

COMMONWEALTH DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM: CHAMPIONING DISABLED PEOPLE'S RIGHTS ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) began in Kampala, Uganda in the run-up to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2007 to provide an organised voice for Disabled People's Organisations across the Commonwealth.

In truth, it started on the floor of the *ad hoc* Committee on the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in New York in 2005/6, when I, as the representative of the UK Disabled People's Council, met up with James Mwanda representing Kenya as a Kenyan Disabled Parliamentarian. In March 2008, at a meeting in London of delegates from 19 countries, organised largely by Mark Harrison who raised the money from the then UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Commonwealth Secretariat, CDPF was formally set up, a constitution was adopted, and an Executive Committee was elected. An office was established in India and the CDPF was registered there. In June 2009, a four-day meeting was held in Kampala, Uganda on the UN CRPD and to develop future plans. In 2009 and 2010 respectively, the Chair (Mwanda) and Vice-Chair (George Daniels of Trinidad) sadly died, which led to a hiatus.

In September 2011 and January 2012, a reconstituted Executive Committee was formed and met, with Rachel Kachaje of Malawi becoming Acting Chair. As a result, a meeting of 35 country delegates was held at the 8th Disabled People's International (DPI) World Assembly in Durban, South Africa. There, delegates settled that a meeting should be held to both build the CDPF and give it direction in New York in September 2012, to coincide with the UN Conference of States Parties (COSP). In January 2012, CDPF took part in the Commonwealth Secretariat's Human Rights Unit (HRU) Roundtable, and it was agreed we would collaborate in holding a joint meeting at the UN COSP.

Many disabled people do not have equal access to health care, education and employment opportunities, do not receive the disability-related services that they require, and experience exclusion from everyday life activities. Following the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

(CRPD), disability is increasingly understood as a human rights issue. Disability is also an important development issue, with an increasing body of evidence showing that disabled people experience worse socio-economic outcomes and poverty than non-disabled people. Without including and implementing the disability rights perspective, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals will never be achieved. Disabled People's Organisations and their capacity to campaign, advise and implement these rights are the key to progress.

It may be useful for me to provide an explanation of the language that we use in the CDPF.

- **Disabled people:** Why we still choose to call ourselves 'disabled people': In the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) we call ourselves 'disabled people' because of the development of the 'social model of disability'. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a disabled person's medical condition was thought to be the root cause of their exclusion from society, an approach now referred to as the 'medical or individual model' of disability. We use the 'social model of disability', where the barriers of environment, attitude and organisation are what 'disable' people with impairments and lead to prejudice and discrimination. So, to call ourselves 'persons with disabilities' is to accept that we are objects and powerless. We also view ourselves as united by common oppression, so are proud to identify as 'disabled people' rather than 'people with disabilities'. When we are talking about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we will use 'people or persons with disabilities'.

Developing the capacity of Disabled People's Organisations in the South Pacific

A training project that the CDPF organised with World of Inclusion, UK Disabled People's Council and the Pacific Disability Forum (funded by the Commonwealth Foundation) to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) shows the advantage of North-South collaboration in the Commonwealth.



Richard Rieser is a disabled teacher, trainer, writer, speaker, campaigner, filmmaker, and an international advocate/consultant for inclusive education and disability equality in many countries around the world. Richard is the General Secretary of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum and runs World of Inclusion Ltd. All of his work is prompted by disability equality, inclusion and the social model of disability. He is the author of the only handbook on implementing Article 24: Inclusive Education, for the Commonwealth. He has held many positions, including UK Rep on the European Disability Forum, Chair of the Alliance for Inclusive Education and Vice-Chair of the Council for Disabled Children.



Above: Members of the Executive Committee of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum.

With the help of the Forum, a mapping and information gathering analysis was carried out to provide a situation analysis for the project. Training materials were developed and eight target countries - Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu - were asked to select two leaders and a young activist (aged 25 years or under) to be considered for taking part in the capacity-building training week in Port Moresby. The training was a great success, and much was learned by all participants. As a result of the training, five more Pacific Island countries ratified the UN CRPD in the subsequent three years.

Revitalising the CDPF

After 2013, through organisational difficulties and a lack of funding, the CDPF 'went to sleep'. In July 2018 at the Global Summit on Disability held in London, I brought together a number of previous members of the CDPF to raise funding and hold a relaunched General Assembly during the Conference of State Parties in New York in June 2019. The existing, Chair Rachael Kachaje from Malawi enthusiastically took up

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the reins until her untimely death in September 2020. Sarah Kamau from Kenya has since very effectively taken on the role of Chair.

Sourcing funding from the Disability Rights Fund (DRF) in the UK, I was able to restart the campaign and an MoU was signed with Action on Disability and Development (ADD) to assist with the organisation of the CDPF General Assembly. The collaboration, now in its third year, has worked well, especially with the loaning of Gemma White as a part-time administrator from ADD.

Key objectives and priorities

The CDPF set out to represent the majority of disabled people in the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth promotes democracy and equality across its member countries with over 2.6 billion citizens. Over 450 million are disabled people, mainly young people. The self-organisation of Commonwealth Disabled People's Organisations and their collaboration, capacity building with each other and advocacy play a crucial role in implementing the UN CRPD and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The relaunch of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum, with the support of Disabled People's Organisations in a majority of Commonwealth countries, gives us a supportive and democratic structure to ensure disabled people across the Commonwealth are not left behind. We reawakened old contacts and made new ones. We aimed to have a majority of female delegates and a majority on the new CDPF Executive Committee.

In 2019, delegates from 27 national DPOs met in person for the General Assembly at the Ford Foundation, who generously donated a meeting space. Delegates agreed to an amended constitution, a

work plan and elected an Executive Committee of 17 and co-opted 3 other members to give us a representative Committee with a range of impairments, geographical locations and a gender balance (11 women and 9 men).

The CDPF declaration stated: *“We recognise much has still to be achieved to create equality for more than 450 million disabled people throughout the 53 countries of the Commonwealth and to achieve the standards set in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, our organisations and countries need core funding, human and technical resources to advise and pressure our governments to fulfil their obligations towards their disabled citizens. We call on the international community, bilateral and multilateral donors and our governments’ to adequately fund us in carrying out our role as Representative DPOs in line with Article 4 and 33 of the UNCRPD.”*

The CDPF is committed to improving the position of disabled people across the Commonwealth, with two key priorities: to grow in influence and develop our organisation. The CDPF has grown and now represents a wide range of Disabled People’s Organisations, representing cross impairment needs in 44 Commonwealth countries, and a further 45 Associate Disabled People’s Organisations representing particular impairments, disabled women or youth in their respective countries. In all, the CDPF has member organisations in 47 of the 54 Commonwealth countries.

The CDPF held face-to-face meetings in Malta in February 2020 where we developed strong policies through forums on women, employment, inclusive education, humanitarian situations, accessibility, stigma and discrimination, and anti-racism. Essential ways of working were agreed upon, and plans were made to provide a training course and interventions at the forthcoming CHOGM in Rwanda in June 2020, before it was postponed when COVID-19 struck.

The impact of COVID-19 on disabled people

The CDPF has reorientated its second grant from the Disability Rights Fund to support building solidarity for Disabled People’s

Organisations and support for disabled people in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have held two online Summits, carried out a survey and held regional meetings.

As a result of these consultations, it emerged that many governments were largely ignoring the needs of disabled people in their responses to the pandemic with respect to:

- Under-estimating or ignoring that disabled people were at the highest risk of infection. Eugenicist ideas were creeping in with notions of ‘herd immunity’, ‘do not resuscitate’ and a lack of response to those in care homes, long-stay hospitals or institutions. The net impact in certain countries was much higher death rates amongst disabled people than in the rest of the population [According to the Office of National Statistics in the UK, 68% of deaths amongst disabled people, who account for 20% of the population].
- Lack of support during ‘lockdown’ for food and medical needs (examples in India, Pakistan, South Africa and elsewhere).
- Lack of accessible communications about the pandemic, for example, a lack of sign language at government briefings (the UK Government were taken to court on this issue), a lack of ‘easy read’ communications on information about COVID-19 (Canadian People First had to provide their own information for certain groups), or curfews administered by police and military who weren’t trained to communicate with deaf people (at least one example from Uganda where a deaf man was shot at by military police during a curfew).
- Lockdown, leading to the closure of schooling in most Commonwealth countries, resulted in many disabled students not being given the support or communication technology to continue their studies and accelerating permanent drop-out.
- Lack of appropriate protective personal protective equipment (PPE) for both carers and individuals.
- As the vaccines were introduced, there was a failure to vaccinate those most at risk in some countries and a more general failure of the ‘richer’ countries of the Commonwealth to share sufficient vaccines through the Co-Vax exchange.

The CDPF wrote to many Commonwealth governments to emphasise these points with responses received from Guyana, Dominica, Bangladesh, New Zealand, Malaysia, India and South Africa.

The CDPF developed an online training course on ‘Disability Equality Capacity Building’ with 421 disabled people from 41 Commonwealth countries taking part.² This course was funded by the Commonwealth Secretariat and Disability Rights Fund to develop accessible course materials, providing International Sign Language, captioning, online resource production and accreditation. Following the success of the course, materials will be provided via USB sticks for those without sufficient internet connectivity and providing course materials translated from English. Course materials are also available to access on our website.

The CDPF will follow this up by developing a network of experienced trainers and developing structured dialogues with state parties guided by the thinking and experience of disabled people

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themselves. This is in line with the UN CRPD, which says ‘*Nothing About Us Without Us*’.

Ratifying the UN CRPD

164 countries have ratified the UN CRPD, with Botswana being the latest Commonwealth country in August 2021. Today, 51 out of 54 countries in the Commonwealth have ratified the UNCRPD. This leaves only Cameroon, Solomon Islands and Tonga to ratify. However, according to the UN CRPD, ratification should lead to a substantial change in the lives of disabled people and in the majority of countries, we are a long way from full implementation. The CDPF is committed to ensuring this implementation takes place and will work with all agencies and accredited Commonwealth Organisations, State Governments and centrally Disabled People’s Organisations to achieve these aims.

Key areas where the profile of disabled people’s interests must improve in the Commonwealth include:

- **Climate and environmental stability.** The recent UN COP26 statement only mentioned disabled people once. Thirty-two out of forty-two small island countries are in the Commonwealth, and we know that disabled people are often at greatest risk in these countries. Disabled people must be fully included in developing emergency plans and strategies to ameliorate the impact of climate change. (Article 11)
- **Improving livelihood, employment, health provision and food security.** Disabled people are disproportionately represented amongst the most insecure and poorest communities. Sustainable change must come from the grassroots, with disabled people included and Disabled People’s Organisations

being consulted by the leadership. (Article 25,26, 27 & 28)

• **Legal protections for disabled people.** Ending institutions and providing the support and legal protection for disabled people to live in the community, with their needs met and choice and control over how they are treated. (Article 12 and 19)

• **Protecting disabled women and girls.** Disabled women and girls are impacted by patriarchy and sexism and are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence. Effective measures must be introduced, led by women and their allies, supported by effective legislation and enforcement. (Article 6 and 23)

• **Accessibility and assistive technology** must be a fundamental part of all development and product and infrastructure design. Disaggregated disability data should be regularly gathered, utilising the Washington Group methodology, to enable Governments to

know and plan for the real demographic of disabled people in their population. (Article 9, 20 & 31)

- **Inclusive education** must be recognised and legislated as requiring a complete transformation of the education system including, curriculum, assessment, teacher development and school design with disabled pupils and adults playing a key role in challenging ‘disablism’. (Article 24 and 7)

All of the above and much more requires strong and effective legislation to fully implement and enforce the implementation of the UN CRPD and disabled people’s human rights. Increasing the number of disabled Parliamentarians in all Legislatures is a key part of such a transformation. (Article 29)

In order for disabled people’s interests to be effectively represented, Governments must ensure representative Disabled People’s Organisations are properly funded, and that regular dialogue takes place with them. (Article 4.3 and 33)

Achieving the above and many other positive changes required to implement human rights for disabled people, the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum and its member organisations are keen to cooperate further with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Further information: Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum www.commonwealthdpf.org and World of Inclusion Ltd www.worldofinclusion.com

References:

- ¹ <https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/uganda-deaf-man>
- ² <https://commonwealthdpf.org/training>