

## **Submission by Fiji National Organisations of Persons with Disability on Australia's Disability Equity Rights Strategy**

### **Introduction**

This submission is prepared by the Fiji Disabled People's Federation (FDPF) and its community-based branches and four affiliates (the Fiji Association of the Deaf, United Blind Persons of Fiji, Spinal Injury Association and Psychiatric Survivors' Association).

We commend the Government of Australia for being an international and Pacific regional leader in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. We acknowledge the consistent funding that Australia continues to provide to national organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) through regional and international OPDs and as well as the ongoing advocacy by Australia with the Fiji Government, regional organisations and other development partners on disability inclusive development.

We are likewise thankful for the virtual briefings and the in-country face-to-face consultations held in Fiji on 8 December 2023. The Fiji OPDs reviewed the four questions and a simplified version consisting of five questions<sup>1</sup> was circulated to FDPF, affiliates and branches.

This submission consolidates the recommendations of diverse groups of persons with disabilities including women and girls with disabilities, children, parents, carers, personal assistants, older persons and youths with disabilities. Through national consultations we have included the perspectives of the most out-of-reach groups, notably persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and those living in rural and maritime regions who are likely to be most severely impacted by climate change.

### **The current context for OPDs**

OPDs remain central partners and leaders in guiding and delivering a targeted Australian Disability and Equity Rights Strategy. As partners and leaders in this sector we ensure that the lived experience of persons with disability guide policies and strategies and all development programs delivered by Australia (including in the areas of climate change, humanitarian action, human rights engagement, foreign policy, international and regional cooperation) promote the principle of "nothing about us without us".

Due to a range of recent climate, health and natural crises and conflicts, the level of global funding and attention given to the rights of persons with disabilities and partnerships with OPDs has reduced in recent years. At a national level we face a range of additional challenges, including varied institutional OPD capacity, low levels of political will, diminished attention to disability-inclusive disability and a steady shrinking of funding and capacity development opportunities for OPDs. The national OPDs mandated to advocacy and deliver support services work with constrained resources and without any significant long-term, direct funding. Stress and burn-out continue to impact negatively on the mental and physical health of OPD staff and the sustainability of the OPD movement in Fiji.

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<sup>1</sup> 1. These questions are: A. In the next five years what are the most important things that Australia needs to work on to support people with disabilities to access their rights?; B. What are the best ways Australia can support people with disabilities to access these rights?; C. How can Australia better implement the principle of 'nothing about us without us' in our policies and programs?; D. How can Australia better support OPDs to do their work?; and E. How can Australia better partner with OPDs?

The current modality of disability financing through multilaterals, UN agencies, and regional organisations has led to lower levels of funding in Fiji. Within the NGO sector, national OPDs remain the most underfunded and work with no long-term direct funding unless there is flexibility and mutually agreed partnerships established by the development actors and partners working with the Government of Australia.

Furthermore, OPDs working at national level face heightened barriers to full implement of projects for their members. COVID-19, climate change and disasters continue to exacerbate the discrimination and exclusion faced by persons with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities are three times more likely to be subject to gender-based violence.<sup>2</sup> The gender inequalities faced by people with disabilities remains a barrier to full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The absence of disability rights in mainstream policies including those related to gender and climate change, results in disability being a low policy priority across all sectors of government.

## Our submission

National OPDs have an ambition to work with partners with equal interests to deliver on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and related international, regional and national commitments. Given Australia's role as the lead bilateral donor in the Pacific, your International Disability Rights and Equity Strategy can be a game changer for national OPDs. It has the potential to leverage OPD-led development, revitalise political will in Fiji and the region and establish accountability measures that demonstrate equity results.

To maximise the impact of your strategy, we recommend that you:

- Establish pre-conditions for inclusion<sup>3</sup> in the Disability Equity and Rights Strategy and further promoting these pre-requisites at a bilateral level through partnership arrangements and country-level program development plans. Without pre-conditions for inclusion the strategy will fall short in fully realizing the rights of persons with disabilities.
- Commit to providing long-term direct funding co-designed with OPDs to better reflect the institutional and capacity barriers faced by national OPDs in delivering services, programs, projects using a rights-based approach. At present financing for disability inclusion is subject to government, multilateral and regional partner priorities resulting in disbursement of small pockets of funds to OPDs and its local partners to implement. In this regard the strategy can be a vehicle for increased financing for OPDs and their local partners.
- Commit to stepping up investments in OPD institutional strengthening through technical capacity development in the areas of policy development, policy writing and dialogue, MEL, project management, research and data, risk management, financing and governance, succession planning and reporting on United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Voluntary National Review, Universal Periodic Review, Commission on the Status of Women, Conference Of State Parties and tracking national budgets.

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<sup>2</sup> In the Pacific, two out of three women are subject to intimate partner violence and Fiji's current prevalence rate on intimate partner violence is 64%.

<sup>3</sup> There are six different themes which are pre-conditions for inclusion. These are: i.) accessibility; ii.) non-discrimination; iii.) assistive device; iv.) social protection; v.) support services; and vi.) community based inclusive development (CBID). These measures/actions need to be integrated into all sectors of development and need to be in place first before inclusion for persons with disabilities can be achieved.

- Commit to flexible financing and direct funding arrangements with OPDs by DFAT partners including in the areas of infrastructure, climate and disaster financing.
- Ensure DFAT's regional and national investments aim at meeting targets for disability rights and inclusion and development of specific disability rights and equity programs. This can include taking a 'twin track' approach that includes targeted investments to support OPDs and deliver results that benefit people with disabilities (for example, targeted funding at bilateral level in the areas of social protection, special and inclusive education, rehabilitation services, people with disabilities in decision making and leadership, economic empowerment, gender-based violence against persons with disabilities or climate loss and damage felt by persons with disabilities).
- Implement targeted disability inclusive budgeting programs through DFAT's support for multilaterals in the areas of public finance management and governance (as already done in the area of gender responsive budgeting).
- Fund OPD operations, infrastructure and staffing to strengthen decentralised support services delivered by OPDs.
- Promote intersectionality to ensure that diverse people with disabilities – in particular people with disabilities in rural and remote areas, people with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, women and girls with disabilities, those with complex disabilities and medical conditions, children and older persons with disabilities, LGBTQI and people with disabilities who are impacted by disaster and climate change – all benefit from more and better services and rights.
- Assess regional and national programs delivered by Australian partners (including multilaterals, contractors, INGOs and regional organisations) for UNCRPD compliance.
- Support the strategy through a robust MEL framework that links with country development plan MEL plans and includes disability rights and equity-based objectives, targets, and indicators as well as the Washington group set of questions. The strategy should align with the SDG targets and indicators, as well as including new targets and indicators that focus on assessing the strategy's performance as it relates to climate change, humanitarian actions, health, education, employment and social protection.
- Establish disability resource hubs that decentralise services, preposition assistive devices and help provide people with disabilities with skills that prepare them for workforce and industry.
- Acknowledging the important role Australia plays in infrastructure development, integrate universal design and accessible standards in all Australia infrastructure projects. Additionally, the strategy should promote OPD partnerships as part of all infrastructure projects delivered by DFAT partners.
- In line with CRPD pre-condition 3 on assistive devices, establish a centralised Pacific assistive device procurement hub to ensure an efficient flow of assistive devices and supplies to OPDs and service delivery partners particularly in times of disaster and humanitarian crisis.
- Invest in developing a specialised workforce through its education, Australia Awards and Labour Development Programs to scale up disability support services at regional and national levels in the areas of sign language interpretation, braille instruction, psychosocial rehabilitation, inclusive counselling, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathology, orientation and mobility instruction, assistive device maintenance, caring,

prosthetics, orthotics, ENT, autism, education psychology, dyslexia and intellectual disability.

- Draw from lessons in gender investments to design a similar investment approach for the disability sector. This approach can promote the design of investment targets to inform global, regional and bilateral programs.
- Work with international governments, partners and philanthropists to improve access to low-cost and high-quality assistive devices in Fiji and the region. Due to rising inflation, increasing costs and disruptions in supply chains, OPDs have observed disruptions in access to assistive devices, technology, products, mobility aid and medical consumables. Access is particularly challenging due to dispersed locations, transport costs and frequent disasters which disrupt transportation of goods and services in Fiji and the Pacific.
- Establish national disability rights and equity data hubs to strengthen OPD data and information systems, including collection, analysis and sharing of inclusive and intersectional data.
- Build capacity and accountability for disability inclusive budgeting through Australia's governance and public financial management programs with multilaterals and governments.
- Make national OPDs equal partners for Australia. At present, the partnership model with OPDs at national level is not well-defined as most partnerships are established through international and regional OPDs. To make Australia's partnerships with national OPDs more direct and equal, the Disability Rights and Equity Strategy should:
  - Support the principle of "nothing about us without us" by requiring the development of OPD engagement strategies by all investment partners, including government, contractors, civil society, and companies working at national and regional level.
  - Promote the inclusion of OPDs in all levels of program development by including feedback from national OPDs when designing regional and national programs.
  - Commit Australia to championing OPD representation and participation in national policy and budget forums, particularly in sector ministries supported through Australia's bilateral programs.
  - Create resource mobilisation opportunities and new funding platforms with government, other donors and philanthropists to scale up disability financing and funding for disability.

## Closing Statement

FDPF, its branches and affiliates are thankful to the Government of Australia for this opportunity to contribute to the development of the International Rights and Equity Strategy. For national OPDs we are hopeful that your Strategy will be a vehicle for transformative change at both national and community levels. We look forward to discussing these recommendations with you and continuing to work with Australia to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Fiji and the region.