

ChildFund Australia submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

December 2023

ChildFund Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the development of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade *International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy*. We note upfront our support and endorsement of the submission to this strategy from ADDC, however see a need to provide further recommendations specific to children and young people. We therefore urge the Department to ensure the *International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy* intentionally considers the rights of children and young people with disabilities and we make recommendations to this end.

ChildFund Australia is an independent international development organisation that works to reduce poverty for children and young people in developing communities. ChildFund Australia is a member of the ChildFund Alliance – a global network of 11 development and humanitarian organisations reaching nearly 36 million children and their family members in 70 countries.

Working in partnership with local organisations, including those led by or for women, people with disabilities and other marginalised and excluded groups wherever possible, ChildFund Australia seeks to address social inequalities and exclusion in order to support girls, children with disabilities and other marginalised children and young people¹.

Explicit recognition of children is required to best address their different and unique needs. This has never been more important than now; as is recognised in the New Development Policy, children and young people comprise the largest group across the Asia Pacific region – accounting for over 50% of the population. This is a trend that will impact every aspect of Australia’s ambitions in the region, and beyond.

The prevalence of children with disabilities is significant and increasing. Globally, an estimated one in 10 children has a moderate to severe functional difficulty, and a significant proportion live in the Asia-Pacific region.² Despite the massive data gaps when it comes to children with disabilities, there is evidence of significant diversity among these children, including gender, type and degree of impairment and the barriers they face within their specific environment.

Access to assistive devices, technology and health and rehabilitation services, as well as exposure to nurturing relationships and positive social norms and beliefs, are crucial to promoting equity and rights for all such children, irrespective of their impairments.

We note that the most recent strategy *Development for All 2015-2020* effectively narrowed its efforts for children and young people to a singular focus on inclusive education and skills, a regression from its predecessor *Development for All 2009-2014*, which provided a focus on children

¹ This includes LBGTQIA+/ diverse SOGIESC youth, those from ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and those who are migrants, internally displaced or refugees.

² United Nations Children’s Fund, *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*, UNICEF, New York, 2021.

and young people as a guiding principle. Inclusive education is essential and should remain a core focus in the forthcoming strategy. However, we illuminate below priority areas to more holistically meet the needs of children and young people with disabilities.

On inclusive education, we commend the Department for its continued focus, and recommend the next strategy seek to deepen its educational focus to better recognise one of the most prominent barriers for children with disabilities – social norms and attitudes, which could be more comprehensively addressed. The attached case study (see appendix) highlights an inclusive education project and how it not only provides for inclusive education but actively seeks a change in the attitude and behaviours of both peers and parents to foster more holistic impact for children with disabilities, thereby addressing the social norms and attitudes that prevent them from enjoying their right to education.

Evidence shows that early intervention to support children with disabilities to receive good care and developmental opportunities during early childhood makes them more likely to become healthy and productive adults.³ Promotion of early child development must take a systems-thinking approach, taking into account the wider context (the ‘system’) around the child, which includes recognising the interconnectedness of the child with their family, community and wider society. This requires targeted support and funding for multi-sector programs that provide holistic support for children with disabilities, including strengthening functioning systems for early identification of impairments, health, and rehabilitation services. We must continue to prioritise addressing harmful social norms and attitudes that may prevent families from accessing health, education, and other basic rights. Early child development programming must take this approach to ensure interventions truly ‘do no harm’ and meet the pre-conditions for inclusion, equity, and rights of children with disabilities.

There are significant gaps concerning the unique protection needs of children with disabilities, and we urge the strategy to address this. Girls and women with disabilities are estimated to be at greater risk of violence, abuse and neglect and disproportionately exposed to gender-based violence.⁴ Solid evidence relating to the specific gender-based threats and needs of children with disabilities is scarce, however, and knowledge-building in this area is greatly needed. This includes scarcity of data relating to diversity of needs across gender (especially GBV against adolescent girls) and type of impairment, both offline and online. ChildFund Australia’s work in the region strongly suggests this is an urgent and pressing issue.

ChildFund Australia recommends the *International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy*:

1. Recognises children and young people with disabilities as subjects of human rights and promote the rights of children in the strategy in line with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to which Australia is signatory.
2. Adopts an [intersectional and transformative⁵ approach](#) that considers disability equity and rights across the lifespan, in recognition of the different and unique rights and needs of

³ WHO and UNICEF, Early childhood development and disability: discussion paper. WHO, Geneva, 2012.

⁴ See: UN Women, Facts and figures: Women and girls with disabilities; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018. First Quadrennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report.

⁵ Transformative in this context refers to addressing key social norms and attitudes that create barriers, stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities, and shape dominant narratives and paradigms around how persons with disabilities are perceived and treated. This aligns with current DFAT focus on equity and a rights-based approach, addressing root causes of their exclusion and promoting dignity and respect for persons with disabilities and all they are capable of contributing to any society.

children and young people. Such an approach emphasises the significant impact of early life experiences on lifelong health and wellbeing, and brings greater focus to long-term programming that addresses harmful social norms that perpetuate stigma and discrimination against persons with disabilities.

3. Commits to, within general targets, dedicated funding for twin-track programming with children and young people.
4. Specifically names and responds to the principle of 'do no harm' in the strategy as fundamental for disability equity and rights programming.
5. Provides for increasing the reliable collection, management and use of high-quality disaggregated data at the community, subnational, national and global levels that accounts for children and young people with disabilities, and monitors for inequalities.
6. Further, provides for improved data including through targeted investment with particular emphasis on diverse data collection methodologies such as qualitative and participatory methods to bring out the voices of women and girls with disabilities and build a clearer picture of their specific needs.
7. Introduces an explicit focus on early childhood development⁶ and support for children with disabilities (as separate and distinct to 'education' as a sectoral focus) through targeted investment and support for the implementation of programs that address early development for children with disabilities, taking a 'systems-thinking' and 'do not harm' approach.
8. Continues Australia's leadership on inclusive education, emphasising a holistic multi-sectoral approach addressing children with disabilities, their families and community including persons with disabilities, and school systems. (see appendix for case study)
9. Commits to support research and targeted programming to address the gap in the specific protection concerns for children with disabilities, with particular emphasis on understanding the protection needs of diverse girls with disabilities.
10. Commits funding to and support for nurturing the emerging leadership of young persons with disabilities and for organisations of children and young people with disabilities, including youth-led actors or organisations, and their participation through the use of child/youth friendly engagement methodologies.
11. Includes a focus on organisations of parents and caregivers of children with severe cognitive or communication-related disabilities, who may not be able to self-advocate or represent, alongside a focus on enabling parents to help ensure the wellbeing of children with disabilities and represent their best interests.
12. Ensures core and flexible funding for organisational and programmatic capacity strengthening for OPDs, which includes capacity strengthening on child rights, child protection/safeguarding, and child and youth participation and voice.

Should you have any questions or queries regarding this submission, please contact Jayshree Mangubhai, Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Advisor on jmangubhai@childfund.org.au or via 0423557989

⁶ Spanning prenatal development to eight years of age.

APPENDIX 1

Case Study of ChildFund Australia's 'My Right to Education' project in Vietnam

The My Right to Education Project in Bac Kan and Cao Bang provinces in Vietnam aims to ensure children with disabilities can learn, play and be cared for in an inclusive home, school and community environment. It was designed and implemented with technical support from a national OPD, Action to the Community Development Center (ACDC). Now in its second phase, it programs at multiple levels. It supports children with disabilities in schools, through teacher training on inclusive education and support to create individual education plans for these children, additional teaching support materials, and the creation of inclusive hubs in mainstream schools. It also works with parents of children with disabilities and communities, to equip parents with knowledge and skills to support their child's learning, care and access to core services, and also enable wider engagement between children with disabilities and their peers without disabilities in play. In the absence of an existing local OPD, in phase I the project supported persons with disabilities to form self-help groups, to create awareness both in the community and with local authorities about disability rights and inclusion.

Key results include not only an increase in the number of children identified with impairments, resulting in **increased access to support and services**, but also an **improved learning environment** for them resulting in higher learning outcomes, changes in perceptions, behaviour and emotions of these children. Alongside this has been **changes in the attitudes of classmates without disabilities** towards the children, alongside the parents of these children. Parents of children with disabilities are demonstrating increased support their children, including in relation to school activities. At the school level, **school managers are** developing and implementing inclusive school plans, while **teachers** are using specific strategies to support children with disabilities, (e.g.: developing and implementing individual education plans, adapting teaching methodologies). A **model of community and school inclusive hubs** is established and functioning to support children with disabilities and also interaction between children with disabilities and their peers without disabilities. There has been a significant increase in **local authority awareness** and significantly also engaging in advocacy for people with disabilities alongside the newly established OPD. **Self-help groups catalysed into the establishment of an OPD** and have been engaged within school activities, broader community and in work with local authorities, which has resulted in changing public perceptions towards persons with disabilities.

More recently, engagement with local education authorities at the district and provincial level and the provision of evidence on the effectiveness of inclusive education strategies has borne fruit. The education authorities in the two provinces have now issued **province-wide guidance on inclusive education for children with disabilities** which adopts the good practices of individual education plan/supporting room for children with disabilities piloted in the project.