

**Media statement: UFS Conference**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**BEYOND D20 AND THE G20 - SO, WHAT NOW?**

**BLOEMFONTEIN, SOUTH AFRICA:** South Africa's progressive, "beautiful" education policies are failing on delivery, leaving hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities locked out of the classroom, or trapped in a system wholly unequipped to teach them. This stark reality was presented by a premier four-panel expert team, comprising Professor Maximus Sefotho, Dr Siva Moodley, Dr Letitia Pienaar, and Mr Andrew Hoffmeyr, at the 3rd International Disability Rights Conference at the University of the Free State on Thursday 4 June 2026. Addressing an audience of disability rights advocates, educators, and legal minds, the panel issued an urgent call to action. Drawing directly from the ground-breaking 2025 South African D20 Inclusive Education Workstream, which united over 300 participants across six months of intense consultation, the experts exposed a devastating implementation gap. Their core message is clear: fostering an inclusive education system is not a social charity handout, but a critical, long-term economic investment required to unlock human potential.

The crisis on the ground is severe, and the panel highlighted a cycle of systemic neglect. "Children with intellectual and physical disabilities are starting school far too late in life, only to encounter severe shortages of basic infrastructure and assistive devices. Overwhelmed and under-supported educators are battling massive class sizes, making individualised attention impossible, while outdated attitudes persist among some staff who still believe learners with disabilities simply do not belong in mainstream schools. Shockingly, South Africa currently has no law explicitly prohibiting the exclusion of children with disabilities from schools." Says Dr Siva Moodley: Researcher, Advocacy and Disability-Rights Strategist at the National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD). "This systemic exclusion follows individuals into higher education and the workforce, effectively barring even qualified teachers with disabilities from entering the profession."

To dismantle these barriers, the panel is demanding a rapid transformation centred on five key pillars. First, educator capacity must be revolutionised by mandating compulsory inclusive pedagogy and assistive technology training for all teachers, backed by a national mentorship programme, a digital resource hub, and the deployment of specialised support staff such as occupational therapists and sign language interpreters. Second, the veil of invisibility must be lifted through mandated disability-disaggregated data collection, standardised protocols, and a secure national registry. Partnering directly with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) will ensure that public data transparency finally holds the government accountable to the true lived experiences of these learners.

True inclusion also requires an accessible environment and a sustainable financial foundation. The presenters are calling for the strict enforcement of universal design principles on all new school infrastructure, alongside accessibility benchmarks for digital learning platforms and national subsidies to make assistive technologies affordable. Financially, this means legally ring-fencing the inclusive education budget to prevent the diversion of funds, establishing a multi-donor National Inclusive Education Fund to drive public-private partnerships, auditing current spending, and prioritising early intervention funding for early childhood development.

Ultimately, the panel called for absolute legal accountability and cross-sectoral collaboration to break down government silos. This requires the immediate enactment of a national law explicitly prohibiting the exclusion of children with disabilities, alongside the creation of a multi-stakeholder National Oversight Body dominated by persons with disabilities. By tracking progress via a public accountability dashboard and properly funding civil society advocacy

under the banner of "Nothing About Us Without Us," South Africa can shift from treating inclusive education as an optional burden to recognising it as a system-wide triumph. The time has come to move beyond well-intentioned policy and build an education system that truly leaves no learner behind.

Ends

**Media enquiries and request for information, interviews and images:**

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