

UNDP Submission to the Australian Government's New International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) welcomes the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) open consultative process to inform the Australian Government's New International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy. This demonstrates Australia's commitment to fostering an inclusive, equitable world where the rights of persons with disabilities are recognized and upheld.

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

- The lack of quality data on the experiences and challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the realisation of their rights is a barrier in the design of targeted policies that are responsive and impactful. The new Strategy should consider **prioritising efforts aimed at developing a comprehensive evidence base around disability inclusion**. Reliable data is essential for efforts to both target and mainstream disability inclusion across development domains, to effectively allocate resources and to monitor progress over time. Better quality data will also allow for improved understanding of the intersectionalities of disability with other identity factors so that policies can respond to the diverse needs of persons with disabilities.
- Persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group and the Strategy should **recognize and proactively address the diversity and the multifaceted experiences of persons with disabilities**. To effectively respond to this diversity, the Strategy should focus on supporting efforts that are not one-size-fits-all but address the specific barriers, discrimination and marginalization experienced by different groups within the disability community. For example, women and girls with disabilities often face compounded discrimination and barriers, such as increased risk of violence and abuse and limited access to education and health care, including sexual and reproductive health¹. Similarly, understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by indigenous persons with disabilities, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and those living in remote areas can ensure a more inclusive and equitable approach to disability inclusion.
- The new Strategy should prioritise efforts that **integrate disability inclusion across development domains, and as a precondition to achieving sustainable development**. This includes, for example, initiatives that aim to embed disability inclusion into climate action. Mitigation and adaptation responses to climate change, environmental degradation, and biodiversity loss are at the forefront of development interventions. It is critical that these measures are as impactful as possible, which will be impossible without the inclusion of perspectives of specific groups, including persons with

¹UN Women. Women and girls with disabilities. At <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/women-and-girls-with-disabilities>; see also UNICEF, UN Women, WHO, ILO, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA and UNPRPD (2023) Working together to ensure the rights of girls with disabilities to live free from violence. At <https://www.unicef.org/reports/working-together-ensure-right-girls-disabilities-live-free-violence#:~:text=The%20statement%20analyzes%20the%20phenomenon,from%20violence%20in%20all%20sphere>.

disabilities. So far these perspectives have not been adequately reflected in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs). There is a need to ensure that no one is left behind, including persons with disabilities, in countries' transitions to low-carbon economies. There is a significant risk that persons with disabilities will be overlooked amidst the urgency to address environmental degradation and disasters and the anticipated increase in displacement related to these issues.

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

- **Adopting a human rights-based approach to disability inclusion is essential to the success of any effort to advance this agenda.** Human rights – and as such, the rights of persons with disabilities – should be placed at the heart of the Strategy. Guided by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a rights-based approach acknowledges the social and systemic barriers faced by persons with disabilities, treats persons with disabilities as equal rights holders, and ensures their autonomy and dignity. A human rights-based approach to disability inclusion also contributes to changing societal attitudes and behaviors, challenging stereotypes and prejudices against persons with disabilities.
- This approach also recognises the importance of the **CRPD and the SDGs as mutually reinforcing frameworks.** The CRPD provides a comprehensive human rights framework focused specifically on the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, outlining legal and policy commitments to address discrimination, promote accessibility, and guarantee equal participation in all areas of life. The SDGs, and the overarching principle of "leaving no one behind," embed these commitments within a broader development agenda, emphasizing the need to integrate disability inclusion into all aspects and domains of sustainable development.
- **Adopting a so-called “twin-track approach” will also be key to ensuring that disability inclusion is both mainstreamed in and targeted by DFAT’s development efforts.** This includes integrating disability considerations into all development efforts and ensuring that all programmes, projects and policies are designed and implemented in a way that is accessible to and inclusive of persons with disabilities. It also entails investing in targeted responses, and specialized programs or policies that acknowledge and address the unique opportunities of, and challenges and barriers faced by, persons with disabilities.
- **To enhance global and national efforts to collect, analyse and share data on disability, it is key to build capacity in this critical area.** Not only in the collection of data that is specifically relevant to the monitoring and implementation of the CRPD but also for reporting on the indicators framework of different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), prioritising data collection that captures the intersectional aspects of disability. In relation to the SDGs, this would entail raising awareness about how disability intersects with various SDG targets and ensuring that progress on the SDGs is measured with, by and for persons with disabilities and through inclusive, accessible data collection. UNDP, within and with the United Nations System, is already working with Governments and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), including through the United Nations Partnership

on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD)², to strengthen data collection processes and to translate data into inclusive policies.

- **Understanding the intersectionality of disability is essential to inform policy and program development.** This involves both quantifying the prevalence of disabilities in different demographic groups and understanding the qualitative aspects of their experiences. Meaningful engagement and consultation with diverse groups within the disability community will be crucial to this scope. This approach will inform the development of tailored policies and programs that cater to the unique needs of specific groups within the disability community³.

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

- DFAT and the Strategy should **acknowledge the distinction between Organizations “of” Persons with Disabilities and organizations “for” persons with disabilities** that primarily offer services or advocate on their behalf. Partnerships with Organizations “of” Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) should be prioritized.
- **DFAT’s efforts to mainstream and target disability inclusion should include, by design, mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation of OPDs.** This includes not only the creation of spaces and fora for persons with disabilities – and OPDs - to meaningfully participate in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects and initiatives (e.g. consultations⁴, co-design sessions, project steering committees, advisory and executive boards) but also efforts to facilitate participation and access of persons with disabilities to these spaces, including accessible venues and formats, reasonable accommodation measures and inclusive communications.
- **DFAT can also play a pivotal role in supporting OPDs through targeted capacity-building and funding initiatives.** In addition to providing direct funding support to help them scale up their operations, develop new programs, and extend their reach to more beneficiaries, DFAT and its partners should focus on training and resources on sustainability and fundraising to help OPDs reduce dependence on external development funding in the long term.
- **DFAT’s capacity-building efforts targeting OPDs should also focus on essential skills such as – among others - leadership and management, advocacy and strategic communication.** Building capacities of OPDs to meaningfully participate and drive data collection and analysis will be key, not only for DFAT to strengthen the evidence base around disability inclusion, but also for OPDs to monitor and evaluate their programs, advocate for policy changes, and secure further funding.

² See <https://www.unprpd.org/>. UNDP hosts the Technical Secretariat of the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD).

³ See also UNPRPD – UN Women (2021) Intersectionality resource guide and toolkit. At <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/01/intersectionality-resource-guide-and-toolkit>

⁴ See also United Nations (2021) Guidelines on Consulting Persons with Disabilities. At https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_consultation_guidelines.pdf

- **DFAT can amplify the voices of OPDs on the global stage.** This entails not only providing financial support for travel and accommodation to enable OPDs to attend international forums and conferences but also helping prepare for effective participation. By facilitating their active participation in global platforms, DFAT can support OPDs in sharing their insights, learning from international best practices, and forming strategic partnerships.
- In cases where OPDs are not available in DFAT's countries of operations, or these fail to represent specific identity factors, **direct outreach to individuals and disability groups** becomes necessary to ensure their voices are heard and their perspectives considered. DFAT can also rely on UNDP's and the United Nations System's wide network of OPDs across the globe in their outreach and engagement.

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

- **The compounding crises the world is currently experiencing disproportionately affect persons with disabilities.** These include growing debt levels, escalating violence and conflicts⁵, and climate change⁶. These crises exacerbate existing inequalities, making it harder for persons with disabilities to access essential services, maintain livelihoods, and ensure their safety and well-being. The situation is further exacerbated for persons with diverse, intersecting identities who often experience increased risks and barriers based on gender, age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other factors. The heightened level of marginalization of persons with disabilities in these crisis situations, coupled with a global data gap that affects the international community's efforts to address it, presents a significant challenge to advancing disability inclusion.
- Another significant challenge is the **prevalence of ad hoc initiatives for disability inclusion that are not embedded in broader, long-term, evidence-based national disability inclusion and/or inclusion strategies.** These initiatives can often be designed and implemented without meaningful consultation with and active engagement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. As a result, they may fail to address the actual needs of persons with disabilities and can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion and inequality.
- **Budgeting for disability inclusion can also be a major barrier in any effort to advance this agenda.** For example, the cost of accessible infrastructure, services, and inclusive programmes can be

⁵ Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities et al. (2023) Armed conflict puts human rights of people with disabilities and all civilians in peril: UN experts. At <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/12/armed-conflict-puts-human-rights-people-disabilities-and-all-civilians-peril-un>; see also IASC (2029) Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. At <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-guidelines-on-inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-humanitarian-action-2019>

⁶ IDA. Disability Inclusive Climate Action. At <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/climate-change>

considerable, and often, these additional expenses are not adequately factored into mainstream government budgeting processes. While high-income countries generally possess the fiscal capacity to allocate budgets for disability-inclusion policies and programs, low and middle-income countries often face considerable constraints in this regard⁷.

- The world is increasingly relying on emerging technologies to cater for the different needs - and harness the opportunities - of persons with disabilities. **Yet, a non-inclusive design of these technologies (including AI) - particularly if used to deliver goods and services - may pose an additional challenge to advancing disability inclusion.** For example, AI systems can inadvertently perpetuate existing biases or create new forms of discrimination. If these systems are trained on datasets that do not adequately represent the diversity of persons with disabilities, their outputs may not adequately cater to or accurately reflect the needs of this group. This could lead to unequal treatment and/or exclusion from certain services. Similarly, technology solutions to access these same services that are not designed with universal design principles, may not be accessible to all persons with disabilities.

Each of the abovementioned challenges is also a catalyst for change.

- The current planetary crises prompt a re-evaluation of policies and systems, in order to “build forward better”, including reflections about social contracts and the relationship between decision-takers and different groups in society. There is a chance for DFAT to tap into the heightened attention on these matters and advocate for responses that are designed with, for and by persons with disabilities for a more inclusive future.
- In the midst of ad-hoc, poorly funded, projects and programmes to advance disability inclusion, DFAT can advocate for and demonstrate the long-term socio-economic benefits of inclusion⁸. This will be key to trigger a shift in perspective where financing and planning for inclusive infrastructure, services and policies are seen as valuable investments. DFAT may also draw from a wealth of United Nations System’s resources on budgeting for disability inclusion, to ensure that financing for inclusion is sufficiently prioritized in the projects and operations of DFAT’s partner countries⁹.
- The challenges posed by emerging technologies, including AI, also bring the opportunity to champion and innovate in inclusive design. DFAT can spearhead these efforts, ensuring that persons with disabilities and OPDs are meaningfully engaged in and by key international fora and stakeholders.

⁷ UN Women (2023) Gender- and disability-inclusive budgeting: Issues and policy options. At <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/12/issue-paper-gender-and-disability-inclusive-budgeting-issues-and-policy-options>.

⁸ Several international and multilateral organisations have studied and demonstrated the positive economic spillovers of inclusion, including [World Bank](#), [OECD](#).

⁹ Ibid; see also UNICEF (2021) [Combating the Costs of Exclusion for Children with Disabilities and Their Families](https://www.unicef.org/documents/combating-costs-exclusion-children-disabilities-and-their-families). At <https://www.unicef.org/documents/combating-costs-exclusion-children-disabilities-and-their-families>; UN Women (2019)

Fiscal space for social protection: A handbook for assessing financing options. At <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/10/fiscal-space-for-social-protection>;

Particularly those driving the discussions around ethical and human-centered design and use of emerging technologies (e.g. [WSIS](#), [Internet Governance Forum](#), and others).