



PRACTICE NOTE

Principles for working on Disability and Development

1. Context

Many Australian organisations are interested in working internationally to contribute towards meeting the rights of people with disabilities. New commitment by the Australian Government in 2008 to a development assistance program that is inclusive of people with disabilities, means there will be greater opportunities for support in this area.

The Australian Disability and Development Consortium (ADDC) is a national network focusing attention, expertise and action on disability issues in developing countries and building a national platform for disability advocacy. The ADDC was launched at Parliament House Canberra in 2007 and grew out of the ACFID Disabilities and Development Working Group. ADDC comprises a wide range of organisations with interests and expertise in development cooperation and programs that are focused on the rights and priorities of people with disabilities.

A great deal has been learned by Australian and international organisations about working in disability and development activities.

2. Purpose of this note

Agencies often say: "how should we approach this new area of work?" or "what should we do to ensure our activities are inclusive of people with disabilities?" There are many resources available on the Internet to guide more specific activities, such as how to run a training program on the rights of people with disabilities or how to make buildings accessible for all people or how to establish a community based rehabilitation program.

Like many topics in the development cooperation area, there are many layers of complexity in working in the disability area internationally. Disability and development issues can be considered at broad philosophical levels (e.g. is it appropriate to consider the rights of individual people with disabilities in countries where human rights are considered as collective rather than individual?), through to very technical levels (e.g. at what angle should an access ramp be built, so that wheelchair users are able to get into buildings safely?). In between there are many issues associated with policies, cultural beliefs, organisational capacity etc. which influence the way disability and development activities can operate.

3. Principles for working internationally on disability and development

Inclusive Practice

- a) **Always work with people with disabilities in your programs.** This means they should be key players in all aspects of your work, including governance, planning, management, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It is important not to be "tokenistic" and to promote local ownership of programs at all times. This means taking steps to increase understanding both of ways about what is possible in each particular

context and encouraging local leadership of processes, agendas and objectives rather than leadership from outside.

b) “Doing” development is about working and learning together with others to find out how things can be achieved in particular contexts.

It is generally not about teaching, but about two or more groups of people learning together. It is generally not about “transferring” ways of working from one place to another, but building on what is already existing in one context and what is already working well, as well as working on priorities that have already been identified by local people with disabilities and their organisations. For example, there is no point in an Australian organisation deciding to transfer Australian building legislation to a Pacific Island country – none of the factors that exist in Australia to support such legislation are likely to exist in a Pacific Island country. If you want to be part of bringing about new legislation in a Pacific Island country, you have to work with your partners to find out what their priorities are and what is possible (feasible, culturally appropriate, realistic etc.) there.

c) Work in partnership with existing local community, civil society and government organisations and networks rather than try to work on your own or establish new organisations

- i. For example, if there is an existing disabled people’s organisation (DPO), which may have limited capacity in some areas, identify ways in which you might contribute to strengthening its capacity, rather than establish a new organisation or set up your own office.
- ii. And if you are mainly working with the community sector, remember you still need to work collaboratively with Government authorities and respect local laws if you want to be able to work successfully.

d) Work with existing international conventions and standards as well as national laws, systems, and structures and if they need to be improved, then build on what is already there (rather than introduce Australian or other foreign versions) in partnership with local organisations, for example:

- i. Useful starting points for identifying plans and activities include the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Biwako Millennium Framework, that people with disabilities from the Pacific and Asia have already contributed towards – these identify laws and systems that need to be considered and prioritized
- ii. If there is a need to recruit people with disabilities to a Government task-force, make sure the existing recruitment system is respected
- iii. If there is a need for DPO members to attend a training course, then ask the DPO to use its own selection process for candidates rather than apply yours (and if there are problems with the existing selection process, then help identify and contribute to solving the problems).

- e) Use a “strengths-based approach”** rather than a “problem-based approach” or an approach that focuses on weaknesses or gaps. This means you and your partner agencies need to find out what already works well or has worked well, what resources and strengths already exist in the particular context and how you can work with your partners to build on the existing situation to achieve any shared objectives. If objectives are set too high, they are not likely to be met, people will feel a sense of failure, and this can affect any future activities. There are some tools to use within a strengths-based approach (e.g. Appreciative Inquiry as a tool for participatory organisational or project planning), as well as other information about the approach from other disciplines (social work, community development, organisational government, education, psychology etc.) which are readily available on the Internet (see for example http://www.icvet.tafensw.edu.au/resources/strengths_based.htm)
- f) Be realistic about the range of influences on a particular issue or situation.** Anything that an individual or an organisation contributes is just one contribution to a complex range of influences that interact with each other in unpredictable ways. There is very rarely a direct connection between inputs (e.g. a training course or a new computer) and outcomes (e.g. improved access to schools or increased employment for people with disabilities), but many factors needing to come together to bring about sustainable change. Every context is different and there is very rarely a universal solution or objective or method which can apply in each context.
- g) Learn about the cultural values that influence the way people and organisations exist and change over time.** While development is often about changing some values (such as attitudes towards people with disabilities), it is important to understand what they are before you engage in processes of change. For example, if you want to support leaders to have a better understanding of disability issues, then it will be important to understand how leaders are viewed in the local context and how they are expected to behave. Similarly, if you expect that people with disabilities should have a voice about their rights and priorities to influence decision-makers, it is important to try to understand how local cultures view issues such as hierarchies and power relationships and decision-making.
- h) Emphasise the process of “capacity development” for individuals and organisations** (i.e. their ability to manage themselves and achieve their own objectives within their own context) over the achievement of specific pre-determined targets or outputs. For example, it may be preferable to find a number of ways (e.g. mentoring, sharing ideas, training, organisational twinning, exchange programs, study tours, support for local seminars) to assist DPOs to plan for and provide a variety of services for their members, than to set up a particular service by a fixed date. In the latter case, if the DPO is not able to manage the service in a sustainable way, then the service could fail quite quickly.

- i) Work both on activities that 'promote the specific rights' of people with disabilities as well as activities that 'include' people with disabilities.** For example this might mean working with a DPO to strengthen its advocacy efforts about children's access to schools, at the same time as working with a Ministry of Education on improving accessibility of all schools and with a broader aid project that is contributing to educational policy. Another example might be the provision of sign-language training which meets the specific rights to communication of people who have hearing impairments, while a project which aims to improve media services should ensure that people with disabilities are involved in community consultations and planning about accessible communications formats.
- j) Identify, work with and support, but don't overwhelm, local "champions of change".** Local formal or informal leaders know best about what is possible in each context, and foreign donors and partners can often play a key role in supporting them to achieve big changes. Sometimes this might mean "protecting" organisations that are vulnerable or criticised for raising their voice. It might mean helping an organisation through a leadership change too.
- k) Ensure you have paid attention to monitoring and evaluation systems as part of your initial planning.** While it isn't always necessary to be specific about particular targets or end results, it is always helpful to involve partners in early discussions about perceptions about what "success" might look like along the way and at the end. People with disabilities should always be involved in these discussions and with all monitoring and evaluation processes (e.g. regular management processes or periodic reviews and assessments)

4. Sources of advice

Members of ADDC have a range of expertise and experience in working on disability issues internationally and can assist in many ways. The ADDC website also includes links to other resources.

For further information contact:

Christine Walton, ADDC Executive Officer
cwalton@cbm.org.au Ph 1800 678 069
www.addc.org.au

or

Neva Wendt, ACFID
nwendt@acfid.asn.au Ph (02) 6281 9232

Drafted by Deborah Rhodes, Australia Pacific Islands Disability Support (APIDS)

Endorsed at the ACFID Development Practice Committee (DPC) Meeting May 2009