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A Historical Reflection on Disability Policy and Practice in Nigeria

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Abstract

The evolution of disability policy and practice in Nigeria, which has undergone significant transformation from pre-colonial times through contemporary democratic governance, requires critical historical examination to understand the persistent gaps between policy formulation and implementation. Scholars have examined Nigerian disability frameworks through legislative analysis; comparative studies with international conventions; rights-based approaches; and within the context of healthcare delivery, education access, and employment opportunities. However, these scholars have not adequately addressed the historical trajectory of disability policy development and its socio-cultural implications within Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious landscape. Therefore, this study intends to examine the historical evolution of disability policy and practice in Nigeria and its socio-cultural implications for contemporary inclusive development, drawing upon historical analysis and policy evaluation methodologies. Primary and secondary data will be collected using archival research, policy document analysis, and oral history methods, and will be analysed descriptively and thematically. The historical evidence reveals that traditional African societies possessed indigenous frameworks for disability inclusion, which colonial administration disrupted. These historical patterns demonstrate both the resilience of community-based support systems and the challenges of policy implementation, emphasising the need for culturally responsive, historically informed approaches to contemporary disability governance.

Keywords: disability policy, Nigerian governance, inclusive development, policy implementation, socio-cultural implications

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Introduction

Many individuals face health challenges, and while some are able to recover, others live with disabilities that are either present from birth or acquired through illness, accident, or injury. Disability has become a widespread phenomenon, with over one billion people worldwide living with some form of impairment. According to the World Bank and World Health Organisation (WHO), approximately 25 million people in Nigeria live with disabilities.[4] These disorders are either developmental, cognitive, physical, or a combination of all, and they often affect individuals from birth, making it difficult for them to function appropriately.[5] The meaning of the word 'disability' has been defined in various ways by scholars, and there is no single, universally accepted definition.

The WHO explains disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being."[6] According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."[7] Moreover, Adegbindin posited that disability is also understood from the social and medical perspective. The former sees it as a social problem that needs social intervention, while the latter argues that disability is a fixed condition and problem that needs social intervention.[8]

Ajobiewe, on the other hand, states that it is "…any restriction or lack of ability… to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for human being."[9] These disabilities often pose limitations to the persons affected and a number of them face social exclusion.[10] Obraori further explains that "…a person with disability suffers from long term impairment which may be of physical, mental, intellectual or sensorial in nature; is unable to, or hindered or prevented from independently, effectively and normally performing everyday life's activities; and suffers stereotype from others."[11] Disability is often

[4] WHO and World Bank, *World Report on Disability* (Geneva: WHO, 2011).
[5] Akeem O. Ayub and Usman Abubakar, "Institutional Challenges Faced by Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria," *Ife Social Sciences Review* 30, no. 2 (2022): p 124-125.
[6] World Health Organisation, *International classification of impairment and handicaps* (Geneva: WHO, 1990).
[7] United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities* (2006), p 3.
[8] Omotade Adegbindin, "Disability and Human Diversity: A Reinterpretation of Eni-Oosa Philosophy in Yoruba Belief," *Yoruba Studies Review* 3, no.1 (2021): p 3.
[9] Theo Ajobiewe, Management of Disability in the Family and Community (Ibadan: Teton Educational Services, 2014), p 8.
[10] Ahmed S. Ullah et al., "Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) with special reference to their financial access to education," *International Journal of Sciences and Education* 29, no. 1-3 (2020): pp 24-32.
[11] Adiela N.P. Obraori, "Understanding Disability and Disability Rights in Nigeria," *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research* 11, no. 1 (2023): p 43.

interchanged with the terms 'impairment' and 'handicap'.[12] Aremu opines that Persons With Disabilities (PWDs) are "individuals who experience one or more of a wide range of impairments or handicaps generally referred to as disabilities."[13]

From the pre-colonial to colonial era in Nigeria, there have been varying ways in which disabled persons are treated. It has ranged from the traditional measures to Western-based primarily because of colonial influence. The efforts of missionaries were also pivotal in addressing individuals with disabilities as they set up homes and specialised schools. After Nigeria's independence, the government took actions towards these special people by introducing and implementing certain programs and policies regarding Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). In 1976, the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy was promulgated and this guaranteed free and basic education for all children, including those with disabilities.[14] As a result of the increased awareness of PWDs in the country, the Nigerian with Disability Decree was introduced in 1993.[15] Other policies were initiated thereafter; however, it was not until 2018 that the landmark Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act was enacted, safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities and protecting them from stigma and marginalisation.[16]

Despite these, the policies have not been adequately enforced, thus causing success for some states and little in others. This study thus examines the experiences of persons with disabilities in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria; it also explores the post-independence era, focusing on the evolution of disability approaches from 1960 to 1999, and the third aspect discusses the democratic era, highlighting the emergence of a rights-based framework for persons with disabilities.

Persons with Disabilities in the Pre-colonial and Colonial Era

In precolonial Nigeria, disability was viewed and interpreted through the lens of cultural and spiritual beliefs, and this translated into how people with disabilities were treated. Among the Yoruba, disability was associated with a deity known as Orisa-nla or Obatala, the god of creation. It is believed that when Olodumare, the Supreme Being, was creating the world, he gave Obatala the task of moulding the parts of man in whichever way he deemed fit, either in a good shape or with deformed features.[17] The Yoruba people believed that the Orisa created the disabled, such as the disabled people, the hunchbacks, the

[12] Omotade Adegbindin, "Disability and Human Diversity: A Reinterpretation of Eni-Oosa Philosophy in Yoruba Belief," Yoruba Studies Review 3, no.1 (2021): p 2.
[13] Elizabeth S. Aremu, "„Inclusion of Persons With Disabilities in Nigeria: A Pre-Requisite for National Sustainable Development," (paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of College of Management Sciences, University of Lagos, Yaba, May p 4, 2023).
[14] Ibid., p 7.
[15] Charles D. Akhidenor, Nigeria's Attitudes towards People with Disabilities (Minneapolis: Capella University, 2007), p 6.
[16] Federal Republic of Nigeria Official Gazette, "Discrimination Against Persons With Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018," Government Notice 106, no. 10 (2019): p 101.
[17] Omotade Adegbindin, "Disability and Human Diversity: A Reinterpretation of Eni-Oosa Philosophy in Yoruba Belief," Yoruba Studies Review 3, no.1 (2021): pp 3-11.

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dumb, etc, to make them sacred to him; therefore, those living with disability were regarded as 'Eni-Orisa' (offspring of the deity).[18] These people are also seen as a curse, evil, punishment from either the gods or ancestors, and some were even isolated. Those with leprosy were regarded with shame and filth, often facing discrimination as people avoided interacting with them for fear of contracting the disease. Despite negative perceptions and supernatural beliefs about those born with disabilities, the traditional society encouraged the families of such people to take care of them.[19]

The perception of disability among the Igbo was similar to that of the Yoruba, as their traditional beliefs shaped their attitudes towards people with disabilities. Onwuatuegwu argued that the Igbo also saw those born with disabilities as a result of supernatural causes, and as the consequence of past wrongdoing of their families.[20] The Igbo believed in communalism, which influenced their communication and social interactions. They cherished their social life and prioritised belongingness, striving to maintain harmony within the group. However, despite the sense of belonging and community support, disabled people were excluded because they could not contribute to the community's welfare in traditional ways.[21] Mkparu argued that the presence of individuals with disabilities was believed to disrupt the Igbo community, which in turn affected how disabled people were treated, leading to discrimination and social exclusion for some.[22] However, the treatment of some disabled individuals was even more severe. For instance, those with mental illness were subjected to extreme measures, including being killed for rituals, seen as unclean, perceived as one who did an abominable thing, or accused of witchcraft, which resulted in their death.[23] Notwithstanding the prevalent negative perceptions of Igbo communities towards individuals with disabilities, the Mgbowo community, despite viewing disability as an act of deviation, demonstrated a notable level of acceptance towards the physically impaired. The community incorporated these group of people into social and economic production, provided they adhered to the norms and had a reputable lineage.[24]

In pre-colonial Hausaland, social order was rooted in status and communal obligations. Inclusion in society was determined by one's status, rather than their physical abilities or disabilities. This meant that individuals with

[18] Omotade Adegbindin, "Disability and Human Diversity: A Reinterpretation of Eni-Oosa Philosophy in Yoruba Belief," Yoruba Studies Review 3, no.1 (2021): p 11.
[19] Adebanke Oketola, Employment Challenges experienced by Persons With Disabilities: A Case study of Southwest Nigeria (Winnipeg: Department of Manitoba, 2017).
[20] Ignatius N. Onwuatuegwu, "Exploring Disability within Igbo Cultural Identity: A Philosophical Inquiry," International Journal of Language, Literature, and Culture (IJLLC) 4, no.5 (2024): p 57.
[21] Ibid., p 58.
[22] C. Mkparu, "Disability and Social Exclusion in Igboland: The need for paradigm shift," Journal of Igbo Studies 8, no. 2 (2018): pp 35-42.
[23] Oliver O. C. Uche and Ndukwe Kalu," Ableism in the African Traditional Religion: A Critical Analysis of some select Igbo Proverbs,"Ekwe Jonal Nke Ndi Igbo Scholars Forum for Socio-cultural Advancement 18, no.1 (2025): p 205.
[24] Vitalis Nwashindu, "Imagining "Deviance" as a Disability in a Precolonial Igbo Village in Southern Nigeria: The Mgbowo Example," Allofusdha.org, 4 July 2025, <https://allofusdha.org/research/imagining-deviance-as-disability-in-a-precolonial-igno-village-in-southern-nigeria-the-mgbowo-example/> (Accessed 8 December 2025).

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impairments were integrated into the community based on their social standing and contributions, rather than being solely defined by their physical or economic limitations.[25] The introduction of Islam to areas in Hausaland also influenced the way the people behaved towards disabled people. Disabilities were viewed as tests of faith or punishment for sin, however, Islam's strong emphasis on charity (Zakat) and almsgiving (Sadaka) ensured that individuals with special needs received support from their communities, enabling them to be cared for and integrated into society.

On a general perspective, Usuanlele contended that many communities practised a form of premarital screening where prospective couples underwent family background checks to identify potential genetic predispositions to disabilities. Both the groom's and bride's families would investigate each other's family histories to ensure there were no existing impairments, based on the belief that this would minimise the risk of their offspring being born with disabilities.[26] Certain groups, such as the Igbo, Ijaw, Efik, and Birom, practised infanticide, abandoning children with disabilities or twins in the forest to die. Despite the belief that the cause of disabilities was linked to spiritual and cultural factors, several groups, such as the Edo, did not view people with disabilities as burdens. Instead, they provided employment, with some individuals serving in the King's Palace.[27]

By the early 19th century, European missionaries began their activities in the area now regarded as Nigeria. They spread their influence by converting the people to Christianity via the instrumentality of education.[28] Aremu stated that the missionaries taught the adherents of Christianity about love and acceptance for everyone, including those born with deformities. The teachings of the missionaries curtailed the killings of individuals with disabilities. They also founded schools for children with visual impairment, teaching them the Braille system of reading and writing.[29] By the mid-19th century, British interests had established a presence in the region now known as Nigeria, and following the annexation of Lagos in 1861, colonialism gained traction. During this period, the conceptualisation of disability underwent a vital shift, transitioning from mainly a cultural or spiritual understanding to a more medicalised point of view, as the colonial masters introduced Western medical facilities and frameworks that attributed disability to biomedical causes rather than supernatural factors.[30] Also, the colonial administrators and Christian missionaries outlawed the indigenous practices towards the disabled. Subsequently, these practices went

[25] M.G. Smith, "The Hausa System of Social Status," Africa 39, no.3 (1959).
[26] Uyilawa Usuanlele, "Colonialism, Disability, and Welfare in Nigeria, 1900-1954," in Beyond the Boundaries: Toyin Falola and the Art of Genre-Bending, ed. Nana A. Amponsah (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Monsuru. B. Muraina, "Historical Antecedents of Development and Management of Educational Resources in Nigeria: 1882-2013," Historical Research Letter 23 (2015): pp 12-13.
[29] Joann I. Anokwuru, Living and Learning with Disabilities in Nigeria: An Ecological Narrative Inquiry (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia, 2023), p 15.
[30] Olayinka Akanle, "Christianity and Disability in Post-Colonial South-western Nigeria," Journal of Environment and Culture 11, no.2 (2014): p 38.

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underground and started to fade away.[31] The British introduced the indirect rule system and under this system, revenues from indigenous institutions, including Zakat, were redirected into a native administration treasury. Notwithstanding, this redirection largely benefited the colonial masters while negatively impacting individuals with disabilities, who previously relied on these funds for support.[32]

As colonial influence shaped the understanding of disability in present-day Nigeria, European missionaries concurrently pursued their own initiatives to address disability, thereby creating a dual approach to disability support. The colonial economy's monetisation and new cash demands forced colonised subjects to seek wage labour, leading to mass migration and the creation of a new labour regime. This resulted in injuries, impairments, and disabilities among workers. The migration also spread diseases, such as leprosy, and increased mental health issues. Inadequate food and high prices led to poor nutrition, making people vulnerable to diseases. For example, school children had blindness due to dietary deficiencies.[33] Before the end of the 20th century, leprosy control existent but was limited. In 1895, the Roman Catholic Mission founded a facility for lepers. The colonial government also controlled an asylum for lepers in Asaba, however, the place was not properly managed.[34] Earlier laws addressing leprosy in Nigeria included the 1908 Lepers Ordinance in Southern Nigeria, which assigned responsibility for leprosy asylums to the government and the 1911 Lepers Proclamation in Northern Nigeria, which placed the establishment of leprosy asylums under the local authorities. However, implementation was limited, yielding little practical impact.[35] In 1935, the Sudan United Mission (American branch) established a school for blind students in Faliya in present-day Bauchi state. By 1953, the British branch opened the Gindiri school for blind students in what is now known as Plateau State.[36] According to Okeke, as cited by Akhidenor, efforts towards ensuring the educational needs of the disabled date back to 1954, when the Western Region's Education Law mandated the establishment of special schools for children with special needs, this was replicated in the Northern region.[37] The missionaries also launched vocational schools for children with special needs, such as Wesley School for deaf students and Hearing Impaired in Lagos, in 1956. Some of the vocations taught included bead making, knitting, and cobbling[38]

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[31] Uyilawa Usuanlele, "Colonialism, Disability, and Welfare in Nigeria, 1900-1954," in Beyond the Boundaries: Toyin Falola and the Art of Genre-Bending, ed. Nana A. Amponsah (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Takehiko Ochiai, "Leprosy Control in Colonial Nigeria: A Historical Overview," Sophia Journal of Asian, African, and Middle East Studies 40 (2022): p 7.
[35] Tunde Oduwobi, "Tackling Leprosy in Colonial Nigeria, 1926- 1960," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria 22 (2013): pp 184-185.
[36] Charles D. Akhidenor, Nigeria's Attitudes towards People with Disabilities (Minneapolis: Capella University, 2007), p 7.
[37] Ibid., p 6.
[38] Elizabeth S. Aremu, "„Inclusion of Persons With Disabilities in Nigeria: A Pre-Requisite for National Sustainable Development," (paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of College of Management Sciences, University of Lagos, Yaba, May p 7, 2023).

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The above development summarily led to the evolution of special education in Nigeria which can be traced back to the efforts of missionaries from Europe and America.[39] The Sudan United Mission (SUM) initiated the first formal special education efforts in 1915, teaching Braille to visually impaired children in the Hausa language.[40] Missionaries were driven by a belief in accommodating the "needy" and used "religious but caring activities" to gain influence among the people.[41] Other missions quickly followed suit, establishing schools in their churches. Their work was charity-based and focused on specific impairments (e.g., visual, hearing), establishing separate schools for disabled children because they "could not be taught with other children".[42] The missionaries formalised their curriculum, enabling people with impairments to obtain certifications similar to those from conventional schools.[43]

The history of the Pacelli School for the Blind, which was officially opened in 1962 but was a product of the colonial missionary legacy, provides a crucial case study.[44] It was a Catholic mission-led initiative that later came under government control, which led to a deterioration in the quality of education and neglect of student welfare.[45] The mission requested its return in 1997, demonstrating the government's historical indecisiveness toward special education. The quality of care and education suffered under state management, making the central role of religious and charitable organisations in providing services important. This historical pattern explains why, even today, NGOs and faith-based groups are often at the forefront of disability services.[46]

Post Independence Development and Approach for Persons with Disabilities (1960-1999)

The period between Nigeria's independence in 1960 and the dawn of democratic governance in 1999 represents a crucial epoch in the evolution of disability policy and practice within the Nigerian state. This era witnessed the emergence of foundational policy frameworks, legislative initiatives, and institutional structures that would shape the evolution of disability rights and services for decades to come. Understanding this historical development

[39]special education provision in nigeria: analyzing contexts, problem - ERIC, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ921180.pdf

[40]History of special education in nigeria, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://assets-global.website-files.com/67571be6006009bdbc1401d1/67fd2c9fadb7485d56c3e93b_41788728149.pdf

[41]Pacelli School for the Blind and Partially Sighted::history, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://www.pacellischoolfortheblind.org/history.html

[42]History of special education in nigeria, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://assets-global.website-files.com/67571be6006009bdbc1401d1/67fd2c9fadb7485d56c3e93b_41788728149.pdf

[43] Ibid

[44]www.pacellischoolfortheblind.org, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://www.pacellischoolfortheblind.org/history.html#:~:text=Pacelli%20School%20for%20the%20Blind%20and%20Partially%20Sighted%2C%20an%20initiative,for%20the%20education%20of%20the

[45] Ibid

[46] Brace Foundation – Embracing Special Needs With Love, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://www.bracefoundation.org/

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provides essential context for comprehending both the progress made and the persistent challenges that continue to characterise the disability discourse in contemporary Nigeria.

The post-independence period began with a nation grappling with the fundamental task of nation-building while simultaneously addressing the diverse needs of its population, including those living with disabilities. The nascent Nigerian state inherited colonial structures that had largely marginalised persons with disabilities, viewing them through a predominantly medical model that emphasised charity and institutionalisation rather than rights and integration. This historical legacy would profoundly influence the approaches adopted during the early years of independence, as successive governments struggled to develop comprehensive policies that addressed the complex needs of this vulnerable population.

International developments significantly influenced the evolution of disability policy during this period in human rights discourse and disability advocacy. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) of 1948[47] and subsequent international instruments provided a normative framework that gradually influenced Nigerian policy-makers. However, the translation of these international standards into domestic policy and practice proved to be a protracted and often inconsistent process.[48] The influence of international conventions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) of 1946[49] and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948[50] strongly shaped Nigeria's approach to disability policy, particularly in the realm of education.[51] The increasing recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities, as exemplified by the UDHR, prompted the Nigerian government to establish the Declaration School for the Deaf in 1961, providing education for children with hearing impairments.[52] However, despite this initiative, issues such as inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of trained personnel persisted, hindering the effectiveness of such efforts.[53]

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970) left many soldiers disabled, prompting the government to establish the National Committee for Rehabilitation (NCR) in 1969 to rehabilitate and reintegrate them. The committee provided free medical care, vocational training, financial benefits, and job placement opportunities. This initiative marked a significant step towards accommodating

[47] Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (1948). New York: United Nations General Assembly.
[48] Etieyibo, Edwin. "Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria." Afrika Focus 33, no. 1 (2020): 59-81.
[49] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. (1946). Constitution of UNESCO. Paris: UNESCO.
[50] Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (1948). New York: United Nations General Assembly.
[51] Ibekwe, Chineze Sophia, and Onyeka Christiana Aduma. "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria: Pitfalls and Prospects." African Journal of Law and Human Rights 3, no. 2 (2019): 137-147.
[52] Saliu K. Abdulrauf and Isiaka T. Ontada, "Tracing the Historical Trajectory of Special Education in Nigeria: From Colonial to Contemporary Practices," *Port Harcourt Journal of Educational Studies* 9, no.3 (2024): p 852.
[53] Ibid.

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individuals with disabilities in the country, promoting their economic independence and social inclusion.[54]

One of the earliest and most significant policy initiatives during this period was the formulation of the National Policy on Education in 1977. This policy marked a watershed moment in Nigeria's approach to disability, as it explicitly recognised the educational rights of persons with disabilities. The policy stated that "the disabled, the disadvantaged and the gifted/talented, be they children or adults, would be granted adequate education to enable them to contribute meaningfully to the development of the nation."[55] This declaration represented a paradigm shift from viewing persons with disabilities as objects of charity to recognising them as potential contributors to national development. The policy's emphasis on enabling meaningful contribution to national development reflected an understanding that investing in the education of persons with disabilities could yield both individual and societal benefits.

The implementation of this educational policy, however, faced numerous challenges that would persist throughout the period under consideration. The lack of adequate funding, trained personnel, and appropriate infrastructure severely limited the policy's effectiveness. Many educational institutions remained inaccessible to persons with disabilities, and the few special schools that existed were often poorly equipped and staffed.[56] The concentration of these facilities in urban areas further marginalised rural populations with disabilities, creating geographical disparities in access to educational opportunities that would become a defining feature of Nigeria's disability landscape.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed an increasing awareness of international developments in disability rights, leading to Nigeria's ratification of several key international instruments. The country ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 159 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons in 1983/85,[57] and endorsed the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons in 1981.[58] These international commitments reflected a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive approaches to disability that extended beyond education to encompass employment, rehabilitation, and social integration.

However, the dual nature of Nigeria's legal system meant that these international instruments required further domestication before they could acquire the force of law within the domestic legal framework. This constitutional requirement created a significant gap between international commitments and domestic legal obligations, allowing successive governments to maintain rhetorical support for disability rights while avoiding the practical obligations that would flow from legally enforceable standards. The

[54] Johnson Adama, Amputee Rebellion Revisiting Veteran Care in Postwar Nigeria 1970-1979, *Research Gate* (2025), pp 1-4.
[55] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 140.
[56] Etieyibo, "Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria," 69-70.
[57] International Labour Organisation. *Convention No. 159 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons* (Geneva: ILO Publications, 1983).
[58] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 140.

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domestication of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in 1982 provided some recourse for disability rights advocates, as this instrument contained provisions that could potentially be invoked to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, though such applications remained largely theoretical during this period.[59]

The 1990s marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's approach to disability policy with the enactment of the Nigerians with Disabilities Act of 1993. This legislation represented the first comprehensive domestic legal framework specifically designed to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities in Nigeria. The Act was heavily influenced by international instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), and the Declaration on Rights of the Disabled (1995).[60] The timing of this legislation coincided with a global movement towards recognising disability as a human rights issue rather than merely a medical or charitable concern.

The 1993 Disabilities Act established several important principles that would influence subsequent disability policy development.[61] The Act declared the responsibility of government and other authorities to adopt and promote policies that would ensure the full integration of persons with disabilities into the mainstream of society.[62] This emphasis on mainstreaming represented a significant departure from earlier approaches that had focused on segregated services and institutions. The Act guaranteed the right of persons with disabilities to free primary and tertiary education, required the adaptation of educational facilities to ensure accessibility, and mandated the training of special educational personnel to handle their unique learning needs. Employment provisions within the Act reflected progressive thinking about workplace inclusion. The legislation required all employers of labour to reserve not less than ten per cent of their workforce for persons with disabilities, representing one of the earliest examples of affirmative action policies in Nigerian employment law.[63] This quota system, while ambitious, would prove difficult to implement and monitor due to the absence of effective enforcem]ent mechanisms and regulatory oversight.

Despite its progressive provisions, the 1993 Disabilities Act contained several problematic elements that would limit its effectiveness. The Act's definition of "disabled person" was restricted to those who had obtained a preliminary or permanent certificate of disability, effectively excluding the majority of persons with disabilities who lacked knowledge of such certification requirements or were unable to obtain the necessary documentation.[64] This definitional limitation reflected the persistence of medical model thinking, which required

[59] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 140.
[60] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 140.
[61] International Labour Organisation. *Convention No. 159 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons* (Geneva: ILO Publications, 1983).
[62] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 140.
[63] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 141.
[64] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 141.

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official recognition of impairment rather than focusing on the barriers and discrimination faced by individuals in society.

The institutional framework established by the Act also proved inadequate to the task of implementation and enforcement. While the Act provided for the establishment of a National Commission for People with Disability, this body was neither adequately funded nor empowered with the necessary authority to fulfil its mandate.[65] The Commission lacked the power to request recruitment data from employers to monitor compliance with employment quotas, nor could it institute legal actions in cases of alleged disability discrimination. These institutional weaknesses meant that the Commission remained largely ineffectual, and responsibility for disability-related issues continued to reside within the Rehabilitation Department of the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs, where it received limited priority and resources.

Throughout the 1960-1999 period, the social model of disability began to gain recognition alongside the traditional medical model that had dominated earlier approaches. The social model, which understood disability as arising from society's failure to adapt to the needs and aspirations of people with disabilities rather than from individual impairments, gradually influenced policy discourse and advocacy efforts.[66] This theoretical shift was reflected in the work of disability scholars and advocates who argued that "disability does not simply refer to an individual's intrinsic features but comes about as a result of an interaction between a person (with a health condition) and that person's contextual factors (both environmental and personal factors)."[67]

The emergence of disability advocacy organisations during this period played a crucial role in advancing the rights agenda and maintaining pressure on the government for policy reform. These organisations, many of which were formed by persons with disabilities themselves, brought lived experience and authentic voices to the policy discourse. Their advocacy efforts were instrumental in securing the passage of the 1993 Disabilities Act and in maintaining public attention on disability issues during periods of political instability and economic hardship.

The economic challenges that characterised much of this period significantly impacted the implementation of disability policies and programmes. Nigeria's economy experienced considerable volatility, with periods of oil boom followed by economic recession and structural adjustment programmes. These economic fluctuations affected government capacity to fund disability services and infrastructure development, often relegating disability issues to low-priority status in national budget allocations. The persistence of poverty, which affected a significant proportion of the general population, created additional challenges for persons with disabilities who faced both disability-related barriers and general economic hardship.

Another feature of the period was that the cultural and religious attitudes towards disability continued to influence policy implementation and social

[65] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 141.
[66] Etieyibo, "Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria," 61-62.
[67] Etieyibo, "Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria," 61

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acceptance throughout this period. Traditional beliefs that attributed disability to spiritual causes or divine punishment remained prevalent in many communities, creating barriers to the acceptance and integration of persons with disabilities.[68] These cultural attitudes were often reinforced by religious interpretations that emphasised charity and pity rather than rights and empowerment. The tension between traditional cultural values and emerging human rights frameworks created complex challenges for policy-makers and advocates seeking to promote inclusion and equality.

The educational sector experienced particular challenges in implementing inclusive policies during this period. Despite the progressive provisions of the 1977 National Policy on Education,[69] the actual delivery of educational services to persons with disabilities remained inadequate. Many schools lacked the physical infrastructure necessary to accommodate students with mobility impairments, while the shortage of trained teachers and appropriate learning materials limited the quality of education available to those who did gain access. The concentration of special education services in urban areas meant that rural children with disabilities were often excluded entirely from formal education.[70]

During this period, healthcare services for persons with disabilities also remained underdeveloped throughout this period. The focus on curative rather than preventive care, combined with limited resources and infrastructure, meant that many individuals with disabilities were unable to access appropriate medical support or rehabilitation services. The absence of community-based rehabilitation programmes left many persons with disabilities without access to the support services necessary for independent living and social participation. Additionally, employment opportunities for persons with disabilities remained severely limited despite the progressive provisions of the 1993 Disabilities Act. Discriminatory attitudes among employers, combined with inaccessible workplaces and limited vocational training opportunities, created significant barriers to economic participation.[71] The informal nature of much of Nigeria's economy also meant that employment protections and quotas were difficult to monitor and enforce, leaving many persons with disabilities dependent on subsistence activities or family support.

The period also witnessed the emergence of disability-specific advocacy organisations that would play increasingly important roles in subsequent decades. The Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities

[68] Imam, Ibrahim, and M. A. Abdulraheem-Mustapha. 2016. "Rights of People with Disability in Nigeria: Attitude and Commitment." African Journal of International and Comparative Law 24 (3): 439-459.
[69] Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1977). National Policy on Education. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Education.
[70] Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1977). National Policy on Education. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Education.

[71] Imam, Ibrahim, and M. A. Abdulraheem-Mustapha. 2016. "Rights of People with Disability in Nigeria: Attitude and Commitment." African Journal of International and Comparative Law 24 (3): 439-459.

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(JONAPWD), established in 1992,[72] became the primary umbrella organisation representing the interests of persons with disabilities across different impairment categories.[73] These organisations provided platforms for collective advocacy while also delivering direct services to their members, filling gaps left by inadequate government provision. At the time, transport and accessibility remained significant challenges throughout this period, with most public infrastructure remaining inaccessible to persons with disabilities. The absence of building codes that mandated accessibility features meant that new construction often replicated the barriers present in older buildings. Public transportation systems were similarly inaccessible, limiting the mobility and independence of persons with disabilities and reinforcing their social and economic marginalisation.[74]

The legal framework during this period reflected the broader challenges of implementing progressive policies within weak institutional structures. While the 1993 Disabilities Act represented a significant advancement in legal protections, its effectiveness was undermined by the absence of implementing regulations, enforcement mechanisms, and judicial precedents.[75] The low levels of legal literacy among persons with disabilities, combined with limited access to legal services, meant that few individuals were able to invoke their rights under the legislation. Political instability and military governance during much of this period also affected the consistency and sustainability of disability policies. Changes in government leadership often resulted in policy discontinuities, with new administrations failing to build upon the initiatives of their predecessors. The absence of democratic accountability mechanisms during military rule limited the influence of disability advocacy organisations and reduced the pressure on the government to implement progressive policies.

The international dimension of disability policy development remained important throughout this period, with Nigerian advocates and policy-makers drawing inspiration from developments in other countries and international organisations. Technical assistance from international development agencies and disability organisations helped to build local capacity and introduce best practices, though the sustainability of such support was often limited by funding cycles and changing donor priorities. By the end of the 1990s, Nigeria had established a foundational legal and policy framework for disability rights, but significant gaps remained between policy intentions and implementation reality. The 1993 Disabilities Act represented a progressive legal instrument, but institutional weaknesses, resource constraints, and persistent social barriers limited its impact.[76] The National Policy on Education had articulated a vision of inclusive education, but the majority of children with disabilities

[72] Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities, *Establishing conference proceedings* (University of Jos, 1992).
[73] Ibekwe and Aduma, "The Evolution of Disability Rights in Nigeria," 142.
[74] Imam, Ibrahim, and M. A. Abdulraheem-Mustapha. 2016. "Rights of People with Disability in Nigeria: Attitude and Commitment." African Journal of International and Comparative Law 24 (3): 439-459.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Imam, Ibrahim, and M. A. Abdulraheem-Mustapha. 2016. "Rights of People with Disability in Nigeria: Attitude and Commitment." African Journal of International and Comparative Law 24 (3): 439-459.

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remained out of school. Employment quotas had been established, but discriminatory practices continued to exclude persons with disabilities from the workforce.

The period from 1960 to 1999 thus represents a phase of policy development and institution-building that laid important groundwork for subsequent advances in disability rights, while also establishing patterns of implementation challenges that would persist into the democratic era. The tension between progressive policy aspirations and limited implementation capacity became a defining characteristic of Nigeria's approach to disability issues, reflecting broader challenges in the country's development.

The Democratic Era and the Emergence of a Rights-Based Framework for Persons with Disabilities in Nigeria (1999-2018)

The year 1999 marked the advent of Nigeria's fourth republic, which was a significant political shift from the decades of turbulent military rule to a new democratic era. With former president Olusegun Obasanjo stepping in, the ground for human rights, especially for marginalised populations, including persons with disabilities, was created. From 1999 to 2018, the evolution of right-based frameworks spearheaded and created results that have never happened since the emergence of Nigeria as an independent nation. The perception of disabilities in Nigeria has slowly evolved from the Charity model, which pronounced disabilities as unfortunate, a curse or even a spiritual punishment. Unfortunately, people are still stuck in this mindset despite the awareness shown. Another perception of disabilities is the medical model. Of course, drugs are essential and are encouraged to treat or even cure them. However, there is a more appropriate approach, which is the rights-based model, which primarily focuses on the attitudes towards persons with disabilities rather than tailoring persons with disabilities to fit the demands of society.

The 1999th year marked the launch of the 1999 constitution, which gave provisions to persons with disabilities in section 34, guaranteeing the dignity of all human persons, a provision that implicitly covers PWDs.[77] This was a necessary starting point, as it established that all citizens, regardless of their physical or mental status, were entitled to fundamental human rights. However, this was not sufficient, as people with disabilities did not have enough evidence to address discrimination, especially in the courtroom. It was viewed more as a moral issue than a legal entitlement. Asides from the 1993 Nigerians with disabilities decree which lacked a modern rights-based perspective. [78]

[77] NIGERIANS WITH DISABILITY DECREE 1993 THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT hereby decrees as follows - Child Law Resources, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://clr.africanchildforum.org/Legislation%20Per%20Country/Nigeria/nigeria_disability_1993_en.pdf

[78] NIGERIANS WITH DISABILITY DECREE 1993 THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT hereby decrees as follows - Child Law Resources, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://clr.africanchildforum.org/Legislation%20Per%20Country/Nigeria/nigeria_disability_1993_en.pdf

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The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and its optional protocol in 2011 set the pace for the development of the rights of persons with disabilities.[79] The ratification led to various domestic movements by government and non-governmental organisations. For instance, the Lagos state government brought up the special people's law, which comprehensively covered the Rights of persons with disabilities from education to labour rights to healthcare, etc.[80] By 2015, Nigeria adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of whose core principles is fighting inequality. This was another step towards ensuring inclusivity for all people, including those with impairments.[81] A few years later, Nigeria enacted the Discrimination Against Persons with disabilities act, which brought about the association of joint persons with disabilities in 2018, mandated a 5% quota for employment of persons with disabilities in the public sector. It was signed into law on January 23, 2019.[82] Those who contravene the Act's provisions are liable to a fine of 1,000,000. The National Commission for Persons with disabilities was created to oversee the implementation of the 2018 act, but its success is in doubt.[83] From 2018 till January 2024, the Act gave specific mandates for all public buildings and structures, ranging from government offices to private offices, banks, restaurants, schools, etc, to have their buildings modified to be easily accessible for persons with disabilities. Any found building that is non-compliant is charged 1,000,000 naira or two years' imprisonment. These provisions also apply to ramps, public transport, parks, etc. For instance, the bus rapid transit in Lagos state has special provisions for persons with disabilities, including a free transport charge and as well as a reserved seat.[84] In between were the 2012 national policy on albinism and in 2017 national policy on disability in Nigeria.

In the aspect of education concerning persons with disabilities, speaking with Mr Felix Areo, a final year student of law at the University of Lagos.[85] He observed that his academic journey as a visually impaired student has been

[79] Understanding Disability and Disability Rights in Nigeria - ResearchGate, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369037718_Understanding_Disability_and_Disability_Rights_in_Nigeria

[80] Lagos State Special Peoples Bill 2010 - Equal Rights Trust, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://www.equalrightstrust.org/ertdocumentbank/LAGOS_SUBMISSION_27032011.pdf

[81] Similoluwa E. Aremu, " ,Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities: A Prerequisite for National Sustainable Development" (paper presented at the International Conference of College of Management Sciences, Yaba, University of Lagos, May p 5, 2023).

[82] Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Nigeria_Discrimination-Against-Persons-with-Disabilities-Prohibition-Act-2018.pdf

[83] NCPWD Unveils 5-Year Strategic Plan For Inclusion Of PWDs ..., accessed on September 3, 2025, https://inclusion.com.ng/ncpwd-unveils-5-year-strategic-plan-for-inclusion-of-pwds%EF%BF%BC/

[84] Lagos state special peoples bill 2010 - jonapwd, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://www.jonapwd.org/lagosdisabilitybill.pdf

[85] Mr Felix Areo

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quite a roller coaster. Why? Starting from the delay in his Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) exams, he had to be delayed for a year. He was even made to resit due to the mishandling of the answer sheets of all visually impaired candidates. After overcoming the challenge, he had also struggled with getting fair marks with his lecturers despite his excellence in his writing. This is amidst the implementation of the 2018 act.[86] Neurotypical and physically abled citizens struggle to even know their fundamental human rights; this is twice as hard for persons with disabilities. It is an area that needs urgent attention. The basic knowledge of every Nigerian and their rights. With labour laws, sections 28 and 29 of the 2018 act highlight the rights of a person with disability to work. All employers of labour should have at least 5% of persons with disability as employees. Any violation, the victim has the right to seek redress. This is a key development in the Nigerian law because prior laws had no legal standing. However, a critical gap exists between the legal provisions and the reality of a lay Nigerian with a disability. NGO's civil society groups, and persons with disabilities themselves have had to step in with media advocacy and that's where the problem is. In the world at large, disability advocacy continues to be a brilliant way to effect policies, either through social media or even the corridors of power.

Conclusion

This study has attempted a historical examination of disability, policies, programmes and practices in Nigeria. It therefore noted that after Nigeria's independence in 1960, the development of special education was slow at first, but the government eventually began to partner with foreign voluntary agencies and provide financial and moral support[87] Following the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War (1967-1970), the government became more "aggressive" in providing special education and rehabilitation, reflecting a growing awareness of disability rights influenced by global trends.[88] The first significant government policies focused on the rehabilitation of war veterans with disabilities.[89] These programs were aimed at reintegrating "rehabilitees" into the workforce, a concept known as "social orthopaedics".[90] The goal was to make disabled veterans "productive workers".[91]

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[86] Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, accessed on September 3, 2025, https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/11/Nigeria_Discrimination-Against-Persons-with-Disabilities-Prohibition-Act-2018.pdf

[87]History of special education in nigeria, accessed on August 22, 2025, History of special education in nigeria

[88] Ibid

[89] History of special education in nigeria, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://assets-global.website-files.com/67571be6006009bdbc1401d1/67fd2c9fadb7485d56c3e93b_41788728149.pdf

[90]Rights of People with Disability in Nigeria: Attitude and Commitment, accessed on August 22, 2025, https://rodra.co.za/images/countries/nigeria/research/RIGHTS%20OF%20PEOPLEWITH%20DISABILITY%20IN%20NIGERIA.pdf

[91] Ibid

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Nigeria made significant strides in promoting disability rights from the 1970s to 2018. Key developments included the 1977 National Policy on Education, which promoted inclusivity, and the 1993 Nigerians with Disability Act, which granted rights to free education and protected persons with disabilities. The country's approach shifted from a social model to a rights-based model, as reflected in the 1999 constitution and international conventions ratified by Nigeria, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals. Despite these efforts, challenges persist, including inadequate funding, infrastructure, and learning materials. Nigeria has also implemented domestic policies, including the 2012 National Policy on Albinism, the 2017 National Policy on Disability, and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018 emphasising equal rights for persons with disabilities. These efforts have been complemented by NGOs and persons with disabilities themselves, who have engaged in media advocacy to raise awareness and promote the rights of individuals with disabilities, thereby augmenting government efforts.

Though the legal process of rights for persons with disabilities has been slow, the future of policymaking for persons with disabilities looks bright. Both public and private structures are being put in place to inhabit the new phase. The consciousness of neurotypical and physically abled children who go to school with neurodivergent and physically disabled children is being built for them to be more inclusive adults in society once they grow up. For legislators and policymakers, the National Commission of Persons with Disabilities needs a significantly larger budget with receipts of how every penny is spent. The 2018 act also needs to be followed up on by enforcement officers being in place to rule out defaulters of the provisions of this Act. The advocacy from media houses and non-governmental organisations is a major part of the future of policymaking for persons with disabilities in Nigeria. However, it should not be solely relied on. Unless it results in plenty of talk and little action. All citizens, institutions, and government bodies that are fully informed about the provisions of private companies should also actively look out for persons with disabilities either as staff or given access to their organistion.

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