**DFAT Disability Equity and rights strategy submission: International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) Pacific**

ICEVI Pacific has prepared the following responses to DFAT’s call for submissions to support the development of the new Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. We welcome further opportunities to discuss this strategy through contacting the ICEVI Pacific President, Dr Joanne Mosen at jo@inclusion.net.au or mobile: +61 478 940 631. Our response has been supported by information from an ICEVI Pacific scoping study on access to education for Pacific Islanders who are blind or vision impaired, conducted in 2021 by Deborah Rhodes and Mereoni Daveta with these reports available at <https://icevi.org/pacific/>. ICEVI Pacific congratulates DFAT’s ongoing global leadership and commitment to disability inclusive development alongside Australia’s renewed focus on the Pacific region. In this submission, we provide an overview of our organization and responses to the key questions, in order to further strengthen DFAT’s reputation in disability inclusive development.

**About ICEVI:** Founded in 1952, the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) is an organization of individuals and agencies concerned with the formal and non-formal educational needs of children with visual impairment throughout the world. ICEVI brings together educators, administrators, leaders with lived experience of vision impairment, parents and interested individuals to promote equal educational opportunity for children with vision impairment with particular focus on the rights of children and youth in developing countries where blindness is most prevalent and where, on average, less than 10 per cent of these children have access to any education.

ICEVI Pacific is one of seven global regions representing ICEVI. ICEVI Pacific believes that all children and young people with vision impairment and their families have the right to:

* Provision of a full range of educational services and to be included in the educational programs of their respective countries and communities;
* Receive early intervention, early childhood development, care and pre-primary education;
* Receive support by teachers and other professionals who are properly trained
* Access educational materials, teaching methods and programs that are of a high standard, conform to best practices, and meet their needs;
* Live in environments that are free of barriers, social stigmas, and stereotypes; and
* Lead productive lives, according to their aspirations and capabilities.

ICEVI Pacific operates in partnership with its members to promote educational inclusion for people who are blind or vision impaired. ICEVI Pacific’s board includes educators and leaders from across the region including the CEO of the Pacific Disability Forum and World Blind Union President. Information about ICEVI Pacific including its full list of board members is available at <https://icevi.org/pacific/>.

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

**A targeted focus on people who are blind or vision impaired:** ICEVI Pacific has identified that inclusive education commitments, policies and development programs are typically generic rather than address specific means for educational inclusion of children who are blind or vision impaired. ICEVI Pacific is interested in partnering with DFAT to ensure an in-depth focus on vision impairment as a disability group that requires more specific resources, skills, services and technical advice; to ensure full and equitable inclusion in all aspects of life. In doing so, ICEVI Pacific calls for the new DFAT Disability Equity and Rights Strategy to explicitly identify marginalised disability groups such as Pacific Islanders who are blind or vision impaired, as a priority focus area for DFAT.

**Strategic use of funding on inclusive initiatives rather than data collection:** ICEVI Pacific recommend that this new strategy operate through the assumption that all Pacific Islands include people at all ages who are blind or vision impaired, rather than devoting time and resources to count these individuals. These funds would be better utilised in the establishment and scaling up of inclusive education initiatives that focus on the training, assistive devices, alternative format production, orientation and mobility skills, mainstreaming and promotion of educational opportunities at all levels for Pacific Islanders who are blind or vision impaired. This is based on global estimates from the World Report on Vision (World Health Organization, 2019) which states that over 2.2 billion individuals live with a vision impairment, of which roughly 36 million are identified as blind and 217 million as having low vision. Most individuals with a vision impairment live in developing countries and are part of marginalized communities.

**What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?**

**Partnerships with specialist organisations:** Work in direct partnership with peak specialist bodies such as ICEVI Pacific, that comprise of regional leaders and specialists including people with disability; rather than through generalist global bodies such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). This ensures a more targeted and specialised focus, relevant to the context, with existing reputations and relationships, offering far more effective value for money responses for the region. ICEVI Pacific membership possesses strong, evidence-based understanding of what resources are needed for education systems to be able to provide the necessary responses to the current inequities experienced by people who are blind or vision impaired in developing countries.

To support this, the ICEVI Pacific Scoping Study (Rhodes & Daveta, 2021) suggest the following focus areas for DFAT leadership, in association with ICEVI Pacific:

* explicit policies and strategies, skilled teachers, particular technologies and supportive school communities, alongside ongoing provision of resources and support.
* Inclusive education is preferable to segregated education, providing certain conditions related to specialist support and resources are in place.
* Access to assistive devices, orientation and mobility support, and accessible public spaces are critical pre-conditions for children to maximise their educational potential and therefore their prospects of participating in social and economic life and maintaining well-being
* Access to all types of information (e.g. textbooks, on-line material, work-sheets, journals and other reading material) relevant to different levels of learning, is also essential for children to reach their potential, in a range of accessible formats including braille, large print, audio and electronic format. This is to occur alongside the skills in accessible format production and the specialist and assistive devices required to produce and read using these formats.
* Support for inclusive education requires parents to trust their children will be safe
* The support of schools and broader communities through inclusive and welcoming cultures and willingness to remove access barriers for students who are blind or vision impaired, is required to maximise inclusive learning environments.

This should occur through the following approaches:

1. Support Pacific Ministries of Education as they seek to build on existing strengths and services for education of children who are blind or vision impaired, consistent with PACREF.
2. Recognise that many people have already dedicated a great deal of effort in the provision of education services for students who are blind or vision impaired and have contributed to existing knowledge, skills and equipment.
3. Draw upon existing technical expertise within networks such as ICEVI and SPEVI (South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment) to support programming across the Pacific and promote knowledge-sharing opportunities for established services in the Pacific.
4. Recognise the integrated nature of education for students who are blind or vision impaired including: social, cultural and institutional support for inclusion and education for all, leadership by Ministries of Education on inclusive education; awareness of how all children benefit from accessing education and the whole community benefits from their participation in social and economic life; importance of principals, teachers and school communities in supporting inclusion (as a concept and practice), and dedicated skills-development in provision of education for children with sensory impairments, at all levels of education; sustained management of and access to specialist equipment, resources and services for students at different levels of education, particularly in relation to access to information, including books, articles and on-line information, as supported by the Marrakech Treaty.
5. Promote and share information about good practices in various contexts, such as in Fiji and Kiribati, to support other schools and countries as they progress towards better education service delivery for students who are blind or vision impaired.

Some specific opportunities that can be highlighted in DFAT’s new strategy include:

1. A Pacific regional hub for inclusive education that includes specialist support for vision impairment inclusion, access to assistive devices, alternative formatting and the coordination of opportunities for people who are blind or vision impaired to gather and build their disability specific skills such as braille, orientation and mobility and self-advocacy skills; as identified in the

Expanded Core Curriculum for students who are blind or vision impaired.

1. Promote the Marrakech Treaty throughout the Pacific Region, given only three Pacific Islands are signatories, alongside opportunities to encourage access to accessible format reading materials for people who are blind or vision impaired, as the core focus of this treaty.
2. Promote opportunities to research, train and build local capacity in inclusive education for this population of students across the Pacific, through partnership opportunities with Australian universities with expertise and Pacific relationships such as the University of Melbourne and University of Newcastle.
3. Promote partnerships with existing vision services and opportunities to develop contextualised services across the Pacific region, such as through ICEVI and SPEVI.

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

**DFAT partnership with specialist regional disability organisations:** Establish a partnership with ICEVI Pacific and SPEVI to enable access to leaders with lived experience of vision impairment and technical specialists in braille literacy, orientation and mobility instruction, adaptive and inclusive technologies and the mainstream educational inclusion of people who are blind or vision impaired. Our ICEVI Pacific Board includes a minimum of 50% of people with lived experience of vision impairment including our President, Dr Jo Mosen and board members from OPDs including the CEO of Pacific Disability Forum (PDF), President of the World Blind Union (WBU) and a representative from Kiribati Association of People who are Blind and Vision Impaired (KABVI). A formal partnership with ICEVI Pacific and PDF member OPDs focused on vision impairment would ensure local priorities are identified and addressed through harnessing existing knowledge and relationships with key specialist partners.

**Development partner financial commitment for marginalised disability groups:** Funding is required to build capacity, strengthen relationships, training delivery and the provision of assistive devices as essential reading and writing tools for people who are blind or vision impaired.

**Partnership priorities:** The Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) includes the goal of inclusive education among its strategic priorities and participates in regional networks and systems to advocate for the achievement of inclusive education. Targeted initiatives focused on vision impairment inclusion in education, alongside DFAT funding for training, resources and ongoing support. Within the Pacific, some vision impairment specific OPDs are advocating at individual or systemic levels. These include United Blind Persons of Fiji (UBP), Kiribati Association for people who are Blind or Vision Impaired (KABVI), Tonga National Vision Impairment Association (TNVIA) and Samoa Blind Persons Association (SBPA). These OPDs are an ideal partner organisation for funding and strengthening their activities through an ICEVI Pacific partnership, where targeted activities can occur in partnership with national OPDs, with the support of DFAT funding and highlighting key priority marginalised disability groups in the new strategy.

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

Importantly, education for children who are blind or vision impaired requires specific, and specialised ‘inputs’ and technology which distinguish it from more generic aspects of inclusive education. There are many specialist leaders with vision impairment, academics, teachers and vision specialists to support work in this area, through ICEVI Pacific members and networks.

The following provides an overview of the current situation across the Pacific (Daveta & Rhodes, 2021).

* In Fiji, Cook Islands, Samoa and Kiribati, there is currently a high possibility that educational services are available in mainstream schools for this group of students and that the majority of students who are blind or vision impaired attend school, especially in capital centres.
* In Papua New Guinea, a range of support services are provided by a large non-government organisation (Callan Services) through provincial-level resource centres for children to attend mainstream schools, although it is understood a large number of students in this category are not attending school
* In Samoa, some students attend mainstream schools, with various levels of specialist support provided, while others attend schools dedicated to education for children with disabilities
* In Vanuatu, a small number of students with vision impairment attend mainstream schools in Port Vila, with low levels of support, but no students who are blind and most of those with vision impairment do not attend at all
* In Tonga, there are currently no services for children with vision impairment: some have moved to Fiji to attend Fiji School for the Blind
* In Solomon Islands, a small number of students attend a school run by Red Cross, while others have attended Fiji School for the Blind, however, for most, no accessible and inclusive education is available
* In the Federated States of Micronesia, very small numbers of students who are vision impaired attend school, while others are served at home or in special schools
* In Nauru there is one school, where students who are blind or vision impaired may attend, with little specialist support
* In Marshall Islands, there are reported to be six students who are vision impaired attending school, three who do not attend school and eight who attend schools in other countries

The following Six Key Elements will support the provision of education for students who are blind or vision impaired (Daveta & Rhodes, 2021):

1. A broad social, cultural and institutional context which supports inclusion, values education and incentivises educational achievement and success for all
2. Committed leaders and officials in Ministries of Education, who are open to leading and driving change, learning, collaborating and supporting inclusive education
3. Supportive parents, families and communities who recognise all of their children will benefit from accessing education and the whole community will benefit from their participation in all aspects of social and economic life
4. Principals, teachers and school communities who support inclusion (as a concept and practice), and are skilled in how to provide education for children with sensory impairments, and have access to the specialist resources necessary for students at different levels of education
5. Sustained access to ongoing provision of orientation and mobility services and related specialist support for schools, teachers and students
6. Sustained access to specialist equipment, particularly alternative formatting services such as Braille machines, technology (particularly tools for supporting screen-based reading and writing tools) and relevant supplies and maintenance, and budgets and organisational responsibilities for their provision and maintenance.

Since each of these elements needs to operate effectively and in mutually-supportive ways for children to succeed in education, a coordinated and collaborative approach is required, usually beyond the scope of Ministries of Education on their own. In response, ICEVI Pacific recommend specific reference to targeted initiatives for the inclusion of people who are blind or vision impaired, including the promotion of partnerships with peak specialist bodies like ICEVI Pacific working with OPDs across the Pacific, supported by development partner resources, long term support and regional approaches promoting inclusion for people who are blind or vision impaired.