



May 2026

NEWSLETTER

COMMONWEALTH DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM

Empowering the voices and rights of disabled people across the Commonwealth

IN THIS ISSUE

1. Update from the General Secretary's Desk
2. Introducing CDPF Executive Committee 2026-2027
3. CDPF Annual General Meeting 2026
4. In the News
5. Voices & Perspectives
6. Driving Change: CDPF Activities & Initiatives
7. On the Ground: Members in Action

Update from the desk of the General Secretary Richard Rieser

Pushing Back on Funding Cuts: A Partial Victory

Following strong campaigning from CDPF, we reversed the decision to cut DPO Movement Building Grant from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Development by 100% to 50%. The cut comes about from the decision to cut UK FCDO spend by 40% from April 2027 and increase UK armaments spend by this amount. But what was to happen in 2026 was unclear. Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF), GLAD, International Disability Alliance, Disability Rights Fund and others benefitted from this 4.5 million.

CDPF wrote to UK Minister Baroness Chapman, Sec of State Evette Cooper MP, Emily Thornbury MP, Chair Foreign Affairs Committee and our Trustee Marsha de Cordova MP and the Chair of the Overseas Development Committee, MP Sarah Champion. The result was a hearing at the Overseas Development Committee, Questions asked in the House of Commons by Emily Thornberry MP and Marsha De Cordova MP, a disabled person. Answers having to be put forward to the Questions and an Equality Impact Assessment on the UK change of policy that recommended not leaving a cliff edge, but only reducing spending in 2026/27 by 50%. This meant all the organisations received 50% of previous grant. CDPF is still not out of the woods and we are seeking funding for all our various projects of more than £500k, but our core funding is secure until April 2027. We urgently need other funders to fund our wide range of work.



Richard Rieser
General Secretary

The Commonwealth and Disability Rights: A Vision Taking Shape

The Mission of the 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 (CHOGM) 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 (hereafter referred to as the 'Youth 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.

Meet the CDPF Executive Committee 2026–2027

Following the Global Officers election held in February 2026, the CDPF Executive Committee for 2026–2027 is now in place.

Elections were held for all positions except the four senior officer roles - Chair, two Vice-Chairs, and Treasurer. These positions will be up for election in 2027.



Sarah Muthoni Kamau
Chair



Dr. Sruti Mohapatra
Vice-Chair



Kerryann Ifill
Vice-Chair



Scader Louis
Treasurer



Richard Rieser
General Secretary



Clare Gibellini
Jt. Asst Secy Equalities



Patience Ogolo-Dickson
Jt. Asst Secy Equalities



Rasanjali Pathirage
Asst Secy Admin



Diethono Nakhro
Communications Officer



Kihembo Wilbert
Youth Officer



Gaudence Mushimiyimana
Women's Officer



Emile Gouws
Rep for Intellectual Disability
& under-represented groups



William Ward-Boas
Indigenous Peoples
Officer



Nancy Maguire
London Liaison Officer

To view the full list of Executive Committee members, click the link below:

<https://commonwealthdpf.org/executive-committee/>

Annual General Meeting of the CDPF

The Annual General Meeting of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum was held on 19 March 2026. It was held online and was attended by 42 delegates. A further 16 delegates took part in the Proxy vote circulated at the close of the meeting to all delegates to vote if they had not voted at the online meeting.

Four motions were moved and adopted at the AGM.

1. GLOBAL SITUATION

Moved by R. Rieser and Seconded by Sruti Mohapatra

"CDPF are greatly concerned about the detrimental impact of the United States administration on the progress of Disabled People and their Rights across the Commonwealth and in particular their stopping of Overseas aid and attacks on Diversity, Inclusion and Equality and the worsening economic situation so created.

CDPF welcomes and supports the approach taken by Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada Leadership as expressed in Speech at Davos and subsequent actions. In particular, recognising that the rules-based order is dead, replaced by the dominance of most powerful states utilising their trading positions to bully others and forming an alliance of middle powers to form an alternative trade block based on human rights values. CDPF calls on Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth countries to join this alliance underpinned by the values of the Commonwealth Charter. This should include middle powers such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada but also UK, EU and India, Pakistan and South Africa, but also regional groupings of Commonwealth countries including smaller states of e.g. Pacific and Caribbean.

Part of the development of this coalition must be the full implementation of Disability Rights. CDPF call on all Commonwealth States to support the adoption of the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan at CHOGM 2026. To this end we welcome the adoption of the Nadi Declaration by Commonwealth Law Ministers in February 2026, who agreed to "Promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind on the basis of disability .

In light of 2026 being the Twentieth Anniversary of the adoption by the United Nations of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CDPF is working for a Disability Rights Implementation one day Symposium at the end of CHOGM on Thursday 5th November in Antigua.

To this end we call on Commonwealth countries to financially and materially support this initiative and to ensure their delegations to CHOGM include one DPO/OPD nominated representative and a Minister with responsibility for disability.

In addition, we urge all member organisations to lobby their Government to support campaign 109 to renegotiate the United Nations Charter to more fairly represent the 193 countries of the World and the interests of their people."

VOTE: For-24; Ag-0; Abs-0; **PROXY:** For-13; Ag-0; Abs-1

TOTAL: For-37; Abs-1

ADOPTED

2. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Moved by R. Rieser and Seconded by Sruti Mohapatra

"CDPF recognises many of the 240 million disabled children are not in school or not benefitting from effective inclusive education where they thrive. CDPF recognises it is necessary to use our knowledge, our voices and our networks to champion the rights of disabled children everywhere, ensuring the inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream systems. To challenge ourselves, our organisations, and our allies-governments to work in partnership with families, disabled people and their representative organisations, teachers, and others directly involved in inclusive education. To move from talking to doing, and deliver real change for the millions of disabled children worldwide and especially across the Commonwealth, CDPF agrees to prioritise campaigns around increasing attendance in mainstream schools of disabled pupils and students seeking to provide solutions to the barriers that lead to high drop-out or non-enrolment, especially at transition points between phases of education e.g. early years /primary/secondary, secondary/tertiary."

VOTE: For-24; Ag-0; Abs-0 **PROXY:** For-13; Ag-0; Abs-1

TOTAL: For-37; Ag-1; Abs-1

ADOPTED

3. EMPLOYMENT AND COOPERATIVES

Moved by Sarah Kamau and Seconded by Patience Ogulu Dickson

CDPF agrees to prioritise campaigns to prioritise the development of rural opportunities for employment of persons with disabilities through championing the establishment of cooperatives and cooperatives in general.

In light of resolution UN Resolution 80_182 (15thDec 2025) which highlights the important role of cooperatives in advancing inclusive social and economic development, especially by supporting groups that are often left behind (women, youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and rural communities). It recognises that cooperatives help reduce poverty and hunger, strengthen food security, create decent jobs, and expand access to services and opportunities – often reaching communities that traditional profit-driven businesses do not.

CDPF, like the motion, calls on governments and partners to strengthen cooperatives through targeted budget support, improved laws and regulations, capacity-building, and greater access to finance and technology. The resolution also encourages closing the digital divide to support cooperatives, improving data and evidence on their impact, and proposes holding an International Year of Cooperatives every 10 years after 2025 to sustain global momentum.

CDPF notes five key values that both the co-operative and Disabled People's Movements share: inclusivity and egalitarianism; collective self-interest; autonomy, choice and control in everyday life; non-paternalistic solidarity based on principles of mutual aid rather than charity; and making the environment fit people rather than vice versa.

VOTE: For-29; Ag-0; Abs-0 **PROXY:** For-14; Ag-0; Abs-0

TOTAL: For-43

ADOPTED

4. EQUALITIES

Moved by Clare Gibellini and Seconded by Sarah Kamau

“As an organisation representing disabled persons across the Commonwealth, we the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum recognise that justice and prosperity cannot be achieved without dismantling the legacies of colonialism, systemic discrimination, and economic exclusion that continue to shape global inequalities.

CDPF will champion policies and initiatives rooted in Human Rights, Equality, and Inclusive Development, where Inclusion, Diversity, and Equality (IDE) are not mere principles, but working realities. This role acknowledges the deep intersections between disability, gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and class, and commits to amplifying the voices of those with disabilities most often left behind: women and girls, children, Indigenous peoples, LGBTI+ communities, and other marginalised groups across the Commonwealth. Through a postcolonial lens, this role recognises that oppressive structures, past and present, manifest differently across contexts, and that equitable participation requires redistributing not just opportunity, but power.

The Assistant Secretary – Equalities will therefore serve as a bridge between advocacy and accountability, ensuring that the lived experiences of disabled people, especially those facing compounded marginalisation, inform every level of CDPF’s work, from strategy to representation.

To take the above forward the CDPF, Board/Executive and Assistant Secretaries Equalities will develop:

- **Policy Leadership:** Develop and implement equality-oriented policies addressing structural discrimination and socioeconomic disparities affecting disabled people and intersecting communities.
- **Human Rights Advocacy:** Represent CDPF within Commonwealth and UN forums to advance inclusive human rights frameworks that uplift minorities and promote global equity in wealth and wellbeing.
- **Intersectional Strategy Development:** Integrate intersectionality into all CDPF programmes, ensuring that diverse experiences, across disability, gender, race, class, sexuality, and age, inform decision making.
- **Research and Analysis:** Undertake research on the postcolonial and economic dimensions of inequality, contributing to CDPF’s policy briefs, reports, and international advocacy submissions.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Build partnerships with grassroots disability organisations, women’s groups, Indigenous collectives, unions, and LGBTI+ networks to enhance collaborative action.
- **Education and Capacity Building:** Develop training resources on Inclusion, Diversity, and Equality (IDE) for CDPF members, Secretariat staff, and affiliates across Commonwealth regions.
- **Monitoring and Accountability:** Establish frameworks to measure progress toward equality of wellbeing and wealth, using participatory approaches that reflect lived experience”.

VOTE: For-23; Ag-0; Abs-1 **Proxy:** For-14; Ag-1; Abs-1

TOTAL: For-37; Ag-1; Abs-1

ADOPTED

To read the full minutes of the Annual General Meeting, click the link below:

<https://commonwealthdpf.org/annual-general-meeting-2026/>

IN THE NEWS

Australia's disability rights record under the spotlight at the United Nations

Report by:

People with Disability Australia (PWDA)

Australia appeared before the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) in February 2026 as part of the Committee's review of Australia's sixth periodic report under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

As part of this process, People with Disability Australia (PWDA) and the National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA) appeared before the CESCR at its informal civil society briefing session. PWDA and NEDA highlighted the concerning gap between policy commitments and lived experience, highlighting that many people with disability continue to face high rates of violence, poverty and exclusion. For example, only around half report feeling valued in their communities, and more than one-third of households with a person with disability have a low household income. Progress on rights relating to access to housing, transport and support services is not only slow, but in some cases has been going backwards.

PWDA and NEDA also raised serious concerns about the limited implementation of the Disability Royal Commission recommendations, ongoing barriers within the NDIS, and the lack of data on people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. These gaps make it harder to address systemic inequality and ensure services meet community needs.

Prior to attending the Committee's civil society briefing session, PWDA and NEDA provided a written submission with input from Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) outlining their recommendations. The submission can be accessed [here](#).

PWDA welcomed the Committee's Concluding Observations that reflected many of the concerns raised. Key recommendations include:

- increasing social security payments
- simplifying access to the Disability Support Pension,
- addressing employment barriers, and
- developing a national strategy to reduce poverty.

The Committee also called for stronger inclusive education, improved community-based mental health supports, and better access to technology and cultural spaces.

The review is an important accountability moment for Australia and provides a further basis for disability organisations and allies to advocate for practical reforms that improve the everyday lives of people with disability.

CRPD Committee findings on Lesotho, Samoa, Pakistan

The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recently issued its findings on five States Parties during its latest session. The States Parties reviewed included the Commonwealth countries of Lesotho, Pakistan and Samoa. The findings contain the Committee's main concerns and recommendations on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as positive aspects.

LESOTHO

The first review of Lesotho included standard recommendations: legal harmonisation, recognition of economic, social, and cultural rights, increased budget allocations (paras. 71, (d), and l), stronger and better-resourced disability governance structures (para. 65(b)), and OPD consultation (para. 9(b)). The Committee clarified, under Article 13, that procedural and age-appropriate accommodations apply not only to judicial and administrative, but also (and for the first time) to customary dispute-settlement mechanisms, which recognises and entitlement but presents implementation challenges. For the right to privacy - until 2023 almost unaddressed - the recommendations are detailed: the state must prevent interference, raise awareness among persons with disabilities, service providers, and others (para. 45(a)), ensure parties request consent for access and management of personal, health, rehabilitation, and disability-related information (para. 45(b)), and introduce complaint mechanisms (para. 45(c)). For Lesotho and also Pakistan, the Committee revived the call for a "non-rejection" education policy, urging the State to end special education, develop a plan for quality inclusive education, and prohibit discontinuation or referrals based on impairment (para. 49(b)).

SAMOA

Nearly 10 years after ratifying the Convention, Samoa still lacks a comprehensive legal and policy framework for implementing the CRPD. The Committee recommended adopting one, including through a Disability Bill (para. 6(b)). Samoa plays a key role in global climate discussions as Chair of the Alliance of Small Island States and in International Court of Justice proceedings. The Committee therefore urged it to "[p]romote the leadership and representation of persons with disabilities in...advocacy efforts on climate change, including in the implementation of the Paris Agreement and reporting of NDCs" (para. 20(c)). This aligns and coincides in time with the recognition of the Disability Caucus at the UN Climate Change Conference. The Committee noted that disability policies are "largely donor-driven and time-bound," with "limited government ownership and sustainability" (para. 60). It recommended "adequate and sustainable domestic funding...reducing reliance on external donor support" (para. 61(b)) and called for increased fiscal space and domestic resource mobilisation for sustainability.

PAKISTAN

The review of Pakistan highlighted typical federal-state concerns. It found significant disparities in rights protection across provinces and weak coordination between government levels. This results in fragmented implementation. The Committee called for “effective federal and interprovincial coordination mechanisms to ensure a reasonable level of harmonisation of the laws and policies [of] different provinces” (para. 6(d)). Natural disasters such as floods in 2022 and 2025 present challenges and have affected many persons with disabilities. The Committee required the State to provide fully accessible emergency services nationwide. It called for “full and effective representation and participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in the federal and provincial disaster prevention and mitigation mechanisms” (paras. 20(a) and (b)). Many countries experience exploitation of persons with disabilities, especially children, through forced begging. In Pakistan, it could also be linked to international human trafficking. The Committee noted that policies under the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act are not inclusive. Thus, it urged the State to “[i]nvestigate and report on the number of persons with disabilities who are being subjected to human trafficking,” and to ensure access to remedies, sanctions, and reparations (para. 30(b)).

Source: IDA CRPD Pulse (April 2026)

For full details of the 34th Session of the CRPD Committee, go to the link below:

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=2898&Lang=en

“

Whoever is elected should step up and do the work, not just make promises. They need to listen to people in the community and understand the real challenges we face every day. That's especially important for people with disabilities, who often depend on strong advocacy, access to resources, and leaders who are willing to stand up for our needs.

~ **Nevelyn Noel**

Disabled Voter, Antigua and Barbuda 2026

”

VOICES & PERSPECTIVES

From Exclusion to the Global Stage: Why Education Is Personal

Speaking at the **World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) 2026** hosted by @Institute Of Neurodiversity, hosted in collaboration with the United Nations, was one of the greatest honours that I ever experienced.

It was the first time I had the opportunity to contribute to this global platform one that shapes conversations, policies, and perspectives on autism across the world. But for me, this was never just about standing on an international stage.

It was personal.

Because my journey into education, advocacy, and inclusion did not begin in lecture halls or policy spaces.

It began in exclusion.

When Education Fails, It Leaves a Mark

I am an autistic person who was **non-speaking from the time I entered primary school until the age of 15.**

During those years, I experienced an education system that did not understand me and often did not try to.

Mainstream education excluded me. Not always intentionally, but through a lack of understanding, rigid expectations, and approaches that prioritized compliance over connection.

One experience has stayed with me throughout my life.

In Grade 2, a teacher tied my hands.

The intention, as it was explained, was to stop behaviours that were seen as inappropriate to make me appear "less different" so that I would not scare the other children. It was also framed as a way to teach me what was considered acceptable behaviour.



Dr. Emile Gouws

Postdoctoral Fellow @ University of South Africa | Research, Education. International Autism Self advocate | Executive on the Steering Committee of South Africa's response to the United Nations

But what it taught me was something else entirely.

It taught me what it feels like to be **misunderstood, controlled, and excluded rather than supported.**

There were also times when I spent breaks alone not because I chose to, but because I did not fit into environments that were never designed for someone like me.

These experiences are not easy to share.

But they are important to share.

Because they are not unique.

Why Education Is Personal

When I spoke at WAAD 2026, I did not speak only as an academic or an international advocate.

I spoke as someone who has lived through the consequences of educational systems that fail to recognize difference.

Education is not abstract.

It is deeply personal.

It shapes how we see ourselves, how others see us, and what opportunities we are given or denied.

My experiences also exposed me to very different approaches to autism.

On the one hand, I experienced approaches aligned with **Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)**, which often focused on changing behaviour to fit normative expectations.

On the other hand, I later encountered **DIR/Floortime**, which focuses on connection, emotional development, and meeting the individual where they are.

Having experienced both, I can say this:

Approaches that prioritise **relationship, respect, and understanding** have a far more meaningful and lasting impact than those focused solely on behaviour.

From Non-Speaking to Speaking Out

For many years, I was a child who could not express himself through speech.

Yet I understood far more than people realised.

Today, I stand in spaces connected to the United Nations, contributing to global discussions on inclusion, accessibility, and neurodivergence. This journey from being non-speaking to speaking on international platforms is not just a personal achievement. It is evidence of what becomes possible when individuals are given **time, support, and the opportunity to develop in ways that respect who they are.**

From Lived Experience to Professional Purpose

My experiences in education did not only shape my personal journey they shaped my professional path.

I became a specialist teacher.

I worked with learners who, like me, were often misunderstood or underestimated. I saw firsthand how small changes patience, flexible communication, relational approaches could transform a child's experience of learning.

Today, in my academic work at the University of South Africa and through my advocacy with the Commonwealth Disabled Peoples Forum, I continue to push for systems that are more inclusive, more humane, and more responsive to diversity.

A Call Beyond Awareness

Platforms like WAAD are important because they create visibility. But awareness alone is not enough. We must move towards **acceptance that leads to action.**

Action in how we design education systems. Action in how we train teachers. Action in how we understand communication and behaviour.

The principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities remind us that inclusion is not optional. It is a matter of rights, dignity, and participation.

A Different Future Is Possible

Standing at WAAD 2026 was an honour I will carry with me for the rest of my life. I'm so blessed to have the best support system in the world. I'm married to a beautiful autistic Alexic lady named Sammi and we are loved and supported by our mother and carer.

But more importantly, it was a reminder of why this work and advocating matters.

Because somewhere today, there is a child sitting in a classroom misunderstood and called ret*rd and cr*pple, excluded, or underestimated.

That child is not the problem.

The system is.

And systems can change.

Final Reflection

I was once a child whose hands were tied in a classroom. Today, I use my voice on global platforms connected to the United Nations.

That contrast should make us reflect. Not on how far I have come but on how much further our systems still need to go.

Because inclusion is not about fixing individuals.

It is about **transforming systems so that every individual has the opportunity to belong, to learn, and to thrive.**

When AI Misses the Most Vulnerable: The Hidden Risks in Disaster Planning for People with Disabilities

Artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming how governments and agencies prepare for and respond to natural disasters. From analysing flood risks to predicting bushfire behaviour and coordinating logistics, AI tools promise efficiency and speed. Yet these same attributes can unintentionally heighten the risks faced by people with disabilities, not because of technology itself, but because of how it is designed, trained, and applied.

Invisible People

AI systems rely on data to make decisions, and in disaster planning, that data often comes from geolocation records, online services, and government databases. But not everyone leaves a clear digital trace. Populations without reliable internet access, digital identifiers, or participation in digital health systems, such as people with disabilities living in remote, low-income, or digitally excluded communities can effectively vanish from AI models.

For example, if a predictive system maps safe evacuation routes using smartphone location data, people who do not use smartphones or assistive technologies compatible with those systems may simply not appear. Similarly, when risk profiles are created from historic emergency management data, individuals who never accessed formal government channels may be entirely absent. This digital invisibility translates into policy invisibility, meaning emergency resources and communications may never reach those most at risk.

Efficiency over equity: how optimisation deprioritises the vulnerable



Clare Gibellini
*Independent Advocate |
Disability, Gender, LGBTQIA+,
Climate and DIDRR*

AI systems are designed to optimise outcomes, typically for efficiency, cost-effectiveness, or measurable success. In economics or logistics, this approach makes sense. In humanitarian contexts, it can be ethically fraught. When algorithms prioritise areas where intervention yields the “highest return on investment,” the least profitable and most complex populations often fall to the bottom of the list.

Disaster planning driven by AI may allocate more evacuation resources to densely populated regions, faster communications to urban areas, or medical supply chains to larger hospitals, while rural, disability-focused, or low-income communities receive less attention. Because people with disabilities may require tailored support such as accessible transport, communication aids, or specialised medical care, their needs can be seen as inefficient relative to standard emergency operations. In this way, AI unintentionally reproduces a utilitarian logic that values scale over equity, leaving vulnerable populations structurally deprioritised.

Bias baked into the data

Data is rarely neutral. Historical records of emergency service access, infrastructure development, and social support reveal patterns of inequity, who was reached, who was ignored, and who was excluded. If these records serve as training data for AI systems, the technology will repeat and amplify those biases.

For instance, if an AI-driven resource model learns from past events where disability services were underfunded or slow to respond, the system will “learn” that disability-specific needs do not warrant as much resource allocation. Similarly, language used to categorise communities in data systems (e.g., “low priority,” “remote,” or “non-critical”) can entrench exclusion by coding human bias into machine logic. The outcome is a disaster planning framework that frames vulnerability as inefficiency rather than injustice.

The Ethical implications on data, privacy, and autonomy

Beyond bias and exclusion, AI in disaster planning raises profound ethical questions about privacy and autonomy. Predictive systems often rely on sensitive data such as medical histories, disability registrations, or mobility patterns that can expose individuals to surveillance or categorisation without consent. Labelling a person as “high-risk” for evacuation or medical intervention can strip away choice, leading to well-intentioned paternalism if not ethically governed.

In emergencies, consent often becomes secondary to urgency, but AI-driven systems that pre-emptively act on incomplete or biased data can make errors that have real consequences for safety, dignity, and privacy. This risk is especially acute for people with disabilities who may already experience systemic oversight or paternalistic decision-making in social services.

Building a fairer foundation for AI-driven disaster planning

Technology can support equitable disaster planning, but only if inclusion is treated as a design requirement, not an afterthought. To ensure AI enhances rather than endangers the resilience of people with disabilities, policymakers, technologists, and advocates must act decisively.

Three key recommendations:

1. Build data equity from the ground up. Governments and organisations must invest in inclusive data collection that represents the full range of human diversity, including people with disabilities who exist outside conventional digital infrastructures. Community-based participatory mapping and partnerships with disability organisations can fill the gaps that big data misses.

2. Embed ethical and accessibility standards in AI design and procurement. Emergency planning technology should meet clear accessibility, fairness, and transparency criteria. This means co-designing AI systems with disability advocates, ensuring accountability for bias testing, and openly reporting limitations. Ethical procurement frameworks should mandate these safeguards before deployment.
3. Retain human oversight and accountability. Human expertise, empathy, and contextual understanding must guide AI outputs, not be subordinated to them. Disaster response decisions should remain subject to review by trained responders and community representatives who can recognise when an algorithm's logic fails the test of equity.

A future that sees everyone

AI can make disaster response faster, more data-informed, and potentially life-saving, but only if it sees the full spectrum of humanity. When entire populations are invisible to digital systems, or when technology values efficiency over compassion, equity becomes the casualty.

For people with disabilities, disaster resilience depends not just on the strength of technology but on the inclusiveness of governance. As we move toward an era of AI-enabled planning, the question is not simply what our systems can predict, but whom they choose to protect.



When disability equality is embedded at all levels of decision-making and development planning, inclusive and sustainable progress becomes possible for all

- Sarah Muthoni Kamau
Chair CDPF



DRIVING CHANGE CDPF ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

CDYF Capacity Building Webinar Series

Between October 2025 and March 2026, the Commonwealth Disabled Youth Forum (CDYF), with support from the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF), successfully delivered its first Capacity Building Webinar Series. What started as a simple idea to create learning spaces for disabled youth quickly grew into something deeper, a platform for connection, reflection, and collective voice across the Commonwealth.

The series brought together young people with disabilities, advocates, and experienced leaders from different countries and backgrounds. Each session created an opportunity not only to learn, but also to share lived experiences and challenge systems that continue to exclude disabled youth.



The journey began with a powerful opening session on Climate Change Through an Inclusive Lens. This discussion highlighted how climate change does not affect everyone equally. Persons with disabilities often face greater risks during disasters, displacement, and environmental crises, yet they are rarely included in planning and response efforts. Participants explored the need for inclusive climate policies and the role of disabled youth in shaping climate action. It was a strong start that set the tone for honest, relevant, and action-focused conversations.

As the series continued, it moved into more personal and often overlooked areas. One of the most impactful sessions focused on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). This topic is rarely discussed openly in many communities, especially in relation to disability. Yet it directly affects the dignity, safety, and wellbeing of young disabled people.

The session created a safe space for participants to speak openly about the barriers they face. These included lack of access to information, inaccessible health services, untrained health workers, and harmful stereotypes that silence young people with disabilities. The discussion also highlighted the increased risks faced by women and girls with disabilities. At the same time, it was not only about challenges. Participants explored solutions such as inclusive health policies, accessible communication tools, community awareness, and the importance of empowering disabled youth to advocate for their rights. For many, this session was a turning point, showing the power of creating space for conversations that are often avoided.



Education was another key theme in the series. A session on inclusive education emphasized that the problem is not the learner, but the system. Schools, policies, and attitudes must change to remove barriers and create environments where all learners can thrive. The discussion drew from global frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and highlighted the role of teachers, communities, and governments in making inclusion a reality.

This conversation naturally extended into discussions on higher education and employment. Participants reflected on the gap between accessing education and securing meaningful opportunities in the labour market. It became clear that inclusion in education must be linked to real pathways into employment, leadership, and decision-making. Without this connection, access alone is not enough.

COMMONWEALTH DISABLED YOUTH FORUM (CDYF)

CAPACITY BUILDING

Webinar Series

PANEL DISCUSSION EDITION

TOPIC

Rewriting Leadership: Disabled Youth Taking Charge

27TH MAR 2026

9:30 AM GMT

VENUE: ZOOM ONLINE

Moderator: Harunah Damba (Uganda)

Panelists: Sashiro Raulo (Kenya), Judy Sango (Dominica), Sampson O. Bembah (Ghana), Janitha Rukmal (Sri Lanka), Higenyi S. Cyprian (Uganda)

Link: commonwealthdyf.org/events

VISIT OUR WEBSITE: www.commonwealthdyf.org

@CommonwealthDYF

Another important session focused on the rights and development of disabled girls and women. This discussion brought attention to the multiple and layered forms of discrimination they face. Even where policies exist, implementation often remains weak. Participants emphasized that inclusion must move beyond words and become action led by disabled women themselves. The session also highlighted how issues such as education, health, economic empowerment, and protection from violence are all connected, and must be addressed together.

The final session of the series brought everything together with a strong focus on leadership and meaningful participation. One message stood out clearly throughout the discussion: inclusion is not just about being present, it is about having influence.

As one participant reflected, "It's not enough to be in the room without having influence." Another added, "Presence doesn't mean you have the power to shape decisions." These reflections captured a reality that many disabled youth experience. Being invited into spaces is important, but it is not enough if their voices are not heard or acted upon.

At the same time, the session offered a hopeful and forward-looking perspective on leadership. It challenged traditional ideas that leadership is defined by titles or positions. Instead, it emphasized purpose, action, and the courage to challenge systems that were not designed with inclusion in mind. This message resonated strongly with participants and marked a powerful close to the series.

Across all six sessions, accessibility remained a key priority. The use of sign language interpretation, captioning, and inclusive facilitation ensured that more participants could engage meaningfully. This was not just about talking about inclusion, but demonstrating it in practice.

The webinar series also highlighted some important challenges. Internet connectivity, time zone differences, and limited awareness in the early stages affected participation. However, these challenges became learning points. Improvements in communication, use of reminders, and sharing of recorded sessions helped increase engagement over time.

Despite these challenges, the overall impact of the series was clear. It created a strong sense of community among disabled youth across the Commonwealth. It strengthened confidence, built knowledge, and opened space for voices that are often unheard. It also positioned CDYF as a growing platform for youth-led learning and advocacy.

Looking ahead, the success of this first webinar series marks the beginning of a new phase for CDYF. There is clear potential to expand these efforts into more structured programs, deeper engagement, and stronger advocacy at both national and Commonwealth levels.

More importantly, the series has shown that when disabled youth are given the space, tools, and support, they do not just participate. They lead, they influence, and they redefine what inclusion truly means.

CDYF continues to grow as a space where voices matter, experiences matter, and leadership is shaped by purpose.

All the recordings and resources are available on our website: www.commonwealthdyf.org

Report by:

Kihembo Wilbert

Youth Officer CDPF

The Commonwealth Disabled Youth Forum (CDYF) is a youth-led initiative supported by the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF)

From Exclusion to Empowerment: Transforming lives of girls with disabilities in Kuje, Nigeria

In Kuje, a community in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, many girls with disabilities once lived on the margins, excluded from education, vulnerable to violence, and with little hope for economic independence.

Today, that story is changing.

Through a project implemented by the Advocacy for Women with Disabilities Initiative (AWWDI), with support from the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF), girls with disabilities are gaining skills, confidence, and a voice in their communities.

Building a Foundation for Inclusion

The project, *"Empowerment of Girls with Disabilities through Inclusive Education, Economic Independence and Protection from Gender-Based Violence,"* addressed three major barriers:

- Limited access to inclusive education
- Lack of economic opportunities
- High exposure to gender-based violence

From the beginning, the goal was clear, **No girl should be left behind.**

Through school engagement, community outreach, and stakeholder collaboration, safe and inclusive spaces were created for learning and growth.

In September 2025, AWWDI launched the project at the Junior Secondary School Paseli, Kuje, Abuja Federal Capital Territory FCT during a One-Day Inception and Role-Sharing event held on 19th September 2025.

The event brought together girls with disabilities, school authorities, community stakeholders, and implementing partners. The opening address by AWWDI Executive Director Mrs. Patience Ogolo-Dickson and a goodwill message from CDPF's representative, Madam Gaudence, set the tone for a collaborative and inclusive initiative.

School Principal Dr. Richard Ugbone welcomed the project, reaffirming JSS Paseli's commitment to creating an enabling environment where girls with disabilities can learn alongside their peers without discrimination. A particularly moving moment came when children with disabilities sang the national anthem in an inclusive setting, a simple but powerful symbol of equal opportunity.



For the full report by **Patience Ogolo- Dickson**, Executive Director: Advocacy for Women with Disabilities Initiative (AWWDI), click the link below:

<https://commonwealthdpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/FROM-EXCLUSION-TO-EMPOWERMENT.pdf>

Regional Capacity Building Training Programmes

The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) successfully hosted two training programmes in 2025. The first was a five-day Training the Trainers & Development Programme in New Delhi, India, from 9 to 13 March, 2025, and the second one was a Youth Leadership Training Programme held in Bridgetown, Barbados from 14 to 16 October, 2025.

The two training programmes were part of CDPF's ongoing mission to promote full inclusion of persons with disabilities across all sectors of society, guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Training the Trainers & Development Programme, India

The training brought together disability rights leaders and advocates from across the region – 5 from Sri Lanka, 2 from the Maldives, and 19 participants from across India. Unfortunately, due to visa issues, no participants from Pakistan or Bangladesh were able to attend this time.

The training focused on strengthening leadership, advocacy, and capacity-building for disability rights, aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).



Youth Leadership Training Programme, Barbados

The Youth Leadership Training brought together disability advocates, young leaders, and policymakers from across the English-speaking Caribbean. There were 20 participants from 11 Caribbean countries and 5 from Barbados.

The aim was to strengthen inclusive development and accelerate the implementation of the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP).



A PARTICIPANT REFLECTS

In March last year, I had the opportunity to attend a Leadership Training Programme organised by CDPF in Delhi. The programme was highly informative, empowering, and inspiring. It focused on building awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities and developing leadership skills among participants so they can contribute positively to society and advocate for inclusion. The training introduced us to various provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).



Aqib Rehman
Participant | Delhi Training

The training began with an introduction to disability rights and the importance of changing society's perspective toward disability. Persons with disabilities often face barriers in education, employment, transportation, healthcare, and public spaces. These barriers are created by society and lack of accessibility rather than by disability itself. The training emphasised the need to remove these obstacles and create an inclusive environment where everyone can participate equally.

One of the most valuable learning for me was about inclusive education. We discussed how every child has the right to quality education in mainstream schools with proper support systems. Inclusive education ensures that students with disabilities are not separated or excluded but are given equal opportunities to learn alongside others. We learned about the importance of accessible classrooms, trained teachers, accessible learning materials, assistive technology, and supportive attitudes of school staff and students. This session made me realise that education is the foundation of empowerment and independence.

I also learned a lot about the double discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities due to the intersection of gender and disability. Many women with disabilities experience limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and participation in decision-making. They may also face violence, neglect, or exclusion within families and communities. The trainers explained the importance of promoting leadership among women with disabilities and ensuring their equal participation in social, political, and economic life. This discussion was eye-opening for all participants as we were encouraged to support gender equality within the disability movement.

The training provided us with a deeper understanding of the UNCRPD and its core guiding principles. The Convention addresses a wide range of areas, including education, employment, healthcare, access to justice, independent living, political participation, and protection from abuse and exploitation. Learning about these provisions helped us appreciate how international human rights standards can guide national action. Countries that have ratified the Convention have a responsibility to make laws and policies that uphold and protect the rights of persons with disabilities.

Leadership development was another important and personally meaningful part of the programme for me. Through the sessions, I learned that leadership is not simply about holding a position, but about having the confidence to speak up, understand our rights, and work towards change within our communities. What stayed with me most was the encouragement to see ourselves not just as beneficiaries of change, but as active advocates and leaders.

The methods used during the session were interactive and engaging. There were group discussions, role plays, presentations, and sharing of personal experiences. These activities helped participants learn from each other and understand real-life challenges faced by persons with disabilities. The environment was supportive and respectful, allowing everyone to express their views openly.

Overall, the CDPF Training programme was a highly impactful experience for me. It has motivated me to become more aware, responsible, and active in promoting inclusion and equality. I am grateful for the opportunity to attend such a valuable programme, and I believe the knowledge gained from this training will continue to guide me in the future.

ON THE GROUND: MEMBERS IN ACTION

Chikankata Ngangula Disabled Farmers Association

Chikankata District | Zambia

In Zambia's Chikankata District, the Chikankata Ngangula Disabled Farmers Association brings together persons with disabilities - including those living with albinism - parents of children with disabilities, children of disabled parents, and other vulnerable and supportive community members. This is a unique voice of ordinary rural disabled people who have come together to champion the struggle for their social and economic independence. Our desire is a society where everyone is valued and given equal opportunities.

The association focuses on five areas:

- **Education,**
- **Food security,**
- **Health,**
- **Water,**
- **Environment.**

Through grassroots action, it empowers marginalised groups to build better lives, contribute to human development, and combat climate change.





Key initiatives include:

- **Education:** Supporting Nansenga Primary School, the only school in Chikankata District with a special unit for children with disabilities. The association donates educational materials, particularly for blind and visually impaired students. They are advocating for the construction of a boarding house to increase school access for rural children with disabilities.
- **Livelihoods and Economic Empowerment:** Distributing goats to members for sustainable income generation. Offspring goats are passed on to new beneficiaries, creating a cycle of economic empowerment among rural families.
- **Climate Action:** Establishing a biodigester plant to create employment opportunities and reduce deforestation, tackling both environmental degradation and poverty.
- **Health Services:** Setting up an eye clinic to provide vision screening and eyeglasses. Partnering with a U.S.-based audiologist to launch a hearing aid support project. Advocating for free sunscreen distribution for members living with albinism to protect their skin health.

Projects:

- **Educational project:** In the Chikankata district there is no specialised school to cater for children with disabilities. Nansenga primary school has established a special unit for children with disabilities, but due to lack of infrastructure, the school is only catering for children from within the nearby villages. The association is supporting this unit with educational materials for children who are blind or have a visual impairment with the support of our friends in Kenya Clovernook, an association of the blind and virtually impaired in Kenya
- **Goats pass on project:** People's process housing and poverty in Zambia bought an initial stock of goats for owners to improve the soil health and enhance productivity. Members are encouraged to pass on the first offspring to the next beneficiaries.

- **ICT project:** Closing the gap UK donated two computers to reduce the digital divide among rural disabled people. This has given digital access to association members, but they call for more computers.
- **Reading glasses project:** This project is supported by Brillen in Germany. We distribute free reading glasses to vulnerable members of our communities
- **Regenerative agriculture project** trains farmers in regenerative agriculture with the support of Equipping Farmers International Zimbabwe's regional office. It explores how to look after our planet and mitigate the impact of climate change
- **Disability Awareness project:** We use the media and chess games in schools. The chess kits were received with support of Gift Chess USA
- **Mobility Aids Project:** We are supported by Crutches Africa, a UK based charity organisation that helps with wheelchairs, crutches, canes and frames.
- **The Chikankata Skills Training Centre project** aims to give members vocational skills to enable them to create opportunities for self-employment. Tools with a Mission (TWAM) in UK has donated some tools for use during training, more would be welcome.
- **Capacity Building Training Project:** The Human rights commission of Zambia trains our members in human rights for people with disabilities and uses the media to also raise public awareness.



COMMONWEALTH DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM

The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum (CDPF) serves as a unifying platform for disabled-led organisations and individuals across the Commonwealth. CDPF is committed to engaging with and influencing Commonwealth institutions, governments, and decision-making spaces, including the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Our advocacy aligns with the principles of inclusion, equality, and empowerment, ensuring that disability rights remain central to the Commonwealth Charter and agenda. Our foundation is rooted in the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, and its recognition by Commonwealth Heads of Government in the Kampala Statement of 2007. Despite this progress, disabled people continue to face systemic exclusion across the Commonwealth. CDPF exists to challenge these inequalities and ensure that the rights, dignity, and potential of all disabled people are fully realised.



Company Registration: 7928235

Website:

www.commonwealthdpf.org

General Secretary:

Richard Rieser

Email: rlrieser@gmail.com

Telephone: +44(0)207 359 2855

Address

c/o World of Inclusion
78, Mildmay Grove South,
London N1 4PJ, UK

Communications Officer:

Diethono Nakhro

Email: commscdpf@gmail.com

PARTNERS



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity