

Inable Talk 10 March 2021
Report by Jess Ruddock

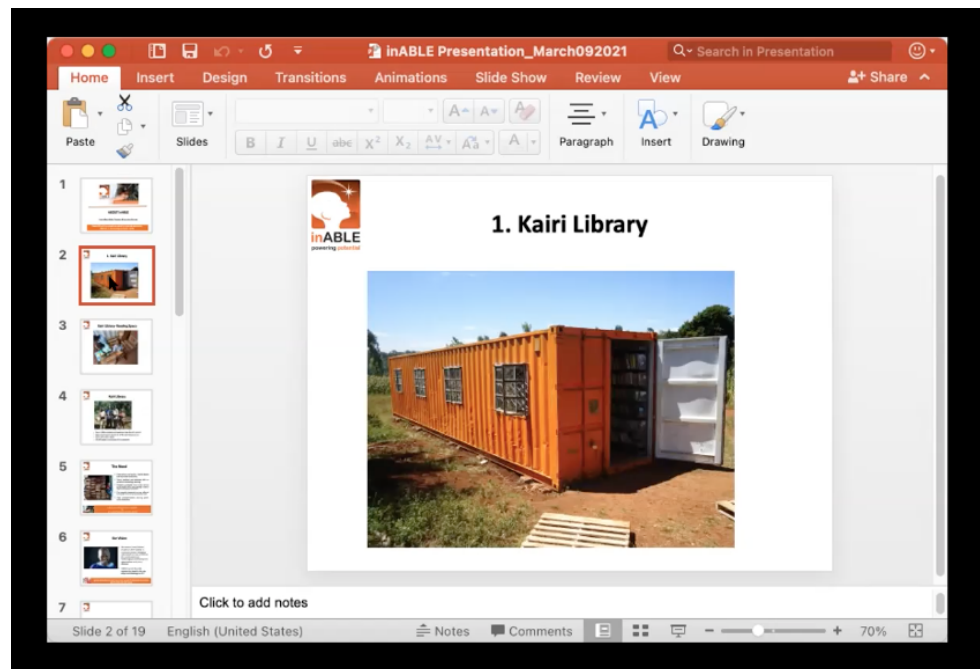
Last Autumn some of the DRIVE network members attended the *Inable* online conference, for which the First Lady of Kenya had given the opening remarks. This really demonstrates how important Inable's work is in Kenya, as does Irene Kirika's award of the *Order of the Grand Warrior of Kenya*; a fantastic honour. Today we are hearing about the work Inable does in Kenya, starting with a presentation from Irene Kirika.

The origin of *Inable* is an interesting story, Irene had visited Kenya and was asked by her Aunt to visit the school she works at. During her visit to the school, Irene was struck by just how excited the children were to be at school. Her Aunt shared the challenges she had faced, and Irene recalls one story that she tells us she will never forget. There was a young boy, around ten years old, who used to come to school in the very early hours of the morning. When the security guard arrived in the morning, the young boy would jump out from the bush, scared because it was so dark. Irene's Aunt was more of a Grandmother figure to the children, and through connecting with and talking to the young boy, she learnt that the reason he comes to school so early each day was to finish his homework,

'Simply because, when he gets home from school there's so many chores that he's normally so exhausted, he never gets to do anything'

There was no way, Irene's Aunt explained, to stop the child coming to school so early; he was one of the top students in the school. This story really resonated with Irene, having grown up herself in one of the poorer areas of Nairobi. She too had to wake up very early every Saturday to go to the local library, because if you're not there at 7 you will not get in at 9. The entire neighbourhood would come in, to make sure they could have their 3 hours at the library.

Reflecting on this, Irene asked herself, 'what can I do to change this?', having connected her story to that of the young boy she had met at the school. She spoke to her own community, who ended up donating a piece of land, that could be used as reading spaces.



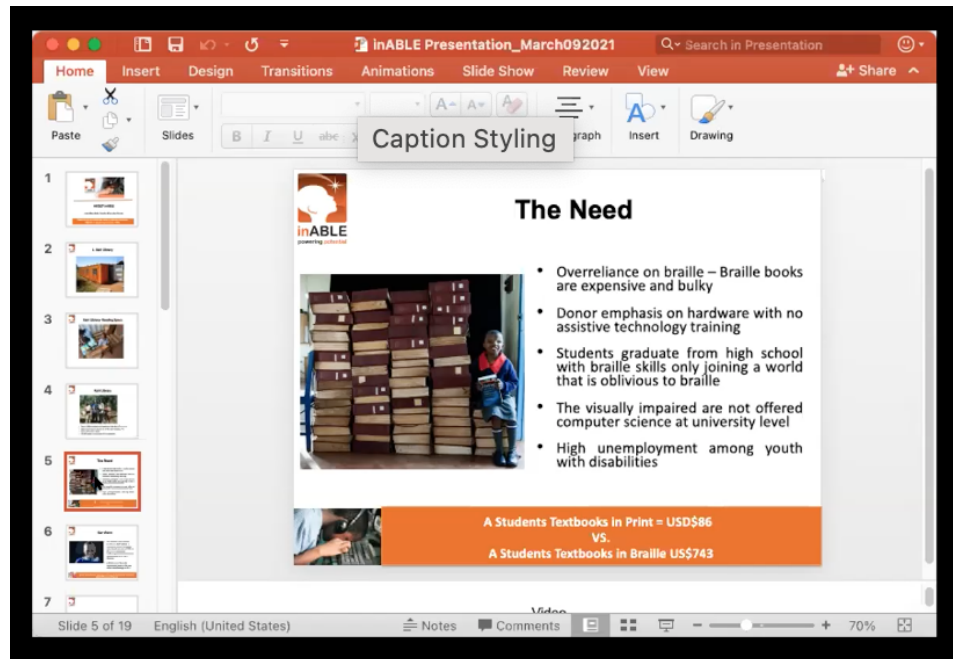
This library has helped *Inable* to learn about the needs of the rural community. There are about 12 schools within a 5km radius, with around 2600 students. Most of these children don't leave the village to visit the city. This is where the role of community libraries come in, since in the cities there is greater access to books, but the rural communities are not as well served in this regard by the Government. This is despite the work of the *Kenyan National Library Service* which has a number of outreach programmes to improve access to books, including a mobile library service. There was a need, therefore, to create a sustainable library service for the rural community,

'Our goal is actually to build a library for this Community so that kids one can have a safe place a safe haven to just come and enjoy reading, but, most importantly, to have reading activities beyond their school environment'

Besides providing this safe haven for reading, *Inable* also strive to provide the children with computer skills training, since they are not usually exposed to digital technology. Through the training, they are able to help connect the children to the wider world. Through *World Reader*, *Inable* were able to secure 25 Kindles for the children to use,

'Having even just basic computer skills or access to a computer it's critical because they can read as many books as they want, is how I look at it...How can you have a reading culture when you don't even have access to books?'

Inable's goal is to raise the funding to build libraries and provide books for children, starting from the ground up to ultimately helping the community to develop a reading culture. Irene introduces to us the second initiative, which developed through the process of figuring out how to create the library. They chose 6 schools, and 10 children from each school, taking 60 to visit the *Kenyan National Library* for a day of activities. The day beforehand, Irene was asked whether a school for the blind could also attend. Irene noticed how much these children in particular took from the experience. She learnt that the books available in Braille were outdated, and incomplete. Irene illustrates this point with an image of a girl holding an Oxford Dictionary, standing beside the comparative Braille version; the size and weight meaning that a blind child will never take a dictionary home.



There was an overall overreliance on Braille, meaning that these children were going through school with Braille skills only,

'But we expecting them to join a world that's completely oblivious to real the country you can't hire them you can't get into higher education, because they don't read print'

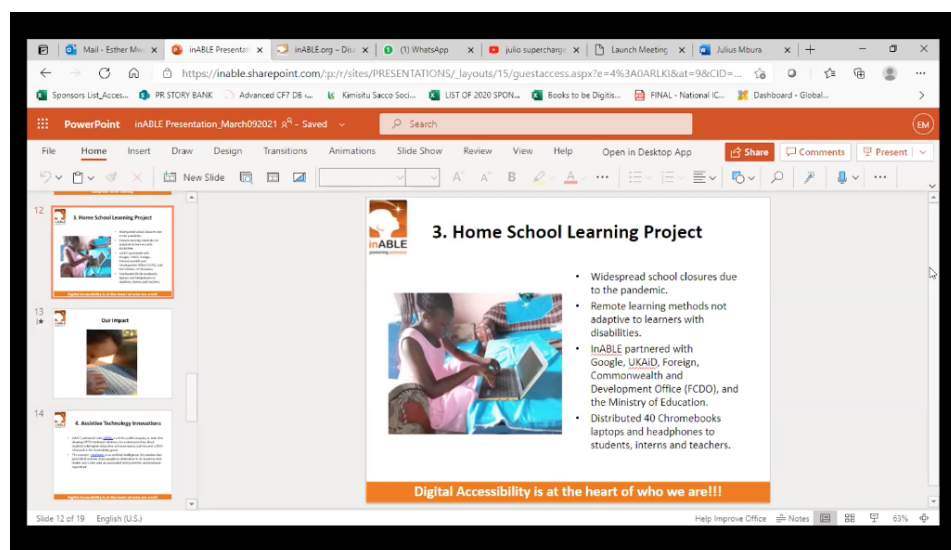
Irene also discusses the lack of training in assistive technology, despite a major emphasis on hardware. This limits these children's opportunities to study at University level, the impact being high levels of unemployment. Where other initiatives have seemed to focus on making a quick impact, *Inable* has focused on sustainability and long-term goals, recognising that the educational aspect will ultimately help to address the wider issue of unemployment rates.

Through partnering with the school for the blind, *Inable* established the first assistive technology lab, aiming to ensure that children with disabilities are empowered through technology, so that the bridge is gapped and these children are no longer left behind. *Inable* brings in the full ecosystem; the hardware, software and instructors. They teach basic computer skills, so that

the children can be independent, starting in the lab environment before progressing to using mobile technology. Their goal has been to scale the programme to the other 16 schools for the blind in Kenya, but also to make sure that the children have their own devices,

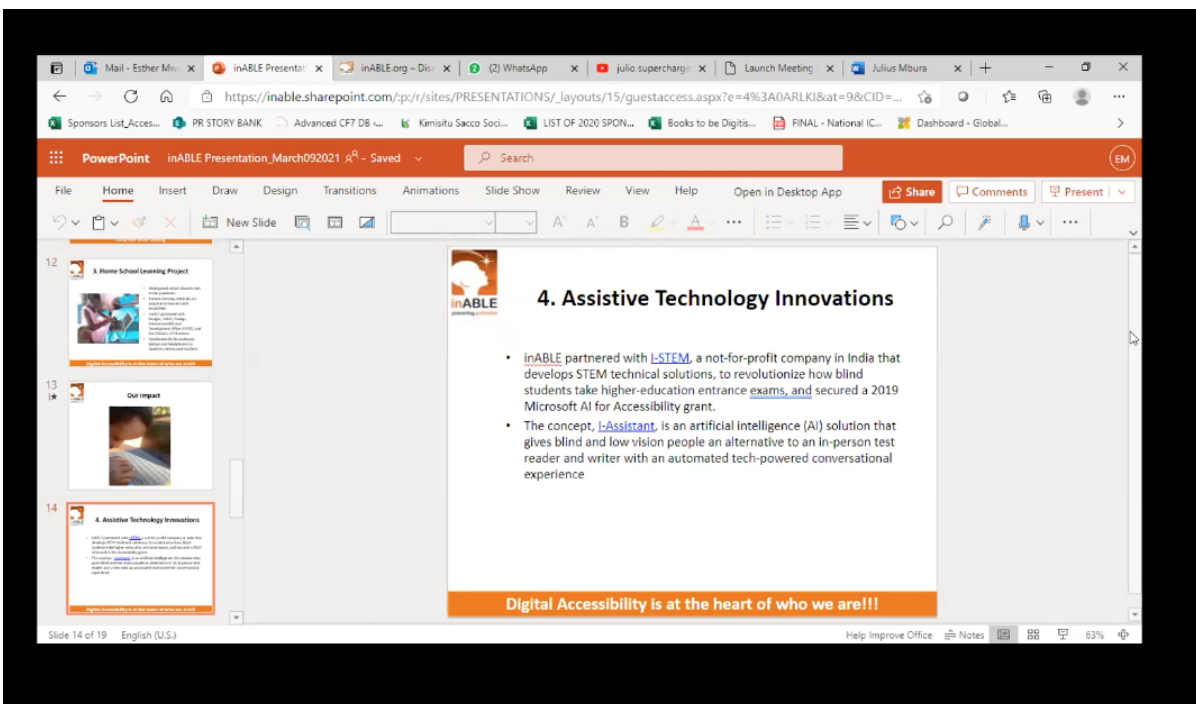
'We've been able to continuously add the programs, we are currently in six schools for the Blind on an average year like now normally we have between 1000 to 1500 students enrolled...And for us that's huge because, having 1000 blind students is like having 500,000 regular mainstream students, because you experience a lot of challenges, and you need a lot of resources to be able to deliver your programs'

Addressing the impact of Covid, Irene shares the details of a case study, which found that children with disabilities really struggled whilst the schools were closed. The Kenyan government had done the best they could to encourage going digital, and emphasise the importance of studying at home. However, children with disabilities were being left out. In partnership with *Google*, *Inable* sent out 40 laptops, 10 to the teachers and 30 to children. Their instructors followed these 30 children to their villages, spending a few days with them to help set up the devices and get familiar with using them.



The Home School Learning Project has been very successful, as it has shown that children with disabilities can have their independent devices, and can make use of digital technologies such as Zoom, like every other student.

Irene moves on to discussing the *Assistive Technology Innovations*, which *Inable* is passionate about participating in, since in Africa there are barely any innovations for people with disabilities. For Irene, the biggest thing is that there is a misunderstanding of what ‘accessibility’ and ‘assistive technology’ actually means; people are developing these technologies with the right intentions, but not always with a focus on the users themselves.

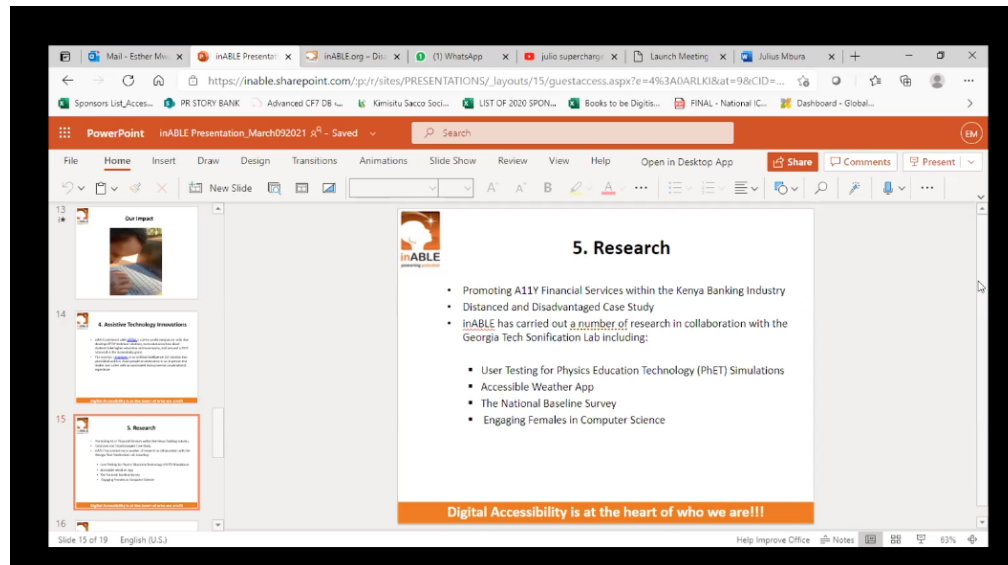


The first initiative aimed to address the issue with students who are blind requiring an assistant to take their exams, the problem being that they often meet their assistant (reader) for the first time during this exam, and it takes time for them to become familiar with their voice. Further, the readers are not always necessarily subject experts, so often the way that they ask the exam questions, and what the question truly means, might be in contradiction. The screen readers are a fantastic solution to this problem, and gives the student independence.

The second initiative, in partnership with the *Rochester Institute of Technology* and other Universities, works with people with disabilities in Africa to create applications, believing that they are the solution, not the problem. They are the best ones to come up with solutions. One example of such a solution is an app which teaches students who are deaf sign language.

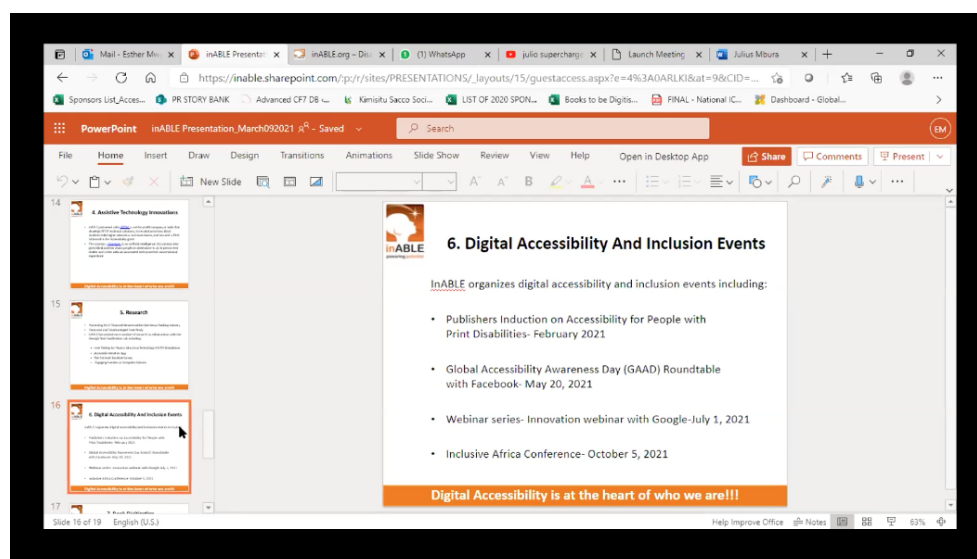
In terms of research, *Inable* have been partners with *Georgia Tech* for the last 10 years, and have undertaken a number of smaller projects during that time. They have done user testing in the educational context, informed by user feedback based on what the students are saying about how they understand the information and simulations. They also developed a weather app, which has been a really exciting tool for the students to use. The latest project was in financial services, which involved interviewing people with disabilities about their thoughts on

financial mobile applications. The research found that less than 30% of people with disabilities actually make use of these services, partly because they are not accessible.



Finally, Irene shares some of the events that Inable have coming up, including an Induction on Accessibility for publishers,

'Because the fact that a book is digital does not mean it's accessible to people with disabilities'



Next, is the *Global Accessibility Awareness Day*, in partnership with *Facebook*, for which Inable will be talking about the importance of accessibility, mainly on a policy level and in terms of the development of products and services. These events will all build momentum towards the *Inclusive Africa* conference that is being held in October. Introducing *Inable's* digitizing of books, Irene introduces our next speaker Julius Mbura,

'This is why we are here because people like Julius have given us the opportunity to come inside their Community can serve their community and, as I say, people with disabilities leads these lives, so they should be at the front of the seats when we're having these conversations'

Julius shares how he has lost his sight due to a degenerative condition twice, the first time being when he was just 10 years old. At age 10, he took classes to learn Braille mobility and orientation. His sight returned after around a year and a half, but by the time he was in High School his condition had become severe. Julius made the decision to return to Braille, going to a High School for the blind, since some of the High School's he had earned a place at could not accommodate his needs. After High School he went to University, where he began fighting for what he wanted, and not for what is presumed people with visual impairments want. Julius went against the grain by choosing to study law, striving to help make things easier for people with visual impairments to follow in his footsteps in the future,

'They can live their dreams and goals and go beyond their comfort zone and the dominant culture that has been created over time to demean, designed to destroy our sense of self and sense of belief'

At University, Julius describes how he was thrown in the deep end, learning to use the digital adaptive and assistive technologies which would help him achieve his degree. Being the only

student out of 500 who was blind, Julius had to transition from Braille to soft copy, since there was nobody on campus conversant with Braille to assist him.

Accessibility has been a big part of Julius' independence, for example apps on his phone enable him to continue the activities he enjoys. He describes himself as a lover of life, and lists an impressive number of hobbies which include hiking, biking, breakdancing, motivational speaking and running a YouTube channel which gives people an appreciation of cars through other senses besides the visual. His passion is disability advocacy, and he goes by the mantra of,

'Changing mindsets, shifting perceptions and changing lives in the process'



He states that the simultaneously easiest and hardest thing for him has been to accept himself, to embody who he is and build his self-esteem. This developed for him at University, where he

mixed with people from a range of different backgrounds, with different perceptions and understandings of his visual impairment. He no longer takes this as a weakness, seeing it instead as what has made him who he is, and where he is;

'...in the arm of advocacy, in a position to shift the paradigm of people undermining persons living with disabilities, and empowering and challenging those with disabilities to see their potential and work towards their dreams'.