



NEWS BULLETIN 262

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Students with Disability Face Bullies and Inaccessible Toilets in Uganda

World Toilet Day - November 19, 2014

Patrick Ojok from the [Gulu Disabled Persons Union \(GDPU\)](#), made his way carefully through the outhouses at the Tochi school in northern Uganda. An agency had installed an accessible toilet at the school some years earlier. The toilet was clean, but missing a seat. The ramp and door were too narrow for a wheel chair. The handrails were low.



Almost accessible: one of the Tochi toilets

Outside, two large water tanks, intended for hand-washing, lay in ruins. One tank had been vandalized by the local community on the day it was installed; the other was too high for students to reach. Also, the tap was broken.

Such problems are common to schools in the area, according to the GDPU, a leading advocate for disability rights. They also help to explain why many children with disability are not attending school, as required by Ugandan law. "Children drop out because facilities are not convenient for them" explained Mr Ojok.

Worried by such findings, GDPU is using World Toilet Day (November 19) to launch a new initiative to install accessible toilets in primary schools. The project hopes to start with three schools, including Tochi, and then work with the

local government to develop a policy for all government-supported schools. The Advocacy Project (AP) has deployed an experienced [Peace Fellow, Kathryn Dutile](#), to help.

The first goal is to make sure that the services are indeed accessible. GDPU recently surveyed ten primary schools and found that none had got it right. "You're seeing problems like a ramp to a step, which is a bit confusing," said Ms Dutile, who has studied water and sanitation at Manchester University. None of the "accessible" toilets appeared to have been built to a common specification.

But Tochi also shows that any program will have to change attitudes as well as provide services. Bullying is a top priority and it too is closely linked to toilets. Ivan Olanya, 14, walks with a limp from polio and is one of sixteen students with a disability at Tochi School. He tried to use the accessible toilet and found that other students had smeared feces on the handrail in an effort to drive him from the school. According to Christine Aloya Foyla, the head teacher, the bullies are jealous of Ivan's grades.



Ivan (right) and Nancy (center) have experienced bullying at Tochi school. Patrick Ojok, from the GDPU is leading a GDPU initiative to improve the accessibility of toilets in schools.

Nancy Okot, another student with a mild case of cerebral palsy, is teased by other girls and was so close to dropping out that teachers gave her knitting to calm her nerves.

Nancy and Ivan are standing up to the bullies with help from their friends, but their teachers are deeply concerned. The school has 489 students, but many have dropped out this year because of food shortages and heavy rains, and the school cannot afford to lose any more talented students. Beyond that, there is the message that would be sent to other families with disabled children.

As a result, the new initiative will try to combine services with counseling. Schools will receive new stalls that will be separated from other school toilets and so less exposed to vandalism. The toilets will also come with water tanks that can be filled from the school pump and used by young children. GDPU will work with the town engineer to adopt a single design, and then monitor how the toilets are used.

Teachers, meanwhile, will work with the local community to prevent vandalism and address the bullying. Mrs Aloya Foyla, the head teacher, admitted that this will not be easy. The bullies have even gone after a student who was kidnapped as a child by the Lord's Resistance Army.

AP's interest in accessible toilets was sparked by a [2011 blog by Peace Fellow Rebecca Scherpelz](#) that led to the construction two years later of an [accessible toilet at the Gulu bus park](#). The toilet was converted into a flush toilet this summer under the supervision of Patrick Ojok and Peace Fellow Kathryn Dutile, and reopened last week.

Kathryn, meanwhile, is undeterred by the sights and smells that come with her assignment, and this has earned her the respect and affection of her GDPU colleagues: "She's generous with everyone. We really love the way she is," said Dennis Lakwonyero, the GDPU treasurer.



Holding firm: head teacher Christine Aloya Foyla is taking steps to curb bullying at Tochi school



Peace Fellow Kathryn Dutile at the GDPU

- To support the accessible toilet project, click the Donate button on the top of this page and specify GDPU
- Learn [more about the GDPU](#)
- Watch Shannon Orcutt's [video about accessibility at the Tochi school](#)
- Read the blogs of Peace Fellows who have worked on accessible toilets at GDPU: [Kathryn Dutile](#), [Rebecca Scherpelz](#), [Dane Macri](#) and [John Steies](#)
- Read about the [2011 Gulu Disability Quilt](#) and the [2014 Disability Quilt](#), assembled recently in Canada by quilters with a disability and managed by Dane Macri.

We are grateful to Humanity United for supporting our fellowship program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network (PCDN) for re-posting our blogs and bulletins.

