# Sightsavers written submission for the Australian Government’s new international disability equity and rights strategy.

13.12.2023

## Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to feed into the development of the Australian Government’s new international disability equity and rights strategy (the Strategy). It is positive to see the renewed and strengthened commitment to disability inclusion as a cross-cutting priority for Australia's international engagement on human rights, development, and humanitarian action. We also welcome that Australia will take a 'twin track' approach to disability inclusion.

We have included some points in the document below in answer to the questions shared. We believe these are important to consider in the development of Strategy and ensure that its ambition is realised in practice. Australia has always played a leading role through its disability inclusion strategies, and we hope to see this level of ambition continued.

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

### **Gender and intersectionality**

It is positive that the strategy will ‘consider intersectionality’ and that DFAT is committed to putting gender and disability at the centre of its development policies[[1]](#footnote-2).

Our experience of working with actors on the development and implementation of strategies shows that unless persons with disabilities with different intersecting identities are considered in the ‘how’ then they are often not included.

We recommend that the Strategy includes a commitment to embed results tracking disaggregated by gender and disability into all programmes and initiatives and ensure a focus on inclusion in reporting. Australia should also set specific targets for the percentage of programmes marked as gender and disability inclusive against the OECD DAC marker.

The Strategy could also include a specific section on women and girls with disabilities, with a particular focus on gender-based violence and the rollback of gender rights. It should also set out how DFAT will continue to strengthen its partnerships with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) that have a specific focus on gender. The Strategy could draw upon resources that have been developed recently in this area, such as the Inclusive Futures learning report, which provides guidance on how to ensure women and girls with disabilities are meaningfully involved in development programmes[[2]](#footnote-3).

### **Advocacy for global health**

Advocacy for global health is another area which should be prioritised in the Strategy. This is an area where the rights of persons with disabilities are often neglected and was identified as a ‘missed opportunity’ in the evaluation of the ‘Development for All’ Strategy[[3]](#footnote-4).

We recommend that the Strategy sets out how DFAT will strengthen advocacy to improve disability inclusion in global health. For example, it should detail how DFAT will support action globally to implement WHA74.8 and to ensure implementation of the recommendations of the WHO global report on health equity for persons with disabilities[[4]](#footnote-5).

It is also important that the Strategy recognises the health inequities that women with disabilities experience, and the [WHO report on health equity for persons with disabilities](https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240063600) could be a useful resource for this[[5]](#footnote-6).

### **Inclusive education**

The Strategy should clarify how Australia will put in practice it’s Transforming Education Summit commitment to increase “education participation and outcomes for vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented learners”. The Strategy should therefore clarify the scale of investment on inclusive education and set out how Australia will ensure disability inclusion is mainstreamed throughout its education programmes. It should also detail how DFAT intends to monitor progress on education for learners with disabilities.

The Strategy could also prioritise scaling up advocacy for inclusive education, setting out ways Australia will use its voice on the global stage to advance inclusive education. This should include influencing global funds to champion inclusive education strategies and frameworks, as well as advocacy to ensure children with disabilities in humanitarian and protracted crises are given equal opportunity to learn in safe and inclusive environments.

Australia has been a strong supporter of Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and is actively engaged on its board and in policy processes. However, this engagement has been mainly directed to governance and financing issues associated with establishment of the GPE, with limited advocacy for disability inclusion[[6]](#footnote-7). The new GPE Operational Framework is a good opportunity to ensure a greater focus on the most marginalised learners and to clarify how this will be coordinated with GPE’s priorities around gender hardwiring, addressing intersecting forms of exclusion in education. Therefore, the new Strategy should set out how DFAT will use its influence in global development discussions to better advocate for disability inclusive education, particularly in the GPE Board and Committees.

### **Climate change**

It is positive that Australia commissioned researchwith the Pacific Disability Forum to generate evidence of the vulnerabilities and opportunities for building climate resilience of persons with disabilities in the Pacific[[7]](#footnote-8). This should be built upon, particularly to explore the potential of education to change attitudes, build resilience and equip learners with disabilities with the knowledge and skills to mitigate and adapt to changes in the environment. The findings of this research should also be used to prioritise climate change as a priority area in the Strategy, especially as climate change was absent previously.

### **Inclusive data**

The Strategy should also build on Australia’s leadership on disability-inclusive development, particularly in areas where Australia has a comparative advantage. For example, it should set out how DFAT will continue to support global capacity on disability data. One suggestion would be for Australia to become champions of the Inclusive Data Charter and develop an associated action plan, to advance inclusive and disaggregated data[[8]](#footnote-9)**.** DFAT should continue to prioritise strengthening disaggregation of SDG targets by disability at country level and when reporting to the High-Level Political Forum.

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

### **Connecting and implementing commitments on disability inclusion**

The Strategy should make connections with the Australian Government’s existing commitments on disability and detail how these will be implemented, such as those in the new International Development Policy[[9]](#footnote-10).

The Strategy should also ensure accountability for the Australian Government’s Global Disability Summit commitments[[10]](#footnote-11). These commitments are very strong, and we were pleased to see them highlighted as examples of best practice[[11]](#footnote-12). However, some of them lack specificity and timeframes so the Strategy presents an opportunity to set out how the ambition of these commitments will be implemented in practice.

### **Strong accountability frameworks**

The Strategy would be significantly strengthened if an action plan was developed, or at least a commitment to add this later. This is a key lesson from other strategies as without this there is a risk that the ambition of the strategy is not realised. The action plan could include clear timelines, indicators, funding allocations and accountability mechanisms to enable quality impact that can be fully demonstrated, developed, and monitored in full and meaningful consultation with OPDs.

This could be in the form of an indicator matrix to track progress on disability inclusion across all areas of the Strategy, like that adopted by the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS)[[12]](#footnote-13). A mid-term evaluation could also be helpful, given the prominent role the two evaluations of the ‘Development for All’ Strategy played[[13]](#footnote-14),[[14]](#footnote-15).

We welcome that DFAT has established an External Reference Group of disability leaders to guide the Strategy development process. Beyond this, the group should also hold DFAT accountable on implementing the Strategy, which is another reason why an action plan would be an important resource.

### **Mainstreaming disability**

A mid-term review of the ‘Development for All’ Strategy identified challenges around the strategy being viewed as the responsibility of a core team only and recommended that more should be done to embed the strategy across the agency[[15]](#footnote-16). This is an issue that many organisations and governments experience. The way the policy is written can shift the understanding towards other areas of the organisation feeling a responsibility for disability inclusion and implementing the strategy. The framing of disability inclusion, for example, should make it clear that disability inclusion is everyone’s responsibility within the Australian Government and a core part of achieving broader objectives.

Challenges were also noted at the country level where staff require additional support as they lack confidence and a working knowledge of inclusion[[16]](#footnote-17). As well as trainings and capacity building, the Strategy could also commit to including disability across all programme documents. For example, the ambition of the strategy should be transferred into programme proposals when new programmes are developed, and that disability is specifically referenced**.**

The Strategy should build on Australia’s experience of providing budget for mainstreaming, as this is a critical way of ensuring effective mainstreaming. The Strategy could also build on this by setting out more broadly how disability will be budgeted for across DFAT’s programming, for example, through budgets for reasonable accommodation.

### **Measuring outcomes for persons with disabilities**

The evaluation of the ‘Development for All’ Strategy rightly recommends that DFAT needs to establish tools and a methodology to assess outcomes for persons with disabilities. This will allow DFAT to better measure whether disability inclusive programming is making a real difference in the lives of persons with disabilities. The Strategy should clearly set out how this will be achieved, for example requiring programs to include measures of outcomes for persons with disabilities in program monitoring and evaluation. The use of control groups is another example, which has been successfully used in the Inclusive Futures Global Labour Programme in Kenya[[17]](#footnote-18). This allowed programme results to be compared with the conditions for people with disabilities in locations where the programme was not implemented. This approach should, of course, always be used with caution and only where appropriate.

The Aid Quality Checks were a positive element of the previous strategy. The Strategy should explain how the Aid Quality Checks (AQC) have been improved to better measure the implementation of disability-inclusive programs.

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

We are pleased to see the GDS 2022 commitment to increase multi-year core and flexible funding to OPDs. In particular, we welcome the attention that will be given to strategies to advance gender equality and persons facing intersectional discrimination.

We also welcome the commitment to provide OPDs with support to strengthen their skills and knowledge to confidently contribute to discussions with governments and other duty bearers. As capacity constraints still exists, capacity support should continue to be a priority in the Strategy. The Strategy could also go further by actively seek to include and support underrepresented groups at the local level, particular OPDs led by women.

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

### **Institutional change**

One of the biggest challenges for donors working on disability inclusion is that the process of mainstreaming disability inclusion requires a significant process of internal institutional change which is often underestimated. Because although there may not be significant resistance to working on disability inclusion, there is a need to shift to a point where including people with disabilities within programming and policy becomes “business as usual.” Australia has included important measures to support this in previous strategies, such as the budgets for mainstreaming. However, we recommend that in developing this strategy DFAT reflects further on what other mechanisms might be needed to drive this change internally and how they can be integrated into the strategy more systematically.

### Loss of momentum

There has been an increase in interest in disability as a development issue in recent years. However, there is a risk that as disability reaches a point of more policies being in place and not being as ‘neglected’ donors and governments will lose momentum and political interest will decline. Building long-term commitments and a vision into the strategy which goes beyond getting to the minimum level of disability inclusion is one way of ensuring that DFAT can support the ongoing prioritisation of disability globally. Given earlier engagement Australia is well placed to do this.

### **International Forums and processes**

Australia is a strong and consistent advocate for disability inclusion in international forums and encourages engagement of OPDs in UN and other multilateral systems. The Strategy should set out clearly that this will continue to be a priority.

Australia should use its voice and influence to ensure that the Secretary General’s Common Agendameaningfullyincludes persons with disabilities. As part of this, the upcoming Summit for the Future offers a vital opportunity to reform multilateralism and UN institutions to address today’s political and economic realities. Australia should ensure that the Pact for the Future demonstrates how to implement the disability inclusive commitments made in the newly adopted Political Declaration[[18]](#footnote-19), [[19]](#footnote-20). This is vital to achieve the Leave No One Behind promise of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Beyond GPE, as mentioned above, Australia has an opportunity to influence on the funds and boards it sits on and this should be a key feature of the Strategy. For example, Australia could commit to advancing disability inclusion in the World Bank’s next IDA round and to providing ongoing support, and holding the UN to account, for the implementation of UNDIS.

For more information please contact Hannah Dawson, Policy Officer - Inclusion and Gender [hdawson@sightsavers.org](mailto:hdawson@sightsavers.org)

1. Australia Government (May, 2023) [Disability Development Corporation Factsheet](https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/development-cooperation-fact-sheets-for-country-regional-and-sector-thematic-programs/disability) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Inclusive Futures (2023) [Be Inclusive: Including women and girls with disabilities in development and humanitarian projects](https://inclusivefutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Women_and_Girls_Report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Australian Government (2017) [Unfinished Business: Evaluation of Australian Advocacy for Disability-Inclusive Development](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/evaluation-australian-advocacy-disability-inclusive-development.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. WHO (2022) [Global Health Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. WHO (2022) [Global Health Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Australian Government (2017) [Unfinished Business: Evaluation of Australian Advocacy for Disability-Inclusive Development](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/evaluation-australian-advocacy-disability-inclusive-development.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Australia Government (May 2023) [Disability Development Cooperation Factsheet](https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/development-cooperation-fact-sheets-for-country-regional-and-sector-thematic-programs/disability#:~:text=Australia%20commissioned%20research%20with%20the,Climate%20Change%20Conference%20in%20Egypt.) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. [Inclusive Data Charter](https://www.data4sdgs.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/IDC_onepager_Final.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Australia Government (2023) [Australia’s International Development Policy](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/international-development-policy.pdf), p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. [Australia Government Global Disability Summit Commitments 2022](file:///C://Users/hdawson/Downloads/2022-GDS-Australian-committments-%20(1).pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Global Disability Summit (2022) [Report](https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/gds_report_2022_norad.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. [United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy](https://www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/assets/documentation/UN_Disability_Inclusion_Strategy_english.pdf) (2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. 1. Australian Government (2018) [Development for All: Evaluation of progress made in strengthening disability inclusion in Australian aid.](https://app-as.readspeaker.com/cgi-bin/rsent?customerid=6248&amp;lang=en_au;&amp;readclass=main-content)

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Australian Government (2017) [Unfinished Business: Evaluation of Australian Advocacy for Disability-Inclusive Development](https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/evaluation-australian-advocacy-disability-inclusive-development.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. AusAID (2012) Development for All Strategy Mid-Term Review Report. Pages 27, 64, 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. AusAID (2012) Development for All Strategy Mid-Term Review Report. Pages 27, 64, 69 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Sightsavers (2022) [Measuring the impact of our work in Kenya](https://inclusivefutures.org/measuring-impact-work-with-farmers-in-kenya/) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. [Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly](https://hlpf.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/A%20HLPF%202023%20L1.pdf?_gl=1*1bsc309*_ga*MTM5Njk2MzU0OS4xNjcxNzAzOTky*_ga_TK9BQL5X7Z*MTY5NzIwMjY0MC4zNC4xLjE2OTcyMDI2NTUuMC4wLjA.) (2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Disability inclusive commitments in the newly adopted Political Declaration include ‘ensuring that persons with disabilities actively participate in and equally benefit from sustainable development efforts…’ (Paragraph 14) ‘identify those who are being left behind and reach those who are the furthest behind first. People who are vulnerable must be empowered. Those whose needs are reflected in the 2030 Agenda include all children, youth, persons with disabilities…’ (Paragraph 37) ‘address barriers to girls’ education, gender and disability gaps and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in and through education and safe, healthy and stimulating learning environments that enable all learners to achieve their full potential and physical, mental and emotional well-being.’ (Paragraph 38, d)) ‘take action to strengthen international, national and local data systems efforts to collect high quality, timely, relevant, disaggregated and reliable data on SDG progress and to intensify efforts to strengthen data and statistical capacities in developing countries… [and] continue to strengthen our efforts to collect, analyse and disseminate relevant, reliable and disaggregated data for better monitoring and policymaking to accelerate the achievement of the 2030 Agenda’ (Paragraph 38, r)). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)