

# Exploring Community Participation by People with Intellectual Disabilities in Rural Communities: Obstacles, Opportunities and Strategies

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300154>

Received: 24 February 2025; Accepted: 01 March 2025; Published: 04 April 2025

## ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore community participation of people with intellectual disabilities in rural communities, focusing on obstacles, opportunities and propose strategies to enhance their inclusion. Community participation facilitates the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities for them to acquire social skills through interaction with others and skill development. People with intellectual disabilities encounter discrimination, lack of knowledge and skills to engage in community life. The study is premised on human rights and social inclusion approaches to disability issues. The former emphasizes the need for society to create opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to participate in community activities, whilst the latter stresses the removal of barriers to ensure that their right to participation is fulfilled. This qualitative research employed semi structured interviews to collect data from 4 individuals with intellectual disabilities, 6 family members and 2 community members who were purposively selected. The study found that opportunities for community participation were not utilized by people with intellectual disabilities due to stigma, discrimination and lack of accessible support services. The study suggests raising community awareness on the rights of people with intellectual disabilities, enhancing local support networks, and developing community resources that are accessible and welcoming to all.

**Key words:** Community participation, communities, social inclusion, intellectual disabilities, participation, quality of life

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Intellectual disability (ID) is the largest impairment grouping on the African continent (Mckenzie, McConkey, and Adnams, 2013). Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) describes ID as characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills (Ke & Liu, 2012). The updated definition of ID that it is a condition that is marked by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior that manifests before the age of 22 (AAIDD, 2025). It refers to neurodevelopmental conditions that affect functioning in two areas: Cognitive functioning, adaptive functioning, activities of daily life such as communication skills and social participation that begin early in the developmental period, before age 18 years (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). ID is denoted by significant limitations in intellectual and adaptive functioning. Persons with ID have challenges in social skills such as obeying rules, communication skills, making and maintaining friendships, self-esteem, practical skills that encompass activities of daily living, for example, personal care, travelling, recreation, employment skills, use of cell phone and conceptual skills such as reading, writing, memory, problem solving, among others. ID ranges from mild, moderate, severe to profound. Inclusion of people with ID in their communities is associated with many benefits.

Various studies have been conducted on community participation by different categories of people with intellectual disabilities. A study by Getting (1997) explored the double disadvantage experienced by people with disabilities living in remote and rural areas. Data collected through consultations and field trips found that geographical, physical, cultural, social and psychological factors within the external environment create

disadvantages for the individual. People with disabilities experience similar disadvantages to other remote and rural dwellers when compared with their urban counterparts. Environments that do not cater for the needs of PWDs worsen the situation. Major issues include transport, isolation, consumer involvement, service provision, disability awareness, education, protection, carers, respite care, accommodation, housing, education, employment, and specialized equipment access.

Another study conducted by Nicholson and Cooper (2012) in Scotland compared many indicators of social exclusion among persons with ID who lived in rural and urban areas, to determine whether there is a double disadvantage. The study revealed that adults with ID from rural areas have more regular daytime opportunities, including attending resource centers, compared to those from urban areas. Participants from urban and rural areas had similar contact numbers with other people in varied situations, but relationships were less close in rural areas, despite being more likely to be on holiday. The study found that adults with intellectual disabilities in rural areas have better opportunities and live in less deprived areas, but lack positive relationships, highlighting social exclusion issues.

Hall's (2016) study on community involvement by young adults with intellectual disabilities employed interviews to investigate their involvement in work, recreation and leisure activities and found four themes: vocational endeavors, leisure pursuits, social inclusion, and supports. Their contexts facilitated or hindered their community participation depending on the availability of opportunities and support. The study suggests that community involvement varies depending on available opportunities and support, such as transportation, vocational education, personalized guidance, and welcoming environments. Also, a study in Québec City, Canada, by Milot et al (2020) found that factors influencing community participation for people with intellectual disabilities include accessibility, openness, and adaptations. The study concluded that providing social support and training community members is crucial for creating meaningful relationships and creating an environment where people with ID feel part of the community. The above studies contribute greatly to the literature on community participation by people with intellectual disabilities. The current study focuses on people with intellectual disabilities in rural settings that have distinct community life which is different from urban communities.

A study by Krupa et al (2022) in Ethiopia, on activity and participation experiences of people with disabilities using qualitative interviews with people with disabilities and their family members found that people with disabilities experience marginalisation, distress and practical challenges in both routine daily activities and participation in broader social roles and opportunities. These experiences violate the rights stipulated by the UNCRPD. They concluded that regardless of the presence of legislation, people with disabilities continue to live on social margins and suggested that the government should allocate resources to support national-level programmes and policy change. People with disabilities and their families should also receive relevant support and serve as change leaders.

The study explored the obstacles opportunities, and strategies for enhancing community participation by people with intellectual disabilities and suggested practical solutions to foster their social inclusion. The proceeding sections will discuss the theoretical framework, research methodology, major findings conclusions and recommendations.

## **Theoretical framework**

The study was grounded on human rights and social inclusion. Human rights are the rights of everyone on the basis that they are humans. These include the right to education, health, employment, family life and to justice. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) emphasis on the rights and empowerment of people with disabilities and advocates for their inclusion and participation in human rights development and humanitarian objectives. It is the first comprehensive human rights treaty and convention of the 21st century that was signed by 88 states (United Nations, 2022). It ushered in new approaches to viewing people with disabilities from objects to subjects who can claim their rights, make decisions about their life and active members of society (ibid). Article 9 focuses on accessibility to all aspects of society; the physical environment, transportation, information, communications and other facilities and services provided to others. This means that society must adapt its facilities to accommodate people with disabilities and provide the necessary support

to ensure that they enjoy their rights as human beings. The human rights approach applies to this study in the sense that people with intellectual disabilities have the right to recreation, sports and other aspects of community life and society must take initiatives to ensure access to facilities in the community by these people. Community participation is a human rights issue as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Article 19, in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), emphasizes independent living and community inclusion and acknowledges that all people with disabilities have an equal right to live in the community with equal choices, and mandates states to implement measures that facilitate their full enjoyment and participation.

The definition of social inclusion is a contested area and is unclear because it is a multidimensional phenomenon (United Nations 2016, Rimmerman, 2024). Social inclusion refers to the interaction between two major life domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation (Simplican et al (2015). The term social inclusion is interlinked with personhood. Being a person entitles an individual to interact with other people in their social niche (Rimmerman, 2024). Social inclusion is often used interchangeably with other concepts, such as social capital, cultural capital, social cohesion, social integration, and social connection (Rimmerman, 2024) 'Social inclusion is defined as the process of improving the terms of participation in society, particularly for people who are disadvantaged, through enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice and respect for rights' (United Nations, 2016, pg17). This study adopted the definition proposed by the World Bank (2013) that refers to social inclusion as the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society; improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged based on their identity. It focuses on inclusion in social activities that take place in society. Some people experience social exclusion due to legal systems, land, and labor markets, discriminatory or stigmatizing attitudes, beliefs, or perceptions robs individuals of dignity, security, and the opportunity to lead a better life (World Bank, 2013). In conducting social exclusion analysis four questions must be answered, who is excluded, how, why and what can be done to achieve greater inclusion. These four questions resonate with the aim of this study very well. Strategies must be adopted to address the identified factors contributing to the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities from social life to enjoy their human rights. These theories were deemed relevant to this study because they address, they acknowledge the rights of people with disabilities to community participation, advocate for the removal of obstacles that hinder them from realizing their right to community involvement and implementation of strategies that enhance their participation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing community participation

Community participation is essential to all human beings because people are social beings who need to interact and participate in various activities. It is essential to the well-being of humans. The term community participation is difficult to define (Bigby in Bigby and Hough 2024) and it is conceptualized as a versatile and contextual phenomenon by Akyurek and Bumin (2017). Community participation means different things to different people depending on their environments. It refers to participation in an activity, which typically involves social interaction with various individuals, including strangers, peers, friends, or fellow club members and participants (Bigby 2023). It encompasses everyday activities of one's choice and is varied. Caring Arms Disability Support Services (2024) defines community participation as the active involvement of individuals in community activities, events, and decision-making processes. Bigby 2024, pg59 says:

*It takes many forms—going out with friends to an exhibition, the cinema or for lunch; playing sport; volunteering in a charity shop or coaching the local football team; attending a cooking class at a neighbourhood house; being a member of a walking club; or simply regularly going to the local swimming pool. It means being engaged in an activity and most likely some form of social interaction with others be they strangers, peers, friends or people who recognise you as another club member or participant. What it looks like depends on an individual's preferences, available resources and opportunities in their environment.*

Verdonschot et al (2009) view community participation as “performance of people in actual activities in social life domains through interaction with others in the context in which they live” (2009), implying that it is about

engaging in activities that allow social interaction with others and that are accessible to others in that community. Community activities vary from one community to another. For instance, activities that may be available in urban areas may be different from those that are found in rural areas. In this study it is viewed as the engaging in activities that community members take part as individuals or groups. These activities encompass sports, watching soccer, joining women's clubs, cooperative gardening projects, attending public celebrations and gatherings.

Participation is a fundamental human rights principle established in Article 3 of the CRPD and constitutes a general obligation for nations to protect and promote the complete realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for individuals with disabilities (Article 4.3 CRPD). Participation allows a person with a disability to fully engage in everyday aspects of life, focusing on building lasting connections within their communities (SPARK 2022). This principle resonates with the slogan 'Nothing about us without us' within the disability movement.

### **Benefits of community participation**

Community participation by its very nature creates opportunities for social interaction among people with intellectual disabilities and the rest of the community. People living in the community are presumed to use community resources more and to encounter more opportunities to experience relationships and roles, such as neighbour, friend, club member, which are vital in being part of a community (Verdonschot, et al 2009). Community living and participation changes the life of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities by creating opportunities for making friendships, encouraging creativity, and nurturing independence (The Baddour Center, 2024).

### **Obstacles**

The opportunities for community participation for this population may be limited or non-existent in some cases. Many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are isolated and do not have opportunities to engage in community life and form social networks (Presnell and Kessler, 2022). Community participation is a critical component of social inclusion, but it is a challenge for people with intellectual disabilities due to their unique individual needs and discriminatory social structures (Bigby 2022). Obstacles that lead to social exclusion and lack of empowerment of people with disabilities include physical disabilities such as inaccessible buildings and transportation, informational obstacles include lack of sign language interpreters, institutional and systemic barriers such as a lack of laws and policies mandating that cultural events be accessible, and stigmatizing attitudes (White, Saran and Kuper, n.d. pg 1). These obstacles support the notion that 'Some of Adults with an intellectual disability are often in the community, but not really a part of the community, but out on the "fringes" (Bray and Gates, 2003).

Barriers to community involvement for people with disabilities include personal barriers (the lack of friends, a lack of personal and social confidence, unwillingness to complain, low expectations and the protectiveness of family), service barriers include (limited imagination, inadequate communication support, the use of time, the quality of support time, a perceived lack of transparency, problems with individualized planning, collective vs individual participation, the availability of services) (Milner et al, n.d.). Economic challenges also impede the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in activities that require subscriptions such as clubs whereby members pull resources together to run a project. Bigby (2024) points out that this population is likely to have a low income. Poverty, or inadequate income, poses enormous barriers to community participation for many people with disabilities (Milner et al, n.d.). Poverty and living in rural areas make accessibility to critical resources, such as social services, health care and rehabilitation, difficult (Krupa et al, 2022).

Discrimination from negative attitudes and perceptions, misunderstandings, and lack of awareness create barriers to participation by people with disabilities (Disability for Africa n.d). Society's lack of awareness about disability leads to individuals with disabilities facing challenges to participate in social life and fulfilling their social roles that are not due to physical, mental, and emotional limitations, but as a result of societal barriers (Onal et al, 2024). Persons with disabilities often face challenges in societal participation due to inaccessible physical environments, transportation, and information and communication systems (Disability



for Africa, n.d). Their challenges are compounded by lack of implementation of policies on community participation.

## Opportunities

Community members who hold various responsibilities play significant roles that can enhance the chances of engagement in community life for people with intellectual disabilities. These include chiefs, herdsman, and village health workers. Childcare workers and village health workers also detect people with impairments in their communities, through outreach programmes and the community-based rehabilitation model that is used by the Ministry of Health and Child Care for disability service delivery (United Nations, 2022). The rehabilitation program would ensure that people with intellectual disabilities receive the support that they deserve from the health sector to facilitate their participation in community life.

The Government Zimbabwe through POTRAZ has established Community Information Centres throughout the country to enable people to access communication services. These centres were established in rural and marginalized communities, equipped with digital technologies such as computers, internet access, printing and photocopying, faxing, scanning, laminating for telecommunication services and gaming services (MISA, Zimbabwe, 2023). These centers offer opportunities to people with intellectual disabilities to connect with others.

Zimbabwe has enacted legislation that includes community participation aspects. According to the National Disability Policy (2021), Article 3.3 on Living conditions of people with disabilities section 3.33.3.8 states that:

*Persons with disabilities must have access to a range of in home, residential and other community support services, including personal assistance that is necessary to support living and inclusion in the community, and to prevent isolation and segregation from the community.*

The provisions mentioned in this clause are meant to ensure that individuals with disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities in either urban or rural areas, enjoy their rights to community life and get support where necessary.

## Research questions

1. What are the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in rural areas pertaining to community participation and their social inclusion?
2. What barriers do they face to participate in community life?
3. How can community participation and social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities be enhanced in rural communities?

## METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by the interpretivism paradigm that enabled the researcher to see reality from multiple perspectives based on participants' lived experiences. Data was gathered from 14 participants who were purposively selected, 4 individuals with intellectual disabilities, 8 family members and 2 community leaders. Semi structured interviews were utilized to collect data from the participants. Purposive sampling helped to ensure participants who are most relevant to the study objectives were selected (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews with people with intellectual disabilities, families and community members were conducted to explore their personal experiences, perceptions, and the challenges they face in community participation (Kvale, 2007). Thematic Analysis was employed to analyze data. Themes identified from the qualitative data highlighted recurring patterns and key issues regarding community participation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Informed consent was sought from the participants and detailed explanations about the study's purpose and

procedures were given before data collection began. Data was anonymized to protect the identities of participants, and all information was treated confidentially.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Demography of participants with intellectual disabilities

Age Ranges	Females	Males	Marital status	No. of children
25-30		2	Single	0
31-35	1		Married	0
36-40+		1	Married	1

The ages of people with intellectual disabilities who participated in this study ranged from 25 to above 40 years. They were residing in the same community, and no one had ever moved to another community. Out of three males who participated in the study one was married and had one child. The female was married to the male in the 36-40+ age range, and they had established their own homestead. Family members were coded F1 to F6 whilst community members were denoted with C1 and C2.

### Level of education

Participants with intellectual disabilities revealed that they had attained primary education but did not sit for the Grade 7 examinations.

### Obstacles to community participation

People with intellectual disabilities encounter a number of obstacles to participating in community life. These include lack of information, resources, support and discrimination.

### Lack of financial resources

It was revealed that participants could not take part in activities that required financial input. They were discriminated against and sometimes their ideas and initial subscriptions were ignored. In their review Hästbacka, Nygård and Nyqvist, (2016) identified financial factors, attitudes, health issues and unemployment as barriers to societal participation by people with disabilities. P1 and P2 said *we gave the football patron money to join the club, but we were made to only care for others' clothes and pick stray balls. Sometimes we cheered for the team.* A parent to P3 said *the community does not have projects for able-bodied people with disabilities. In any case even if there were there, PWDs would not afford joining fees.* Generally, the participants' parents thought that their children could not be accepted in community activities because of the ignorance surrounding disability issues. Disability is associated with myths and misconceptions in many African countries. P4 reported that: *I do not have the strength to engage in gold panning, I would rather work in the garden with my wife.* His age could be a deterring factor.

### Discrimination

The participants and their family members felt that there was discrimination against them because the cause of the disabilities was being speculated on. Superstition that surrounds disability includes that it (disability) could be due to avenging spirits seeking atonement for sins that were committed by ancestors or parents of the member with a disability. In some cases, it is equated to mental illness. Discrimination and negative attitudes are the main barriers to full participation of people with disabilities in society, with prejudices and stereotypes

impeding access to education, employment, and social participation (SPARK, 2022). Many rural communities hold negative perceptions and misconceptions about individuals with intellectual disabilities, viewing them as incapable of meaningful contribution to society. A family member (F) said *Their-PWDs' - situation is attributed to curses from wronged people*. P4 said *they say I am mad hence cannot play or move around with them despite the fact that I am able to do some of the things they do. I used to be a very good long-distance runner at school but could not properly count the rounds I ran*. What was lacking here was coaching and track-side assistance. P3 said *no matter how much I tried to be presentable; men did not look at me so I stayed single for long time and refused men who just wanted to sleep with me. I take very good care of my home now, despite the labels from society. Ask my in-laws*. This stigma leads to exclusion, discrimination, and social isolation, preventing people with ID from accessing education, employment, and social opportunities (Shakespeare, 2014).

### **Lack of support services**

The absence of organisations for people with disabilities proved to be a drawback for people with IDs in this study. Organisations for PWDs play an important role in supporting them and ensuring that their rights are not violated and that they get the support they require to participate in life facets. The absence of these organisations in rural areas means that people with intellectual disabilities remain dependent on their families and the possibility of community engagement is very limited. Participant D revealed that: *We have no idea of any organisation or people who can assist us*. F2, a brother to P2 reported that: *We paid fees for him but eventually he dropped out of school because he was not benefiting at all, and he sought employment in the community. He is herding cattle. He could not proceed with education or attend vocational training*. The government initiated Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) excluding people with IDs. Sporting activities in the area under study favour the *so-called normal* people. Family members and a few people outside the study showed that they had not heard about Paralympics/Special Olympics games at local, national or international level. There is a need for organisations and relevant government departments to be visible in communities and sensitise people to the existence of support groups in various areas. The first lady of Zimbabwe, Dr. Auxillia Mnangagwa is doing a lot in this regard with her Angel of Hope Foundation.

### **Limited support networks**

The study established that people with ID spend more time alone and have limited social interaction. The couple in the study kept to themselves most of the time. P3 indicated that: *We spend most of the day together working in the garden, at times we go out fishing, and I do not have friends to visit. I can only visit my parents. We also visit those who offer us menial jobs, for example fetching firewood*. A systematic review of empirical findings by Vendonschot, et al, (2009) established that interpersonal interactions and relationships, social network of people with ID is very narrow and is primarily composed of people with ID. This is similar to Shandra (2021) who established that people with disabilities spend more time at home, less time in public places, and less time in transportation compared to those without disabilities.

### **Lack of information**

Lack of information may pose as a barrier to people with disabilities and their families on available services, rights, and participation opportunities. People with intellectual disabilities struggle with written communication which makes it difficult for them to access information about their rights and even advocacy. Participants revealed that they were not aware of any disability organization or anyone who could assist their family members in any way except those who distributed food relief during drought periods. F2 said: *When my son dropped out of school he spent a long period of time at home, I accepted it. He assisted me with doing work, fetching water and I discouraged him from joining gold panning activities'. Now he is herding cattle at a nearby village, at least he gets something for his personal use*.

### **Opportunities**

People with intellectual disabilities are present in communities but their involvement in community activities is limited and they have few opportunities to interact with others. However, the study found that there are varied opportunities for community participation to people with disabilities in rural communities. There are social clubs, village information centres and soccer games.

### **Communal Field ‘Zunde ramambo’ program**

There are numerous activities where members of the community work together that can be used to enhance community participation by people with intellectual disabilities. One of the family members F1 reported that: The community works together at the community field known as ‘Zunde RaMambo’ to plant, weed and harvest crops that are meant to cater for the needs of orphans and others requiring food assistance’. This is a traditional social welfare system where a communal plot is farmed by the whole community for food security purposes. People with intellectual disabilities also contribute to the communal field by working together with others on stipulated days. Participant C revealed that: *We went to plough, plant maize and weed the community field. We used our own tools, and we will also harvest the crops, the yields are going to be stored at the chief’s place. We have also ploughed our own field.*

### **Social exclusion**

Some people seem to be ashamed to be seen in the company of people with IDs. People with IDs have internalized and accepted exclusion thus do not find it worthwhile to get included where behaviour markers point to exclusion. While every community has its unique social activities, the exclusion of disadvantaged members is rife. Soccer is one of the social activities that bring people together in the community. It is common in rural areas for people to gather at local shops to watch soccer and drink beer during the day. This creates opportunities for people with disabilities to interact with others. Although Merrells, et al (2017) indicate that participating in recreational activities increases the social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, it is not easy for them to be accepted by other people. P2 revealed that: *I do not play soccer because I am always busy herding cattle. I can only go to the shops after work whilst P4 said that: I do not play soccer because I do not want to leave my wife alone and even if I go to the shops other people will not allow me to join them.*

### **Inaccessible facilities**

When asked about the availability and accessibility of facilities such as the Community Information Centre (CIC)/Village Information Centre (VIC), the participants reported that they were not aware of such a facility. The facility was non-existent in the community where this study was conducted. A survey revealed that 9.3 percent of possible users had special needs (visual impairments and limited mobility) but CICs/VICs lack specialised equipment to support people with disabilities (MISA, Zimbabwe, 2023). Additionally, these facilities are not easily accessible to members of the community as pointed out by C2 who said that:

*We do not have a village information center at the local shopping centre but there is one which is a distance from our area and one needs transport to reach that place. People with ID in our community do not have transport to access the facility. For what purpose can they use it?*

### **Strategies to enhance community participation**

There are several strategies that can be used to enhance community participation by people with intellectual disabilities within the 25 to 40 and above age group. The participants mentioned that respecting others, having access to modern devices such as smart phones, awareness about disability and provision of support to start on projects could help to include people with intellectual disabilities in society.

### **Welcoming communities**



Family members of people with intellectual disabilities expressed that the community should value their relatives and treat them with respect. This means that the community should be inclusive and value the diversity of its members, which gives people with intellectual disabilities the chance to share their views about community life and participate in activities of their own choice and interest. A mother to P1 said that: *I think the community members should accept my son and allow him to play soccer with his agemates and they should treat him with respect instead of viewing him as someone who is mentally ill because he does not fight anyone.* Whilst a brother to P4 indicated that: *It hurts me when some of the community members ask my brother to assist them to do some work at their homesteads such as fetching firewood and they do not pay him for the services rendered.*

Building inclusive communities enhances community participation of people with intellectual disabilities. This approach is similar to the Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy. According to Mbazzi et al (2020) in Uganda ‘Obuntu bulamu’ is an accepted and consistent behaviour that signifies a shared set of values that promote well-being, togetherness, and unity. These communities actively engage individuals with IDD and their families, guarantee equal opportunities for comprehensive participation in community life, and foster a profound sense of belonging (Presnell, and Keesler, (2022). Creating inclusive communities requires transforming the mindset of the society, which can be achieved by sharing information about people with disabilities at all local gatherings. For instance, when members of the community come together to receive farm inputs from the government, local leaders and government officials present should utilise that opportunity to assure the rest of the community that inclusion does not threaten their own lives. Religious leaders should talk about inclusion to their congregants. Chiefs and herdsmen who regularly hold meetings (dare) in their communities to discuss critical issues in their catchment area or solve disputes among their people could leverage on such gatherings to talk about inclusion.

## Social networks

Social media can be used to improve community participation of people with ID. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on the applications available on the device or the ability of the concerned individuals to access smart phones. People with intellectual disabilities indicated that they desire to have smart phones that have many functions, but they could not afford such devices. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook facilitate social interaction as well as enable people to get connected to friends and family easily. Milner et al (n.d) suggests improving access to technology as means to erode the distance of space, supporting and sustaining friendships, supporting relationships with families, finding employment, promoting a sustained and regular presence, having safe places to return to, giving people real choices, and having a participatory presence in services. Participants with intellectual disabilities have cellphones but these gadgets have limited applications that do not allow them to use social platforms like WhatsApp.

Participant C revealed the following: *‘I can only phone my relatives and receive their calls, I do not chat on WhatsApp’.* Participant B reported that: *‘I do not have the money to buy a big phone, it is too expensive for me, maybe if I get it as a gift but I will lose it to those boys like A and B’.*

To achieve social networking, government and non-governmental organisations could provide smart phones to people with intellectual disabilities and request local schools to provide adult education on digital use. Smart phones are ideal because they have many applications that include options for voice chats. Existing organisations for people with disabilities such as the National Association of Societies for the Care of the Handicapped (NASCOH) should reach out to those in rural areas and understand their concerns and ensure that their unique needs are addressed and help them to access devices that enable them to connect with others in the country. Additionally these organisations are better positioned to organise sports and visits to local resort places such as Victoria Falls and Great Zimbabwe Monuments by people with intellectual disabilities.

## Support

Guidance is essential to enable people with intellectual disabilities to pursue community activities that promote their personal growth and reach high levels of independence. Some family members of people with intellectual disabilities reported that their relatives needed help to manage their finances. The characteristics of

intellectual disability indicate that individuals may require support in selecting preferred methods of community involvement, examining alternatives, facilitating access, commuting to locations, participating in activities, and connecting with others and their surroundings once arrival (Bigby, 2024). P1's uncle indicated that: *Most of the time this young man spends his money at the shops and does not buy himself clothes. His brother must shoulder that responsibility.* One of the community members, C1 had this to say about two men in the 25-30 age range: *These two gentlemen herd cattle at different homesteads in the community but on very few occasions they come to the shops to drink beer.* This demonstrates a great need for support on budgeting.

Financial literacy skills are critical and enable people with intellectual disabilities to put their resources to good use. Non-governmental organisations operating in rural communities could impart these skills to the whole community through diverse educational activities. For instance Koilor, (2024) avers that the Catholic Relief Services partnered with the National Adult Education Association of Liberia to implement a savings project for women who were facing financial management challenges, WINSS (2024) suggests that these programs must be inclusive. People with intellectual disabilities, with help from their families can then use their savings to start group projects such as poultry rearing.

People with intellectual disabilities face many barriers in attempting to be part of their society. Despite these challenges a lot of opportunities exist to enhance their inclusion through advocacy and provision of appropriate support. Community participation by this population requires a multifaceted approach whereby government agencies, non-governmental organizations, organizations of people with disabilities, their families, local businesses, chiefs and other community leaders work together to address their needs. This could be achieved by adopting the ecological systems and community based rehabilitation models.

### **Proposed theoretical perspectives for supporting community participation by people with intellectual disabilities**

#### **Ecological systems model**

The ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner and community based rehabilitation could be adopted to promote community engagement by people with intellectual disabilities in rural areas. The ecological model is a helpful tool to map enabling and disabling factors of social inclusion in individual cases (Meys et al 2021) of people with disabilities. The theory identifies five interconnected systems, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronsosystem that influence individual experiences of members in a given environment. The microsystem is composed of the immediate family, friends and the school, whilst the mesosystem is constituted by interactions between the microsystems, exosystem incorporates formal and informal structures that include mass media, local government (Guy-Evans, 2024). The macrosystem covers cultural values, norms, attitudes, social laws and the chrosystem (time related changes). Changes that occur in any one of these systems has ripple effect on the others. Addressing challenges faced by people with disabilities to participate in their communities should employ interventions that consider the interrelatedness of different factors in each system. Different stakeholders at each level starting from the family collaborate to identify needs of people with intellectual disabilities, mobilize members and resources, capacity development and influence policy adjustments.

#### **Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)**

Community Based Rehabilitation was introduced by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to provide rehabilitation, reduce poverty, equalize opportunities and facilitate social inclusion of all people with disabilities (WHO, 2010). A CBR approach is a community-driven program that is made up of five components; health, education, livelihood, social inclusion, and empowerment to support inclusion and participation of individuals with disabilities in their communities. Each component is made up of five elements. CBR utilizes local resources and capacities, leverages on community strengths and structures, and fills service gaps within the community (Community Based Rehabilitation n.d.). Community participation is central in CBR. CBR is a comprehensive approach that involves the collaboration of individuals with disabilities, their families, communities, and various government and non-governmental organisations, health, education, vocational, and social services (WHO). Capacity building of all stakeholders on essential skills to

participate in daily activities takes place in the community. Evaluation of the success of CBR is ensured through records of all activities, including training sessions, awareness campaigns, support groups established, projects, meetings and surveys conducted in the community. Implementing CBR involves; needs assessment, planning and designing programs, interventions, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

Both the ecological model and CBR require collaboration from all stakeholders and create opportunities for human capacity and skills development which are critical to enhance community participation by people with intellectual disabilities. These two models depict the Ubuntu/unhu philosophy which believes that ‘a human being is what he/she is because of others’. The whole community has responsibility of the humanness of a person. Modalities for evaluation of these two approaches could utilise interviews, surveys conducted in the community and document analysis. Additionally the quality of life shown by community participation, of people with intellectual disabilities could be used as evidence to evaluate effectiveness of these models.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Community participation is important to people with intellectual disabilities, it aids their social inclusion empowerment and improves their quality of life. This is achieved through interaction with others, developing friendships, acquisition of skills and positive self-esteem. Engaging in activities such as local sports clubs and gardening projects ensures that their voices are heard, and they contribute to community development. The Ubuntu/Unhu philosophy is enhanced through community participation and an inclusive community is created. Negative attitudes, lack of support services and skills training limit the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in community life. Some of the services that they require such as counselling and vocational training are not available in their communities. These obstacles must be uprooted to help them improve their community participation and consequently their quality of life.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, I suggest the following:

- Organisations for people with disabilities must improve their visibility in rural communities and conduct disability awareness
- Policies covering issues related to people with disabilities and their rights should be shared with all stakeholders including their families, churches, service providers and community leaders.
- Policymakers should take cognizance of the important role of stakeholders such as family and community leaders in spearheading community participation by people with intellectual disabilities and improve accessibility to support services in rural communities.
- This can be achieved through disability organisations taking the lead to source for funds. In cases where they attend an activity, they do not get the opportunity to participate or get assigned any role.
- Training families and community leaders on disability issues so that they can play a key role in building inclusive communities.
- Creating opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to access vocational training centers to develop skills that enable them to earn a living and possibly join community clubs
- A lot of effort and commitment is required to ensure that they engage in activities that take place in their communities as well as visit local places starting with those found in their communities.
- The local business community should take the initiative to introduce sports for all and sponsor the games at local level

- Collaboration between Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), government agencies and social workers could help to ensure that people with intellectual disabilities receive the support that they require to participate in community life to their fullest potential.

## Limitations

The findings of the study cannot be generalized to other rural areas because it was confined to a specific geographical area that has its unique beliefs, resources, daily activities and patterns of interaction among its members that different from other rural areas.

## FUNDING

I did not receive funding from any organization to conduct this study.

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