



SUPPORTING EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Botswana Red Cross Society

CASE STUDY

Photo description: Students participating in vocational skills at Botswana Red Cross Society Tlamelong Rehabilitation Center for children living with disabilities
Photo credit: Botswana Red Cross

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Background

Botswana Red Cross Society (BRCS) runs two specialized early childhood centres that support children with special needs across the country. These are the Sefhare Stimulation Centre in Tswapong South and the Tshimologo Stimulation Centre in Francistown.

Established in 1996, the Sefhare Stimulation Centre welcomes about 40 children each year, aged between 2 and 12 years. The centre supports children with disabilities such as Down syndrome, speech disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder, and cerebral palsy. It also extends its care to orphans and vulnerable children, ensuring that those who are often overlooked by mainstream education systems receive the attention and support they need.

Similarly, the Tshimologo Stimulation Centre focuses on children with complex conditions, including muscular dystrophy, autism spectrum disorder, and cerebral palsy. The centre offers two dedicated stimulation classes and has a resident physiotherapist on staff, providing both educational and therapeutic support to its young learners.

Both centres were established in response to a clear need for early intervention, inclusive education, physiotherapy services and community-based rehabilitation for children with disabilities in Botswana. BRCS works closely with partners such as the Ministry of Education, educational psychologists, nurses, and rehabilitation officers to deliver comprehensive services. The Ministry of Health facilitates the delivery of services in the schools through financial support.

The schools operate under the technical guidance of the Ministry of Education, delivering a formally approved curriculum, following the standard operating procedures and registration requirements facilitated by local authorities. They function in unison with other similar centres under the coordination of the Botswana Disability Council.

The BRCS also form parts of the Districts' Child Protection committee and partners with various private companies to support ensuring that the rights of children with disabilities are well advocated and catered for. Through these collaborations, BRCS aims to empower children with disabilities, support their equitable access to inclusive education services, promote their independence, and improve their overall quality of life (and subsequently that of their parents or caregivers).

Who was supported and How

BRCS centres provide holistic interventions for children, especially those in the most vulnerable situations. These interventions are tailored to the specific physical, mental, emotional and developmental needs of each child and sensitive to their age, gender and any other relevant aspect of their identity, life and background.

They include:

- Pre-literacy and cognitive skills (pre-numeracy, pre-writing, pre-reading)
- Personal and household hygiene activities (toilet training, cleaning, self-care)
- Physiotherapy and speech therapy
- Language development and communication skills
- Cultural, sports and social inclusion activities (see example in below box)
- Home visit and outreach programmes
- Community-based rehabilitation

Parents and caregivers are also trained to extend learning and rehabilitation at home, thereby ensuring a continuum of care.

BRCS and the Special Olympics Botswana partnership

BRCS coordinates with the Special Olympics Botswana which comprises a consortium of special education institutions across the country. Participation in the Special Olympics' activities fosters social inclusion and awareness about disabilities. BRCS partnership with the Special Olympics is primarily about sports competitions at regional and national levels for which BRCS provides physical education and mental preparation to its centres' students as part of their learning programme.

Like BRCS, the Special Olympics program has a family focus and provides social support to caregivers and parents of children with disabilities; it also exposes the children to screenings and medical checks for different health issues and facilitates access to assistive devices.

For the past 5 years, BRCS has deployed 20 students annually to participate in the Special Olympics, particularly in the fields of athletics and football.

Successes

74 students (on average) are supported annually by the two schools, to learn, grow and thrive. Some students transition to mainstream education while others continue with the program until they are ready to do so too, respecting the learning and development pace of each student, through an individualised educational approach and offer.

- Over 125 children graduated from the program in the past five years, proceeding to mainstream primary schools - a rare success given systemic challenges in integrating children with disabilities.
- Some children gaining physical independence, particularly those benefiting from in-house physiotherapy.
- Improved socialization and cognitive development among children who would otherwise be excluded.
- Increased disability awareness and advocacy through public events like the Special Olympics and disability commemorative events i.e. Down syndrome day.

These outcomes highlight the transformative impact of early, inclusive, and community-anchored interventions.

Challenges and Difficulties

Despite the positive impact of the two centres, they still face several ongoing challenges.

- Some children have severe or multiple disabilities, which can make it difficult for them to progress further in their education.
- There aren't always enough resources or specialist staff available, which limits the range and reach of services the centres can provide.
- The children come from a wide geographic area, making it hard for families to access the centres regularly and for staff to follow up as needed.
- Social stigma around disability remains a barrier, sometimes discouraging parents from enrolling their children or fully engaging with the programmes.

To help overcome these obstacles, the centres have introduced home-based programmes and stepped-up caregiver training. This approach ensures that children continue to receive support and stimulation at home, even when regular visits to the centres aren't possible. By empowering caregivers and families, the centres are working to extend their impact beyond their walls and into the wider community.

Lessons Learned

Key lessons from the Botswana Red Cross Society (BRCS) experience highlight important principles for supporting children with disabilities:

- 1- **Flexibility is essential:** Centres need to tailor their programmes to meet the unique needs and varying severity of disabilities, going beyond standard curricula to truly support each child.
- 2- **Collaboration drives success:** Engaging parents, health professionals, and government partners actively creates a stronger support network and improves outcomes for the children.
- 3- **Resources make a difference:** Ongoing investment in staff training, equipment, and facilities is critical to expand the reach and quality of services.
- 4- **Inclusion is an ongoing journey:** Building an inclusive society requires continuous advocacy and community involvement to break down barriers and change attitudes.

The BRCS Stimulation Centres in Sefhare and Tshimologo demonstrate a replicable model for holistic disability care in low-resource settings. Their integrated approach combining education, therapy, and family support, offers vital insights for similar programmes in Botswana and beyond.