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Best Practice of Community Participation in Monitoring Special Needs Education Services in Nigeria

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Abstract

Community participation in monitoring special needs education services in Nigeria represents a critical mechanism for ensuring quality, accountability, and inclusive educational outcomes for learners with special needs. This paper examines best practices for engaging communities including parents, caregivers, traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and persons with disabilities. Through a review of existing frameworks, the research identifies key enablers of effective community monitoring, including capacity building for stakeholders, establishment of inclusive school-based management committees, development of culturally appropriate monitoring tools, and creation of feedback mechanisms that bridge the gap between service providers and beneficiaries. The findings reveal that successful community participation models in Nigeria are characterized by clearly defined roles, regular training on disability rights and inclusive education principles, collaboration with government agencies and development partners, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems with formal monitoring structures. Challenges such as limited awareness of special needs education rights, inadequate funding, geographical barriers, and attitudinal prejudices toward disabilities are also explored. The study concludes that strengthening community-driven monitoring not only enhances service delivery and resource allocation but also promotes social inclusion, empowers marginalized groups, and contributes to the realization of Nigeria's commitments under international conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education.

Keywords: Community Participation, Disability rights, Educational monitoring, Inclusive education, Special Needs Education

Introduction

Special needs education (SNE) refers to the provision of instructional services, therapeutic interventions, and supportive environments tailored to the unique learning requirements of learners with physical, intellectual, sensory, or psychosocial disabilities. In Nigeria, the right to inclusive and special education is anchored in the Persons with Disabilities (Discrimination) Act of 2018 and reinforced by the revised National Policy on Inclusive Education approved in 2023, which explicitly emphasises the integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream schools and the allocation of adequate resources for their support (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2023). Despite these legislative provisions, the practical realization of quality special needs education services continues to lag significantly behind policy aspirations across the country (James, et al., 2025). Community participation in education governance has long been recognized as a cornerstone of accountable and responsive service delivery. Omede and Momoh (2022) emphasised that communities play a significant role in strengthening the cultural importance attached to education, addressing harmful traditional perceptions, and encouraging inclusive practices that support vulnerable children. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2022) explicitly advocates for grassroots involvement in education delivery through school development planning and performance monitoring. However, community engagement in the monitoring of special needs education services remains especially weak, particularly in conflict-affected and rural regions of Nigeria (Usman, 2020). Monitoring of special needs education services is a critical mechanism for closing the gap between policy intent and classroom reality. Adamu (2023) observes that parents' perceptions of children with learning disabilities

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in Nigeria are often coloured by stigma and misinformation, making it essential to involve communities in tracking the quality, inclusivity, and adequacy of educational services provided to learners with disabilities. Equally, the 2024 State of Disability Inclusion Report the most comprehensive assessment of disability inclusion ever conducted in Nigeria found that as of 2024, only 23 states had domesticated disability laws, with just 15 operational agencies, pointing to critical gaps in accountability and monitoring (Project Enable Africa, 2024). Against this backdrop, this paper examines best practices for community participation in monitoring special needs education services in Nigeria. It reviews relevant concepts, explores documented examples of successful community-based monitoring, identifies challenges, and proposes evidence-based strategies for strengthening community engagement in ensuring that learners with special needs receive education services that are equitable, inclusive, and of acceptable quality. Given that UNICEF (2021) estimates 18.3 million Nigerian children are out of school, and children with disabilities are disproportionately represented, the urgency for robust community oversight of special needs education cannot be overstated.

Conceptual Review

Special Needs Education

Special needs education encompasses a wide range of educational provisions designed to address the learning requirements of individuals whose development, learning ability, or behaviour differs significantly from the norm. The International Journal of Educational Management (2025, Vol. 1, No. 2) defines special needs as a range of conditions including physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, or developmental impairments that limit an individual's ability to participate fully in standard educational settings without additional support and tailored interventions. In Nigeria, special needs education is delivered through a combination of special schools, resource rooms, and inclusive mainstream classrooms, though access remains severely unequal across geographical zones (UBEC, 2022). Historically, special needs education in Nigeria has been characterised by marginalisation, inadequate funding, and limited trained personnel. Angwaomaodoko (2023) notes that many Nigerian teachers have never received specialised training in inclusive pedagogy, severely limiting their ability to support learners with disabilities. The analysis of UBEC's 2022 data further revealed substantial disparities between inclusive and special schools, with significant regional differences, the North West having the highest number of both inclusive and special schools, yet learner enrolment in inclusive schools remaining markedly higher at the primary level, suggesting that learners with disabilities are still being absorbed into mainstream settings without adequate specialist support (UBEC, 2022).

Community Participation and Special Needs Education

Community participation in education refers to the active and meaningful involvement of parents, traditional leaders, civil society organisations, disability advocacy groups, and other community stakeholders in the planning, delivery, oversight, and evaluation of educational services. In the context of special needs education, community participation takes on special importance because families and caregivers of children with disabilities are often the primary advocates for these learners' rights and are better positioned than formal institutions to monitor whether their children's needs are being adequately met (Omede & Momoh, 2022). According to the National Policy on Education (2014), as cited in IJRISS (2025), community participation is vital to the administration and sustainability of basic education in Nigeria. The relationship between community participation and special needs education quality is well established in the literature. Inclusive Futures (2023), through the SMILE project in Kaduna State, demonstrated that by strengthening school-based management committees (SBMCs) and parent-teacher associations (PTAs) with knowledge of inclusive education concepts, schools achieved stronger links between communities and children with disabilities. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2024) similarly underscores that parent and community awareness programmes are a strategic tool for ensuring children with disabilities are enrolled, retained, and adequately supported in Nigerian schools. UNESCO (2020) affirms that achieving meaningful inclusion requires not only coherent policy frameworks but also robust accountability mechanisms that monitor enrolment, participation, accommodations, and learning outcomes for all learners. This highlights the indispensable role of communities as monitoring agents who complement formal state oversight systems. The World Bank in 2025 further corroborates this finding, noting through the AGILE programme in Nigeria that flexible, locally managed capacity-building for school committees is essential for effective, sustainable delivery of inclusive education services. Without active community oversight, special needs education services risk becoming invisible to policymakers and subject to chronic underinvestment.

Community Participation in Monitoring Special Needs Education Services in Nigeria

In Nigeria, community participation in monitoring special needs education services operates within the broader framework of school-based management and social accountability. The UBEC (2022) programme structure encourages grassroots involvement in performance monitoring through school development plans; however, implementation has been uneven. Hussaini (2025) identifies weak accountability mechanisms as one of the major challenges hindering inclusive education, noting that monitoring structures often lack the capacity or mandate to track whether learners with special needs are accessing appropriate services. The revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (FME, 2023) attempts to address these gaps by emphasising collaborative efforts among

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stakeholders to create enabling environments for inclusive education. Evidence from practice in Nigeria reveals pockets of successful community-led monitoring of special needs education. The Irede Foundation (2022) and faith-based organisations have mobilised communities in selected states to track attendance, accessibility, and the availability of assistive technologies in schools serving learners with disabilities. These initiatives demonstrate that where communities are empowered with information and a formal mandate to monitor, there is measurable improvement in service accountability. Usman (2020) documents how community monitoring in Nasarawa State helped surface critical gaps in teacher deployment for special needs classrooms, prompting corrective action by the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB). Despite these encouraging examples, the overall landscape of community participation in monitoring special needs education in Nigeria remains underdeveloped. The Global Disability Fund (2025) situational analysis found that there are no established mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation of organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) in legal and policy reforms or development programmes in Nigeria, reflecting a broader systemic exclusion of disability communities from monitoring and accountability processes. James et al. (2025) further note that children with disabilities in many Nigerian states face what they describe as 'triple marginalisation,' where disability intersects with poverty and regional vulnerability to intensify educational exclusion, underscoring the urgent need for community-based monitoring systems that are sensitive to these intersecting inequalities.

Best Practices for Effective Community Participation

Effective community participation in monitoring special needs education services requires deliberate structures, sustained capacity, and inclusive processes. Drawing from documented experiences in Nigeria and comparable contexts, the following best practices have been identified as particularly consequential for translating community goodwill into meaningful oversight of educational services for learners with special needs.

Capacity Building of Stakeholders

One of the most consistently documented best practices is the systematic capacity building of community stakeholders, including parents, SBMCs, PTAs, traditional rulers, and disability advocacy groups, to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to monitor special needs education services effectively. The NGO Education Partnership's Inclusive Education Action Plan (2024-2028) identifies capacity building for teachers and school management committees as a critical strategy for sustaining inclusive educational environments. In Nigeria, the AGILE programme, supported by the World Bank (2025), demonstrated that investing in locally managed capacity-building resulted in more active, informed, and effective community committees capable of holding schools accountable for the needs of vulnerable and special-needs learners. Capacity-building programmes should specifically include modules on disability rights, identification of special needs, monitoring tools, and community advocacy techniques (FME, 2023).

Inclusive School-Based Monitoring Committees

Inclusive school-based monitoring committees that deliberately incorporate parents of children with special needs, representatives of organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and community leaders provide a structured platform for community oversight. Inclusive Futures (2023) reports that in Kaduna State, Nigeria, the strengthening of SBMCs to include disability-inclusive school planning resulted in measurable improvements in how schools responded to the needs of children with disabilities. The National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD, 2024), in its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for inclusion and access, similarly highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder participation in school governance as a mechanism for ensuring that special needs learners are not overlooked in resource allocation and service delivery. Where SBMCs are properly constituted and trained, they function as early warning systems that escalate service gaps to education authorities before they become entrenched.

Community Feedback Mechanisms

Robust community feedback mechanisms, including suggestion boxes, community town halls, digital reporting platforms, and structured dialogue sessions between parents and school administrators, are essential for creating a continuous loop of information between communities and education managers. IJRISS (2025) notes that community engagement that includes effective feedback structures strengthens the accountability of school administrators and local education authorities to the needs of learners with disabilities. In contexts where digital infrastructure is limited, UNESCO (2023) recommends the use of radio platforms and community liaisons as alternative feedback channels. The operationalisation of the Nigeria Inclusive Data Charter Action Plan (2024-2028), which mandates the use of structured tools like the Washington Group Questions in data collection, provides an important opportunity to embed community-sourced monitoring data into formal education information systems (Global Disability Fund, 2025).

Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Best-practice community monitoring of special needs education does not occur in silos; it thrives through deliberate multi-stakeholder collaboration among government agencies, civil society organisations, international development partners, OPDs, and communities. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE, 2024) frames

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Nigeria's partnership compact precisely around multi-stakeholder collaboration, including civil society advocacy through the Civil Society Action Coalition on Education for All (CSACEFA) for the 2024-2026 period, to hold the government accountable for inclusive education commitments. UNICEF Nigeria's (2021) partnerships with the private sector and NGOs for disability-inclusive programming similarly illustrate how coordinated multi-actor approaches amplify the monitoring function of communities. At the community level, this means creating formal coordination platforms where information gathered by parents, OPDs, NGOs, and community leaders is synthesised, verified, and channelled to education authorities for action.

Disability Rights Awareness and Advocacy

A foundational best practice is embedding disability rights awareness and advocacy within community monitoring efforts, so that communities understand the legal entitlements of learners with special needs and are empowered to demand their fulfilment. The Joint Association of Persons with Disabilities (Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities, 2025) actively works to educate communities about disability rights and has helped draft Nigeria's commitments for the 2025 Global Disability Summit, ensuring that inclusive education remains central to government policy. Awareness campaigns that demystify disability, challenge cultural stigmas which Omede and Momoh (2022) identify as a major barrier to inclusion in Nigeria, and educate communities about the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) create the social foundation for communities to monitor, report, and advocate for appropriate special needs education services. Crucially, such advocacy must be tailored to address the intersecting vulnerabilities of women and girls with disabilities, who face heightened marginalisation in educational participation (Project Enable Africa, 2024).

Challenges to Community Participation in Monitoring Special Needs Education Services

Community participation in monitoring special needs education in Nigeria faces several structural, cultural, and institutional challenges that limit its effectiveness.

i. **Pervasive Stigma and Cultural Misconceptions about Disability:** Cultural beliefs and stigma, especially in rural areas, hinder disability inclusion and discourage community participation in monitoring special needs education, requiring stronger awareness campaigns (Omede and Momoh, 2022).
ii. **Inadequate Capacity and Awareness Among Community Stakeholders:** Community stakeholders often lack the technical knowledge to effectively monitor special needs education, leading to weak and superficial oversight of services (Hussaini, 2025; International Journal of Educational Management, 2025; UBEC, 2022).
iii. **Weak Institutional Frameworks and Lack of Formal Monitoring Mandates:** The absence of clear legal and institutional frameworks limits structured community participation in monitoring special needs education, resulting in fragmented and poorly coordinated oversight systems (Global Disability Fund, 2025; Hussaini, 2025).
iv. **Socioeconomic Barriers and Resource Constraints:** Poverty, distance, and lack of infrastructure significantly reduce community members' ability to consistently participate in monitoring special needs education services (James et al., 2025).
v. **Insecurity and Conflict-Induced Displacement:** Armed conflict and insecurity disrupt education systems and displace communities, making sustained community monitoring of special needs education difficult or impossible in affected regions (Hussaini, 2025; Nigeria Humanitarian Response Plan, 2024; Education Cannot Wait, 2024).

Strategies for Strengthening Community-Based Monitoring of Special Needs Education Services

Addressing the challenges outlined above requires a multi-level, evidence-informed set of strategies. The following five strategies are proposed for strengthening community participation in monitoring special needs education services in Nigeria.

i. **Institutionalise Inclusive Community Monitoring Frameworks:** Community monitoring should be formally embedded in policy and legal structures that clearly define roles for parents, OPDs, and local leaders in supervising special needs education, with proper accountability channels (GPE, 2024).
ii. **Scale Up Targeted Capacity-Building for Community Monitors:** There is a need to train community stakeholders on disability awareness, monitoring tools, and advocacy skills to improve their effectiveness in assessing special needs education services (World Bank, 2025).
iii. **Leverage Technology and Community Feedback Systems:** Mobile platforms, SMS tools, and community media should be used to enhance inclusive, accessible, and continuous community feedback on special needs education services (UNESCO, 2023).
iv. **Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Monitoring:** Effective monitoring requires coordinated collaboration between communities, CSOs, government, and development partners, with clear data-sharing and accountability mechanisms (Global Disability Fund, 2025).
v. **Conduct Disability Rights Awareness Campaigns at Community Level:** Community-based awareness campaigns in local languages are essential for reducing stigma and promoting understanding of disability

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rights to strengthen inclusive education monitoring (Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities, 2025).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

i. Government should institutionalise inclusive community monitoring frameworks with clear roles and accountability mechanisms.
ii. Community stakeholders should receive regular training on disability rights, monitoring tools, inclusive education, and advocacy.
iii. Schools and education authorities should strengthen community feedback systems through mobile platforms, SMS, town halls, and other accessible channels.
iv. Government, NGOs, OPDs, and development partners should strengthen collaboration in monitoring and improving special needs education services.
v. Disability rights awareness campaigns should be intensified at community level, using local languages to reduce stigma and promote inclusion.

Conclusion

Community participation in monitoring special needs education services in Nigeria represents both a critical accountability mechanism and an unrealised opportunity. Despite a legal framework anchored in the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and the revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (FME, 2023), the gap between policy aspiration and service delivery reality remains wide, driven by persistent stigma, weak institutional structures, inadequate capacity, and the exclusion of disability communities from formal monitoring processes. Where structured community participation has been deliberately cultivated through inclusive SBMCs, disability rights advocacy, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, measurable improvements in the visibility and accountability of special needs education services have been documented (Inclusive Futures, 2023; James et al., 2025). These examples provide proof of concept that with the right investments, community monitoring can meaningfully improve outcomes for learners with special needs.

Suggestions

The following recommendations are made for Nigeria to accelerate progress toward inclusive, high-quality special needs education.

i. Government should establish and strengthen community-based monitoring frameworks to assess the implementation and quality of special needs education programmes.
ii. Continuous training should be provided for parents, teachers, community leaders, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders to improve their capacity for effective monitoring and advocacy.
iii. Government, schools, communities, parents, civil society organisations, and disability-focused organisations should collaborate to improve accountability and service delivery in special needs education.
iv. Findings from community monitoring should be used to inform policy decisions, address identified gaps, and ensure that the educational rights of persons with disabilities are effectively implemented and protected, as emphasised by Project Enable Africa (2024).

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