

Contribution by Disability Rights Advocacy Fund to Australia's new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

Since 2009, the Disability Rights Advocacy Fund (DRAF) has worked with DFAT to promote disability-inclusive development, assisting Australia to conduct its foreign aid in accordance with its international commitments as a party to the UN CRPD. We commend your outreach for informing DFAT's new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy and take this opportunity to provide the following suggestions based on our experience working with you, as well as with organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) in regions prioritised by DFAT, and beyond. Disability equity is a core principle guiding DRAF's approaches, so that they reach the whole diversity of people with disabilities - especially the most marginalised.

1. Priorities to advance disability equity and rights internationally:

Australia's leadership in disability inclusion stems from its implementation of the UN CRPD across legislation and policies and DFAT's inclusive practices in bilateral, regional and international cooperation. These practices can be expanded, and Australia's leadership can be leveraged to promote disability equity and accessibility requirements across multilateral processes. In your new strategy, the following priorities may be considered:

- **Championing a disability lens in the solutions to global crises:** Australia is well positioned to champion disability perspectives in all multilateral forums to solve the most pressing global challenges. For this, DFAT can lead the way, embedding the experiences and expertise of OPDs across ODA portfolios, humanitarian aid, climate action, human rights and all aspects of foreign relations, including bilateral and multilateral trade and economic growth.
- **Partnering with the disability movements to drive global change:** DFAT's longstanding support for the work of OPDs in their communities must be coupled with decisive action to promote their participation in crafting global change and solutions. For this, DFAT's partnering with OPDs needs to evolve from only financial support to facilitators of an active role for the movement in multilateral processes and mechanisms where global problems are addressed. Ambitious ODA targets on disability will boost the participation of OPDs in DFAT-funded initiatives across Australia's priority regions and could be instrumental in expanding this cooperation into neighbouring regions, like the ASEAN group of countries.
- **Strengthening the disability movement through technical support and collective learning:** Investment in technical capacity and knowledge production by OPDs is essential to increase the quality of their participation in responses to global challenges. DFAT should emphasise peer exchanges and mutual learning, always requiring that concerned communities participate in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of processes so that the learning and outcomes generated have an empowering effect.

2. Most effective approaches to progress these priorities:

The experiences of people with disabilities, particularly of the most marginalised, are indispensable for inclusive development and solutions to our global challenges. DFAT should champion their mainstreaming, promoting synergies between OPDs and groups representing other social movements based on *participation, trust, accessibility, mutual learning and intersectionality*.

OPDs understand the intersectionality between the barriers, injustices and inequities that they face and the main challenges faced by humanity as a whole. This is reflected in the wide scope of their advocacy across social causes, including climate justice, humanitarian responses, poverty and gender inequality, the rights of First Nations peoples, youth participation and racial discrimination, among others.

Cross-movement collaboration and learning across these causes can be encouraged through an ambitious target for disability inclusion. This may be set at least at 16% of Australia's development cooperation, backed by the new stand-alone disability equity and rights strategy. In addition, specific targets and indicators referring to women and girls with disabilities should be included in DFAT's new gender equality strategy.

Central disability allocation increases should also be aligned with overall budget increases, and investments over AUD 3 million should be required to include disability targets and indicators.

Other specific approaches for the priorities outlined in the previous section are:

- **A disability lens across Australia's International cooperation and engagements:**

In order to advance this priority, DFAT needs to build its own internal resources to ensure a whole-of-agency approach to disability rights, equity and inclusion. Like the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), this strategy must be implemented Department-wide, developing capacity among senior leadership and all staff, and must include making business systems and procedures accessible and inclusive. An external advisory group with diverse representation from the movement could meet annually to help DFAT review progress and challenges and guide the strategy towards its desired outcomes.

DFAT should only support responses to humanitarian crises derived from conflict, climate change or global pandemics that meaningfully engage persons with disabilities in their decision-making, design and evaluation. The same requirements should become standard due diligence for *all procurements, as well as programmes for economic recovery*. Guided by the *do no harm* principle, any support for inaccessible schools, community centres, hospitals or segregated facilities may be replaced by investments in infrastructure to include people with disabilities in the community, such as accessible environments, public institutions, services, transport, information and communications.

DFAT could also use its influence and convening power to promote the adoption of inclusive approaches by the UN system and by all international, regional and national partners, encouraging partnerships with organisations from the disability movement. DFAT should require all its implementing partners to follow its standards on accessibility and reasonable accommodation.

On trade policy, DFAT should continue spearheading the discussions on disability and trade initiated by Australia in 2019 and draw from its own research¹ as well as others, like the report by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland² recently presented at UNCTAD. Overall, DFAT should ensure that OPDs are involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of a trade agenda that is disability inclusive.

- **Strengthening the movement by supporting its organisations:**

DFAT can contribute to shifting power and decision-making to the community and its leaders. This means moving beyond “consultation and participation” to fully embrace the agency of communities experiencing injustice through the lifecycle of projects and interventions. Their unique expertise makes these communities indispensable partners in creating solutions to longstanding community and global problems of injustice, oppression and ableism.

Grantmaking and contracting practices, bilateral funding and all other relevant forms of cooperation should be adapted to better serve the disability movements, promoting the emergence of groups and projects among the most marginalised and harder to reach groups, as well as collaboration with organisations representing other social justice movements.

Pooled funding mechanisms based on horizontal partnerships between donors and OPDs, such as DRAF, which allow multi-year funding for movement-led advocacy and peer-based learning, are effective for this.³ They are informed through regular grantee surveys and may serve as a reference for DFAT’s planning.

Australia-supported experiences in the Asia Pacific and other priority regions through DFAT funding can also serve as templates for movement building in other regions, such as ASEAN countries. With a minimum annual investment *requirement of AU\$ 1.5 million per country for 5 years*, DFAT can contribute to consolidating the movement’s transformative impact in the region of focus and beyond.

Strengthening the movement also *requires connection and solidarity with other human rights movements*, as mentioned above. Cross-movement collaboration with feminist, youth, LGBTQI+, environmental justice or indigenous rights organisations should facilitate access of the most marginalised communities to broader platforms, make allies and coordinate work towards common objectives.

Accountability mechanisms should involve the community beyond consultations to include participation as experts in developing recommendations and strategies. DFAT should ensure that the most marginalised communities are actively involved, with their agency fully recognised.

Similarly, *research supported by DFAT should involve the concerned communities* in the design and implementation so that knowledge, learning and outcomes are informed by lived experience and have an empowering and emancipatory effect.

The effectiveness of ODA spending to engage the most marginalised should be tracked and analysed, measuring outreach, enjoyment of rights, access to services and

¹ Aid for Inclusive Trade report: Extending the benefits of trade to reduce poverty, 2019

² Marzia Fontana & Sophie Mitra, Inclusive trade and persons with disabilities, 2023. The report was presented in a session co-organised by the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development \(UNCTAD\)](#) and the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland](#).

³ DRAF’s approach to movement-led technical assistance is illustrated here: <https://disabilityrightsfund.org/shifting-power-and-narratives-movement-led-technical-assistance-in-action/>

opportunities, and their participation in setting advocacy agendas and project objectives.

Funding allocation should be decided based on evidence, factoring in diversity in data collection. Fund distribution, programming, and the resulting policymaking will improve by consistently applying the OECD DAC marker in data disaggregation on gender, disability and other intersectional aspects of identity.

3. Supporting the role of and partnering with organisations of persons with disabilities:

Recent reports indicate the frustration of OPDs with the marginal roles they have in initiatives designed without their participation by international NGOs and other delivery intermediaries.⁴ This is especially the case among grassroots OPDs representing the most marginalised communities. The reliance of bilateral donors on funding models based on intermediaries needs to be challenged. DFAT can lead the way in doing so, adopting alternative approaches that promote true partnerships between donors and OPDs based on *mutual trust, risk sharing, and engagement throughout the full cycle of projects.*

Streamlined processes and requirements, simplified reporting and flexibility to allow multi-year funding will facilitate DFAT's partnership with OPDs, particularly with those representing the most marginalised communities.

In addition, DFAT should strengthen its internal capacities and accountability through staff training and regular audits on the accessibility and inclusiveness of procurement processes, practices and systems.

To meet Australia's commitment to put the most marginalised at the centre of its development work, DFAT should make intersectional approaches a requirement for itself and all its partners. Initiatives from *Indigenous peoples with disabilities, SOGIESC diverse persons and other harder to reach groups must be prioritised, and DFAT should leverage its convening power to create space for their representation in regional and global fora.* This would be a demonstration of what strategic partnerships look like in practice.

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

DFAT's new strategy is developed in a context marked by armed conflicts disproportionately affecting civilian populations, which are damaging trust and cooperation between nations and peoples across geopolitical divides. The multilateral system—to which Australia is a large contributor—is in a serious crisis of legitimacy, as nations apply international law and obligations inconsistently and fail to work together to prevent and resolve conflicts.

⁴ The report *Localisation and disability: Investments in OPDs in Bangladesh, Nepal and Kenya*, commissioned by the GLAD Network features the Disability Rights Fund as an effective alternative for engaging grassroots and emergent OPDs, by combining peer-to-peer trainings, capacity building, and mechanisms for risk mitigation.

In this context, Australia must rise to the occasion and above geopolitical lines, showing coherence and reliability as a partner for global development and for promoting human rights and justice for everyone and everywhere.

In addition, escalating climate emergencies are prompting food insecurity, displacement and migration in regions that are a priority for Australia's cooperation. People with disabilities are at the frontline of these emergencies, and their organisations are already engaged in critical work for climate justice and resilience. However, OPDs are often unable to meet eligibility criteria and technical requirements of climate-related funding, rendering the disability experiences virtually absent from vital preparedness and response work.

DFAT can draw from existing good practices for promoting the integration of OPDs' work into the broader climate change funding streams, facilitating their access to relevant funding.⁵

Opportunities

Australia's regional projection and leadership in disability inclusive development can be used to promote bilateral and multilateral approaches that uphold human rights, democracy, multiculturalism and diversity. Australia should continue supporting the UNDIS, the OECD DAC marker on disability, and the further expansion of funding commitments by members of the GLAD Network. Additionally, DFAT can throw its weight on current developments, such as the Summit of the Future in 2024⁶, to ensure that its agenda and results do not exclude persons with disabilities and their experiences.

DFAT can also have a significant impact on current discussions to transform the care economy, drawing from its own experiences with NDIS in structuring services, support and social protection so they enhance autonomy, choice and control, promote gender equality, disability equity, and respect for the rights of all involved.

Finally, Australia can promote the direct participation of persons with disabilities in ongoing treaty drafting processes like the instrument on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, a legally binding instrument on business and human rights, and in the processes for developing a treaty on crimes against humanity, and global conventions on tax and on the rights of older persons.

⁵ Targeted outreach to OPD by the [Global Greengrants Fund](#) and the [Gender Just Climate Solutions Scale Fund of the Women's Environment and Development Organisation \(WEDO\)](#) are useful examples.

⁶ The upcoming [Summit of the Future](#) (September 2024) includes in its agenda: global financial investment in the SDGs, climate action, and future generations; a new agenda for peace; managing global shocks; transforming education; youth engagement; a global digital compact; and measuring what we value (beyond GDP), among others. Australia's leadership will be pivotal to ensure that multilateral solutions across all these areas are inclusive of persons with disabilities.