**COMMONWEALTH DISABLED PEOPLE’S FORUM**

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Dear Secretary General, 22nd August 2025

Thank you for meeting the delegation from the Commonwealth Disabled Peoples Forum on 30th July. Please find below our promised contribution to the Commonwealth Strategy 2025-2030.

**CDPF INPUT TO COMMONWEALTH STRATEGY 2025-2030**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan. We value the Secretariat’s commitment to strengthening partnerships that advance Commonwealth priorities and improve the lives of all Commonwealth citizens, including the estimated 450 million persons with disabilities who make up a significant part of our populations. We note that: 1) this is a plan for the Secretariat, 2) the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning have complementary plans which must be meaningfully aligned with the Secretariat’s Strategic Plan to ensure disability inclusion, and 3) the work of the broader Commonwealth family of stakeholders including CDPF (Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum),particularly that representative Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs), should be recognised, supported, and resourced within these plans. This alignment is essential to reflect the full breadth and inclusivity of Commonwealth activity.

1.2 We recognise that priorities set by non-progressive Global forces are leading to reduced budgets in the Commonwealth and amongst member Governments but urge that a vital part of the Strategy needs to be based on the principle of pooling resources and avoiding unnecessary duplication in support for our vital social, economic and political goals.

1.3 From the perspective of CDPF, the core elements to emphasise are:

* Recognising the Secretariat’s role as guardian of the Commonwealth Charter and Declarations, and as steward of the Commonwealth’s institutional architecture, while embedding disability rights and inclusion as central principles in all areas of partnership and governance. This should include along with the continued formal recognition of CDPF as an Accredited Organisation, and as the representative and collective voice of disabled people/persons with disabilities across the Commonwealth, ensuring sustained engagement and accountability.
* Recognising the specific needs, rights, and aspirations of persons with disabilities, and ensuring that all pan-Commonwealth initiatives are disability- inclusive. This requires that access to education, healthcare, employment, political participation, and resilience-building be designed to meet the basic and evolving needs of disabled citizens.

**2. SAFEGUARDING AND STRENGTHENING THE COMMONWEALTH ECOSYSTEM:**

**THE SECRETARIAT’S ROLE**

2.1 The Secretariat may not be able to address every challenge directly, but it holds a central responsibility as guardian of the Commonwealth Charter and Declarations and as steward of the Commonwealth’s institutional architecture. From the disability and inclusion perspective, this role is vital in ensuring that the Commonwealth ecosystem reflects the aspirations and rights of persons with disabilities, who are among the most marginalised yet resilient citizens of the Commonwealth. The Secretariat must act as the connective tissue that sustains and amplifies inclusive leadership, ensuring that the capacities and contributions of disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) and inclusion-focused partners are fully recognised.

This leadership role has not been acknowledged in previous Commonwealth reports, but it must now be made explicit in the Strategic Plan with a disability-inclusive lens in both the internal workings of the Commonwealth Secretariat and in CHOGM, Ministerial Meetings and other policy forums.

The Secretariat should provide practical support for accessible and robust partnerships, ensure clear points of contact for DPOs and other civil society actors, and maintain transparent, predictable mechanisms for engagement that guarantee accessibility for all. Without such inclusive coordination, the Commonwealth ecosystem risks fragmentation and the exclusion of people with disabilities, undermining its shared vision.

In this context, a formal agreement with CDPF, as the recognised collective voice of persons with disabilities across the Commonwealth, should be established to serve as a channel for structured engagement. This should complement bilateral relations with individual Accredited Organisations. In addition, discussions are needed on resourcing and funding inclusive partnerships within the evolving institutional architecture, ensuring that DPOs and inclusion-led organisations can engage meaningfully and sustainably.

2.2 We welcome the recognition of partnerships in the Theory of Change framework, particularly the Secretariat’s role in convening and sustaining collaboration. We strongly recommend that the Strategic Plan give prominence to this core function, explicitly embedding disability inclusion in all partnership frameworks. This requires a cross-cutting commitment to inclusive partnership working as a central role of the Secretariat, led at the senior management level (e.g., DSG) with dedicated colleagues who have both lived experience and expertise in disability, inclusion and technical knowledge. The delivery plan should further develop this function, ensuring that engagement with non-state actors, including DPOs, is not only routine but also transformative, making the Commonwealth a true model of inclusive global cooperation.

**3. ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS OF DISABLED PEOPLE**

3.1 The Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF) is concerned that the basic needs of Commonwealth citizens, clearly articulated in the Commonwealth Charter, the 2024 CHOGM Communiqué, and other Declarations, are insufficiently reflected in the Strategic Plan. This omission risks weakening the connection between the Secretariat’s strategy and the wider ecosystem of pan Commonwealth activity, including the critical work of CDPF. It also neglects the lived realities of millions of citizens, particularly persons with disabilities, who continue to face systemic exclusion from development gains. We urge acceleration of the joint efforts to reach agreement on the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP), by the regular joint involvement of the Advisory Representatives of DPOs/OPDs with the country nominated Expert Group to reach agreement on a DIAP that can be agreed by all Commonwealth countries (55 of whom have already ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. CDPF’s contributions must be acknowledged and supported in an ongoing way if the Commonwealth is to deliver on its vision of equity and inclusion.

3.2 We propose that this gap be addressed within the current framework through a clear statement at the outset of the Plan, affirming that all three pillars, democratic resilience, environmental resilience, and economic resilience, are sub-sets of an overarching Commonwealth commitment to the goal of achieving:

**‘Resilient, inclusive, and equitable societies and peoples’**.

Such framing ensures that disability inclusion, human rights, and social justice are not seen as add-ons, but as integral to the Commonwealth’s development vision.

3.3 The Strategic Plan must also explicitly reference the commitments in Clause 11 of the Commonwealth Charter. This includes promotion of gender equality, opportunities for decent work, advancing human dignity, and protecting and promoting the rights and aspirations of children, youth, persons with disabilities, older persons, Indigenous peoples, and marginalised and minority groups. For CDPF, this is a critical inclusion, as it reinforces the Commonwealth’s obligation to uphold the rights and aspirations of the 1.3 billion persons with disabilities worldwide, many of whom live in Commonwealth

member states.

Embedding these principles strengthens pan-Commonwealth capacity to work in genuine partnership on these core issues and prevents the perception that the Commonwealth is retreating from its commitment to the very people it exists to serve, particularly at a time when equity, resilience, and inclusion are most urgently needed.

**4. CONTEXT**

4.1 The Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF), warmly welcomed the Secretary- General’s statement in her first meeting with AOs on 15 July 2025: “We cannot address the challenges faced by our member countries and their desire for shared prosperity by continuing with the business-as-usual model. And I want to be clear: this vision can only be achieved if we all are part of it.”

For CDPF, this acknowledgement is vital. Persons with disabilities, estimated at one billion globally and 450 million across the Commonwealth, must be explicitly recognised in the Commonwealth’s prosperity agenda. They form a heterogeneous population, including people with physical, sensory, intellectual, mental, psychosocial, multiple, and invisible impairments. Within this diversity are women, children, older persons, Indigenous peoples, rural and remote communities, and intersecting minority groups, many of whom experience the highest rates of poverty and exclusion.

Despite this diversity, persons with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers, from inaccessible infrastructure, discriminatory laws and policies, and exclusion from education and employment, to lack of access to healthcare, assistive technologies, digital tools, and political participation. These barriers are structural, environmental, attitudinal, and institutional, rooted in an oppressive disabling past, leaving millions locked out of development opportunities.

The 2023 UN Disability and SDGs Report warns that persons with disabilities are being left furthest behind in most of the Goals, with persistent gaps in education, employment, social protection, and resilience. It stresses that without urgent acceleration, “the SDGs will not be achieved for persons with disabilities.”

For CDPF, this underlines that inclusion, accessibility, and equity must be the foundations for moving beyond **“business as usual.”**

This imperative aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), particularly Article 9 (Accessibility), Article 19 (Living independently and being included in the community),Article 24 Inclusive Education, Article 25(Health), Article 27 (Employment) and Article 29 (Participation in political and public life).

4.2 We also welcomed the Deputy Secretary-General’s statement that: **“We have to distinguish what we have been doing from what we will do going forward. We must ask: How do we enhance this current partnership? There is tremendous know-how and passion in this room, accredited organisations are a real asset. Your participation is vital to get to where we want to be in the next five years.”**15th July2025

For CDPF, this validates the lived expertise of Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs). Persons with disabilities and their representative bodies bring critical insight into dismantling barriers in education, employment, healthcare, accessibility, climate resilience, and democratic participation. Their leadership is essential for achieving the SDGs:

* SDG 4 (Quality Education): through inclusive and accessible learning systems (UNCRPD Article 24).
* SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): by promoting fair, inclusive, and accessible labour markets (UNCRPD Article 27).
* SDG 13 (Climate Action): by embedding disability-inclusive disaster preparedness and resilience (UNCRPD Article 11).

4.3 In the spirit of partnership, “to get to where we want to be CDPF recognises the three pillars defined by the Board of Governors for the Strategic Plan. While regretting that Accredited Organisations were not consulted in setting these pillars, and noting that they do not fully reflect either the Commonwealth Charter or the 2024 CHOGM commitments, we accept this framework as given. However, CDPF insists that these pillars be implemented in ways that prioritise equity, diversity, accessibility, and disability inclusion. Without this, the pillars risk reinforcing exclusion rather than fostering resilience and inclusion..

4.4 As the full Strategic Plan has not yet been shared, CDPF and partners propose measures that are both aligned with its intentions and responsive to critical gaps. Our framing anchors persons with disabilities at the centre of each pillar, democratic, environmental, and economic resilience, because resilient societies are impossible without inclusive participation, accessible systems, and sustainable livelihoods for all. This strengthens the Commonwealth’s contribution to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well- Being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and reinforces the principle of **Leave No One Behind**. It also ensures compliance with UNCRPD obligations across sectors, most notably Article 28 (Adequate standard of living and social protection).

4.5 We affirm the Secretary-General’s vision: “this vision can only be achieved if we all are part of it.” For CDPF, this means ensuring that disabled citizens, particularly the poorest and most marginalised, are not left on the margins, but are recognised as equal partners and leaders in building inclusive, accessible, and sustainable Commonwealth futures.

**5. STRATEGY INPUT**

The Commonwealth, with its 56 diverse member nations, represents over 2.7 billion people, more than 450 million are persons with disabilities. For the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF), disability inclusion is not a foot note to development but a central measure of progress. When democracies fail to include disabled voices, they weaken. When trade overlooks disabled entrepreneurs and workers, economies lose potential. When education, energy, and resilience planning are not accessible, societies leave millions behind.

Secretary-General Hon. Shirley Botchwey’s new vision for the Commonwealth is both timely and inspiring. Yet, its success will depend on how meaningfully it embraces the rights, aspirations, and leadership of persons with disabilities. The five major shifts she outlined are democracy, trade, distance learning, renewable energy, and global resilience, that offer unprecedented opportunities to transform lives, provided inclusion is at the core. From the CDPF perspective, these shifts must be harnessed to create a Commonwealth where no citizen is invisible, and where persons with disabilities are recognised as equal partners in shaping a sustainable and just future.

**5.1. Democracies and Social Development Must Be Responsive**

**Expectations:**

For over 1.3 billion persons with disabilities worldwide, including millions across the 56 Commonwealth nations, democracy often feels incomplete. Participation in political and civic life is frequently curtailed by inaccessible electoral systems, weak enforcement of disability rights laws, and tokenistic representation. Disabled people expect that democracy will mean equal voice, equal vote, and equal influence. Agencies and Governments committed to social development, meanwhile, must prioritise inclusive education, health, employment, and social protection systems that leave no one behind.

**Way Forward and proposals:**

* Mandate accessible electoral processes: ballots, polling stations, political

campaigns, and parliamentary procedures and selection of representatives.

* Strengthen disability rights commissions and independent monitoring bodies to

ensure accountability.

* Invest in inclusive social protection schemes, community support systems, and

universal healthcare and education systems with reasonable accommodation.

* Create spaces where disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) are not just
* consulted but are part of the decision-making process (co-production).

**5.2. Trade Must Become a Win-Win for Businesses, Economies, and People**

**Expectations:**

Trade is usually seen in terms of GDP and markets, but for disabled people, economic

inclusion means employment, entrepreneurship, and access to markets. Persons with

disabilities face exclusion from supply chains, inaccessible workplaces, and lack of

credit support. CDPF envisions trade that recognises persons with disabilities as

economic actors, members of co-operatives, employers, innovators, artisans, and entrepreneurs, whose contributions strengthen economies.

Proposals:

* Governments and businesses must adopt disability-inclusive procurement

policies, ensuring supplier diversity.

* Trade agreements should carry social clauses mandating accessibility and

inclusion.

* Support small businesses and co-operatives run by persons with disabilities through credit, training, and access to markets.
* Promote accessible tourism and services within the Commonwealth as a major

growth sector that benefits all.

**5.3. Distance Learning And Digital Skills For Every Child**

Expectations:

For children with disabilities, access to education remains very patchy. Distance learning and digital education offer a transformative opportunity, if accessibility is built in from the start, provided they have sufficient teachers. Digital divide, lack of assistive technologies, and unaffordable devices often exclude disabled learners. CDPF insists that inclusive digital learning is not optional; it is a right.

Proposals:

* All Commonwealth e-learning platforms must meet international accessibility

standards (WCAG, DAISY, captioning, sign language).

* Governments must subsidise assistive technology, internet access, and devices

for disabled children.

* Teacher training should include disability-inclusive pedagogy in both physical

and digital classrooms. A large boost in supply and remuneration of teachers is necessary.

* Peer networks across the Commonwealth should exchange best practices in

inclusive digital education, including learning about Disability Equality (Article 8 UNCRPD)

**5.4. A Renewable Energy Revolution Across the Commonwealth**

**Expectations:**

The climate crisis disproportionately impacts persons with disabilities, who are often

excluded from disaster planning, energy policy, and green job opportunities. Renewable energy must not only transform economies but also ensure disabled people are resilient, safe, and part of the workforce of the future.

Proposals:

* Renewable energy projects must prioritise accessibility in infrastructure, from

solar-powered schools to disaster-resilient housing.

* Green jobs and skilling programs must recruit and train persons with

disabilities.

* Energy policy must integrate inclusive disaster risk reduction, ensuring disabled

people are not left behind in climate emergencies.

* Finance for renewable projects should incentivise accessibility and disability

inclusion.

**5.5. Our Voice Must Count in Global Resilience Building**

**Expectations:**

Global crises, from pandemics to conflicts to climate shocks, expose the high risk of persons with disabilities, yet their voices are often excluded from international

negotiations. CDPF calls for a seat at the table: **“Nothing about us, without us.”** The

Commonwealth’s collective strength should be used to amplify the voices of disabled

people in global resilience strategies i.e. being part of Com. Sec. delegation to COP.

Proposals:

* Institutionalise representation of DPOs in Commonwealth delegations to UN and

global forums.

* Build a Commonwealth Disability Resilience Network to share data, innovations,

and strategies.

* Fund cross-country research on resilience led by disabled scholars and

practitioners.

* Use Commonwealth platforms to showcase inclusive models of disaster

management, health response, and conflict recovery.

In essence, the CDPF’s perspective is that these five shifts must be harnessed to build a truly inclusive Commonwealth, where persons with disabilities are not passive recipients but equal shapers of democracy, trade, education, energy, and resilience.

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