant themes, trends being experienced, and challenges over time. A chronological approach helped to map the evolution of policies and practices, while content analysis was applied to policy documents and reports to establish the congruence of policy plans with the real implementation. Differences were used to identify gaps in years with fewer studies or fewer reports, reflecting years where monitoring and evaluation were scant or absent.

Reporting Style and Themes

The findings of this review will be communicated in a brief and engaging narrative format. The report accounts for the history of how special needs and Inclusive Education have evolved in Ethiopia, centering on higher learning institutions, specifically highlighting crucial successes, challenges, and points needing focused attention. The narrative charts the significant events in a timeline, including changes in the country's policies, teacher education reforms, and international cooperation with nations such as Finland and Norway. The narrative also zeroes in on crucial phases of advancement and stagnation, thereby providing readers with an easier understanding of what has shaped today's landscape.

Special attention is given to exploring the policy-practice gaps. The report looks at where national inclusion commitments continue not to have reached teachers' everyday practice in teacher training colleges and universities. This analysis offers instructive insights into why some reforms are effective, and some are not. In addition to recording

national-level trends, the report also includes illustrations drawn from significant institutions such as Addis Ababa University, where Special Needs Education has set promising precedents through innovative methodologies. Where possible, the perspectives of educators, policymakers, and students' perceptions are woven into the analysis to provide the findings with grounding in daily life.

Finally, the report concludes by offering practical recommendations and identifying areas that need further research. It encourages closer connections between teacher training, local research, and inclusive policy-making and argues that sustainable progress will require collaboration across sectors, continuous professional learning, and dedicated leadership at all levels.

Gaps in Research and Teacher Preparation

The absence of a national quality assurance or accreditation system for Inclusive Education has the following consequence: programmes of teacher preparation are extremely varied. The majority of teachers identify themselves as being insufficiently prepared to support students with disabilities, indicating a distinct necessity for targeted professional development and continuous standards (Yoseph & Alemayehu, 2025).

Empirical studies of SNE at Ethiopian universities are also limited. Apart from teacher attitudes and primary education, longitudinal or qualitative studies of students with disabilities at the tertiary level are few (Chernet & Endrerud, 2004; Alemayehu, 2021). Above all, perhaps, their own voices are rarely at the forefront of research or policy discussions, and most urgently there is the unanswered question of how they experience life at university, what they most need, and best-practice inclusive pedagogy. An additional deterrent is the lack of research infrastructure and funds in Ethiopian universities, limiting long-term practice-oriented research. Interaction between higher education institutions, organizations dealing with disability, and

policymakers remains low, preventing translation of research into effective reforms.

Evolution of Modern Education in Ethiopia

Education has deep historical roots in Ethiopia, with significant influences from the Orthodox Church, which only offered religious and classical education to boys. However, the modern era of education began to take root during Emperor Menelik II's rule (1889-1913) to provide boys with appropriate knowledge and skills for military, civil service, and international relations, such as the ability to communicate fluently in other languages, such as English (Alemayehu, 2000; Tadesse, 2018).

During Emperor Haile Selassie's rule (1913-1974), there was institutionalization and expansion of education, although it was still oriented towards males and excluded children with disabilities. A significant policy change was made in 1963, declaring Amharic the sole medium of instruction, promoting national identity (Belew, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Throughout the twentieth century, Ethiopia's educational policy has been shaped by different models, such as the British, North American, and Soviet models, which had significant effects on Ethiopia's educational system (Getahun, 2021). After the Transitional Government of Ethiopia took power in 1991, there emerged about 9,000 schools managed by different actors such as government agencies, private organizations, mission bodies, Christian churches, and Muslim Koranic schools (MOE/FINNIDA, 1993; Tessema, 2019).

The prevailing policy in education focuses on decentralization in recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. Primary education lasts 8 years and is divided into two cycles. In the first cycle of grades 1-3, all subjects are taught by one teacher in a self-contained classroom. There is no repetition of classes to promote continuous learning (Ministry of Education, 2020; Bekele, 2022).

Despite all these reforms in the Ethiopian education system, there still remains a lot to be achieved. In the mid-1990s, more than 80% of Ethiopians were without formal education (UNESCO, 2002). Although there has been progress in terms of access in the last few decades, inequalities persist (World Bank, 2023; EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2024).

Evolution of Special Education in Ethiopia

Special education in Ethiopia has existed for over a century, dating back to the early years of the introduction of formal education. The first school for the disabled was opened in 1917 in Dembi Dollo, western Ethiopia, by Rev. Gidada, who was functionally blind but trained in Braille literacy by the Swedish missionaries. Rev. Gidada, the father of Dr. Negasso Gidada, President of Ethiopia from 1995 to 2001, is recognized as the first instructor of special education in Ethiopia (Alemayehu, 2000; Getachew, 2023).

The activities of missionaries from America, Finland, and Sweden contributed greatly to the establishment of several special education schools and teacher training in braille literacy, mobility, and other skills for people with visual, hearing, and physical impairments (MOE & UNESCO IBE, 2021). Until the 1980s, the Ethiopian government's involvement in the development of special education remained low, with sporadic support not integrated into the national education policy (Alemayehu, 2000).

However, recent estimates indicate some progress. Previously, Ethiopia had 15 special day schools, 5 residential schools, and more than 285 special classes in general education schools (MoE, 2012). Although the number of special classes has increased, that of special schools and residential centres has remained small. Currently, children with disabilities in Ethiopia are the least likely to be in school, and those in schools face problems such as poor facilities, untrained staff, and lack of learning materials (UNICEF, 2022).

The Education and Training Policy of 1994 recognized the right to education for children with special needs, and the government has been working towards providing these children with the right to education. However, the implementation has been poor, particularly in rural areas (MoE, 2023). The government's renewed interest in Inclusive Education stems from its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, which include the attainment of "inclusive and equitable quality education for all" in Ethiopia. This requires the development of a well-organized and well-funded Special Needs Education system, including basic and higher levels of learning (Belay, Daniel, & Teka, 2025; Alemayehu, 2021).

Educating Teachers in Special Needs Education in Ethiopia

The history of training teachers in Special Needs Education (SNE) in Ethiopia has taken a path similar to that of foreign countries in earlier days, which was casual but later became more formal. In earlier days, it was foreign missionaries who pioneered the training of teachers in special education in Ethiopia. The missionaries brought their own teachers who imparted short-term training to teachers in Ethiopia. The training was casual and had no long-term planning and was mainly based on the types of disabilities each school catered to (Alemayehu, 2000; Pankhurst, 1990).

Most of these teachers were not formally prepared in special education before entering their profession and learned their craft through on-the-job mentoring or apprenticeship in schools such as Alpha School for the Deaf, Mekanisa School, Hosanna School for the Deaf, Sebeta School for the Blind, Wolaita School for the Blind, and Bako School for the Blind. In the 1980s, Ethiopian teachers also took short-term training in various countries to teach deaf and blind students (Alemayehu, 2000; MoE, 2012). Such a model of teacher training in a specific specialty, such as schools for the blind or deaf, is reminiscent of the beginnings of special education teacher training in many European countries (Johnsen, 2001).

For example, in the Nordic countries, teacher training for those working with children with sensory, physical, or intellectual disabilities began with training on the job in special institutions, supplemented with reading circles, seminars, and study tours (Johnsen, 2001; Tøssebro & Ytterhus, 2006). This has gradually been replaced with more formal and integrated approaches to teacher training. For example, in Norway, the Norwegian Institute for Special Education (NISE) was established in 1961 and later developed into an integrated department of the University of Oslo, offering training programmes ranging from the bachelor's to the doctoral levels (Johnsen, 2001).

Two main patterns of development of special education worldwide can be identified. The first model focused on specialization and institutionalization, with teacher training taking place in special institutions for children with specific disabilities, such as the blind or the deaf. Such institutions were usually isolated from the mainstream educational system and therefore did not allow for integration (Skrtic, 1991; Florian, 2007).

The second direction aimed at moving towards a more inclusive and holistic approach, and this is most evident in post-revolutionary Russia. In fact, after the revolution in 1917, there was a significant population of

vulnerable children, and many were orphans and poverty-stricken. In response to these conditions, there were educational reforms aimed at increasing the inclusivity of marginalized children. In fact, with the leadership of Lev Vygotsky at the Institute of Defectology in the 1920s, there was the emergence of a new perspective on disability, which saw the issue not just as the individual's problem but also as influenced by the social and developmental context (Vygotsky, 1993; Daniels, 2005).

Vygotsky and his associates proposed that all children, despite their ability level, had the potential to learn. These ideas, which were also influenced by other pioneers such as Édouard Séguin, focused on the potential for development that each child possesses and proposed educational systems that would accommodate children's needs without excluding them (Daniels, 2005; Florian, 2007). These two global trends of specialization and integration continue to impact the way special education services are provided in different countries today. Despite the fact that both models paved the way for the advancement of knowledge and practice, they also pointed out the limitations and segregation that children with disabilities often faced from their families and communities (Florian, 2007; Tøssebro & Ytterhus, 2006).

Ethiopia's Shift: From Donor Support to Homegrown Skills

The Ethiopian experience resonates with elements of both global trends. The first government-initiated effort at systematic training of special education teachers commenced in 1993 with a six-month certificate course at the Nazareth Teacher Training Institute (later renamed Adama Teachers Training College), funded by UNICEF. Although of short duration, having graduated a total of 62 teachers prior to phasing out due to insufficient funds and institutional commitment, it was the first major milestone (MOE/FINNIDA, 1993). It opened special classes in regular schools for children with hearing, visual, and intellectual disabilities. The second milestone was the establishment of a special teacher education centre in 1995/96 in

Sebeta School for the blind, by the Government of Finland and the Ministry of Education.

This centre was later retained and developed into College of Special Needs Education, though it gradually lost strength as a Special Needs Education centre. The centre was not just meant to train special education teachers in a one-year in-service programme, but also to serve as a national resource and assessment centre, offering support to schools and regional education bureaus across the country (Alemayehu, 2021). Around the millennium turn, a new generation of Ethiopian scholars with postgraduate degrees from abroad returned home and began advocating for Inclusive Education. Their efforts coincided with the global momentum created by the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which signaled a paradigm shift towards the integration of students with disabilities into ordinary classrooms and emphasized education for all (EFA). Ethiopia adopted the EFA agenda in 1994, making Inclusive Education a national goal.

Towards Higher Education and Comprehensive Training

In 1998, the first Master of Arts in Special Needs Education was initiated at Addis Ababa University (AAU) in the Department of Psychology, in cooperation with the University of Oslo, financed by NURAD. This development indicated a move from ad hoc training to systematic, academic, and research-based teacher education. Addis Ababa University sustained the donor-assisted Special Needs Education programme by adding more programmes at bachelor's and PhD levels. Immediately after that, the Department of Special Needs Education became a full-fledged Department on May 4, 2007, with three programmes: BA, MA, and PhD. All three programmes were the first of their kind in Ethiopia, and the PhD one became the first Education programme in the then College of Education of Addis Ababa University. Soon after AAU, Bachelor of Arts and Master's programmes in SNE started in other public universities such as Dilla, Haromaya,

Kotebe, Bahir Dar, Gondar, and other universities, being sustainable (Belay, Daniel & Teka, 2025). They aimed to prepare teachers and educational leaders to teach in special schools and in inclusive classrooms for students with diverse educational needs.

They promoted an integrated model, connecting academic theory, practice training, and inclusive pedagogy. Despite progress, there remain challenges. Many teachers still have no pre-service exposure to Inclusive Education, and in-service training opportunities differ across locations (UNICEF, 2022). Besides, the dominant curriculum of teacher education colleges gives peripheral attention to inclusive practices or universal design for learning (Yoseph & Alemayehhu, 2025). Ethiopia's Education and Training Policy (2023) acknowledges the right to education for learners with disabilities but is evasive in giving binding standards for teacher preparation to teach in inclusive settings (MoE, 2023).

Ethiopia and Finland: A Journey of Partnership in Special Needs Education

As a witness and active participant in the journey of Special Needs Education in Ethiopia, it is a matter of responsibility and obligation on the author's part to enlighten readers about the significant contributions made by Finland. Such experiences and observations are not based on written information and second-hand knowledge alone, but also on practical experiences and first-hand information about how Finland's contributions to Ethiopia's special education sector have impacted institutions and individuals. Finland's contributions to special education in Ethiopia are not limited to technical assistance alone, but also include contributions to the training of professionals and the development of key infrastructure and a more "inclusive" attitude in Ethiopian education (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

The contribution has been a silent but effective driver in guiding Ethiopia in addressing Special Needs Education. While there was only a low-key academic exchange in the early 1980s, it eventually blossomed into a lifelong engagement that enabled capacity building, professional development, and Inclusive Education development in Ethiopia (Johnsen, 2001; MoE, 2012).

The journey started when Ethiopia joined the STAFRICA Project at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Six students from Ethiopia were among those who benefited from the opportunities to study Special Needs Education at the university, alongside other African students. After completing their courses in Finland, they returned to their home country to pioneer Special Needs Education development in the country, particularly at Adama Teacher Training College (Johnsen, 2001; MoE, 2012). This marked the beginning of a national movement in Special Needs Education in Ethiopia.

A breakthrough was achieved between 1994 and 1998 through support for a more comprehensive framework of cooperation through a bilateral agreement with the Ministry of Education of Ethiopia. Within this framework, in collaboration with the University of Joensuu, the Support to Special Education in Ethiopia Project was initiated. This involved not only training but also strengthening the entire special education system (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

During this period, 26 students achieved their bachelor's degrees while 18 did their master's degrees through a collaboration between Ethiopian and Finnish educators. Among the most outstanding achievements of this collaboration was the establishment of a National Special Education Resource Centre in Sebeta. This was equipped with books and materials and became instrumental in training professionals and developing resources. In addition to this, the project implemented in-service teacher training programmes and held awareness

campaigns to promote societal and educational understanding of disability (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

Another significant milestone was the 1995 baseline study conducted to establish the status quo of children with disabilities in Ethiopia. The study identified challenges to education, thus enabling policymakers and educators to better understand problems faced by children with disabilities in accessing education (MoE, 1995; UNESCO, 2020).

The partnership between Ethiopia and Finland has been continuous beyond the initial project implementation. Since 2003, the partnership has taken different forms, including the establishment of new resource centres and technical assistance programmes. Six Ethiopian education experts completed their PhDs in Finland, later becoming prominent in the development of Inclusive Education policy and research in Ethiopia. Some of these experts are currently based at Addis Ababa University, where they are involved in the training of new generations of teachers and researchers in special needs and Inclusive Education (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

Most recently, under the Teacher Education Development Programme (TEDP), Finland has assisted in policy development, research, and implementation in the regions on issues related to Inclusive Education. This has involved developing teaching materials, supporting academic research, and supporting education bureaus in the regions in implementing Inclusive Education more effectively (MoE, 2012; World Bank, 2013).

Because of this long-standing partnership, Ethiopia has transitioned from isolated pilot initiatives to a more integrated national approach to Inclusive Education. Although there are still major issues to be addressed, notably in implementation, it is evident from this transition that positive change is possible with long-term international cooperation and national commitment. The partnership between

Ethiopia and Finland is, therefore, an important example of positive and respectful international engagement to advance Inclusive Education (UNESCO, 2020; MoE, 2012).

Ethiopia's Cooperation with Norway in Special Needs Education

Ethiopia's cooperation with Norway began in the early 1990s and has also played a crucial role in developing capacity for Special Needs Education and inclusive practices. This collaborative effort has been spearheaded primarily by Addis Ababa University (AAU) in partnership with Norwegian universities, including the University of Bergen and the University of Oslo.

The first major project, launched in 1990 in cooperation with the Centre for International Health (University of Bergen), was in the field of early psychosocial intervention. The project led to the completion of two Ethiopian Master's and three PhD dissertations, building a research foundation in early childhood special education (Rye, 2001; Teka, 1996; Zelalem, 2001).

This was followed by a second project, Competence Building in Special Education, coordinated by the Department of Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo and funded by the Norwegian Council for Higher Education's Programme for Development Research and Education (NUFU). Its primary goal was to establish a Master's programme in Special Needs Education at AAU, which has continued to be one of the most highly regarded programmes of its kind in Ethiopia (Endrerud, 2000; NUFU, 1999).

By 2005, fifty students had graduated from the programme, and its annual intake had increased to thirty. With long-term sustainability in mind, the programme prioritized local PhD training for university lecturers. Some personnel have since gained their doctorate degrees in Norway, with ongoing support from AAU and the University of Oslo.

The third phase of the long-standing collaboration between Ethiopia and Norway created a further step when the Research and Innovation towards Inclusion project (NUFU 35/2002) took off.

The project was not concerned with policy or theory, but with real classrooms, actual students, and tangible ways of making education inclusive. One of its core aims was to examine how Inclusive Education was being implemented at the grassroots level. Researchers conducted in-depth case studies in schools across Addis Ababa to find out what was working, what was not, and how things could be done better to support children with varying learning needs. But the project did not stop at a research level but evolved to developing intervention strategies that teachers and schools could use to develop more inclusive teaching and learning environments. This included critical thinking about pedagogy, support systems, and how to equip educators with what they require to teach all children, and not just the majority. A major strength of this phase was the priority given to developing local academic capacity.

Over 13 Ethiopian students were sponsored to pursue their MPhil degrees in Special Needs Education at the University of Oslo. This experience not only upgraded their knowledge but also improved the Ethiopian education landscape. These students were the beneficiaries of two significant Norwegian scholarship schemes: the Norad Fellowship Programme (NFP), which funds higher education for students from the Global South, and the Quota Programme, run by the Norwegian Ministry of Education to foster international academic cooperation. This era of collaboration showed a clear shift toward research-driven, long-term transformation. Ethiopia and Norway were not simply exchanging ideas, but co-developing policy and knowledge based on both research and lived experience. This spirit of partnership lives on today, as both countries strive to advance Inclusive Education through two-way learning, cultural exchange, and respect.

Impact of Development Cooperation

Ethiopia's Special Needs Education (SNE) collaboration with Finland and Norway represents not just bilateral partnerships, but also prolonged, ongoing processes that have had a deep impact on the nation's education system. Initiated as separate projects, these two strands of collaboration became entangled through the energetic participation of major researchers and practitioners at Addis Ababa University (AAU), several of whom were fundamental to both partnerships.

While there has been no explicit coordination between the Norwegian and Finnish partners, the overall effect of these activities has been a synergistic development of Special Needs Education, especially in higher education and teacher education. Some students graduating from Finnish-supported BA programmes went on to MA studies in Addis Ababa or Oslo, while others continued with doctoral studies in Finland, Norway, or elsewhere. More and more of these professionals have returned to Ethiopia and are now actively engaged in national education systems, policies, and institutions.

However, up to the present time, no systematic, independent impact evaluation has been carried out to measure the success of these cooperation programmes in transforming access to and quality of education for children with disabilities. While internal reports and reviews (e.g., NORAD, 2005; MoE, 2023) provide some data, the absence of clear and quantifiable outcome indicators remains a challenge. What is, therefore, known about impact is based on informal observations and anecdotal evidence by stakeholders with regard to the programmes.

Professional Outcomes

Where Are the Graduates Now?

Within the last two decades or so, Ethiopia's partnership with Finland and Norway has gradually and steadily produced a new generation of professionals in the area of Special Needs Education (SNE). Although there is a lack of formal tracking of graduates, unofficial tracking and observations indicate that graduates are making a positive impact in various areas of education (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

At various higher learning institutions in Ethiopia, many of the graduates of the MA in SNE programme are currently occupying academic positions in various universities and teacher training institutions throughout the country. At Addis Ababa University, many of the graduates of the SNE programme who underwent their training in Finland and Norway are actively engaged in teaching and research in special needs and Inclusive Education. Sebeta College, which was originally established with Finnish assistance, still functions as a key hub in the area of Inclusive Education, and many of these trained professionals are still in active service there. Private teacher training colleges are also beginning to realize the value of SNE graduates and are actively recruiting them to teach various subjects in psychology, pedagogy, and Inclusive Education (MoE, 2012; Johnsen, 2001).

This influence is also seen in government institutions. Currently, several of the MA graduates are working in the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and in several of the regional education bureaus. They are involved in developing policies, designing curricula, and developing teacher training programmes in Inclusive Education. However, there is an uneven distribution of these professionals in the regions. While there is a higher concentration of SNE professionals in Addis Ababa,

there are few dedicated personnel working in Special Needs Education in several of the other regions (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

In primary and secondary schools, the contribution of SNE graduates is multifaceted. Currently, over 400 SNE graduates from the Sebeta training programmes are working in special schools and integrated units in several regions of Ethiopia. However, there is a need for more professionals at the primary and lower levels of schooling, particularly in pre-schools where children with disabilities need to be identified and provided with appropriate interventions (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2013).

Outside of the education sector, SNE-trained professionals have also been able to find employment in non-governmental organizations as programme officers, rehabilitation specialists, and trainers in promoting Inclusive Education and disability rights in various communities. Their work essentially creates a bridge that narrows the gap in bringing education to those who would otherwise not have the opportunity (Miles & Singal, 2010; UNESCO, 2020).

Although there are many positive contributions to be celebrated regarding SNE-trained professionals, it is also important to acknowledge that not all of their efforts and contributions have been entirely successful. For instance, it is reported that there are recruitment and placement problems that have led to SNE-trained professionals being placed in jobs that are not in their area of specialization. Such examples include being placed to teach subjects like chemistry in secondary schools, when in fact they are not qualified to teach that subject (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

Systemic and Structural Changes

While Ethiopia has made remarkable progress in building professional capacity in Special Needs Education (SNE), the overall impact at the system level remains modest. One of the most visible achievements to date, in 2025, is the MA programme in SNE at Addis Ababa University (AAU), which is now heading towards self-sufficiency in terms of faculty. This is a giant step forward, especially considering the programme's original reliance on external support, namely from Finland. However, there is still no national undergraduate programme in SNE to ensure the continuity of trained professionals. This creates an enormous gap because most regions still do not have adequately trained teachers at the foundational levels of the education system.

Currently, MA students at AAU come from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, including psychology, general education, and in-service teacher training. Many have valuable work experience in schools, government ministries, and NGOs, which they draw upon to enrich classroom discussion and research with real-world insights. Yet, there is a notable absence of primary and lower secondary school teachers in these graduate programmes mainly because of the disparity between the certificate-level preparation many primary school teachers have had and the university-level requirements for graduate study.

This discrepancy is particularly concerning because early intervention is paramount in Inclusive Education, and support for children with special educational needs is most effective when it begins in early childhood and during elementary school years. If teachers who teach at these lower levels are not brought into the higher-level training program, the advantages of Inclusive Education remain curtailed, though it is most necessary at this level.

An additional challenge is the gender imbalance in the SNE programme enrolment. Despite national efforts to increase female uptake in higher education and teacher training, women are underrepresented in the profession (NORAD, 2022). Bridging this divide will be important to ensuring that SNE is not only inclusive in its aspirations but also in the diversity of those leading change.

From Individual Advancement to System Change?

Among the overriding questions that arise when one reflects on Ethiopia's progress in Special Needs Education (SNE) is whether the capacity built in individuals through international partnerships has, in fact, resulted in broader changes across the education system. In other words, borrowing Tobin's (1999) questions on comparative education, what effect, if any, does development cooperation have on policy and practice? And can academic advancement at the individual level ripple outward to transform institutions as a whole?

In the Ethiopian case, the answer is in the direction of cautious optimism. There is clear evidence that professionalization of SNE is advancing rapidly. More well-trained teachers, researchers, and policymakers, many of whom have been supported through cooperation with countries like Finland and Norway, are now holding positions where they can lead serious reforms. This "critical mass" of professionals is a major threshold.

But the bigger challenge is to translate this expertise into tangible gains in daily school and classroom life on the ground. So far, the impact is patchy and partial, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas where the need is often greatest.

That said, there are heartening examples of what is possible. One is the Mediation Intervention for Sensitizing Caregivers (MISC) project, which has been launched in some of Addis Ababa's poorer

neighborhoods. Originally developed by Klein (2001) and adapted to the Ethiopian context by Rye and Tirussew (2001), MISC has shown substantial effects. It helped parents communicate more effectively with their children, made learning environments at home more supportive and stimulating, and improved language development in young children with disabilities.

What's particularly encouraging is that this approach has not been kept within a silo; it is being taught at Addis Ababa University and in several Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) across the country, planting seeds for system change. While full system change is still a work in progress, initiatives like MISC demonstrate that with the right tools and committed practitioners, real impact is achievable.

Knowledge Exchange

While the majority of interest in Ethiopia's partnerships with Finland and Norway has understandably focused on knowledge and expertise transfer for the benefit of Ethiopian education, it is noteworthy that the learning has been reciprocal. Norwegian and Finnish academics have also had valuable lessons to learn from their collaboration with Ethiopian educators and communities.

Working in Ethiopia has provided them with the opportunity to observe how Inclusive Education can be implemented and translated in low-resource contexts, which is frequently radically different from their own environments. These experiences have contributed to their learning on how to enable inclusion to function and become effective even in resource-scarce situations.

The partnerships also created space for co-developing more culturally and contextually appropriate models of early intervention, teacher education, and inclusive pedagogy. This was especially evident in partnership projects like the NUFU "Research and Innovation toward

Inclusion" project, where researchers from both countries collaborated on case studies and classroom-based interventions in Ethiopian schools. These partnership projects created space for rich, cross-cultural learning and the development of new tools and strategies that were grounded in everyday classroom practice.

This kind of two-way learning, where both partners learn, grow, and co-create knowledge, tends to be overlooked in global development discussions. But it is a powerful reminder that North-South partnership is not so much about exporting solutions from one place to another. It is about building relationships, learning from each other, and developing new ideas that are more inclusive, sustainable, and globally informed.

Trends and Prospects

Despite the heightened global pressure for Inclusive Education, Ethiopia's experience in transitioning towards inclusive schooling for children with special needs remains in its embryonic stage. Although the policy frameworks have been in place for years, their realization has been slow, and less than 11% of children with disabilities are accessing any level of education, according to the Ministry of Education's statistics (MoE, 2024). Low access is largely attributed to the absence of inclusive schools, inadequate teacher training, limited provision of adaptive learning materials, and underinvested educational infrastructure.

At the same time, strongly entrenched cultural beliefs, albeit sometimes supportive in the form of care and sympathy, also contribute to stigmatization and a lack of understanding of what children with disabilities can do (Asrat, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). Only certain types of disabilities (e.g., visual, hearing, or physical disabilities) are normally officially recognized, and others, such as intellectual or psychosocial

disabilities, are largely overlooked in both identification and intervention.

Moreover, the majority of children with disabilities in regular schools are not supported at all, leading to repetition and dropout. In fact, the Grade 1 dropout rate remains over 25% nationwide, with worse rates for students with additional learning needs (MoE Statistical Abstract, 2024).

Policy Developments

Since the launch of Ethiopia's innovative Education and Training Policy in 1994, education has been recognized as a pillar of national development. The policy made the education system more inclusive and progressive by giving precedence to a range of key goals: expanding access to basic education for all, building problem-solving skills, promoting cultural values and human rights, and expanding the role of scientific knowledge towards an active and responsible citizenry (TGE, 1994).

The most progressive in the policy is the clear recognition of the right to education for children and young people with special needs. It states that all pupils, regardless of ability, have the right to access good-quality education appropriate to their individual needs and potential. This commitment aligns Ethiopia with international frameworks such as UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994), which calls for Inclusive Education systems that are welcoming to all learners, and the more recent UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020), which reiterates inclusion as one of the cornerstones of equitable education worldwide.

By codifying these principles in national policy, Ethiopia took giant steps toward the realization of a more Inclusive Education system. However, policy implementation remains an enormous challenge.

Bridging the gap between vision and implementation will require time, resources, and focused attention to teacher preparation and community engagement. Nonetheless, the policy of 1994 remains a milestone that guides Ethiopia's advancement toward educational inclusion and equity.

Developing an Inclusive Teacher Workforce

One of the greatest challenges to Ethiopia's education system is the severe shortage of Special Needs Education (SNE) trained educators. The Ministry of Education (MoE, 2023) reports that Ethiopia's new education system requires that each of the country's 38,000 public schools has at least two SNE-trained educators. That equates to a requirement for more than 76,000 qualified individuals. But the current figure of trained SNE teachers stands at a mere 8000, a gap so wide stressing the necessity for urgent intervention.

This is not simply an administrative issue; it is a major hindrance to Ethiopia's progress towards Inclusive Education. As long as there are insufficient trained teachers, children with disabilities and other varying learning requirements are at risk of being precluded from full participation in school. This contradicts not only the country's commitment under Sustainable Development Goal 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all, but also Ethiopia's own Ten-Year Education Sector Development Plan (2021–2030).

To close this gap, a sustained and concerted effort is required around the enlargement of teacher education programmes, offering incentives for SNE specialization, and infusing inclusive pedagogy in all phases of teacher training. Inclusive Education is not merely a policy matter; it is a human rights and a strategic necessity if Ethiopia is to build an equitable and just education system where no learner will be left behind.

The Role of Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs)

Ethiopia has increasingly come to realize the importance of teacher preparation in achieving Inclusive Education and, over the years, has made some considerable efforts towards meeting this need. As early as 1994, the country incorporated a foundation course on Special Needs Education (SNE) into the curriculum of teacher education institutes (TEIs) for first-cycle primary school teachers. This was a valuable starting point, which aimed at creating general awareness of Inclusive Education among teachers.

A decade later, in 2003–2004, similar introductory SNE courses were launched at the university and college levels, stretching the coverage of these concepts through further stages of the education system (MoE, 2024). These developments reflected a growing understanding that all teachers, and not just specialists, need some level of training in how to deal with diverse learners.

However, despite these positive advances, SNE content within most teacher education programmes is quite minimal. The courses are theoretical in nature and do not go far enough to equip future teachers with practical tools and strategies that can be used in real classrooms. There is not enough focus on adaptive teaching approaches, differentiated instruction, or practical strategies for working with students with disabilities.

As a result, many teachers enter the profession not feeling adequately prepared to cater to all learners, and Inclusive Education is kept as a sideline issue rather than a cornerstone of teacher training. In order to move forward, Ethiopia will need to strengthen and expand its SNE training, not just as a voluntary add-on course, but as a cornerstone of how all teachers are trained.

Integration into National Strategies

In the early phases of Ethiopia's Education Sector Development Programmes (ESDP I and II), Special Needs Education (SNE) received little attention. The first two plans did not make any meaningful provision for students with disabilities nor for teacher training in Inclusive Education. Even in ESDP III, the only serious mention was the construction of special classrooms, an effort that did not go far enough in developing a system-wide vision for inclusion.

A significant breakthrough occurred in 2005 when there were large-scale consultations between the Ministry of Education and Regional Education Bureaus. These discussions led to the formulation of a national Special Needs Education Strategy. This was a landmark. The strategy provided the much-needed framework with clear objectives and implementable steps for promoting Inclusive Education across the country. It was subsequently included in both ESDP III and the recent ESDP V (2021–2030), an indication of a growing commitment to inclusive reform (MoE, 2021).

The strategy gives general objectives, such as operationalizing Ethiopia's national and international obligations to Inclusive Education, making curricula at the school level responsive to the needs of diverse learners, and including stronger SNE components in teacher education and higher education. It also addresses expanding access to vocational and university-level education for students with disabilities, while improving the availability and use of assistive technologies and accessible educational materials.

Looking ahead to the years 2025–2030, several priority actions are established. These include raising awareness of SNE at every level of the education system, integrating SNE into government planning and budgeting, setting up regional support centres and mobile outreach teams, and expanding both pre-service and in-service teacher training.

The strategy also calls for better monitoring and evaluation of progress, using disaggregated data to leave no child behind.

If implemented effectively, these activities are expected to lead to a significant rise in the number of SNE-trained teachers, better enrolment and retention of children with special needs, and a noticeable decline in dropout and repetition rates among them. The vision is simple: establishing an Inclusive Education system where all learners, regardless of ability, have a chance to succeed.

Scaling up Higher Education to Meet Demand

For its vision of Inclusive Education for all to come to fruition in Ethiopia, the country must scale up its human resource capacity by making a huge investment in training Special Needs Education professionals. Within the next five years, it is projected that at least 2,000 new graduates at the bachelor's and master's levels in SNE will be produced in Ethiopia. These professionals will be crucial in actualizing Inclusive Education for all of Ethiopia's children (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

SNE professionals are required at all levels of the education sector in Ethiopia. These professionals will not only be required in schools but also in leadership and support positions in all of the country's 14 regional education bureaus and over 800 district education offices. In schools alone, over 37,000 primary and middle schools and close to 3,800 secondary schools will require professionals with expertise in special needs and Inclusive Education. These professionals will also be required in technical and vocational education and training institutions in the country, which include 156 TVET colleges, 38 teacher training colleges, and 48 universities (World Bank, 2013; MoE, 2012).

Meeting this demand is a formidable challenge. Most Ethiopian universities remain under-resourced and understaffed in Inclusive

Education. Existing SNE programmes cannot yet produce sufficient graduates to meet the nationwide demand (Miles & Singal, 2010; UNESCO, 2020).

Addressing this challenge requires a coordinated national effort. Universities must expand and enhance SNE programmes in both quantity and quality. Development partners, NGOs, and international collaborators have critical roles to play, including providing financing, capacity building, technical assistance, and joint research initiatives. Only through such collaborative efforts can Ethiopia build the academic and institutional capacity necessary to achieve its Inclusive Education objectives, ensuring that all children—including those with disabilities—have access to meaningful learning opportunities (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow, 2020).

Meeting this demand is a daunting task. Most Ethiopian universities face a lack of resources and staff to support Inclusive Education. Currently, existing SNE programmes cannot produce enough graduates to meet national demand (Miles & Singal, 2010; UNESCO, 2020).

To overcome this challenge, it is important to work at a national level to improve and increase SNE programmes qualitatively and quantitatively. Development partners, NGOs, and other international collaborators play an important role in providing support to Ethiopia to meet its Inclusive Education goals. Only through collaborative work is it possible to build academic and institutional capacities to support Ethiopia's Inclusive Education goals so that all children, including those with disabilities, have opportunities to learn (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020; Ainscow, 2020).

Moving ahead: From Practice to Policy

While there has been remarkable progress in the development of an Inclusive Education system in Ethiopia, the next important step would be to translate the policies into practice, which means moving ahead from the policy and investing directly in the personnel, infrastructure, and innovations (MoE, 2012; UNESCO, 2020).

One of the important tasks would be the development and expansion of teacher training programmes in Special Needs Education (SNE). Thousands of additional teachers need to be trained not only to teach but also to work with children with special needs with confidence and compassion. Alongside this, existing teachers need to be trained to keep themselves abreast of the changing trends and innovations in Inclusive Education (Miles & Singal, 2010; Ainscow, 2020).

The integration of SNE with mainstream teacher training would be important, and inclusive pedagogy would need to be included as one of the important components of teacher training, not just for SNE teachers but for all teachers. Moreover, more emphasis would be required on early childhood education, which has the potential to impact learning outcomes and has been underfunded or neglected in Ethiopia (UNICEF, 2018; MoE, 2012).

Equally relevant are the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that evaluate not only enrollment but also the quality of Inclusive Education. This is where evaluation plays its role in capturing classroom realities and measuring students' engagement and support (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2013).

Through its sustained collaboration with stakeholders at national and international levels, including Finland, Norway, UNESCO, and UNICEF, Ethiopia is in an advantageous position to build and strengthen its Inclusive Education practices. Keeping its focus and

commitment to equity and quality outcomes will be essential in making Inclusive Education not only a policy rhetoric but also a reality for all (MoE, 2012; Ainscow, 2020; UNICEF, 2018).

Higher Education and capacity building

Ethiopia's cooperation with the Nordic countries, specifically Finland and Norway, has made significant but relatively limited contributions to building capacity in higher education for Special Needs Education (SNE). Through these collaborations, institutions like Addis Ababa University (AAU) and Sebeta College have been in a position to launch meaningful training and research activities. These activities have empowered dozens of Ethiopian professionals to earn BA, MA, and PhD degrees in SNE. The majority of these graduates have advanced to be lecturers, researchers, and policy advisors, particularly at AAU and regional education offices.

Despite such human capital development accomplishments, transforming the education system at the school level has been slow. By the early 2020s, less than 11% of children with disabilities received any form of education in Ethiopia. This low enrollment rate is also the as a consequence of the unavailability of trained professionals, shortages of study materials pertinent to SNEs, inadequate infrastructure, and ongoing social stigma (World Bank, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). Although Finnish and Norwegian partnerships have fostered valuable endeavors, their sustained impact on inclusive practice in schools has not been scientifically determined and exists largely as anecdotal evidence.

Addis Ababa University is presently a focal national centre for SNE professionalism with a sustainable MA programme and engages in applied research that addresses Ethiopia's unique challenges. There is mounting pressure to open up SNE studies beyond the master's level to include other undergraduate and doctoral programmes, not only in

AAU but also in regional universities (AAU, 2023; MoE, 2024). Nevertheless, the national system remains plagued by a critical deficiency in trained SNE teachers. According to the Ministry of Education (2021), Ethiopia needs at least 26,000 SNE teachers to meet the inclusion goals for more than 13,000 schools.

Although early SNE training courses were initiated in Teacher Training Institutes (TTIs) as early as 2003, these remained largely cosmetic, dealing with theory but not providing comprehensive, hands-on skills for inclusive classrooms. Previous Education Sector Development Programmes (ESDP I & II) of Ethiopia had also paid little attention to Special Needs Education. It was only with ESDP III and now ESDP V (2021–2030) that definite objectives and policies for inclusion were firmly integrated into national education planning (MoE, 2021).

Ethiopia's Education and Training Policy of 1994 and more recent development plans give emphasis to inclusion as a national priority. Yet turning these policies into tangible transformation will require surmounting tremendous logistical, cultural, and institutional challenges. Whereas the government has committed to posting at least two SNE specialists per school, current initiatives continue to be underfunded and poorly coordinated.

International standards such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Salamanca Statement of UNESCO have prompted policy shifts in Ethiopia towards Inclusive Education. Regional disparities, high school dropout rates, and cultural determinants of disability, however, continue to stymie progress at the classroom level (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

Other programmes, such as Mediation Intervention for Sensitizing Caregivers (MISC), show that well-adapted international models can be highly effective in Ethiopian societies (Klein, 2001; Rye, 2001;

Tirussew, 2001). Yet, scaling up such successful interventions on the national level is a main challenge.

Among Ethiopian institutions, the leading institution in SNE is Addis Ababa University. It has an esteemed and sustainable MA programme with support from a dedicated SNE Research Centre and a vibrant community of scholars and practitioners. AAU's Department of Psychology under the College of Education and Behavioral Studies has made Inclusive Education a strategic agenda, with plans to scale up undergraduate and doctoral programmes in the field (MoE, 2024; AAU, 2023).

This commitment is closely aligned with inclusive, accessible, and quality education that makes national education policies and development priorities for all children, with special reference to children with disabilities. Undergraduate and postgraduate SNE programmes should increase and be among national priorities. Regional universities and colleges need support for SNE to be formalized as an established discipline through the bachelor's degree and growth through innovative projects connected with schools and the local community (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2023).

Ethiopia's long-term international partnerships have laid a solid foundation for future growth in Special Needs Education. AAU's partnerships with Norwegian, Finnish, German, and other institutions have helped develop the academic infrastructure, professional networks, and scholarly exchange opportunities to sustain this growth.

International collaboration is a two-way process: Ethiopian students learn from the experience of international pedagogy, and Nordic and other global researchers benefit from working in Ethiopian contexts. Learning from each other strengthens global knowledge for Inclusive Education and shares a common commitment to the UN Sustainable

Development Goal 4 (SDG V), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Although setbacks have been experienced along the way, such as in 2002 when the AAU's joint PhD programme application with the University of Oslo was turned down, momentum is gaining significant traction once more. As of 2025, new efforts are being made to establish joint doctoral programmes, regional postgraduate networks, and inclusive centres for research focused on African education contexts (Oslo Met-AAU Joint Statement, 2024).

Conclusion

Ethiopia has made considerable progress in Inclusive Education, particularly within higher education, with substantial international support from allies such as Finland and Norway. The pioneering programmes at Addis Ababa University are a perfect example of what can be achieved by working together through collaboration. Nevertheless, despite all these advances, Ethiopia still struggles with serious issues. Shortage of a harmonized national policy framework for quality, desperate teacher training needs, dilapidated infrastructure, and inadequate inclusive support services continue to hamper the full realization of a quality inclusive learning environment in higher institutions.

Future prospects: Ethiopia must go the extra mile to increase its commitment to Inclusive Education in some crucial areas. First, setting and implementing national standards and accreditation processes for inclusive teacher education programmes will guarantee that instructors are well-equipped to cater to the needs of diverse students. Second, serious investment should go into expanding campus accessibility and disability support services that are holistic in nature, offering a platform where all students can thrive. Third, increased student-centred research should be the order of the day, prioritizing students' real-life

experiences with disabilities in a bid to inform policy and practice substantially. Lastly, stronger measures are required to translate Inclusive Education policies into practice and hold universities accountable to Ethiopia's commitments to Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Ethiopia's journey towards Inclusive Education has found a solid foundation in international solidarity, capacity building, and research innovation. Transformation of the system, nonetheless, requires unwavering political will, long-term investment, and continuous professional training for teachers. Scaling up inclusive pedagogy to general and special education teacher education programmes is central to extended impact.

Lastly, Ethiopia stands at a crossroads. By combining research, policy, and institutional action, the nation can build an inclusive yet equitable and quality higher education system. Holistic measures will make the right to education not a policy goal but a daily reality for every learner, no matter their ability.

Through a joint national effort of leadership, investment, and partnership, Ethiopia can achieve its vision of inclusive higher education, serving as an effective model for the region and as a significant player in the world movement for education equity and social justice.

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