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Impact. As Uganda looks back on the December 3 commemoration of International Day for Persons with Disabilities, one Kampala mother's personal struggle has grown into a movement supporting more than 400 families, proving that inclusion begins with courage at home. **P.20**



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As Uganda looks back on the December 3 commemoration of International Day for Persons with Disabilities, one Kampala mother's personal struggle has grown into a movement supporting more than 400 families, proving that inclusion begins with courage at home, writes **Beatrice Nakibuka**.

As Uganda observed International Day for People with Disabilities on December 3, the nation was reminded that every person, regardless of their abilities, has a place, purpose, and a voice that deserves to be heard. This day serves as an opportunity to reflect on challenges, celebrate progress, and renew our commitment to building inclusive communities.

For Teopista Uwimana Nalongo, a mother of four and the founder of the Kampala Parents of Children with Disabilities Association Makindye (KAPCDAM), the journey toward inclusion began not with policy but with personal struggle: raising a child with cerebral palsy in a society that often overlooks children with disabilities.

In 2010, Nalongo gave birth to healthy twins. However, a few months later, one of the twins developed cerebral malaria, which affected his brain development. While his sister

continued to grow normally, he faced many challenges.

"I took him to Mulago National Referral Hospital for physiotherapy, but progress was slow," she recalls. "Sometimes I struggled to find transportation because I had lost my job. I could not trust his care with any other person, so I quit my job to take care of him."

The financial and emotional strain became overwhelming for Nalongo. Like many mothers of children with disabilities, she felt isolated, especially after losing her job.

However, amid her struggles, she discovered the strength that would eventually enable her to support hundreds of families.

Support network

When her son turned three, he still could not sit on his own. A friend referred her to Katalamwa Cheshire Home in Gayaza, where a special sit-

ting chair was made for him. However, as he grew, the chair became too small, and she could not afford to buy another one. Long distances and transportation costs made it nearly impossible for her to access therapy.

During her visits to Mulago, she met other parents facing similar challenges. They bonded over their experiences of stigma, uncertainty, and a shared hope that their children would be accepted with dignity.

That hope was rekindled when she heard a radio announcement about a surgical camp for children with disabilities in Bwaise, organised by the Uganda Society of Disabled Children (USDC). A social worker encouraged her to mobilise other parents in her area.

"At first, I resisted," Nalongo says. "I feared it would take time away from my son's treatment."

With support, she delivered invitation letters to churches and mosques in Makindye. St Ponsiano Catholic Church in Kyamula became their meeting point.

"I was afraid no one would come," she smiles. "But many parents showed up. We registered them, shared contact information, and decided to stay in touch. That is how KAPCDAM was born."

What began as small medical camps has grown into a community-based organisation with more than 400 members. KAPCDAM now trains parents in

A GLOBAL REALITY

Disability is far more common than many people realise. Globally, about one in every six people lives with a significant disability, a reminder that disability is not a fringe issue, but a central part of the human experience.

Yet for millions, disability still comes with deep inequality. People with disabilities are far more likely to face poor health, social exclusion and poverty, not because of their condition, but because of barriers created by society. Many die years earlier than their peers, largely due to limited access to quality healthcare. They are also more likely to develop other serious health conditions such as depression, diabetes and heart disease.

Across the world, inaccessible transportation, healthcare facilities, and public spaces continue to exclude people from essential services. Reaching a hospital, getting an education or securing decent work can still be a daily struggle, especially in low- and middle-income countries like Uganda.

The global message is clear: disability itself is not the problem, inequality is. With inclusive policies, accessible infrastructure and supportive communities, persons with disabilities can live healthy, productive and dignified lives, fully participating in society rather than being pushed to its margins.

tailoring, liquid soap making, crafts, and urban farming; skills that provide income and restore dignity.

The group also conducts sessions on nutrition and home-based therapy to help children's development.

"For many parents, caregiving means giving up formal jobs," Nalongo explains. "So we teach skills they can use from home. This is not charity, it is empowerment."

Beyond income, KAPCDAM offers emotional healing. Parents meet regularly to share experiences, celebrate progress, and find comfort. The isolation many once endured has given way to belonging and mutual strength.

A nation still learning to include

Uganda has made progress with the Persons with Disabilities Act (2020), which protects the rights of individuals in education, employment, and access to services. The Constitution also guarantees equality for all citizens. However, implementation remains weak. Many schools lack ramps, accessible toilets, and special needs teachers, and employers often overlook qualified individuals with disabilities. Additionally, public transport is still largely inaccessible.

In rural areas, stigma persists. Some families hide children with disabilities, while others delay seeking medical care due to myths and fear. "The community must change its mindset," says Nalongo. "Disability is not a curse. These children can learn, play, and succeed if society gives them the chance."

The International Day for People with Disabilities serves as a reminder that inclusion begins with awareness. Across Uganda, advocacy groups, schools, and faith institutions use this day to amplify the voices that have long been ignored. In Kampala, the day is celebrated with music, art, and testimonies from athletes, entrepreneurs, and professionals with disabilities, demonstrating that disability does not equate to inability.

Families are the first line of support for individuals with disabilities, but they cannot navigate this journey alone. They need access to information, financial support, and inclusive communities. In many homes, mothers bear most of the caregiving burden, often sacrificing their careers and personal dreams. Supporting these mothers through community rehabilitation and inclusive social protection is essential.

At KAPCDAM fun days, children laugh freely while parents share their stories of both struggle and triumph.

"Here, no one sees your child as a burden," one parent remarks. "They are seen as a blessing."

To create a more inclusive Uganda, Dolorence Were, the executive director of USDC, emphasises the importance of government collaboration with organisations such as KAPCDAM, USDC, and NUDIPU for advocacy, vocational training, and rehabilitation.

"But real change must begin in homes, schools, workplaces, and communities. Inclusion is not just about rights; it is about humanity. Society must be inclusive enough to accommodate persons with disabilities," she asserts.

A ray of hope shines through Nalongo's story. Her son is now a teenager who continues therapy and lives joyfully.

"He has taught me patience and unconditional love," she says. "Through him, I found my purpose."

Her experience reflects the quiet resilience of thousands of Ugandan parents who are determined to provide their children with a meaningful life. Beyond commemorations and speeches, the daily courage of these families is the true heartbeat of inclusion.