

Advocacy Brief:

The driving force of the Sustainable Development Goals in India for disability-inclusive policies and social accountability





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**Population Group:
Persons with Disability**

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Venue: USI Residency Resort**





Training of OPD members on the SDG/UNCRPD Framework in Odisha, Bengal. (March 2021)

Introduction

The localisation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is at the core of India's SDG implementation strategy.

In the federal governance structure, states play a vital role in implementing and monitoring development policies and programmes – they are the main driving force of the SDGs. The NITI Aayog is the nodal agency at the central level that supports and guides in this work. Localisation efforts revolve around how local governments use bottom-up actions to support the achievement of the SDGs as well as how the SDGs provide the framework for local development policies and planning. At the district and local levels, elected representatives of Panchayati Raj institutions, district administrations and frontline functionaries are vital for action on the SDGs.

This paper outlines how participation and inclusion can strengthen policy influencing and establish accountable governance in the implementation of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind' at the local level. The paper is based on a review of project documents and informal discussions with Sightsavers staff, organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and project partners. It summarises Sightsavers' experience in the Building Partnerships for the SDGs project, highlights the development of the Disability Inclusion Score Card (DISC) as a key mechanism for creating an enabling environment and makes recommendations based on learnings from the programme.



OPD Women Members compile scorecard indicators , Chittorgarh, Rajasthan (Feb 2020)

The Disability Inclusion Score Card (DISC) process

The purpose of DISC is to empower people with disabilities to know and claim their rights and, in doing so, increase the accountability of individuals and institutions for the decisions they make.

It is led by OPDs as equal stakeholders in SDG implementation and aims to strengthen collaborative engagement with local and district administrations. The process starts with people with disabilities presenting evidence around the level of provision of services. This is then linked with the SDG framework, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, to drive effective decision-making and accountability. They use the process

to advocate for their rights, monitor SDG implementation and improve access to government schemes. To build the foundation for this exercise, the project trained OPD members on the SDGs, UNCRPD and the RPWD Act. In addition, a gender analysis exercise was conducted with all OPDs to assess and promote discussion on the extent of engagement of women with disabilities. This resulted in the formation of 'gender committees' which comprised of both men and women.

From there, the process was:



Phase one: Preparation

- The OPDs decided on the scope of DISC in terms of services, geographical areas and stakeholders. The pilot focused on inclusive education services provided for children with disabilities at early childhood care centres, primary and middle schools in the context of SDG 4 on quality education.
- To build better engagement, preliminary meetings were held with school administration and education officials at block and district level, OPDs, parents and children to introduce the DISC process and its anticipated outcomes.
- The OPD members in the facilitation team were then trained on the process, their roles and the rights of people with disabilities.
- An 'input tracking' exercise was then carried out to understand the status of services available to people with disabilities including accessibility, infrastructure, teaching aids and the attitudes of staff and fellow students towards children with disabilities.
- Input tracking included observation of physical structures plus interviews with parents and children with disabilities, teachers, school management committees and community members.
- Interviews were also conducted with officials and community representatives to gain feedback on the quality of existing services. Verification of these outcomes included the attendance of students with disabilities, availability and sufficiency of teachers.



Phase two: Indicators setting and scoring

- Group meetings were conducted with children with disabilities, parents and service providers to discuss issues, develop and prioritise indicators. Separate focus group discussions were also conducted with women and girls. All participants rated each indicator (1-5) and votes were compiled into a result scoring sheet which showed the status of services.



Phase three: Interface meeting and joint action plan

- An interface meeting followed with government officials and service providers in decision-making positions to present results. Indicators with low scores were discussed, solutions were explored and action plans developed based on the discussion.

The process was led by people with disabilities but the outcome was a collective decision about policy change and implementation with government officials.

Building partnerships for the SDGs: Empowering organisations of people with disabilities



The project is implemented by Sightsavers India, in partnership with the European Development Forum and supported by the EU. It has strengthened 15 OPDs across five states (Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan) in India to proactively shape and monitor SDG implementation.

The aim has been to enable people with disabilities to advocate for their rights and support them with improved access to government development schemes and entitlements – such as equal job opportunities, decent work conditions and equal participation in the democratic processes. This project also strengthened the partnership between Indian OPDs and EU institutions, bringing the voice of India's OPDs to an international stage and ensuring that information on global processes reached grassroots activists. Gender equality is at the core of this project, which aims to develop disability inclusion in the SDG implementation from the perspective of women with disabilities.

The UNCRPD, SDG framework and the national RPWD Act have provided real opportunities to increase accountability and disability-inclusive development. The project follows a people-centric approach that combines several activities to ensure rural communities have access to relevant information and decision-making platforms

so that they can collaborate and participate in development. In India, 29 functions related to socio-economic development are devolved to local governments. As a result, out of the 17 SDGs, 15 are directly related to activities carried out by local governments in India. At the national level, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, responsible for administering local self-government in rural areas, has been advocating to integrate SDGs within the local plans.

Sightsavers India has been working with OPDs for many years and these partnerships have impacted and empowered thousands of people with disabilities. However, there is still a need to build OPD capacity to advocate for accountability in SDG implementation and monitoring at a local level. The voices of people with disabilities are not adequately reflected in mainstream Civil Society Organisation (CSO) platforms, local government or national-level planning. The project is designed to address these gaps in representation and participation.



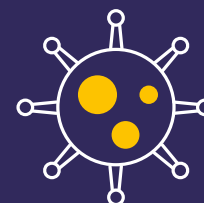
Timeline of the project

The project began on 1 March 2018 and will end on 31 August 2021.

Some project references:

- www.sightsaversindia.in/news/2018/07/two-day-state-level-workshop-on-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-united-nations-convention-for-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-uncrpd-and-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-rpwd-act-org/
- www.sightsavers.org/blogs/2020/07/impact-india-sdg-scorecard-project/
- www.sightsaversindia.in/news/2020/10/sightsavers-eu-and-edf-launch-rising-voices-a-paper-on-women-with-disabilities/
- youtu.be/jxS-J4TCjUs
- www.edf-feph.org/projects/building-partnerships-for-the-sustainable-development-goals-empowering-organisations-of-persons-with-disabilities-india/

The impact of COVID-19 and the challenges of connectivity



The main impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the timeframes of the project. It constrained follow-up on the commitments in the action plan, but efforts by dedicated OPDs and proactive government officials have still resulted in good progress. This demonstrates the importance of goodwill in the DISC process.

Meetings were held virtually or over the telephone. Some activities have not been able to run. In Odisha, Sightsavers India have not yet started to develop a paper providing recommendations and action steps for an inclusive village through their studies on physical accessibility in five to seven villages.

There are promising developments across states and the project has benefitted from DISC. It is improving engagement with

district officials and making the higher levels of government more accessible to OPDs. For example,

- In Jharkhand, letters were sent to the inclusive education department and district administration.
- In Rajasthan, letters were given to the District Collector.

Promoting gender equality



“My dreams have wings now. When I was recently nominated leader of the parents and OPD group in Ganjam to develop ratings for the SDG scorecard, I ‘found myself’. I learned how to lead active advocacy and stand up for the rights of girls and women with disabilities. For me, now there is no looking back.” – Danjai, an OPD leader

At the start of the project, while there was an understanding of the importance of gender equality, there was little awareness of the importance of gender equity within OPDs themselves. The project carried out gender assessments, which led to greater awareness of the importance of the voices of women with disabilities being heard within OPDs. This resulted in the formation of gender committees that aim to increase women’s participation and voice within the organisations. These committees enabled members to discuss and highlight key gender issues that were not previously being spoken of and to call for a greater number of women in leadership roles within each OPD. For example, within Rajasthan, female OPD members refused to participate in a meeting until there was greater gender equity within the OPD membership. This resulted in 50 per cent of core OPD members being women.

As a result of the increased participation and leadership roles of women within OPDs, their involvement in advocacy with local decision-makers has increased. It was reported by project staff that women are increasingly aware of their rights and the SDG framework, and are now often more vocal in meetings with local government officials than their male counterparts. Women took a very active role in the DISC process and were able to highlight gender-related issues in discussions with service

providers and local government officials. Women’s knowledge and confidence has increased in some OPDs to the extent that women are now aspiring to political posts and standing to become Gran Panchayat leaders. Therefore, the gender committees have generally improved women’s engagement within the OPDs. Their voices have not been confined to the committee and they now have the ability and confidence to engage with government officials.

There have been challenges reported in engaging women within the project such as restrictions, social taboos and concern from family members (often male). These familial concerns were due to women with disabilities needing to travel long distances alone so there was reluctance to attend the initial training and meetings which were often 300-400km from participants’ homes and involved taking public transport. Women may also be giving up their daily wage as they spent a day travelling to and participating in a meeting. For the most part, the burden of care and domestic responsibilities also lies with women, making the challenge of taking a whole day to attend a meeting significant. When attending training and meetings, women were often reluctant to speak openly but their confidence grew with time, with the gender committees giving space to raise issues.

“I spoke with a mic for the first time in my life as part of the scorecard process. Now I’m confident that I can address community meetings better and actively advocate for other women with disabilities.”

– Leela, an OPD member

While many male OPD members are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of gender equity within OPDs, the challenge remains of men sometimes struggling to accept women in leadership positions. This has included reluctance to support women to take control and be the dominant speakers during meetings with government officials. There has also been a reluctance among male government officials to listen to women and the extent to which women’s participation is accepted is very dependent on the different levels of understanding of women’s rights between government departments.

There can also be a language barrier for rural women, and indeed men, with disabilities when national-level consultations, such as the voluntary national review process, take place in English. This is less of an issue at the local level where communication tends to be in Hindi and other local languages.

Finally, while the gender committees have been a significant step in improving women’s participation within OPDs, members in some committees would still like further training around gender equity. This includes further guidance on how to proceed and ensure that the committees are functional and achieving their objectives.

The experience of the programme emphasises the need to ensure the inclusion of women with disabilities, which can be better secured by:

- establishing adequate measures to guarantee that the perspectives of women and girls with disabilities are fully taken into account, especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence.
- making disability and gender awareness part of pre-service and in-service training for all public officials to facilitate equitable behaviour towards people with disabilities and promote their rights, with particular emphasis on the rights of girls and women with disabilities.

Linking SDGs and disability inclusion



The project was built on the principle of 'leave no one behind' in the SDGs – that the rights of people with disabilities are an essential element of sustainable development and the SDGs cannot be achieved without these rights being realised. The project aimed to translate this concept into practical change through the links with both the UNCRPD and the RPWD Act by showing how the implementation of this law was central to the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to 'leave no one behind'. This allowed a link between global frameworks, rights and local action so the implementation of the SDGs became a practical tool for promoting awareness of rights.

The first element was to work with members of OPDs to understand and translate the SDGs to everyday experiences. Many members did not initially view the SDGs as tangible. It was important to start from the basis of the challenges that they faced and then understand how the SDGs, the UNCRPD and RPWD Act approached each of these. This approach helped the different OPDs to articulate their specific challenges within a global and national rights frameworks and to describe the changes they wanted to see in a way that policymakers understood. The DISC process gave people the knowledge of their rights and built their confidence in what they were looking to change.

The project empowered groups to orient their advocacy with the laws they wanted to change and they confirmed that this made their advocacy more successful. They could convince authorities about their rights and their entitlements because of their knowledge and understanding. In most cases, this led to a perceptible difference in how they were listened to and how their requests were received and agreed upon. One remaining challenge is that monitoring mechanisms do not exist for much of the change that was highlighted through the DISC process, which means that following up the approach is critical for its ongoing success.

One key and consistent benefit of the project was the sensitisation of local government officials about SDGs, UNCRPD and the RPWD Act. This was not just a one-way process, as the participants in the project learned to relate with the government authorities. This helped them understand the process of decision-making, as well as the most effective ways of influencing them.

Influencing disability policy at local and state level

"The scorecard process was a one of a kind experience for me. I got to learn many things from it, which will help me to develop problem-solving skills, effective communication and advocacy strategy. This was a platform where all the key stakeholders, like children with disabilities, parents, OPD members, Anganwadi workers, teachers and government officials, came together and developed a road map for the betterment of children with disabilities." - A female OPD member from Ganjam, Odisha

The DISC was an extremely useful tool for supporting OPD engagement with service providers and local authorities. Since the DISC process is participatory and collaborative, the various stakeholders involved (parents, OPDs, service providers and local officials) were able to work together to discuss the scorecard results, how to address any issues and where responsibility lies for improvement of services. The collaborative, rather than confrontational, approach enabled stakeholders to work together through a constructive dialogue and develop an action plan to address concerns moving forward.

The scorecard process increased the understanding and knowledge of OPDs on how change can happen and provided a tool to ensure that advocacy was focused and specific rather than ad hoc. While conversations with service providers had previously been on a small scale, perhaps focused on one child, the scorecard process enabled these conversations to become broader, with children, parents and teachers consulted and local officials brought into the conversation.

In many cases, the process resulted in a better connection between OPDs and local government officials, increasing the visibility of the OPDs and raising awareness of the importance of disability inclusion. The interface meetings enabled participants to consider solutions for short-term problems with service providers. But also, to consider longer-term, systemic challenges and how local authorities could address these. This engagement with local government was crucial and the collaborative process meant that local authorities were not simply confronted with their shortcomings but were able to work together with other stakeholders to consider the context and how they could contribute.

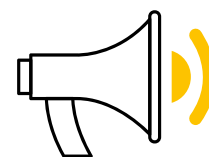
One challenge that the project's participants faced was that service providers and local authorities were reluctant to engage in the process if the scorecard contained poor scores. This often led them to question the method of the rating or argue that it does not reflect reality.

The level of receptivity to the disability rights agenda varied considerably between local authorities; it is important to note that changing perceptions and understanding around disability rights may take some time and requires ongoing engagement. A final challenge was that the project was limited in time and resources. It will be important to ensure that the scorecard process and resulting action plans are followed up on beyond the length of the project.

Fostering greater collaboration is critical. This can be furthered by:

- building strong and collaborative partnerships among policymakers, academic institutions, the private sector and civil society to ensure inclusion and the rights of people with disabilities in economic, social and political spheres. This leads to an equitable society.
- establishing a working relationship between OPDs, policymakers and other stakeholders to address policy gaps at a local and subnational level.
- establishing monitoring and accountability mechanisms of service providers to ensure access and quality of services to people with disabilities; especially at a local level to address gaps and barriers together.

Creating an enabling environment for the voice and agency of OPDs in the context of the SDGs



“The scorecard process is a unique initiative of advocacy. Putting our demands forward, a positive and healthy relationship can be built and the gap between OPDs and government stakeholders can be narrowed. We, the OPD leaders, are now able to do advocacy for the empowerment of people with disabilities in Hazaribagh in a positive atmosphere. Our OPD will work as a facilitating organisation for successful implementation of SDGs and the RPWD Act.” – Mr Mukesh Rana, President of Divya Jyoti Divyang Samiti in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

The participants of the project noted that, in the past, OPD advocacy tended to be negative and confrontational, with a focus on rallies and protests that highlighted specific injustices. This project instead promoted a more constructive and relational approach to influencing by working together with the government to understand the causes of the challenges that people with disabilities were facing. The project also helped OPDs through the process of influencing by understanding that speaking to the right person at the right time can make a huge difference.

The project focused on supporting a greater understanding of legislation. This means that if a particular issue of discrimination was noted, it was possible to collectively understand the local change required based on an understanding of the local implications of national legislation.

The development of a constructive relationship between OPDs and government officials has been described as one of the biggest successes of the project. OPDs came to see government officials as allies in promoting change and government officials were impressed when OPD members could refer to the SDGs, UNCRPD and the RPWD Act in their influencing. One example of the impact

comes from Rajasthan, where the OPD were able to build such a constructive relationship with the District Collector that the government requested support on accessible elections. This was linked to the politics of the elections in Rajasthan, but it was also a recognition of people with disabilities as a community with a voice, power and political influence.

The DISC process focused on inclusive education. Initially, it was felt that there was not the necessary political will to see change, but it was reported by project participants that they now believed that government officials are ready to listen and accept the need for change. The amount of time for sustainable changes to be implemented and the lack of effective monitoring and accountability means that there is a need for the processes in the project to continue. Due to the short timeframes in the project and despite progress, there are still a lot of areas that need to advance further, including the application process and use of Unique Disability Identification Cards which ensure access to various government schemes and benefits for people with disabilities.

To view the cards, visit:
www.swavlambancard.gov.in/





Public meeting with education department to share scorecard results, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan. (Feb 2020)

Government officials still need to be supported to understand how they integrate the SDGs, UNCRPD and RPWD Act into local policies and practices and there remains a lack of interdepartmental cooperation on cross-cutting issues. Over time it's important that it's not just the state disability commissioner who engages and leads but also the health, education and social welfare departments.

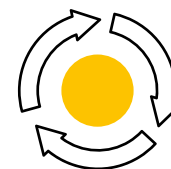
Engagement and coordination at the national level still require work. There has been a good relationship built with the national civil society platform, Wada Na Todo Abhiyan. But due to the challenge of organising workshops and events throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, this has not progressed to the point where there is a functional national network of OPDs. The intention has always been for

the project to begin at the local and state level before progressing to the national. But the participants accepted that this is an area that needs much longer for a sustainable network to be in place.

The SDGs and their link with the UNCRPD provide an important opportunity to empower people with disabilities and further disability rights. The project has emphasised the importance of:

- making the UNCRPD a core element of SDG implementation with national disability laws being fully enacted in the process.
- ensuring transparent and participatory approaches such as including OPDs in developing policies, plans, budgeting and implementation aligned with the SDGs.

The sustainability of the project



"In the DISC training we were able to identify and prioritise the issues on which advocacy needs to be done and together people with and without disabilities helped in identifying the issues for advocacy." – Santosh Gujar, treasurer for Viklang Ekta Sewa Samiti OPD in Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh

The project has taken a multi-dimensional approach with different elements linking together and reinforcing each other. The bedrock of the project was on training OPDs to use the SDGs, the UNCRPD and the national disability law as advocacy tools and enabling them to relate these to their local context and specific challenges. Understanding the different frameworks, how they link to each other and articulating the gaps on the ground was important to develop a strong foundation for engagement with SDG implementation.

The OPDs were introduced to the concept of accountability and trained on local accountability mechanisms such as DISC. A twin-track approach on gender equality as one of the main pillars of this project was used. Gender was a cross-cutting theme woven into different project activities. It was also a standalone component within the assessment process of OPD functioning and a process of internal inquiry among OPD members which led to the establishment of the Gender Committees. The focus on gender was amplified as DISC included specific focus groups of women and girls with disabilities to ensure their voice was heard.

The opportunity for practical engagement in exercising accountability enabled OPDs to make their voice heard, use evidence gathered, request their entitlements and engage with local governments in a collaborative manner. Another important dimension has been a strong partnership element that links local, regional, national and international levels: OPDs engaged with the European Development Forum

through exchange visits to Europe; participated in the national level CSO process on SDG implementation with the pan-India CSO platform, Wada Na Todo Abhiyan; and engaged with other CSOs at state level. This marked a departure from the usual silo-based approach which is common to the disability sector in India and also bridged the rural/urban divide. Importantly, partnerships and collaboration with local and district administration have resulted in real changes on the ground and some policy successes as well. It has linked OPDs to macro issues while enabling them to provide invaluable insights into the ground-level realities and contribute to national-level SDG processes such as voluntary national review reporting.

The project was designed to build upon existing initiatives under Sightsavers' social inclusion thematic area. The project has developed several knowledge products and resources like the DISC guide and training modules on SDGs and UNCRPD, which will help support ongoing initiatives by OPDs. The OPDs in the target areas will continue to be supported with the provision of technical assistance, linkages and partnership development under this area. This will ensure continuity and future opportunities to engage in SDG implementation at local and national level. Partnerships with CSOs built during the life of the project at state level and stronger linkages with national CSO platforms will ensure that OPDs can continue to feed into CSO-led processes for SDG implementation. A partnership strategy has been developed with European Development Forum

members and OPDs to ensure a longer-term impact. In addition, strengthened relationships and collaboration with state and district governments will continue to be nurtured. OPDs are now being viewed

as strategic change agents and more equal stakeholders by local governments, especially in the context of the COVID-19 recovery process.

Summary of recommendations

Understanding the impact of DISC shows that meaningful engagement and participation in SDG implementation and monitoring requires:

- Establishing adequate measures to guarantee that the perspectives of women and girls with disabilities are taken into account. Especially in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence.
- Making disability and gender awareness part of pre-service and in-service training for all public officials. This will facilitate equitable behaviour towards people with disabilities and promotion of their rights, with particular emphasis on the rights of girls and women with disabilities.
- Building strong and collaborative partnerships among policymakers, academic institutions, the private sector and civil society. This ensures the inclusion and rights of people with disabilities in economic, social and political spheres and leads to an equitable society.
- Establishing a working relationship between organisations of people with disabilities, policymakers and other stakeholders to address policy gaps at local and subnational levels.
- Ensuring transparent, participatory approaches such as including OPDs in developing policies, plans, budgets and implementation aligned with the SDGs.
- Making the UNCRPD a core element of SDG implementation with national disability laws being fully enacted in the process.
- Establishing monitoring and accountability mechanisms of service providers to ensure access and quality of services to people with disabilities and especially at local level to collaboratively address gaps and barriers.

We work with partners in low and middle income countries to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equal opportunities for people with disabilities

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