**UNICEF inputs to DFAT’s International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy  
December 2023**

UNICEF welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as part of DFAT’s consultation process on the International Disability Equity and Rights strategy.

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

UNICEF recommends Australia **prioritize** the specific rights and experiences of **children with disabilities** and their families, both in development and humanitarian contexts, and commit to advocating with policy makers for legislative frameworks, policies, services and interventions to address those needs. UNICEF urges Australia to promote the intersectionality of children’s rights so that children with disability are visible when addressing girls, gender diverse children, young people with disability, etc.

Kindly find below the main focus areas suggested by UNICEF:

**Early identification, intervention and enabling systems for children with disabilities**

* Prioritise investments for the youngest children with disabilities and their families as a means to advancing lifelong inclusion to accelerate inclusive programming across areas, from early childhood care and education to employment. In support of this, we recommend Australia invest in:
  + **early identification and intervention systems.** Systems for identifying children with disabilities and providing them with the required support are under-developed resulting in children with disabilities being late in getting essential support, including health and education. Targeted programs to strengthen early identification and support for children with disabilities are an important aspect of a lifespan approach to disability rights and equity, allowing children with disabilities to access their entitlements. This is a prerequisite for the mainstreaming of disability rights.
  + **other enabling systems through the lifespan** (e.g. assistive technology, social protection mechanisms, policy, data, development of inclusive curricula & learning materials, workforce capacity development, etc.). Children with disabilities have specific requirements and these essential supports need to be in place to realise their rights. As for adults, enabling systems should take a CRPD-aligned approach based on children’s experience of barriers and requirements for support, rather than impairments/medical conditions.
* Ensure systematic mainstreaming of disability rights and equity across all DFAT supported programmes (including climate, gender and humanitarian) and initiatives by developing and implementing a results and monitoring framework for disability inclusion to evaluate and prioritize investments, mandate data collection and reporting, and inclusive budgeting.
* Invest in the development of models of gender-responsive integrated care and support system in low- and middle-income countries, including small development islands states, which articulate cash transfer, coverage of health care costs, access to assistive technology and human assistance with case management and information system addressing cost of disability and facilitating access to education and community participation. Specific attention should be given to PICS which face tremendous challenge in reaching economy of scale. Care services and support to families are also a critical issue with the rise of the care (economy) agenda (ageing population) in Asia-Pacific, the expansion of social protection, and the issue of assistive technology.
* Expand upon the need to include a focus on gender-based violence and disability equity to ensure **consideration of violence against children** (VAC), given children with disabilities and girls and women with disabilities experience different forms of violence and abuse (such as relating to neglect or denial of disability support, or violence from both informal/family and professional/institutional carers). Children with disabilities face intersectional discrimination where the unique combination of characteristics and identities for children/girls/women with disabilities create different dynamics of power and violence that may not be addressed by many GBV responses.

**Data on children with disabilities**

* Continue **strengthening national** **survey and administrative data collection on children with disabilities**, including by building capacity on and scaling up use of the WG/UNICEF tools, and WB/UNICEF Child Functioning Module within administrative data systems.
* Invest in fostering disability data analysis and data use. DFAT has been a great partner in strengthening the availability of official statistics on children with disabilities, and should now push for the **analysis and use of the available data**, as we continue to close data gaps.This could include investing in projects that supports Organizations for People with Disabilities (OPDs) or governments to make use of data, including data on children with disabilities, and considering what could be done to better integrate an evidence-based policy lens into DFAT engagement with partner governments.

**Participation of children with disabilities**

* Children with disabilities are an **under-represented group in terms of participation at all levels.** As it may not be realistic for OPDs to be the mechanism for child participation, UNICEF encourages DFAT to consider existing UNICEF mechanisms and other avenues to engage children and youth with disabilities in issues that affect their lives.
* The UN CRPD General Comment on Participation includes specific guidance on: organizations of children and young people with disabilities and their participation through the use of child friendly engagement methodologies; children self-representing and supportive decision making for those who require support; and regarding organizations of parents with children who have cognitive or severe communication related disabilities who may not be able to represent themselves.

**Scale up provisioning of assistive technology and ensure emerging technologies, including AI, are harnessed to benefit persons with disabilities**

* Emerging technologies, including AI powered technologies and tools have considerable potential to addressing many barriers experienced by children and adults with disabilities, reduce cost and scale up disability inclusion.

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

To **progress on these priorities**, UNICEF recommends that Australia:

* Adopt a **cross-sectoral approach to disability inclusion**, as addressing challenges faced by children and adults with disabilities require multiple sectors to come together take simultaneous action.
* Continue to set **joint agendas and strategies** on disability-inclusive development and endorse their implementation (in GLAD and other forums)
* Provide support for (new) **regional coordinating mechanisms** at regional level, and regional frameworks in East Asia - in line with support provided in the Pacific region, and the Pacific framework on the rights of persons with disabilities.
* Systematically **integrate a disability equity and rights lens** in all other strategic plans (climate, gender, humanitarian, LGBTQI)
* Set **specific and ambitious performance criteria** in the new strategy.
* Prioritize investments for the youngest children with disabilities and their families as a means to advancing lifelong inclusion – starting with early identification and intervention systems and other enabling systems (e.g. AT, social protection mechanisms, policy, data, development of inclusive curricula & learning materials, workforce capacity development, etc.) to accelerate inclusive programming across areas, from early childhood care and education to employment.

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

In addition to the point made above about strengthening the participation of children with disabilities in decision making, it is critical for DFAT to continue its steadfast support to meaningful participation of OPDs by:

* Making partnering with organizations of persons with disabilities a key consideration across partnerships.
* Invest in organizational development of OPDs, to enable them to better advocate and partner with a range of stakeholders, to advance disability inclusion.
* Continuing core funding to the Pacific disability forum and its members as well as other regional OPDs and with greater attention to most marginalized groups as well as organizations of parents of children with disabilities, especially those with high support needs.
* Continue the systematic consultation of OPDs in DFAT programming and promoting systematic inclusion of OPDs across all policy dialogues opportunities with authorities fostered by DFAT.

1. **Greatest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights**

Social norms, stigma and prejudice against persons with disabilities, combined with the still prevalent medical and charity model continue to be one of the biggest barriers for advancing disability equity and rights.

While there has never been as many people aware and skilled for disability inclusion and inclusive policies and programs, there has been a loss of momentum and investment after 2019 due to COVID, the climate urgency, the care economy agenda, aging, and conflicts, as well as the lack of clear champions such as DFAT or FCDO have been at some point. There is now opportunity to systematically build disability rights and equity in those megatrend related streams of work, processes and programs, which should themselves incorporate the costs of disability inclusion.

Investing with a clear disability inclusion perspective in community care and support system combining cash transfers, access to assistive technology, human assistance, case management and information system would relate to the care agenda, ageing and disaster preparedness and response to shocks (climate, conflict, health emergencies).

The lack of systematic and comprehensive attention to disability inclusion is a considerable barrier and it results in fragmented and ‘project-ized’ approaches to inclusion. For disability inclusion to be sustainable and impactful, attention is needed to strengthen existing systems holistically, so that they are inclusive across all aspects of programmes and services.