



**Wilton
Park**



Report:

Disability Rights: Advancing the Agenda

Tuesday 21 May – Thursday 23 May 2024

In association with

Disability Rights Fund and Disability Rights Advocacy Fund, Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ford Foundation

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The Wilton Park retreat ‘Disability Rights: Advancing the Agenda’ was a multi-stakeholder dialogue that gathered approximately 60 participants representing Governments, civil society – in particular organizations of persons with disabilities, or OPDs –, the United Nations System (UNS) and private donors.

The event was organized in the lead up to the 20th anniversary of the 2006 adoption of the **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (CRPD), as well as the five-year review of the **United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy** (UNDIS), in 2024. It was also timed to precede the **2025 Global Disability Summit**.

Since the adoption of the CRPD, the UNS has taken great strides towards the inclusion of a disability perspective in its work in multiple areas, ranging from awareness raising, to more accessible and inclusive work environments. On the other hand, the UNDIS was launched in 2019 by the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG), with the aim of fostering sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all

pillars of the work of the United Nations: peace and security, human rights and development.

Aside from the CRPD and UNDIS, the UN has various other mechanisms to promote disability rights.¹ These have undoubtedly fostered change, but challenges and implementation gaps still remain. The retreat provided an overview of progress made; explored persisting challenges; identified opportunities for action, including for the improvement of synergies and coordination within the UN System and for more tangible results on the ground; and put forward recommendations and concrete proposals to enhance efforts in support of the rights of persons with disabilities at the local, national and international levels.

The discussions also highlighted that the practical implementation by States and the UNS of inclusive, rights-based policies in the field, where it matters most, is essential to improve the daily lives of persons with disabilities. The importance of engaging in meaningful partnerships with OPDs was also underscored.

1. The good news: progress made so far

The CRPD established a new paradigm in which persons with disabilities are fully recognised, legally, as rights-holders. The Convention triggered an enhanced awareness within the UNS regarding disability rights. The treaty has reached nearly universal membership, with 191 States parties.

For its part, UNDIS has been a game changer for the UNS, as it provides a common framework to guide the actions of all UN agencies for disability inclusion. It sets measurable indicators and reporting obligations for UN entities and country teams. A robust framework has been established within the UNS. Progress has been made across the UN system especially in UN entities, within their respective mandates,

¹ For an indicative list of mechanisms, see the appendix to the Concept Note of the retreat.

establishing specific strategies and programmes to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities both internally and in the outputs and outcomes they deliver. UN country teams are increasingly integrating disability inclusion in Common Country Analyses and Cooperation Frameworks.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 SDGs are an important framework to guide local communities, countries and the international community toward the achievement of disability-inclusive development. The 2030 Agenda pledges to leave no one behind, including persons with disabilities, and recognizes disability as a cross-cutting issue, to be considered in the implementation of all of its goals. The Agenda also includes seven targets and 11 indicators explicitly making reference to persons with disabilities.²

In 2019 the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted a ground-breaking resolution on protection of persons with disabilities in conflict.³ Outside of the UNS, various international organizations and initiatives - some of which are multi-stakeholder in nature - are seized of the matter, notably the process of the Global Disability Summit (GDS), the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) Network, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank (WB), among others.

In the spirit of “nothing about us without us”, a culture of participation and inclusion has developed in the UN and States, to collaborate with civil society organizations, particularly organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), especially in the context of multi-stakeholder processes such as the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), GLAD and the GDS.

2. Remaining challenges: what needs to change?

Despite the significant progress achieved, considerable challenges remain in order to meet the goal of the full enjoyment of rights by persons with disabilities and equal opportunities for them in all spheres. Disability rights need to shift from *‘nice to have’* to *‘must have’*.

² From the Disability and Development Report “Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities” 2018. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. New York, 2019. Available at: <https://social.un.org/publications/UN-Flagship-Report-Disability-Final.pdf> (consulted on July 17th, 2024).

³ UNSC resolution 2475 of 20 June 2019, available at <https://press.un.org/en/2019/sc13851.doc.htm>.

Setting **more ambitious goals** would benefit the sector significantly. There is a need to articulate our ambitions clearly and adopt a more sophisticated approach to setting priorities and goals. The lack of prioritization affects our capacity to achieve objectives and maximize resources. We must assess whether we are allocating our efforts and resources towards the most effective processes.

Political leverage and commitment need to be more visible at the leadership levels. Disability rights should be a non-negotiable priority both at the national and international levels. Governments must take a hard look at their normative frameworks, policies and implementation measures to ensure their compliance with the CRPD at national, local and community levels. The United Nations System has to *walk the talk* by ensuring that disability rights are a priority consideration in the mainstream human rights agenda, both within the institutional arrangements of the organizations and in the services and products they deliver. States can encourage this by bringing the issue to the attention of the heads of UN organizations.

Negative narratives and stereotypes about persons with disabilities persist. They have to be vanished. Unconscious biases and ableism are still pervasive, and disability rights education is limited. Increased **awareness raising** and a change of culture towards persons with disabilities is key to fostering change and building more resilient societies. Societies need to recognize that persons with disabilities are not only rights holders but also valuable actors who contribute positively to their communities. Governments, the UN and other partners have a duty to design and carry out measures to foster this cultural change, recognizing the broad diversity of persons with disabilities. In this context, more attention should be paid to the most marginalized groups of persons with disabilities, who are often overlooked.

Full accessibility for persons with all different kinds of disabilities remains elusive. Persons with disabilities continue to face barriers, including to the physical, digital and communications environments, which hinder their equal participation in all spheres of life, including in UN meetings and conferences. While accessibility has significantly improved in the premises, conference services and digital environments of the UN System, gaps persist. The UN should strive to be a role model on accessibility, including by becoming the employer of choice for persons with disabilities, by improving the accessibility of its recruitment practices and ensuring reasonable accommodation as well as adequate disability allowances and support to its staff with disabilities or staff dependents with disabilities. States should furnish the UNS with the necessary mandates and resources to become fully accessible,

including by allowing the continuation of remote participation in meetings and conferences to foster greater participation, particularly of OPDs.

More and better disaggregated data is needed on persons with disabilities, to serve as a basis both for policy making and for advocacy. Further data needs to be collected and analyzed to objectively measure progress and identify gaps, to allow for the design of tailored solutions and approaches. Standards for data collection should be homogenized internationally, as much as possible, to facilitate comparative analysis. Data at the global, regional and country level should be connected and analyzed to find trends. A few significant figures were mentioned:

- Approximately 16% of the population worldwide is made up of persons with disabilities with one or more impairment. Among those, approximately 240 million are children;
- The unemployment rate among persons with disabilities is 40% higher than among the rest of the population. When persons with disabilities are employed, there is a higher risk of precarious and abusive working conditions;
- 80% of persons with disabilities are excluded from humanitarian responses; and
- The UN invests approximately 15 million USD on persons with disabilities annually.

Prioritization of disability rights means that **more and better resources** need to be allocated to this issue, both nationally and internationally. This is a challenge, in the context of concurring economic and financial crises and competing priorities worldwide. However, investing in persons with disabilities means investing in more inclusive, productive, resilient and sustainable societies, which in turn will help development and economic growth. On the other hand, the cost of exclusion is too high. Like governments, the UN System also faces a problem of resource constraints vs. constantly increasing demands. UNDIS implementation is largely dependent on voluntary contributions, which puts its sustainability at risk. Innovative solutions need to be found in order to ensure sufficient resources to advance disability rights, including by strengthening the Disability Inclusion Team at the UN Executive Office of the Secretary General, and ensuring its sustainable financing. Many solutions are not that costly and can be implemented incrementally.

At the country level, there are positive examples **of CRPD compliant national public budgeting**, which could be studied and replicated, so that public resources are explicitly allocated to disability inclusion.

While the participation of OPDs is increasingly recognized as a necessary element to the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and processes, there is a need to move beyond tokenistic engagement and to **institutionalize mechanisms for the participation of OPDs at all levels of the UNS and States** for their meaningful participation. This entails intentional outreach and inclusion of underrepresented groups such as women and girls, children and young people, refugees, indigenous peoples, those living in rural areas, persons with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression and sex characteristics, persons with intellectual disabilities, persons with psychosocial disabilities, persons with albinism, persons with autism, Deafblind persons, among others.

Funding for organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) also faces many challenges. Given the existing regulations and practices around Official Development Assistance (ODA) grants, grassroots organizations are often not able to obtain such financing, particularly core-funding which would allow them to grow and strengthen their capacities. In light of the crucial work of grassroots OPDs at the community level, funding requirements and procedures should be made accessible and inclusive to enable their possibilities to access adequate financing on an equal basis with other civil society organizations and across a broad array of themes- not solely limited to disability-specific matters.

Stronger coordination, collaboration and communication is needed, to **break down the silos and achieve systemic change**. At the national level, responsibilities and efforts to protect and promote disability rights are often fragmented between the different government agencies, and between the national, provincial and local levels. More efforts are needed for all government institutions, at all levels, to take ownership of disability rights and better coordinate their work to mainstream them into all their activities. Enhanced collaboration is also necessary in the UN System among the different bodies, agencies and other entities. A better connection is required particularly between UN headquarters and country teams, for a continuity of commitment to disability inclusion, including to engage in active outreach to OPDs and persons with disabilities in the field. Resources dedicated to disability should be used more efficiently, avoiding overlap and duplication of initiatives, programs and projects.

3. Putting obligations and commitments into practice: how to tackle the implementation gap?

Implementation should be understood as the ***actual fulfillment of concrete measures***, which have an impact on people's lives. As the CRPD approaches the 20th anniversary of its adoption, and has reached nearly universal membership, States need to re-commit to the Convention's implementation.

In order to further support national efforts to implement the Convention, a clearer link could be established between the concluding observations and **recommendations made to States by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, and opportunities for international cooperation and capacity building to support the follow-up and implementation of those recommendations. For this purpose, the dialogue between States and the Committee could be improved. The United Nations System could also assist countries through its country offices, focusing on outcomes and engagement with local OPDs for effective implementation.

The **Universal Periodic Review Mechanism (UPR)** of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) could also be utilized by actively including OPDs in the pre-UPR meetings and more systematically addressing disability rights in the context of States' reviews, including by formulating pertinent recommendations on the matter and pursuing their implementation. States could also share knowledge and best practices on disability in the context of the review. International cooperation and UN country teams could also play a supporting role in engaging local OPDs in implementing UPR recommendations.

Implementation at community level is crucial. Communities constitute the most immediate context in the everyday lives of persons with disabilities and therefore they must be fully inclusive so that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in political decision-making and equal access to education, employment, health and rehabilitation services, social security and social protection, culture, sports and other key services and/or areas in which they wish to participate. Governments, in cooperation with the UNS should ensure that disability rights are fully realized at the community level with support available for the creation and development of OPDs, including those representing the most marginalized groups. Collaboration with grassroots OPDs is a valuable and indispensable tool to achieve

this goal, as they have first-hand knowledge and experience of the realities on the ground.

4. Developing quality, durable partnerships

The principle of *'nothing about us without us'* must be upheld in national and international actions concerning disability rights. We should also **find innovative ways to work in partnership with different actors**. Traditional dynamics between States, the UNS, OPDs, other civil society organizations (CSOs), donors and other stakeholders will not lead us to the systemic transformations that are needed to advance the disability agenda.

Genuine partnerships mean that grassroots, community level organizations must be empowered and leveraged, their leadership and their core capacities strengthened. This requires investment from States, the UNS and other donors. OPDs carry out crucial work on the ground and they have much to teach and valuable experiences to share. Success cases of States, the UNS and donors helping to bolster women's rights grassroots organizations could be used as models to replicate in the OPD movement, so that they are able to directly receive the support they need.

National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) can play an important role in creating an enabling environment to bring OPDs into policy conversations. Many NHRIs have a disability focal point, and they also have a formal role as independent mechanisms for monitoring of implementation under the CRPD at the national level. As such, they serve as a bridge not only between the government and the CRPD Committee, but also between the government and OPDs to support the latter in all aspects of CRPD implementation and monitoring. **Parliaments** should also be involved in conversations about disability rights. The **International Parliamentary Union** (IPU) could be a valuable ally in raising disability inclusion across parliamentary agendas. Interesting alliances could be forged among UN country teams, NHRIs, parliaments and OPDs. **Academic and research institutions** should also be actively engaged.

Disability rights organizations can also play a key role in mainstreaming disability into other sectors through cross-movement collaboration and cross-fertilization to create a broad base of support (*'nothing without us'* and *'nothing only with us'*). While some OPDs have been taking action to diversify their agenda by participating in national, regional and international discussions and initiatives related to issues such as security, culture and protection of the environment, including climate

change, further efforts and resources are needed on the part of States and the UNS to support their participation and engagement across these spaces and movements.

Mainstream rights organizations could visibly incorporate a disability perspective into their agendas. OPDs can also strengthen their knowledge from the experiences, successes and lessons learned of other sectors, particularly feminism. Disability expertise should also be leveraged in solidarity with the older persons movement, to ensure that any new standards adopted in relation to older persons rights are consistent with existing human rights standards in the field of disability rights. Inter-sectoral collaboration will also highlight the need to address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by different groups. More efforts are needed to put solidarity into practice by the disability movement on the one side, and other human rights and social justice movements on the other.

There are also areas of opportunity to enhance the collaboration and partnerships between the UN System and the disability movement, while underscoring and embracing the diversity of the movement. Funding, access, capacity strengthening and co-design of solutions are required to increase the participation of OPDs in UN meetings, conferences, services, international human rights mechanisms and of information and communications in general. With the increased attention to disability rights and inclusion has come increased demand on OPDs by governments and the UNS for inputs and consultation. Recognizing OPDs as a valuable resource requires investing in them, including to support their organizational development so that they are better equipped to respond to these demands and continue to develop and flourish. Proactive efforts are needed from States, the UN and larger civil society organizations to broadly disseminate UN norms, standards and policies (including resolutions) in accessible languages and formats and to translate them into concrete collaborative efforts on the ground. There are positive examples of UN agencies explicitly committing to enhance their collaboration with OPDs, including in the field. Guidelines for engagement with OPDs have been developed by some agencies.

5. Opportunities and pathways forward

Disability rights are generally considered a consensus-gathering issue. This capacity to garner broad agreement and support should be leveraged to further advance the agenda. It is time to recognize that ambitions are building blocks, and we should

elevate our ambitions, spell them out clearly and strive for a truly transformative impact.

6. Institutional strengthening of the United Nations System

UN Disability Inclusion Strategy

The five-year review of UNDIS, to be launched in 2024, is a unique opportunity to build on its strengths and the lessons learned, and revisit and update the Strategy as needed. The review process should be participatory and inclusive for Member States and all interested stakeholders, including OPDs, which in turn are invited to engage constructively in the review. The review should provide recommendations on how the Strategy could have the capacity to further enhance the system-wide coordination and follow up of ambitious, transformative goals. High-level political commitment and sustainable financing are indispensable to ensure not only the Strategy's continuity, but also its strengthened capacity.

Through the review, there is a possibility to revisit UNDIS indicators considering the progress made and heightened ambitions. The updated Strategy should prioritize structural changes. Accountability and UN entity and country team reporting to the Secretary-General is seen as a powerful mechanism to advance implementation. UN entities could make their annual UNDIS progress reports public, to foster transparency, accountability and an honest dialogue among UN entities, Member States, civil society and donors.

Re-thinking the UN's institutional architecture for disability rights mainstreaming

There is a need for more strategic direction, coherence and intersectionality from the top management of the UN. The UN System should strive to advance as a whole, and not only as individual agencies.

Proposals were made to create new institutional structures and/or strengthen existing ones:

1. Establishment of a Disability Office within the UN Secretariat, with the purpose of ensuring the visibility and sustainability of the disability agenda. The office should be headed by an Assistant Secretary General (ASG), like the

recently established Youth Office. Its mandate would include the coordination of guidance and knowledge; the dissemination of good practices; the creation and maintenance of a repository of priorities; and standard setting. It should be funded through the UN regular budget.

2. Creation of a World Disability Organization, to improve international coordination and coherence.
3. Include disability advisors in UN country offices and peacekeeping missions.
4. UN offices to request Member States to second staff with disabilities to work in the UN System to help establish priorities and work on creating change.
5. UNS organizations to set up a special program for interns with disabilities and provide them with the necessary conditions for their employment, in an effort to facilitate and boost the overall employment of staff with disabilities.
6. To review, in the framework of the Chief Executives Board (CEB) and in collaboration with the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC) and the UN Staff Federation, the conditions of recruitment and work for persons with disabilities and UN employees with dependents with disabilities, to make them more inclusive. This comprises the provision of reasonable accommodation and relevant disability benefits.
7. To undertake a system-wide accessibility audit.⁴
8. To leverage the Human Rights Council (HRC) to request greater funding for disability rights within the UNS, through the regular budget.

Proposals were also made to strengthen the UN's normative and policy framework:

1. To elaborate guidelines to work on violence against persons with disabilities, including children;
2. To further strengthen the mandate of inclusion and participation as an intrinsic part of the working culture within the UNS organizations;

⁴ The UN Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) carried out a review of enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations System, available at: <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g19/039/16/pdf/g1903916.pdf?token=h7uYkyTDJX9OK4eIKa&fe=true> (consulted on 28 June 2024).

3. To enhance awareness raising and carry out mandatory training on disability rights for UN staff at all levels;
4. To establish a new Decade for Persons with Disabilities that should start in 2026, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the CRPD.

7. Unlocking the potential of international cooperation

International cooperation (IC) is a fundamental tool to achieve disability rights and inclusion. The CRPD is the only human rights treaty that contains a stand-alone article on IC. However, the follow-up and implementation of that provision has not reached its full potential. It is not well known within the mainstream development cooperation community nor among groups of main donors, such as the G20 and the G7. It is key to find avenues for engaging these actors in disability rights cooperation, and to better use Article 32 to foster the implementation of the Convention.

Many donors have a policy of mainstreaming a disability perspective into their international development cooperation and assistance activities. This is a good practice, and the international community should ensure that IC projects are not building new barriers. While mainstreaming disability rights into all development efforts is essential, targeted IC projects are equally important for propelling progress. These projects can focus on specific areas like inclusive education, improvement of physical and digital accessibility and fostering innovation in assistive technologies, among many other issues.

The active participation of OPDs as meaningful partners in international cooperation programs is paramount. IC can also be leveraged to strengthen and support the disability movement. It would be useful to map existing financing mechanisms for OPDs, to identify existing barriers and gaps, achieve a better coordination of existing finances and better understand how to leverage more resources.

The international community can learn from each other's knowledge, experience, good practices and lessons learned, thus building on progress already made, and avoiding the repetition of the same mistakes. But mechanisms for sharing information on advancing disability rights are not available. An accessible repository or hub of rights-based good practices and capacity strengthening opportunities should be created, based on experiences on the ground. Information should also be available at the community level. OPDs and CRPD Committee members and former

members could be actively involved in activities on awareness raising, training and capacity building.

8. Milestone opportunities ahead

As the United Nations sets its sights on landmark meetings like the **Summit of the Future** (September 2024) and the **Second World Summit for Social Development** (2025), a strategic approach that prioritizes disability rights is crucial. This means embedding persons with disabilities within both the **Pact for the Future** and the **Global Digital Compact**, to be adopted during the 2024 Summit. By prioritizing their rights, removing discriminatory barriers, and fostering participation in these discussions, the UN can craft solutions that benefit all individuals, building a world that truly leaves no one behind.

Furthermore, the **Third Global Disability Summit** (GDS), co-hosted by the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the Governments of Germany and Jordan, to be held in Berlin on 2-3 April 2025, will be a pivotal meeting in shaping the future of the disability agenda. The GDS is a unique multi-stakeholder global mechanism that seeks to improve the lives of persons with disabilities, especially from the Global South. It is a true partnership between member States and OPDs. The summits aim to bridge the gap between disability inclusion and development cooperation. The GDS entails continuous advocacy with global disability development stakeholders and mobilization of the disability rights movement and its allies.⁵

The high-level participation in the Summit (including Heads of State and Government) represents an outstanding opportunity to raise the level of political engagement and create a renewed sense of priority for disability rights in the international agenda. Recognizing that the GDS is a process beyond the event itself, it is important for States, OPDs and all stakeholders to follow up on all commitments submitted by governments in the context of the Summit and accelerate their fulfillment. Pledges and commitments should be ambitious and aim for profound changes.

Lastly, on 13 December 2026 we will commemorate **20 years of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. The international community should prepare for that occasion as a watershed moment to take stock

⁵ The White Paper for the Summit is available at: <https://www.bmz.de/resource/blob/173656/whitepaper-gds2025.pdf> (consulted on June 26, 2024).

of the significant progress made since the Convention was adopted; reflect on the remaining implementation gaps and the new challenges that have arisen; and renew its commitment to the fulfillment of the rights of persons with disabilities on the ground.

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Wilton Park | 25 July 2024

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