

# Submission to DFAT Disability Equity and Rights Strategy Consultation

December 2023



## Introduction

Caritas Australia welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation on DFAT's new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.

Caritas Australia is the international development and humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church, committed to tackling poverty in Australia and overseas since 1964. We support local organisations and communities across the Pacific, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Australia to be architects of their own development. We are a member of Caritas Internationalis, the world's second largest humanitarian network.

Our submission is drawn from the experiences of our local partners overseas, particularly those with strong disability inclusion programs in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe, as well as our program staff who support them.

We have responded to Questions 1, 2 and 3 of the consultation questions.

## Question 1: What are the most important things we should work on for disability equity and rights?

Our partners told us that the important considerations for upholding disability equity and rights included:

1. **Improve mainstreaming of disability inclusion into wider programming**
2. **Taking a holistic approach to disability equity:**
  - **Working with whole communities** to address different barriers to inclusion and participation, through awareness raising, economic empowerment activities, vocational training, employment, and job matching.
  - **Focus on changing mindsets, attitudes, and beliefs about disabilities.** Our partners spoke about the stigma and shame that is still attached to people with disabilities and their families. It is not uncommon in some societies for a person with disabilities to be hidden away at home. Our partners in Vietnam who work with children with disabilities noted that children with special needs are often bullied and harassed in school.
  - Advocacy and policy influencing at local levels for the rights and entitlements of people with disabilities. For example, our partner in Zimbabwe works with the Government of Zimbabwe on awareness and community education initiatives to promote the rights of people with disabilities and to reduce stigma. Our partners in Vietnam have mobilised people with disabilities to participate in policy dialogues with district authorities and different government ministries to influence policies to support the vocational training and employment of people with disabilities.
  - An emphasis on intersectionality of disability with other aspects of one's identity:
    - Addressing burden of care on women in households with members who have disabilities; and discrimination or stigma on women/families who have children with disabilities.
    - Increased risks of women and girls with disabilities to gender-based violence (GBV).
3. **Linking disability with issues of climate change, food security, access to water and sanitation:**
  - A good example from one of our local partners in Zimbabwe is the installation of solar-powered water pumps which have allowed people with disabilities to easily access water in communities in Zimbabwe.

- People with disabilities have less access to basic needs which can be made worse by climate change or humanitarian emergencies.
4. **Investing in infrastructure to increase accessibility**, such as:
    - Pathways and ramps in remote areas or in areas with terrain that is inaccessible for people with disabilities, e.g. wheelchair users on sandy soils.
    - Toilets and latrines accessible for people with disabilities.
    - Transport for people with disabilities who cannot otherwise participate in education or other important day to day occupations.
  5. **Provision of assistive devices and technologies.** We heard from numerous sources that the lack of assistive devices and technologies - including wheelchairs, hearing aids, aids for the visually impaired are major impediments to participation by people with disabilities. These devices and technologies must be suited to the local context.
  6. **Training for service providers to remove barriers that limit people with disability from engaging in programs**, including:
    - Local sign language skills and access to translators and interpreters.
    - Identifying diverse forms of disabilities and the barriers that people face.

## Question 2: What are the best ways we can do this?

Based on input from our partners, we believe that effective strategies to promote disability equity and rights include the following:

1. **Supporting the formation or maintenance of networks working on disability issues to facilitate learning exchange and strengthen advocacy efforts.** This support should prioritise disabled people's organisations (DPOs), in line with the principle of subsidiarity.
2. **Localisation should be central to this strategy** – the needs of people with disability vary greatly from place to place.
3. **Channelling funding through existing networks.** For example, in the Hwange district of Zimbabwe, there are no DPOs in the area. Our partner Caritas Hwange is one of the few organisations working in the district to promote disability rights and inclusion. Our partners in Cambodia have also noted the need for stronger coordination among organisations working on disability issues to enable more effective and efficient delivery of services.
4. **Ensuring the availability of technical support and guidance on disability inclusion** at the earliest possible entry point of project planning, and in every stage thereafter.
5. **Supporting local partners to address stigma and discrimination of people with disabilities.** Many of our partners are faith-based organisations and in their communities, churches and faith-based organisations are significant and influential civil society actors. Helping our local partners to strengthen church and community awareness of disability equity and rights is key to addressing stigma in the community.
6. **Ensuring inclusive and accessible feedback and complaints mechanisms, and monitoring and evaluation processes**

7. **Funding and support for rights-based service providers to better address needs of people with disabilities.**
8. **Providing technical guidance for governments to enable them to deliver on international commitments on the rights of people with disabilities**, including mainstreaming disability equity and rights in all levels of governance and service delivery. For example, despite national policies that ensure inclusive education, public schools in Cambodia lack the capacity to address the specific needs of children and learners with disabilities. They are often integrated into regular classes where they often experience bullying or harassment.

### **Question 3 Part 1: How can we support people with disabilities to do this work?**

We encourage DFAT to **direct more funding and resources to Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) and networks to enable them to expand and strengthen their work on disability equity and rights**. In remote and geographically hard to reach areas, there are few, if any, OPDs that NGOs can collaborate with to support disability inclusion and equity. Often OPDs are located in central areas and are usually under resourced and understaffed but overburdened with work and overwhelmed with the demand for technical support. Support for local OPDs is important to ensure contextualised and localised work on disability.

### **Question 3 Part 2: How can we support organisations working with people with disabilities to do this work?**

#### **The need for increased resourcing**

Lack of funding to adequately resource disability equity, rights and inclusion is one of the most significant barriers for our partners. Our partners have told us that they lack funding to provide assistive devices; transport for people with disabilities to attend school or health clinics; to build institutional capacity to strengthen disability inclusion; or to have the capacity to network with other organisations who work with people with disabilities.

In recent years, the central disability allocation in Australia's aid program was cut significantly. We urge the government to increase DFAT's central disability allocation by AUD7.1m in FY2024-25 to a minimum of AUD20m annually and increase in line with year-on-year ODA growth.

#### **We also encourage DFAT to:**

- Support the capacity building of local organisations to mainstream disability inclusion across all areas of programming, including those whose work does not necessarily focus on disability issues.
- Encourage flexible budgets that allow for reasonable accommodations and assistive devices/technologies at any or all stages of a program/project cycle.
- Support churches and faith-based organisations, who in many communities are significant and influential civil society actors, to challenge social norms that perpetuate stigma and discrimination of people with disabilities, and to mainstream disability inclusion into the health and education services they deliver.
- Support longer or multi-year programs to ensure sustainability of efforts and continued work towards transformative change. Addressing the barriers faced by people with disabilities entails holistic

approaches that involve working with different stakeholders including carers, family members, whole communities, government, and the private sector to change attitudes and mindsets, as well as to provide necessary, and often specialised services. These require long-term, and sustained efforts.

## Recommendations

We recommend that the new Disability Equity and Rights Strategy includes provisions to:

1. Increase investment in disability equity and rights by increasing DFAT's central disability allocation by AUD7.1m in FY2024-25 to a minimum of AUD20m annually and increase in line with year-on-year ODA growth.
2. Direct more funding and resources to OPDs and networks to enable them to expand and strengthen their work on disability equity and rights.
3. Provide technical guidance and support on disability inclusion mainstreaming for programs that are not directly working on disability issues.
4. Support governments to deliver on their commitments under the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
5. Encourage flexible budgets that allow for reasonable accommodations and assistive devices/technologies at any or all stages of a program/project cycle.
6. Support churches and faith-based organisations, who in many communities are significant and influential civil society actors, to challenge social norms that perpetuate stigma and discrimination of people with disabilities, and to mainstream disability inclusion into the health and education services they deliver.
7. Support longer or multi-year programs to ensure sustainability of efforts and continued work towards transformative change, as changing attitudes and mindsets requires long-term, sustained efforts.