

Burnet's Submission to DFAT: New International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

The Burnet Institute (burnet.edu.au) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to DFAT's consultation process for the new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. As an Australian, unaligned, not-for-profit, and independent medical research institute and DFAT-accredited NGO, Burnet Institute has a long history of integrating medical research with pragmatic initiatives to combat severe health challenges overseas and in Australia. Our core mission revolves around generating and applying knowledge to enhance health outcomes, ensuring no one is left behind. Based in Melbourne, Australia, with additional offices in Papua New Guinea and Myanmar, we actively engage in projects spanning over 20 countries globally.

Our submission addresses the four key questions:

1. What should Australia prioritise to advance disability equity and rights internationally?
2. What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?
3. How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organisations of persons with disabilities?
4. What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?

Burnet's responses to the below questions draw from our experience in developing our first Disability Action Plan (DAP) over the past year. The DAP was developed through a comprehensive process that began in 2022. Throughout 2023, staff from across the organisation and at every level, came together to identify the needs and shape the plan, supported by Burnet's Diversity and Inclusion Team, the Gender Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (GEDI) Committee and its Disability Inclusion sub-committee, as well as stakeholders within and beyond Burnet. Needs and solutions were further informed by qualitative and quantitative analyses which all staff were invited to participate in.

The plan's development incorporated insights from staff across many teams including our PNG and Myanmar national staff, engagements with external networks, and contributions from employees with lived experiences. This collective endeavour underscores Burnet's commitment to embedding inclusivity into our values, operations, and interactions. Burnet's anticipated launch of the DAP in the first half of the upcoming year distinguishes it as the first among Australia's Medical Research Institutes and as one of the most comprehensive among Australian International NGOs.

1. What should Australia prioritise to advance disability equity and rights internationally?

Australia's prioritisation in advancing disability equity and rights internationally should encompass several key facets.



Comprehensive Disability Action Plans (DAPs):

There's a crucial need for organisations to focus on comprehensive DAPs that transcend mere workplace adjustments and recruitment. Incorporating disability equity and rights into all elements of an organisation's operations, projects and programs requires a clear action plan and a cultural shift permeating the entire organisation and involving every staff member. These plans should integrate actions aimed at embedding a disability lens into various facets like products, services, research, and project work. We found that there was a lack of comprehensive examples showcasing how a holistic approach can coordinate and implement organisation-wide actions. This scarcity makes it challenging to find effective models for conducting thorough gap analyses and self-assessments. Within organisations, the issue often lies in the diversity and separation of disability equity and inclusion quality standards such as those provided by ACFID and those within the frameworks guiding other areas of the organization such as HR. Effective coordination of stakeholder contributions is essential to identify and harmonise priority actions into a comprehensive action plan.

In sum, our experience is that the first step to achieving disability equity and rights as an organisational mindset driving action at all levels is that the organisation requires a unified, comprehensive document to deliver a clear roadmap for disability inclusion and coordinate efforts internally. Further, the organisation should have champions that include senior management to display commitment to and drive meaningful organisation-wide change that is carried into our work with partners and communities.

Redefining Disability:

Addressing the issue of defining disability is paramount. Uncounted too often means unseen and ignored. While Australia has legislative frameworks and international commitments like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the existing definitions within these frameworks are predominantly tied to medical models. A shift towards a social model of disability is imperative, one that recognises societal and environmental factors as the primary challenge in fulfilling their potential for people with a disability rather than an individual's impairment or condition. This shift is crucial for a more inclusive approach.

Moreover, incorporating concepts like the Disability Justice framework and the Twin Track Approach into the discourse surrounding disability definitions and terms is essential. These frameworks provide critical perspectives necessary for understanding and defining disability within a broader societal context. Achieving a consensus on updated definitions and terms is pivotal in fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to disability equity and rights.

DFAT Commitment and Resourcing:

The priority for the Australian Government is to ensure commitment remains strong and sustained across all individuals and department's required to realise the Strategy's vision. Importantly, adequate resourcing and flexible financing options must be made available to ensure that DFAT, Australian NGOs, development contractors, civil society organisations and other local implementing partners can integrate, fund and access required resources to implement the full potential of the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy Vision in their work,



and make corresponding shifts and commitments in their own organisational operations and cultures. Further, to advance disability equity and rights nationally, Australia's International Development Policy identifies the need for DFAT to "support local leadership, solutions, and accountability, including by channelling funding to local actors". We would recommend that DFAT considers direct funding to local Organisations for People with Disability's (OPDs), with appropriate external supports if needed, supporting a localised context and increased local capacity.

2. What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?

1. Organisational approaches

Development and ongoing assessment of DAPs:

The value of comprehensive DAPs as underlying sustainable disability equity and rights resourcing, lens and approach within organisations and throughout their work was discussed in the previous response. However, even with DAP's in place, there is limited availability of formal DAP assessment criteria or processes, with minimal external influence from organisations like the Australia Network on Disability, which excels in guiding plan development. These plans are predominantly self-imposed and lack standardised evaluation methods for determining their effectiveness. Such organisations as AND should be resourced to develop standards for the development and assessment of organisational level DAPs. Moreover, efforts could be made to provide organisations with examples of successful models which, as previously mentioned, is lacking.

Strategic Approach to Formulating the DAP:

During the development phase of Burnet's DAP, strategic discussions revealed that the approach of concentrating disability equity and rights actions within just a few departments or teams hindered significant organisational strides toward inclusion. That is, progress was not filtering out to other parts of the organisation and the cultural shift was not permeating staff that were not directly part of those actions. In response, Senior Management stepped up internal advocacy and support for the initiative, and we embraced a holistic approach, integrating many agreed-upon practical actions from internal stakeholders. To inform the DAP development, we conducted qualitative and quantitative analyses at Burnet, engaging all staff within the institute to identify gaps. Additionally, we formed a diverse steering group, encompassing stakeholders from all departments and levels across the institute. Through comprehensive stakeholder management, consensus was achieved about each Department/team's actions within the agreed-upon implementation timeline.

Integration of Overseas Offices in DAP development:

It's worth noting that each of the Burnet's international offices (in Papua New Guinea and Myanmar) has been integral to this journey. As part of the DAP development, the leadership teams in each country crafted their context-specific action plans, which are integrated into Burnet's overarching DAP. With the DAP in place and strong Senior Leadership support behind its implementation, we are confident of ongoing progress within our global offices as we



walk together in this journey. This framework allows for mutual understanding, learning and growth among and between our offices.

2. Australian Government approaches

Investment and Commitment to Disability Inclusion:

We firmly believe that comprehensive development of a DAP is the most critical step in embedding a disability lens into all aspects of our operations if genuine progress is our aim. However, it is important to recognise that developing and implementing a unified, comprehensive approach to disability inclusion entails costs for organisations including expertise, research, collaboration, stakeholder input, and potential external resources, requiring both financial investment and dedicated effort.

Perspectives on Australian Government Priorities:

We acknowledge that the Australian Government embodied transition toward equity and rights requires a significant shift in the scale and nature of Australia's engagement in disability equity as an outcome and as a driver of investments and decision making. This leadership, and the resulting initiatives and resourcing, will be crucial to ensure that sector and in-country partners are encouraged and practically supported to also make this shift towards disability equity and rights in their own organisations and their overseas work.

ACFID Resolution 1/2023 - Disability Equity & Rights:

As a member of the Australian Council for International Development, the peak body representing Australian INGOs, Burnet Institute supported the endorsement of ACFID Resolution 1/2023- Disability Equity & Rights at this year's AGM. We would like to take this opportunity to reinforce the commitment within the resolution to encourage the Australian Government to:

- a. Ensure that the vision, commitments and resourcing of the forthcoming Disability Equity and Rights strategy are commensurate with the scale required to make measurable and substantive contributions toward equity and rights outcomes of people with disabilities in the Indo-Pacific region.
- b. Commit to establishing funding requirements and performance targets for disability equity that mirror those in place for climate change and gender equality which were identified, along with disability equity, as core areas for action in the Australian Government's new International Development policy.

3. How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organisations of persons with disabilities?

DFAT possesses various pathways to support and collaborate with organisations of persons with disabilities:

1. **Reforming Definitions:** There's a growing demand for a more comprehensive legislative definition, favouring a social model of disability. Emphasising societal and environmental factors as primary causes, rather than individual impairments, is pivotal for fostering



inclusivity. Integrating concepts like the Disability Justice framework and the Twin Track Approach into these definitions is essential for broader societal comprehension. Attaining consensus and raising awareness on updated terms is crucial for a more inclusive approach to disability equity and rights.

2. **Knowledge Sharing:** Partnering with organisations like the Burnet Institute and Australia Network on Disability (AND) allows DFAT to exchange best practices in Disability Action Plan development. Moreover, collaborating with AND to craft guidelines, potentially categorising Action Plans and predicting their success rates, could offer invaluable insights. This collaboration could not only pave the way for all organisations but also particularly empower international aid organisations, leading to accelerated progress in the field of disability inclusion.
3. **Guidance and Resources:** Providing toolkits or guidance for organisations striving to create comprehensive Disability Action Plans would be beneficial. Supplying resources such as templates and frameworks can aid in both formulation and evaluation.
4. **Promoting Collaboration:** DFAT can foster partnerships among NGOs, government bodies, disability rights organisations, and stakeholders. This concerted effort can cultivate a more unified approach to disability inclusion in international development.
5. **Financial Assistance:** Considering additional funding for projects primarily focused on working with communities is crucial to ensure that disability inclusion is adequately built into the entire project cycle, and that engaged Organisations for People with a Disability (OPDs) are adequately funded for their services, advice, training and support. Often, opportunities for enhancing capability and knowledge exist, but lack of funding hinders engagement with external consultants for training or similar purposes. Deliberating funding or grants for organisations dedicated to advancing disability equity and rights could significantly aid in implementing inclusive practices and building organisational capacity.
6. **Sustainable and accessible OPDs:** The heterogeneity of people living with a disability, and its convergence with other intersectional identities such as gender or ethnicity, is best represented by Organisations for People with a Disability (OPDs). It is crucial that the Australian Government invest in OPDs to ensure their availability as they are increasingly engaged by DFAT and the sector to strengthen their initiatives and capacity to contribute to the outcomes in the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. In Australia, PNG and Myanmar where Burnet have our offices, we have found that there is a shortage of access to OPDs due to: increased demand on them in recent years to provide advice, support, input or training to projects, programs and organisations seeking to improve inclusion; and often there is a lack of OPDs in or near the Provinces/Townships in which we work.

DFAT should seek to build the sustainability, capacity and reach of OPDs by directly investing in their leadership through multi-year and flexible funding mechanisms, by strengthening partnerships, and by increasing investment into peak representative bodies.

7. **Consultation Processes:**

Ensuring the active participation of disability organisations and those showcasing exemplary practices in policy development consultations guarantees a diverse integration of perspectives into international development policies and initiatives. For instance, organisations like Science Australia Gender Equity offer personalised



support, incredible resources, and foster a robust network. They facilitate information sharing, discussions, and brainstorming sessions while forming working groups to effectively implement Gender Equity Diversity Inclusion (GEDI) strategies within organisations.

4. What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?

The challenges and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights can be outlined based on the Burnet Institute's comprehensive response:

1. **Comprehensive Disability Action Plans:** Creating plans that transcend basic workplace adjustments and recruitment, integrating a disability lens into various organisational facets including research, and project/program work, remains a challenge due to a lack of comprehensive examples. This scarcity makes it difficult to conduct thorough gap analyses and self-assessments.
2. **Defining Disability:** The existing definitions predominantly tied to medical models hinder progress. Shifting towards a social model recognising societal and environmental factors is crucial for inclusivity, but achieving consensus on updated terms poses a challenge.
3. **Evaluation and Models:** Assessing the effectiveness of Disability Action Plans is limited by the absence of standardised evaluation methods and the difficulty in locating successful models.

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