

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Engagement of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities in Inclusive Education Development Programs: Recommendations from a Multi-Country Evaluation

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To date, international development programs in inclusive education have had limited engagement of organizations of persons with disabilities. Funders, however, are increasingly recognizing that engagement of persons with disabilities in programming related to disability inclusion is essential. In this short field reflection, we share lessons learned from evaluating three United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded education activities – in Cambodia, Malawi, and Nepal. In particular, we share how organizations of persons with disabilities were included in the activities; and we offer recommendations for international development actors to consider for future programming, based on our experiences in the field.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Malawi; Nepal; Cambodia; Organizations of Persons with Disabilities; USAID

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) affirms access to education as a basic human right for all persons with disabilities, yet the journey to making this right available to all children is often marked by slow progress. Around the world, learners with disabilities have lower school participation and outcomes than those without disabilities (UNICEF, 2021). There is growing qualitative evidence from global South contexts indicating that children with disabilities are more likely than children without disabilities to be excluded from learning in general education classrooms (e.g., Singal, 2019; Vorapanya & Dunlap, 2014; Malik et al., 2022). Significant research has linked limited educational opportunities for persons with disabilities to ongoing cycles of poverty around the world, including in the global South (Quinn, 2021). International poverty-reduction and development assistance frequently engages a range of actors to implement development initiatives around the world, including those supporting the education sector. It is essential for national, bilateral,

and multi-lateral initiatives in the education sector to promote and enable inclusive education for all, including children and youth with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Equally important is the ongoing and critical evaluation of such initiatives to identify promising practices and areas for improvement, to better enable quality inclusive education for all.

The International Disability Alliance (IDA) has argued that it is critical to understand how OPDs take part in international development and that ‘there cannot be sustainable development without inclusion of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all decision-making processes’ (IDA, 2022: 5). In light of this, we believe it is crucial to elevate recent international development program evaluation findings on OPD engagement and use these to offer concrete recommendations for funders and project implementation teams to improve OPD engagement in future projects.

Multi-Country Study on Inclusive Education (MCSIE)

From 2019-2024, the authors were part of a team that completed an evaluation of three USAID-funded inclusive literacy development projects. The overall study objectives were to evaluate three of USAID’s inclusive education programs in Cambodia, Nepal, and Malawi in five areas: (a) Process, (b) Identification, (c) Training, (d) Instruction, and (e) Unintended consequences. The full evaluation of the three programs included key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, training observations, and material review. A full methodological description and description of findings are publicly available on the USAID Education Links site (USAID, 2024). One important finding from this evaluation related to the engagement of organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) within each program. After detailing key learnings from the field as it relates to implementing the three programs (namely, the All Children Reading – Cambodia, the Reading for All Malawi, and Reading for All Nepal projects), we then offer concrete suggestions for development funders, governments, and implementing partners to consider in the future.

Overview of MCSIE Findings on OPD Engagement

MCSIE evaluators concluded that the All Children Reading – Cambodia (ACR – Cambodia) project engaged a number of different Civil Society Organizations, but did not include OPDs in a meaningful way, beyond invitations to select meetings (Aldersey et al., 2024). As one OPD key informant reflected:

I asked for travel expenses, food, then they approved only a small travel fee, so I participated [in a couple meetings]. I said it was impossible because I could not go home empty-handed. How did I get the rice to eat? So, I stopped from there.

A key lesson learned from the MCSIE evaluation was that ACR Cambodia missed the vital

contribution of OPDs and their expertise in the activity implementation (Aldersey et al., 2024). In the Reading for All (REFAM) – Malawi project, evaluators noted that OPD engagement began early in the activity due to the funders' requirements for collaboration. In this activity, OPDs provided essential knowledge specifically related to accessible literacy and sign language. They also participated in strategy sessions, supported the development of materials, and helped facilitate trainings. Yet, in the evaluation, some key informants from OPDs lamented that their engagement on the project was not formalized with contracts and that funding flowed through an intermediary:

It's true that we have been working together in terms of programs. But when it comes to some administrative costs, we need that to be direct to [OPD name]. We do not need to work under them but rather with them. We can have a separate budget whereby we can take care of some administrative issues... The second thing is...we work together but as [OPD name] we do not get anything from them. It is just some staff that benefit. As of now we can say we support them but there is no memorandum of understanding. Documentation of partnership is very important.

OPDs reported that working with REFAM Malawi enabled them to secure additional work within the inclusive education sector. They also reported that they strengthened their technical capacity by engaging with the project. Out of the REFAM Malawi experience, the MCSIE evaluation highlighted: (a) due to bureaucratic and contractual limitations, OPDs were not compensated for all their effort on the activity; and (b) implementing partners must be transparent with contracting and budgeting decisions (Aldersey et al., 2024).

Finally, from the beginning, Reading for All Nepal (R4A Nepal) aimed to engage OPDs as full partners in designing, implementing, and refining the activity, including collaborating with them to design materials, implement tasks, and deliver training. OPDs supported R4A Nepal in understanding resources and opportunities in the local context. In the final evaluation, OPDs identified that they gained capacity in inclusive education by working on the activity and reported that their stature with the government increased. Furthermore, the following quote indicates a sentiment that engagement in R4A Nepal increased the OPD's financial capacity.

Because of this project, we have improved our good governance, particularly on financial management of the organization. Previously we had a very traditional finance management system, but because there is huge money to managed at the office level, they supported us to hire a finance manager for the organization.

OPD leadership and decision makers believed they had less engagement or influence in the activity than the R4A Nepal activity staff. They also believed that activity staff did not always function in the most inclusive or accessible way, creating barriers to their full engagement.

Sometimes [the lead implementing organization] would have very urgent request... we were asked to submit to our Board [of Directors], but they would want the decision by tomorrow morning. How is that possible for us, persons with disabilities, living in different locations? And Internet is not always reliable and not everyone has reliable mobile phones to connect [for virtual meetings]. So we are coming early morning to have a meeting and they provided all these documents [to review]. And there is no provision [financial] for the Board members to do this, so they have to come on their own expenses, and it created really difficult situations but we managed it. Sometimes we are unable to communicate or understand each other [because lack of interpreters] but we manage because they are a partner and we have to.

Overall, MCSIE evaluators (Aldersey et al., 2024) identified that OPD engagement was a “win-win” for R4A Nepal and Nepali OPDs but could have been enhanced with more timely requests and accessibility in communication, materials and resources and at meeting venues. Moreover, they concluded that transparency on operational requirements and decisions and inclusion of OPD leadership can improve partnerships.

Recommendations for the Future

Having highlighted findings from MCSIE related to OPD engagement, we offer some recommendations for funders, government, and international development activity implementers to consider in the future. Specifically, these recommendations relate to (a) the importance of OPD inclusion at the proposal solicitation stage; (b) the necessity of timely and accessible consultations; and (c) resource requirements for meaningful OPD engagement.

Importance of OPD Inclusion in Proposal Solicitation

It is interesting to note that in the original solicitation for proposals, USAID did not specifically require collaboration with OPDs for the ACR-Cambodia project, and effectively, ACR-Cambodia did not meaningfully engage with OPDs beyond invitations to some select meetings. The other two project solicitations did have mandatory engagement with OPDs in the original solicitation; and the MCSIE evaluation identified that OPD engagement in activity implementation improved activity delivery and outcomes for REFAM-Malawi (3 OPDs engaged) and R4A-Nepal (9 OPDs engaged). Some of the experiences shared from the MCSIE evaluation align with IDA’s (2022) Global Survey of OPDs Participation findings. IDA notes that historically, project implementers engage OPDs after the design and conceptualization of an activity; have been asked to consult and provide input but have not been seen as full partners in activities; or have supported training or limited data collection during project implementation (IDA, 2022).

As a future recommendation, we suggest funders of disability-inclusive development initiatives

require OPD engagement at the proposal/solicitation stage and set specific requirements (and reporting/accountability mechanisms) around ongoing, meaningful OPD engagement at every stage of a funded project. Furthermore, governments of the countries where activities are implemented could consult with local OPDs when developing and reviewing relevant inclusive education and disability strategies, policies, or bilateral and multilateral engagements. They might also consider requiring local OPD engagement in international inclusive education projects as a prerequisite for government endorsement or engagement. Future implementing partners also have a responsibility to ensure OPDs help design and develop activity interventions, even if not explicitly mandated by the funder or government. This should not only be at the project design phase, but implementing partners might also strive for OPD representation in monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities. This level of representation may require additional resources if capacity does not already exist, an element that we discuss in further depth below.

Necessity of Timely and Accessible Consultations

In MCSIE, OPD representatives from both Malawi and Nepal shared that providing accessibility and more timely consultation could help strengthen partnerships in future activities. In Malawi, KIIs revealed examples to support accessibility, including holding meetings and trainings in accessible venues, providing materials early and in multiple formats, and providing interpreting services to OPD representatives (Aldersey et al., 2024). Nepal OPD partners also raised these examples and indicated that virtual meetings with advance notice would improve accessibility. This advance notice was critical for both in-person and virtual meetings because of the associated time required to coordinate any reasonable accommodations and necessary support services. When OPD members were informed of meetings without sufficient time to prepare to meet their individual requirements, this created challenges for full participation and substantial engagement. Additionally, OPD partners in both countries touched on the importance of being included during the design phase of activities and having partners use their knowledge and expertise to contextualize planned interventions, training materials, and teaching and learning materials (Aldersey et al., 2024).

We suggest that in the future, funders must designate a percentage of project budget to support accessibility and meaningful engagement needs. They might also consider enabling flexible use of project funds to support accessibility and engagement needs if they are identified following the project design and initial budgeting process. In its 2022 survey of OPD participation, IDA also concludes that funders need to accelerate investments in participation supports, accessibility, and provision of reasonable accommodation and to plan and support disability inclusion in their initiatives proactively.

Similarly, implementing partners for future development projects must provide OPDs with a budget and equitable pay for their contributions. Moreover, they should ensure meetings and

events are accessible and provide reasonable accommodations and offer sufficient advance notice of meetings and events to enable individuals time to secure their requirements for full and meaningful participation. Implementing partners should also consider providing additional time when adapting materials to ensure OPDs can support contextualization and refinement and communicate and plan early to ensure accessibility in technical activities.

Resource Requirements for Meaningful OPD Engagement

Based on MCSIE findings, we suggest that one way to avoid tokenistic engagement, would be for implementing partners to develop mechanisms for transparency and knowledge sharing with OPDs around project implementation, including having OPD representation on project leadership committees and regularly welcoming OPDs to review and provide input on budgets and operational plans. In some instances, it may be most appropriate for OPDs to be the key implementation lead. Yet, meaningful engagement and transfer of activity leadership directly to OPDs may require careful consideration of and support for existing OPD capacity.

IDA (2022) indicates that OPD capacity can be a challenge to meaningful participation, and this was also reflected in MCSIE findings, where evaluators concluded that “training on budgeting, administrative reporting, and human resource management would help ensure that the OPDs’ financial and human capital are adequate to cover and align with the scope of work” (Aldersey et al., 2024 p. 31). In alignment with our recommendations based on MCSIE findings, IDA (2022) also calls for investment in capacity development and the creation of processes to learn from the technical capacities of OPDs, as well as funding and opportunities for OPD organizational development.

We suggest future funders of international inclusive education projects fund operational and focused technical training as needed to OPD members to support current and future project implementation. Funders should prioritize strengthening OPD leadership and operational systems to support localization efforts as necessary, and have funding flow directly to OPDs. As it relates to implementing partners, we suggest they build in time and financial resources at start-up and throughout an activity to understand current capacity and, if necessary, strengthen the capacity and provide training to OPDs on: (a) Donor-regulations; (b) Budgeting; (c) Work Planning; (d) Staffing; and (f) Reporting and knowledge management. They should provide early and ongoing training on technical areas of relevant project content to strengthen OPD members’ skills. In the implementation of activities, implementing and technical partners could also enable access and capacity supports for OPD leaders (rather than just the lead implementing organization) to have close coordination and collaboration among federal, provincial, and local leaders, to help ensure the sustainability of the efforts. Implementing partners might strive to engage OPD leadership in capacity strengthening efforts, not just activity-specific staff, to further support sustainability of project efforts and outcomes.

Conclusion

Critical evaluations of international development projects for inclusive education are very important, and it is equally as critical to turn the findings of evaluations into action. The MCSIE evaluation highlighted that OPDs are essential partners for inclusive education initiatives and identified missed opportunities and areas for improved OPD engagement from three example education activities. Collaboration with OPDs should be initiated during project solicitation and design and last through activity completion. OPDs must be recognized for their contributions, including through payment, co-authorship, or other desirable means they might identify. Project implementers must ensure accessibility in all areas of partnership and implementation and plan for additional time and support and resources to strengthen OPD operational capacity, as required. We caution that the recommendations provided here are based on evaluating three specific activities in three different countries and may not apply outside of these specific boundaries. We believe, however, that activity- and context-specific learning and knowledge sharing offer a value that, when combined with more comprehensive surveys (e.g., IDA 2022), can begin to offer a fuller picture of good practice for OPD engagement.

This brief report is one attempt to promote the translation of critical findings of the MCSIE evaluation around OPD engagement into action. However, it will be essential for further program evaluation and ongoing knowledge sharing to better promote and enable meaningful OPD for improved inclusive education initiatives for all.

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