



## SUMMARY

**Challenge:** PWD face barriers to financial inclusion in spite of evidence that companies with strong disability inclusion outperform their competitors.

**Opportunity's Solution:** Opportunity Bank Uganda, Ltd. (OBUL) is mainstreaming PWD into normal banking operations.

**Evidence of Success:** 21,767 PWD and their caregivers and supporters accessing finance, in several pilot branches over a period of 2.5 years.

**Next Steps:** Scale-up phase with the pace depending on funds available until OBUL can cover costs themselves.

## THE CHALLENGE: REMOVING BARRIERS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN ACCESSING FINANCIAL SERVICES

Around 15% of the global population – over 1 billion people – identify as having a disability.<sup>1</sup> They face multiple barriers to economic empowerment, including barriers accessing financial services, a critical tool in achieving economic independence. Yet there is a strong business case for serving people with disabilities (PWD). Among mainstream corporations, high performers on disability inclusion achieve 28% higher revenue, double the income, and 30% higher profit margins.<sup>2</sup> This strong performance is recognized by mainstream financial institutions such as Citi, Barclays, and Deutsche Bank, who are becoming disability inclusion champions themselves.<sup>3</sup> Most financial institutions in the global south have yet to embrace disability inclusion, with women facing double barriers.<sup>4</sup> As a result, there is a long way to go in living up to the UN declaration to prohibit discrimination and to identify and remove obstacles to the full participation of PWD.<sup>5</sup>

## OPPORTUNITY'S INNOVATION: MAINSTREAMING FINANCIAL INCLUSION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN UGANDA

Following a lighter-touch initiative, Opportunity International and OBUL embarked on a pilot program to mainstream disability inclusion into OBUL banking services. The program is taking place on two levels. First, changes are being made across the bank. These changes include –

- ▶ Training staff in disability awareness;
- ▶ Policy and procedure alignment;
- ▶ Community sensitization through signage, a television drama series, and other public relations activities; and
- ▶ Physical changes at multiple branches including adding ramps and making wheelchairs available.

Second, in 7 pilot branches, OBUL offers deeper financial inclusion services, working in close partnership with the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU), Association of Microfinance Institutions of Uganda (AMFIU), and other like-minded organizations. OBUL hired financial inclusion officers (FIOs) with experience working with PWD. These FIOs conduct outreach through NUDIPU and other partners. They –

- ▶ Build trust between PWD communities and OBUL;
- ▶ Deliver financial literacy and business skills training; and
- ▶ Link PWD to relevant financial services.

NUDIPU's key financial intervention is to organize PWD and their caregivers into village savings and loans associations (VSLAs). OBUL, thus, links to PWD communities through these VSLAs. The main financial services OBUL offers is group



PWD VSLA Meeting

savings accounts and loans to VSLAs. Individual PWDs are also served in both the pilot and mainstream branches, but data is not yet reported on this outreach.

The program represents a very intensive push to make products and services that already exist at OBUL accessible to everyone. There are no interest rate subsidies or alternative collateral mechanisms, and no special products for PWD. Rather, financial education is visually inclusive for those who can't hear, is designed to be easily explained verbally for those who can't see, and so on. Part of the intensive push is extensive outreach using FIOs and VSLAs.

In 2.5 years – in spite of some of the longest pandemic lockdowns in the world – the program has achieved results. The total outreach to PWD, caregivers, and supporting members of VSLAs was 21,676 as of August 2022 through 3,000 accounts and 167 loans. Critical success factors include:

- ▶ Key partnerships
- ▶ Community sensitization (radio, television, and road shows)
- ▶ Assessment and adjustment of policies and procedures
- ▶ Management commitment and staff allocated to serving PWD

*“PWDs were initially disregarded in the communities but with the coming of OBUL and the financial literacy training, we are able to set up our own businesses.”*

*PWD Customer, Mbale Branch*

## NEXT STEPS to SUSTAINABILITY and SCALE: MAINSTREAMING DISABILITY INCLUSION ACROSS OBUL

Serving PWD is core to OBUL’s social performance goals and is integrated into its strategic plan. The challenge, particularly given the financial constraints imposed on OBUL due to the pandemic-related recession, is to finance the financial inclusion officers who are critical to the successful engagement of the disability community. In addition, further adaptations are needed to multiple branches and to services for people with visual impairment and the deaf. OBUL is considering a subsidized scale-up phase prior to being able to maintain the mainstreaming of PWD across the bank in the long run. The pace of the scale-up will depend on the availability of funds.

## ONGOING QUESTIONS AND DEBATES: SUBSIDIES AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION

- ▶ **Subsidies:** The PWD mainstreaming approach has institutional subsidies, but does not involve client-level interest rate or collateral subsidies; yet, interest rate and collateral subsidies are increasingly popular when targeting disadvantaged populations, including women and refugees. Which approach has more merit in which situations?
- ▶ **Reasonable Accommodation:** In some branches, some physical accommodations proved too expensive/difficult to make, for example lowering the counters. Instead, staff serve PWD in wheelchairs at customer service tables and they are able to skip the counter line. Is this an appropriate accommodation in resource-constrained situations?

<sup>1</sup> *Inclusive Banking: Emerging Practices for the Economic Inclusion ...* – IFC. International Finance Corporation, Apr. 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Accenture Disability Inclusion Research Report.” *Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage*, AADP, Disability IN, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *Inclusive Banking: Emerging Practices for the Economic Inclusion ...* – IFC. International Finance Corporation, Apr. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Gupta, Vipin. *Making Microfinance Accessible to Persons with Disabilities: Awareness ...* Center for Financial Inclusion, May 2014; Lewis, Cindy. “Microfinance from the Point of View of Women with Disabilities: Lessons from Zambia and Zimbabwe.” *Taylor & Francis*, Gender & Development, 24 June 2010; Mersland, Roy, et al. “Access to Mainstream Microfinance Services for Persons with Disabilities: Lessons Learned from Uganda.” *SSRN*, 5 Mar. 2008.

<sup>5</sup> “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Enable.” *United Nations*, United Nations, 13 Dec. 2006.