Disability Inclusion Helpdesk, June 2025

Evidence digest focus issue: Disability inclusion in healthcare systems

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Guest blog: Jo Keatinge

Jo Keatinge is a Senior Health Adviser in the Health Systems team at FCDO's Global Health Directorate. A medical doctor by training, she has over 25 years of experience working across the health system in Africa, including clinical work and technical advisory roles in Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. At FCDO, she leads on health systems strengthening and was instrumental in developing the department's 2019 Health Systems Strengthening position paper.

Q: What are the key challenges faced by healthcare systems in low-resource or conflict-affected settings, and how are donor agencies currently addressing these?
Jo: Right now, the world is facing multiple pressures—conflict, fragility, climate change—and there's also been a lot of disruption in global health financing, including some major funding shifts that have affected partners across the sector. That's been challenging but also presents an opportunity to collectively rethink our approaches. Health systems vary hugely

by context, and there's no one-size-fits-all. Strengthening them requires not just technical solutions but also political understanding—where a country is, what it wants, and how best to support that. Donors have sometimes been quite rigid, often focusing on vertical programmes around specific diseases. **Vertical programmes** are stand-alone, categorical, disease management or disease control programmes, that are disease- or service-specific. But true health system strengthening means taking a more integrated, context-driven, and country-led approach. It's complex, but increasingly necessary, and this moment of change gives us a platform to evolve.

Q: Have you seen particular barriers around disability inclusion within health systems?

Jo: At FCDO, we've always tried to focus on those most left behind— marginalised and vulnerable groups including people living with disabilities. We work closely with partners like WHO on health financing, particularly looking at financial protection for the most vulnerable households. We don't tend to take a separate or targeted approach to disability, but instead we aim to ensure national reforms and systems are inclusive by design. Take health insurance: we need to think beyond voluntary schemes and ensure there's state support for those least able to pay. Our emphasis is on primary health care, because 90% of SDG-related health needs can be met there—and that's also the level of care most accessible to vulnerable populations. Too often, governments focus on specialised tertiary care, but it's that local, integrated, high-quality provision that matters most for the majority.

Q: What kinds of approaches have you seen that help make healthcare systems more inclusive?

Jo: The HIV sector offers some really strong examples—support for sex workers, adolescents, and other marginalised groups. When people are organised and have a voice, they can shift how services are delivered. In Zimbabwe, for instance, a USAID funded peer-led adolescent HIV group worked closely with communities and was incredibly influential in reducing stigma and ensuring compliance with treatment for those infected. FCDO has also been supporting work in this space—for example in Nigeria, there's work on community-level accountability and understanding around health budgets to start to improve transparency and the dialogue between citizens and government. We've seen promising models globally, like Thailand's National Health Assemblies, which bring communities into national dialogues on health. But these approaches haven't been widely scaled, and that's partly because of competing priorities. Still, I think there's untapped potential in movements around climate and youth engagement. These could be powerful drivers of inclusion if we invest more deliberately in them.

Q: Given shrinking budgets and changing global trends, what role should donors play moving forward?

Jo: We need to reduce fragmentation and make more efficient use of available resources. That means reducing programmatic silos, more pooled funding, and better alignment with government plans. Ideally, we'd have one health sector plan, one budget, one monitoring framework. There are some encouraging developments, like the Lusaka Agenda, which aims to bring greater coherence across global health organisations. Longer-term, predictable financing is crucial—especially because strengthening systems takes time. We're also likely to see international financial institutions like the World Bank playing a bigger role. But that will need to be more transparent and work in stronger partnerships so we can all coordinate more effectively. Ultimately, we're all working with the same health workers, in the same facilities, supporting the same people—whether they're living with disabilities, have malaria, or are pregnant. We need to stop funding those needs in fragmented ways. And governments are increasingly clear—they want to lead, and they want to build sustainable systems. Donors need to support that shift, even if it means rethinking how we've traditionally worked.

Q: Any final reflections?

Jo: Data is key—especially for tracking how vulnerable populations are being reached. But we're seeing some gaps emerging, particularly as the funding for major global surveys becomes uncertain. Different organisations and donors keep asking for more and more data and this has led to more fragmentation, with everyone doing their own thing. We need to simplify and prioritise what data we collect—most of it isn't used, and collecting it can be a real burden for health workers. At the same time, we need to move away from extractive data practices. The real value of data is in-country—to support local planning, make the case for budget allocations, and improve services. And we absolutely need to invest more in digitalisation. That's a gap across the sector, including for FCDO, and we need to build those skills to deliver more efficient, responsive support.

The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion and healthcare systems

Guidance

Guide for Organisations of Persons with Disabilities: Driving health equity for persons with disabilities through inclusive health system strengthening (November 2024) - A practical toolkit supporting OPDs to engage in health system strengthening, covering advocacy phases, budgeting, workforce training, and data. Includes example indicators and a template letter to health ministries.

WHO launches new toolkit to advance health equity for persons with disabilities (November 2024) - A structured toolkit helping ministries integrate disability inclusion into national health systems. Includes early use cases in Côte d'Ivoire, Malaysia, Montenegro, and Tanzania, and emphasises participatory planning.

Advancing inclusive care pathways for people with disabilities (September 2024, McKinsey Health Institute) – Identifies disparities in disease-specific care, especially for cervical cancer and HIV. Recommends embedding disability into care pathways, training, and program design.

Inclusive Health Initiative (CBM, date not specified) – Describes integration of inclusive practices into health systems, covering services like eye health and rehabilitation. Focuses on accessible care, workforce training, and community participation.

Towards an agenda of action and research for making health systems responsive to the needs of people with disabilities (October 2024, *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*) – Calls for tackling ableism across WHO's health system building blocks and offers a conceptual agenda for inclusive health system reform.

Inclusive Health Principles and Strategies (date not specified) – A practical guide focused on people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Highlights strategies like welcoming environments, staff training, and inclusive communication.

Special Olympics' health chief on championing inclusive care (September 2024, McKinsey Health Institute) – An interview with Dr. Dimitri Christakis outlining a framework of prevention, assessment, training, and system reform. Stresses enforcement, data use, and cross-sector coalitions.

Universal Health Coverage Day 2025: Disability inclusion is critical to achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) by 2030 (December 2024) – Marks Universal Health Coverage Day with a call to dismantle systemic barriers and invest in inclusive systems. Highlights the Kuala Lumpur Declaration and rights-based advocacy.

Mitigating risks of digital exclusion in health systems (30 July 2024, Good Things Foundation) – Outlines five actions to address digital exclusion in health, especially for people with disabilities. Advocates for inclusive tech design and non-digital options.

Supporting People with Disabilities: The Importance of Inclusive Healthcare Solutions (Date not provided): Highlights physical, communication, and provider barriers, calling for accessibility improvements and mental health inclusion.

Practical Strategies for Improving Disability Awareness in Healthcare (October 2024, Quality Interactions): Offers strategies to address bias and promote disability-inclusive, culturally competent, and tech-enabled care.

Programme learning

Ensuring SRH Access for All: A Focus on Disability Inclusion (2 June 2025) – Highlights a disability-inclusive SRHR outreach initiative led by Fiji's Ministry of Health with support from UNFPA and partners. Combined mainstream and targeted interventions created safe, accessible spaces for dialogue and care, enabling first-time engagement with health professionals.

10 lessons on disability inclusive mental health from an expert (8 October 2024) – Disability advisor Adedotun Esan shares lessons from advocacy with disabled youth in Nigeria, including empathy, the buddy system, and safe spaces. Emphasises person-centred, proactive mental health support.

Driving change: six principles for disability inclusive development (September 2024, Inclusive Futures) – Draws from 12 projects in five countries, offering insights for embedding disability inclusion in health, education, and work. Recommends early mapping of needs, partnerships with OPDs, and disaggregated data use.

McKinsey fellows support expanding disability-inclusive healthcare access (29 May 2025, McKinsey & Company) – Spotlights work on women with disabilities' health access and training of 400 health workers in Kenya. Emphasises financing reform and embedding inclusion into mainstream systems, not as add-ons.

Improving health access for people with disabilities in Mozambique: a commitment to materialise a fundamental human right (2024, Missing Billion Initiative & World Bank)**:** Describes joint efforts by the World Bank and MBI to address policy gaps. Pilots included integrating disability into health worker training and engaging OPDs in planning and monitoring.

Research

Inclusive health for people with disabilities in Chile: a national health system assessment (20 February 2025) – National assessment using the Missing Billion framework found low overall progress. Strengths included assistive technology and accessibility; key gaps were affordability, autonomy, and workforce capacity. Recommends stronger governance, leadership by persons with disabilities, and mandatory training.

The process of developing and piloting a tool in the Maldives and Zimbabwe for assessing disability inclusion in health systems performance (December 2024) – Tested a 48-indicator tool for assessing disability inclusion in health systems. Feasible and effective in both countries, it revealed governance strengths and data and leadership gaps. Supports policy reform and Ministry-led action.

A closer look at Global Disability Summit health commitments (January 2025) – WHO review of 185 health-related commitments from the 2022 Summit. Emphasises system

strengthening, workforce development, and anti-discrimination. Notes weak engagement from private donors and sets recommendations for GDS 2025.

New Report Increases Visibility of Investments for Disability-Inclusive Health and Calls for Bolder Action (20 February 2025) – Found only 0.4% of global health aid supports disability-inclusive services; most funding lacks disability tracking. Offers 20+ actions for donors to scale investment, ahead of GDS 2025.

Social Services: Inclusive Practice for Persons with Disabilities – Briefing Note (January 2025) – Identifies access, income, and communication barriers in social services. Recommends person-centred systems, coordinated care, and support shaped by lived experience.

Prioritising Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities in Non-Communicable Disease Policies and Services (January 2025, IDDC Inclusive Health Task Group) – Argues for integrating disability in non-communicable disease policies. Persons with disabilities face higher risks and poorer outcomes. Calls for leadership, investment, and inclusive service design.

Fostering inclusion: Advancing social health protection for persons with disabilities in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Vietnam (17 January 2025, ILO) – Reviews disability inclusion in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Recommends inclusive legal frameworks, adequate benefits, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in shaping resilient health systems.

Understanding challenges and enhancing the competency of healthcare providers for disability inclusive sexual and reproductive health services in rural Nepal (May 2024, *PLOS ONE*) – Qualitative study found provider bias, poor communication, and skill gaps despite national guidelines. Recommends provider training, sign language access, and decision-making autonomy.

Suggested solutions to barriers in accessing healthcare by persons with disability in Uganda: a qualitative study (2024) - Interviews with disabled people identified demand- and supply-side barriers. Recommends healthcare worker training, employing staff with disabilities, and improving community-based care.

The Role of Disabled People in Healthcare: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Path Forward (2024) - Highlights low representation of disabled people in healthcare roles. Identifies new opportunities in areas like transcription and navigation. Calls for universal design, education pathways, and NHS-led initiatives.

Beyond Disability: Inclusive Healthcare Delivery in Nigeria (November 2024) – Explores intersecting exclusion based on ethnicity, geography, and poverty. Recommends rights-based, multisectoral approaches, workforce training, infrastructure upgrades, and disability law enforcement.

Access to healthcare for people with disabilities in Zambia: a qualitative study (March 2025, *PLOS Global Public Health*) – Study found widespread access barriers—stigma, poor

training, and infrastructure. While national insurance helped some, implementation was inconsistent. Urges government action on training and infrastructure.

The latest evidence and guidance on disability inclusion: Other topics

General

How can we achieve disability inclusion? Understanding the social model and the framing of the CRPD (28 March 2024, UNICEF Innocenti) – Advocates shifting to the social model of disability and restructuring systems based on the CRPD. Emphasises inclusive language, participatory research, and system-wide reforms across health, education, and legal sectors.

What impact could D&I pushback have on disability? (May 2025, D&I Leaders) – Warns that global pushback on D&I could undermine disability inclusion. Highlights legal risks, burnout, and reduced innovation. Calls for leadership to uphold accessibility and equity as strategic priorities.

2024 Disability Index Report (2024) – Marks 10 years of the Index, showing widespread growth in inclusive practices (e.g. 93% now have disability-focused ERGs). Notes expanded health benefits and legal momentum via EU and Canadian legislation.

Global Disability Inclusion Report (March 2025, Global Disability Summit) – United Nations-led report examining global enablers like policy harmonisation, data systems, and inclusive spending. Outlines strategies across sectors and stresses tackling stigma and scaling assistive tech.

Preconditions needed to meet new global target on disability inclusion (April 2025, Global Disability Summit) – Introduces a new commitment: by 2028, 15% of international development programmes should focus on disability. Advocates foundational reforms—laws, accessibility, services—to support sustainable inclusion.

Global Disability Summit – Learnings from the Disability Inclusive Development Networks (April 2025, Stephen Thompson) – Shares lessons from 10 arts and humanities research networks. Recommends engaging OPDs, reflecting on power, accessible funding, and warning against "eco-ableism" in climate research.

Advancing Inclusion: The UN Global Disability Fund at the 2025 Global Disability Summit (April 2025, United Nations Global Disability Fund) – Details the Fund's strategic shift toward implementation and intersectionality. Describes events, partnerships, and progress toward the 15% programme inclusion goal.

Situational Analysis on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Sri Lanka (December 2024, United Nations Global Disability Fund) – UN-led study identifying progress and gaps in CRPD implementation. Uses stakeholder interviews and desk reviews to guide inclusive development programming and capacity building.

Employment

Towards a Disability-Smart World: Global Disability Inclusion Strategy Report (June 2025) – Based on research sponsored by Shell, this report reviews global disability inclusion strategies. Only 23% had a funded strategy, though 57% were in development. Highlights the importance of senior champions, context adaptation, and alignment with core business goals.

Reporting on Disability Inclusion Initiatives: Best Practices for Businesses (May 2025) – Advises businesses to measure real impact—not just activities—across five areas: individuals, service orgs, employees, environment, and the business. Recommends metrics, tools like DEI indices, and accessible storytelling.

Disability-Inclusive Graduation Programme Intervention on Social Participation Among Ultra-Poor People with Disabilities in North Uganda (2025, Chen et al.) – Evaluates an 18-month disability-inclusive programme for ultra-poor Ugandans. Found short-term gains in social participation, but no sustained impact after 16 months. Suggests long-term support is essential for durable inclusion.

Disability Inclusion in the EU: A Legal Analysis to Guide Corporate Responsibilities Under New EU Disability Inclusive Legislation (2025, Disability: IN, White & Case, Trustlaw) – Provides legal guidance for corporate compliance with three frameworks: the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, and the European Accessibility Act. Helps companies understand their legal responsibilities related to sustainability and inclusion.

Evidence for Inclusion: The 2025 Global Research Agenda for Children with Disabilities (2025, Global Research Agenda Brief) – Outlines a new research agenda for improving inclusion outcomes for children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries. Emphasises ethical, participatory research methods and cross-cutting themes including intersectionality, climate risk, and the leadership of organisations of persons with disabilities.

Advancing Disability Inclusion in the Global Labour Market (4 April 2025, International Labour Organisation) – Highlights persistent labour market inequalities, including a 30% participation gap and high rates of youth with disabilities not in education, employment, or training. Features the International Labour Organisation's Global Business and Disability Network and calls for inclusive labour markets and social protection. Ends with the Amman-Berlin Declaration urging 15% of development programmes to include disability.

Disability-Inclusive Supply Chains: Guide for Business (22 April 2025, International Labour Organisation Global Business and Disability Network) – Provides practical guidance for integrating disability inclusion into supply chains. Aimed at supply chain managers, diversity and inclusion leads, and sustainability professionals. Includes technical advice and good practices to support both multinational and small-to-medium enterprises.

Climate justice

Disability Inclusive Emergency Management (2025, University of Sydney and Australian Government) – Outlines a $1 million project to improve disaster safety for people with disabilities in Australia. Produced a toolkit and free eLearning, co-designed with people with disabilities and sector partners.

UK International Climate Finance Guidance Note for Delivery Partners: Integration of Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (2025, UK Government) – Sets out how the United Kingdom integrates Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion across its international climate finance. Aligns with global frameworks and disability/gender markers.

Education

Five strategies for disability inclusive education (2 April 2025, Raising Learning Outcomes Programme) – Summarises findings from research in five countries, outlining strategies such as teacher training, intersectional approaches, and inclusive early years education.

To achieve quality education for all, disability inclusion is critical (13 April 2025, Sightsavers) – Reflects on the exclusion of disability at a major education conference. Highlights research on digital exclusion and early learning, and calls for inclusive system reform.

Removing Barriers to Learning for Children with Disabilities (June 2025, Global Partnership for Education) – Reviews efforts across 109 grants to improve access to education for children with disabilities. Features examples from Kyrgyz Republic and Vanuatu.

Inclusive Education Fact Sheet (June 2025, World Bank) – Outlines the World Bank's twin-track approach to inclusion. Includes country case studies and highlights the Inclusive Education Policy Academy.

Health

Strengthening Disability Inclusion in Medical Education: The Role of Disability Resource Professionals Through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Framework (2024, Sarah E. Triano & Lisa M. Meeks) – Examines the role of Disability Resource Professionals in U.S. medical schools. Finds low staffing, persistent stigma, and calls for institutional reform and standardised competencies.

Infrastructure & cities

Opportunities for Disability-Inclusive Energy Access (2025, Global Disability Innovation Hub for the Transforming Energy Access Platform) – Explores how disability inclusion is essential for a just energy transition. Highlights risks of exclusion and proposes a three-part framework to embed inclusion across the energy value chain.

Women and girls with disabilities

Knowledge Compendium: Reflections on Gender and Disability Inclusion in the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (2025, UN Inter-Agency Working Group on Gender and Disability Inclusion) – Compiles 32 case studies from United Nations agencies and country teams. Highlights best practices on violence prevention and decision-making participation, reinforcing system-wide commitments to inclusion.

About the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk:

The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk provides research and technical assistance on disability inclusion to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office as part of the Disability Inclusive Development Programme. All our published reports are available on **our website**. Contact us via: **enquiries@disabilityinclusion.org.uk**