The Commonwealth and Disability Rights: A Vision Taking Shape

The Mission of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) to seek full implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities across the 56 countries of the Commonwealth has come a step nearer with the agreement of a final draft of the Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) on 26th March 2026 by the Expert Working Group.

The DIAP was originally drafted by CDPF, after it was clear at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, that the Commonwealth did not take Disability Equality seriously. Access was poor, there were no disabled speakers or topics at the various meetings and yet around 430 million citizens in the Commonwealth were disabled people at that time in 2022.

We pushed hard with a number of countries supporting us for the DIAP to be adopted at CHOGM 2024 in Samoa. The Commonwealth Secretary blocked progress, maintaining that a number of countries has reservations. Instead of adoption, we got a nod of encouragement to set up an Expert Working Group nominated by 17 countries and were asked to provide nominations for a DPO advisory Group to the EWG. From March 2025 to March 2026, a number of separate and joint meetings were held. Professor Anna Lawson of Leeds University was appointed as an independent consultant at our prompting.

The Advisory Group consisted of the following members: Carla Qualtrough (Canada, former Member of Parliament and former Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion); Richard Rieser (UK, Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum), Sarah Kamau (Kenya, United Disabled Persons of Kenya), Floyd Morris (Jamaica, UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), Abia Akram (Pakistan, National Forum of Women with Disabilities), Setareki Macanawai (Fiji, former CEO, Pacific Disability Forum), Heather Walkus (Canada, Council of Canadians with Disabilities) and Rachael Chomba (Zambia, Zambian Federation of the Disabled). Additionally, the Commonwealth Children and Youth Disability Network was engaged in an advisory capacity, similarly providing guidance from October 2025, making suggestions and recommendations to the EWG on the draft Action Plan.

We did not get everything that was in the original DIAP accepted, particularly the proposal for a representative Commonwealth DPO Committee or a Ministerial Meeting. But enough is in the DIAP for DPOs to use to move implementation of Disability Rights forward once agreed upon by Heads in November at the CHOGM 2026 in Antigua.

COMMONWEALTH DISABILITY INCLUSION ACTION PLAN

Final Draft (26 March 2026)

A. PURPOSE

The purpose of this Disability Inclusion Action Plan is to affirm the commitment of Commonwealth Member Countries to the realisation of the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities in the Commonwealth, in alignment with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). To this end, it provides a framework for action for Commonwealth Member Countries and outlines how the Commonwealth Secretariat could support and facilitate such action. It recognises the varied social and economic circumstances of Commonwealth countries. It also recognises that over 60% of the Commonwealth's population is under the age of 30, and that particular attention must therefore be given to ensuring that the human rights of children and young persons with disabilities are fully realised.

In implementing and reviewing this Disability Inclusion Action Plan, Commonwealth Member Countries and the Commonwealth Secretariat will consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, including children and young persons with disabilities and their representative organisations.

Law Ministers resolve to endorse this Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan.

Member countries will review the Action Plan five years from adoption and adjust as needed.

B. OBJECTIVES OF COMMONWEALTH MEMBER COUNTRIES

Objective 1: General CRPD Principles

Commonwealth Member Countries should:

- Recognise that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and socially-created barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. This approach reflects the social model of disability and highlights the need for a rights-based approach.
- Ensure that their laws and policies are consistent with the obligations set out in the CRPD. This includes promoting and advancing equality and non-discrimination for all persons with disabilities and taking proactive steps to dismantle the socially-created barriers that hinder their full and equal

participation in society — whether those barriers are legal, physical, attitudinal, organisational, economic, technological or other.

- Uphold and be guided by the general principles of the CRPD. These are:

(a) Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons;

(b) Non-discrimination;

(c) Full and effective participation and inclusion in society;

(d) Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;

(e) Equality of opportunity;

(f) Accessibility;

(g) Equality between men and women;

(h) Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

- Recognise and address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation experienced by persons with disabilities.

Objective 2: Meaningful Involvement and Political Participation

Commonwealth Member Countries should:

- Ensure meaningful, inclusive and accessible engagement and consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, including children and young persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, guided by 'nothing without us', in the development, adoption and implementation of laws, policies and programmes relating to persons with disabilities.
- Ensure that electoral processes promote and facilitate the inclusion of persons with disabilities, including in voting processes (e.g. by facilitating access to voting stations) and the candidacy of persons with disabilities for federal, state and local elections.
- Ensure the meaningful and systematic participation of persons with disabilities in shaping emergency preparedness, response, and risk reduction strategies, in light of the disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities of recent global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing impacts of climate change and natural disasters.
- Support Indigenous peoples with disabilities to take on leadership roles in disability-related decision-making and advisory groups.

Objective 3: Disability-Inclusive Governance

Commonwealth Member Countries should:

- Adopt a twin-track approach to the implementation and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities, namely (i) recognising the rights of persons with disabilities as a cross-cutting issue requiring mainstreaming and integration across all aspects of society (as the first track), and (ii) taking all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others (as the second track).
- Collaborate across government departments and other levels of national, regional and local government, in consultation with persons with disabilities and the organizations that represent them, to identify factors that hinder the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and develop and implement strategies for the proactive removal of all barriers to ensure the full participation of persons with disabilities in all spheres of society.
- Amend or repeal existing legislation that discriminates against persons with disabilities, and adopt a CRPD-compliant approach to the development of all laws, policies, programmes and services, so that the human rights of persons with disabilities are assured.
- Take appropriate steps to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities, including in public and private employment contexts, and recognise that denial of reasonable accommodation could constitute discrimination on the basis of disability.
- Take steps to ensure procurement processes adhere to accessibility standards and the principle of non-discrimination in accordance with their legal systems, including through engagement with persons with disabilities, where appropriate
- Take steps to improve the economic and social outcomes of persons with disabilities, recognising that they are disproportionately affected by financial insecurity and poverty compared to persons without disabilities. This can include advancing and promoting equitable access to education, such as early learning, primary, secondary and tertiary education, employment, entrepreneurship, and financial resources to support sustainable economic inclusion.

Objective 4: Training and Capacity Building

Commonwealth Member Countries should:

- Build the capacity of public and government officials and youth in understanding the rights of persons with disabilities to enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others.
- Ensure people working in justice mechanisms (including corrections, courts and police) receive training and support so that persons with disabilities are granted equal access to justice, and equal recognition before (and protection of) the law.
- Build the capacity of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations, in particular those representing marginalised communities, to

enable them to meaningfully contribute to local and national policy development and share their perspectives.

Objective 5: Data Collection

Commonwealth Member Countries should:

- Gather and disseminate data, disaggregated by disability status and other intersecting status such as age, sex, income, race and indigenous identity, using appropriate measurement tools and data-collection methodologies (such as those proposed by the Washington Group or equivalent appropriate measurement tools) to inform planning and policy-making.

C. OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT

Objective 1: Engage with organisations of persons with disabilities

- The Commonwealth Secretariat should closely consult and actively involve organisations of persons with disabilities to ensure that the perspectives of persons with disabilities (including children and young people) are meaningfully reflected in Commonwealth-level discussions.

Objective 2: Support Member Countries with Human Rights Expertise

The Commonwealth Secretariat should support Member Countries, on request and where appropriate, through its human rights expertise in connection with relevant issues including:

- the development of legislation in line with the CRPD, including by drafting model legislation and other toolkits and guides;
- the identification and assessment of barriers to disability rights and inclusion in existing legal, policy, and practice frameworks; and
- the fulfilment of reporting obligations to the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Objective 3: Support Member Countries with Relevant Capacity Building

The Commonwealth Secretariat should support Member Countries, on request and where appropriate, with:

- initiatives to build capacity on disability rights awareness and inclusion, including by developing model curricula and toolkits; and
- initiatives to build relevant capacity in the justice system, including by drafting model judicial training programmes on implementing the rights of persons with disabilities; and

- initiatives to develop disability rights awareness and expertise in key services such as education and health.

Objective 4: Support Member Countries by Facilitating Network Building and Knowledge Sharing

The Commonwealth Secretariat should support Member Countries, on request and where appropriate, by:

- convening fora of stakeholders (including organisations of persons with disabilities), establishing task forces, knowledge-building activities, exchanges, mentoring and networking activities, to maximise synergies and increase the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities;
- collating and disseminating good practice examples of mechanisms which support and strengthen the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities; and
- sharing information highlighting relevant research.

Objective 5: Support Member Countries through Research

The Commonwealth Secretariat should support Member Countries, on request and where appropriate, by:

- conducting empirical research on the rights of persons with disabilities; and
- conducting empirical research to identify key barriers hampering Commonwealth countries from ensuring the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities.

Objective 6: Advance Disability Inclusion within the Commonwealth Secretariat

The Commonwealth Secretariat should embed disability inclusion across its internal policies, programs, and practices by:

- aligning internal practices with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- exploring ways to remove barriers and improve accessibility in physical spaces, digital platforms, and communications;
- providing reasonable accommodation and assistive technologies to staff and participants in Secretariat led meetings;
- promoting equal opportunities for persons with disabilities in recruitment, retention, and leadership roles; and
- supporting disability awareness and inclusion training for all staff.