



August 2026

NEWSLETTER

COMMONWEALTH DISABLED PEOPLE'S FORUM

Empowering the voices and rights of disabled people across the Commonwealth

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From the desk of the General Secretary Richard Rieser

CDPF delivered a clear and unequivocal message to delegates at COSP19

NO TO ATTACKS ON OUR HUMAN RIGHTS. FOR INCLUSION. PROTECT AND DEFEND DISABLED PEOPLE'S RIGHTS!

"Representatives of Governments and organisations of persons with disabilities/organisations of disabled people (OPDs/DPOs) meet for COSP19 at a time of dangerous and unstable political, economic and social crisis. Disabled people still marginalised at the best of times, are severely impacted by food shortages, rising prices, war and conflict, natural disasters and climate emergencies. How much more we are impacted is a measure of how far the Governments of the world still have to go to implement our full HUMAN RIGHTS! These are not a fad or political fashion to be attacked as 'woke', 'diversity, equality and inclusion' but are our fundamental rights as human beings that prior to the UNCRPD had previously been ignored, leading to isolation, harassment, segregation and premature death. We all need to redouble our efforts and combine to achieve substantial progress on the goals of the UNCRPD in this anniversary year and stand firm against the Populist and Neo-Fascist forces that deny our rights.

The Commonwealth promotes democracy and equality across its member countries with over 2.8 billion citizens. The Commonwealth Charter, in these times of growing autocracy, insecurity and inequality, though far from perfect, provides an alternative way of maintaining parliamentary democracy. independent judiciary and a free media. Over 430 million are persons with disabilities, 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 CRPD and the Sustainable Development Goals. CDPF has more than 100 member DPOs/OPDs across the 56 countries of the Commonwealth including 50 DPO national umbrella organisations. The CDPF has found that although 55 of our member countries have ratified the UNCRPD, implementation of the rights, protections and freedom from discrimination for disabled people is not happening or is very patchy.



Richard Rieser
General Secretary

The Commonwealth could play a major role in creating the coalition of middle powers and smaller states advocated by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, forging a collaborative 'third path' based on strategic economic autonomy and Commonwealth values and respect for human rights, against external pressures and transactional diplomacy. The Commonwealth's history of mutual support, peaceful co-existence and consensus-driven diplomacy has consistently bridged divides between the Global North and South, uniting G20 economies with Small Island Developing States (SIDS). For this approach to move forward, Commonwealth governments and civil society need to unite in a common cause, necessitating a more open involvement of Accredited Organisations both with Governments and the Secretariat. This model should encourage many other UN member countries to join this 'third path'

The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum organised an important side meeting at the Conference of State Parties at the United Nations in June. The meeting was recorded and is available with captioning on our [website](#) and on [YouTube](#).

Preparing for CHOGM 2026

The CHOGM, Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, is coming up from 1st to 4th November in Antigua. CDPF National Member Organisations should be trying to get a member on the Government delegation and ensure a Minister or senior official with responsibility for Disability is on the Government Delegation. Also get the delegation from your country to be represented at the Day Symposium on 5th November 'Implementing Disability Rights Across the Commonwealth'. This is on the day after CHOGM closes so delegates need to extend their stay in Antigua to attend the Symposium.

Transparency this year for Civil Society Accredited Organisation (AOs) involvement has been made more difficult. After 20 years of AO involvement in the Committee of the Whole which drafts the Communique, no AOs including CDPF were invited this year. The Draft that has emerged does not contain the draft paragraph we circulated to the High Commissioners prior to the meeting. Please use your best endeavours to get your Government to support this amendment :

"In this 20th anniversary year of the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we urge all member states to redouble their efforts to fully adopt, ratify and implement this important Human Rights instrument. We are grateful for the initiative of the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum in bringing forward the Disability Inclusion Action Plan to provide a framework for implementation and the work done by the Secretariat, State Parties and representative organisations of persons with disabilities to produce a final draft. This has now been agreed by all member state's Law Ministers and we are pleased to approve the Disability Inclusion Action Plan as part of the report of the Law Ministers meeting in Fiji in February 2026 and the Nadi Declaration.

We further support initiatives such as the Symposium to implement Disability Rights across the Commonwealth to be held on 5th November. The Commonwealth, according to estimates of the World Health Organisation, has 450 million citizens with disabilities, who are entitled to the promotion, protection and the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and the promotion and respect for their inherent dignity (Article 1 UNCRPD)."

This is in marked contrast to preparation for CHOGM 2024 in Samoa where our General Secretary was invited to speak to COW and this led to paragraph 6 in the Communiqué which opened the way to setting up a mechanism to get the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP) agreed.

CDPF did not get a Ministerial Meeting on Disability or a Standing Disability Committee included in the DIAP. However, CDPF have managed to get the support of the Government of Antigua Barbuda, the Commonwealth Secretariat, The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Independent Forum of Commonwealth Organisations for a One Day Symposium on 5th November 'Implementing Disability Rights Across the Commonwealth'. We hope to have a lively day of presentations and interactions that will set the course for implementation of Disability Rights and develop ways for Disabled People and Governments to collaborate. See programme below.

The overarching objective of the Symposium is to raise awareness about the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan, highlight its importance to the Commonwealth, and advance its implementation. Other objectives include deepening understanding of the relationship between the DIAP and UNCRPD; sharing experiences, expertise and good practices on promoting and protecting disabled people's rights; enhancing collaboration between governments and disabled people's organisations; and advocating for disabled people's rights across the Commonwealth.

Following a high-level opening, the Symposium will include three key sessions on legal and policy frameworks; perspectives of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; reasonable accommodations with a focus on education, employment and political processes. The event will close with a plenary considering the way forward for the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan. A reception will follow the Symposium.

To ensure diverse perspectives are shared throughout the Symposium, gender parity, a youth focus and inclusion of the broadest possible range of impairments will be maintained across speakers, facilitators, and participants

If you are going to Antigua for CHOGM or you know who is going from your Government who is going, get them to book their place for the Symposium.

Some reasons for lack of progress in implementing the UNCRPD in the Commonwealth

Once countries have notified the United Nations that they have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, they have 2 years to lodge a report. Yet the UNCRPD Committee publishes a list of countries that have ratified the UNCRPD but have not lodged an initial report within 2 years.

Article 35: Reports by States Parties

1. Each State Party shall submit to the Committee, through the Secretary General of the United Nations, a comprehensive report on measures taken to give effect to its obligations under the present Convention and on the progress made in that regard, within two years after the entry into force of the present Convention for the State Party concerned.
2. Thereafter, States Parties shall submit subsequent reports at least every four years and further whenever the Committee so requests.

3. The Committee shall decide any guidelines applicable to the content of the reports.
4. A State Party which has submitted a comprehensive initial report to the Committee need not, in its subsequent reports, repeat information previously provided. When preparing reports to the Committee, States Parties are invited to consider doing so in an open and transparent process and to give due consideration to the provision set out in article 4, paragraph 3,(see below*) of the present Convention.
5. Reports may indicate factors and difficulties affecting the degree of fulfilment of obligations under the present Convention.

**4.3. In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the “present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations.*

Commonwealth Countries whose initial reports are more than five years overdue (due dates are noted):

Antigua Barbuda	-	Feb 2018
Bahamas	-	October 2017
Barbados	-	March 2015
Brunei Darussalam	-	May 2018
Cameroon	-	October 2025
Dominica	-	November 2014
The Gambia	-	August 2017
Grenada	-	September 2016
Guyana	-	October 2016
Malaysia	-	August 2012
Nauru	-	July 2014
Papua New Guinea	-	October 2015
St Kitts & Nevis	-	November 2021
St Lucia	-	July 2022
St Vincent & Grenadines	-	November 2012
United Republic Tanzania	-	October 2011

Source: *Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Report on its thirty-fourth session (9–27 March 2026) Annex II: States Parties whose initial reports are more than five years overdue CRPD/C/34/2*

If there is no initial report, the country is not scheduled for a meeting with the UNCRPD Committee and so are not held to account against the standards they have agreed to abide by with regard to disability rights.

Clearly there is an important role here for DPOs/OPDs and CPDF would urge our members in the above countries to raise these with their governments.

DRIVING CHANGE CDPF ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

CDPF at COSP19

Promoting the Implementation of Disability Rights across the Commonwealth: Moving forward with the Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan.



The Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum convened a side meeting at the 19th Session of the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD (COSP19) in New York on June 11, 2026, to explore how to turn commitments on disability rights into meaningful change.

The event was sponsored by the Government of Eswatini and co-sponsored by the Governments of Canada and Ghana, the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

CDPF Chair Sarah Muthoni Kamau opened the meeting and stated that the **Commonwealth Disability Inclusion Action Plan (DIAP)** has been developed through extensive consultation involving Commonwealth member states, an expert working group, an advisory group composed primarily of persons with disabilities and the Commonwealth Secretariat. The goal is for the plan to be endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of Government in Antigua in November 2026, accelerating implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) across Commonwealth countries.

Eswatini gave a video presentation of its disability inclusion journey, highlighting constitutional protections, the Disability Act (2018), and its costed National Disability Plan of Action (2024–2028). The Deputy Prime Minister of Eswatini Hon Thulisile Dladla also spoke and said the DIAP provides a strategic framework for member states to integrate disability inclusion into all aspects of governance, policy development, and service delivery. By endorsing this initiative, she said Eswatini has demonstrated its dedication to creating an equitable and inclusive society where all persons with disabilities have equal opportunities and access to all sectors.

Canadian MP Leslie Church reaffirmed Canada's support for the DIAP, emphasising disability inclusion across all sectors, including transportation, digital services, and AI, better disability-disaggregated data for accountability, meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, and continued collaboration while awaiting formal approval of the Action Plan.

Speaking via video, CDPF General Secretary Richard Rieser explained that the Action Plan emerged partly from accessibility failures experienced at earlier Commonwealth meetings, such as CHOGM 2022. The DIAP shifts disability policy from a medical model toward a social model, focusing on removing environmental and attitudinal barriers. He also stressed that many Commonwealth countries remain overdue in fulfilling their CRPD reporting obligations, making the Action Plan a catalyst for stronger implementation and accountability.

Justin Pettit, Acting Head of Human Rights Unit from The Commonwealth Secretariat, described the collaborative drafting process involving 17 member states, an advisory body composed primarily of persons with disabilities, and nearly a year of negotiations. He said a wide range of issues were considered and throughout the process, emergencies and natural disasters, public procurement, intersectionality, reasonable accommodation and accessibility were amongst the issues that received quite a bit of attention. He further said the final draft is not prescriptive, rather it provides members guidance on setting out actions they can take to better implement the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities.

Carla Qualtrough, Ex-Minister Disability, Canada, Advisory Group, Rhoda Garland, Commissioner Rights PWD, Malta, Member of EWG, Clare Gebellini, Asst Secretary CDPF, Australian Federation of Disability Organisations, Rasanjali Pathirage, CDPF Asst Secretary, Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities, Sri Lanka, Mawunyo Yakor-Dagbah, Ghana Disability Federation, and representatives from India and Kenya were also heard.

They emphasised translating commitments into measurable implementation, leadership by persons with disabilities, stronger accountability mechanisms, and greater political participation. Recurring challenges across Commonwealth countries were also highlighted, including inaccessible infrastructure, insufficient disability data, unequal employment opportunities, exclusion of women and marginalised disability groups, and limited access to assistive technologies. A call was made for sustainable financing, clear benchmarks, and implementation rather than additional policy declarations.

A prerecorded address from the CDPF Youth Officer and Commonwealth Disabled Youth Forum representative Kihembo Wilbert emphasised that young persons with disabilities are not merely beneficiaries but leaders and innovators. He welcomed the Action Plan's focus on youth inclusion while urging governments to move beyond consultation toward genuine partnerships backed by investment and accountability.

During Q&A, participants discussed assistive technology for autistic learners, emphasising co-design, government investment, and long-term benefits. The meeting concluded with a call for all participants to continue advocating within their governments so that the Disability Inclusion Action Plan is formally adopted and effectively implemented throughout the Commonwealth.

IN FOCUS

Commonwealth Games 2026

Glasgow 2026: A New Model for Inclusive Sport



Photo: Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games

The Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games has demonstrated how major sporting events can be delivered in a more inclusive, sustainable and financially responsible way, with important lessons for the future of the Commonwealth Sport Movement.

Over 11 days, athletes from 74 nations and territories competed across 10 sports. More than 630,000 people engaged with the Games, supported by over 4,000 volunteers.



A defining achievement was the **largest integrated Para sport programme in Commonwealth Games history**, with a record **47 Para sport events across six sports**. In a significant statement about inclusion, the **first medal event of the Games was a Para sport event**, with England's Mark Swan winning gold in Para Powerlifting.

The integrated approach also brought athletes with and without disabilities together within the same Games environment. Commonwealth Para Bowls champion Pauline Wilson highlighted the importance of this integration, noting that competing and training alongside other athletes helps demonstrate that sport is inclusive regardless of ability.

Beyond competition, Glasgow 2026 embedded inclusion within the wider Games experience. Community organisations, schools, sports clubs and businesses participated through the **All In programme**, which involved more than 750 organisations. More than 900 women also participated in the Leading Women programme, promoting female leadership in sport.

The Games also demonstrated a strong commitment to environmental sustainability. Existing venues were used within an eight-mile footprint, all competition venues operated on renewable energy from the Scottish Grid, and 71% of Games transportation was hybrid or electric. The Games achieved ISO 20121 certification for sustainable event management.

Financial sustainability was equally significant.



Working with the Royal Commonwealth Society, the King's Baton Relay set out to help prevent one million pieces of plastic reaching the ocean - and exceeded it, with 1,019,554 pieces collected through 111 clean-ups across 188 locations, powered by 14,304 volunteers.

Delivered in approximately 18 months and using a privately funded model, Glasgow 2026's projected spend of £162.6 million was considerably lower than previous Games in Glasgow and Birmingham.

The independent interim report, *The Story So Far*, describes Glasgow 2026 as a "proof of concept" for the future of the Commonwealth Sport Movement. Its model is already influencing future planning, with seven nations expressing interest in hosting upcoming Games and Ahmedabad, India, confirmed to host the Centenary Games in 2030.

Glasgow 2026 Chief Executive Phil Batty OBE said: "This report shows the early evidence of what a reimaged Games model can achieve, and the belief we have instilled in Games future.

For the disability movement, Glasgow 2026 offers an important example of how Para sport can be integrated from the outset rather than treated as an additional component of the Games. Its experience also reinforces the importance of accessibility, meaningful participation and inclusion in shaping the future of major sporting events.

A fuller independent evaluation, including athlete, volunteer and visitor feedback, economic impact and case studies, is expected later in 2026.

Source: <https://www.glasgowlife.org.uk/news/the-story-so-far-game-changer-glasgow-2026>

Glasgow Games and sports ministers celebrate inclusion, partnership and Commonwealth unity



Photo: Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games

Together, the Commonwealth Sport GAPS Programme, the 12th Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting and the Secretary-General's medal presentation at the Games underscored one message: sport can advance inclusion, opportunity and cooperation across the Commonwealth.

Inclusion in action

On 21 July, the Commonwealth Sport Gather, Adjust, Prepare and Sustain (GAPS) Programme brought ministers, 37 Para athletes, their coaches and sporting partners to the University of the West of Scotland to showcase inclusive pathways in sport. The camp highlighted the importance of creating opportunities for Para athletes and coaches, particularly women and girls with disabilities, to participate, lead and compete.

Ministers advance collaboration and equality in sport

Sports ministers and senior officials gathered for the [12th Commonwealth Sports Ministers Meeting](#) on Wednesday 22 July. Held under the theme Reimagining the power of sport towards healthier, fairer and equitable Commonwealth communities, the meeting set out a renewed vision for sport in the Commonwealth, shaped by stronger partnerships, innovation and investment.

A key moment was the signing of the [Brighton plus Helsinki Declaration](#) by the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Scottish Government, marking a shared commitment to advancing gender equality and equity for women and girls in and through sport. The signing emphasised the need for practical action to make sport more inclusive, from grassroots participation to leadership and achieving high-performance in sport.

The spirit of the Games was also reflected during the ministerial, with the King's Baton and Games mascot Finny joining and bringing colour and energy to the meeting.

The Duke of Edinburgh, Vice-Patron of Commonwealth Sport, gave a keynote address where he stressed the importance of protecting our young people while reaffirming the mutual respect and cooperation across the Commonwealth family.

Commonwealth Games

Commonwealth Secretary-General Hon Shirley Botchway attended her first Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony since taking office in April 2025. She also presented medals after the women's 400m swimming event, celebrating athletes whose performances embodied the determination, excellence and unity at the heart of the Games.

Looking ahead

From the GAPS Camp, to the ministerial, to the medal podium, the Commonwealth's commitment to inclusion, partnership and opportunity through sport was on full display in Glasgow.

Looking ahead to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Antigua and Barbuda in November, the Malta 2027 Commonwealth Youth Games and the centenary Commonwealth Games in India in 2030, Glasgow has set a strong example of how sport can continue to build healthier, fairer and more connected communities.

Source: <https://thecommonwealth.org/news/glasgow-games-and-sports-ministers-celebrate-inclusion-partnership-and-commonwealth-unity>

New alliance launched to help drive sustainability at Commonwealth sporting events

Commonwealth Sport has joined forces with the Sustainable Markets Initiative (SMI) and the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) to help shape a more sustainable future for sporting events across the Commonwealth.

The new partnership was announced during the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games at the Commonwealth Sustainable Events Breakfast Roundtable, where leaders from sport, business, government and sustainability came together to explore how major events can deliver long-term benefits for communities while reducing their environmental impact.

Speaking about the new alliance, Commonwealth Sport Deputy Chief Executive Martin Reynolds said: "Glasgow 2026 is already starting to show that major sporting events can be sustainable, affordable and impactful. One of the most important things we can do now is capture those lessons and share them across the Commonwealth.

"By bringing together sport, business, government and civil society, we can share insights and expertise and help future hosts reduce environmental impact, strengthen community outcomes and build lasting legacies that extend well beyond competition.

At the heart of the partnership is a commitment to share practical lessons and build stronger collaboration across the Commonwealth. The organisations will establish a Commonwealth Sustainable Events Network, creating a platform for future hosts of the Commonwealth Games, Commonwealth Youth Games and other major events to exchange ideas, learn from one another and adopt more sustainable approaches to event delivery.

Jennifer Jordan-Saifi, Chief Executive Officer of the Sustainable Markets Initiative, said: "Sport brings people together across cultures, generations and borders in a way almost nothing else can. This alliance gives us a chance to make major sporting events genuinely more sustainable, and to build models that other hosts across the Commonwealth - and beyond - can pick up and use. When business, governments, sporting organisations and civil society work together, we can drive the sustainable transition while strengthening communities and creating economic and social value that lasts."

The initiative builds on the momentum created by the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Plastics Campaign, which formed part of the King's Baton Relay and saw communities across all 74 Commonwealth nations and territories come together to remove more than one million pieces of plastic from rivers, coastlines and waterways.

With work from the alliance set to inform discussions at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) later this year, the partnership represents another step in Commonwealth Sport's commitment to ensuring that major events create benefits that extend far beyond the field of play.

Source: <https://www.glasgow2026.com/news/4551066/new-alliance-launched-to-help-drive-sustainability-at-commonwealth-sporting-events>

ON THE GROUND: MEMBERS IN ACTION

Sri Lanka 2026: A Blueprint for Inclusive Governance and Digital Equality

Disability Organization Joint Front (DOJF)

The year 2026 stands as a landmark in Sri Lanka's journey toward full inclusion. Moving beyond fragmented aid, the nation is currently implementing a series of structural reforms designed to institutionalize the rights of persons with disabilities through data, digital innovation, and collaborative policy-making.

BUILDING THE DATA FOUNDATION: IN COLLABORATION WITH NCPD

- The National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) is currently spearheading three pillars of reform that will define the next decade of disability rights:
- National Disability Classification Framework: Shifting away from a medical-only model, this new framework adopts a biopsychosocial approach, ensuring that support services are accurately tailored to the functional needs and environmental barriers faced by individuals.
- National Disability Data Management System: Set for full implementation in 2026, this digital ecosystem will centralize information, allowing for evidence-based planning and ensuring that social protection reaches those who need it most without administrative delay.
- Drafting the New National Policy on Disability: This policy serves as the strategic North Star for the country, aligning domestic legislation with the UNCRPD and focusing on autonomy, dignity, and non-discrimination across all sectors.

STRENGTHENING THE GRASSROOTS: THE DOJF RESTRUCTURING

As the national umbrella organization, the Disability Organization Joint Front (DOJF) has undergone a significant transformation to ensure that the "Diverse Voices" of its member organizations are truly representative.

Recognising that geographical constraints often silence those in rural areas, the DOJF has restructured its member organisation communication networks. By prioritizing digital accessibility and inclusive meeting formats, the DOJF now facilitates equal participation for advocates from across the island, regardless of their location or physical mobility.

Furthermore, the DOJF is working in close collaboration with the NCPD to analyse critical field data. This partnership ensures that the lived experiences of persons with disabilities directly inform the drafting of the National Disability Policy, bridging the gap between high-level governance and grassroots reality.



THE DIGITAL FRONTIER: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Sri Lanka is currently undergoing a massive Digital Transformation in Education, and the DOJF is at the forefront of strategizing to ensure no learner is left behind. Central to this is the 5Cs Inclusion Strategy, developed by Mr. Ashoka Bandula Weerawardhana, President of the DOJF.

◀ **Ashoka Bandula Weerawardhana**

THE 5CS STRATEGY FOCUSES ON FIVE CRITICAL PILLARS:

1. Kit: Ensuring the availability of hardware and assistive devices
2. Content: Developing accessible digital learning materials (EPUB 3, DAISY).
3. Confidence: Training both students and educators to use technology effectively.
4. Connection: Providing affordable, reliable internet and network access.
5. Culture: Fostering an inclusive mindset within the educational ecosystem.

This strategy has been officially endorsed by the Task Force for Digital Transformation of Education in Sri Lanka. Crucially, its implementation is not limited to virtual learning; it represents a radical overhaul of the entire educational ecosystem. The 5Cs are being integrated into every facet of the national system, including:

- Learning and Teaching: Modernizing classroom pedagogy to be inclusive by design.
- Evaluation Processes: Ensuring that examinations and assessments are accessible, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge without technical barriers.



ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION: FROM ADVOCACY TO ACTION

A major milestone in physical accessibility was reached on April 21st, 2026, following a sustained advocacy campaign by the DOJF and its member organizations.

- Ten newly purchased low-floor buses were officially deployed, making public transport accessible to wheelchair users and those with limited mobility for the first time in a systematic way.
- The DOJF is working closely with the Ministry of Transport to promote the service and ensure the associated mobile tracking app meets high accessibility standards for all users.
- While currently centred in Colombo, the DOJF is committed to advocating for

the expansion of low-floor bus fleets to cover other provinces, ensuring rural connectivity.



DIGITAL ECONOMY AND NATIONAL GUIDELINES

In partnership with the Ministry of Digital Economy, the DOJF has taken a leadership role in securing the “right to information” in the digital age.

- The DOJF has actively contributed to the creation of National Guidelines for Digital Accessibility, mandating that all public-facing digital services adhere to international standards (such as WCAG).
- A dedicated team has been established to conduct continuous accessibility audits of government websites. This ensures that digital platforms remain usable as they evolve, preventing the re-emergence of digital barriers.

A COLLABORATIVE ECOSYSTEM: POLICY DIALOGUES & GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS

The momentum in Sri Lanka is sustained through a rigorous schedule of policy dialogues. The DOJF and NCPD are engaging directly with the Ministry of Digital Economy, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Empowerment, and even the Government Press to ensure that accessibility is not an afterthought, but a prerequisite for all public services.

These domestic efforts are bolstered by strategic support from International NGOs. Collaborations with UNICEF and UNDP have been vital in providing the technical expertise and resource mobilization necessary to validate accessible digital textbooks and support local governance initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka’s approach in 2026 demonstrates that inclusion is not a single project, but a multi-sectoral commitment. By combining robust government data systems with an empowered, digitally-connected civil society, we are building a nation where participation is not a privilege, but a right.

Disability Organisations Joint Front DOJF is a full member of the CDPF

Empowering Women with Disabilities through Digital Democracy in Sri Lanka



Rasanjali Pathirage
*Founder President/CEO
Nation Forum of Women with
Disabilities in Sri Lanka*

The Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities recently concluded its “Digital Democracy for Women with Disabilities” initiative, aimed at strengthening inclusive civic engagement and digital participation among women with disabilities across Sri Lanka.

The project focused on building the knowledge, confidence, and leadership of women with disabilities in areas such as digital democracy, human rights, online safety, and civic participation. Through a series of training programmes and awareness activities, participants were empowered to use digital platforms more safely and effectively for advocacy, communication, and democratic engagement.

A key component of the initiative addressed online harassment and cyberbullying, which disproportionately affect women and girls in digital spaces. Participants were provided with practical guidance on identifying online abuse, protecting digital rights, and accessing support mechanisms when facing discrimination or harassment online.

The programme also promoted awareness of disability rights and inclusive governance in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Interactive and participatory learning methods - including group discussions, peer exchanges, and practical digital literacy sessions - created safe spaces for

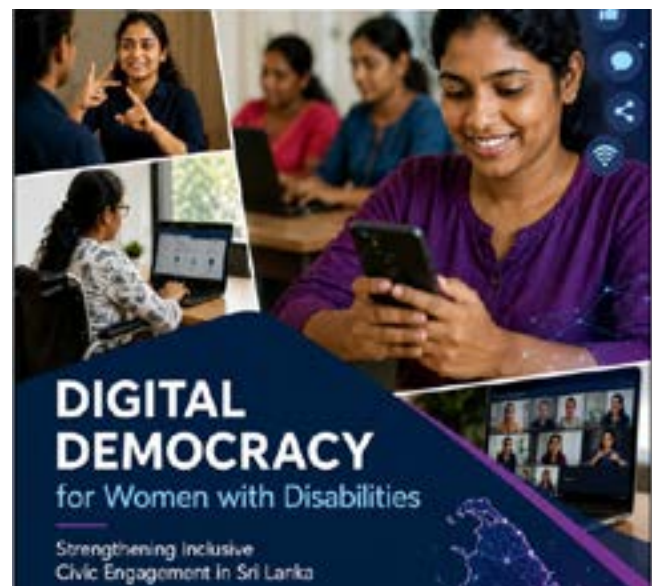
women with disabilities to share experiences and strengthen collective advocacy.

As part of the project’s sustainability efforts, six peer learning groups were established in selected provinces to continue knowledge-sharing, mentorship, and community engagement beyond the formal training period. The initiative also included an online awareness campaign to promote digital inclusion, online safety, and meaningful participation of women with disabilities in democratic processes.

The project highlights the growing importance of inclusive digital spaces in strengthening democracy and ensuring that marginalized communities are not left behind in digital transformation efforts. It further demonstrates how women with disabilities can play an active and influential role in civic engagement when provided with accessible tools, information, and supportive networks.

Through initiatives such as this, the Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities continues to advocate for disability-inclusive governance, equal participation, and the empowerment of women with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

**Rasanjali Pathirage is also
Assistant Secretary Admin CDPF
Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities is an
Associate Member of the CDPF**



From Uncertainty to Active Civic Participation

As Zambia prepares for the 2026 General Elections, the Zambia Federation of Disability Organisations (ZAFOD), through its ongoing **Why My Voice Matters Civic Voter Education Project**, continues to empower young persons with disabilities to exercise their constitutional right to vote and actively participate in the electoral process.

One participant shared how the training transformed their perception of civic participation. Prior to attending the disability-inclusive voter education session, the young person believed that their vote would have little impact and had limited knowledge of their civic rights and responsibilities. Like many young persons with disabilities, they had experienced barriers including limited access to accessible civic information, negative societal attitudes, and a lack of confidence to engage in democratic processes.

Following the training, the participant reported a significant shift in both knowledge and attitude. They gained a clearer understanding of the importance of voting, democratic participation, and the role of citizens in shaping the country's future. The sessions also reinforced that disability does not diminish one's right to participate in governance or influence decisions affecting their lives.

Motivated by the knowledge acquired, the participant has committed to casting their vote in the forthcoming 2026 General Elections. They have also taken on the role of a community advocate by encouraging fellow young persons with disabilities to register, seek civic information, and participate in electoral and community activities. The participant expressed increased confidence in speaking about disability rights and political inclusion, emphasizing that every voice matters in building a more inclusive and representative Zambia.



Civic Voter Education project coordinator during the training



A sign language interpreter interpreting for participants with hearing impairment



This story reflects the growing impact of ZAFOD's voter education initiative, which is equipping young persons with disabilities with the knowledge, confidence, and skills needed to participate meaningfully in Zambia's democratic processes ahead of the 2026 polls.

Report by: Racheal Chomba
Zambia Federation of Disability Organisations
(ZAFOD) is a full member of the CDPF

Art, Data and Dialogues: Swabhiman Launches first-of-its-kind World Population Day Initiative on Disability and Census

Swabhiman, a leading disability rights organisation working towards an inclusive and accessible society, observed World Population Day 2026 with a unique four-day public initiative titled “Lotus of the Forgotten Petals”, bringing disability inclusion to the centre of population and development discussions. The programme was held from 11 to 14 July 2026 in Bhubaneswar, Odisha in India.

The event sought to draw national attention to one of the most overlooked aspects of development planning – the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in population data and public policy. While population statistics guide decisions on education, healthcare, employment, housing, social protection and infrastructure, millions of persons with disabilities continue to remain invisible in official records, limiting their access to opportunities and public investment.

According to the World Health Organisation, over 1.3 billion people, nearly 16 percent of the world's population, live with disabilities. Yet India's Census 2011 recorded only 26.8 million persons with disabilities, a figure widely considered to underestimate the actual population. This gap has significant implications for policy formulation, budget allocation and inclusive governance.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr. Sruti Mohapatra, Founder of Swabhiman, said:

“Development begins with visibility. When people are not counted, they are not considered in planning, budgeting or policymaking. Through this initiative, we want to remind society that disability data is not merely about statistics, it is about human rights, dignity and equal opportunities. Every individual deserves to be counted, recognised and included. Through creative visual installations, visitors will experience how exclusion from data translates into exclusion from development. The programme will also host “Dialogues in Disability” for youth and officials, with disability rights educators, artists and leaders in disability sector. Together, they will explore how accurate, disability-disaggregated data can strengthen inclusive governance and ensure that no one is left behind.”

Event Curator Veejayant Dash stated that unlike conventional observances, the World Population Day 2026 initiative combined art, public dialogue, data and policy advocacy. The event featured an exhibition presenting population trends, disability statistics, census history, Sustainable Development Goals, climate vulnerability and accessibility innovations through artistic creations.

Swabhiman is an associate member of the CDPF



VOICES & PERSPECTIVES

Breaking Barriers to Higher Education for Deaf Youths in Nigeria: Challenges, Progress, and the Way Forward



Mutari Liman

As a Deaf person from Yandutse Village in Jigawa State, Nigeria, I understand firsthand the challenges that many Deaf youths face in accessing education. I lost my hearing at the age of eight and soon discovered that disability often creates barriers that extend far beyond the impairment itself. Several schools refused to admit me because they lacked trained teachers, sign language support, and inclusive learning environments. While I was fortunate to eventually continue my education, many Deaf children in Nigeria never get that opportunity.

Education is a fundamental human right, yet for thousands of Deaf youths across Nigeria, access to quality and inclusive education remains a significant challenge. Although progress has been made in recent years, many barriers continue to prevent Deaf learners from reaching their full potential, particularly at the secondary and tertiary education levels.

One of the most pressing challenges is the shortage

of qualified teachers who can effectively support Deaf students. In many schools, teachers have little or no training in sign language or inclusive education practices. As a result, Deaf students often struggle to follow lessons, participate in classroom activities, and achieve academic success. This situation is even more difficult in rural communities where educational resources are limited.

Another major challenge is the lack of sign language interpreters in higher education institutions. While some universities have established Special Education departments, support services for Deaf students outside these departments remain extremely limited. Many Deaf students who wish to study courses such as law, agriculture, engineering, medicine, business, or public administration face communication barriers because lectures, seminars, and examinations are not designed to accommodate their needs. Without interpreters and accessible learning materials, many talented Deaf students are discouraged from pursuing higher education.

Negative attitudes and misconceptions about disability also continue to affect educational opportunities. In some communities, disability is still viewed through a lens of stigma and limitation rather than capability and potential. Consequently, some parents hesitate to invest in the education of Deaf children, while some institutions underestimate the abilities of learners with disabilities. These attitudes contribute to low enrollment, high dropout rates, and limited opportunities for career advancement.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging examples of progress. Across Nigeria, disability advocates, civil society organizations, educators, and government institutions are increasingly working together to promote inclusive education. Legislative frameworks and disability policies have also strengthened the recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities.

In my own community, I witnessed how local action can create meaningful change. While serving as Special Assistant on Disability Affairs to the Executive Chairman of Ringim Local Government Area in Jigawa State, I observed that many Deaf children had no access to formal education. Through advocacy and collaboration with local authorities and education stakeholders, inclusive classrooms were established at Katutu Special Primary School in Ringim in 2023. The initiative initially enrolled 20 Deaf pupils and has since expanded to serve more than 50 learners. This experience demonstrated that when leaders are willing to listen and act, barriers to education can be reduced and opportunities can be created.

In 2024, after completing a two-month leadership training through the Young African Leaders Initiative Regional Leadership Centre (YALI RLC) West Africa in Accra, Ghana, I co-founded Thrive Disability Initiative (TDI). Through the organization, we have implemented mentorship and career development programs for Deaf secondary school students in Jigawa and Katsina States. These programs have helped young people gain confidence, develop leadership skills, explore career opportunities, and prepare for higher education and employment. Many participants reported increased awareness of educational pathways and greater motivation to pursue their goals.

However, much more remains to be done. Governments, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and development partners must work together to ensure that Deaf youths are not left behind. First, more investment is needed in training teachers in sign language and inclusive

education methodologies. Teachers play a critical role in creating supportive learning environments where Deaf students can succeed.

Second, universities and colleges should provide qualified sign language interpreters and accessible learning resources across all faculties and departments. Deaf students should not be limited in their choice of academic programs because of communication barriers.

Third, governments should strengthen the implementation of disability-inclusive education policies and allocate adequate funding to support inclusive infrastructure, learning materials, assistive technologies, and specialized support services.

Finally, mentorship and leadership development programs should be expanded to empower Deaf youths with the knowledge, confidence, and skills necessary to become future leaders, professionals, entrepreneurs, and advocates.

The Commonwealth has long championed the principles of equality, inclusion, and human dignity. By investing in inclusive education for Deaf learners, member countries can unlock the potential of millions of young people who are eager to contribute to their communities and national development.

My journey from a young Deaf child facing rejection from schools to becoming a disability advocate has taught me that disability is not inability. With the right support, opportunities, and inclusive policies, Deaf youths can excel academically, contribute meaningfully to society, and lead positive change in their communities. The challenge before us is not whether Deaf youths can succeed, but whether our educational systems are willing to provide the opportunities they deserve.

Mutari Liman is a Deaf disability advocate, social entrepreneur, and co-founder/Executive Director of Thrive Disability Initiative, an organisation focused on promoting inclusive education and empowerment for persons with disabilities in Nigeria.

From Design to Inclusion: How UX and AI Can Redefine Digital Accessibility in Pakistan

Ossama Mehmood

Sr. Graphic Designer/UI/UX Designer



In today's digital landscape across the Commonwealth, digital systems are central to access to education, healthcare, employment, and public services. However, for many persons with disabilities, these systems still create barriers instead of removing them.

In Pakistan, digital transformation is accelerating across government platforms, startups, and private services, but accessibility is still not consistently treated as a core design principle. It is often added late or overlooked entirely.

This creates a gap between digital progress and digital inclusion.

The reality of digital access today

For users with disabilities, everyday digital interactions can still be difficult or incomplete. This is often not intentional, but it is consistent.

Common issues include:

- Low contrast interfaces that reduce readability for visually impaired users
- Missing image descriptions that break screen reader experiences
- Complex navigation structures that increase cognitive effort
- Forms that are not fully compatible with assistive technologies
- Limited consideration for Urdu and local language accessibility

Many systems are still designed for an 'average user' that does not actually exist.

A shift is beginning, but it is early

There is a growing awareness in Pakistan's design and tech community that accessibility matters. While implementation is still inconsistent, the conversation is changing.

We are starting to see:

- Awareness of WCAG guidelines among designers and developers
- Accessibility being discussed in UX reviews and product planning
- Early adoption of structured design systems
- A shift toward user-centred thinking in digital teams

These are early signals of meaningful change.

Where AI is changing the accessibility landscape

Artificial intelligence is becoming a practical support layer for accessibility, especially where it has not been fully implemented in design.

Today AI supports accessibility through:

- Automatic image descriptions for visually impaired users
- Speech-to-text and text-to-speech systems
- Real-time captioning for video content
- Language translation improving access to Urdu and multilingual content

- Intelligent assistants simplifying navigation for users with cognitive or motor challenges

However, AI cannot define accessibility. It must be guided by human-centered design to ensure accuracy and relevance.

The missing piece: design responsibility

Even with AI progress, accessibility still depends on design decisions.

UX design ensures:

- Clarity of interaction
- Consistency of navigation
- Compatibility with assistive tools
- Reduction of cognitive overload
- Inclusive language and structure

When accessibility is built into design from the start, it benefits everyone, not just users with disabilities.

Initiatives and ongoing work in the region

Across Pakistan and beyond, different efforts are contributing to inclusion:

- Disability empowerment initiatives such as NOWPDP
- Educational programs like Deaf Reach supporting deaf communities

- Community awareness efforts promoting inclusive education
- Early inclusion practices in academic and startup ecosystems

These efforts are building momentum toward a more inclusive digital environment.

A broader shift in perspective

Accessibility is gradually being recognised as a core part of good design rather than a special requirement.

Inclusive design improves usability for all users, not just persons with disabilities. At the same time, persons with disabilities continue to contribute in education, advocacy, and professional spaces despite systemic barriers.

Inclusion is not a feature. It is a design responsibility.

Closing thought

As digital systems continue to expand, accessibility cannot remain optional.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating what is possible, but meaningful inclusion will always depend on intentional design and human understanding. The future of digital systems should be more accessible by default.

NEWS UPDATES

Parliamentarians focus *on representation* at CPwD Forum in Cape Town

Parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth met in Cape Town, South Africa from 26 to 28 May 2026 for the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) Forum. They were hosted by the Western Cape Provincial Parliament.

Delegates took part in a wide-ranging programme, with an overall focus on increasing representation of persons with disabilities in Parliament. The programme included expert presentations, peer-to-peer learning, case studies and group exercises.

Session topics included employment and representation and pathways for persons with disabilities in politics; carrying out accessibility audits in Legislatures; civil society and the role of Parliamentary Committees and technology and innovation for political participation.

Part of the programme also focused on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's first annual campaign, which encourages more Commonwealth Parliaments to introduce legislation that advances the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities.



Powerful moment of recognition *for* South African disability advocate

The annual South African Disability Alliance (SADA) Gala Dinner, held on June 5, 2026 at Deloitte, became a deeply significant evening of recognition, reflection, and hope as disability advocate Emile Gouws received the 2026 SADA Rising Changemaker Award.



The award is presented to a young person between the ages of 18 and 35 who has made significant contributions to advancing the rights, dignity, inclusion, and empowerment of persons with disabilities. It recognises emerging leadership, courage, and the growing impact of young people shaping a more inclusive society.

For Gouws, however, the moment carried a deeper personal weight. He described the award as the first time in his life that he has received what he

experienced as “proper acknowledgement” for his work as an autistic self-advocate, researcher, and leader within the disability rights movement.

Speaking at the gala, he reflected on the meaning behind the recognition:

“Thank you for this Rising Changemaker Award. I accept it on behalf of every person whose voice has been overlooked, especially neurodivergent people and persons with disabilities. Real change happens when we stop talking about inclusion and start creating it.”

His message focused on shifting inclusion from theory into practice and ensuring that the lived experiences of persons with disabilities are not only heard but also actively shape policy, systems, and society.

He also spoke about the deeper motivation behind his work: “What motivates me every day to fight, as I realised as an autistic person, researcher and leader, is that the purpose is bigger than me, than us. I see this as a civic duty and a principle that I live every day: dignity, humanity, respect, equality, and most of all, the attitude that no one should be left behind. Tonight we celebrate, but tomorrow we fight another day.”

Gouws further highlighted his commitment to systemic change, including initiatives such as a national autism strategy that could improve the lives of millions of South Africans.

The SADA Gala Dinner brought together advocates, families, and partners from across the disability sector, celebrating not only individual achievement but also the collective movement toward inclusion and accessibility in South Africa. Among those recognised were supporters and allies who continue to play a critical role in strengthening disability advocacy and community-based change.

As the evening closed, the message was clear: while awards mark milestones, the work of building a more inclusive society continues. For Gouws, the Rising Changemaker Award was not an endpoint but a renewed commitment to ensure that no one is left behind.

Worth

THE READ

1. What being institutionalised taught me about resistance

Institutionalisation teaches that obedience feeds abusive systems and non-compliance preserves humanity. Writer Rachel Litchman explored these lessons in her essay for [Disability Debrief](#).

2. The politics of sitting down

140,000 Londoners with non-visible disabilities wear TfL's 'Please Offer Me A Seat' badge on public transport. Does it work? Read Celestine Fraser's essay in [Body Babble](#).

3. Why the future of robots is serving humans, not just imitating them

The success of physical AI won't be judged by what robots can do, but what people can do because of them, writes Aaron Edsinger, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Hello Robot, in the [World Economic Forum](#).

4. Walking and Wheeling: Language and Normalcy

We should try to reimagine our vocabularies such that we stop centring abledness and start thinking about the constructions of the body that we're discussing, Jamie Hale writes in his [Substack](#).

5. Disability Intimacy: Essays on Love, Care, and Desire

25 original pieces carefully curated by Alice Wong. More than sex, more than romantic love, the pieces in this illuminating anthology offer broader and more inclusive definitions of what it can mean to be intimate with another person.

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 (CHOGM). 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 (UNCRPD) 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

