

Beyond a seat at the table: towards disability equity in Asia-Pacific

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Disability advocates from Vanuatu
Photo Credit: CBM Australia

While there has been some progress in our region for people with disabilities in the last decade, it has been far too slow, and was set back by the pandemic, leaving people with disabilities even further behind. People with disabilities remain among the poorest and most marginalised in any given place at any given time, including in the Asia-Pacific region.

Included? Sometimes. A seat at the table? Occasionally. Full and equal participation and leadership? Rarely.

People with disabilities were **hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic** – in terms of both impacts on health and on livelihoods. People with disabilities are **more vulnerable to the growing effects** of climate change. The scale of **national budget investment** to support people with disabilities remains stubbornly low across the region. And in 2021-22, just 2.5% of Australia's **aid expenditure was attributable** as disability inclusion.

So – how do we shift the dial?

The Australian government is about to start development of **a new strategy to guide disability inclusion** in its development work, to be called the 'Disability Equity and Rights Strategy'. This will be the third disability inclusion strategy in the development program.

The name for the new strategy signals that government has listened to the shift taking place in the disability movement, with strong leadership from the Pacific, seeking to take a step beyond 'inclusion' and work for true equity.

What do we mean when we talk about equity as a step beyond inclusion?

Australia has played an important role, over more than a decade, in the progress we have seen toward disability inclusion. The two previous **Development for All strategies** had a solid focus on the central role of people with disabilities and their

representative organisations at the front and centre of development efforts. This laid a strong platform for people with disabilities to be acknowledged, be present and participate.

More broadly, international frameworks and organised representation by people with disabilities are mature and well established. The [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) has been in place for 15 years and has been almost universally adopted. The early work of pioneers of the disability movement in the Pacific led to the establishment of the [Pacific Disability Forum](#) in 2002. The first Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons was proclaimed in 1992. We are now in the fourth decade.

Building on these frameworks, initiatives and representations, people with disabilities are often included, and they can sometimes be found at the table. But we must now ask – are people with disabilities seeing and feeling the benefits of that inclusion? While there are many examples of progress and good practice, the overall answer is ‘no’.

Too often, we see disability inclusion in practice as largely rhetorical. It’s a box to tick in a funding application or in donor reporting. It’s the ability to say that one member on a committee is a person with disabilities. It does not equate to fit for purpose engagement.

So then, there’s a difference between inclusion as such and full, effective and meaningful participation and leadership. And it’s the latter that we need. That will make a difference in the lives of hundreds of millions of people in our region alone.

We understand that this is a process as well as an outcome. The key now is how to significantly improve both the process and the outcome.

As is so often the case, the answer is in the fundamentals. The fundamentals of what real inclusion looks like, of what’s required in order for there to be equity. We call them the [‘pre-conditions to inclusion’](#), which remove barriers to full, effective and meaningful participation.

The pre-conditions, as defined by the Pacific Disability Forum, are accessibility, assistive technology, support services, social protection, non-discrimination and community-based inclusive development.

These are not radical or complex concepts in themselves. So, you may well ask, decades into the organised movement for disability inclusion – what’s holding up the achievement of these pre-conditions?

In large part, the answer is a lack of understanding. Too often this comes from not taking the time to listen – to really listen – to the needs of people with lived experience of disability.

The disability movement is speaking clearly. We need governments, institutions and development actors to listen, take the time to understand, and commit resources to responding appropriately.

We recognise and acknowledge the early signs that this call is being heard as part of the implementation plan for the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), which is currently in development, and in the naming of the forthcoming Australian ‘Disability Equity and Rights Strategy’.

What would it look like for the Australian government to turn these early signs into positive steps in the strategy? It would look like a strategy that is:

- ambitious – that has the voice and priorities of people with disabilities and their representative organisations at the heart, and prioritises authentic partnership, including ensuring space is created to hear from women and children with disabilities
- accountable – includes requirements and targets for disability inclusion across the development program with effective monitoring and reporting
- resourced – comes with increased, long-term, flexible funding for organisations of people with disabilities, and boosted capacity across the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) to deliver, including technical capacity on disability inclusion and capacity to support civil society; this includes supporting initiatives, movements, and organisations of and for women with disabilities.

The disability movement and its allies are clear about what’s needed. We look forward to working with the Australian government and other actors to ensure those needs are heard and implemented, so that we really can move beyond having a seat at the table, towards full and meaningful participation for people with disabilities – towards equity.

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