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Accessible Toilet in Northern Uganda Promises an End to Bullying of Students with Disability

TOCHI SCHOOL, GULU DISTRICT, UGANDA: The joyful and much-publicized opening of an accessible toilet at this remote school in northern Uganda has raised hopes that children with disabilities can now attend the school without fear of bullying, and that the local government will make accessible sanitation a priority in future education plans.



Object of admiration: The accessible Tochi toilet on opening day

The sturdy toilet - complete with ramps, handrails, a sitting provision, and a rain-fed water tank for hand-washing - was opened on August 11 at an enthusiastic ceremony that drew over 1,000 visitors.

Part celebration and part rally, the event lasted the entire day and triggered an outpouring of support for accessible water and sanitation from students, community leaders and government officials.

Mr. Okumu Luriu, the senior local politician, praised Tochi school and assured Christina Aloya Foyla, the Tochi principal, of his support. He also urged the Tochi community to keep the toilet

in good condition. Mr. Tadeo Walter, the Gulu District School Inspector, followed Chairman Luriu in expressing admiration for the toilet project, which seeks to improve sanitation at Tochi and provide a more inclusive environment for the students with disabilities.

Organizers were delighted by the August 11 event. Ojok Patrick, a program officer at the Gulu Disabled Persons Union (GDPU), a leading advocate for disability rights, said that he had received calls from the media throughout Uganda. He also expressed confidence that the toilet would "attract more children from the community."



Meeting of minds: Christine Aloya Foyla, the Tochi principal, and Okumu Luriu, chairman of the local Gulu district Council commit to accessible sanitation

[Josh Levy](#), a Peace Fellow at the GDPU who raised most of the funds for the accessible toilet through crowd funding, said he was "amazed" at the response. "It's so exciting to see the community unite around the toilet," he said. "Now we must all work hard to make sure it is maintained and also copied by others."

The August 11 opening capped five years of advocacy by the GDPU and The Advocacy Project (AP). The LRA rebellion left Gulu district with higher than average rates of disability, but as Peace Fellow Rebecca Scherpelz noted in a [ground-breaking blog](#), there were no public accessible services available anywhere in the district in 2011.

Peace Fellows [Dane Macri](#) and [John Steies](#) helped the GDPU to install an accessible toilet at the Gulu bus park. The focus then shifted to schools. In 2014, [Peace Fellow Kathryn Dutile](#) helped GDPU to survey 10 schools and found that none met government specifications for accessibility.

A team from the GDPU and AP visited Tochi school in October 2014 and [met with several students](#), including Ivan Olanya, 14, who faced incessant bullying because of their disabilities. Ivan complained that other students smeared feces on the bars of the toilet to force him from school because of his good grades. Ivan was on the point of dropping out.

AP agreed to raise funds for a new toilet unit if the school would commit to ending bullying. Josh [raised \\$4,000](#) from over 70 donors, while the [Rotary Club of Windsor Ontario](#) donated \$1,000. Humanity United provided \$1,000 to support Josh's fellowship.

From the start, the project has focused as much on changing attitudes among students as installing facilities. The school held a painting competition on July 25 to encourage new ways of thinking about disability, and the best painting, by student Ocitti Deogracias in Grade 7, will now feature as a mural on the side of the toilet. The Tochi students also played a leading role at the August 11 ceremony, by acting out a series of skits to show what it means to be disabled. One fellow student even played the part of his class-mate Ivan.



This painting, by student Ocitti Deogracias, will form the basis for a mural on the new toilet wall

The August 11 festivities produced other encouraging outcomes. The Tochi teachers received new shirts and were heaped with praise by local government officials. Two local associations loaned chairs and tables, while the Gulu Samaritans provided refreshments. [Motivation](#), an international charity, installed ramps and handrails for the school's 8 classrooms at a cost of \$3,000.

The Rotary Club donation covered the fees of seven students who had excelled at school and provided each student with 2,000 Ugandan shillings to buy supplies for forthcoming exams. The project also purchased a pail, mops, cleaning bleach, soap and toilet paper.



Accessible ceremony: Tochi student Olai Santos used sign language to translate speeches for his parents in the audience

GDPU has monitored every stage of the process, and is now seeking to ensure that the toilet is used properly. The school has created a roster of students who will refill the water tanks from a hand-pump during the dry season, and the school will find money to drain the toilet's septic tank when the time comes. The local community will also make good on a promise to combat vandalism. GDPU will visit the school twice a month to check up on progress.

Another long-term goal is to spread the message and scale up the Tochi model. GDPU and AP have identified two larger schools that need new facilities, and will target them in 2016 if funds can be found. Another possible beneficiary could be the Bwobo Manam Primary School, whose head teacher, Ms. Okidi Lydia, attended the August 11 ceremony with 39 of her students.

GDPU and AP will now press the district government to install proper accessible services in all government schools. This long-term goal has been given a strong boost by the Tochi toilet and the engagement of the Tochi community.

* Read a blow by blow account of the building of the Tochi toilet through the [blogs of 2015](#)

[Peace Fellow Josh Levy](#)

* View [Josh Levy's photos](#)

* Visit the [GDPU website](#) and [GDPU partner page](#)

* Meet [past Fellows](#), including those who have worked in Uganda.

Read past AP news bulletins about accessible water and sanitation [here!](#)

Thanks to Humanity United for supporting our fellowship program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network for re-posting our bulletins.

