

# Towards an Inclusive Society in Cameroon: Understanding the Perceptions of Students in University of Yaounde II about Persons with Disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** *Disability cuts across every society and all spheres of life. For an inclusive society, it is important to understand people's perceptions about persons with disabilities. However, there seems to be limited information, particularly about the perceptions of students who are the generation of future policy-makers. This study examines the perceptions of students in the University of Yaoundé II about persons with disabilities in Cameroon.*

**Methods:** *A cross sectional study design using quantitative methods was employed with a sample of students at the University of Yaoundé II. A questionnaire was used to gather information from 500 students selected by simple random sampling. The data analysis involved descriptive and inferential statistics at 95% CI.*

**Results:** *Among the participants, 51.8% were males, 89.2% were single and the average age was 24.9 years. Findings showed that 69.8% did not know about the actual population of persons with disabilities in Cameroon, though 14.6% had relatives with disabilities. None of the students perceived disability as a contagious condition, and 79.8% agreed that education had influenced their perceptions about persons with disabilities. Gender and education level had significant relationship with changes in perception (OR=1.8;  $p=0.01$  and OR=1.91;  $p=0.04$ ). However, 13.5% were unwilling to work with a person with disability in the future.*

**Conclusion:** *The findings suggest that issues of disability have not been taken into consideration in Cameroon. Therefore, there is the need for education and sensitisation of the general population towards disability. Additionally, policy-makers should factor persons with disabilities into national strategic plans, in*

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*order to ensure an inclusive society.*

**Keywords:** *perception, persons with disabilities, Cameroon, label, policy-making, spirituality*

## INTRODUCTION

Disability cuts across all societies and all spheres of life; therefore, there is the need to understand people's perceptions about these minority groups. Interestingly, the understanding of disability differs from one culture to another (Staniland, 2009; Aldersey, 2012). For instance, cultural differences among societies in Africa have a major impact on how disabilities are perceived (Stöpler, 2007; Eskay et al, 2012). According to Baffoe (2013), *"The importance of understanding disability and its perception lies in the fact that societies address disability issues based on the ways they conceptualise it."* It is important to understand the perceptions about persons with disabilities before setting out measures to address their concerns.

In order to factor persons with disabilities into any major policy, there is the need for policy-makers to develop a thorough understanding of this minority group in order to impact their lives (Drame and Kamploff, 2014; United Nations Programme on Aids, 2014). Baffoe (2013) noted that attitudes towards disability in Africa are based on fear and misunderstanding of disability. For instance, communities in Nigeria attribute factors that cause disability to include: a curse from the Gods as a result of family disobedience, violation of societal norms, breaking of laws, disobeying the Gods of the land, adultery, witchcraft and others (Eskay et al, 2012; Drame and Kamploff, 2014). In Somalia, persons with disabilities are seen as a punishment from Allah to parents who are culpable of offences like adultery. Lack of understanding may impact negatively on the attitudes of people towards persons with disabilities (Government of South Africa, 1997; Venter et al, 2003; Ingstad & Grut, 2007; Vavouraki et al, 2009).

In almost all societies in Africa, persons with disabilities are labelled. *"Labels to people with disabilities impose severe limits on them from a cultural, social and economic perspective"* (Baffoe, 2013). In South Africa, persons with intellectual disability are regarded as sick people who need regular attention and care (Government of South Africa, 1997). In this regard, they are seen as liabilities in society and are therefore unable to take part in societal activities (Government of South Africa, 1997; Ingstad & Grut, 2007; Aldersey, 2012). Similarly, women with disabilities were found to be more highly discriminated against than women without

disabilities. This is because they are unable to perform their roles as women, in relation to child-bearing and even marriage which is a major status attainment (Stöpler, 2007; Vavouraki et al, 2009; Aldersey, 2012). The rise of women's advocacy movements has made the plight of women with disabilities worse. These movements argue that women are powerful, efficient, independent and active members of society (Vavouraki et al, 2009; Drame and Kamploff, 2014). Meanwhile, women with disabilities do not warrant such accolades, thereby exacerbating their discrimination.

In Senegal, the negative attitude towards families with disabilities plays a major role in their exclusion. Persons with disabilities are banned from family gatherings and are banished from their respective homes. Additionally, it is widely believed that children with disabilities are a curse to the family and society at large (Ingstad and Grut, 2007; Staniland, 2009; Eskay et al, 2012). This leads to a situation where persons with disabilities are viewed as unfit to make any meaningful contribution to society. Similarly in Ghana, disability is equated with sickness and, to be specific, persons with intellectual disability are referred to as 'mad persons'. Also, autistic and Down syndrome children are characterised as imbeciles and stupid persons (Eskay et al, 2012). Additionally, those who are hearing impaired are also labelled as dumb. These traditional beliefs influence the thinking of people and their eventual conceptions about persons with disabilities. *"The public attitudes and perceptions about disabilities have created situations that lead to the further isolation and stigmatisation of persons with disabilities"* (Baffoe, 2013).

There are widely published works on the perceptions of people about persons with disabilities in Africa. However the perceptions of students, who constitute a generation of future policy-makers and leaders, and the extent to which education has made an impact on their thoughts about disabilities, have been left out of these studies. Besides, because of their diverse backgrounds, the perceptions of students represent a broad view of the wider society. In the same way, disability issues have not been given much attention in national discourse in Cameroon. Although Cameroon is a signatory, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is yet to be ratified by the national legislature. Students represent a section of the population that will initiate policies and programmes for the future. Therefore, there is the need to examine their perceptions about persons with disabilities who, as confirmed by studies, are vulnerable in every society in Africa.

## Objective

The current study was undertaken to document the perceptions of students at University of Yaounde II, about disability in Cameroon.

## METHODS

### Study Design, Setting and Population

This cross-sectional study adopted quantitative methods of data collection. The target population consisted of students at University of Yaounde II. This University was selected for its reputation as one of the best public universities in Cameroon, in terms of social science specialisations. Additionally, students being trained in this field have open minds about real-life situations and are well-informed when it comes to discussing societal issues. Since most students graduating from this university are likely to rise to key national and leadership positions in Cameroon, there is the need to find out how they perceive the concept of disability in this country.

### Study Area

Cameroon is in Central Africa, located north of the Gulf of Guinea. It shares its border with Nigeria to the west, Chad to the north-east, Central African Republic to the east, and Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Congo to the south. Cameroon obtained independence from both France and Britain on January 1, 1960 and October 1, 1961, respectively. The decision of British Cameroon to join French Cameroon instead of Nigeria accounts for the two dates of independence. Currently, the population of Cameroon is estimated at 23,130,708 people. According to the World Health Organisation, the population of persons with disabilities in Cameroon is a little over 2 million (World Bank, 2014; McSweeney et al, n.d.).

### Sampling Technique

A total of 500 students from both undergraduate and master's degree programmes (various backgrounds, levels and departments) were enrolled as participants. The study used purposive sampling to select undergraduate and master's degree programmes within the University of Yaoundé II. In each of these programmes, simple random sampling was used to select participants for the study. The class list for each selected programme of study was used as a sampling frame. This ensured that all students from various backgrounds and programmes had an equal chance to be selected for enrolment in the study.

## Data Collection and Analysis

The study used a structured questionnaire to collection information from the study participants. Much attention was given to variables such as background characteristics and students' perceptions about persons with disabilities in Cameroon. The questionnaires had mainly close-ended questions. Results of the questionnaires were generated using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results were first summarised into frequency and percentage, and presented in Tables. This involved percentage distribution of background information and the perceptions of students about persons with disabilities. Logistic regression analysis was further explored to establish the relationship between background information of respondents and the influence of education on the perceptions of students. The analysis was done using STATA 12 which made the data entry easier than the manual process and reduced human errors. All significant levels were set at 95% Confidence Interval.

## RESULTS

### Background Information

The background information of the students who participated in the study is presented in Table 1. Out of 500 students aged 18 years and above, 359 (71.8%) were between 18 – 25 years of age, 21.2% were between 26 – 35 years, and 16.0% were 46 years and above. The mean age of the respondents was 25 years. Slightly more than half of the total respondents were males, while 48.2% were females. A high proportion of them (89.2%) were currently single, while about 10.8% were married. There were more undergraduate students (81.2%) than master's students (18.8%) in the sample.

**Table 1: Percentage distribution of Background Information of Students**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
18 – 25 years	359	71.8
26 – 35 years	106	21.2
36 – 45 years	27	5.2
46 years and above	8	16
Mean; Min/Max	24.9; 18/54	
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	259	51.8

Female	241	48.2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	54	10.8
Single	446	89.2
<b>Level within the Institution</b>		
Undergraduate degree	402	81.2
Master's level	94	18.8

### Perceptions of Students about Disability

Table 2 presents the percentage distribution of the students' perceptions about persons with disability. Out of 500 students in the sample, 245 (49.0%) were aware of the prevalence of disability in Cameroon, unlike 51.0% who were not aware. Most of the respondents (69.8%) did not know about the actual population of persons with disability in Cameroon, while 30.2% knew of it. Among these students, only 14.6% had a family member or relative with disability, and 83.6% did not. None of the students perceived disability as a contagious condition. While 79.8% agreed that education had influenced their perceptions about persons with disability, 20.2% opined that their level of education had no bearing on their perceptions about disability. The results further indicated that while the majority of students (86.5%) were willing to work with a person with disability in future, 13.5% were unwilling to do so.

**Table 2: Percentage distribution of Perceptions of Respondents about Disability**

Variable	Sample	Yes N (%)	No N (%)
Awareness of the prevalence of disability in Cameroon	500	245 (49.0)	255 (51.0)
Idea about the population of persons with disability in Cameroon	349	151 (30.2)	349 (69.8)
Possess a family member or relative with a disability	491	73 (14.6)	418 (83.6)
Perceive disability as contagious	491	-	491 (100)
Education influences students' perceptions about persons with disability	500	399 (79.8)	101 (20.2)
Willing to work with a person with disability in future	480	415 (86.5)	65 (13.5)

Table 3 presents further perceptions of students, particularly with regard to the prevalence, causes and acceptability of persons with disability. When asked about the most prevalent type of disability in Cameroon, 36.2% mentioned physical disability, 27.1% indicated visual impairment, 17.4% mentioned deafness, and 19.4% indicated disabilities like epilepsy, stroke, and even multiple disabilities. The most common causes of disability, as perceived by respondents, were hereditary reasons, medical problems, injuries, curses and spiritual issues. About the kind of treatment given to persons with disability in their culture, 51% of the respondents revealed that persons with disability were treated nicely, while 25.8% perceived that they were somehow catered for; however, 15.6% believed that persons with disability were not welcome, while 7.6% indicated that disability was seen as an abomination. Despite these perceptions, 61.5% felt that persons with disability enjoyed the same rights in their society.

**Table 3: Perceived Prevalence, Causes and Acceptability of Persons with Disability among Students**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>The most Prevalent type of Disability</b>		
Visual	95	27.1
Physical	127	36.2
Deafness	61	17.4
Other disabilities	68	19.4
<b>Opinion about the Causes of Disabilities</b>		
Spiritual	57	11.6
Curse	69	14.1
Hereditary	111	22.7
Alcoholism	68	13.9
Medical problems	99	20.2
Injuries	86	17.6
<b>How persons with disabilities are Treated in respondents' culture</b>		
Not welcome	78	15.6
Abomination	38	7.6
Treated nicely	255	51.0
Somehow catered for	129	25.8
<b>View on how persons with disabilities are Accepted</b>		
Normal persons	185	38.5
Enjoy same rights	295	61.5

Table 4 shows the influence of background information on the respondents' perceptions about persons with disabilities. The results suggested a statistically significant relationship between gender and changes in students' perceptions about disability ( $p=0.01$ ). Compared to males, females were 1.8 times (95% CI;1.15, 2.84) more likely to have their perceptions towards persons with disabilities changed by education. Similarly, chances of changes in perceptions of disability increased with their level of education. Those in the master's degree programmes were 1.91 times more likely to have education change their perceptions about disability, compared to those at undergraduate level. In contrast, no significant difference was observed between background information like age and marital status, and changes in perception about disability ( $p>0.05$ ).

**Table 4: Logistic Regression Analysis of changes in Perception of Students about Disability**

Variable	OR	95% CI	p-value
<b>Age</b>			
18 – 25 years	1.00		
26 – 35 years	1.04	0.61, 1.77	0.87
36 – 45 years	3.41	0.79, 14.72	0.10
46 years and above			
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	1.00		
Female	1.80	1.15, 2.84	0.01
<b>Marital Status</b>			
Single	1.00		
Married	1.79	0.78, 4.09	0.16
<b>Level within the Institution</b>			
Undergraduate degree	1.00		
Master's level	1.91	1.00, 3.67	0.04

OR=Odds Ratio; CI=Confidence Interval, Outcome measures: Education changed the perception of students about persons with disabilities

## DISCUSSION

The study found that most students in this study are within the youth bracket. In their study, Gallant and Maticka-Tyndale (2004) found that the literacy level in



most countries in Africa has improved, that is, one out of three people in Africa who are in school, are between 10-24 years of age. Millennium Development Goal reports have confirmed that the population of youth in education has increased all over the African continent. The increase in the population of youth in Africa has coincided with the interest and participation in school by most youth in Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Programme on Aids, 2014).

There were more male participants than females. This might suggest that in the African setting, females are less likely to be in school than males. Covell et al (2003) found that the participation rate of women was less compared to men, and they were under-represented in areas of study. It is possible that in Cameroon, education for females might be less prioritised than for their male counterparts.

The study results also revealed that almost half of the participants were unaware of the prevalence of disability in Cameroon. It is not surprising that most of them did not know about the actual number or population of people with disability in the country. This confirms results of studies by Vavouraki et al (2009) and the United Nations Programme on Aids (2014), which confirmed the lack of knowledge about issues of disability among people in Africa. Therefore, it is likely that persons with disabilities have not been at the forefront of policy-making in Cameroon. It might suggest that the needs of such persons have not been taken care of, resulting in a high rate of negligence on issues concerning their welfare.

A few participants confirmed that they had a family member with disability, which suggests that disability is visible within the societies. There is however the likelihood that participants did not want to disclose whether or not there was a family member with disability, due to the stigma associated with it. For instance, in India, the number of people with disabilities is underestimated for people to avoid the stigma associated with it (Venter et al, 2003). Stopler (2007) added that in East Africa the notion of disability resulting from either sin or punishment from ancestors, leads to parents hiding such children to avoid being mocked by members of the community.

Participants were emphatic that disability is not a contagious disease. This might suggest that the level of education of participants had impacted positively on their knowledge and perception of disability. This finding was in accord with a prior study by Staniland (2009). It was found that there is a relationship between educational levels and attitudes towards disability. Individuals with higher levels of education had a different or changed perception about disability issues.

Consistently, in the current study also there was a significant relationship between the educational level reached and changes in the perceptions of respondents. This further validates the study findings, as most of the students were prepared to work with persons with disabilities in the future.

Furthermore, the results of the study revealed that the commonly known disabilities in Cameroon were physical disabilities, while hearing impairments were less well-known. The leading causes of disabilities in Cameroon, as mentioned by the majority of participants, were hereditary, spiritual, curses, alcoholism, medical problems and injuries. This finding is in keeping with the study by Munyi (2012) who mentioned that in Nigeria, causes of disabilities were found to include witchcraft, juju and supernatural forces. Similarly, Baffoe (2013) corroborated the study findings by stating that some communities in Ghana are of the view that disability is caused by harm or cruelty to crocodiles, snakes and other creatures who are seen as possessing supernatural powers. This might suggest that people are still of the opinion that disability is caused by factors based on religion, superstition and beliefs, rather than the proven medical condition or injuries.

Moreover, participants were asked about the treatment that persons with disabilities received in their respective families. The majority mentioned that persons with disabilities were treated well and catered for in their respective societies. However, a significant number mentioned that they were either not welcome, abominated or somehow catered for. In Kenya and Zimbabwe, children with disabilities are seen as a curse and totally rejected by their families. Similarly, in central Ghana, children with disabilities are totally rejected because they are viewed as helpless individuals, and this influences society's treatment of them. Most often, the bad treatment meted out to persons with disabilities is justified in relation to the fact that communities see them as evil people who are given to the family as a form punishment (Munyi, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The findings from the study suggest that, in Cameroon, there are stereotyped views about disability. Although education has helped in one way or the other, to improve how people perceive disability, traditional views about disability still persist. This suggests the need for intensive national awareness campaigns to sensitise people about disability issues. In the communities, measures should be put in place to change people's perceptions about persons with disabilities.

These measures should engender a positive change in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour towards persons with disabilities. This can be achieved through active participation of the media, opinion leaders and Disabled Peoples' Organisations (DPOs). For example, activities such as honouring persons with disability who have succeeded academically will serve as motivation for communities, families and other persons with disability. This will change perceptions about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. Also, parents could be engaged and sensitised about the importance of education for their children with disabilities, for them to be productive citizens in future.

Cameroon envisions the achievement of economic transformation by 2035, and has formulated a national strategic plan towards realising this objective. Alleviation of poverty cannot be achieved if vulnerable groups such as persons with disability are not factored into the scheme of things. The study findings revealed that, in Cameroon, intellectuals and the future generation of leaders retain primitive views about persons with disability, which might not be very different from the views held by the uneducated. Therefore, there is the need for national consensus to bring issues of disability to the fore, in order to enhance participation of persons with disability in economic activities and thereby remove the yoke of poverty and dependence. Without this, poverty reduction in Cameroon will be a mirage. Thus, the goal of only one in ten poor Cameroonians by 2035, as well as improved access to education, healthcare, basic infrastructure and employment, will be achieved only if persons with disability are given a prime role in policy-making in Cameroon.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The authors wish to thank the Institute of Humanities, Governance and Social Science for its assistance and role in making this work a success. They would also like to thank all the study participants for giving their time and contributing to the study.

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