



Punuka
FOUNDATION

MERISTEM
TRUSTEES LIMITED

Baseline Report:
NEURODIVERSITY
AWARENESS
FELLOWSHIP
(Anglophone West Africa)

Assessing Knowledge, Skills, Readiness
and Challenges to Inform Programme
Design and Implementation



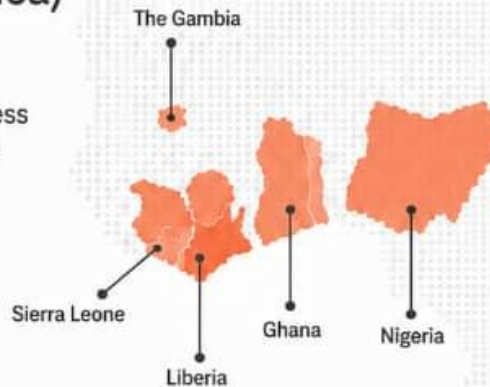
Promoting Awareness.
Championing Inclusion.



Empowering Communities.
Inspiring Change.



Building a Neuroinclusive
West Africa.



2026
Baseline Study

PUNUKA FOUNDATION

Baseline Report: Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship (Anglophone West Africa)

Acknowledgement

Punuka Foundation extends its sincere gratitude to Meristem Trustees Limited, whose partnership and support made the Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship (Anglophone West Africa) possible. Their commitment has been instrumental in advancing neurodiversity awareness and inclusion across the region.

We also deeply appreciate all fellowship participants from Nigeria, Ghana, and The Gambia—including parents, educators, caregivers, therapists, and inclusion advocates—who contributed to the baseline survey and focus group discussions. Their insights, lived experiences, and openness provided the foundation for this assessment.

Special recognition goes to Ebuka Alumona (National Programmes Coordinator) for coordinating the evaluation process and ensuring data quality, and to Bidmus Kolapo and Paschal Ofodile (Programmes/M&E Interns) for their contributions to data analysis, report writing and visualization.

This report reflects a shared commitment to strengthening neurodiversity awareness and building inclusive systems across Anglophone West Africa.

About Meristem Trustees Limited

Meristem Trustees Limited is a leading licensed trustee and estate planning firm in Nigeria, regulated by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). As part of the Meristem Group, the company provides professional services in private and corporate trusteeship, estate planning, and wealth transfer solutions, supporting

individuals and organizations in safeguarding and managing assets across generations.

In partnership with Punuka Foundation, Meristem Trustees Limited contributes to the Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship (Anglophone West Africa), a regional initiative focused on promoting inclusion, awareness, and capacity building for neurodiverse individuals. Through this collaboration, both organizations demonstrate a shared commitment to social impact, inclusivity, and the advancement of equitable opportunities across West Africa.

Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations, and recommendations presented in this report are based on data collected during the baseline study and are intended to inform programme design and implementation. They do not represent official policy positions but reflect evidence generated through this assessment.

All data should be cited as:

Punuka Foundation Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship Baseline Report (2026).

Evaluation Team

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Executive Summary

This baseline study was conducted to inform the design and implementation of the Punuka Foundation Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship (Anglophone West

Africa). The study assessed participants' knowledge, skills, readiness, and challenges related to neurodiversity advocacy using a mixed-methods approach.

A total of 32 unique participants from Nigeria, Ghana, and The Gambia took part in the study, comprising 21 survey respondents and 11 focus group discussion (FGD) participants.

Findings indicate that while participants demonstrate moderate awareness and strong interest in neurodiversity, critical gaps exist in technical capacity, policy knowledge, and programme implementation skills. Although many participants have prior exposure to neurodiversity through professional or advocacy roles, this knowledge is largely informal and lacks structured application.

Participants reported relatively high confidence in advocacy and stigma reduction, but significantly lower confidence in legal frameworks, monitoring and evaluation, and structured programme design.

Key challenges identified include limited community awareness, persistent stigma, weak policy implementation, insufficient technical skills, and barriers to effective community engagement. Insights from FGDs further highlight systemic issues such as cultural misconceptions, limited institutional support, and gaps in early diagnosis and inclusive education systems.

These findings underscore the need for a fellowship model that prioritizes practical skill-building, mentorship, and supported project implementation to enable participants to translate knowledge into measurable impact.

Introduction

Neurodiversity is an emerging field across West Africa, with growing recognition but limited structured interventions to support awareness, inclusion, and advocacy. Despite increasing interest, many stakeholders lack the tools and systems required to drive sustainable change.

In response, Punuka Foundation developed the **Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship (Anglophone West Africa)** to equip parents, educators, therapists,

caregivers, and advocates with the knowledge and skills needed to promote inclusion and challenge stigma within their communities.

This baseline study serves as a critical first step in understanding participants' starting points, including their knowledge levels, prior experience, and readiness to implement advocacy and community-based projects. The findings are intended to guide the design and delivery of the fellowship programme.

Background

Punuka Foundation is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization dedicated to supporting neurodiverse individuals through interventions that promote inclusive education, awareness, and vocational development.

The Neurodiversity Awareness Fellowship aims to:

- Strengthen advocacy capacity
- Improve knowledge dissemination
- Empower participants to design and implement community-based initiatives

Given the diversity of participants across Anglophone West Africa, a baseline assessment was necessary to establish existing knowledge levels, competencies, and expectations. This provides a clear understanding of current gaps and informs programme design.

Baseline Objectives

The study aimed to:

- Assess participants' understanding of neurodiversity and its development within the region
- Evaluate participants' confidence in advocacy, policy engagement, and programme implementation

- Identify existing skills gaps and training needs
- Understand barriers to effective neurodiversity advocacy and project execution
- Generate insights to inform fellowship curriculum design and delivery

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Baseline Survey

A structured questionnaire was administered to **21 participants** across Nigeria, Ghana, and The Gambia using an online survey tool. The survey captured:

- Demographic information
- Awareness and knowledge levels
- Confidence in key competencies
- Prior experience in neurodiversity-related work

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages.

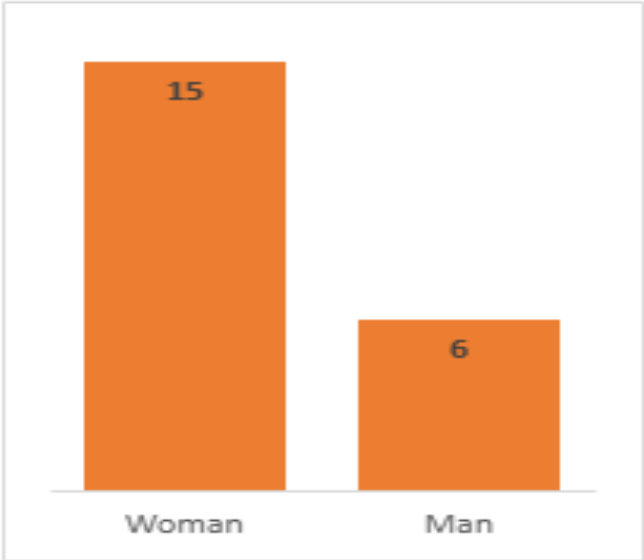
Focus Group Discussion (FGDs)

Two focus group discussions, involving **11 participants**, were conducted to generate deeper insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and expectations. Qualitative data from the FGDs were analyzed using a **thematic approach** to identify recurring patterns and systemic issues.

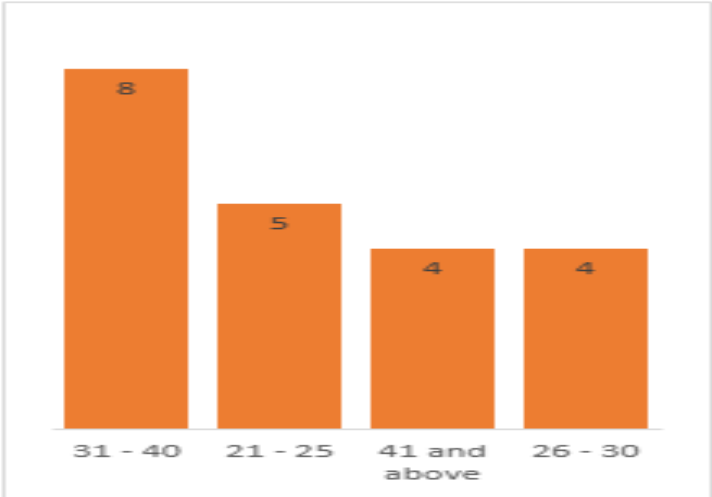
Key Findings from Baseline Survey

Demographics

- **Gender distribution:** Approximately **71% female** and **29% male**, indicating strong female representation in neurodiversity advocacy.

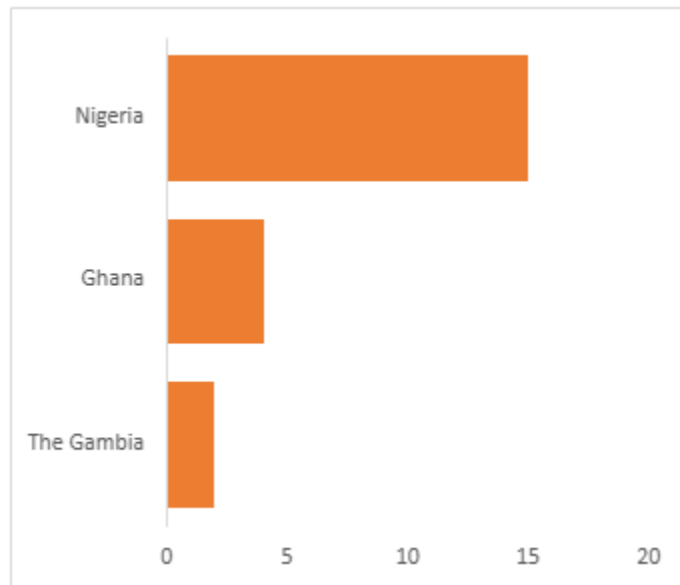


- **Age brackets:** Majority of participants fall within the **31–40 age bracket**, suggesting a mid-career cohort.

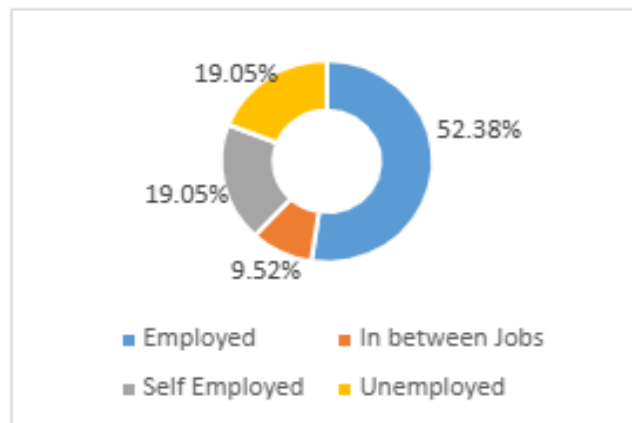


- **Country of residence:** Nigeria (15), Ghana (4), The Gambia (2).

This indicates a strong concentration in Nigeria, with emerging regional representation.

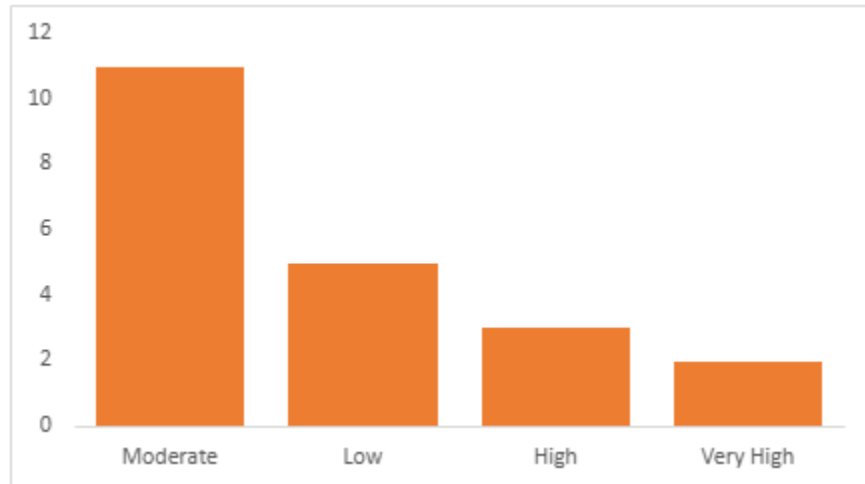


Employment status: Over half of participants are formally employed, with smaller proportions self-employed or unemployed, suggesting a relatively stable professional base.



Awareness levels

Most participants rated their understanding of neurodiversity as **moderate**, indicating foundational awareness but limited depth of knowledge



Confidence Levels

Participants reported:

- **High confidence** in advocacy and stigma reduction
- **Lower confidence** in:
 - Legal and policy frameworks
 - Monitoring and evaluation
 - Structured programme design



Readiness to implement projects

Participants were divided between:

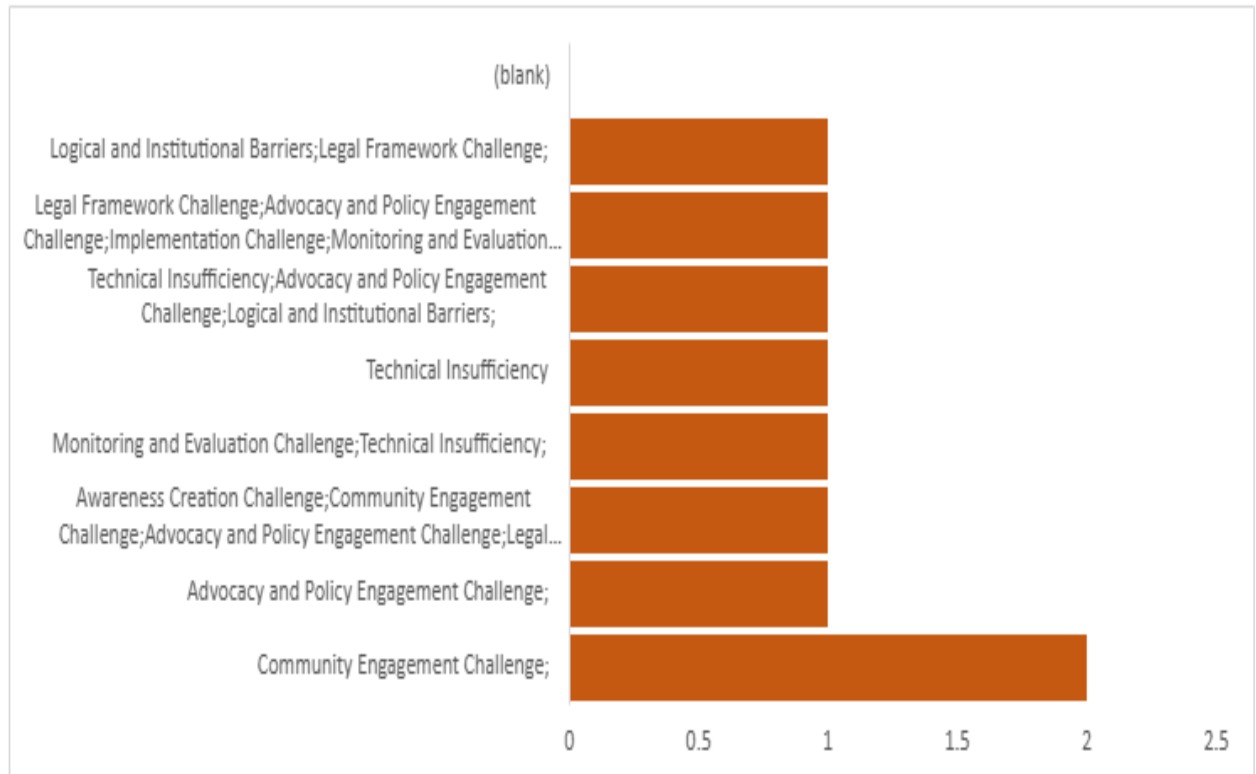
- Those with clear project ideas, and
- Those requiring significant guidance and support

This highlights the need for structured mentorship and practical training.



Key Challenges Identified

- Limited technical expertise
- Weak community engagement strategies
- Policy and advocacy barriers
- Gaps in legal framework knowledge



Insights from Focus Group Discussions

1. Diverse but Relevant Professional Backgrounds

Participants come from education, healthcare, advocacy, and social impact sectors, positioning them as key actors in driving community-level change.

2. Exposure Without Structure

While many participants have prior exposure to neurodiversity, this knowledge is largely informal and lacks structured learning pathways.

3. Low Community Awareness and Cultural Barriers

Persistent misconceptions -- including cultural and spiritual interpretations of neurodiversity – continue to reinforce stigma and exclusion.

4. Systemic Barriers

Key systemic challenges include:

- Limited access to inclusive education
- Weak policy implementation
- Lack of early diagnosis systems
- Inadequate support structures for families

5. Demand for Practical Learning

Participants expressed strong interest in applied learning, particularly in:

- Project design and implementation
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Policy engagement and advocacy

6. Potential for Amplified Impact

Participants see themselves as change agents and have existing networks that can be leveraged to scale impact across communities.

Limitations

The study had a relatively small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across the Anglophone West Africa region.

Conclusion

The baseline findings reveal a strong foundation of interest, commitment, and emerging awareness among participants. However, this potential is constrained by gaps in structured knowledge, technical capacity, and systemic support.

The study highlights the need to move beyond awareness of creation toward **practical, action-oriented capacity building**. Without structured training, mentorship, and institutional support, participants may face challenges in translating knowledge into sustainable impact.

Recommendations

1. Integrate Practical and Applied Training Modules

The fellowship curriculum should prioritize hands-on and implementation-focused learning that enables participants to move beyond theoretical understanding into practical action. Findings from the FGDs revealed that while many participants had prior exposure to neurodiversity through awareness campaigns, teaching, healthcare, and advocacy work, most lacked structured training and practical implementation skills.

FGD participants specifically expressed the need for:

- Practical skills for identifying and supporting neurodivergent individuals
- Guidance on inclusive education strategies
- Skills for re-educating parents and communities
- Training on monitoring and evaluation
- Practical project implementation support

Participants also emphasized challenges such as underdiagnosis, lack of early intervention systems, and inadequate inclusive education facilities. These discussions suggest that training should include:

- Community-based case studies and simulations

- Practical sessions on neurodiversity identification and referral pathways
- Inclusive classroom and workplace strategies
- Project design workshops
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) frameworks
- Stakeholder engagement and communication strategies

Embedding experiential learning opportunities such as field assignments, peer review sessions, and action-learning projects will help participants apply fellowship knowledge directly within their communities.

2. Strengthen Policy, Legal, and Systems Level Education

FGD discussions consistently highlighted weak institutional frameworks, poor policy implementation, and limited awareness of existing legal protections for neurodiverse individuals. Participants identified the absence of regulation and enforcement, discrimination, and insufficient institutional support as major barriers to inclusion.

To address these gaps, the fellowship should provide structured learning on:

- National and regional disability and inclusion laws
- Child protection and inclusive education policies
- Advocacy and policy influencing techniques
- Rights-based approaches to neurodiversity programming
- Institutional accountability mechanisms

Participants also expressed interest in understanding how to influence policy and collaborate across sectors. Therefore, the programme should incorporate:

- Policy dialogue sessions with government stakeholders
- Advocacy campaign design exercises
- Exposure to successful inclusion models and frameworks

- Cross-sector collaboration training involving education, healthcare, and social development actors

This will help fellows move beyond awareness of creation toward systemic advocacy and sustainable institutional change.

3. Adopt a Structured Mentorship and Coaching Model

The FGDs revealed that participants possess strong motivation and commitment to neurodiversity advocacy but require technical guidance and structured support to translate ideas into sustainable action. Several participants identified themselves as advocates, educators, or caregivers seeking professional direction and deeper expertise.

A structured mentorship model should therefore be integrated into the fellowship to:

- Support fellows in refining project ideas
- Provide technical guidance during implementation
- Strengthen accountability and consistency
- Facilitate professional growth and leadership development

Mentors should ideally include experienced practitioners from sectors such as:

- Special education
- Mental health and psychology
- Inclusive policy advocacy
- Community development
- Monitoring and evaluation

The mentorship process should include:

- Regular coaching sessions

- Project review checkpoints
- Technical feedback mechanisms
- Peer mentoring opportunities
- Reflection and learning sessions

This approach will help bridge the gap between participants' passion for inclusion and their ability to implement high-impact interventions effectively.

4. Support Community-Based and Family-Centered Interventions

FGD participants repeatedly emphasized that neurodiverse individuals and their families face isolation, stigma, limited support systems, and inadequate access to services. One participant described the experience of caregivers as “a lonely journey,” while others highlighted the lack of quality support for low-income families.

To address these realities, the fellowship should support fellows to design and implement localized interventions that directly respond to community needs. This can include:

- Parent and caregiver support groups
- Community sensitization campaigns
- School-based inclusion initiatives
- Referral and support networks
- Awareness programmes targeting religious and traditional institutions

The FGDs also revealed that cultural and spiritual interpretations of neurodiversity contribute significantly to stigma and discrimination. As a result, community engagement strategies should intentionally address:

- Harmful stereotypes and misconceptions
- Spiritualized explanations of neurodiversity

- Social exclusion and discrimination
- Community acceptance and inclusion

Providing fellows with seed grants, technical support, and implementation toolkits will enable them to pilot context-specific interventions capable of generating sustainable grassroots impact.

5. Enhance Peer Learning, Regional Collaboration, and Knowledge Exchange.

The fellowship brings together participants from diverse professional backgrounds and countries including Nigeria, Ghana, and The Gambia. FGD discussions demonstrated that participants possess valuable experiences, networks, and insights that can enrich collective learning.

To maximize this potential, the programme should establish structured peer-learning mechanisms such as:

- Regional learning circles
- Virtual communities of practice
- Cross-country project showcases
- Peer review and feedback sessions
- Collaborative advocacy campaigns

Participants also expressed interest in intersectoral collaboration, particularly between educators, healthcare professionals, advocates, researchers, and caregivers. Creating opportunities for multidisciplinary engagement will strengthen innovation and encourage the sharing of context-specific solutions.

This collaborative model can also help fellows sustain motivation, reduce professional isolation, and strengthen long-term regional networks for neurodiversity advocacy.

6. Promote Long- Term Sustainability and Institutional Partnerships

Findings from both the survey and FGDs suggest that while participants are highly motivated, many operate within environments with limited institutional support and weak systems for sustaining neurodiversity interventions.

To ensure long-term impact, the fellowship should encourage fellows to:

- Develop sustainability plans for their projects
- Build partnerships with schools, hospitals, NGOs, and community organizations
- Integrate neurodiversity programming into existing institutional structures
- Mobilize local support and resources
- Document and measure project outcomes

Participants also highlighted gaps in early diagnosis systems, including educational infrastructure, and institutional accountability. Addressing these systemic issues requires long-term collaboration with:

- Government agencies
- Educational institutions
- Healthcare systems
- Community and faith-based organizations
- Disability and inclusion networks

The fellowship should therefore facilitate institutional linkages and create pathways for fellows to engage relevant stakeholders beyond the duration of the programme. This will improve continuity, strengthen ownership, and increase the likelihood of sustainable community-level impact.



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