

1. A Brief introduction and Overview in developing a Disability Equity and Rights strategy:

A disability equity and rights strategy encompasses a set of principles, initiatives, and affirmative actions aimed at advocating, promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities (PWDs), who have been voiceless, marginalized and poorly represented at decision making tables; the world over.

Currently in its stages of consultation and conversations, this strategy should be designed or formulated to ensure that PWDs have equal opportunities, equal access, and equal rights in all aspects of life, including employment, education, healthcare, public services and social participation.

Based on the understanding that PWDs have unique needs and face barriers that may prevent us from participating fully in professional and public life in the communities or societies we live in.

This strategy should also seek to address existing gaps, barriers faced, and strongly promote inclusion, dignity, and respect for PWDs, with achievable recommendations.

2. Some reflections on the disability sector in PNG over the past years:

From my general observation and analysis as a person with a physical disability and my engagement with the disability over the past fifteen (15) years in the country, I've seen that this sector in PNG has had its fair share of achievements and challenges in its endeavors to be the voice of the vulnerable, marginalized and the minority of citizens with disabilities it represents.

In making reference to the PNG National Policy on Disability 2015-2025 (NPD 2015-2025), it clearly highlights its goal in addressing these objectives;

- Promoting and protecting the rights of Persons with Disabilities,
- Improving delivery of disability services, using inclusive development and Community Based Rehabilitation approaches.
- Improve institutional framework, performance management and financing arrangements focused around implementing the policy action plan.

The above objectives were to be delivered or implemented using these three (3) strategies,

- a) Advocacy, rights and responsibilities
- b) Improve access to quality services and support programs for Persons with Disabilities.
- c) Develop an effective institutional, legal and financial framework for the Disability sector.

Measuring of indicators and expected outcomes of the above mentioned policy statement, is a black area that needs to be seriously addressed in terms of achieving the goals and objectives. Government agencies responsible in monitoring and evaluating the Disability Policy need to make a clear cut statement to the government of the day in regard to what has worked well, what has not and what needs to be done.

In the quest to achieve these goals, objectives and strategies outlined in the NPD 2015- 2025, financial and technical support from both national and international governments, together with donor agencies and non-government organizations have been targeted towards the disability sector in terms of technical support and advice to OPDs, inclusive education and study opportunities, equal rights advocacy programs, life skills and livelihood projects, community based rehabilitation programs, capacity building training, and assistive device procurement to name a few.

I can only share the same sentiments with other persons with disabilities, to say that there is a lot more yet to be done in driving the agenda for disability inclusion locally, through further consultation and collaboration with the National, Provincial and Local Level Governments in PNG, Department of Community Development, elected local leaders, developmental partners and stakeholder, NGOs in the country and governments abroad to chart a way forward for disability equity and rights.

3. Current situation and challenges encountered:

The following are some key component areas of the situation and challenges faced in the disability sector; and areas that needs to be readdressed in order for the disability sector in PNG to move forward in the right direction thus, effectively addressing issues affecting persons with disabilities and their respective organizations in order to be able to equally participate and exercise their rights as any other citizen in the country.

- The National Disability Policy framework needs to be reviewed to better safeguard rights of PWDs, including anti-discriminating laws, accessibility standards and regulations that promote inclusion and equal treatment; and also the current status of the "Disability Inclusion Bill" brought forward from the last Parliament has to be made known to the disability community in the country.

- Governance and leadership of the disability sector from the National level, down to the Provincial and local level in the communities is an area that has not worked well in advancing the cause of the disability movement in the country. Lack of visionary leadership, self-serving leadership mentality and attitudes, power struggles among leaders in this space have created more harm than good, resulting in organizations and persons with disabilities to be divided and scattered across the communities and been more marginalized and left behind. Lack of accessibility to physical, digital, and communication in enabling PWDs to fully participate in all areas of life, including buildings, transportation, websites, information resources needed must also be available in accessible formats such as braille, audio, easy-to-read materials, communication methods like sign language interpretation and other communication devices.
- Awareness and Education initiatives have been minimal in promoting positive attitudes educating the public, employers, educators, and service providers about the needs and rights of PWDs.
- Employment support
- Healthcare and support services is major need area for PWDs, including rehabilitation programs and support services in addressing their specific needs and ensure access to the same quality of care as others.
- Social and recreational inclusion initiatives have not been fully tapped into in promoting inclusive recreational activities, cultural events and social opportunities to engage in community life.
- Empowerment and advocacy programs and leadership development in the disability space must be encouraged to enable PWDs to advocate for their own rights and engage or participate in decision-making processes.
- Collaboration and consultation with organizations, advocates, and individuals with disabilities to ensure strategies and policies are informed by the lived experiences and diverse needs of the disability community.
- Data collection and monitoring systems on disability prevalence, access to services, employment rates and other relevant indicators to track progress and inform evidence-based policy development.

4. A call to action, going forward:

a. What should Australia prioritize to advance disability equity and rights internationally?

The Areas that the Australian Government can prioritize in developing a disability equity and rights strategy is;

- Firstly, to do more follow up consultations with established Organization for People with Disabilities (OPDs) in recipient countries to review and amend existing legal and policy frameworks, to better promote equality and rights of PWDs.
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- More training opportunities for inclusive and special education teachers, sign language interpreters, and scholarship programs targeting PWDs based on their needs.
- Focus on accessible healthcare and support services for PWDs in rural areas and other remote settings.
- Direct Grant/Funding of OPDs, with emphasis appropriate compliance methods and practices.
- Lastly, to work towards a social support system that can be able to ease financial burdens and general welfare of PWDs in program countries.

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

The following points are some key effective approach methods that can be undertaken to progress the priority areas.

- Direct consultation and dialogue with OPDs for better implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programs and projects.
- Work close consultation with partner governments and authorities in the future for roll out of the disability equity and rights strategy in program area countries.
- Effective, efficient and a user friendly compliance mechanisms for reporting by recipient OPDs for funded programs and projects.

c. How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organizations of persons with disabilities?

- Good governance and quality leadership in the disability sector is a need area and of great concern for all PWDs and their respective OPDs. Upskilling through capacity building programs will enhance leaders to be more accountable and transparent in executing their duties, based on best practice methods

- Work towards establishing practical leadership structures catering for all forms of disabilities in the areas of Advocacy, Capacity building, Livelihood projects for socioeconomic empowerment, Resilience, Sports, other social and cultural activities.
- Setting up of networking and partnership systems with other OPDs locally and globally in resource sharing, to achieve disability equity and rights goals.
- Equipping OPDs with the relevant skills and tools for data collection and survey for accurate disability data base.
- Engagement of specialized technical advisors and volunteers in Australian Government funded projects for recipient OPDs.

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

Here are some major challenges that can hinder the advancement of disability equity and rights are;

- Political interference and conflicting ideas and concepts of the disability equity and rights strategy in program countries.
- Non-compliance, un-corporative attitude, sheer ignorance by governments, elected leaders, development partners, stakeholders and OPD management teams in implementing the strategy to achieve its goals and objectives.
- Mismanagement of funds and resources earmarked for programs by entrusted persons and groups.
- Minimal or non-representation of OPDs/PWDs in decision making processes can create setbacks for advancement.
- Cultural ideologies and restrictions, ethnic barriers and differences are some of the biggest challenges that deny the advancement of disability equity and rights.

Opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights will result in;

- More voices and views of PWDs can be clearly outlined in their respective societies.
- Maximum and meaningful engagement and participation by OPDs in driving the equity and rights agenda.
- More equal opportunities and realization of rights for PWDs in professional, private and public life.
- Appropriate networking and partnership with the Australian Government for the development and growth of the disability sector/movement in recipient countries.

5. Concluding remarks:

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that a “Disability Equity and Rights Strategy” should be comprehensive, systemic and intersectional; recognizing that the people with disabilities may also face discrimination based on other factors such as race, gender, sexuality, and their socioeconomic status.

Prioritizing meaningful engagement with the disability community or sector and ensure the voices and perspective of PWDs are central to the development and implementation of the strategy.

Once again, the ultimate goal of this strategy is to create a society where all individuals, regardless of ability can fully participate, contribute and thrive.

“Equal voices , Equal Rights: Building on Inclusive and Barrier-Free Society for All”, stresses the importance of inclusivity , Empowerment and a collective effort in making rights real for people with disabilities.

The slogan or theme often used by OPDs globally, stating “Nothing About Us, Without Us and Leaving No one Behind, by Removing Barriers to make Rights Real” is all about breaking down all barriers and creating an inclusive society where everyone has an equal opportunity to thrive, and also in highlighting the importance of amplifying the voice of persons with disabilities and recognizing the shared responsibility of creating a more conducive, inclusive and an equitable world.

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References:

1. PNG National Policy on Disability 2015-2025. Pp: 12-13