

# Strengthening Disability Inclusion in Digitalization of Social Protection in Nigeria

## Introduction

as at December 2022, only 1,505,300 persons with disabilities (PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES) were captured in Nigeria's National Social Register (NSR);<sup>1</sup> representing 3.2% of the total registrants of between 46<sup>2</sup> to 50<sup>3</sup> million registrants. This shows that only about 5% of the estimated 30 million population of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in the country might be able to access and/or benefit from the various social protection programs provided by all levels of government. Evidently, this indicates a very low inclusion rate of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in the delivery of social protection programs.

A recent study conducted by the Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD),<sup>4</sup> the umbrella body of and for all disability organizations in Nigeria, found that the poor disability inclusion in the digitalization of social protection constitutes a significant barrier to workers with disabilities in accessing and benefiting from social protection programs. This situation defeats the entire essence of social protection as an intervention deliberately designed by government to reduce prevalence of poverty especially among most vulnerable populations amongst whom are PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in general.

Against the above backgrounds, the persistence in exclusion of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in use of digital tools and platforms to deliver social protection could draw-down significantly on Nigeria's progress with achieving a number of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Strengthening disability inclusion in the digitalization of social protection will therefore require an approach of policy-driven coordinated multi-agency action; prompting relevant Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) of the Federal government to establish appropriate measures in this regard.

## Current Situation

The digitalization of social protection programs in Nigeria has led to reduced access and inclusion of workers with disabilities. Despite the awareness of several social protection programs, the use of digital tools and platforms to deliver social protection programs makes it difficult for workers with disabilities in engaging with social protection processes. This includes but not limited to enrollment, receiving

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<sup>1</sup> National Social Safety Net Coordinating Office (NASSCO). (2023). Unpublished report.

<sup>2</sup> Abdullahi M.(2022). Over 46m Nigerians now on national social register. The Cable. Retrieved from: <https://www.thecable.ng/minister-over-46m-nigerians-now-on-national-social-register>

<sup>3</sup> Guardian Nigeria, (2022). How Nigeria developed one of the World's largest social registers. Retrieved from: <https://guardian.ng/interview/how-nigeria-developed-one-of-the-worlds-largest-social-registers/>

<sup>4</sup> JONAPWD (2024). Workers's Rights Approach to the Understanding of Digitalization of Social Protection in Africa: The Case of Workers with Disabilities in Nigeria.

benefits and services, as well as in resolving complaints and other grievances. Many workers with disabilities have been victims of poorly managed personal information and data submitted during enrollment for social protection programs because they are unable to independently enroll themselves due to inaccessible digital enrollment platforms. Similarly, workers with disabilities face difficulties with accessing social protection benefits and services such as electronic cash transfers, online health services, digital skills training programs, etc due to inaccessible digital tools and platforms.

Most of the workers with disabilities are unable to afford the very high cost of digital tools like computers, smart phones, internet data and the various assistive technologies required to mitigate the inaccessible designs of some of the digital platforms deployed for delivery of social protection benefits and services. They are not digitally literate and are unable to use some of the digital tools deployed for delivery of social protection. It is also observed that most of the available digital tools are not designed with universal standards to address the accessibility concerns of the diverse disability spectrum. As such, persons with intellectual and development disabilities, as well as those with visual disabilities are found to be most excluded as a result of digitalization of social protection in Nigeria.

## **RISK FACTORS**

Several risk factors contribute towards the poor inclusion of workers with disabilities in the digitalization of social protection in Nigeria. Low Awareness and capacity gaps among relevant government agencies, organizations of persons with disabilities, and mainstream civil society organizations; poor access of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES to digital tools and platforms such as phones, internet data, websites, bank ATMs; non-consideration of disability inclusion in the design and delivery strategies adopted for social protection programs and many more are major factors which reinforce these digital barriers. Workers with disabilities encounter these barriers across all stages of social protection including enrollment and protection of data privacy rights, receiving benefits and services, grievance resolution, and participation in the implementation of social protection programs. The JONAPWD's study of workers with disabilities in Nigeria (Lagos, Jigawa and FCT-Abuja) reveals the following:

- There are obvious awareness and capacity gaps among MDAs responsible for implementing disability rights laws and social protection respectively on issues of disability inclusion in design and delivery of social protection programs. This is one of the reasons for the low uptake of social protection programs by workers with disabilities.
- There are emerging trends of exploitation of workers with disabilities especially females in their attempt to uptake social protection programs as a result of a near total lack of understanding on the disability rights approaches to information security and privacy among workers with disabilities themselves, civil society organizations and MDAs responsible for implementing disability laws and social protection in Nigeria.

- The digitalization of social protection in Nigeria has brought with it a high prevalence of digital barriers hindering access of workers with disabilities to social protection programs. This is so because digital technologies deployed for social protection in Nigeria are mostly not in compliance with relevant accessibility and assistive standards.
- Digitalization of social protection is raising the risk of exclusion of workers with disabilities from enjoying social protection benefits due to non-availability of appropriate assistive digital technologies, high cost of digital tools and services, high digital illiteracy among PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, low internet and telephone coverage especially in rural areas where most PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES reside, and the insufficiency of the interventions made by government MDAs and CSOs to increase digital access for workers with disabilities.
- The manifestation of exclusion is more visible in persons with intellectual disabilities, amputees and blind persons due to non-availability of appropriate assistive technologies that meet their digital needs.
- Organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and mainstream civil society organizations have not demonstrated sufficient strategic capacity to address gaps in inclusion of workers with disabilities in digitalization of social protection.
- There are no real and strategic collaborations between government MDAs and organizations of persons with disabilities towards addressing digital gaps among persons with disabilities.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF EXCLUDING WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES FROM DIGITALIZATION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION**

Nigeria has one of the highest population of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in the world and one of the effective ways of mitigating the high prevalence of disability population rate is by guarantying inclusion and access of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES to social protection. As such, exclusion of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES in general and workers with disabilities in particular from social protection will translate to a sustained increase in the rate of disability prevalence in Nigeria, and by extension, a higher social burden of caring for an increasing population of very vulnerable citizens. Specifically, the exclusion of workers with disabilities from social protection will significantly reduce their socio-economic productivity with its unimaginable negative impact on the overall economic development of the country. Digitalization of social protection has proved to be one of the most efficient ways of increasing access for vulnerable groups such as workers with disabilities. However, it will be very necessary to remove all digital barriers which hinder inclusion and access of workers

with disabilities to social protection. Achieving more disability inclusion in the digitalization of social protection will contribute to a more economically prosperous Nigeria.

## PRIORITY ACTION STEPS

- The Federal Government of Nigeria can take advantage of low hanging fruits of immediate policy actions to review and address the accessibility challenges present in existing digital platforms such as websites and digital mobile applications currently being used to deliver social protection in the country. These digital tools and platforms must be redesigned to meet relevant international accessibility standards including the W3C Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).<sup>5</sup> This will address some of the immediate accessibility difficulties encountered by some categories of PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES especially those with albinism, visual impairments, etc.
- The government may also consider adopting a mixed model of using both digital and non-digital means of delivering social protection. In this regard, PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES may be given the opportunity to choose which option is most suitable (in terms of accessibility) to them.
- Sensitization and capacity-building programs should be implemented by government, OPDs and other stakeholders with a view to bridging awareness, knowledge and capacity gaps especially among relevant MDAs involved in the digitalization of social protection.
- The government, in collaboration with OPDs, mainstream CSOs and the private sector should vigorously pursue programs and interventions in digital literacy and access to assistive digital technologies for PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES. Implementation of this program should be based on needs assessment because, as shown in the JONAPWD's study, digital literacy prevalence rate varies across regions in Nigeria, while digital accessibility needs also vary across the diverse disability spectrum.
- On the medium term, and for the purpose of achieving sustainability, Government should embark on appropriate policy reforms that will accommodate the above priority actions and beyond. For example, there may be need to develop a Framework to support disability inclusion in the general implementation of social protection including the digitalization process.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is imperative to address the challenges faced by workers with disabilities in accessing social protection programs in Nigeria. By strengthening disability inclusion in the digitalization of social protection, we can ensure that all individuals, including those with disabilities, have equal opportunities to benefit from these essential programs. Collaboration among stakeholders, increased

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<sup>5</sup> W3C. (2023). W3C Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 3.0. Retrieved from: <https://www.w3.org/TR/wcag-3.0/>

awareness, and proactive measures to enhance accessibility and data protection are key steps towards achieving this goal.