



**Inclusive Futures**  
Promoting disability inclusion



# Guidance Note on the Role of European organisations of persons with disabilities in International Cooperation

**December 2019**

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This publication has received financial support from the European Union. The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the official position of the European Commission.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our partners and members who contributed their time and expertise to the contents of this report:

David Adams, Gunta Anca, Ana Lucía Arellano, Mostafa Attia, Charlotte Axelsson, Elisabeth Bruce, Francois Carbonez, Lucía D'Arino, Lisa Feenny, Giampiero Griffo, Javier Guemes Pedrazán, Jesper Hansen, Mark Harrisson, Klaus Hockner, Humberto Insolera, Matleena Järviö, Magdalena Kern, Keogh Mary, Kamran Mallick, Maurizio Marrone, Mette Müller Kristensen, Catherine Naughton, Iyiola Olafimihan, Francesca Ortali, Marion Steff, Johannes Trimmel.

We wish to also thank Sightsavers for supporting and funding this work.

## List of Acronyms

- NGOs: Non-Governmental Organisations
- DPOs: Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
- CRPD: UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- EDF: European Disability Forum
- SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

## Introduction: Why this guidance note?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) laid a firm foundation for ensuring that international cooperation can contribute to promoting the rights of persons with disabilities. There is a global advocacy effort to ensure that international cooperation can become fully inclusive and accessible. One important component of this effort must be the meaningful involvement of persons with disabilities through their representative organisations (DPOs).

This process of involving DPOs in international cooperation has been going on for many years in some countries and contexts. However, little has been done to explore the work European DPOs are playing or should be playing in international cooperation. EDF proposes to bridge the existing knowledge gap on the role of European DPOs in international cooperation.

**The objective of the guidance note is to document for the first time the experience of European DPOs in international cooperation.** We focus on the role of DPOs in the global north and in particular, in Europe, based on the experience of the European Disability Forum (EDF), its members and partners.

This guidance note outlines why and how European DPOs should be included in international cooperation.

## Policy frameworks

### **The new international cooperation strategy of EDF**

Our new strategy called '[EDF in the World: EDF's strategy for international cooperation 2019-2022](#)' was adopted in 2019. One of its objective is to promote the engagement of DPOs in international cooperation. We want to ensure persons with disabilities are actively engaged in international cooperation, not just as beneficiaries but also as experts.

### **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

[Article 32](#) (International Cooperation) of the CRPD outlines the measures State Parties must take to fulfil their obligations regarding international cooperation. [Article 11](#) (Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies) obligates them to ensure the protection of persons with disabilities in situations of risk. [General Comment 7](#) on Articles 4 (3) and 33 (3), relating to the consultation and involvement of persons with disabilities, clarifies what meaningful involvement of DPOs means.

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) aim to leave no-one behind, and it is understood that this cannot be done without fully including persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities cannot be fully included unless DPO representatives are involved and engaged. This must become "business as usual" to quote the Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade<sup>1</sup>.

## Methodology

In order to provide a first documentation on the role of European DPOs in international cooperation, EDF organised a workshop in Brussels, in 2019. The workshop was attended by 26 people, including EDF members or partners who had responded to our call for interest. You can read the [full report of our workshop](#). During the workshop, we brainstormed on the role of European DPOs, and we collected the experience and perspectives of the participants.

We also launched an online call to receive examples of European DPOs working international cooperation. This guidance note is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> <https://did4all.com.au/Uploads/CreatingANewBusinessAsUsualDPOEngagementInDevelopment.pdf>

accompanied by a [set of stories](#) available on EDF's website. The stories illustrate further the work of European DPOs in the field of international cooperation. We will continue to publish and expand on this work in the coming years.

## Why work with European Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in international cooperation?

We see five clear reasons to engage with European DPOs in international cooperation. They are:

- **Political:** The meaningful engagement of the disability movement in all policies and programmes is important to change power dynamics. Traditionally, persons with disabilities and their organisations had decisions made on their behalf by service providers, policy makers and professionals. The motto of the disability movement (nothing about us without us) encompasses this call for a power shift. No organisation or government claiming to act to improve the situation of persons with disabilities should do so without their full involvement. Equally, the situation of persons with disabilities in the Global South can be only fully represented by persons with disabilities from the Global South.
- **Legal:** The CRPD imposes the legal obligation for meaningful involvement of persons with disabilities, through their representative organisations, in all spheres of life, including international cooperation. General Comment 7 of the CRPD (2016) outlines, in particular, how organisations should be meaningfully involved.
- **Technical:** Persons with disabilities are best placed to identify the actual barriers they face, and to find innovative solutions. Therefore, involving their representative organisations is essential. This also includes women and girls with disabilities as experts for their rights and interests, i.e. women with disabilities and organisations of women with disabilities must be consulted in issues relevant to their lives such as health care, education, access to jobs and economy, loans, etc.

- **Financial sustainability:** Small investments can have a very positive long-term impact on the work DPOs can play in policy, advocacy and programmes. DPOs are permanent structures representing persons with disabilities and defending their interests, with persons with disabilities on their board committees. Therefore, strengthening their core capacity will ensure better governance and the possibility to actively provide input into development policies.
- **Policy work:** European governments are creating policies and strategies to implement the CRPD in their own countries. In line with the CRPD, these should be developed with meaningful participation of persons with disabilities through their representative organisations. Policies and strategies to promote the CRPD should also include international cooperation to ensure the governments' external policies and programmes are coherent with the CRPD. Involvement of DPOs will help to ensure that the approach to disability, inclusion and accessibility will be coherent between the national level and international policies and programmes.

## Guidance for working with European Organisations of Persons with Disabilities

Based on the outcomes of workshop we organised earlier this year and the case studies we gathered, here is a list of our first reflections on how all partners can improve their cooperation with European organisations of persons with disabilities. This list will be reviewed and improved in the future.

- 1) **Respect for the unique role of DPOs:** Allocate time and resources to understand the role of European DPOs in your field. Meet with them to discuss their work and objectives. Request their input as trainers and experts. Ask them about their priorities. Expect them to represent the interests of persons with disabilities at the national and local level and to hold you and partners to account.
- 2) **Meaningful participation:** Involve DPO partners from the development of a new policy or strategy all the way through to

its implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The entire process must be fully accessible and inclusive. Involving DPOs solely for consultation and without the opportunity to engage concretely in activities does not constitute meaningful involvement. Consider real responsibilities and activities at all levels of work and communicate transparently throughout.

- 3) **Budget:** Make budgetary provisions for involvement of DPOs in consultation and meaningful participation of projects. Investing is vital. This includes budgets to be available for accessibility and reasonable accommodation.
- 4) **Partnership:** Agree to a Memorandum of Understanding or grants only if DPOs are fully included. Their role and participation must clearly explain how persons with disabilities will benefit from and be included in each stage of the programme.
- 5) **Long-term engagement:** Focus on long-term cooperation, as it yields better results than short-term projects. Whatever process you are planning, make sure it is inclusive and accessible from the beginning. DPOs should be involved at all levels of programming from the grass roots, to national, regional and international. Many examples of positive cooperation we have collected were long-term cooperation.
- 6) **Capacity assessment and capacity building:** Bear in mind the challenges faced by smaller organisations everywhere in terms of human and financial resources. For instance, DPOs may have not the programmatic capacity right from the beginning. Project co-financing requirements can prevent DPOs from being able to implement or even apply for funds. If you are serious about partnership, invest in building the capacity of the DPO.

## What to be cautious about

- **DO NOT use DPOs for information sharing only.** Sharing information does not constitute inclusion or meaningful participation.
- **DO NOT involve DPOs without providing adequate financial resources.** DPOs in a programme should be resourced like other partners and free labour should not be expected from their staff.
- **DO NOT ask DPOs to carry out your priority actions only,** this takes them away from their core advocacy work. It is better to find joint activities which support their priorities, and builds the strength of the disability movement on core CRPD implementation and monitoring issues.
- **DO NOT take the place of European DPOs in key discussions** about disability.
- **DO NOT engage only on a short-term and/or one off basis,** which can lead to disappointment, unmet expectations and demotivation of all partners as it is hard to have a real impact in a small period. Short-term cooperation can be useful to get to know partners but it is necessary to aim for long-term perspectives.
- **DO NOT, whenever possible, fund a single DPO with a smaller mandate,** when it can create tension and division within the movement. Consider ways to strengthen the overall movement.

## Examples of the role European Organisations of Persons with Disabilities can play

European organisations of persons with disabilities should be engaged at every level where international cooperation takes place. It is essential to have the lived experience of persons with disabilities as well as their expertise at the centre of policymaking, budget, programmes, decision making and evaluation. In the stories we collected from members, we

found a range of activities European DPOs have been successful in international cooperation.

Here are some examples of the roles played by European DPOs in international cooperation.

- **Advocacy to their government for inclusive development cooperation policies and programmes.** For example, EDF, together with other regional organisations of persons with disabilities and the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC) advocated for the inclusion of disability in the EU's Consensus on Development, a policy that aims to ensure all actions on development cooperation are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Implementation and monitoring of the UN CRPD.** For example, the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forums supports Commonwealth countries to adapt and ratify the CPRD.
- **Awareness raising.** Disabled People's Organisations Denmark (DPOD) and Norwegian Association of the Disabled (NAD) are good examples of awareness raising and mainstreaming of disability. For instance, DPOD influenced the parliament to secure seats for persons with disabilities in Uganda. Moreover, both organisations have carried out exchange visits of European DPOs to low income countries, strengthening partnerships and encouraging knowledge and expertise exchange.
- **Capacity building and empowerment of DPOs to be involved in development cooperation projects.** The Disability Partnership Finland (DPF) provides training with and by local DPOs in programme countries for development organisations, including trainings on accessibility and inclusion. They also work directly with federal and local DPOs.
- **Capacity building of DPOs on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities.** For example, SUSTENTO (Latvian Umbrella Body for Disability Organisations) has been involved in human rights trainings based on the CRPD in a range of Russian-speaking countries. Another example can be found in the ["Bridge CRPD-SDGs Training Initiative"](#), which aims to support disability activists to develop an inclusive and comprehensive

CRPD perspective on development. This is an initiative between the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and IDDC, with support from the Disability Rights Fund.

- **Inclusive employment.** For instance, ONCE (the Spanish National Organisation for the Blind) currently works on projects in Brazil and Argentina to make internal software of companies accessible to screen readers and implement inclusive programs for staff with visual impairments.
- **Inclusive education.** Circle Association for International Cooperation and Development (Italy) supports two projects in a school and rehabilitation center in Kenya with local partners. The aim is to support the inclusion of students with disabilities through the construction of infrastructure and resources. ONCE also supports the creation of special education centers in Uruguay and Paraguay and centralises funding distribution to accommodate blind children in mainstream schools.
- **Networking.** Access Israel and HGB (Hilfsgemeinschaft, Austria) organise joint activities to bring together ICT companies and persons with disabilities from Israel and Austria. MyRight (Sweden) provides treatments (haemophilia), educational activities (children with autism) and networking opportunities between persons with disabilities and/or guardians of persons with disabilities, amongst others.
- **Emancipatory research.** The Italian Development Cooperation Agency led a research project called “Emancipation Research on Women with Disabilities in Gaza and Palestine West”. The data was self-managed by women with disabilities themselves. This was also the case for the participatory research project known as W-DARE, which aimed to improve access to sexual and reproductive health for women with disabilities.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This Guidance Note is a first reflection for EDF on the role of European DPOs in international cooperation, to help us strengthen our advocacy in

this field. It is, of course, also a message to our partners on how they can rethink their development cooperation work and the role DPOs can play.

Our main conclusion is that this process opened a conversation internally in EDF and with our partners, which could lead, in the future, to a better and stronger engagement of DPOs in international cooperation.

The following recommendations will be helpful for future avenues of work:

1. **The involvement of European DPOs should not replace the involvement of DPOs** from the countries that are benefiting from development projects and policies.
2. **This document constitutes a first gathering and analysis of the perspectives of European DPOs in international cooperation.** Due to limitations of funding and timing, only DPOs with the EDF membership and partner network were included in the discussions and analysis. Therefore, future work would need to include an equal share of DPOs from our partner countries in the global south to truly assess the situation.
3. **The collection of case studies we have documented online is just skimming the surface of the experience of our members and partners:** there would be benefits from a deeper exploration of the range of DPO activities in international cooperation and their impact.
4. **The role DPOs in Europe play in advocating for disability inclusive development and humanitarian policies should be deeply explored.** Many European DPOs have been working effectively alone and in networks to achieve better development policies and programmes (both at the national and EU level) and this is something we haven't had a chance to study further.
5. **Development agencies are progressively making their international cooperation programmes more inclusive.** They are working in collaboration with DPOs, both in Europe and in partner countries. These are initiatives to enhance the engagement of DPOs by providing support through adapted approaches to funding, capacity building, long term partnership and projects which should also be explored, as development agencies are an essential partner in disability inclusive development.

## Further reading

- Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's publication and CBM (2018): [Creating A New 'Business As Usual': Reflections And Lessons From The Australian Aid Program On Engaging With Disabled People's Organisations In Development Programming And Humanitarian Action](#)
- Bridging the Gap study (2019): [Inclusion of persons with disabilities in European Union development cooperation](#)
- [IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#) (2019).
- Light for the World (2019): [Cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities in community programmes: A learning guide](#)
- MyRight (2019): [Empowered - a report on disability, inclusion and human rights](#)