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Inclusion in international cooperation: commitment and reality

Recommendations from the Swiss Disability and Development Consortium (SDDC)

The role of Swiss international cooperation in advancing disability inclusion

By Chantal Baumgarten

International cooperation plays an active role in ensuring disability inclusive development and humanitarian action. Disability-inclusive responses and policies are needed to enable persons with disabilities to actively participate in and benefit from development and humanitarian outcomes on an equal basis with everyone else. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) requires States Parties, including Switzerland, to render their international cooperation inclusive of persons with disabilities. Switzerland has taken some positive steps in this direction, but still needs to improve its policies and programmes for full inclusion. Its efforts in implementing the CRPD so far, will be scrutinized by the CRPD Committee in 2022.



Women's self-help group in Ghana. Photo: © CBM

Disability inclusion in international cooperation – the CRPD

In 2006, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reaffirming that all persons with disabilities enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Switzerland ratified the CRPD in 2014.

A unique feature of the CRPD is that for the first time, a human rights convention contains a stand-alone provision on international cooperation (Article 32), and recognizes the responsibility of countries that have ratified the convention to include persons with disabilities in their international development efforts. It also contains a provision on situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies (Article 11), including armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters. Both of these articles direct attention to the concerns and contributions of persons with disabilities within a country's international cooperation efforts, demanding that countries undertake "[...] appropriate and effective measures between and among States and, as appropriate, in partnership with relevant international and regional organisations and civil society; in particular with organisations of persons with disabilities" (CRPD, 2006, Article 32).

This means that Switzerland as a State Party to the CRPD is not only obligated to implement it within its own national context, but also within its international cooperation efforts worldwide.



Persons with disabilities in Lomé, Togo rehearse a short sketch as part of a theatrical group. Photo: © CBM/Hayduk

A human-rights based approach to the inclusion of persons with disabilities

The CRPD constitutes a paradigm shift and has introduced the human-rights based approach towards disability inclusion. Persons with disabilities are no longer seen as passive recipients of charity, protection or care, as this was the case in now outdated approaches, but are active rights holders.

In compliance with the General Principles (Article 3) of the CRPD, all international cooperation efforts must uphold and promote core human rights norms and standards including non-discrimination, accessibility, participation and accountability. Importantly, international cooperation shall not create new barriers, strengthen existing ones or discriminate against persons with disabilities. For example, an international cooperation project supporting the institutionalization of persons with disabilities, regardless of the size of the facility or institution, deprives persons with disabilities of liberty and perpetuates or exacerbates discrimination and exclusion of this group by segregating them from the community (CRPD, 2006, Article 19), and therefore contradicts the CRPD.

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Inclusion of persons with disabilities in international cooperation requires a so called 'twin-track' approach; with both the mainstreaming of disability in international cooperation efforts as well as disability-specific initiatives. A combination of mainstream and targeted measures is needed to systematically include persons with disabilities in all aspects of international cooperation. For example, following a humanitarian emergency, persons with disabilities should have full access to relief operations and protection including communication, shelter, distribution points etc., while also being provided with specific support such as assistive devices or medication. Such a combination is essential to ensure the systematic inclusion of persons with disabilities.

State of the inclusion of persons with disabilities in Swiss international cooperation

Two years after ratification and every four years thereafter, countries that have ratified the CRPD are reviewed by a Committee of 18 independent experts. The Committee then presents a set of Concluding Observations, or recommendations, which the country commits to implement. Switzerland will foreseeably be reviewed on its implementation of the CPRD (including within its international cooperation) in March 2022.

While promoting human rights and a rights-based approach in its international cooperation, Switzerland does not yet fully respect, protect and fulfill the rights of persons with disabilities in its international cooperation. Specifically, the core guiding principles of accessibility, non-discrimination and reasonable accommodation, full and effective participation as well as the twin-track approach are not yet fully understood and translated into action by the Swiss government.



In Bangladesh following heavy flooding, CBM together with a partner organization supported persons with disabilities by providing unconditional grants and quality assistive devices. Photo: © CBM

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Swiss international cooperation must improve in order to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities throughout all its projects and to enhance the design and implementation of disability specific ones.

To implement the CRPD in international cooperation, it is essential for countries to develop a strategic framework to guide their work in disability inclusion. The Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stresses that donors who solely focus on “developing guidance and building internal capacity around disability inclusion in general” are not doing enough. Such approaches are “insufficient to achieve systematic change, since a strategic framework is needed to provide direction and focus on disability inclusion” (Special Rapporteur, 2020). Both Australia and the United Kingdom have national strategies for disability inclusive development.

Aside from a disability-specific strategy, disability-inclusion must also be mainstreamed into all other policy documents of international cooperation, including those that do not target persons with disabilities specifically. To date, Switzerland does not yet have an overarching strategic framework on disability inclusion, and no adequate financial and human resources that would allow for a comprehensive approach.

The meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations is a common principle that must be applied in all stages of international cooperation. In line with the motto of the disability movement of “nothing about us, without us”, the CRPD calls for the close consultation and active participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all issues relating to them (CRPD, 2006, Article 4.3) as they are the experts on matters affecting them. Persons with disabilities must be consulted and actively involved in the conversation between donor country and recipient countries in international cooperation projects; throughout all strategy, policy and programme processes, including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of international cooperation plans. Unfortunately, Switzerland does not yet have a consistent strategy to consult and engage meaningfully with organizations of persons with disabilities in Switzerland and in recipient countries.

Disability inclusive programmes in international cooperation are generally sparse and underfunded. As of 2018, many donor countries started marking their development projects against a ‘disability marker’, which helps identify to which extent an international cooperation project aims to be disability inclusive. Initial data from the 2019 OECD DAC policy marker on disability, suggests that only 3% of all Swiss development projects aimed to be disability inclusive. More needs to be done to ensure consistent and quality marking of these projects. In fact, in 2019, only 13% of all Swiss development projects were screened for disability inclusion.

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All programs and projects in international cooperation must also collect data on disability and disaggregate along disability in order to track their quality and impact, and to make sure that persons with disabilities in general and specific groups of persons with disabilities are not left behind. The lack of these in Swiss international cooperation efforts is a major setback for the evaluation of programmes. Furthermore, all international cooperation budgets, including funds going to NGOs, the private sector and multilateral agencies, need to be compliant with the CRPD and uphold the principles of equality, non-discrimination and participation.



Reducing poverty in Bihar, India through a community based inclusive development initiative. Photo: © CBM/ Argum/ Einberger

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SDDC recommendations for Swiss international cooperation

The Swiss Disability and Development Consortium (SDDC) has the following five key recommendations for the implementation of the CRPD by Switzerland in its international cooperation:

- **No guidelines, no priority.** Switzerland needs guidelines to inform its work on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in its international cooperation. Current efforts on disability inclusion are small scale, ad-hoc and mostly segregating.
- **Nothing about us, without us!** Switzerland must ensure the full and active participation of persons with disabilities throughout all processes affecting them, including in its international cooperation. Arrangements must be made to enable their participation.
- **What isn't counted, doesn't count.** Switzerland has committed itself to be a leader on data collection, but it is not systematically collecting and disaggregating data on disability in

its international programmes.

- **Leave no one behind in humanitarian crises.** Persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected in humanitarian crises. Switzerland committed itself to making its humanitarian action inclusive of persons with disabilities, but it is not clear how it is living up to its commitment.
- **What isn't budgeted for, doesn't get done.** Switzerland must sufficiently budget for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in its international cooperation and must commit itself not to finance programs and services that segregate persons with disabilities from the community.

Who is the SDDC?

The Swiss Disability and Development Consortium (SDDC) is a Swiss based network advocating for the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in Swiss international cooperation. SDDC was founded in 2016 by CBM Switzerland, FAIRMED and Handicap International Switzerland (HI). In 2019, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) joined the consortium. CBM Switzerland hosts the secretariat. The work of SDDC aims at the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by Switzerland, specifically in relation to its international cooperation efforts. In addition to its advocacy work, SDDC gathers, develops and shares expertise, resources and information on disability-inclusive development. Please visit www.leave-no-one-behind.ch for more information.

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