

***Hargeisa, 17 June 2010* - Children with disabilities in the self-declared republic of Somaliland should be given priority in education, livelihood and health policies, child rights activists said on 16 June, during a ceremony marking the Day of the African Child.**

"The physical environment [access to schools and hospitals], attitudes of people and lack of public awareness and sensitization are the real barriers to the development of these children and not their impairments," said Ali Jama Hassan of the Disability Action Network (DAN), the largest NGO supporting children with physical and/or psychological disabilities.

The theme for the ceremony was Planning and Budgeting for the Wellbeing of the Child: A Collective Responsibility.

"Policies on children with disabilities are not a priority in the country," Hassan told IRIN. "Some of the change we are looking for is the mainstreaming of the needs of children with disabilities in education, healthcare and livelihoods."

Ettie Higgins, chief of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) field office in Hargeisa, described the situation of children in Somaliland as "critical".

"There are several thousand children living in Somaliland with physical and psychological disabilities - but only very limited facilities are available to cater for their needs," she said. "For example, deaf children come from as far as Mogadishu [Somalia's capital] to attend the Hargeisa School for the Deaf, since these facilities are unavailable [there]."

Somalia's infant and maternal mortality rates are among the world's highest, with the main causes of death being diarrhoeal diseases, malaria and respiratory infections.

"Access to basic services such as primary education, proper healthcare, and safe drinking water is still a challenge in many areas," Higgins said. "In such an environment, children living with disabilities are often further marginalized by communities in the effort to just sustain lives, and their special needs are not addressed, and they are not given the opportunity to contribute to society."

This sense of responsibility, Higgins said, should be ingrained in various planning and budgeting initiatives for the welfare of Somali children, "and this especially should also include those children most marginalized - including orphans and vulnerable children, as well as those living with disabilities".

According to Hassan, Somaliland's constitution denies people with physical or psychological disabilities the right to run for public office, "a clause we have been fighting to have removed from the books".

Accurate data on the number of children with disabilities in Somaliland is not available, but DAN estimates that at least 10 percent of children in the country have some form of disability.

Hodan Mohammed, 30, mother of two – one of whom is disabled – said she was attending the Day of the African Child ceremony in the hope that her child would in future be treated as any other “normal” child.

Source: [IRIN](#)