



# MALAWI UNION OF THE BLIND

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## CALL TO ACTION

### FOR AN INCLUSIVE COVID-19 RESPONSE ON EDUCATION IN MALAWI

#### 1 Preamble

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, 700,000 people were estimated to be visually impaired (blind and partially sighted) and DeafBlind in Malawi with about 98.5% living in rural areas. Of all the school-age children with visual impairment and DeafBlindness, less than half were receiving education.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that has now enveloped the whole country, government have taken swift response measures to contain the spread of the virus and to mitigate against its impact. Within the education sector in Malawi, learning institutions were closed and alternative educational methods such as online and distance learning were adopted to ensure continuity of the learning process.

#### 2 Challenge

Unfortunately, these alternatives have proven to exclude learners who are visually impaired and DeafBlind including those with additional disabilities. This is attributable to a lack of inclusive planning in the design and delivery of these alternative educational methods, inaccessible learning media interfaces and instructional methods as well as poor or absence of internet and radio signal.

In situations where these conditions are favorable, more practical challenges are further contributing to the exclusion of learners who are blind or partially sighted and DeafBlind from current online and distance learning programs. These challenges include the absence of accessible content, lack of devices needed for reading and writing and the lack of skills to manipulate the devices and interact with the content.

As a result, most learners who are visually impaired and DeafBlind in Malawi, are being left behind or totally excluded from the alternative learning processes. For them, the COVID-19 response measures within the education sector have increased their alienation from the right to learning, thus further exacerbating an already prejudiced situation. It is more likely that learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness who live in rural setting will be worst hit by these alternative educational methods. Also, Due to the long stay at home, female learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness who have been cut off from essential protection services and social networks may find it even more challenging accessing education. This has resulted in a



growing concern that female learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness may not be able to continue with their education causing increased drop-out rates which will further entrench the gender disparities in education.

This is an infringement of their right to education and a matter of great concern for agencies working to promote the right to education for all persons with visual impairment and DeafBlindness in Malawi.

It is to be noted that over 80% of all incidental learning and the performance of activities of daily living are dependent on sight. The loss of sight and Deafness therefore poses unique challenges that require a large number of diverse measures to enable people who are visually impaired and DeafBlind participate fully and inclusively in education, mobility and other activities.

### **3 Commitment**

The Malawi Union of the Blind (MUB) in conjunction with VIHEMA DeafBlind Malawi and African Federation of the DeafBlind is committed to promote equal access to appropriate education and support services of people with visual impairment and DeafBlindness in Malawi and Africa in general so that they may achieve their full potential. Our Visionary Learning Model is a comprehensive strategy that facilitates multi-agency collaboration in the provision of quality education to learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness guided by a shared goal.

Through this model, we seek to ensure that all learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness have access to the right **Kit** (the gadgets and devices that they require to read and write), **Content** (the learning materials that they need in a range of accessible formats) and **Confidence** (the skills and training that they require to be able to use the devices and the learning materials confidently).

Malawi Union of the Blind believes that, more than ever, this is the time to take conscious steps to guarantee the fundamental rights of every member of society and to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized segments of the society are not exposed or subjected to further vulnerability or marginalization as a result of the implementation of control and mitigation measures against COVID-19.

### **4 Call**

Malawi Union of the Blind therefore calls on Government, stakeholders, human rights entities, civil society organisations and international development agencies to take deliberate measures to ensure that in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic, all learners, including learners with disabilities enjoy the right to education on an equal basis despite their educational needs. In particular, for learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness who face unique challenges in accessing education and who are at greater risk of exclusion, Malawi Union of the Blind, VIHEMA DeafBlind Malawi and African Federation of the DeafBlind call for action as follows:

#### **a Inclusive COVID-19 Response-Related Educational Policies and Planning**

Government and other stakeholders to ensure that all policies and programs that are being developed to respond to COVID-19 within the education sector are inclusive and clearly demonstrate considerations for all learners including those who face multiple and



intersectional discrimination and other persons who require continuous and personalized support. In particular, Government and other stakeholders are called upon to recognize the unique and multi-faceted needs and response measures for persons with visual impairment and DeafBlindness and make the necessary provisions in these policies, plans and programs right from their inception.

**b Inclusive Alternative Learning and Delivery Methods**

Government and other stakeholders should ensure that these measures do not exclude or leave behind some of the learners. To this end, Governments and other stakeholders are called upon to adopt and integrate the Visionary Learning Model in the education of learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness to enable them participate fully and meaningfully in the learning process like their sighted peers.

**c Health and Safety in Educational Institutions**

Government and other stakeholders should ensure that plans to re-open educational institutions and on-board learners take into account the health and safety of learners who require continuous and personalized support. Specifically, Government and other stakeholders are called upon to recognize the unique vulnerability of learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness occasioned by the nature of their reading, mobility and socialization, and make explicit provisions for them. This includes equipping schools with COVID-19 control and mitigation measures as well as equipping teachers and other support personnel with skills to provide COVID-19 related support to learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness before re-opening of institutions.

**d Information Collection, Documentation and Dissemination**

Government and other stakeholders to systematically collect, document and disseminate information on the effect and impact of COVID-19 on education. In particular, they are called upon to ensure that the collection of information takes into account the unique experiences, challenges and effects that the pandemic has had – including its control and mitigation measures - on learners who require support ; and to further ensure that all related documentation and reporting desegregates information accordingly for the diverse categories of learners with disabilities.

**e Financing Of interventions for learners with disabilities**

Government and other stakeholders to allocate adequate financing for COVID-19 education-related responses to education of learners with disabilities. In addition, Governments and other stakeholders are called upon to ensure that such financial allocations are informed by and respond to the unique and diverse needs of the various categories of learners with disabilities, and that they are available easily and timely and for the intended purposes.

**f Collaboration and Stakeholder Involvement**

Government and other stakeholders to consult, involve and collaborate - to the fullest extent possible - with agencies working with diverse categories of learners with disabilities as well as representative organizations of persons with disabilities. Governments and other stakeholders



are reminded that the uniqueness of visual impairment and DeafBlindness require varied interventions to enable people with visual impairment and DeafBlindness participate fully in education and in other social and economic activities. These have led to many agencies and service providers coming in to compliment government in providing education to learners with visual impairment and DeafBlindness in Malawi. To this end, Government and other stakeholders are called upon to make use of the expertise and experience among these agencies with the required technical knowledge in policy development, planning, implementation and monitoring to ensure that all relevant aspects of visual impairment and DeafBlindness in particular and disability in general are included.

## **5 Conclusion**

The risk and ultimate impact of COVID-19 on the education of children with visual impairment and DeafBlindness can only be mitigated through national solidarity and inclusive, human rights approaches. We need to ensure that all learners' rights and needs are met, through the effective provision of quality and inclusive education during this crisis and beyond.



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