Poor School Provision for Disabled Kids in Tajikistan

Despite good legislation, funding cuts mean disabled children are deprived of adequate schooling. Tajikistan’s education system is failing disabled children, with specialised teaching thin on the ground and poor provision in mainstream state schools.

Conventional schools make little allowance for disabled children, funding for specialised teaching is often unavailable, and lack of money prevents many parents from accessing the help their children need.

Sohima Muhabbatova from the Ministry for Work and Social Protection says there are currently more than 19,000 disabled children aged 16 or under in Tajikistan. Other government statistics put the figure at 31,000, out of a total disabled population of 135,000.

Esanboy Vohidov, who heads the National Invalids’ Association, questions these figures as he says the accepted international convention is that one in ten of any country’s will have some disability. “Considering that there are just over seven million people living in our republic, then around 700,000 of them will be disabled,” he concluded.

Jamol Khudododov, who chairs the Vozrozhdenie children’s foundation, says the reason Tajik government statistics do not capture the full numbers is that they are based on records for people receiving disability benefits.

In the southeastern province of Badakhshan, for example, there are 850 children registered as disabled, but Khudododov explains, “In reality, the figure is higher because in remote areas, many of the disabled do not have birth certificates and are thus unaccounted for.”

No figures are available for the number who lack adequate access to education, although an education official in Soghd told IWPR in May that just over 400 children were placed in special schools and kindergartens, compared with a total figure of 5,000 disabled children for the region.

Tajikistan has specific legislation requiring the ministries for education, health, and labour and social protection to ensure disabled children get schooling, either in mainstream or specialised schools or else at home. Additional oversight is provided by the National Commission for the Protection of Children’s Rights.

Specialised education provision in Tajikistan includes both day and boarding schools, although many of the former have closed for lack of funding. A school for the deaf in the southern town of Qurghonteppa, for example, closed in 2007 after existing for eight years. There are 12 state-run specialised schools across the country, four of them run by the education ministry and the rest funded by local government.

According to the rules, the parents of children who get home schooling are entitled to benefits and the cost of tuition, plus support from their local school, said Muhabbatova.

The legislation itself is exemplary, says Kamol Shanbezoda, director of the Badakhshan-based Nur Centre, which works with disabled children; the problem lies in the way it is implemented.
Disabled rights activists and parents say that in practice, educational provision is often poor or non-existent.

Khudododov’s Vozrozhdenie group and the Nur Centre conducted a survey last year which found that disabled children in this part of Tajikistan were deprived of education, unless they were able to keep up in a mainstream school.

Garibsho Garibshoev, the head of education for Badakhshan region, acknowledges that many disabled children are able to go to school. “Only children whose disabilities are not severe attend ordinary schools,” he said.

The Nur Centre’s director Kamol Shanbezoda says there are still no specialised schools for the disabled in Badakhshan, while non-government groups like his own do not have the funding to fill the gap.

“As a result, most disabled children remain at home and cannot get an education,” he said.

The situation is not unique to Badakhshan, even though it is a remote and particularly poor part of the country. A similar study conducted in the northern Soghd region in 2007 came to similar conclusions.

In Soghd, too, the main option for disabled children is to go to a mainstream state school if they can. However, as the association of young lawyers which carried out the study noted, “The findings showed that school staff are not interested in teaching disabled children in mainstream schools, as they require special attention.”

Education officials in the Khatlon region of southern Tajikistan told IWPR that a boarding school for children with mental disabilities still existed in Vose district, but schools for the blind and deaf had mostly closed down.

Mamurjon, 11, lives in Qurghonteppa, the main town in the Khatlon region of southern Tajikistan, goes to his local school for want of any alternative. But his speech impediment means he is unable to keep pace with the class, and he stays at home for most of the school year. As a result, he still cannot read or write.

Although provided for by law, home schooling is not really an option for many families. A welfare official in Badakhshan, who asked not to be named, said the provincial government could only afford to pay disablement benefits of 18 US dollars a month, and nothing extra for the cost of a visiting teacher.

Aslon, a 14-year-old from Khorog, the main town in Badakhshan, has cerebral palsy and cannot walk, so attending a conventional school is out of the question. His parents got a teacher to come to the house, but the money ran out after only two years.

Still, Aslon said, “I would like to get an education so I can help my family out somehow.”
Teachers in Tajikistan earn very poor wages and have few incentives to take on extracurricular tuition for little money, especially as the education ministry scrapped an additional payment scheme two years ago.

“The main source of income for more than 80 per cent of teachers comes from working their garden plots, and so there aren’t many who’d want to spend time on [extra] teaching,” said Shanbezoda.

In any case, the lawyers who studied education provision in Soghd concluded that private tuition for disabled children was substandard. There were no special guidelines or textbooks, and teachers often put in only a perfunctory appearance or did not turn up at all.

Parents are often reluctant to send their children to a special school because of the long distances involved.

“Not everyone has that opportunity, and in any case it’s more comfortable and stable for a child to live at home and study nearby,” said Savrigul, who lives in Dushanbe and has four children with cerebral palsy.

“My children were lucky – three of them received home teaching because they live in the capital. I can’t imagine what I would have done if we’d lived in a village.”

The fourth child is about to go into first grade in a mainstream school close to the family home. “I hope the other children and the teachers will treat her considerately,” said Savrigul.

Rights groups and children’s charities around Tajikistan are pushing for the state to do more. In Soghd, the young lawyers’ association has worked with the regional education department to produce a standardised teaching programme for home schooling, although this has yet to be put into practice.

In the south, Shoddi Davlatov of the Mechta non-government group has been pressing the Khatlon regional authorities to allow his group to fill the niche left by the closure of the school for the deaf. However, education officials have so far proved unwilling to allocate classrooms in mainstream schools where specialised teaching could take place, so the organisation runs its classes in private homes.

In Qurghonteppa, Mahmadrajab Rahimov runs a treatment and learning centre for disabled children, but recognises that the teaching it can offer is no substitute for schooling.

Children from the town come twice a week, while those from further away are only able to attend a couple of times a month.

Rajabov encourages parents to do what they can to fill in the gaps.

“We advise parents to devote two hours a day to their child, and we also recommend that school-age children go to mainstream schools so they can grow up alongside their peers and integrate into society,” he said.
The chronic shortfall in funding at national and local level is perhaps understandable given that Tajikistan is the poorest state in the former Soviet Union. Around half the population is living on less than two dollars a day, the World Bank’s benchmark figure for assessing poverty.

However, money problems are compounded by the perception that disabled children come low on the list of priorities.

The Nur Centre wants to set up a boarding school for disabled children in Badakhshan, to be supported by local government, businesses and other donors.

However, Anjirbegim Maqbulshoeva of the regional commission for minors said no one had approached them so far with any proposals in the area of child education, health and welfare rights.

Many would like to see local government become more proactive, and more open to cooperation with the non-government sector.

Nasrin Nekushoeva, a child specialist with the health department in Badakhshan, believes the solution lies in local government working hand in hand with NGOs and donor organisations.

“Virtually no one takes note of how disabled children are living or raises these issues,” she said. “There’s no money for therapy so they are left without care and they don’t develop, even though they could be educated and become useful members of society.”

(The names of children interviewed in this report have been changed.)

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