# **Submission to DFAT- Australia on Disability Equity & Rights Strategy**

**From K. Sriram-India**

*About My background:*

*I am a late blind person based in Chennai-India. My education includes a B. Com, MBA, ICWA & Ph. D. My work experience spans 17 years in industry, teaching and volunteering. I currently advise the following organisations:*

1. *Continual Engine (Website-* [*www.continualengine.com*](http://www.continualengine.com)*): This is an assistive technology start up using Artificial Intelligence to make digital content accessible.*
2. *Samarthanam Assistive Technology Accelerator (website-* [*https://www.samarthanam.org/assistive-technology-accelerator/*](https://www.samarthanam.org/assistive-technology-accelerator/)*): This NGO is building a 360 degree network for assistive technology to reach the underserved among the differently abled.*
3. *Jungle Scapes (website-* [*www.junglescapes.org*](http://www.junglescapes.org)*): This organisation is into assisted ecological restoration in South India.*

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**Text of Submission:**

Please find suggestions for questions raised in the call for submissions for the Disability Equity & Rights Strategy of Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT)- Australia.:-

**Question 1:What should Australia prioritise to advance disability equity and rights internationally?**

At the macro perspective of society the strategy needs to focus on the following:

* 1. Accessible Technology: Technology accessible to all 21 categories of the differently abled recognised in Indian law. Such technologies include Information & Communication technology, machines used in the shop floor and equipment used in labs.
	2. Accessible Content: Content in all languages and disciplines of education whether in digital or physical form for all categories of the differently abled. Digital content includes websites, documents, images, audio files and video files. Content in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math and Management needs to be made more accessible because of non-availability of such accessible content in such specialised subjects.
	3. Accessible Infrastructure: Infrastructure includes buildings and transportation networks. Such infrastructure needs to be resilient for the differently abled during disasters and conflicts too.
	4. Accessible Networks: Differently abled need networks to help mentor them in professional, personal and social life. Access to such networks needs to be facilitated, to ensure differently abled achieve their potential.

At the micro level of each differently abled person, the following needs to be focussed on:

* 1. Learning: Formal education for the differently abled from the level of Kinder Garden to the Level of Doctorate. Continuing education, outside school education, informal education & skilling needs to be facilitated.
	2. Livelihoods: Ensuring the differently abled get a suitable employment and progress in their employment. Avoiding unemployment and under employment of the differently abled. Facilitation of self-employment would also be included in this theme. The differently abled need to become tax payers instead of being treated as objects of charity.
	3. Living: Daily living activities for the differently abled like eating, cooking, bathing, operating gadgets and moving around need to be made easier. Further, holistic development of the differently abled through hobbies and social work need to be encouraged. Interaction between differently abled and other sections of society need to be made easier for integration of the differently abled into society.

The above issues in relation to the differently abled need to be taken to the next orbit globally. Best practices in the above globally need to be shared across borders to increase benchmarks in the above. International collaboration projects on the above are the need of the hour.

**Question 2: What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?**

The following approaches will help to progress the priorities outlined in the focus areas above:

1. Strategic & Operations Planning: Having a visioning exercise consisting of Vision, Goals and targets need to be undertaken. The targets need to be operationalised using quarterly plans. Regular monitoring of these plans would help in course correction. Adequate financial, human and technological resources would be deployed to support these plans.
2. Stakeholder Panels: A panel of all stakeholders is needed to advise and monitor the strategy and plans. This panel needs to have the differently abled, care givers & families, educationalists, researchers, social workers, employers, government officials, technologists, legal experts, ethics experts, Non-government organisations & businesses. Adequate representation of marginalised sections of society like women, senior citizens and rural representatives need to be ensured. The panel needs to be reconstituted every 3 years to bring in new ideas.
3. Events, Projects & Platforms: DFAT needs to hold events anchored by Australian consulates globally, every year. Further, annual international events anchored in Australia need to take place. Virtual platforms for networking are needed to supplement these events. Art fairs to enhance the cause of disability rights & equity need to be conducted globally. Research and scientific study projects on the theme are also the need of the hour. All these can be complemented by essay writing competitions on the topic. Regular sports series of differently abled teams across countries need to be encouraged. Global assistive technology hackathons can compliment these events.

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

DFAT needs to help the differently abled through the following ways:

1. Education & Skilling: Education will help the differently abled to “fish”, instead of giving the differently abled “fish to eat”. A comprehensive knowledge portal accessible for the differently abled to search by topics is also required. Workshops, soft skilling sessions and cross cultural training also are useful.
2. Finances: Grants & Loans for overseas differently abled from DFAT, for expenditure like education, treatment, assistive technology, equipment, accessible books, accessible learning materials and other needs of the differently abled. Providing international scholarships in Australian Universities, for differently abled students from other countries needs to be encouraged.
3. Encouraging International trade and Investments: International trade and investments in products and services of, by and for the differently abled are the need of the hour.

Organisations for the differently abled need the services of DFAT on the following lines:

1. Funding: Grants, loans, social venture capital and structured finance for projects advancing disability rights and equity need to be facilitated. Flow of international aid during disasters and conflicts to differently abled beneficiaries need to be encouraged.
2. Networking across borders: There is a need for agencies in Australia to connect with peers/partners in other countries and vice versa. Such networking is needed in the virtual and physical space.
3. Theme Parks: DFAT needs to set up theme parks in other countries for disability equity & rights. Organisations for the differently abled need to be partners of the same. Such theme parks need to show case assistive technology, accessible products, accessible content, art, sporting equipment, charters of legal rights and role models in the context of disability equity & rights.
4. Curriculum on Disability Equity & rights: Education curriculum from the kinder garden level to the doctorate level on disability equity and rights needs to be developed globally in a collaborative manner. Themes like assistive technology, accessible content, accessible design, legal rights, ethical issues and interface of disability in all education disciplines need a quality curriculum developed globally.
5. Awards: DFAT needs to recognise work in this area globally through awards for the organisations for the differently abled.

**Question 4: What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?**

Challenges for advancing disability equity & rights globally include the following:

1. Ableism in Society: Some segments of society think the differently abled are inferior to other humans. However, the truth is this- given adequate enabling mechanisms the differently abled have and will shine in their chosen fields.
2. Legacy Infrastructure, technology and content: There is a generation of these which have been designed without considering the needs of the differently abled. Retrofitting these to be accessible is a challenging task.

 Opportunities for Disability Rights and Equity arise from the following:

1. The Next Generation: The values, attitudes and beliefs of a new generation are being shaped. These need to be aligned to disability rights and equity.
2. Media & Social Media: The power of the fourth estate and electronic media can be used to highlight disability rights and equity.
3. Globalisation: International trade, foreign investments, international aid and sharing of best practices can be facilitated in the context of disability equity and rights through the process of globalisation.

 **Conclusion:**

In summary, disability equity & rights needs to become one of the basis of diplomacy, international trade, international investments and international aid between Australia and other countries.