Bridging the GAP

Inclusive Development Cooperation

**Capitalisation of experiences
in the framework of the EU Bridging the Gap project**

Janina Arsenjeva and Paula F. Hunt
With the support of Laeticia Antonowicz, Skye Bain,
Stefan Meyer, and Ana-Matilde Neves

July 2021

FIIAPP COOPERACIÓN ESPAÑOLA   Spanish Cooperation AECID   ITALIAN AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION   AUSTRIAN DEVELOPMENT AGENCY   EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM   iDDC   MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF FINLAND   UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

With the support of Fresno, the right link

Abbreviations

ADA	Austrian Development Agency
AECID	Spanish Agency for Development and Cooperation
Agenda 2030	2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
AICS	the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation
BtG-I	Bridging the Gap I project
BtG-II	Bridging the Gap II project
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DAC	Development Assistance Committee - OECD
DID	Disability-inclusive development (cooperation)
EC	European Commission
EDF	European Disability Forum
EU INTPA	European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships
EU	European Union
FIIAPP	International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies
HQ	Headquarter (of Agencies)
IDDC	International Disability and Development Consortium
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Official Development Aid
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPD	Organization of People with Disabilities
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCT	United Nations Country Team

1 Introduction

The Bridging the Gap II project (henceforth, the Project) is one of the European Union's response to its obligation to make international cooperation inclusive of persons with disabilities imposed by the EU and all its Member States ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly its Article 32 "International Cooperation".

Making development inclusive of persons with disabilities is a precondition for the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Failure to do so makes meeting of the SDGs and its "Leave No One Behind" tagline impossible - on average, 15% of the global population has a disability, and an overwhelming majority of persons with disabilities live in low- and middle-income countries. Therefore, leaving them behind in the efforts to alleviate extreme poverty and hunger, fight climate change or reduce inequalities will undoubtedly compromise the progress of the development efforts.

In practice, disability-inclusive development requires that all efforts towards development cooperation must be based on the twin-track approach. On the one hand, interventions targeting access to education, employment, social protection, or healthcare must be inclusive of and accessible for women, men and children with disabilities. On the other hand, they must be complemented by targeted investments on persons with disabilities to address their needs related to their impairments, such as the need to access to assistive technologies or social support services in the community.

2 Bridging the Gap II and inclusive development cooperation

Supporting the achievement of disability-inclusive SDGs was one of the two specific objectives of the Project. To this end, the expected results were:

- Increased capacity of development partners to include persons with disabilities in mainstream development cooperation;
- Enhanced capacity of government stakeholders to develop and implement disability-inclusive sector policies and services while involving OPDs;
- Enhanced capacity of OPDs and civil society organisations to engage in and influence policy development processes.

The European Union is the world's largest donor of development aid. Together with its Member States, in 2020, its Official Development Assistance (ODA) amounted to €75.2 billion in 2019, representing 55.2% of global assistance (European Commission, 2020a). As such, its role in driving the global processes of making development inclusive of persons with disabilities cannot be

underestimated. Bridging the Gap II undertook a number of strategic actions to support better inclusion of persons with disabilities through policy influencing and technical support at both EU level and the development agencies of the EU Member States that participated in the implementation of the Project.

2.1 European Union level

The 2019 preliminary study on disability inclusion in the EU development cooperation instruments (Axelsson & BtG-II, 2019) was one of the most significant Project's contributions to the discussion of disability mainstreaming in the EU external action. It provided an analytical snapshot of the current EU financial instruments for their inclusion of persons with disabilities and made a series of recommendations, providing sets of short- and long-term action points, making them the basis of the Project contribution to the European Commission consultation for the next European Disability Strategy (BtG-II, 2020a):

Short-term recommendations to the EU	Long-term recommendations to the EU
Make the draft Neighbourhood, Development and International Instrument disability-inclusive	Assign disability to the Directors level at the Commission to strengthen its global leadership on disability-inclusive development
Step up in the field of collection of disaggregated data, using tools, such as the Washington Group Questions, and own research	Maintain external action as one of the components of the next disability strategy, and develop an action plan with measurable goals and indicators, and resources
Work towards full implementation of the OECD DAC marker, updating the 2012 staff guidance note in its light	Invest into strengthening the technical capacity in the Commission, for example, by creating a disability inclusion helpdesk and forming a network of focal points
Make all EU institutions and delegations fully accessible for persons with disabilities and ensure full participation of the organisations of persons with disabilities via consultation mechanisms	Revise the existing action plans on gender equality and human rights in consultation with the disability movement
Identify "Champion EU Delegations" having expressed commitment towards disability-inclusive development	Improve the inclusion of rights of persons with disabilities in the EU development programmes by including them across existing thematic and sectoral training and capacity development programmes

The Axelsson report was presented at the **conference "Disability-inclusive development cooperation: the European way forward"** organised in Brussels on 5 December 2019 (BtG-II, 2019). The main purpose of the conference was to collect contributions for a post-2020 European Disability Strategy that was, at the time, in the making. The conference produced recommendations for improving the EU disability mainstreaming processes through enhanced accountability, technical assistance, OPDs participation and data collection.

The 2020 pilot study **"The unsteady path: Towards meaningful participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in the implementation of the CRPD and SDGs"** (BtG-II & Cote, 2020) developed a framework to evaluate the meaningful participation of OPDs national policy setting using criteria such as willingness to engage, availability of consultation mechanisms and resources, transparency and support to OPDs. It also considers the efforts to ensure participation of persons with disabilities in the five BtG-II countries on a scale from tokenism and extension to claimed and meaningful participation.

Also in 2020, and in line with its recommendations to make programming and environment more accessible for persons with disabilities, the Project produced a **Guidance Note on Disability-Inclusive Public Procurement**. (BtG-II, Beales - 2019 - Disability-Inclusive Procurement - Guidance Note, n.d.) Addressed to the European Commission, European donor agencies and partner countries in receipt of EU development aid, the Guidance Note pulled together all available resources to procure goods and services inclusive of persons with disabilities.

The framework developed by the above-mentioned Axelsson study was used and further developed in the subsequent 2020 Arsenjeva and Meyer **"Study on disability mainstreaming in partner agencies' work"** (BtG-II et al., 2020). This study explored the disability mainstreaming practices in the three BtG-II implementing agencies Austrian Development Agency (ADA), Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS), and the project lead implementing party International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies (FIIAPP) in Headquarters and beneficiary countries. The findings of this research echo the conclusions of the Axelsson study: **political will, technical capacity and accountability mechanisms are indispensable for ensuring progress towards disability-inclusive development.**

2.2   Project partners-led activities in beneficiary countries

In the partner countries, the Project focused on five sector policies inclusive education, universal access to healthcare, universal access to employment, livelihoods and social protection, and data generation and use.

The activities to mainstream disability in developing cooperation that took place in the partner countries included workshops, training, and targeted support to

ongoing activities of other stakeholders. Activities were organised in cooperation with the European OPD experts and, on occasions, supported by the EU delegations in partner countries. The latter also benefited from the Project expertise. Some of the activities were:

- In Sudan, the project provided technical support to the EU Delegation by assessing the universal accessibility to the EU Day celebrations in May 2018 (FIIAPP & BtG II, 2018, p. 12);
- In Ethiopia, in line with the country strategy to reinforce the disability dimension of the already existing programmes run by other international donors, the Project successfully included a disability component in the situation analysis on destitute urban populations and their access to services in 2018 (*BtG_Overview-of-the-Activity-Report-2018.Pdf*, n.d., p. 13);
- In Ecuador, the document establishing the terms of cooperation between Ecuador and Spain - Country Association Framework (FIIAPP & BtG-II, 2020) - mentioned the inclusion of the rights of persons with disabilities;
- The Ethiopian BtG-II team travelled to Vienna in 2019 to train the ADA headquarters staff in disability rights and disability-inclusive policies.

3 Promising practices initiated or supported by the Project

3.1 European Union: more references to disability-inclusive development than ever before

Ensuring a robust international cooperation dimension in a post-2020 European disability strategy was a strong global component of the project. BtG-II contributed to the stakeholder consultation for the strategy alongside project partners EDF and IDDC. Their combined efforts and strategic advocacy action in Brussels and in the partner-countries led to an ever-growing awareness of the CRPD by the EU. Thus, while other efforts have been made in this regard, the Project implementation period has been characterised by a significant number of references to persons with disabilities in critical policy and financial instruments that will shape the EU external action in the next few years.

The **European Disability Strategy 2021-2030** (European Commission, 2021) was published in March 2021 and retains a chapter on External Action from the Strategy 2010-2020. EDF and IDDC called for robust mechanisms for implementation of this chapter, transparent interagency coordination and participation of OPDs to ensure the Strategy does not become a declarative proclamation of intentions without meaningful impact on the ground (EDF & IDDC, n.d.).

Importantly, while the European Disability Strategy 2021-2030 (European Commission, n.d.) is the most recent and, arguably, the most critical piece of

strategic guidance informing the rights of persons with disabilities, it is not the only one. A few months before its adoption, the Commission published the third iteration of its Gender Action Plan (GAP III) and the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, both of which are directly applicable to the rights of persons with disabilities as summarized below.

- The **European Gender Action Plan III (GAP III)** (European Commission, 2020b) was published in November 2020, taking on board BtG-II recommendations (BtG II, 2020b). It acknowledges multiple discrimination experienced by women with disabilities and commits the EU to use its resources to address it. The Staff Working Document accompanying the Plan: insists that whenever possible, data should be disaggregated by disability status; and includes a disability-inclusive indicator explicit to social protection as per SDG indicator 1.3.1; and, includes an indicator to measure inclusive education for children with disabilities.
- The **European Union Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024** (European Union, 2020) mainstreams the rights of persons with disabilities in its commitments to fight discrimination, empower individuals and work towards an inclusive digital world.
- Finally – and most importantly – the new "**Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe**" (European Union, 2021), the main EU financial instrument for all external action in 2021-2027 adopted in June 2021, is fully inclusive of persons with disabilities(European Disability Forum, 2021). Thus, it lays the foundation for continuing and further improving disability-inclusive development cooperation of, and within, the European Union.

3.2 Improved awareness about disability-inclusive development cooperation among participating agencies

Before their involvement, each of the four project participating agencies ADA, AECID, AICS and FIIAPP was at a different stage in understanding, and commitment to, disability-inclusive development. For example, AICS has the longest history of disability mainstreaming with its first Guidelines on disability-inclusive development adopted in 2010, while FIIAPP was just starting to explore different possibilities to mainstream disability in its work. The Project conducted a review of each Agency's disability mainstreaming policies and practices in 2020 and made agency-specific recommendations. At the closing conference in June 2021, project partners overwhelmingly reported that participation in the Project was an enriching experience for them. There are three noteworthy findings reported by project partners.

- First, BtG-II improved their understanding of the rights-based approach to disability and how different stakeholders in different contexts implement the Convention in different ways. While some partners reported that the learning curve has been steep, they also appreciated the "learning by doing" approach and the value of their newly gained experience.

- Second, in each agency, the Project has triggered the review of internal practices, resources and relationships dedicated to disability mainstreaming. For example, the relationship between high turnover of staff working on disability and the limited progress in achieving disability mainstreaming on the ground have been noted and addressed by some participating agencies. The Project pressed the participating agencies to explore their leverage in the beneficiary countries and open avenues for questioning their modalities regarding the involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities. Internal guidelines for disability-inclusive development were drafted for the first time (FIIAPP) or revised (ADA). Additionally, the cross-pollination of an ongoing donor intervention without a prior disability component with the BtG-II expertise was noted. DICTORNA – a large-scale multi-annual intervention of AICS Sudan to create community-based health centres – is now disability-inclusive and reaches out to people who would otherwise have remained invisible by the intervention.
- Third, the Project was instrumental in introducing new and innovative working methods in all participating Agencies who have uniformly identified the possibility of working together, exchanging experiences and providing/receiving support as the single-most enriching Project takeaway.

3.3 Multi-stakeholder cooperation as important public policy innovation

The opportunity to bring together different partners from the Global North and South - including national donor agencies and organisations of persons with disabilities - around key issues concerning persons with disabilities, was identified as one of the promising practices of the project, and perhaps the most significant. The crucial public policy innovation offered by the Project was noted by its partners and external stakeholders as allowing for cross-pollination of expertise and mutual reinforcement. Specifically, the Project introduced and/or facilitated the following models of cooperation:

1. **Multilevel cooperation between project partners**: Initially designed as a European pilot project, its unique approach to multi-stakeholder cooperation modelled multilevel interaction between different structures - European Commission; national development agencies; international disability organisations - each contributing with their unique knowledge and expertise.
2. **Cooperation between donor agencies as part of the GLAD network**: The Project implementation phase (2018-2021) coincided with the intensified growth of the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) Network, the body of bilateral and multilateral donors and partners united around the common goal of disability-inclusive development and humanitarian action. For most BtG-II partners, the Project provided an introduction to GLAD's work, an opportunity to establish a learning and experience-sharing channel with GLAD members.
3. **Donors' cooperation in the partner countries**: The Project enhanced and highlighted the wealth of expertise related to disability rights pre-existing within partner countries via initiatives such as Group of Friends of Persons

with Disabilities in Sudan, championed by the Italian Embassy, AICS and Sudan's National Council of Persons with Disabilities.

4. **South-South cooperation**: perhaps the most impactful outcome of the Project are the long-lasting collaborations developed at local and national levels by virtue of engaging in an international development project. All national stakeholders interviewed considered the collaboration opportunities afforded to them by the Project to be crucial in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in their own countries. Both OPDs and government representatives indicated that they have created or enhanced working relationships that will continue to grow well beyond the life of the Project and regardless of donor and/or EU requirements.

3.4 External recognition of Project partners as reliable and credible collaborators in the field of development cooperation

The European Disability Forum (EDF) and the International Consortium for Disability and Development (IDDC) provide a direct link to the disability community while mandated to implement the CRPD. Partnership with disability organisations has been essential to ensuring the Project´s relevance to the needs of the disability community. It also served the important function of using the Project's findings in international and European advocacy.

Both organisations had been fully engaged in disability-inclusive international cooperation work before the launch of the Project. Therefore, while the Project might have had little effect on their commitment or interest towards disability-inclusive development, it increased the tools and advocacy instruments at their disposal, as well as their visibility with donors and the EU, and their capacity to advocate with the European Commission.

In the case of EDF, the Project triggered a more considered reflection of the organisation's role in the international cooperation work arena that resulted in the adoption of EDF's Strategy for International Cooperation 2019-2022. EDF has already started capitalizing on the Project – and will likely continue to do so – as reflected by the received external acknowledgement and recognition for its work in international cooperation and being approached for partnership in similar initiatives.

3.5 Establishment of the EU disability technical assistance facility

The establishment of the EU disability technical assistance facility at DG INTPA is a forward step towards broad disability-inclusion, directly related to the 2019 Axelsson report recommendations. The expertise is provided on a consultancy basis and, while it was initially intended to be demand-driven (to answer queries from the EU development cooperation processes) it has already started the capitalization process by going beyond its original intent and proactively

contributing to important initiatives developed by the EU such as the Human Right-Based Approach (HRBA) toolbox current revision.

Possibly due to low visibility of the facility or the low awareness of the EU delegations about the support available through the facility, the demand for assistance has been underwhelming. To fully capitalize on the establishment of the EU disability technical assistance facility, the knowledge database generated by the Project is of vital importance. In addition to providing assistance that is tailored to each EU delegation's specific needs, the package of essential resources developed and compiled by BtG-II can be offered as a useful starting point to address the most immediate delegations' needs.

4 Lessons learnt through the Project

Bridging the Gap II was conceived as a pilot initiative that would bring together donors, OPDs, international organisations and stakeholders around the two most significant opportunities available today to improve the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the international cooperation work: the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and fulfilling the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, the expectations for a renewed and enhanced involvement of all stakeholders and innovative modes of cooperation between partners had been high.

While the promising practices presented above are critical in advancing the work on disability-inclusive international development it is equally important to identify and reflect upon activities that might require re-formulating or further efforts to ensure maximum capitalization. Therefore, each of the examples provided below are followed by a set of suggested observations for further analysis.

4.1 Investment in the development of, and support to, knowledgeable staff

In both the European Commission and partner agencies, the availability, personal commitment and working style of the technical expert serving as disability focal point were identified as a deciding factor in the success of the organisation's disability mainstreaming efforts. A high rate of staff turnover will inevitably have a negative effect on the continuity and effectiveness of the process. In contrast, personal or long-term professional background on disability-related issues is a driving force for success. Despite an expressed broad political will to make international cooperation inclusive of persons with disabilities, the limited technical capacity of field staff continues to be a significant barrier as identified by study informants. In this respect, capitalizing on lessons learned might require that:

The disability focal point be placed strategically within the organisation's structure to ensure high visibility and have a broad mandate that can enable following up on the political commitment to mainstream disability. Capitalize on the existing disability focal points in delegations and field offices by encouraging and resourcing a reliable, transparent, and united network that can provide regional and thematic support.

Under-resourcing is a significant barrier to meaningful disability-inclusive programming. It creates expectations that cannot be met and triggers frustration of the post-holder and its collaborators. If disability focal points remain the main linkage points between the European Commission and others, then adequate resources must be allocated to the disability focal points. The development of country teams might be considered.

Consider current BtG-II country teams as explicit regional hubs of knowledge on disability-inclusive development. In 2019, ADA headquarters in Vienna received induction on disability rights by the BtG-II country team in Ethiopia. Identified as a good practice, this approach should be rolled out in other countries and expanded to South-to-South cooperation, with Project partners providing training on disability-inclusive development in neighbouring countries.

All roads *do not* lead to the disability focal point. Reliance upon a disability focal point to collaborate with the field delegations creates a bottleneck in the exchange of information and slows down the process, discouraging the continued involvement of the field staff in initiatives, especially in large organisations. Disability focal points must not be seen as the only counterpart for all disability-specific referrals. Services and delegations should be prepared to discuss aspects of their work through the lens of disability, without relying on the disability focal point.

Skills and knowledge related to disability-mainstreaming should become a part of the organizational ethos. Prioritising basic training on CRPD and disability-inclusive development may ensure a more robust body of knowledge. As is already a practice in some organisations, notably ADA, for gender mainstreaming, mandatory training on disability might need to be considered as part of the new staff induction activities.

4.2 Monitoring the evolution of disability mainstreaming in international cooperation projects

The Project implementation phase has coincided with the adoption by the OECD DAC of a new policy marker on the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities" (commonly known as the DAC disability marker). The marker provides for a three-tier evaluation of any reported project for inclusion of persons with disabilities: "2" for disability as the main objective of the project, "1" for disability as a significant objective, and "0" when disability is not targeted at all.

The European Union committed to applying the OECD DAC marker to its own spending and the first monitoring data became available in 2020, showing that the overwhelming number of EU projects have scored a "0" marker, indicating that disability was not targeted at all.

However, while the DAC marker is a valuable tool to obtain a general overview of the share of national development aid budget that is inclusive, it is not without limitations. It is voluntary by nature (not all EU countries choose to apply it), it is purely quantitative (thus failing to report on the qualitative aspects of aid work) and measures disability mainstreaming of the spending commitment, not disability mainstreaming as an outcome. Additionally, national donor agencies indicated that evaluating a project for disability inclusion with the DAC Marker takes place at the stage of its inception, but the ongoing monitoring of the activities for the continued inclusion of persons with disabilities is seldom completed due to its labour-intensive character. The DAC marker could be capitalized upon if combined with the **human rights indicators for the CRPD in support of a disability-inclusive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,** developed by Bridging the Gap I. They are a valuable qualitative complement to the evaluation of mainstreaming efforts (especially those on CRPD Article 11 Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies and CRPD Article 32 International cooperation) and aim to measure the processes and outcomes of donors' actions towards achieving a disability-inclusive approach to programming.

4.3 Involvement of the EU Delegations in the activities to foster disability-inclusive international cooperation

One of the most often-mentioned limitations of the Project, present since the design phase of BtG-II, was the limited involvement of the European Union delegations in the partner countries. The new EU approach to funding of international cooperation work, introduced in the new Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) (European Union, 2021) is characterised by a strong geographical focus of strategy setting and funds disbursement, has made this limitation evident.

However, this new funding approach also offers an opportunity to improve the disability awareness of the EU delegations. Implementing the disability-inclusive NDICI Instrument, will further expose EU delegations to disability-inclusive work. In turn, this will create demand for technical support, including using the know-how developed by the Project.

4.4 Gender mainstreaming remains the aspirational model for disability-inclusive development

Systemic disability mainstreaming lags behind in most countries, resulting in the lack of reliable data, benchmarking indicators, and difficulties measuring progress. However, making the case for a more efficient and systematic engagement in fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities can be successfully achieved if modelled after the efforts made in gender mainstreaming.

As an example, the 2020 Arsenjeva and Meyer report (BtG-II et al., 2020) compares the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC) approaches to gender mainstreaming and disability mainstreaming to illustrate how modelling disability-mainstreaming efforts after gender-mainstreaming efforts could have a capitalizing effect. The ADC strategy on gender equality to implement the EU Gender Action Plan II, makes gender mainstreaming an unmissable requirement of all its programming work. A strong gender perspective is built in the multi-annual and annual work programmes of the Austrian Development Agency and include the required steps to achieve 85% compliance of when measured with the OECD DAC gender marker 1 (gender mainstreaming) or 2 (specific equality target). Additionally, gender issues have been prioritised in staff trainings, including mandatory training. Gender is considered an integral and unquestionable element of ADA's project cycle management, is introduced at the earliest stage of any project and is monitored throughout. However, disability enjoys a more limited exposure and buy-in. In the words of ADA staff members,

"There is no genuine disability mainstreaming in ADA yet comparable to gender or environment. Disability is seen as one sub-category of social inclusion, and there are not many projects that target it. There is no [mandatory] DAC marker, no SDG target…" […] gender is huge in ADA work because there is support. It's a priority and very visible. Disability marker is somewhat understood, but it's picked up much more slowly."

This comparison is not unique to Austria or any other EU Member State. An important lesson from the Project implementation is that with increased awareness about disability mainstreaming, the pressure on staff – of the Commission and national agencies, both in HQ and field – to "mainstream everything" also increased. Thus, it is important to address "mainstreaming fatigue" via a unified approach to cross-cutting issues. Disability is one of the latest additions to the many issues that programming teams are requested to include in their proposals and implementation work. Overtime, the piecemeal approach to mainstreaming has become unsustainable, and donor organisations are exploring how to ensure a unified approach to mainstreaming cross-cutting issues. One good example of how to progress on mainstreaming is by using the Directorate-General International Partnerships (DG INTPA) toolbox on the rights-based approach to international cooperation currently being revised. Aimed at

supporting EU delegations' staff, it includes a section on disability mainstreaming thanks to a contribution from the EU disability technical assistance facility.

This could be further capitalized upon with the establishment of a horizontal service responsible for mainstreaming cross-cutting issues in development cooperation work of donor organisations, to ensure including issues such as the intersection of disability and gender, disability and migration, or persons with disabilities affected by climate change.

4.5   Reinforcing and expanding multi-stakeholder cooperation

As mentioned above, the Project partners and other collaborators have identified their partnership as the fundamental takeaway from the Project, worth preserving and multiplying in future opportunities. Two important reflections can be offered in this regard:

- The initial selection of partner agencies and beneficiary countries participating in the Project created confusion when establishing a common denominator for all participating countries. Different national contexts, specific donor agency priorities, uneven political opportunities and bottlenecks, and different operating methods made coordination difficult. Future projects should consider a more organic regional model of multi-stakeholder cooperation, whereby mutual learning is facilitated by similar contexts, political priorities, languages and demographics of participating countries/agencies. Such an approach seems particularly suitable to the decentralisation of the European Union development cooperation and its concentration in the EU delegations.

- A strategic complementarity between donor organisations would also enable each partner to focus on the areas of their best interest and existing expertise. The thematic know-how gained by partners during the Project – such as on health in Burkina Faso, livelihood in Ethiopia or data generation in Paraguay – should be preserved, but also expanded and shared. Such a complementarity model could be explored within the GLAD network or as part of the above-mentioned regional approach to development cooperation.

4.6   Investment in human capital

Improvement of stakeholders' technical capacity was identified as one of the Project's key expected outcomes. As a direct result of a targeted investment of knowledge, skills and resources in the people involved in the Project implementation, a tangible increase in human capital available to promote disability-inclusive development is observed. It includes:

- Activists with disabilities at national and regional levels in the five partner countries;
- Field staff of the three implementing partner agencies in the five partner countries;

- Representatives of the national authorities in the five partner countries;
- Other collaborators (international donors, embassies, EU delegations, service providers) in the five partner countries;
- Headquarters staff in the three implementing agencies and FIIAPP;
- OPDs and NGOs in Austria, Italy and Spain advising national partner agencies in the implementation of the Project;
- EDF and IDDC staff and members;
- EU institutions' staff.

The implementation of the Project produced some internal transfer of knowledge between Project stakeholders, such as trainings offered to government officials and local OPDs, training by the field BtG-II staff to agency headquarters' staff, numerous webinars on various themes, and mutual learning activities organised in the framework of the Project. Although it is expected that this production of invaluable knowledge and experience can be preserved, grown, and capitalised upon in the future it is still unclear how. A modality to export the learnings outside the Project's framework to other contexts and geographical areas should be considered.

4.7 Involvement of organisations of persons with disabilities

Meaningful participation of persons with disabilities is a necessary precondition for disability-inclusive development. While it has been reasonably successful in the partner countries, the 2020 Cote study (BtG-II & Cote, 2020) identified bottlenecks that need to take into consideration when capitalizing upon BtG-II, such as:

- Barriers to OPDs participation due to inaccessible infrastructure/information, or the cost or lack of formal education/knowledge of many OPDs leaders. While most OPDs in partner countries identified their low administrative capacity and insufficient project management skills as obstacles, some appreciated the steep learning curve provided by the Project and acknowledged its contribution to improving these skills;
- OPDs' financial dependence on the government often limits their participation in advocacy for a systemic change, calling, on the one hand, for diversification of OPDs income sources and, on the other, improvement of the governments' awareness of the value of OPDs' participation;
- The value of "claimed" participation of OPDs is not yet entirely accepted: it is often expected that the OPDs should only intervene when invited. Fragmentation of the national disability movement makes speaking in a united voice a challenge. In response, the Project has demonstrated that the resistance of "claimed" participation can partly be overcome by setting up and developing pluralistic and representative national disability councils;
- Human rights advocacy and awareness-raising is not a core business for many OPDs in partner countries who prioritise service delivery to beneficiaries that often their only source of income. One of the main reasons for this is lack of donor funding for advocacy activities, and by supporting the development

of robust OPD-led advocacy, the Project has demonstrated that the shift is possible and necessary;

- OPDs have indicated that sustainability of the good initiatives started by the BtG-II may be under threat due to their limited ability to ensure continuity of interventions after the end of the project, and requested that a capitalisation budget be built into a next similar project to help the OPDs to build on the project's achievements after its formal closure.

4.8   Lessons learnt from unmet expectations

The majority of this study's informants reported that the European Union's potential to be seen as the global leader of disability-inclusive development cooperation was not fully realised in this Project.

The limited buy-in of the European Commission (EC) in the new approach to disability-inclusive development spearheaded by the project was manifested at both political and technical levels. The fairly critical assessment of the European Disability Strategy External Action chapter by EDF and IDDC point to questions regarding the EU's understanding of, and commitment to, disability-inclusive development. This being the case, the slow progress in improving the technical capacity of staff is understandable, if not justified.

Some informants reported a somewhat distant and, at times, simply procedural involvement of the European Commission in the Project activities, and a slow adoption of the Project's learning curve by the EU. They reported a lack of visible presence of the EU in multilateral stakeholder gatherings such as GLAD Network, and the continued compartmentalisation of disability within the European Union structures.

As mentioned above, the dependence of the disability mainstreaming actions on the disability focal points may have contributed to the varying degrees of the EC's engagement in the project activities. However, to fully capitalize on the Project, the reasons for the reported lack of meaningful engagement must be better understood to be avoided in the future. The task of ensuring sustainable, meaningful and comprehensive disability mainstreaming throughout all EU policies and programmes goes beyond any one project. However, BtG-II has served the purpose of exporting the issue beyond the traditionally "disability-curious" services and generated a wealth of knowledge that can be used in the future to deepen the understanding of disability-inclusive development.

5 Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations to the European Union

Many of the Project **recommendations to the European Union made in 2019** (Axelsson & BtG II, 2019) remain relevant, even if significant progress has been achieved on others (establishment of the technical assistance facility, mainstreaming of disability in the EU funding framework, among others). They have been complemented and reinforced in the Call for Action (BtG-II, 2021) adopted by the Project partners at the June 2021 closing conference.

Political

- Building on the robust policy and financial framework, the European Disability Strategy 2021-2030 and the NDICI Instrument, adopt a European action plan detailing the implementation mechanisms to achieve fully CRPD-compliant development cooperation. Such an action plan could be inspired by the European development cooperation activities on gender mainstreaming;
- Demonstrate global leadership in disability-inclusive development by proactive engagement in the GLAD network and hosting a future Global Disability Summit within a concrete time frame;
- Building on the Axelsson study, undertake a more complete and exhaustive review of the state of play of the EU development cooperation concerning disability;
- Make an explicit commitment for a specific share of EU development aid to be compliant with the OECD DAC marker "1". Consider using the BtG-I human rights indicators to add a qualitative element to measuring disability mainstreaming of EU programmes and projects;
- Revisit its internal structures, including assigning disability at the highest appropriate level at the Commission, providing disability focal points/ coordinators with human and financial resources and sufficient mandate and increasing the external transparency of their work.

Operational

- In line with the decentralisation approach to the EU development cooperation, prioritise equipping the EU delegations' staff with knowledge, skills and resources to mainstream cross-cutting issues, including disability, in their work;
- Use Project learning tools to provide training and support to the EU staff in headquarters and delegations on disability-inclusive development;
- Consider including mandatory training on key issues, such as CRPD, inclusive budgeting, accessibility, meaningful participation with the organisations of persons with disabilities, application of the OECD DAC disability marker, etc.;
- Improve staff awareness about the availability of the disability technical facility to support disability mainstreaming in their work;

- Make all EU offices and delegations fully accessible for persons with disabilities, and introduce a mandatory accessibility clause in public procurement tenders for goods and services in the framework of EU-funded programmes in line with the BtG-II guidance note on inclusive public procurement (BtG-II & Beales, 2019);
- Make mandatory the hiring of persons with disabilities in the EU delegations, including local staff;
- Facilitate and encourage exchanges and mutual learning on disability rights between donor agencies present in beneficiary countries;
- Consider the regional approach in the future of the disability technical assistance facility, exploring the peer-to-peer model of learning by matching the requests from the field with the regional/local and thematic expertise obtained during the Project.

Participation of organisations of persons with disabilities

- Model meaningful participation of organisations of persons with disabilities in beneficiary countries by example, setting the standard for other donors present in the country. This work should follow the recommendations of the BtG-II 2020 study on meaningful participation(BtG-II & Cote, 2020);
- Create a facility of structured dialogue with organisations of persons with disabilities in the EU and beneficiary countries to monitor the implementation of the European Disability Strategy;
- Take steps to include marginalised and under-represented groups of persons with disabilities, such as persons with psychosocial disabilities, persons in remote and rural areas, persons without access to formal education and those living in poverty in the EU programmes and projects on the ground, including by making the application, participation, implementation and reporting process accessible to them; consider extending direct or indirect support to groups of persons with disabilities prevented from establishing formal organisations due to national legal or political constraints.

5.2 Recommendations to the development partners

The recommendations outlined in the **2020 BtG-II study on disability mainstreaming of the Project participating partner agencies** (BtG-II et al., 2020) remain relevant today. In addition, they can be complemented with additional recommendations based on the progress achieved by the agencies since 2020.

Political

Ensure total commitment to disability-inclusive development by reflecting this priority in all strategic and policy instruments at the highest level and accompanying it with technical implementation guidelines for national development actors

Build disability inclusion into the core strategy of the organisation to ensure ownership and foster cultivation, multiplication, and transfer of good practices

If not yet done so, start applying the OECD DAC disability marker and commit to achieving a particular share of projects compliant with marker "1" or "2" within a specific timeframe;

Improve accessibility of information and offices of donor agencies in headquarters and partner countries; commit to disability-inclusive public procurement of goods and services in the framework of the day-to-day functioning of the agency and its funded projects, using the BtG-II guidance (BtG-II & Beales, 2019);

Operational

Provide continuous training on issues such as CRPD, disability-inclusive development, DAC marker etc. to staff in Headquarters and partner countries; consider making some training modules mandatory;

Utilise the expertise built by the national donor agency staff in the BtG-II partner countries to train and inspire projects in other countries;

Use the BtG-I and BtG-II project materials, including human rights indicators (OHCHR, 2020), to complement monitoring of projects for disability inclusion, emphasising monitoring throughout the project cycle (not just its inception stage).

Participation of organisations of persons with disabilities

- Earmark funding for direct grant-making to the civil society organisations in the partner countries, making the conditions of application, implementation and reporting accessible to them;
- Strategically support the organisations of women with disabilities and of most marginalised persons with disabilities with the view to increasing their visibility and improving their access to vital information about opportunities and resources;
- Consolidate and systematise cooperation with organisations of persons with disabilities in the home country in a memorandum of understanding and cooperation and via a scheme of financial compensation of expertise.

5.3   Recommendations to the OPDs and the civil society

- Diversify national representation to include women, persons from most marginalised and invisible groups and persons with disabilities from rural and remote areas;
- Adopt strategies to develop and grow the advocacy branch of the organisation and earmark human and financial resources to work on systemic reforms, in addition to service provision (if this is the organisation's core business).

Bibliography

Axelsson, C. & BtG II. (2019). Inclusion of persons with disabilities in European Union development cooperation mechanisms, geographic and thematic instruments. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/

BtG II. (2020a). Contribution to the European Commission's consultation for the next European Disability Strategy. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/BtG-Contribution-EUDIS.pdf

BtG II. (2020b). Contribution to the European Commission's consultation for the next Gender Equality Action Plan. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/BtG-Contribution-EU-Gender-Action-Plan.pdf

BtG II. (2021). Disability Inclusion in International Cooperation – The way forward. Call for Action. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/Call-for-Action-Inclusive-Development-Cooperation_Final-1.pdf

BtG II, Arsenjeva, J., & Meyer, S. (2020). Study on the inclusion of the rights of persons with disabilities in development cooperation in Bridging the Gap II project partners. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/Inclusion-of-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-development-cooperation-in-BtG-II.pdf

BtG II, & Beales, S. (2019). Disability-Inclusive Procurement—Guidance note. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/BtG-Inclusive-Public-Procurement-Guidance-Note.pdf

BtG II, Beales—2019—Disability-Inclusive Procurement—Guidance note. (n.d.).

BtG II, & Cote, A. (2020). Study on the participation of the Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in the monitoring and implementation of the CRPD. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/The-unsteady-path.-A-pilot-study-by-BtG.pdf

BtG_Overview-of-the-activity-report-2018.pdf. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 May 2021, from https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/BtG_Overview-of-the-activity-report-2018.pdf

EDF, & IDDC. (n.d.). Analysis of EU Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities: Focus on EU's external action "Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities globally" (Section 6). Retrieved 19 June 2021, from https://www.edf-feph.org/content/uploads/2021/06/EDF-IDDC-Analysis-of-EU-Strategy-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-Priorities-plus-Annex.pdf

European Commission. (n.d.). Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0101&qid=1624211794555&from=EN

European Commission. (2020a, April 16). The European Union remains world's leading donor of Official Development Assistance with €75.2 billion in 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_674

European Commission. (2020b). EU GENDER ACTION PLAN (GAP) III – AN AMBITIOUS AGENDA FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN EU EXTERNAL ACTION. https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/join-2020-17-final_en.pdf

European Commission. (2021). Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0101&qid=1624211794555&from=EN

European Disability Forum. (2021, July 2). Success! Persons with disabilities are included in the EU's new external action budget 2021-2027. https://www.edf-feph.org/success-persons-with-disabilities-are-included-in-the-eu-new-external-action-budget-2021-2027/

European Union. (2020). European Union Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf

European Union. (2021). REGULATION (EU) 2021/947 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 9 June 2021 establishing the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe, amending and repealing Decision No 466/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU) 2017/1601 and Council Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 480/2009. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32021R0947&qid=1625911074496&from=EN

FIIAPP & BtG II. (2018). Bridging the Gap: Advancing on the path of inclusion. Overview of the activity report 2018. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/BtG_Overview-of-the-activity-report-2018.pdf

FIIAPP & BtG II. (2020). Annual report Ecuador 2020. Progress Report—3rd year. Narrative section. https://fresnoconsultinges.sharepoint.com/sites/03proyectos/INT/FIIAPP_BtG2_capitalization/FIIAPP_BtG2_capitalization_shared/doc_ref_BtG_II_docs/4_Annual_report_2020/Annual_report_2020_Ecuador.pdf?CT=1620632370350&OR=ItemsView

OHCHR. (2020). Bridging the Gap Component I: Human Rights indicators for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in support of a disability inclusive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. https://bridgingthegap-project.eu/crpd-indicators/