

Disability Equity and Rights Strategy: Submission to DFAT December 2023

With a demonstrated commitment to furthering the rights of people with disabilities, DT Global offers reflections drawn from our experience across Asia and the Pacific to inform development of DFAT's Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.

***Development for All* has assisted in laying the groundwork for disability equity and rights**

DFAT's *Development for All* strategy has helped to establish that the rights of people with disabilities are a concern for all development partners, including government and civil society. *Development for All* has enabled implementers to assist partner countries to ratify and operationalise the Convention on the Rights of People with disabilities (CRPD), in collaboration with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD). Considering and supporting disability inclusion has become a standard way of operating for many DFAT-funded programs, including those delivered by DT Global and highlighted here, and provided an important role model for other donors.

In Indonesia, collaboration between the government and civil society organisations, facilitated by AIPJ2 / DFAT, has successfully encouraged the Indonesian Government to develop policies related to persons with disabilities, which have mainstreamed disability inclusion into the Indonesian government's development programs and action plans.

In Timor-Leste, DFAT has been a significant funder of OPDs and disability inclusion. OPDs are bigger, more active, and more empowered. There has been greater momentum and buy in on disability inclusion by development actors, including government. Two of the biggest wins from this have been the development of the National Disability Action Plan 2018–2024 and the ratification of the CRPD.

In Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Australia Health Partnership (VAHP) has supported the Ministry of Health (MoH) to develop Inclusive Health Objectives in the Health Sector Strategy for 2022–2030, work with the Ministry of Justice Disability Desk Coordinator, and build new health centres in an accessible way.

In Southeast Asia, ASEAN–ACT has established a disability working group to oversee disability inclusion. Efforts include research to reduce the vulnerability of people with disabilities to trafficking.

Responses to DFAT's guiding questions follow.

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

Achieving disability equity and rights requires intensified support to disability-inclusive education pathways

Many of DFAT's education programs utilise inclusive education approaches to improve learning outcomes for learners with disabilities. However, globally, children with disabilities are less likely to be enrolled in school, have lower rates of attendance and of transition to higher levels of education, and are less likely to complete education compared to children without disabilities.¹ Disability-inclusive education and skills development can challenge stigmatising assumptions about the capabilities of people with disabilities, build local leaders with disabilities, and importantly, improve the quality of life of people with disabilities and their families.

¹ Mitra, S. and Yap, J. (2022). The Disability Data Report 2022. Disability Data Initiative. Fordham Research Consortium on Disability: New York.

DT Global proposes amplified support to disability inclusion in education and skills development investments, including Australia Awards. Entry to formal education opportunities, including training providers, tertiary institutions, and scholarships, have historically been inaccessible to many people with disabilities due to strict eligibility criteria, which can be difficult for people with disabilities to meet due to systemic barriers to primary and secondary education. Pathways towards formal skills development, tertiary education and scholarships must be developed to improve access to leadership and economic empowerment opportunities.

Achieving disability equity requires greater attention to the rights of people with disabilities to health services

While *Development for All* has encouraged efforts to mainstream disability inclusion across investments in several sectors, the health sector remains underserved. Globally, people with disabilities continue to experience a wide range of health inequities. The World Health Organisation reports that contributing factors to these inequities remain unchanged during the past decade, and as a result, many persons with disabilities continue to die prematurely and have poorer health.²

DT Global recommends placing health equity for people with disabilities at the centre of all health sector support. This requires the involvement and prioritisation of people with disabilities when designing and implementing health sector investments. Using *Development for All's* twin-track approach, this would mean mainstreaming the rights and requirements of people with disabilities across the development and delivery of health programs, as well as designing efforts which meet the specific health needs of people with disabilities.

Much more support is needed for a specific pre-condition of health equity: access to assistive technology. Particularly in Pacific countries, assistive technology is difficult to access by people with disabilities, especially for those outside of urban centres. This gap means that people who need wheelchairs, hearing aids, white canes, walking sticks or other devices are frequently underserved. This can result in exclusion from school, community meetings, health services and evacuation during a disaster. DT Global recommends prioritising and resourcing improved access to specific health services including assistive technology.

Improving disability equity and rights requires improved access to early childhood development

Early childhood development includes early identification of disability, provision of early intervention services, and early childhood education. These services are a key enabler of access to education and can improve life chances for people with disabilities. However, these are lacking in many parts of the world, including the Pacific, due to lack of access to trained personnel and programs. This is a particular gap in rural and remote geographical areas. DT Global recommends greater attention to this gap in DFAT's new Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.

Improving disability equity and rights requires government leadership and coordination

Government coordination of efforts to develop, implement and report on policies in line with the CRPD are critical to the achievement of disability equity and rights. This can incorporate responsibility for raising awareness across government ministries regarding disability commitments and requirements, advising government disability budgeting, and guiding disability data collection, DT Global suggests that DFAT's Disability Equity and Rights strategy could incorporate improved support to strengthen government coordination in disability equity and rights. This would include support to enable and strengthen dialogue and collaboration between government disability focal points and OPDs.

² Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022.

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

Development for All encouraged approaches that enable effective disability inclusion. DT Global recommends retaining and building on these proven approaches to achieve disability equity and rights.

Utilise the twin-track approach

DT Global's experience demonstrates that program-level disability inclusion strategies aligned with *Development for All's* twin-track approach enable the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of activities which mainstream disability inclusion across program activities, as well as targeted activities which address the requirements of people with disabilities. Continued use of this approach is recommended.

Adequately resource investments to deliver disability equity and rights

Development for All created an authorising environment that enabled programs to resource personnel to guide and support disability inclusion efforts. Many of DT Global's investments engage disability inclusion-focussed staff and advisers. This experience demonstrates that when dedicated disability inclusion focussed human resources are engaged within program and program partner teams, efforts are amplified. Dedicated personnel enable collaboration with OPDs and others, building awareness, knowledge, and momentum for action amongst teams, and identification of reasonable adjustments which support the participation of people with disabilities. DT Global recommends that DFAT strengthens the requirements for expertise and provision of adequate budget to fund disability equity and rights considerations in design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of investments.

Strengthen monitoring and evaluation of disability equity and rights

Systems that mainstream disability data collection and monitoring enable the collection of lessons and the demonstration of results. DFAT's Development Policy outlines disability-related performance monitoring requirements, and DFAT reports against the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) disability marker. DFAT's requirement for programs to report on disability inclusion in Investment Monitoring Reports has reinforced the need for disability inclusive monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

DT Global suggests that the development of a new strategy offers DFAT an opportunity to review its current performance indicators relating to disability. Monitoring and evaluating disability equity and rights, as compared to disability inclusion, will require new definitions of what achievement looks like, and how it should be measured.

Pacific Women Lead Enabling Services, delivered by DT Global, has recently developed a guide which assists implementers to monitor efforts towards the achievement of equity and rights. This includes reporting on reasonable adjustments provided as preconditions; quantitative data indicating inclusion, and qualitative data indicating the outcomes of equitable participation. While many implementers are increasingly aware of the Washington Group questions as a quantitative tool for monitoring disability inclusion, DT Global suggests careful consideration must be applied to monitoring and reporting outcomes for people with disabilities beyond inclusion.

Allocate budget for reasonable adjustments

Operationalising disability equity and rights requires budget to support the costs of reasonable adjustments such as transport, accessibility, and access to personal support workers. Annual plan budgets that incorporate the costs of reasonable adjustments are more likely to meet the preconditions for disability inclusion. The *Disability Inclusion in the DFAT Development Program Good Practice Note* (2021) specifies 'approximately 3 to 5 per cent of the budget should be allocated specifically for ensuring the program or strategy development process is inclusive and accessible'.³ DT Global suggests that monitoring of a target related to budget allocation as an enabler of disability inclusion via established processes such as Investment Monitoring Reports would strengthen action towards good intentions.

³ Disability inclusion in the DFAT development program: Good practice note. Canberra: DFAT, 2021.

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

Create an enabling environment for OPDs as leaders in disability equity and rights

Partnerships with OPDs are foundational to efforts to achieve locally led disability equity and rights. OPDs are regularly drawn on for advice, but not adequately compensated or supported. Demand for OPD partnerships from bilateral programs, multilateral organisations and non-government organisations has resulted in OPDs in some countries being overstretched, managing multiple partnerships, hectic implementation schedules and demanding procurement, compliance, and reporting requirements.

DT Global suggests that an enabling environment must be created to maximise the participation, independence, and sustainability of OPDs. This requires greater investment in OPD capacity, through the coordinated and consistent provision of financial, human, and in-kind resources, as a pre-condition to meaningful OPD involvement in planning, implementation, and decision-making. A discrete grants program which covers OPD institutional costs and supports organisational and management capacity, including compliance with DFAT requirements and safeguards, would free OPDs from grant-seeking and, to an extent, reporting to multiple partners. Pacific Women Lead's grants facility, coordinated by the Pacific Community (SPC), offers an example.

As outlined in DFAT's new International Development Policy, the importance of locally led development is central. DT Global suggests that the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy should prioritise the involvement of local disability movement leaders in investment design and implementation, and strategic support to these leaders must be made available where useful. DT Global urges DFAT to encourage well-defined partnerships between OPDs and implementers, to avoid superficial engagement, or out-sourcing of disability efforts to OPDs, rather than partnership with OPDs as leaders and collaborators.

Supporting local leadership amongst OPDs must utilise an intersectional approach and seek to strengthen representation of diverse people with disabilities. Experiences of disability are influenced by gender, sexuality, geographic location, and type of impairment. In some places, OPD representation of these diverse experiences can vary, and may need financial and technical support to flourish.

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

Defining disability equity and rights

At present, DFAT's disability efforts are widely understood as those that support disability inclusive development. While DT Global welcomes a shift towards action that promotes the rights of people with disabilities, DFAT's understanding of disability equity and rights, and how it differs from disability inclusion, requires clear definition. A change in title suggests different approaches are to be utilised; DT Global welcomes clarity regarding how the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy will support the achievement of equitable outcomes for all.

Access to technical expertise

To effectively guide and monitor disability equity and rights, DT Global suggests that DFAT requires ongoing access to human resources with deep technical understanding and experience in disability inclusive development. This should include engaging persons with disabilities for strategic and technical advice. Without this, it can be difficult to lead efforts, and discriminate between superficial 'tick-box' and profound efforts to enable disability equity and rights in designs, reports, and evaluations.

Intersectionality and GEDSI

The intersections between DFAT's new Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, Gender Equality Strategy and LGBTQIA+ Human Rights Engagement Strategy must be explicit. Gender equality requires consideration of and support for the diverse experiences of people with disabilities. Similarly, disability equity and rights cannot be achieved without exploring and considering the different experiences of men and women with

disabilities. To promote intersectionality, and the achievement of human rights for all, DT Global recommends that the three strategies intersect, and that connection points are clearly articulated.

DFAT's processes and expectations in relation to the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, as well as those related to GEDSI, must be streamlined, and clarified. DFAT has established a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) team and promotes GEDSI approaches. Posts are required to develop an integrated GEDSI strategy, and Investment Design Documents require articulation of GEDSI priorities, however gender equality and disability inclusion are assessed separately in Investment Monitoring Reports. DT Global recommends a review of processes and expectations, and articulation of these which demonstrate alignment between its GEDSI approaches and its Gender Equality and Disability Equity and Rights Strategies. This clarity is particularly important when it comes to investment design, monitoring, and evaluation. DT Global also suggests DFAT explore alternatives to 'GEDSI' terminology, noting GEDSI is not always well known outside of DFAT circles. Terms such as 'inclusion' might be more effective.

Enabling effective disability equity and rights requires access to specific technical resourcing. Intersectional efforts frequently require access to specific disability equity and rights technical resources, alongside dedicated gender equality advice. This avoids subjugation of disability equity and rights considerations beneath a gender equality focus. SURGE, DFAT's gender equality panel delivered by DT Global, collaborates with DFAT's disability inclusion help desk. This enables the delivery of gender equality advice with an intersectional disability inclusion lens, and vice versa. DT Global suggests the delivery of the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy requires discrete technical resourcing, and to enable intersectional approaches, recommends close collaboration with gender technical resources.

Disability Equity and Rights and Climate Change

People with disabilities face heightened protection risks and barriers to inclusion and are likely to have specific, additional needs related to forced displacement in the context of disasters and climate change.⁴ DT Global recommends consideration of the increased risks faced by people with disabilities in the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, and strategies which may mitigate these. These include participation of people with disabilities and OPDs in disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and humanitarian responses.

⁴ Disability, Displacement and Climate Change. UNHCR, IDMC & International Disability Alliance, 2021.