

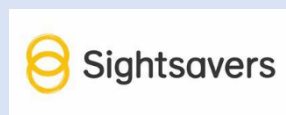


# Workshop Report

# Disability Rights Landscape

## in Bangladesh

Organizers



Empowered lives.  
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Drafted By: Arju Afrin Kathy

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## Executive Summary |

The three-day residential workshop on the disability rights landscape in Bangladesh provided a critical platform for reviewing the status of disability rights and social protection in the country. The workshop brought together diverse stakeholders, including NGOs, CSOs, UN agencies, and government officials, to engage in comprehensive discussions aimed at identifying key challenges and solutions for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. The overarching goal was to foster collaboration among stakeholders and make actionable commitments for advancing disability rights in Bangladesh for the year 2025.

The workshop began with an introduction to the disability rights landscape in Bangladesh, including an overview of key legislation such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities (RRPD) Act 2013. The session also covered the Rules of Business 2015 and National Action Plan (NAP) for persons with disabilities, all of which aim to create a more inclusive environment for persons with disabilities. Updates from a recent visit with the Chief Advisor of Bangladesh highlighted the importance of political will in advancing disability rights and inclusivity. The workshop also reviewed the social protection landscape for persons with disabilities from a disability-inclusive lens. Discussions focused on disability allowances, Active Labour Market Programs (ALMPs), and the integration of disability rights into the broader social protection framework.

A significant portion of the workshop was dedicated to understanding the UNPRD efforts in Bangladesh, specifically the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy and progress made by various UN agencies in promoting disability inclusion. Presentations from experts highlighted the importance of aligning national policies with global disability rights commitments, and the session emphasized the importance of multilateral cooperation to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in all aspects of development. Additionally, a hands-on exercise on root cause analysis of disability inclusion barriers provided participants with a practical understanding of how to identify and address the underlying issues hindering effective inclusion.

The workshop also featured a panel session with the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and JPUF to discuss the implementation of the RRPD Act 2013. Key themes included revitalizing disability committees, appointing disability focal points within ministries, and enhancing inter-ministerial coordination. The MoSW officials reassured participants of their unwavering commitment to implementing the RRPD Act 2013, with a focus on activating the relevant committees and integrating the findings from the workshop into actionable policies. They also emphasized the importance of ensuring that the honorable adviser to the Ministry of Social Welfare remains supportive and empathetic toward efforts to mainstream persons with disabilities.

Another major focus of the workshop was the need for collaboration and teamwork. The MoSW representatives outlined plans to work closely with the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to address issues related to tax rebates and assistive devices, which have been significant barriers to full participation for persons with disabilities. It was agreed that communication with the NBR Chairman and Secretary would be prioritized to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in government activities and policy initiatives. This highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration to address systemic challenges in disability inclusion.

The issue of disability focal points was also prominently discussed. It was recognized that having a dedicated focal point within each government ministry would help ensure institutional accountability and facilitate the inclusion of persons with disabilities across all sectors. Participants agreed that letters would be sent to each ministry urging them to designate focal points for disability inclusion, which would significantly streamline the implementation of the RRPD Act 2013 and help ensure that disability rights are integrated into all government functions.

One of the workshop's key discussions centered around the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, which has traditionally overlooked the contributions of persons with disabilities. Acknowledging this gap, participants emphasized the need for a more inclusive VNR process that accurately represents the participation of all segments of society, including persons with disabilities. Unlike previous reports, which largely reflected government achievements, the VNR 2025 would be a state document that incorporates inputs from CSOs, NGOs, and organizations representing persons with disabilities, ensuring that their contributions are recognized. The workshop also emphasized the need to integrate disability data into the SDG Tracker, allowing disability-related information to be systematically tracked and incorporated into national development progress reports. This would ensure that disability rights are not only acknowledged but actively measured as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and other global frameworks. The final discussions focused on global commitments to disability inclusion, such as the Global Disability Summit 2022, UN CRPD, and the Marrakesh Treaty.

In conclusion, the workshop marked a pivotal moment in advancing disability rights in Bangladesh, setting the stage for impactful, long-lasting change. The collective commitment to activating disability focal points, strengthening cross-sectoral coordination, and integrating disability data into national and global development frameworks demonstrates a unified drive towards a truly inclusive society. These commitments, when fully realized, hold the potential to transform the lives of persons with disabilities, ensuring their full participation and recognition. By following through on these actions, Bangladesh will not only fulfill its global disability rights obligations but also move closer to achieving the crucial goal of 'leaving no one behind,' fostering a future where everyone, regardless of ability, can thrive.

## Background

Disability is an integral aspect of human diversity, impacting a significant portion of the population at various points in their lives. Currently, an estimated 1.3 billion individuals, equating to roughly 16% of people worldwide, live with substantial disabilities - a number expected to increase due to demographic shifts such as aging populations and the rise of noncommunicable diseases (World Health Organization, 2021). The experience of disability is common; it is anticipated that almost everyone will face a disability; either temporary or permanent—at some stage in their lifetime (Shakespeare et al., 2017)<sup>1</sup>. Alarmingly, 1 in every 6 person are disabled, if we do by children and gender disaggregated, we see that the prevalence of disability is especially pronounced among marginalized demographics, with statistics indicating that one in five women and one in ten children may encounter these challenges (World Health Organization, 2021). This reality underscores the urgent need for inclusive policies and robust support systems to empower those affected. The disability rights movement emphasizes the crucial principle of “nothing about us without us,” advocating for the active participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes that shape their lives (Barnes, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. Despite the existence of international frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) designed to foster equality and inclusion, many individuals with disabilities still confront significant barriers in accessing vital services, impeding efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

Bangladesh’s outlook can be: can be seen through the In Bangladesh, pillars, disability dire need, and overall, a framework which stands on the pillar of Economic Capital, Social Capital, Human Capital where the persons with disabilities will be given the opportunity to develop skills and enter into the labour market, they’ll gain access to the peer support network and they will have affordable health care and access to inclusive and accessible education facilities.

However, one of the most significant challenges in advancing the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, is obtaining accurate and comprehensive data on their population. The absence of precise statistics on the number of individuals with disabilities complicates efforts to develop targeted interventions and policies. Current estimates suggest that approximately 9.7 percent of the population in Bangladesh lives with some form of disability, but this figure is contested due to varying definitions and methodologies used in different studies (HIES 2022<sup>4</sup>; World Health Organization, 2011)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, T., Watson, N., & Aubrecht, K. (2017). **The Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies**. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Barnes, C. (2016). **Disability Studies: A Student's Guide**. Sage Publications.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2021). **Disability and Development Report**.

<sup>4</sup> Household Income and Expenditure Survey, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization. (2021). **World Report on Disability 2021**.

The lack of a robust management information system (MIS) for persons with disabilities further exacerbates this issue. Existing systems often fail to capture essential data regarding the types and severity of disabilities, demographics, and socio-economic conditions of individuals with disabilities. Consequently, many initiatives aimed at improving accessibility, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities face significant obstacles due to insufficient data. Without reliable information, policymakers and development partners struggle to allocate resources effectively and design appropriate programs to meet the diverse needs of this population (Khan & Rahman, 2020)<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the fragmentation of data sources and the absence of a coordinated framework for data collection hinder efforts to establish a clear picture of the disability landscape in Bangladesh. This situation creates a barrier to formulating evidence-based policies and practices, which are critical for promoting inclusion and ensuring that persons with disabilities can fully participate in society (Haq & Sultana, 2018)<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, exploring innovative approaches in data collection by leveraging AI technologies, stakeholders can streamline data gathering processes, improve data accuracy, and facilitate real-time analysis, which can ultimately lead to more informed decision-making and policy formulation (Baker et al., 2022). This workshop aims to bring together stakeholders, including government officials, development partners, INGOs, and technology experts, to collaboratively develop a proposal for an AI-augmented data management system that addresses the unique needs of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

The workshop will focus on advancing the understanding and implementation of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, for senior and mid-level government officials and other relevant stakeholders.

## Objectives of the Workshop

1. Disability rights and social protection landscape in Bangladesh
2. Overview of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)
3. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013
4. Addressing discrepancies in disability data
5. Strengthening inter-ministerial coordination for the effective implementation of the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities

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<sup>6</sup> Khan, M. A., & Rahman, M. M. (2020). Assessing the Challenges of Data Collection on Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: A Review. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 30(3), 180-189. doi:10.1177/1044207319895643

<sup>7</sup> Haq, M. S., & Sultana, R. (2018). *Disability Data Management in Bangladesh: Gaps and Recommendations*. *Bangladesh Journal of Disability Studies*, 5(1), 45-60. doi:10.3329/bjds.v5i1.38981

# Day 01 |

Ms. Amrita Rezina Rozario opened the workshop by providing an overview of its context and objectives. She highlighted the progress of disability rights in Bangladesh, emphasizing the contributions of **Sightsavers** and the **Equal Bangladesh Campaign** in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. She underscored the significance of collective efforts in promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and policy advocacy for persons with disabilities.

## Key Discussion Points and Challenges in Implementing Disability Rights

**Mr. Saidul Haque**

### Impediments to Implementing the Act on Disability Rights

Saidul Haque highlighted several challenges in enforcing the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013. He emphasized that weak enforcement mechanisms, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and limited awareness among policymakers hinder effective implementation. Furthermore, the absence of robust monitoring and evaluation systems makes it difficult to ensure institutional accountability.

### Barriers in Education

According to Saidul Haque, students with disabilities are deprived of opportunities in science and mathematics education due to several structural challenges. These include:

#### **Lack of accessible learning materials and assistive technologies.**

Shortage of qualified teachers trained in inclusive education.

Limited institutional commitment to integrating students with disabilities into mainstream STEM education.

### Employment Challenges

#### **Implementation of the Disability Quota**

Saidul Haque pointed out that the recent ministry circular on employment quotas only includes individuals with physical disabilities, excluding those with sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial disabilities. He stressed the need for an inclusive approach that recognizes all types of disabilities within the quota system.

## **Incentives for Employers (Article 10)**

Under Article 10 of the Disability Rights Act, employers are entitled to incentives for hiring persons with disabilities. However, Saidul Haque noted that there is ambiguity regarding the execution, percentage allocation, and eligibility criteria. He suggested further research into relevant policies to ensure that this provision is effectively implemented.

## **Ensuring Participation in Decision-Making**

Saidul Haque emphasized the need for persons with disabilities to be included in decision-making processes, from local government to parliamentary elections. He pointed out that unless persons with disabilities are given access and a voice in policymaking, true inclusivity cannot be achieved.

## **Accessibility Challenges**

### **Transport and Infrastructure**

Saidul Haque identified transport inaccessibility as a major barrier for persons with disabilities. He highlighted the lack of ramps, designated spaces, and audio-visual guidance in public transport, which limits mobility for individuals with disabilities.

### **Medical Support and Services**

A key issue raised by Saidul Haque was the absence of dedicated disability service desks in hospitals and clinics. He emphasized the urgent need for accessible healthcare services, particularly for individuals with complex medical needs.

### **Capacity Building for Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)**

According to Saidul Haque, OPDs are not receiving adequate training and capacity-building opportunities. He stressed the need for targeted programs to empower OPDs and enhance their ability to advocate for disability rights effectively.

### **Provision of Assistive Technologies**

Saidul Haque highlighted the lack of access to assistive technologies, which limits the independence of persons with disabilities. He called for government intervention to ensure the widespread availability of assistive devices.



## Need for a Disability Research Center

Saidul Haque proposed the establishment of a dedicated research center focused on disability, health, and education. This center would provide data-driven insights for policymaking and help develop inclusive solutions for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

## Institutional Challenges and Advocacy Issues

### Challenges with JPUF and DSS

Saidul Haque urged JPUF to improve accessibility but noted that JPUF often ignores requests and recommendations from OPDs.

He criticized the Department of Social Services (DSS) for not prioritizing disability rights, pointing out the lack of a dedicated focal point or section for disability-related issues.

### Recommendations

- **Disability Allowance**

Saidul Haque recommended a minimum disability allowance of BDT 5,000 per month until employment is ensured.

- **Disability Insurance Program**

He called for the establishment of a national disability insurance program to provide financial security and health coverage for persons with disabilities.

- **Strengthening Accountability**

Saidul Haque emphasized the need for greater institutional accountability to ensure that JPUF and DSS align their services with the rights and needs of persons with disabilities.

- He also called for the creation of a **focal point for disability rights within DSS** to improve service delivery and responsiveness to OPDs and disability advocates.

Saidul Haque concluded that addressing these challenges and implementing the recommended measures would significantly advance the rights of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable society.

## **Presentation Summary: The Evolution of Disability as a Concept, Dr. Nafeesur Rahman**

### **Disability as an Evolving Concept**

Disability is not a static notion; rather, it is shaped by societal attitudes, policies, and legal frameworks. Over time, the understanding of disability has shifted from viewing persons with disabilities as dependent individuals to recognizing them as equal members of society with rights and agency. This transformation can be understood through different models that have influenced policies and perceptions across history.

### **Evolution of Understanding the Concept of Disability**

#### **Charity Model**

The charity model views persons with disabilities as recipients of care, protection, or goodwill. This perspective assumes that they are dependent on others and require assistance to survive. While this model has historically motivated charitable efforts, it reinforces stereotypes of helplessness and fails to address systemic barriers that contribute to exclusion.

#### **Medical Model**

The medical model sees disability as a problem within the individual that needs to be "fixed" or "cured." Under this approach, persons with disabilities are treated as patients rather than individuals with rights. The model prioritizes medical interventions over social and environmental changes, often leading to exclusion from mainstream education, employment, and public life.

#### **Economic Model**

The economic model assesses disability based on an individual's perceived productivity. Persons with disabilities are often seen as less economically valuable, leading to discrimination in employment and financial policies. This model reinforces the exclusion of individuals who do not meet traditional economic productivity standards rather than recognizing the value of inclusive and accessible workplaces.

#### **Social Model**

The social model shifts the focus from an individual's impairment to the barriers created by society. It recognizes that disability is not solely a medical condition but a result of inaccessible environments, discriminatory attitudes, and systemic exclusion. This model advocates for societal adjustments—such as accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, and employment policies—to remove disabling barriers and ensure equal participation.

## **Human Rights Model**

The human rights model takes universal human rights as its foundation, viewing disability as part of human diversity rather than as a problem to be solved. It emphasizes the dignity, rights, and agency of persons with disabilities, ensuring their full participation in society. This model aligns with international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and promotes the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion.

## **Foundation of the Human Rights Model**

### **At the International Level**

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the United Nations, is a landmark treaty that establishes the legal rights of persons with disabilities. It emphasizes full inclusion, accessibility, and the right to live independently. The CRPD's guiding principle of equality ensures that all individuals, regardless of ability, are entitled to the same legal protections, opportunities, and dignity as others.

### **At the National Level**

In Bangladesh, disability rights are rooted in the nation's founding principles and legal framework. The Proclamation of Independence and the Constitution of Bangladesh uphold fundamental rights, including equality, social justice, and non-discrimination. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, further strengthens this commitment by establishing legal safeguards, promoting accessibility, and ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life.

The human rights approach recognizes that persons with disabilities are not passive recipients of aid but active members of society with the right to equal opportunities, dignity, and self-determination. To achieve true inclusivity, it is essential to eliminate structural barriers and foster a society that values diversity and accessibility for all.

## **Key Provisions of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013**

The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 is a landmark legal framework in Bangladesh that ensures the rights, dignity, and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The Act defines disability, outlines specific rights, and establishes mechanisms for protection and enforcement.

### **Types of Disabilities (Articles 3-15)**

Dr. Nafeesur Rahman delivered a detailed presentation on the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, highlighting its key provisions and significance in ensuring the rights, dignity, and inclusion of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

### **Types of Disabilities (Articles 3-15)**

Dr. Rahman explained that the Act recognizes **10 specific types of disabilities**, in addition to **multiple disabilities and other conditions; total mentioned 12 categories**. This broad classification ensures that all persons with disabilities receive appropriate legal protection and access to necessary services.

### **Specific Rights Guaranteed (Article 16)**

The Act guarantees 20 fundamental rights to persons with disabilities, covering education, healthcare, employment, accessibility, and social inclusion. Dr. Rahman emphasized that these rights are critical for ensuring equal participation in society.

### **Registration and Identification (Article 31)**

A crucial component of the Act is the registration and issuance of disability identity cards, which enable persons with disabilities to access their legal rights and government benefits.

### **Reservation of Seats in Public Transport (Article 32)**

To enhance mobility and accessibility, the law mandates reserved seating for persons with disabilities in public transport. Dr. Rahman pointed out that proper implementation of this provision remains a challenge.

### **Right to Education: Elimination of Discrimination (Article 33)**

The Act strictly prohibits discrimination in admission to educational institutions based on disability. Dr. Rahman stressed the importance of inclusive education and the need for adequate resources, training, and assistive technologies to support students with disabilities.

### **Ensuring Accessibility in Public Places (Article 34)**

Dr. Rahman highlighted the Act's requirement for accessible public spaces, transportation, roads, and digital platforms. He noted that while progress has been made, accessibility remains a major barrier for many persons with disabilities.

### **Protection Against Employment Discrimination (Article 35)**

The Act prohibits discrimination in employment, ensuring equal opportunities in hiring, promotions, and workplace accommodations. Dr. Rahman emphasized the need for strict enforcement and incentives for employers to encourage the recruitment of persons with disabilities.

## **Prohibition of Discrimination and Compensation Mechanism (Article 36)**

Dr. Rahman discussed the Act's provisions for legal redress and compensation in cases of discrimination or rights violations, ensuring accountability for institutions and individuals who fail to uphold disability rights.

## **Offense and Punishment (Article 37)**

To enforce compliance, the Act prescribes penalties for discrimination, harassment, or denial of rights to persons with disabilities. Dr. Rahman stressed the need for effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to ensure the law's full implementation.

## **Whose Responsibility Is It? A Shared Duty, Not a Sole Burden**

Dr. Nafeesur Rahman began his presentation with a thought-provoking question: "Whose responsibility is it to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities?" Too often, he noted, the assumption is that disability inclusion falls solely under the Ministry of Social Welfare. But the reality is far more complex—and far more collective.

## **The Web of Responsibility: Committees at Every Level (Articles 17-28)**

The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, does not leave implementation to chance. It establishes a multi-tiered structure of accountability, ensuring that disability rights are not sidelined but actively integrated across governance levels:

- National Coordination Committee – The high-level body ensuring policy alignment and national strategies.
- National Executive Committee – Tasked with turning policies into actionable programs.
- District Committee – Bringing change closer to the grassroots by overseeing disability-related initiatives in districts.
- Upazila Committee – Bridging the gap between policy and practice at the upazila (sub-district) level.
- Urban Committee – Addressing the unique challenges of persons with disabilities in urban environments.

Dr. Rahman made a crucial point: no committee, no official, no person is exempt from their responsibilities. There is no legal immunity for inaction. The law is clear—everyone is accountable.

## **Beyond the Ministry of Social Welfare: A Whole-of-Government Approach**

"Can a single ministry carry the weight of an entire movement?" Dr. Rahman asked. The law itself provides the answer: No.

The Act mandates 35 Ministries and Departments to take action. These include:

- The Ministry of Education, ensuring accessible learning environments.
- The Ministry of Health, providing inclusive healthcare services.
- The Ministry of Labor, enforcing workplace protections and employment quotas.
- The Ministry of Transport, making public transportation truly accessible.

Despite the National Action Plan on Disability outlining responsibilities, the biggest roadblock remains the rigid Allocation of Business across Ministries—a bureaucratic challenge that must change if real progress is to be made.

### **Breaking the Silos: The Urgency of Collaboration**

Dr. Rahman emphasized that disability inclusion is not charity, nor an afterthought—it is a legal and moral obligation. Ensuring accessibility, equality, and inclusion requires:

- Stronger inter-ministerial coordination.
- Clear accountability mechanisms.
- Adequate budget allocations to turn policies into reality

### **Reflections by Khandoker J. Alam**

Khandoker J. Alam shared his insights and reflections, particularly highlighting his engagement with policymakers and ongoing advocacy efforts for the rights of persons with disabilities.

### **Meeting with the Honorable Chief Advisor (HCA)**

On November 2nd, 2024 Khandoker J. Alam and members of Disability Rights Watch, a 12-member advocacy group, had an opportunity to discuss disability rights with the Honorable Chief Advisor. Out of the 12 members, five representatives met with the HCA, raising key concerns and recommendations for strengthening disability inclusion in Bangladesh.

One of the significant proposals made during the discussion was the renaming of the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) to better reflect its role in ensuring rights-based and inclusive development for persons with disabilities.

Additionally, Alam addressed the **National Action Plan (NAP)** on Disability, emphasizing the urgency of its effective implementation. He pointed out that a once-active multi-stakeholder committee involving civil society organizations (CSOs), which used to convene every three months, has been inactive since 2017. A formal request was made to reactivate this committee to ensure continuous dialogue and oversight.

## **SDGs and Data Inclusion**

Alam stressed the importance of ensuring that persons with disabilities are explicitly included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He highlighted the need for disability-disaggregated data to track progress and measure outcomes effectively. He also noted that an action plan already exists, allocating specific roles and responsibilities to various ministries for disability inclusion in the SDG framework.

On the topic of quota reservations, he raised concerns about the inclusion of transgender individuals within the existing 1% quota for persons with disabilities. Alam and other advocates strongly recommended a separate, dedicated quota for persons with disabilities to prevent dilution of their rightful representation.

## **Disability Foundation and White Paper**

Khandoker J. Alam acknowledged and appreciated the fact that disability concerns have been included in the recently published **White Paper on the State of Bangladesh Economy**. This inclusion signifies an important policy recognition of disability issues within broader national development planning. However, he urged that the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) take swift action in addressing these issues to ensure meaningful and sustainable inclusion of persons with disabilities.

## **Reflections and Remarks by the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW)**

Bijoy K. Debnath, the Managing Director of the Joint Public Unity Forum (JPUF), shared important updates from the Ministry of Social Welfare, particularly in regard to special education and inclusive education frameworks for persons with disabilities.

## **Special Education Needs and Comprehensive Plans**

Mr. Debnath emphasized that special education needs are a critical area requiring attention and that comprehensive plans need to be formulated to address the diverse educational needs of students with disabilities. He proposed a more focused approach in developing tailored educational programs, with an emphasis on Mathematics and Science education, which are often overlooked for disabled students.

## **Development of a College for Special Education**

Mr. Debnath also highlighted the development of a college for special education, underscoring that work is ongoing to finalize the organogram and establish a functioning model for the college. This initiative aims to provide higher education opportunities for persons with disabilities, offering specialized training and support in an inclusive environment.

## **Ensuring Accountability through Regular Meetings**

In terms of governance and accountability, Mr. Debnath pointed out that regular committee meetings would play a key role in ensuring effective implementation of disability-related policies and programs. These meetings, he argued, would be essential to track progress, address emerging issues, and hold stakeholders accountable for their roles in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities.

## **Reflections by Mr. Haider Jahan Farash**

Mr. Haider, in his reflections, addressed some critical areas of concern and action regarding the functioning of committees and the overall progress of disability-related initiatives.

### **Committee Meetings and Accountability**

Mr. Haider acknowledged that committee meetings have not been held regularly, a matter that hinders the effective implementation of disability policies and action plans. He expressed his commitment to engaging with the Secretary to ensure that these committees are revived and function in a more systematic and accountable manner.

### **Research and Development (R&D) Cell**

He also pointed out the existence of an R&D cell, which holds promise for advancing disability-related research and innovation. However, he emphasized that the cell requires a dedicated budget to ensure its proper functioning and to support research that could shape better policies and practices for persons with disabilities.

### **Reactivation of Centers**

In a positive move, Mr. Haider shared that 103 centers will be reactivated to provide essential services and support to persons with disabilities. This reactivation is expected to significantly enhance the availability of resources, such as training and rehabilitation, across different regions.



# Overview Of the Social Protection Landscape in Bangladesh from A Disability Lens Social Protection and Labor Market Access for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: A Basic Human Needs Approach Mr. Aminul Arifeen

## A Development Pathway to an Inclusive Future

### Development → Inclusive Development → Disability Inclusive Development

This progression underscores the importance of integrating persons with disabilities into all facets of societal development. Moving away from traditional charity or medical models, the focus is on ensuring equal access to opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

### NSSS Action Plan: Emphasis on Social Inclusion

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) places a strong emphasis on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, aiming to ensure their participation in society and access to the benefits of development through inclusive policies and frameworks.

### Covariate and Idiosyncratic Shocks

Covariate shocks refer to broad societal events like economic recessions or natural disasters, which disproportionately affect persons with disabilities, further increasing their vulnerability.

**Idiosyncratic shocks** are individual-specific, such as personal health crises or family challenges, which also significantly impact persons with disabilities, stressing the need for targeted social protection strategies.

### Disability Allowance Beneficiary Growth Comparison

- FY 2005-06: 104,166 beneficiaries
- FY 2024-25: 3,234,000 beneficiaries

Mr. Arifeen highlighted the remarkable growth in the number of individuals benefiting from disability allowances, from just over 100,000 in 2005-06 to more than 3 million in 2024-25. This increase reflects the national effort to extend support to a larger number of individuals with disabilities.

### Progression of Monthly Allowances for Persons with Disabilities

- 2005-06: 200 BDT
- 2016-17: 750 BDT
- 2024-25: 850 BDT

## **National Budgetary Trend in Disability-Specific Programmes (2008-2024)**

### **1. Grants for Schools and Welfare Fund**

Over the years, funding for schools specifically catering to individuals with disabilities has experienced a steady rise. By FY2023-24, the budget for these institutions reached 42 crore BDT, reflecting a strengthened commitment to providing quality education for disabled students. At the same time, allocations for the welfare fund have been gradually increasing, ranging between 2 crore BDT and 7.12 crore BDT. These funds aim to improve social welfare services, supporting individuals with disabilities in various aspects of life.

### **2. Centers for the Disabled**

In terms of infrastructure, significant attention has been dedicated to establishing Service and Assistance Centers for individuals with disabilities. The financial commitment to these centers has also increased steadily, with an initial budget of 5.41 crore BDT in FY2008-09. By FY2023-24, the budget for these centers has risen to 76.14 crore BDT, signifying a growing investment in providing services and assistance that empower individuals with disabilities to live more independent and fulfilling lives.

### **3. Neuro-Developmental Disability Protection Trust**

The government has also prioritized specialized support for those with neuro-developmental disabilities. The Neuro-Developmental Disability Protection Trust received 36.08 crore BDT, showcasing a targeted effort to protect and assist individuals with conditions such as autism and other related disorders. Furthermore, the National Academy for Autism and Neuro Development received a robust allocation of 97.58 crore BDT, highlighting the government's commitment to research, education, and specialized care for neuro-developmental disabilities.

Mr. Arifeen outlined the prevalence of disabilities in Bangladesh, emphasizing that 1 in 5 individuals has some form of disability, while 1 in 4 experiences moderate to severe disabilities. Additionally, 2 in 5 have mild disabilities but still encounter significant challenges in their daily lives.

He highlighted the gendered disparities in marriage, noting that while men with disabilities are more likely to marry non-disabled women, women with disabilities face social and financial obstacles, including dowry demands in the form of cash, assets, or land. He also drew attention to alarming statistics, revealing that 33% of married women with disabilities experience physical and verbal abuse from their husbands, while 42% face abuse from their in-laws.

The presentation also shed light on education and accessibility barriers, where participation rates among PwDs remain disproportionately low. Mr. Arifeen cited that while 50% of children with disabilities complete primary education, only 2 in 5 finish secondary education, and a mere 1 in 10 attain a higher degree. He pointed out the

inaccessibility of school infrastructure, including washrooms, classrooms on upper floors, and a lack of Braille materials, as well as the absence of awareness among invigilators about exam time accommodations for students with disabilities.

On poverty and employment disparities, Mr. Arifeen referenced data from HIES 2022, which showed that while the national poverty rate is 5.6%, the rate among the poorest individuals with disabilities is 29%—meaning 1 in 3 of the poorest people are PwDs. Additionally, he highlighted the stark gender gap in employment, noting that men with disabilities are four times more likely to secure jobs than women with disabilities.

He also underscored the exclusion of persons with disabilities from political and decision-making processes, with only 0.17% having roles in local government and 0.53% participating in electoral processes. This lack of representation, he argued, calls for stronger advocacy and inclusive governance policies.

Discussing social protection, Mr. Arifeen acknowledged progress in disability allowances, which have increased from 200 taka to 850 taka, covering 90.7% of registered beneficiaries under the Subarna Card. However, he raised concerns that the allowance is not inflation-adjusted, reducing its real impact over time.

### **Fostering an Inclusive Workforce: Ensuring Equal Employment Opportunities**

Continuing his presentation, Mr. Aminul Arifeen emphasized the right to work for persons with disabilities, as outlined in Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). He highlighted that States Parties must ensure equal opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in the labor market and access employment in an open, inclusive, and accessible work environment.

He then outlined the ecosystem required for active labor market participation, involving key stakeholders such as:

- Employers – Ensuring that workplaces foster inclusion and provide fair employment opportunities.
- Educational Institutions – Offering skills training and accessible learning to enhance employability.
- Business Networks – Encouraging companies to adopt inclusive hiring practices.
- Organizations and Civil Society – Advocating for equal rights in the workforce and supporting job seekers.
- Government – Implementing policies and regulations to promote fair labor market participation.

Mr. Arifeen further discussed the interaction between labor market supply and demand, explaining that job seekers with disabilities represent labor market supply, while employers create the demand. Organizations and advocacy groups play a critical role in bridging this gap, ensuring individuals are prepared for the workforce and workplaces are equipped to accommodate them.

## **Key Actions for Promoting Disability-Inclusive Employment**

In his presentation, Mr. Aminul Arifeen emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive labor market to ensure equal opportunities for all individuals. He highlighted several critical actions necessary to promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities:

- Eliminate discrimination in all aspects of employment.
- Ensure equal and favorable working conditions.
- Provide access to vocational and technical guidance programs.
- Promote employment opportunities and career advancement in the public and private sectors.
- Encourage self-employment, entrepreneurship, and cooperative development.
- Guarantee reasonable accommodations in the workplace.
- Support vocational rehabilitation, job retention, and return-to-work programs.

## **Global Best Practices: Pathways to Disability Inclusion in Bangladesh**

Mr. Aminul Arifeen's presentation highlighted global best practices in disability inclusion, showcasing innovative systems from Australia, Japan, and India. These examples not only underline the progress made in disability inclusion worldwide but also offer invaluable insights that could be adapted to enhance the situation in Bangladesh. With a focus on creating a more inclusive society, Arifeen emphasized how Bangladesh can draw inspiration from these models to develop a comprehensive framework that supports persons with disabilities in various aspects of life—financial assistance, healthcare, education, and employment.

### **Australia**

Australia's disability inclusion system is well-established, offering a comprehensive range of financial assistance and services to individuals with disabilities and their caregivers. Key initiatives include:

**Disability Support Pension (DSP):** A financial support program for individuals whose long-term disabilities impact their ability to work, with eligibility determined through updated Impairment Tables to ensure fairness.

**Support for Caregivers:** Non-means-tested payments, such as the Carer Payment & Carer Allowance, to ensure that caregivers can focus on providing high-quality care without financial stress.

**National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS):** This scheme provides individualized plans that fund assistive technologies, therapies, and services, promoting independence and social integration.

## Japan

Japan has implemented a range of policies to ensure the health, well-being, and economic participation of persons with disabilities, including:

**Universal Health Insurance System:** This system guarantees access to healthcare services for both persons with disabilities and their families, covering medical treatment, rehabilitation, and specialized care.

**Long-Term Care Insurance System:** A system providing support to elderly and disabled individuals who need help with daily activities, offering services such as in-home assistance and the use of assistive devices.

**Disability Employment Promotion Center:** This initiative provides funding for workplace modifications, job placements, and support services. Employers who hire persons with disabilities are eligible for subsidies to cover the costs of workplace accommodations and specialized training.

## India

India has developed several national initiatives to support the empowerment of persons with disabilities, including:

**National Institutes for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (NIEPID):** These institutes offer specialized education, training, and rehabilitation, equipping individuals with the skills needed for independent living and social integration.

**National Career Service (NCS):** A government-run platform that provides online job placement services, skill development programs, and career counseling for individuals with disabilities.

**Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY) & Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme:** These initiatives offer health insurance coverage for persons with disabilities and provide financial assistance to NGOs that help train and employ disabled individuals.

## Towards a More Inclusive Bangladesh

By learning from these international best practices, Mr. Arifeen concluded his presentation mentioning that Bangladesh can enhance its disability inclusion efforts. The key lies in creating a robust, multi-faceted support system that encompasses financial security, healthcare access, educational opportunities, and sustainable employment pathways. Building on successful models from countries like Australia, Japan, and India, Bangladesh can foster an environment that empowers persons with disabilities and promotes their full participation in society.

# Overview of UNPRPD Efforts in Bangladesh: Background, Objectives, Disability Inclusion Strategy, Achievements, and Future Plans

Md. Zahid Hossain & Ms. Farjana Reza

## UNPRPD Background and Objectives

The UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) is a vital mechanism designed to promote and strengthen the rights of persons with disabilities globally. The partnership provides a framework for collaboration across UN agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), and government bodies, aiming to drive concrete actions that align with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD).

### Key Objectives:

- **Advancing Disability Inclusion:** Ensuring that persons with disabilities are integrated into development processes and policies.
- **Supporting UN Agencies:** Helping UN entities develop disability-inclusive strategies within their operations.
- **Coordination and Resource Sharing:** Facilitating partnerships between UN agencies and local stakeholders for effective service delivery.

## UN Disability Inclusion Strategy

The UN Disability Inclusion Strategy was established to provide a clear, comprehensive approach to making the UN's work more inclusive. It is aimed at ensuring that UN policies, programs, and operations across the globe fully reflect the inclusion of persons with disabilities. This strategy works on embedding disability inclusion across various sectors, including:

- **Human Resources:** Ensuring inclusive recruitment and workplace accommodations.
- **Policies:** Mainstreaming disability into existing frameworks and policies.
- **Projects:** Designing disability-inclusive projects and initiatives.
- **Operations:** Implementing accessible services and resources.

## **The Change Process: Enhancing Disability Inclusion**

The shift toward more inclusive disability practices is built around several key areas of coordination and engagement. These areas are designed to institutionalize disability inclusion and create meaningful, sustainable change across sectors. The following strategies provide a framework for driving this transformation:

### **1. Clarifying Roles and Responsibilities**

A crucial step in the change process is ensuring that there is clarity of roles and responsibilities. This requires:

Establishing clear mandates for each stakeholder in the disability inclusion ecosystem.

Assigning focal points within UN agencies, CSOs, and government departments to coordinate efforts and ensure accountability.

This clarity will ensure that everyone knows their role in driving the disability inclusion agenda forward, minimizing confusion and optimizing resources.

### **2. Strengthening Interagency Coordination**

For disability inclusion to be effective, interagency coordination must be a priority. This involves:

- Joint planning among UN agencies, government bodies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to align objectives and resources.
- Appointing a Task Team Lead or a Disability Champion to spearhead the initiatives and ensure proper execution.
- Holding regular coordination meetings to keep all stakeholders updated on progress, challenges, and new opportunities for collaboration.

This approach will help build a cohesive strategy and foster a collaborative culture across agencies.

### **3. Promoting Inclusive and Participatory Decision-Making**

The inclusion of persons with disabilities should be reflected at every level of decision-making. This involves:

- Engaging Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)—around 30 key OPDs in Bangladesh—ensuring that they have an active role in shaping policies and programs.
- Promoting cross-sectoral engagement, so that disability inclusion is not only addressed within dedicated disability-related sectors but also in education, health, employment, and social protection.

This participatory approach ensures that the voices of those with lived experiences are integral to the decision-making process.

#### 4. Building Capacity Across Agencies

- To ensure effective implementation, capacity building across agencies is essential. This includes:
- Providing training for stakeholders to understand disability inclusion principles and practices.
- Conducting sensitization sessions to increase awareness of disability issues and remove stigmas.
- Facilitating knowledge sharing and the dissemination of best practices to improve the understanding and execution of inclusive policies.
- Equipped with the right skills and knowledge, agencies will be better positioned to implement disability-inclusive programs.

#### 5. Engagement with Government and Civil Society

A successful disability inclusion framework relies on the active engagement of both government and civil society. This involves:

- Strengthening government engagement to ensure that disability inclusion is prioritized in national policies and programs.
- Actively collaborating with civil society organizations to amplify advocacy efforts and support grassroots initiatives.
- These partnerships are crucial for a multi-faceted approach to inclusion that aligns local, national, and international priorities.

#### 6. Public Awareness and Advocacy

Finally, public awareness and advocacy play a central role in driving societal change. This can be achieved by:

- Launching joint advocacy campaigns that highlight the rights of persons with disabilities and promote inclusive social protection, employment, and skills development.
- Engaging the media to spread awareness and build support for disability inclusion efforts across different sectors, including education, employment, and health.

As a process of change, they have mentioned the initiatives by UNPRPD.

#### Data and Evidence Collection

**Disability Module in Labour Force Survey (LFS, 2022-2024):** A significant initiative was the integration of a Disability Module into the national Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted between 2022 and 2024. This effort aimed to systematically gather data on disability inclusion, particularly regarding individuals with disabilities' participation in the workforce. The survey results provide valuable insights into the challenges and barriers faced by persons with disabilities in accessing employment opportunities and social inclusion.



**Inclusive Reporting Tools:** Alongside the survey, inclusive reporting tools were reviewed and developed, including internal tools for tracking Job Fairs and capacity-building initiatives. These tools are crucial for ensuring that the experiences of persons with disabilities are adequately captured in reports, helping monitor progress on disability inclusion and identify areas for improvement.

### **Capacity Building and Awareness Raising**

**Training for UN Disability Inclusion Task Team:** A series of targeted trainings were rolled out, focusing on the UNCRPD commitment, Social Protection, and LFS data advocacy. These sessions aimed to build the capacity of the UN Disability Inclusion Task Team as well as national stakeholders involved in disability inclusion efforts. The training covered key aspects of disability rights, social protection policies, and how data can be used to advocate for more inclusive policies. This capacity-building initiative helped stakeholders gain a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities in implementing disability-inclusive frameworks.

### **Policy and Framework Integration**

**Aligning Disability Inclusion with the SDG Agenda:** Efforts were made to align disability inclusion with the broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically targeting SDGs 1, 5, 8, 11, 13, and 17. By focusing on these key goals, the aim was to ensure that the inclusion of persons with disabilities is integrated into the national development strategies and priorities.

**Collaboration with Government Agencies:** Significant progress was made in working with government agencies to ensure that disability-related indicators were included in SDG reporting frameworks. This collaboration was crucial in ensuring that disability inclusion is not just a theoretical concept but a practical, measurable component of national policies and progress toward achieving the SDGs.

### **UNPRPD's Effort for OPD Engagement: 'Nothing About Us, Without Us'**

A key element of the disability inclusion strategy is the active engagement of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), guided by the principle of 'Nothing About Us, Without Us'. This approach ensures that persons with disabilities are integral to all stages of planning, implementation, and monitoring of disability inclusion efforts. The engagement process is structured at three levels:

- **Strategic Level**

At this level, OPDs participate directly in decision-making processes, shaping the overall strategies and priorities for disability inclusion. They are crucial in setting the advocacy agenda and influencing the direction of policies that affect persons with disabilities. Their input ensures that the strategies adopted reflect the needs and aspirations of the disability community, thus making disability inclusion a central part of the development agenda.

- **Programmatic Level**

OPDs also have a significant role in the design and implementation of specific disability-inclusive programs and initiatives. Their expertise guides the creation of programs that tackle the diverse challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Whether in the realms of education, employment, healthcare, or social protection, OPDs ensure that these programs are both relevant and effective.

- **Operational Level**

At the operational level, OPDs are involved in data collection, capacity building, monitoring, and reporting activities. They help gather critical data, ensuring that the lived experiences of persons with disabilities are captured accurately in reports. By engaging in monitoring, OPDs track the progress of disability inclusion initiatives, ensuring that they are on track to achieve their intended outcomes.

This multi-tiered engagement approach has been designed by UNPRPD to ensure that disability inclusion is holistic, participatory, and sustainable. By engaging OPDs at these three levels, the process remains inclusive, transparent, and reflective of the needs and priorities of persons with disabilities. Through this comprehensive involvement, OPDs contribute significantly to the creation of an inclusive and equitable society for all.

## **On behalf of UNPRPD: Lessons Learned (Successes)**

### **1. Integrated Disability in UNSDCF Frameworks**

Disability inclusion has successfully become an essential element of the UN Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF), particularly under Social Protection (SP-2). This integration ensures that disability is no longer viewed as a separate issue but as a critical part of broader development goals. The inclusion of disability in the UNSDCF framework provides a foundation for all UN programs and initiatives to prioritize accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that persons with disabilities are not left behind in the country's development process.

### **2. Improved SDG and UN Reporting**

There has been significant progress in monitoring and reporting on disability-related indicators. SDG Indicator 1.3.1, which tracks the proportion of the population covered by social protection, now consistently includes persons with disabilities. This has led to better data collection and reporting mechanisms, fostering greater transparency and accountability. Additionally, the Disability Inclusion Score Card (IMS) has been developed to monitor and assess disability inclusion progress within the UN system. This tool enables a more systematic approach to tracking disability-inclusive policies, ensuring that efforts are both measurable and actionable.

### **3. Evidence-based Advocacy and Knowledge Building**

Over the years, there has been a substantial focus on evidence-based advocacy, using robust data and research to drive the disability inclusion agenda forward. Policy briefs have been produced on social protection, focusing on how social security systems can better serve persons with disabilities. Reports and studies on inclusive skills development, employment opportunities, and gender-responsive legal frameworks have been crucial in shaping policy decisions. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the functional challenges and root causes that hinder the full inclusion of persons with disabilities has been developed, helping to advocate for systemic changes in laws and practices.

### **4. Stakeholder Collaboration**

Strong, effective collaboration among various stakeholders, including persons with disabilities, civil society organizations (CSOs), organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and government bodies, has been key to advancing the disability inclusion agenda. These partnerships have led to the review of CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) concluding remarks and the revision of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities (RPPD) Act. This collaborative approach ensures that disability rights are not only acknowledged but actively protected and promoted through ongoing legislative and policy reforms.

### **5. Replicable Frameworks**

One of the key successes is the development of models and methodologies for disability inclusion that are now considered best practices. The Job Fair Inclusion initiative, which ensures that persons with disabilities have equal access to employment opportunities, and the establishment of the UN Disability Inclusion Taskforce (UNDIT), which drives cross-agency efforts for disability-inclusive policies and programs, are both examples of frameworks that can be replicated in other regions and countries. These frameworks provide a structured approach that can be customized to different national contexts, thus fostering a broader global impact in promoting disability inclusion.

#### **Challenges and Key Lessons based on Mr. Zahid Hossain's presentation:**

- Lack of initial data on people with disabilities.
- Lack of integral/umbrella bodies of OPDs network for advocating the disability agenda to the states.
- Resistance or lack of capacity among UN staff and some national governments, OPDs for including the disability agenda in reporting.

## Closing of Day 1

### Reflections by Ms. Nasima Akter

Nasima emphasized the significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities when attempting to obtain identification cards. These issues often involve physical, emotional, and bureaucratic barriers that exacerbate the difficulties already faced by individuals with disabilities. For instance, long waits, complicated procedures, and sometimes dismissive attitudes from authorities result in harassment and discrimination.

Many individuals with disabilities have reported feeling marginalized or ignored during the application process for these cards, which are essential for accessing services and benefits. The lack of accessible infrastructure, such as ramps or sign language interpreters, further compounds these challenges, making the process even more difficult and exclusionary. The identification card is not just a simple form of documentation but a gateway to access social services, rights, and opportunities. Therefore, these issues underline the urgent need for reforms in the system to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for persons with disabilities.

## Day 02 |

### Panel Session: Ministry of Social Welfare & JPUF

**Topics: Implementation of the RPPD Act 2013, Revitalizing disability committees, appointing disability focal points, Inter-ministerial coordination, Monitoring and evaluation.**

The panel discussion centered around the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the Disability Act, with a focus on coordination gaps, awareness at the grassroots level, and the critical role of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). A variety of stakeholders, including government representatives, OPD leaders, and civil society organizations, participated in the dialogue, which aimed to identify practical solutions for advancing disability inclusion in Bangladesh.

#### **Key Issues Discussed:**

- **Challenges in the Implementation of the Disability Act**

The panel highlighted the ongoing difficulties in translating the provisions of the Disability Act into effective practice. Despite the legal framework, persons with disabilities continue to face barriers to accessing services, rights, and resources.

- **Coordination Gaps Among Ministries and Organizations**

A significant issue identified was the lack of coordination between key governmental bodies such as the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and the Department of Social Services (DSS). This lack of coordination has led to fragmented efforts in implementing disability-related policies and programs, slowing progress and creating inconsistencies in service delivery.

- **Lack of Awareness and Communication at the Grassroots Level**

The panel stressed that the disability agenda is often not adequately communicated at the grassroots level. Local committees and officials lack the awareness and resources to effectively advocate for and implement disability-inclusive policies. This gap in communication hinders the active participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making and their ability to access services.

- **Budget Constraints for OPDs**

OPDs, which play a crucial role in advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities, are struggling due to insufficient funding. Limited budgets restrict their capacity to carry out essential programs, support grassroots mobilization, and ensure that persons with disabilities are properly represented in policy discussions.

**Moderator's Remarks:** The moderator emphasized the need for functional committees at all levels of governance, particularly at the local level. These committees must be adequately resourced and given clear mandates to work toward bridging the gap between rights-holders (persons with disabilities) and duty-bearers (government agencies and service providers). The moderator also called for greater emphasis on raising awareness and ensuring that the voices of persons with disabilities are heard in policy and decision-making processes.

**Mr. Samir Mallick's Remarks:** Mr. Mallick encouraged all stakeholders to remain active in advocating for disability inclusion. He urged civil society organizations, OPDs, and other relevant bodies to work as a pressure group, holding both government agencies and service providers accountable for fulfilling their responsibilities. He also stressed the importance of continuing the push for inclusive policies and practices at all levels of society.

**Key Questions Raised:**

- How can MoSW ensure better inter-divisional coordination? The issue of inter-divisional coordination was highlighted, with a specific focus on how the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) can improve collaboration with other ministries and departments involved in disability inclusion. A more coordinated approach would streamline processes and lead to more efficient service delivery.
- What role can Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation play at the local level? The Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation's role was discussed in terms of its potential to support local-level initiatives for persons with disabilities. The Foundation could assist in raising awareness, mobilizing local communities, and providing direct services to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully included in society.

**Key Observations**

**OPD Participation:** While OPD participation is evident, their advocacy efforts remain somewhat subdued. There is a need for OPDs to adopt a more vocal and proactive stance in pushing for disability rights and inclusion, ensuring that their concerns are addressed in national and local policy frameworks.

**Identification Process:** One of the major challenges discussed was the cumbersome and inaccessible identification process for persons with disabilities. This process continues to create significant barriers, as

persons with disabilities often encounter difficulties in obtaining proper documentation or identification cards, which are essential for accessing services and benefits.

**Lack of Dedicated Officers at the Upazila Level:** Another key observation was the absence of dedicated officers at the Upazila (sub-district) level. Without such officers, disability-inclusive initiatives face significant delays and challenges, particularly in rural areas where local governance structures are often understaffed.

**JPUF Updates:** The JPUF (Jatiya Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation) provided updates on their ongoing sports projects and initiatives for persons with disabilities. They also discussed their plans for upcoming events and activities aimed at increasing awareness about the rights and benefits available to persons with disabilities. These initiatives are critical in promoting social inclusion and empowering persons with disabilities to actively participate in society.

### **Challenges Highlighted**

**Coordination Gaps:** There were ongoing challenges in ensuring smooth coordination among the various ministries and local committees involved in disability inclusion. These gaps hindered the effective implementation of policies and programs designed to support persons with disabilities.

**Exploitation of Quotas and Allowances:** It was also noted that some pressure groups were exploiting quotas and allowances allocated for persons with disabilities, using fraudulent identification practices. This undermines the efforts to ensure that the resources meant for persons with disabilities are properly allocated and used for their benefit.

The panel discussion concluded with a call to activate committees and ensure better inter-ministerial coordination. It was emphasized that government bodies, international NGOs (INGOs), and UN agencies must collaborate effectively to create an inclusive environment for persons with disabilities. The allocation of sufficient funds to OPDs and disability-focused programs was deemed crucial in ensuring the success of these initiatives. The need for a multi-stakeholder approach to address the systemic barriers faced by persons with disabilities was strongly advocated.

## **Social Protection Programs for Persons with Disabilities and Division's Activities to Implement RPPD Act 2013**

**Mohammad Khaled Hasan, Additional Secretary, Cabinet Division**

In his presentation, Mohammad Khaled Hasan, Additional Secretary of the Cabinet Division, delved into the evolving discourse on the development of persons with disabilities with a paradigm shift towards focusing on the development by persons with disabilities, rather than merely the development of persons with disabilities. The core of his talk addressed the integration of international frameworks, national strategies, and inclusive practices in the development and implementation of social protection programs.

### **Key Discussion Points**

#### **Constitutional Mandates**

The presentation began with a reference to the mandates enshrined in the Constitution of Bangladesh, emphasizing the country's commitment to ensuring equality and the rights of all citizens, including persons with disabilities. These constitutional guarantees form the foundation for inclusive development policies and programs for persons with disabilities.

#### **Social Protection Floors Initiatives by the UN**

The United Nations' Social Protection Floors initiative was introduced as a framework that advocates for the provision of basic social protection to all individuals, particularly vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities. This initiative aims to ensure access to essential healthcare, income security, and other services necessary for a decent life.

Four essential guarantees were highlighted under the Social Protection Floors: access to essential healthcare, income security for children, the unemployed, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as assistance for the poor. These guarantees aim to safeguard the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities and create a comprehensive safety net.

#### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**

Khaled Hasan emphasized Bangladesh's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), a crucial framework that guides national policies on disability inclusion. He reiterated that the ratification of the UNCRPD obliges Bangladesh to align its policies and programs with international standards, ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to their rights and are integrated into all aspects of society.



## **National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) and Action Plan**

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) was discussed as a critical document guiding the country's efforts to address the needs of vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. The NSSS outlines key goals, including reducing poverty, enhancing access to services, and promoting the welfare of persons with disabilities.

The presentation also covered the NSSS Action Plan, detailing concrete steps and timelines to ensure disability-inclusive policies. This plan emphasizes improving social protection mechanisms such as cash transfers, vocational training, healthcare, and legal support for persons with disabilities.

## **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**

Khaled Hasan referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, highlighting Article 22 and 25, which affirm the right of everyone, including persons with disabilities, to social security and an adequate standard of living. These principles reinforce the importance of integrating persons with disabilities into the social fabric of the nation and ensuring that their dignity and rights are respected.

## **Social Protection Systems and SDG Goal 1.3**

The speaker linked the discussion to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1.3, which calls for the implementation of nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including persons with disabilities, by 2030. This goal underlines the importance of achieving substantial coverage for the poor and vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities.

## **Amartya Sen's Capability Approach**

Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, Khaled Hasan underscored that poverty should not just be seen as deprivation of income but as the lack of capabilities to access basic life needs and participate fully in society. This approach emphasizes a multidimensional understanding of poverty, where social protection programs should aim to enhance the capabilities of persons with disabilities.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation Tools**

The presentation highlighted the importance of effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems in ensuring that disability-inclusive social protection programs are implemented effectively. Tools such as the Single Registry Management Information System (MIS), Core Diagnostic Instrument (CODI), and Ministry M&E frameworks were discussed as key instruments in tracking the progress and impact of social protection programs.

## **Adaptive Social Protection**

Adaptive social protection was presented as a means to enhance coordination across sectors, build capacity, and implement anticipatory measures in response to evolving challenges. This includes integrating disability-inclusive approaches into social protection systems, ensuring that gender and child-sensitive policies are implemented alongside climate change and food security initiatives.

## **Activation of Committees**

The need for activating various committees at the national, district, and Upazila levels was discussed, emphasizing the importance of strong inter-ministerial coordination to drive disability-inclusive social protection programs. The speaker stressed the need for updating the rules of business to facilitate better implementation and oversight of these initiatives.

In conclusion, Mohammad Khaled Hasan's presentation provided a comprehensive overview of the current landscape and future direction of social protection programs for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. By focusing on the development by persons with disabilities, the speaker highlighted the importance of empowering PwDs and ensuring their active participation in national development. The integration of international frameworks such as the UNCRPD and the Social Protection Floors initiative, along with national strategies like the NSSS and Action Plan, will be crucial in ensuring that persons with disabilities are not only beneficiaries but active contributors to their own development and the development of society at large. The continued focus on adaptive social protection, effective coordination, and monitoring systems will ensure that Bangladesh progresses towards its goal of a fully inclusive society for all.

## Challenges and Opportunities - Disability Inclusive Budget

### Mr. Towfiqul Islam Khan, CPD

In his presentation, Mr. Towfiqul Islam Khan, an expert from the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), provided an in-depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities in formulating a disability-inclusive budget for Bangladesh. The discussion focused on the critical need for a budget that is both transparent and inclusive of persons with disabilities, and how aligning budgetary allocations with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) can enhance the country's commitment to inclusion.

#### Key Discussion Points:

#### Why Do We Need a Disability-Inclusive Budget?

- **Transparency and Participation:** Mr. Khan began by emphasizing that a disability-inclusive budget promotes transparency in government spending. When the needs of persons with disabilities are integrated into the national budget, it creates an open channel for participation, where disabled individuals and their organizations can engage in the planning and budgeting processes, ensuring that their needs are adequately addressed.
- **Compliance with the CRPD:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is a guiding framework for ensuring the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Mr. Khan highlighted that incorporating a disability-inclusive budget is not just a policy recommendation, but a requirement for complying with the CRPD. It ensures that the state's financial commitments are aligned with international human rights standards.
- **Mainstreaming:** A disability-inclusive budget also ensures that persons with disabilities are considered in every aspect of governance. Mainstreaming disability means integrating the needs and rights of persons with disabilities into all stages of the budget process—planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation. This approach ensures that persons with disabilities are not side-lined, but rather are central to the development process.
- **Intersectionality:** The concept of intersectionality was a key point in the discussion. Mr. Khan explained that disability intersects with other categories such as gender, age, and socio-economic status. Thus, a disability-inclusive budget should not only focus on persons with disabilities but also consider

how disability impacts other marginalized groups, ensuring that policies are comprehensive and equitable

### **Sector-Specific Budgets:**

Mr. Khan presented various sector-specific budgets that are essential for the development of inclusive policies:

- **Gender Budget** (21 agencies): This initiative ensures that gender equality is prioritized across the budget, which should also include provisions for women and girls with disabilities.
- **Climate Budget** (25 agencies): Climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities. The budget should thus account for how climate change impacts persons with disabilities and allocate funds for adaptive measures.
- **Child Budget** (15 agencies): Children with disabilities are often overlooked in national planning. Mr. Khan emphasized the importance of a dedicated budget line for children with disabilities to ensure that their educational, healthcare, and developmental needs are addressed.

**Types of Expenditures:** Mr. Khan outlined various types of expenditures related to persons with disabilities:

- **Direct Expenditure (Allowances for persons with disabilities):** These are funds directly allocated to individuals with disabilities, such as allowances for their daily living and support services.
- **Pseudo Direct Expenditure (Old Age Allowances):** While not exclusive to persons with disabilities, these allowances are indirectly relevant as many elderly individuals may have disabilities that require specialized care.
- **Common Expenditure (Roads and Highways):** Public infrastructure should be designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities. Investments in roads, highways, and public transportation should include accessibility features.
- **Indirect Expenditure (Defense):** Although defense spending may seem unrelated, Mr. Khan pointed out that a portion of this budget could be allocated to assist veterans with disabilities, ensuring their rehabilitation and social inclusion.

### Challenges in Disability Budgeting:

- **Disaggregation:** A key challenge discussed by Mr. Khan was the need for disaggregated data on persons with disabilities. Without clear and accurate data on the number and needs of persons with disabilities, it is difficult to allocate resources effectively and measure the impact of expenditures.
- **Implementation vs. Allocation:** The gap between budget allocation and actual implementation was another point of concern. Mr. Khan pointed out that while there may be significant funds allocated for persons with disabilities, the actual impact on their lives is often limited by poor implementation and lack of coordination between agencies.
- **Pledges vs. Reality (Effectiveness):** Despite numerous pledges made by the government regarding disability inclusion, Mr. Khan stressed that these often fall short of reality. He highlighted the need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation to ensure that pledges are turned into tangible outcomes for persons with disabilities.

**Conceptualization and Setting the Ambition:** Mr. Khan laid out a conceptual framework for developing a disability-inclusive budget. This framework includes:

- **Analysis of Gaps:** A thorough analysis of existing gaps in the budget, particularly in sectors affecting persons with disabilities, and the barriers that prevent the effective implementation of disability-inclusive policies.
- **Introducing Disability-Inclusive Budgeting:** Mr. Khan suggested that the introduction of a disability-inclusive budget should be part of the annual national budgets and medium-term budgetary frameworks. This would help ensure that disability-related priorities are consistently funded and addressed.
- **Result-Based/Outcome-Oriented Monitoring:** It is not enough to allocate funds; there must be effective systems in place to monitor the outcomes of disability-inclusive programs. A result-based approach will ensure that the allocated funds translate into measurable improvements in the lives of persons with disabilities.
- **Accountability and Reporting:** Accountability mechanisms are crucial to ensure that the commitments made in disability-inclusive budgets are met. Mr. Khan advocated for robust reporting

systems that track the effectiveness of disability-related expenditures and ensure transparency. Public participation in the monitoring process was also emphasized as a means to hold agencies accountable.

In conclusion, Mr. Towfiqul Islam Khan's presentation provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and opportunities surrounding the development of a disability-inclusive budget. He stressed that while progress has been made, significant gaps remain in ensuring that the needs of persons with disabilities are adequately addressed in national budgeting processes. He called for stronger data disaggregation, improved implementation mechanisms, and greater transparency in the budgeting process. Furthermore, the introduction of a result-based, outcome-oriented framework for monitoring disability-related spending could ensure that pledges are translated into real-world impacts, making a meaningful difference in the lives of persons with disabilities.

# Data Discrepancies and Absence of Disability Disaggregated Data

Ms. Farjana Reza, ILO

In her presentation, Ms. Farjana Reza, representing the International Labour Organization (ILO), explored the critical issue of data discrepancies and the absence of disability-disaggregated data, both globally and in Bangladesh. She provided insights into how the lack of accurate and comprehensive data affects the design and implementation of policies for persons with disabilities, highlighting the urgent need for improved data collection systems.

## Key Discussion Points:

**Reflections on Disability Data from a Global Perspective:** Ms. Reza began her presentation by underscoring the global importance of collecting disability data, particularly in understanding the scope of disability in populations and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions. She explained that there are three primary purposes for collecting disability-related data:

**Monitoring the Population:** Gathering disability data is crucial to assess the extent of disability within a population. This data helps policymakers evaluate how well existing policies and interventions address the needs of persons with disabilities and guides adjustments for greater inclusivity.

**Service Provision:** Disability data is vital in identifying those with specific needs, ensuring that services are designed to cater to those needs. Interventions can either be universal, such as creating accessible infrastructure for everyone, or specific, targeting particular needs like wheelchair accessibility, sign language interpretation, or Braille systems.

**Equalization of Opportunities:** Data on disability status is key to understanding whether persons with disabilities are participating equally in social and economic life. By disaggregating data, we can assess whether persons with disabilities have the same access to opportunities in education, employment, and social services as individuals without disabilities. This is fundamental in identifying gaps and promoting equality.

## Discrepancies in Disability Data in Bangladesh

Ms. Reza highlighted that disability data in Bangladesh varies significantly across different sources due to inconsistencies in classification criteria, measurement tools, and data collection methods. She presented a comparative analysis of disability data from several key sources:

- National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) 2021: Reports that 3.4 million persons with disabilities were recorded as of October 2024.
- Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022: States that 2.8% of the population, or approximately 4.6 million people, live with disabilities.
- Disability Information System (DIS): Indicates that 5.7% of the population, or roughly 9.4 million people, are persons with disabilities.

These discrepancies create confusion and hinder the effective allocation of resources and the implementation of targeted policies for persons with disabilities.

**Why Do We Need Disability Data?** Ms. Reza emphasized the importance of accurate disability data for several reasons:

**Advocacy Focus:** Disability data is essential for advocacy, helping organizations make the case for increased attention to persons with disabilities in laws, policies, and programs. This data helps highlight the gaps between persons with and without disabilities, encouraging policymakers to address these disparities.

**Evidence-Based Policy Making:** Sound policy decisions rely on data. Accurate disability data ensures that policies are evidence-based, designed to meet the real needs of persons with disabilities, and aligned with international standards.

**Role of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs):** OPDs play a crucial role in advocating for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of disability data in accessible formats. Ms. Reza stressed the importance of capacity-building initiatives for OPDs to enhance their ability to use data for effective advocacy.

### **Where Are We Now?**

Ms. Reza pointed out some positive developments in disability data collection, both globally and locally:

- **Use of the Washington Group Questions:** An increasing number of countries are incorporating the Washington Group questions in various surveys, such as Labour Force Surveys (LFS), Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) surveys, and refugee assessments. These questions help gather standardized, comparable disability data.
- **Washington Group/ILO Module for Labour Force Surveys:** There is a specialized module that can be used in Labour Force Surveys and other household surveys to gather more detailed data on the participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market.



- **Disability Survey Models:** For countries with the resources, a standalone disability survey can be conducted, allowing for more in-depth data collection specifically focused on persons with disabilities.
- **Citizen-Generated Data:** Ms. Reza highlighted the emerging potential of citizen-generated data as a complement to traditional data collection methods. This data can provide valuable insights that better inform policies and programs, especially in areas where government data collection is limited or inconsistent.

#### **Recommendations for Improved Data Collection:**

- **Better Use of Disability Modules:** Ms. Reza advocated for the more systematic use of the Washington Group and ILO modules in various national surveys, including labor market surveys, to ensure comprehensive data on disability.
- **Improved Data Analysis and Dissemination:** She stressed the need for better analysis of the collected data and its dissemination in accessible formats, ensuring that persons with disabilities and the general public can easily access and use the information.
- **Engaging Stakeholders in Data Collection:** Engaging OPDs, civil society organizations, and persons with disabilities themselves in the data collection process was identified as a key strategy for improving data accuracy and relevance.

Ms. Farjana Reza's presentation shed light on the challenges and opportunities surrounding disability data collection, particularly in Bangladesh. While there have been positive strides in using standardized disability questions and modules, significant discrepancies remain in data sources, which hinder effective policymaking and the allocation of resources for persons with disabilities. Accurate, disaggregated data is essential for understanding the needs of persons with disabilities and ensuring their inclusion in social, economic, and political life. Ms. Reza's call for improved data collection, capacity-building for OPDs, and more accessible data dissemination provides a clear roadmap for advancing disability inclusion through better data-driven policies.

## Presentation on National Reviews (VNRs) of SDGs at High-Level Political Forum in 2025

**Mohd. Monirul Islam, Additional Secretary (SDGs Affairs), Chief Adviser's Office (CAO)**

This presentation was technical in nature, focusing on how Bangladesh is preparing its Voluntary National Review (VNR) report for the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2025. It highlighted the country's approach to tracking and reporting progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the steps being taken to ensure accurate, inclusive, and evidence-based reporting.

The presentation outlined the current progress made in SDG implementation, with a focus on key areas such as health, gender equality, decent work, life on land, and global partnerships. It also stressed that the consultation process is ongoing, involving inputs from various stakeholders including ministries, government agencies, NGOs, CSOs, academia, and development partners. This inclusive consultation process ensures that all relevant parties are engaged and that the SDG reporting reflects the collective efforts and challenges faced by the country.

In September 2015, at the 70th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), world leaders adopted a global framework for sustainable development, consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. This ambitious agenda outlines a roadmap for a better and more inclusive world by 2030. A key principle of the SDGs is "Leave No One Behind", ensuring that no group, especially vulnerable populations, is excluded from the benefits of development. Mr. Monirul Islam emphasized that no goal can be considered achieved unless it is achieved for everyone, a crucial concept guiding Bangladesh's commitment to the SDGs.

### **SDGs & Persons with Disabilities**

While 15 out of 17 SDGs are directly related to Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), Mr. Islam highlighted that 7 SDG targets and 11 indicators explicitly mention or reference PWDs. These include targets such as 4.5 (education and disability inclusion), 8.5 (equal pay for equal work), 10.2 (promoting social, economic, and political inclusion), and 17.18 (disaggregated data for monitoring progress), among others.

However, it's important to note that the inclusive language in several SDG targets, referring to "for all" or "all women and men", makes many SDGs inherently applicable to PWDs, even if they are not explicitly mentioned. The overarching principle of universality means that the SDGs apply to all people, regardless of their background or condition, reinforcing the commitment that no one should be left behind. Additionally, the 2030 Agenda's preamble (paragraph 23) refers to vulnerable groups, implicitly covering PWDs under the broader umbrella of those who need focused attention for achieving the SDGs.

## Principles of Follow-up and Review of SDGs

The review of the SDGs is voluntary and country-led, with outcomes from national reviews forming the foundation for regional and global dialogues. Mr. Islam outlined several core principles of the review process:

- **Inclusive, Participatory, and Transparent:** Ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders – government, civil society, academia, and development partners.
- **Evidence-based:** National reviews are grounded in high-quality disaggregated data, informed by country-led evaluations.
- **Capacity-building:** Strengthening national data systems and evaluation frameworks is essential for accurate reporting and progress monitoring.
- **Open and People-Centered:** Focusing on the most vulnerable groups and emphasizing gender-sensitivity and human rights.

The review process allows for the identification of achievements, challenges, gaps, and critical success factors while fostering an inclusive environment for discussions.

## Bangladesh's Voluntary National Review (VNR) at HLPF

On 17th July 2017, Bangladesh presented its first VNR at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), along with 42 other countries, to report on its progress towards implementing Agenda 2030. In 2020, Bangladesh presented its second VNR at the HLPF, alongside 46 other countries.

In July 2025, Bangladesh will present its third VNR at the HLPF, alongside 38 countries. This review will focus on **five key SDGs: Goal 3 (Health), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 15 (Life on Land), and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).**

## Key Drivers of SDG Success in Bangladesh

Mr. Islam identified three key drivers for the success of SDG implementation:

- **Good Governance:** Strong governance structures that promote accountability, transparency, and the rule of law are fundamental for ensuring that SDG implementation remains on track. Effective governance also ensures that economic growth is not at odds with individual freedoms and entrepreneurship.
- **Youth Engagement:** Youth participation is a cornerstone of SDG success. With 51% of youth (ages 18-29) rejecting traditional capitalist frameworks, there is a significant push for new, inclusive development approaches. This demographic is increasingly connected, educated, and eager to contribute to the sustainable development agenda.

- **Technology and Innovation:** The role of technology is pivotal in making development inclusive. Social business models and the adaptation of existing technologies for social good can bridge the gap between the upper-income classes and the marginalized. Innovations such as solar panels can be adopted by social businesses to provide affordable energy solutions to disadvantaged communities.

### **Challenges and Opportunities Ahead**

As Bangladesh prepares for its 2025 VNR, ongoing consultations with stakeholders are critical. Efforts will focus on ensuring data disaggregation, reinforcing evidence-based solutions, and emphasizing inclusive governance to meet the SDGs. Mr. Islam reiterated that these consultations are vital in tracking progress, identifying gaps, and building a collective effort for the 2030 Agenda.

In closing, Mr. Islam reiterated Bangladesh's strong commitment to the SDGs, emphasizing that the country's progress must be built on collaborative efforts from government bodies, civil society, youth, and development partners. With inclusive policies, evidence-based strategies, and a focus on equity, Bangladesh aims to meet its SDG targets by 2030, ensuring that no one, including Persons with Disabilities, is left behind.

## Promoting Accessible Publishing for People with Print Disabilities

Vashkar Bhattacharjee, National Consultant of Accessibility - a2i

Vashkar Bhattacharjee delivered an insightful presentation on the promotion of accessible publishing for individuals with visual impairments and print disabilities. He discussed the Marrakesh Treaty of 2013, which was adopted by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to ensure that people with print disabilities can access published materials. This international treaty was designed to remove barriers and improve accessibility by creating exceptions to copyright laws for the benefit of individuals who are unable to read standard print due to disabilities such as blindness or other visual impairments.

### Key Aspects of the Marrakesh Treaty:

The Marrakesh Treaty is a groundbreaking effort to combat the global issue of access to published works for people with visual impairments and other print disabilities. Vashkar elaborated on the core objectives of the Treaty:

- **Combatting the 'Book Famine':** The primary goal of the Marrakesh Treaty is to combat what is referred to as the "book famine". Currently, only 7-20% of published works are available in formats that can be accessed by people with print disabilities, such as braille, large print, or audio formats. This gap in access to educational and recreational material has long been a significant barrier to information and knowledge.
- **Copyright Exceptions for Accessible Formats:** The Treaty provides for exceptions to copyright laws, allowing countries to create and distribute books and publications in accessible formats without needing to seek permission from copyright holders. This step aims to bridge the accessibility gap for individuals with disabilities by allowing them to enjoy the same access to knowledge as other people.
- **Enhancing International Collaboration:** One of the key features of the Marrakesh Treaty is the promotion of cross-border sharing of accessible format books. Countries that have ratified the Treaty can share accessible books and materials internationally, allowing people with disabilities in different countries to benefit from these resources.

## **Bangladesh's Role and Commitments:**

Vashkar shared the commitments and actions that Bangladesh has taken towards supporting the Marrakesh Treaty and improving accessibility for individuals with print disabilities.

- **Ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty (2022):** Bangladesh ratified the Marrakesh Treaty in 2022, marking a significant milestone in the country's journey toward improving accessibility. By ratifying the Treaty, Bangladesh committed to ensuring that individuals with print disabilities can access published works and enjoy the same opportunities for education and information as others.
- **Amendment of the Copyright Act:** As part of its commitment, Bangladesh amended its Copyright Act to incorporate provisions that allow for the creation and distribution of accessible formats of books and other materials. This amendment enables the legal production of materials such as braille books, audiobooks, and digital formats for people with visual impairments and other disabilities.
- **Partnerships with Organizations:** Bangladesh has collaborated with several local and international organizations, including Sightsavers, local publishers, and other advocacy groups, to enhance the production and availability of accessible books. These collaborations have been crucial in creating a strong network for the distribution of accessible reading materials across the country.

## **Implementation and Achievements in Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh has made significant progress in implementing the Marrakesh Treaty, and several achievements were highlighted by Vashkar:

- **YPSA as a Trusted Intermediary:** YPSA (Young Power in Social Action) has served as a trusted intermediary in Bangladesh, playing a key role in facilitating the production and distribution of accessible books. YPSA has been instrumental in coordinating efforts and ensuring that accessible formats are produced for the benefit of people with print disabilities.
- **Collaboration with WIPO's Accessible Book Consortium:** Bangladesh has actively engaged with the Accessible Book Consortium—a global initiative led by WIPO—to promote the availability and sharing of accessible books. This collaboration has led to the creation of more accessible content and increased access for people with disabilities.
- **Production of Accessible Books in Bangla:** One of the most notable achievements is the production of over 10,000 accessible books in Bangla. This is a significant milestone, as it has allowed thousands of individuals with visual impairments in Bangladesh to access books and materials in their native language, helping to improve literacy rates and educational outcomes.

- **Engagement with Libraries and NGOs:** Bangladesh has built strong relationships with libraries and NGOs, such as Bookshare, to ensure that accessible books are distributed widely. These efforts have made it possible for people with disabilities to access a variety of materials, from textbooks to novels, in accessible formats.

### **Challenges in Implementing Accessible Publishing:**

Despite significant progress, there are several challenges that Bangladesh faces in the full implementation of accessible publishing:

- **Limited Infrastructure for Converting Books into Accessible Formats:** A major challenge is the limited infrastructure available to convert printed books into accessible formats such as braille, audio, or digital formats. The lack of technological resources and specialized equipment has slowed down the pace of making books accessible to all who need them.
- **Awareness Gaps Among Publishers and Policymakers:** There is still a lack of awareness among publishers and policymakers about the importance of accessible publishing and the potential benefits it can bring to people with disabilities. Many publishers are unfamiliar with the technical aspects of producing accessible formats, which hinders the availability of such materials.
- **Lack of Accessible Library Systems:** The absence of a national accessible library system remains a major challenge. Inaccessible library services prevent individuals with print disabilities from easily obtaining accessible books. Establishing a robust and widespread accessible library system is critical to overcoming this barrier.

In conclusion, Vashkar emphasized the vital role that the Marrakesh Treaty plays in advancing the rights of people with print disabilities. He acknowledged that Bangladesh has made commendable progress in creating accessible publishing systems, but he also highlighted that there is still a lot of work to be done.

He called for continued investment in infrastructure, greater awareness among stakeholders, and collaboration between government, NGOs, and publishers. The key to achieving the full implementation of the Marrakesh Treaty lies in collective action and increased awareness at all levels of society. Collaboration and a strong commitment to inclusion are essential to ensuring that people with print disabilities in Bangladesh and around the world have equal access to information and educational opportunities.

# Day 3 |

## Why We Must Act to Mitigate the Digital Divide for Advancing Disability Rights

### Mr. Ashfaq

In this compelling presentation, Mr. Ashfaq emphasized the urgent need to address the digital divide in order to advance disability rights. The discussion explored the various facets of digital exclusion and the essential steps to ensure equal access to digital platforms for persons with disabilities, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the growing disparities in access to digital resources.

#### **The COVID-19 Pandemic: Opening Eyes to Subtleties of Digital Exclusion**

Mr. Ashfaq focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic served as a revelation for the hidden nuances of digital exclusion, as millions transitioned to online platforms for essential services like education, healthcare, and public service delivery. Persons with disabilities, in particular, were significantly affected due to limited access to digital tools and reliable internet connectivity, exacerbating existing social and economic challenges. The pandemic's impact on persons with disabilities was especially felt in sectors such as education, where remote learning often left persons with disabilities behind due to a lack of accessible technologies.

#### **Understanding the Nuances of the Digital Divide**

Mr. Ashfaq provided a thorough analysis of the digital divide, highlighting key aspects such as:

- Access to affordable and reliable connectivity for marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities.
- The importance of enhancing digital and AI literacy, ensuring that persons with disabilities can effectively use digital tools and platforms to enhance their quality of life.
- The need for service design to be more inclusive, specifically in sectors like healthcare, education, employment, finance, and public services, ensuring that the underserved populations can fully benefit from digital services.



## Strategic Areas for Mitigating the Digital Divide

Mr. Ashfaq identified several critical areas where digital inclusion efforts must be concentrated to bridge the gap:

### 1. Financial Inclusion: Revolutionizing Social Protection with Digital Payments

The use of digital payments to enhance financial inclusion for persons with disabilities was discussed as a transformative approach to social protection. By incorporating digital financial systems, marginalized groups can access vital resources such as government assistance and welfare programs more efficiently, ensuring greater financial independence and security for persons with disabilities.

### 2. Gender Inclusion: Engendering Digital Interventions

Gender inclusion in digital interventions is equally important. Mr. Ashfaq emphasized that digital platforms should be designed to accommodate the specific needs of women with disabilities, who often face compounded barriers to access due to both gender and disability. Tailored digital solutions can ensure that both men and women with disabilities can fully participate in the digital economy.

### 3. Disability Inclusion: Catalysing Breakthroughs

The presenter highlighted the importance of disability inclusion in the digital space. This involves the development and implementation of assistive technologies, accessible digital content, and inclusive digital services. These breakthroughs are crucial for empowering persons with disabilities, giving them the tools, they need to participate fully in society, work, and education.

### 4. Building a Culturally Aware and Inclusive Society

The presentation stressed the importance of creating a culturally aware and inclusive society where digital interventions are not just a means to bridge the divide but also to transform cultural mindsets.

Mr. Ashfaq highlighted several initiatives that can drive this transformation:

- **Cultural Sensitization:** Creating a mindset shift towards inclusivity through awareness campaigns and public education.
- **Innovative Public Service Design:** Designing public services with inclusivity in mind, ensuring that policies and services are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities.

- **Homegrown Technology:** Emphasizing the role of indigenous assistive technologies, developed by local innovators, to address the unique needs of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. This approach fosters local innovation and self-sufficiency in creating accessible solutions.

### **Nation Branding: An Inclusive Bangladesh**

In closing, Mr. Ashfaq discussed how Bangladesh can project itself as an inclusive nation on the global stage. As the country strives toward a Zero Digital Divide, its global image must reflect the efforts to include persons with disabilities in every aspect of society. The following initiatives were proposed:

- **Visible Inclusivity Campaign:** Public campaigns at international exposure points, such as airports, that highlight Bangladesh's efforts toward inclusivity. These would include signage and displays specifically targeting international visitors, showcasing Bangladesh's commitment to accessibility for persons with disabilities.
- **Physical Accessibility Enhancements:** Ensuring that physical spaces are equipped with the necessary features for accessible travel, such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms.
- **Smart Assistive Technologies:** The deployment of smart technologies at key public points, such as airport kiosks and information desks, that are assistive and accessible to persons with disabilities, ensuring their independence when interacting with public services.

Mr. Ashfaq's presentation provided a comprehensive overview of the digital divide and its direct impact on advancing disability rights. He highlighted that digital inclusion is not just about access to technology; it's about creating a culture of inclusivity that empowers persons with disabilities to thrive in an increasingly digital world. To achieve Zero Digital Divide, there must be a concerted effort at all levels, from financial inclusion to assistive technology development and cultural transformation. Bangladesh has the potential to lead by example as a nation that prioritizes the rights and empowerment of persons with disabilities in the digital age.

## Deconstructing the Problems in Disability Rights Landscape through the Fishbone Diagram

Mr. Tanvir Mahmud, Senior Governance Specialist, UNDP

In this interactive session, Mr. Tanvir Mahmud and assisted by Arju Afrin Kathy from UNDP led a comprehensive exploration into the barriers to disability inclusion using the Fishbone Diagram. The session aimed to critically analyze the complex and multi-faceted challenges within the disability rights landscape by deconstructing the problems into actionable components.

### Fishbone Diagram: A Tool for Problem Analysis

The Fishbone Diagram, also known as the Ishikawa Diagram, is a visual tool used for identifying, exploring, and analyzing the root causes of a particular issue. In this case, it served as an effective method to break down the various barriers to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society.

The Fishbone Diagram categorizes potential causes of a problem into different categories, often depicted as "bones" of a fish. The main "spine" of the fish represents the primary issue or effect—in this instance, the lack of disability inclusion. From this spine, several branches emerge, each representing a category of potential causes contributing to the overall problem. The session allowed participants to identify root causes within these categories, allowing for a clearer understanding of the complex landscape.

### Interactive Session: Key Components Analyzed

- **Policy and Legal Barriers:** The facilitators addressed the policy and legal gaps that often impede disability inclusion. This category explored challenges such as inadequate enforcement of disability rights laws, limited national policies addressing accessibility, and gaps in legal frameworks that do not fully support the needs of persons with disabilities. It was emphasized that while policies may exist, their implementation and enforcement remain significant challenges.
- **Cultural and Societal Attitudes:** Another critical area examined was the cultural and societal attitudes toward people with disabilities. Stigma, discrimination, and misconceptions about disability were discussed as key barriers to inclusion. The facilitators underscored how deeply ingrained societal norms and negative perceptions can affect the empowerment and participation of persons with disabilities in various spheres of life, including education, employment, and social activities.

- **Environmental and Physical Barriers:** The session explored physical accessibility challenges in public spaces, transport, and housing. This category examined the lack of infrastructure that is universally accessible to people with physical disabilities, such as ramps, elevators, and adapted toilets. Inaccessible built environments were identified as major hindrances to persons with disabilities engaging fully in social and professional settings.
- **Educational Barriers:** Education for persons with disabilities was another major focus. The group discussed how lack of specialized resources, such as trained educators and assistive technology, further perpetuates exclusion in education systems. Many schools and universities fail to provide the necessary support for persons with disabilities to participate equally in educational activities, leaving them at a disadvantage.
- **Economic Barriers:** Economic inequality for persons with disabilities was another key focus of the discussion. Lack of employment opportunities, underemployment, and low-income status were recognized as significant factors that limit economic independence for persons with disabilities. The group highlighted the need for targeted interventions in the labor market, as well as greater awareness among employers regarding the capabilities of persons with disabilities.
- **Health and Medical Barriers:** Healthcare accessibility was another area critically analyzed. In many contexts, persons with disabilities face challenges accessing appropriate medical care, including specialized treatments, rehabilitation services, and assistive devices. The session emphasized the need for a more inclusive healthcare system that can meet the needs of persons with disabilities and enable them to live healthier and more independent lives.
- **Technological Barriers:** The discussion also extended to the digital divide, particularly the lack of accessible technology for persons with disabilities. Despite advancements in technology, many digital platforms, websites, and applications are not fully accessible to people with disabilities. Assistive technologies, such as screen readers or braille displays, are often not integrated into mainstream tools, making it difficult for persons with disabilities to access digital information and participate in the digital economy.

### **Outcomes of the Session**

The interactive nature of the session allowed participants to actively contribute to the Fishbone Diagram, providing insights from their diverse perspectives and experiences. This collaborative process helped participants identify root causes of disability exclusion and think critically about potential solutions. Key takeaways included:

- The importance of cross-sectoral collaboration between government bodies, civil society, private sector, and persons with disabilities themselves in addressing the barriers to inclusion.

- The need for a holistic approach that addresses not only legal and policy reforms but also changes in attitudes, infrastructure, and cultural norms.
- Recognition of intersectional challenges, where persons with disabilities face compounded barriers based on gender, economic status, or geographic location.
- The emphasis on raising awareness and fostering social change to overcome stigma and discriminatory attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

The session led by Mr. Tanvir Mahmud provided a valuable analytical tool for breaking down the complex barriers to the inclusion of persons with disabilities. By using the Fishbone Diagram, participants were able to gain a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of these challenges and explore effective solutions. This collaborative session reinforced the need for a multi-dimensional approach to disability inclusion, one that combines policy advocacy, community engagement, and systemic change. The Fishbone Diagram proved to be a useful tool for identifying root causes and developing strategies that can create a more inclusive society for persons with disabilities.

## Reflections on the Duty Bearers Session: Addressing Taxation and Assistive Devices for Persons with Disabilities

The Duty Bearers Session focused on the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing assistive devices and navigating the taxation system in Bangladesh. The discussion raised important concerns about tax exemptions, pricing of assistive devices, and the implementation of government policies to promote disability inclusion.

### **Assistive Devices and Taxation: A Key Barrier**

One of the primary points raised was those assistive devices—critical for empowering persons with disabilities—are not tax-free in Bangladesh. While the government does have provisions in place to provide tax rebates for private companies hiring persons with disabilities, there is no clear specification on how much will be reduced, which has led to uncertainty and challenges for companies. Government representatives indicated a willingness to work on providing tax incentives for assistive devices, yet the lack of clear guidelines remains a significant hurdle.

A key question raised by Nasima Apa, a wheelchair user, **revolved around the availability and pricing of assistive devices in local markets.** She noted that the scarcity of assistive devices at the district level leads to inflated prices, which often burden families of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the VAT tax imposed on these devices only adds to the financial strain, making it difficult for families with limited resources to afford the necessary tools for daily living.

### **Government's Response and Potential Solutions**

In response, the government acknowledged the challenges related to assistive devices and pointed out that HS codes for such devices need to be coordinated globally. However, coordination efforts could be strengthened through platforms like those managed by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), which could help alleviate the challenges of accessing and distributing assistive devices.

The tax-free income threshold for persons with disabilities was also discussed. Persons with disabilities have a tax-free income limit of 4,50,000 BDT, while non-disabled individuals have a limit of 3,00,000 BDT. The government emphasized that facilities for caregivers of persons with disabilities and children with disabilities are also available in many countries. However, for Income Tax, the government faces challenges in verifying the accuracy of this information due to a lack of data linkages between the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and the National Board of Revenue (NBR), allowing for fraudulent claims. This data linkage is necessary for proper implementation and to prevent misuse of benefits.

## **The Need for Policy Development and Inclusive Initiatives**

The discussion also highlighted the need for policy development to support caregivers. Many caregivers of persons with disabilities are financially dependent and provide essential services, and the government is exploring the possibility of allowing tax-free income for caregivers. However, a policy guideline for this initiative is yet to be formulated.

The government's response also noted the need to encourage the local production of assistive devices. MoSW could play a key role in incentivizing local manufacturers, helping to reduce the costs of such devices and making them more accessible for persons with disabilities across the country.

### **Tax Rebates for Employers Hiring Persons with Disabilities: A Barrier to Implementation**

The issue of tax rebates for employers who hire persons with disabilities was also addressed. A recent case was mentioned where an organization employed 13 persons with disabilities but was told by the NBR that the tax rebate would only apply if at least 10% of their total workforce (which, in this case, would be 400 employees) were persons with disabilities. This situation underscores the complexity and lack of clarity in the implementation of the 2013 Act related to disability employment and tax rebates.

The Action Plan for implementing these provisions needs to be better organized and include short, mid, and long-term goals. The MoSW is expected to take the lead in initiating the Action Plan, with the Cabinet Division involved in ensuring its execution. However, there is still uncertainty regarding the allocation of responsibilities and how to prioritize these issues.

### **Ensuring Clear Guidelines for Tax Rebates**

To strengthen the existing law, the government must provide clear instructions regarding the criteria for receiving tax rebates. The law mandates that companies with at least 10% of employees being persons with disabilities are eligible for tax breaks, but it remains unclear how these provisions will be practically implemented. A clear, standardized framework for applying for tax rebates and ensuring full implementation of the law is essential.

In conclusion, the session highlighted several critical issues facing persons with disabilities in accessing assistive devices and tax rebates in Bangladesh. Moving forward, it is essential for the government to provide clear guidelines, improve data linkages between relevant bodies, and focus on local manufacturing to reduce the burden on families. Additionally, stakeholders, including CSOs and OPDs, must continue to advocate for better market availability, pricing transparency, and inclusive policies that empower persons with disabilities and their caregivers.

## Committing Actions to Uphold National Action Plan on Persons with Disabilities

Mr. Asim Dio & Mr. K. Shohel Rana

In this group work session, the discussion centered around the National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities and the concrete actions that need to be taken to advance their rights and ensure their inclusion within the framework of national policies. The session involved key by from the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW), and other stakeholders, emphasizing the urgent need for policy activation, collaboration, and commitment to implementing the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 (RRPD 2013).

### **Commitment to Implement the RRPD 2013**

The MoSW officials reassured the participants of their unwavering commitment to the implementation of RRPD 2013. They emphasized that they would incorporate findings from the workshop into their actions, demonstrating a proactive stance toward advancing disability rights in Bangladesh. Their commitment was also aligned with the broader constitutional guarantees that ensure the dignity and human rights of persons with disabilities.

The MoSW representatives outlined that they would continue their efforts by activating the relevant committees involved in disability-related policymaking. The honorable adviser was mentioned as being supportive and empathetic towards the initiative, which signals a strong political will to mainstream persons with disabilities in the development agenda.

### **Collaboration and Teamwork Approach**

The need for collaboration was strongly highlighted. Mr. Asim Dio mentioned that the MoSW would work closely with the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to address issues related to assistive devices and tax rebates, particularly concerning the lack of coordination between the NBR and MoSW. By communicating directly with the NBR Chairman and Secretary, they hoped to prioritize persons with disabilities in the government's activities and ensure better policy implementation.

This collaborative approach underscores the importance of cross-sectoral cooperation to tackle the systemic challenges faced by persons with disabilities, particularly regarding tax benefits and assistive devices.

### **The Role of Disability Focal Points and Activating Committees**

The session also highlighted the importance of disability focal points within each ministry, a critical step toward ensuring institutional accountability for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all government operations. Bijoy Sir emphasized that if the focal points were to be activated, much progress could be made toward implementing the RRPD 2013. Letters would be sent to each ministry urging them to designate focal points



for disability inclusion. This action would streamline the process of advancing disability rights across all government sectors.

### **Incorporating Disability into the VNR and SDG Tracker**

One of the major challenges discussed was the Voluntary National Review (VNR) process, which has historically overlooked the participation of persons with disabilities. There was consensus that the VNR needs to be more inclusive and representative of all segments of society, including persons with disabilities. Moriul Islam provided a promising update, indicating that the Interim Government (IG) was committed to making the VNR 2025 different from the previous reports. The VNR would now be a state document that reflects the contributions and inputs from various stakeholders, including CSOs, NGOs, and organizations representing persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, disability inclusion would be explicitly integrated into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Tracker. This would allow disability-related data to be accurately tracked and presented, ensuring that disability rights are systematically included in national development progress reports.

### **Addressing Global Commitments to SDGs**

The importance of global commitments to the SDGs was underscored by the participants. Moriul Islam pointed out that the government has not completely halted its commitment to disability inclusion despite the suspension of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. The Interim Government has reaffirmed its commitment to participating in the VNR and ensuring that persons with disabilities are adequately represented in the report. This is a significant shift from previous reports that focused primarily on government achievements and were limited in their inclusiveness.

### **A Path Forward**

The group work session highlighted the necessary steps and strategies for ensuring that the National Action Plan on Persons with Disabilities is successfully implemented. The government's commitment, coupled with active collaboration with CSOs, ministries, and disability-focused organizations, presents a promising path forward for disability inclusion in Bangladesh. The activation of disability focal points, the integration of disability data into SDG trackers, and the inclusive approach to VNR reporting are steps that will likely make a substantial difference in ensuring that persons with disabilities are no longer left behind in Bangladesh's development trajectory.

The focus on policy activation, empowerment, and cross-ministry collaboration marks a significant turning point in ensuring that disability rights are actively upheld and that Bangladesh continues to align with its global commitments towards inclusive development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the three-day residential workshop marked a significant turning point in the journey toward improving disability rights and social protection in Bangladesh. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the workshop fostered a shared commitment to advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. Concrete steps were outlined to enhance collaboration across sectors, designate disability focal points in ministries, and integrate disability data into national and global development frameworks. These actions align with the country's broader goals of creating an inclusive society where no one is excluded. The workshop also highlighted the crucial role of political support, coordinated efforts across ministries, and the active involvement of civil society organizations in achieving meaningful change. By translating these commitments into actionable policies, Bangladesh can ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities are fully integrated into all aspects of national development, bringing the country closer to the global vision of inclusion and equality for all.