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Bridging  the **GAP**

# Stories of Bridging the Gap

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A collection of testimonies  
from project partners  
and beneficiaries

## **Editor**

Bridging the Gap project: Inclusive Policies and Services for  
Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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# What is Bridging the Gap II?

“Bridging the Gap II – Inclusive Policies and Services for Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (BtG-II) is an initiative funded by the European Union (EU) aiming to the socio-economic inclusion of persons with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries.

BtG-II is implemented by a consortium coordinated by FIIAPP – Spanish Cooperation and composed by the Austrian Development Agency, the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, the European Disability Forum, the International Disability and Development Consortium, and, as observers, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland.

BtG-II works in five countries (Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Paraguay, and Sudan) to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as at the global level to reinforce disability inclusion’s mainstreaming in international cooperation through a dedicated Knowledge Management and Learning Strategy (KMLS).

BtG-II was launched in April 2017 under the EU’s Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI), Thematic Programme “Global Public Goods and Challenges”. The project has carried out actions aimed at increasing the inclusion of persons with disabilities at both the international and country level to achieve the

implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and of the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

BtG-II focuses on strengthening the capacities of governments, national human rights institutions, and relevant organizations of persons with disabilities in the five partner countries, as well as mainstreaming disability in international cooperation, to develop, implement and monitor disability-inclusive sector policies and services in a participatory manner and in line with the CRPD, namely concerning:

- inclusive education (Ecuador)
- universal access to health (Burkina Faso)
- universal access to employment (Sudan)
- livelihoods and social protection (Ethiopia)
- data and information generation and use (Paraguay)

The country actions are grounded in the strengthening of the dialogue between national institutions and organizations of persons with disabilities, in line with the CRPD's message of "Nothing about us, without us".

Based upon the country actions, the project advances a human rights-based, disability-inclusive development agenda by raising awareness and strengthening the capacities of development partners and civil society, per the CRPD and the 2030 Agenda. Critical issues such as the overall respect of human rights, universal accessibility, gender equality, and socially sustainable development are meaningfully incorporated into the project's work. Specific analysis and researches are conducted to reinforce the knowledge basis for inclusive development.

For further information on Bridging the Gap II, please visit the official website [www.bridgingthegap-project.eu](http://www.bridgingthegap-project.eu).

# What is this publication about?

A project's success is typically measured in terms of products, outputs, and outcomes it achieves, following the principles of project cycle management. But an initiative aimed at enhancing the socio-economic inclusion of a marginalized, vulnerable group is often much more than that. And while the impacts are generally seen in the mid- or long-run, processes of change are normally incipient.

Understanding how a project evolves and improves the daily life of its final beneficiaries is paramount to fully grasp the actual outreach of the actions, to understand strengths and weaknesses, as part of a self-assessment exercise aimed at communicating key messages and trigger new initiatives.

The present publication follows these principles, and presents 10 testimonies of project beneficiaries, 2 per participating country, and 7 from the project partners, with a double objective:

- Understand the nature and extent of the project's capacity to generate or initiate processes of change helping its final beneficiaries;
- Discover how the project partners have been leveraging the project experience to reinforce their capacity to engage in inclusive international cooperation.

The testimonies you will read in the following pages draw a fil rouge joining the five participating countries and the project partners, representing the essence of the Bridging the Gap action: human beings collaborating to make our societies better, more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable.

How has Bridging the Gap helped Ethiopian women with disabilities building confidence and trust to lead in their society? What do Ecuadorians with intellectual disabilities think of greater opportunities in education? Has BtG supported human rights upholding in Paraguay? Has it helped to generate more understanding about the disability-poverty vicious circle in Burkina Faso? What more can be done to support inclusive democratization in Sudan? Is disability mainstreaming gaining momentum in the work of the project partners?

Scroll down the publication and unveil the replies to these and other questions in our Bridging the Gap stories.

# **Bridging the Gap Stories**

Testimonies from  
project beneficiaries



# Burkina Faso

## Evelyne Hien Winkoun



My name is Evelyne Hien Winkoun and I am a person with hearing impairment. I am a Secondary Education Inspector in Burkina Faso. I am also a member of the Association of Hearing Impaired Women of Burkina Faso (AFHA), which was set up in 2008. I currently hold the position of Secretary General of the AFHA. The main barrier I face is when communicating/exchanging information with others because of my disability.

But I think it is important to make training accessible to persons with disabilities to enable them to access decent employment that is respectful of their dignity. This is because the norms of society are built in such a way that more attention is paid to those who contribute financially to the responsibilities of everyday life. Furthermore, human rights training for persons with disabilities is essential as this training will enable them to better understand their rights, claim them, and become key players in the realisation of their human rights.

I was informed about the launch of the Bridging the Gap project through the project's Country Coordinator and we were put in contact through several individuals and bodies working in the field of disability – bodies which I work with to build a Burkinabe society that is inclusive of persons with disabilities.

The results achieved by the Bridging the Gap project include:

1. The development of a disability assessment framework for health practitioners to better measure the level of disability when issuing the disability card; the disability card is a key element for persons with disabilities to have either reduced-fee or free education/training and health care services;
2. The commitment of all ministries of the Burkina Faso government to disability-sensitive planning in order to include disability in all projects and programmes for sustainable development in Burkina Faso;
3. The development of the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SN3PH), which involved organisations of persons with disabilities;

4. The development of a collection of legal and regulatory texts on health to ensure the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities;
5. The creation of a pedagogical document that includes the specific needs of women and girls with disabilities when planning development strategies;
6. Raising awareness among healthcare workers by explaining the right to healthcare (welcoming persons with disabilities in health centres, facilitating access to health centres, the right of women and girls with physical disabilities to decent childbirth, the rights of disability cardholders, entitling them to either free or reduced medical expenses depending on the level of indigence of the disabled person).

For me, the Bridging the Gap project implemented in my country contributed to the State's commitment towards realising the human rights of persons with disabilities: the right to health care, the right to accessibility in public buildings and services, the right to include persons with disabilities in the planning, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of comprehensive government projects, i.e. to implement disability-sensitive planning in all development projects and programmes.

Bridging the Gap is a meaningful project, and I believe that the results will be a benchmark in promoting the health of girls and women with disabilities and will also engage other technical and financial partners. To ensure the sustainability of the project's overall results, the good practices in health, socio-economic inclusion and community aspects would just need to be replicated across all regions of Burkina.

## Souleymane Ouedraogo

My name is Souleymane Ouedraogo and I am a Burkinabé citizen, lawyer, researcher and analyst at the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. I am also Secretary General of the National Network of organisations of persons with disabilities of Burkina Faso (ReNOH) and of the National Union of Burkinabé Associations for the Promotion of the Blind and the Visually Impaired (UN-ABPAM).

In Burkina Faso, those of us with disabilities face significant barriers in our daily pursuit of development. These difficulties include: prejudice and negative social perceptions of disability, which lead to low self-esteem



and a sense of shame. The inability of persons with disabilities to access healthcare services due to inefficiencies in the free or reduced-cost healthcare measures under current regulations, the high cost of technical aids and limited availability thereof (glasses, white canes, etc.), the lack of health centres and other disability-related services (eye, hearing and child guidance centres, etc.), as well as physical inaccessibility of healthcare services (lack of access ramps and other adapted amenities). Difficulty in gaining access to the disability card, which is necessary to claim the rights provided under current regulations. The inability to access information and communication, with a lack of adapted equipment and techniques for people with visual, hearing or intellectual disabilities. The inability to access bank loans and State funds for the economic empowerment of women and young people due to the lack of guarantees and support. Non-inclusive policies and under-implementation of legal regulations for persons with disabilities.

These are all barriers that the renowned Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) Project has striven to address. Out of the project's work, I remember the unquestionable impact of the numerous training courses we received throughout this project on the daily lives of persons with disabilities in general, and my own life in particular. Indeed, my training on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Sustainable Development Goals and the national regulatory framework has greatly increased my knowledge of international and national legal instruments for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities and how they are used in the CRPD's advocacy and monitoring work. As a result, a drafting committee was set up to draw up the alternative report on the implementation of rights of persons with disabilities in Burkina Faso, a process which I greatly influenced.

This training also led to contracts with several NGOs and associations (Light for the World, Alliance Biblique du Burkina, Associations des Elèves et Etudiants du Burkina, etc.) to provide training and conferences on the rights of persons with disabilities and inclusive development for journalists, students and representatives of organisations of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, thanks to the knowledge I gained on the CRPD, in 2019 I was invited by CBM Switzerland, in collaboration with CBM Burkina, to make a statement in Geneva before the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on a number of articles of the Convention. I also benefited from BtG-II and other training courses on advocacy, project development and management in particular. I have enhanced my skills in the field of advocacy and become well-known in recent years as the spokesperson for persons with disabilities in multiple advocacy campaigns (advocacy for the Washington Group questionnaires to be included in the data collection tools used for the latest general population and housing census in Burkina Faso) and, as spokesperson for OPDs / DPOs at the two national forums of persons with disabilities: a face-to-face meeting between persons with disabilities and the Head of State of Burkina Faso and his government to hear our grievances and make commitments). Through BTG-II, a call for projects was launched by the European Union delegation and three OPDs / DPOs received funding to enhance the economic empowerment of women with disabilities, awareness raising, and advocacy with policy makers, families and the community. Our needs are now better understood and

we are increasingly involved in the process of developing particular public policies, such as the Burkina Faso National Development Reference Framework 2021-2025, which is now underway (national meetings on the RND 2021-2025 on 25-26 May). Two representatives of persons with disabilities, including myself, who are beneficiaries of BTG-II, are participating in this meeting.

I believe that the fight against poverty cannot be won without developing a strong disability movement which takes action to claim its rights and advocate for inclusive policies and good governance, and this can only be achieved through training OPDs / DPOs. In turn, trained OPDs / DPOs will be able to train others so as to ensure the sustainability of the project's achievements.

# Ecuador

## Diana Banchón



My name is Diana Paola Banchón Mateo, I am 40 years old and am from Guayaquil, Ecuador. I work as a social communicator and I am also Chair of the National Federation of Blind Persons of Ecuador (FENCE). One of the main barriers I have encountered is an exclusionary society which has no knowledge of what true INCLUSION means. So I have had to set myself both personal and professional goals and, fortunately, I have been able to keep moving forward with my development.

I believe there has been progress in the perception of disability in recent years, yet there is still a long way to go. People try and talk about inclusion, but for example there are classrooms with 50 students where 49 have no disability and one is visually impaired. In these situations, it is still often the case that the visually impaired student is not provided with adapted educational material and, in turn, is not truly included. Likewise, not everyone with a visual impairment knows Braille, and the same is true for other disabilities. This may be due to the lack of professionals or technical operators to help with this important literacy process, but if sufficient economic resources were available, we could see major improvements in this regard. From my point of view, it is necessary to support associations of persons with disabilities to promote greater progress in inclusion. I belong to the Association of Persons with Visual Impairment (ASODIV). We work on training and rehabilitation so that visually impaired persons can be productive and are not a “burden” on society. Moreover, at the National Federation of Blind Persons of Ecuador (FENCE), we work to promote associations and, through the Federation’s affiliates, provide training in different areas such as Braille, orientation and mobility, computing with the JAWS system, mathematics with abacuses, as well as daily living activities and skills.

I first came into contact with the Bridging the Gap II project thanks to the inter-institutional agreement to support inclusive education in which FENCE is involved. In the last four years, the project has promoted major progress in educational inclusion in Ecuador, such as training for blind teachers, creating Braille-adapted texts for educational centres, providing easier access to technical materials for visually impaired children, etc.



I greatly value their work in promoting the rights and socio-economic inclusion of persons with disabilities and I believe and hope that progress has been made.

## Xavier Mantilla

My name is Xavier Mantilla, I am 38 years old and live in Quito, Ecuador. I am an office assistant at the EINA Foundation. I have worked there for the last 14 years. I have had to face difficulties throughout my life. For example, during the pandemic, my greatest difficulties were health-related as it became increasingly difficult to understand systems for scheduling appointments, receiving my medication or getting vaccinated.

Gaining independence has been difficult as there are no spaces to learn how to do everyday things, such as taking transport. The route is often complex and unclear to me, especially when going to a new place. I have also struggled to learn how to make the necessary arrangements to live on my own, to pay my utilities, solve household problems and organise my diet in a healthier way.

Education was a challenging time too. I found it difficult to understand my teachers and they didn't give me support. I know that this situation is now starting to change, but for me it was very difficult.

In my country I have noticed a change in recent years. We now pay more attention to persons with disabilities. People raising their awareness and when we tell them that we have a disability, they give better explanations, allow us to move faster and are more attentive.

For many years I trained as a self-advocate in FEPAPDEM. In 2018, together with several other persons with intellectual disabilities, we decided to join forces and create the AECADI (Ecuadorian Association of Self-Advocates with Intellectual Disabilities) – the first legally established association whose members all have this condition. The road was not easy, but today we are proud of this achievement and know that it is the only association of its kind in Latin America.

Today AECADI is a full member of FEPAPDEM and RIADIS and I am currently the Chairman of AECADI.



# Ethiopia

## Martha Zenebe



My name is Martha Zenebe, I am 32 and I live in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I work at Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) and I am a project facilitator. I have a physical disability and I have face every day a lot of barriers: infrastructural barriers, institutional barriers, deep rooted misconceptions and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and gender inequality. In the main stream society, disability is still perceived as a consequence of curses, punishment from God inflicted as a result of family's sins, and incapable of self-governance. But, in my immediate environment, the perception towards persons with disabilities is showing positive progresses thanks to the effort of OPDs / DPOs, NGOs, disability right advocates, movements and other stakeholders. It seems that the social and human rights models

are slowly but surely replacing the outdated charity and medical models of disability. However, much effort is still needed to change the deeply rooted misconceptions and negative attitudes of the society towards persons with disabilities.

Gender and disability intersect exposing women with disabilities to multiple discriminations and barriers including: physical / infrastructural, communicational, institutional and attitudinal. And lack of equal opportunity to access to resource and service: education, justice, health. Consequently, women with disabilities are unable to enjoy their independent and dignified life. I joined Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association (EWDNA) in 2014. It was the time that I faced multiple discriminations to access my rights to equal job opportunities. At that time, I have learnt that women with disabilities are not welcomed by most employers, as persons with no disability, to get hired and serve their country as citizens especially in my field of studies (Electrical Engineering). As a result, I used all the discriminations to my advantage and realized that I have to be resilient and be directly involved in disability movement acts. And I believed I can be, not only to myself but, a voice to those women with disability who are deprived of their human rights and started to work towards promoting the rights of inclusion and equality to all persons with disabilities.

I came to know Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) starting from October 2019 after I joined the capacity building leadership program. And then I started to follow the program via social media, and started to receive updates, information and developments. This enabled me to receive and attend free virtual trainings, meetings, and webinars on inclusion. Apart from the capacity building leadership program, I believe that free virtual learning opportunities, webinars and virtual meetings which were provided by the program are significant advances to empower Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs / DPOs).

BtG-II helped me to understand the sense of 'nothing about us without us'. Which in return helped me to make informed decisions how I add meaningful contribution towards inclusive development in my country. Thus, I was able to get involved fully and successfully in social and economic empowerment of persons with disabilities. Additionally, I used the knowledge that I obtained from the capacity building program to boost my personal and career development. Furthermore, BtG-II helped me to create a linkage and introduce myself to OPDs / DPOs as one of the potential women with disabilities. BtG-II served to strengthen the capacity and empowerment of women with disabilities, their families and OPDs / DPOs.

The project helped us to obtain fundamental and advanced knowledge regarding models of disabilities, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2030) Agenda, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), local and international policies, and legal framework, Sexual Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), Advocacy, Activism and proper communication. These topics had been covered by experienced and influential persons with disabilities and non-disabilities who have hands on experience and passed through many challenges and struggles and brought significant changes towards inclusion and gender equality. Moreover, it helped us to connect and network ourselves with these leaders and shared ideas among ourselves. This program helped me to develop individually which brought simultaneous development to the OPDs / DPOs in particular and to the society in general. Through networking and sharing of ideas and creating systematic and well established mechanisms for follow-up, sharing good practices, and using strength-based approach, we can ensure sustainability. It is also important to include the use of technology in the capacity building program. Since technology plays the main roll towards accessibility, communication, inclusive education, health and learning. I see myself in a few years as an advocate and activist who influence and facilitate to bring positive changes and development towards accessibility, inclusion, mainstreaming and equality. I see myself in a few years as an actor who takes EWDNA's Hearing aid centre forward. I see myself as a website owner who create awareness about rights of persons with disabilities.



## Melaku Tekle



My name is Melaku Tekle Zengeta, I am 34 and I live in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. I am the Executive Director of Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD). I am physically impaired, I have faced several challenges but the major ones are inaccessible physical environment, misconceptions and prejudices, and discriminatory policies of various institutions.

There has been a very deep entrenched misconceptions and prejudices towards persons with disabilities. Until now in some parts of the country Disability is still seen as a curse or wrath of God but in urban areas like Addis Ababa where I am living now, there is much better understanding and awareness towards disability.

I have been part of the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) project steering committee representing Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development in Ethiopia. I have also co-facilitated sessions focusing on disability awareness and inclusion to partners including recently for WFP staff in Addis Ababa. I have also attended the international kick off meeting of BtG-II in Madrid. I have taken part in conduct of rapid accessibility audit of the Africa Hall inside the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) compound during its refurbishment. The sole purpose of the feedback was to provide acceptable measurements/usable standards, information and technical advice on accessible or disability inclusive refurbishment work. I have also led BtG-II's support to European Union in assessing its accessibility for employees and clients with disabilities through access audit, provision of Architectural Design and bill of Quantities. I served in BtG-II project's grant evaluation committee during sub granting into some local CSOs. I have also provided my technical support and input on illustrations of the CRPD easy read document.

BtG-II worked both at the national and local levels where it contributed for the full and effective inclusion of persons with disabilities in development work. It has also strengthened selected local and international organizations through provision of small grants and capacity building trainings on disability inclusion. Moreover, it has initiated the country to have first of its kind disability forum where by all actors working in the area of disability to come together for planning, reviewing and resolving bottlenecks alongside learning one another. BtG-II significantly strengthened the leadership capacity of women with disabilities and I believe it has sowed the seeds of next generation of women leaders from various OPDs / DPOs.

It has contributed a lot in promoting disability inclusion in mainstream service delivery what

my organization's sole mission is. It has contributed a lot joining hands to promote full and effective inclusion of persons with disabilities in the UN agencies, giant INGOs and EU which wouldn't be easily accessible to us. This has created a lot of value serving as entry point and ensuring subsequent actions on disability inclusion by these actors.

BtG-II contributed for increased inclusion of persons with disabilities at its target locations working with mainstream development actors like CARE, WFP and others in the areas of food security, social protection and economic empowerment. On the other hand, as a result of capacity development trainings and small grants to local CSOs DPOs in two target areas of BtG-II strengthened a lot. In some places, where no DPOs are existed BtG-II was able to assist for the creation and where available in the strengthening of such associations.

The most important element of sustainability is embedding the project interventions in the existing systems. As far as I know, BtG-II has never duplicated systems and structures, it rather strengthened existing ones to serve persons with disabilities well and better. It is very important to keep working on those results where all actor's government, INGOs, and UN agencies to embed these positive changes on disability inclusion in their standard operating procedures and policies. I want to keep working on disability inclusion arena for zero exclusion and discrimination of persons with disabilities.

# Paraguay

## Paola Amelia Duarte

I am 38 years old. I was born in Asunción, the capital of Paraguay, where I still live with my family. I am the only woman out of my six siblings. When I was two years old, nobody noticed my crying until an uncle came to visit. My uncle told my mother that I couldn't hear. My mother didn't realise that I was deaf, that I couldn't hear, until she took me to the doctor who confirmed what my uncle in Colombia had suspected from my cries. As a child, I went to three schools for the deaf and then to a fourth one for the hearing, Las Almenas. That's where I went to secondary school. Once I finished that, I did some technical courses in IT at the Colegio Virgen del Rosario. I work in the administration department of a public hospital in the Bernardino Caballero area of Asunción.

I am currently studying Public Relations and Human Resources at the Universidad Metropolitana de Asunción. There are still many barriers in access to education for people with disabilities; I have to pay for an interpreter for my online classes out of my own salary for example.

Through the Bridging the Gap (BtG-II) project, we have taken part in numerous training courses that enabled us to see the importance of education, as well as our own training as persons with disabilities. It was thanks also to the strengthening of Paraguay's National Commission for the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CONADIS) that we were able to pass the sign language law. Through Law No 6.530/20, the Executive Power officially recognised Paraguayan Sign Language (LSPy) as the first language of the hearing impaired in Paraguay, so that they can fully and effectively participate in society.

I have been involved in the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) project in Paraguay from the start, taking part through organisations of persons with disabilities. And what I can say is that civil society organisations have stepped up. There is still a long way to go in education and the law still needs to be effectively enforced, but it is a great step forward to have laws that will give hearing impaired people access to education and public information, as this new law means that public news programmes are broadcast with sign language interpreters. There



are currently nine associations of deaf people, and one issue that always concerns us is that there is no specific data on how many deaf people there are in Paraguay. Thanks to BtG-II, with AECID, the next census will collect data to tell us how many deaf people there are in Paraguay, and what level of education they have. I can say that in the Paraguayan Deaf Centre, there are currently 800 members, most of whom have finished primary school, while some have finished secondary school and some have a university degree. I do know that most of them use writing only very little, but we won't have any national data on this until 2022. When I was in secondary school, many teachers could not believe that a deaf person could keep up with a regular school in the way I did. A person with a disability can be integrated into school, into working life and into all areas if barriers are broken down. I like politics and believe I can use this to help many people. In my family, my grandfather was once the mayor of a city. My dad, too, was always involved in associations and working with people, but my mum doesn't like politics. All of the opportunities for training and participating in debates through BtG-II have made me grow as a person, and I now know I also want to be a woman politician.

I'd like to help women. Violence against women is something that concerns me. I myself experienced violence when I was younger and access to justice is still lacking. Being visible, being at the head of an organisation and being in the public eye means that many deaf women come to me to ask for help, and I have to support them with making reports. So far, there is a great scarcity of interpreters when it comes to reporting domestic violence.

I like to help other people, but now I realise that public policy opens up a different kind of advocacy on a legal basis.

## Mario Rubén Marecos



I am 42 years old. I was born and lived in Asunción. I have been working as a Public Relations and Telemarketing Manager in a private company for 13 years. I have a motor disability. As a child I lived in Hogar Albino Luis in Asunción. My home was the house of a lady called Lidia Barreto de Portillo who, in honour of her son with disabilities, opened her home to take in extremely vulnerable and persons with disabilities.

From behind the playground fence, I grew up watching children going to school, holding the hands of adults who took care of them or told them off for misbehaving. When I started secondary school, I was assigned a

classmate to look after me. I refused at first because they hadn't asked him to do it, but he was assigned to me and I was too proud. In the end, this classmate would invite me to his house to study, play, and have sleepovers. Happy ending: his family is now my family. He and his family adopted me.

I became familiar with the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) in 2014, and through Paraguay's National Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CONADIS), we have taken part in building BtG-II. Today I can say that one of our achievements is creating indicators and having these indicators included in the State's Planning by Results System for the execution and control of public policy. In short, the project's greatest milestone is in including the rights of persons with disabilities in the agenda of public institutions with a progressive, administrative approach. One of these rights is the right to education. The right to education for persons with disabilities creates the possibility of real inclusion. I am convinced that my reality, the fact that I have a family and what happened to me, was only possible because I went to a regular school. But if all persons with disabilities only went to schools for persons with disabilities, this would not have been possible for me.

When I was at secondary school, I enjoyed public speaking and was the master of ceremony, presenting my school's activities. I studied journalism up until my second year at the Autonomous University of Asunción. And I even had a programme on Radio Monumental – one of Paraguay's top radio stations. I am an activist, promoter and advocate for the human rights of persons with disabilities.

For me BtG-II ties in with the message of "Nothing about us, without us" because they really involved us from the beginning, from the design and planning stage right through to the project execution. On a personal level, it helped me gain a technical perspective to understand the public policy approach to inclusion and equal opportunities despite diversity. A real tangible achievement thanks to BtG-II was the strengthening of civil society organisations, members of CONADIS and other civil society organisations that in principle were not and are not members of CONADIS. They were engaged in all activities and topics with a 95% participation rate, and all of this resulted in a constant and permanent articulating mechanism.

Through the project, we achieved upwards of 90% in the recognition and discovery of skills and capacities of all those from civil society who were involved. In the last four years, there has been an awareness and interest in developing disability issues at both public and private level, as people are at least interested in what the human rights of persons with disabilities means. With this project, perceptions have changed; there is an interest and within my immediate environment, family and friends, there is a sense of appreciation and joy about my work as an activist and human rights defender. In other words, they see that what I do has an impact at the level of public institutions.

How do we achieve these new perceptions? Through suggestions, demands and requests for information from public institutions. The association of persons with disabilities is vital, as these four years have shown that working with organisations for persons with disabilities is not the same as persons with disabilities themselves raising public policy demands through their organisations. When persons with disabilities engage by using their own voice, this has an impact.



# Sudan

## Ekhlas Kamal Mohammad

My name is Ekhlas Kamal Mohammad, I am 33 years old and originally from Dongola - Magasir island in Northern Sudan, now living in El-Faiha area in East of Nile in Khartoum State. I was classified as person with intellectual disability and I am working as Pastries Makers with the assistance of my mother to earn living for my family because my father is an old man and his pension is not enough at all to cover the necessities and basic needs of the family.

I have worked for few weeks in a sweet factory that promised to pay a suitable salary for us, but my mother, afraid for my safety, asked me to stop working although all the workers in the packaging department in the factory were ladies and transportation is available from the factory to home. My family struggles supporting two persons with disabilities, we have a limited income for basic needs, two of the family member were working daily as labours to contribute for family needs.

The main cause of leaving the work according to my mother was because she was afraid to let me go with non-relative people to the factory.

The main barrier that my family meets in their daily life is poverty, they are a poor family with two persons with disability which make life difficult with a lot to spend on food, medicine, clothing and special needs for them because things are expensive. According to my mother the perception of disability in Sudan is very weak and there is no governmental care about persons with disability or it was very limited, no active and effective legislations implemented; we touch our children with disabilities in private school and it is very expensive although it is the role of the government to include persons with disabilities in all fields of life. Unfortunately, in our environment the understanding of disability issues and interacting with them is very limited, and even the private centres are still useless and have no good impact on our life. Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) project aimed to improve the policies and services provided but greater efforts are needed.



I am a member of the Intellectual Disabilities Union and it is important to promote the role of the Union because it helps in awareness raising, inclusion in the community, training and provision of work opportunities. My mother mentioned that she has been selected for the food processing training after she nominated to it by Sudan Autism Organization, and she passed the selection criteria. At first days, we have been given a general introduction of the all available trainings then every trainee selected the suitable one she or he wanted and I selected food processing and after the training I was contacted and hired in a sweet factory in Khartoum North.

The most important advancement that BtG-II had made it drew the attention of the decision-makers and service providers to the persons with disabilities, it also assists in the socio-economic inclusion and improvement of the psychological and social situation and this last one my family highlighted.

BtG-II has been useful in promotion of the rights of Persons with Disabilities and their socio-economic inclusion in trainings sessions and studies through implementation of rights awareness and through research. It raised the awareness for families and organisations of persons with disabilities about the rights of persons with disabilities and the importance of activation of these rights.

These positive changes must be sustained over time through further trainings, efforts to enable persons with disabilities for work and productivity, monitoring and evaluation of the project outcomes, increasing the fund for similar work and plan for related projects.



## Mohammed Musa

My name is Mosa Mohammadain Adam, I am 20 years old and I am Sudanese with a visual disability. I come from Central Darfur State in Western Sudan, one of the areas badly affected by the Darfur armed conflict. My family become Internal Displaced since 2003 when they were forced to move from Soli area (south east of Zalingie) to Zalinei town as a result of the ongoing war. My father left the family before years without any support. When I grew up I found myself with my mother, brothers and sisters without any supporter or bread winner except my mother who worked for others from time to time to help us; and I am blind since I was two years old; I left school because I have no money for school fees and I am partially blind. I left the school 7 years



ago from level 7 of basic education. I faced and still facing many challenges in my daily life. I am working into Zalingei market as a shoe polisher but the locality officials do not let us to work in stability because we have no authorized places for work. I have been selected and registered to the leather making training which is a part of Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) by the Blind Association; I am happy and lucky that I benefited from this activity, because it is the first time in my life to attend a training and now I can make shoes and bags to sell and earn my living and support my family, I have more confidence on myself and the negative attitude from the people toward me have changed. I benefited from the leather making training and I feel proud that I can produce items sell them. I mentioned that in few weeks I became famous and well known in the market and I am pleased that most of the bags I made I sold them immediately. After the training I received a tool kit and six thousand Sudanese pound as starting capital, but the support is very limited and the raw materials are expensive. For my first patch I travelled to south Darfur-Nyala brought some materials for the leather and visited the persons with disabilities Unions for exchange of information and to learn from their experience. I need money to buy enough materials and I need a good location in the market for my work.

The locality officials chased me away from the temporary location which I used in the previous period in Zalingei market. The association of blind persons in Zalingei is not so active needing technical and financial support so it can support the members and the blind association and they have no own premises and the community lack awareness about persons with disabilities rights and needs.

I was marginalized before this training and I mentioned that as a result of the training. I began to know some of my rights and started to be a productive and useful member in my community and in the blind association. The exclusion and negative attitude towards me as a blind person changed as a result of this training which I have received; if I find more materials and a good location my income will improve quickly and I will support my displaced family in a better way”.

BtG-II project had made significant change in beneficiaries’ social and economic life, although the persons with disabilities in general affected negatively with the inflation and daily shooting up of prices in Sudan but BtG-II assisted by giving hope and better life to make persons active and productive in their communities through training, establishment and activation of the local policies and legislations.

# **Bridging the Gap's path towards inclusion**

Testimonies from  
representatives of the  
project partners

# European Commission

## Marianna Lipponen

I have had the pleasure, as EC official, to work with the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) during its last 1.5 years of duration. As a newcomer to the field of Disability inclusion, I have learned tremendously thanks to the BtG-II. The capacity building activities, the discussions in the Steering Committee meetings and the frequent exchanges with the project stakeholders, including with the civil society partners IDDC and the EDF, and of course with the managing team, have been enlightening to me personally. I am impressed on how smoothly the project staff organised inclusive meetings in practise. Be it online webinar or a conference in-person, sign language interpretation or live captioning was always available. The project has been a fresh blow of energy promoting disability in external cooperation!



The project has not only been important to me personally, it has been an important advocacy tool and promotor of the rights of persons with disabilities in my institution, the Commission services for International Partnership, and in the EU delegations in developing countries, especially in the five project pilot countries of Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Equator and Paraguay. BtG-II has helped raising the disability as a topic in the agenda, it has brought forward timely issues such as intersecting inequalities of gender and disability and inclusive procurement. The inclusive communication training organised by the project is now one of the key learning material on communication available for the staff.

My work now continues to ensure that my colleagues know the project learnings material and use for their work. Understanding the rights of persons with disabilities and putting into practise the principles of the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in international cooperation by all actors of development, including the EC, is so important for meeting the targets of in the Sustainable Development Goals and to 'leave no one behind'.

# FIIAPP (Spanish Cooperation)

## Peggy Martinello



Understanding discrimination or inequality often happens as a light-bulb moment. A decisive moment, a key experience, a piece of work. It is rarely solely the result of an intellectual journey, or a situation of inequality experienced first-hand. There usually has to be a trigger, which builds a bridge between the intimate and the collective. In my case, the trigger for understanding disability inequalities was the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) project. There were three key moments in particular.

The first was during the formulation of the project in 2016. My son had just been born, and getting around Madrid with a pushchair felt like an obstacle course. Narrow pavements, impassable steps, inaccessible public transport, etc. The situation of persons with reduced mobility kept coming back to my mind, not out of compassion, but out of indignation for an obvious situation of inequality in access to and use of public spaces.

The second moment was at the project launch meeting. A colleague from IDDC mentioned two striking figures in her presentation: almost 15% of the world's population lives with a disability; and in the course of one's lifetime, 1 in 2 people will experience a temporary or permanent disability. Two figures that directly confronted me with the possibility of having a disability in one way or another.

The third was at a training workshop organised by BtG-II in 2018. The instructor asked us to do a role-play on disability, taking other factors into account: gender, country, income level, urban or rural residence. The situation quickly helped us understand, in a simple and tangible way, the cross-cutting accumulation of inequalities faced by many persons with disabilities – a process that is often highlighted when talking about gender equality issues, but not enough for disability issues.

These three moments were decisive in my personal journey, and made me change my view – and therefore my approach – towards disability. But we are mainly highlighting the

institutional changes (not merely individual ones) to which the BtG-II has contributed. In the case of FIIAPP, these changes have taken place at several levels.

The first is to understand the dynamics of disability-related discrimination and exclusion, and the importance of a rights-based approach to addressing them. The BtG-II – through internal training workshops, seminars with partner countries, and publications – has succeeded in promoting an integral approach to disability. An approach that combines mainstreaming and targeted interventions (the famous twin-tracking strategy) with universal policies, while integrating differentiated strategies at the heart of the action to ensure the full inclusion of persons with disabilities. In short, the same rights, but different policies to enforce them. This understanding, and the knowledge of the tools available, is an initial step towards developing an integral disability strategy at the FIIAPP.

Another major achievement by BtG-II was highlighting the importance of working on inclusion policies within the framework of international cooperation. According to the report on disability published by the World Bank and WHO (2011), the majority of persons with disabilities live in developing countries, and more than 80% live in conditions of poverty due to marginalisation and difficulty accessing basic services, such as health care, education or employment. It is therefore essential to prioritise disability within international cooperation actions, and build alliances between cooperation players in order to align agendas, ensure a better division of work, and boost the actions' impact. The incorporation of FIIAPP into the Global Action on Disability Network (GLAD), which BtG-II made possible, is undoubtedly a major step forward in facilitating this networking process.

Lastly, BtG-II also highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder work. The project brought together international cooperation institutions, public institutions from partner countries, and civil society organisations that are involved in disability issues. The alliances forged have shown the key role of each stakeholder in the processes of dialogue, development and implementation of truly inclusive policies. Public policy innovation (not only on the issue of disability) is undoubtedly moving in this direction. This is the challenge of the roadmap – at international level – of the Sustainable Development Goals, and – at national level – of the social dialogue processes: to ensure spaces for participation, and build inclusive public policies that raise the voice of the various stakeholders and of society.

There is still a long way to go to ensure that disability is mainstreamed in all aspects of FIIAPP's work. But the work is underway, and the most difficult part has already been achieved: changing the way people see disability in order to include it in all of the FIIAPP's actions. All the necessary resources must now be made available. It is a question of rights, responsibility and dignity.

# Austrian Development Agency (ADA)

## Georg Huber-Grabenwarter

I became program manager for Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) in ADA's headquarters in late 2020. I was quite excited to get to know this project, not only because I was responsible for human rights and the inclusion of persons with disabilities in ADA's project cycle management some years ago, but also because I was primarily responsible for further advancing ADA's processes on implementing EU delegated cooperation projects. I hence expected that the project would help me to get both new insights into EU delegated cooperation projects as well as into how ADA can learn as an institution and integrate elements of inclusion in its structures and processes.

Next to the comprehensive and sometimes cumbersome administrative procedures related to implementing the project, one of my biggest concerns was my starting date during the Covid-19 pandemic, which also meant that I would most probably never be in a position to visit the project and colleagues working on it on site. I also was concerned that this would mean that some activities might not take place. Even more so, since the political tensions in the north of Ethiopia grew over time. Unfortunately, this has proven to be true until now. Some activities had to be postponed, some even cancelled, and I needed to read a lot to get a good overview of the project and its activities. Weekly calls with the back then also new team lead, an excellent leadership by the consortium leader FIIAPP, and well-organised adaptations to challenges in project implementation as well as project plans helped to overcome these challenges.

In the end, I was impressed by the great number of project activities that took place and the positive feedback we received from people from the organisations of persons with disabilities or development partners having, for instance, participated in the numerous inclusion trainings. I was equally impressed by the publications and guidance documents translated into the local languages Amharic and Somali to raise awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities for government staff. I think we also achieved a lot with





our contribution to making many institutions accessible to persons with disabilities. In the Amhara region, for example, we supported Care Ethiopia to make water points and latrines in schools as well as health extension services accessible to persons with disabilities. For our embassy in Ethiopia a mobile ramp was established, allowing persons with disabilities access to the building. For me it was also impressive to work and coordinate with so many local and international partners to implement the project, yielding meaningful outcomes such as a disability action plan for the World Food Program.

The project also proved to be very useful for making ADA more inclusive as an institution. Next to disability sensitization training for the ADA management in 2019, the study published in 2020 on the inclusion of the rights of persons with disabilities in ADA processes and structures was particularly helpful in this respect. Many of the recommendations were now integrated in the upcoming Austria's National Action Plan for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. Others are currently being implemented within ADA, such as the elaboration of an online training course for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in ADA's project cycle management.

The project helped me personally to be more sensitive when it comes to all kind of concerns persons of disabilities have or face in their daily life. It also helped me to put into perspective some worries I might have had in the past. And it confirmed my view that it needs a lot of hard work and patience when it comes to mainstreaming disability and to ensure that we really leave no one behind in our efforts to contribute to a slightly better world.

We are currently trying to sustain the project's results in many areas. First, the final evaluation should help in assessing the relevance, effectiveness, and the prospects of sustainability the project might have had on the ground. Secondly, we are currently negotiating the possibility of a second phase of the project with different actors, which would build on the results and experiences we made so far. We very much hope that this can become a reality, and I also personally hope that I can continue in this not only important but also very interesting area of engagement.

# Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID)

## Leticia de Guindos Talavera



I started working on the Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) project in March 2019, two years after the Consortium Agreement was signed, which committed AECID to implementing the programme through two projects: in Paraguay and Ecuador.

I remember that when I read the action document, my first impression of the project was that AECID's participation posed a major challenge. Firstly, because developing two projects in different countries required a great deal of coordination within AECID, between headquarters and the field, and with the other agencies implementing the project as a whole.

Secondly, the objectives to be achieved and activities to be carried out posed a challenge both of effectiveness and efficiency, as each project had a limited four-year budget. This was compounded by the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, which required many activities to be rescheduled. However, the pandemic also provided an opportunity for projects in Ecuador and Paraguay to help provide up-to-date and accessible information to persons with disabilities in both countries.

As the programme draws to a close, I am well aware of the transformative potential and impact that both projects have had in partner countries. BtG-II arrived in Paraguay at a very opportune moment – a time of paradigm shift towards a model centred around people and respect for their rights with a view to achieving full inclusion of persons with disabilities in society by promoting inclusive public policies. This ambitious project was carried out together with representatives from the State and civil society, and was designed to meet the most pressing needs at the time. The aim was to make persons with disabilities visible in the country's statistics and records by building tools to adequately disaggregate data, as well as to influence specific public policies, such as the National Action Plan for the Rights of



Persons with Disabilities or education policy, to ensure the active participation of people with disabilities through their representatives.

A key element in this process is the interaction between state and civil society bodies, creating a link also between international organisations and the disability sector. The Bridging the Gap team in Paraguay has benefited from its close collaboration with the National Secretariat for the Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SENADIS), which governs policy in this area, as well as with civil society organisations of/for Persons with Disabilities of the National Commission on Disability (CONADIS), and is pleased to have helped build capacities and facilitate dialogue between the various bodies.

The Guide for the inclusion of the disability perspective in development cooperation plans and projects in Paraguay (which is a local version of AECID's Guide for the inclusion of disability) has been an important step forward for the real inclusion of persons with disabilities in the country, as mainstreaming disability is key to ensuring the sustainability of the project's objectives.

In Ecuador, BtG-II has made it possible to do work to promote accessibility when reconstructing various schools in the country that were affected by the 2016 earthquake, and has given a major boost to the effective development of public policy for educational inclusion.

For the first time in the country, the four disability federations have managed to sign an agreement with the Ministry of Education for inclusive education, which has enabled the nationwide distribution of educational materials designed for inclusion, as well as training activities for teachers and educational staff.

The empowerment and inclusion of these four federations in international networks has been remarkable. For the National Federation of Mothers and Fathers of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities and Self-Advocates (FEPAPDEM), its "Así Aprendo" collection for the inclusion of pupils with intellectual disabilities has received international praise and was nominated for the short list of the Zero Project's Zero Award 2020.

Moreover, BtG-II placed the reality of persons with disabilities on the agenda of the negotiations of the Spain–Ecuador Country Partnership Framework 2019–2023, ensuring a focus on this group in our country's equality policies. Since then, AECID has also included disability in other bilateral cooperation programmes and in programmes co-financed with the EU in Ecuador, such as the Northern Border Programme: Territory of Development and Peace and the LAIF sustainable drinking water and sanitation programme in Portoviejo. The extensive work by the Ecuadorian and Paraguayan technical cooperation offices with partner countries, the invaluable technical support provided and the dedication from country technical operators towards the project, have helped make Bridging the Gap a unique example of a joint implementation programme of European cooperation at global level.

# Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)

## Mina Lomuscio

AICS has always been focused on promoting and protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. In line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Italian Cooperation updated its Guidelines on disability in 2010 and approved the “Italian Cooperation Disability Action Plan” in 2013. Later on, in 2018, the Italian Cooperation adopted the Guidelines for mainstreaming disability and social inclusion. All these documents have been drafted with a participatory approach involving representatives of the civil society and organizations of persons with disabilities.

AICS found a common ground with Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) to further support interventions benefitting from the added value brought by European partners and civil society organizations enriching with their skills and experience the entire process of planning, management, and evaluation of initiatives in the sector.

Moreover, BtG-II has represented a great opportunity to know each other’s policies and projects and to increase everyone’s knowledge and skills in this sector and in different countries.

The reinforcement of OPDs / DPOs has been a major focus in BtG-II, that we have jointly implemented in Burkina Faso and Sudan and the experience has highlighted the need of long term programming and funding. We cannot forget that most of the persons with disabilities in the priority countries in which we operate, in Africa as well as in other continents, are deprived of basic resources and often do not dispose of survival means, therefore their organizations need long term technical and financial support.



We already knew, if there was still any doubt, that empowerment is the key to achieve sustainable development for persons with disabilities, and BtG-II has confirmed it.

The results achieved during our experience with BtG-II have reinforced our conviction that we need to take advantage of new information technologies taking into account that they are available and usable at different levels in the various partner countries where we have worked. Moreover, all the stakeholders must make an effort to ensure that all those concerned and not only persons with disabilities, have access to documents and training activities available in local languages and in formats responding to their needs. Making sure that no one is left behind therefore implies paying greater attention to the context in which we work, ensuring not that “good practices” but “appropriate practices” are adopted to allow everyone to obtain the same benefits from the actions undertaken without distinction.

The BtG-II organized countless information sessions, training and awareness-raising activities, but particularly two of them deserve to be highlighted for their innovativeness for the methodology used and their impact on AICS staff.

The first one is the activity to inform non-disability specialists about the tools and strategies available to ensure the passage from “Integration” to “Inclusion” with initiatives at all stages and the ad-hoc experience of the Disability equality training (DET) for the Italian Agency. The dynamic, highly participatory and interactive approach has been able to stimulate attitudinal change towards disability inclusion among AICS staff. The methodology utilized generated competence, confidence and commitment about disability equality in the participants and facilitated their work in how to apply mainstreaming in their daily tasks and projects.

These elements provide valuable information for understanding the best methodology to talk about social inclusion and mainstreaming to a non-expert audience and provide tools to understand why inclusive design is necessary.

I would also like to mention the activity related to Disability-Inclusive Procurement. Credit to BtG-II for tackling this new and “difficult” topic that raised many interesting questions and stimulated reflections. Making public procurement laws, policies and practices compliant with the CRPD is an effective way of disability mainstreaming and to acquire knowledge and competences on this means to promote human rights of persons with disabilities, to improve accessibility, equality and to foster inclusive and accessible international cooperation practices.

The value of BtG-II goes far beyond the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities. Indeed, it represented an inclusive and participatory work experience in which each partner was confronted with other agencies and representatives of international civil society organizations in terms of knowledge and practices. This was an opportunity for reciprocal reflection and learning, regarding the most effective way to implement the CRPD. In conclusion, the BtG-II experience does tell us that the way forward is to work jointly with

all the stakeholders, at all levels, respecting the ownership of the partners' countries and the needs of persons with disabilities to ensure the sustainability of our interventions.

We will know that we have achieved a great deal when we are no longer needed.

## European Disability Forum (EDF)

### Giampiero Griffo



The sustainability of the application of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in each country is primarily in the hands of organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs / DPOs). It is they who represent the key element to ensure that appropriate policies are put in place, innovative legislation is approved, traditional negative stigmas created by millennia of negative treatments are countered.

Considering them vulnerable and fragile groups is a distorted way of representing them, because over the centuries they have been abandoned, excluded and made invisible in segregating structures or by families themselves, even ashamed of existing. It is more accurate to define them as vulnerable and fragile groups by treatments that have violated their human rights. The CRPD says it: “they have been disabled by a society that has created obstacles, barriers and discrimination to their participation, impoverishing them in knowledge and skills”.

Persons with disabilities are not objects of intervention - as they are often represented by the welfare of industrialized countries - but subjects of change, becoming full citizens and holders of rights and therefore able to represent themselves through their organizations.

In recent years, the action of empowerment towards persons with disabilities in international cooperation has grown, undergoing an important acceleration. The spread of peer

counsellors (article 26 of the CRPD), implementation in various countries of Emancipatory disability research which has made persons with disabilities researchers on their condition in application of article 31 of the CRPD, training on human rights for unified OPDs / DPOs are innovative tools that enhance their subjectivity and political and technical participation in the decisions that concern them (article 4 paragraph 3). The two trainings in Burkina Faso and Sudan in the Italian Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) projects in which I was a teacher have shown the great desire to participate and decide for their own lives in OPDs / DPOs. The legacy of BtG-II is that of enhancing the collaboration between OPDs / DPOs and agencies, providing in European calls for direct participation as a partner of OPDs / DPOs, their capacity building and the role of advocacy towards national and local governments. European tenders directed at civil society should also be promoted and agreed with the available states.

Disability mainstreaming must be promoted in every project, developing the skills of NGOs who manage international cooperation projects with specific information and training campaigns that favour the inclusion in projects of the 800 million persons with disabilities living in countries in search of development.

The new European strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities goes precisely in the direction of paying more attention to these persons in international cooperation. A package of tools is foreseen for “the rights-based approach, encompassing all human rights for EU development cooperation”; a more active role of EU delegations, enhancing their skills in order to ensure the mainstreaming of disability in financing projects to third countries, directly promoting the implementation of the CRPD, constituting the initial baselines for inclusion of persons with disabilities in national policies; targeted monitoring of EU funding targeting persons with disabilities; the strengthening of technical assistance, together with the Member States, to the administrations of the partner countries through their programs and structures; regular structured dialogues organized during the annual conference of States Parties to the CRPD Convention and in the context of other existing multilateral fora, and will enhance cooperation, with particular attention to accessibility and employment. The legacy of the experiences gained within BtG-II will be invaluable in fulfilling the commitments of the European Union in international cooperation in favour of persons with disabilities around the world.



# International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC)

## Monika Brenes

For IDDC, Bridging the Gap II (BtG-II) has a significant importance in terms of practically developing, implementing and monitoring disability-inclusive sector policies and services for realising the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), focussing on data collection, social protection, employment and gender, education, livelihood and health. While some IDDC members have been directly involved and participated in BtG-II activities at country level, IDDC's key contribution as a network towards the project's key objectives has been to ensure that good practices and learnings from activities in the five participating countries are gathered, well documented and widely shared, which includes creating spaces for sharing and learning.

IDDC's role in the project was to implement the Knowledge Management and Learning Strategy, to which effect a Knowledge Management and Learning Coordinator was hired.

We have seen that BtG-II has established consistent synergies among partners, EU and International stakeholders. The project supported and reinforced the collaboration between IDDC and EU institutions, especially DG INTPA (Directorate-General for International Partnerships).

IDDC supported the organisation and the contents design of the high-level cycle of conferences dedicated to BtG-II's stakeholders. The aim of these conferences was to encourage and reinforce commitment at the policy-making level, and they led to the development of advocacy tools, such as the "Contribution to the European Commission's consultation for the next European Disability Strategy".



In addition to this new format of stakeholder conferences, BtG-II was able to influence an already existing recurrent event, the European Development Days (EDDs), supporting the organisers and DG INTPA to reinforce the accessibility of the event. In April 2020, BtG-II organised the “Accessible Communication training” for DEVCO Communication unit staff and, at the moment, IDDC and EDF are continuing the collaboration with DG INTPA on EDDs accessibility.

BtG-II and IDDC Task Groups (TG) have collaborated closely by inspiring each other and working jointly on producing studies and advocacy tools (38 publications and communication products available on IDDC, EDF, Capacity4Dev and GLAD Network webpages), organising webinars and conferences, raising awareness and visibility on topics such as Inclusive Education, Health, OPDs / DPOs participation, EU policies and programmes, Social Protection and Data collection (48 global workshops, webinars, and trainings with over 1.500 participants) Some examples are as follows:

- Study on disability mainstreaming in EU programmes and projects. The study was conceptualized within the IDDC EU Task Group and inspired DG INTPA to implement an 18-months project of technical assistance for European Union Delegations;
- Webinar-based training cycle on different areas related to disability inclusion in development cooperation covering topics such as Inclusive Education, access to health, access to employment, inclusive communication, gender, social protection, CRPD and SDGs. The webinars have been a very successful tool, attracting participants from all over the world and from various organizations, governmental agencies for development cooperation, EU institutions, OPDs / DPOs , NGOs and UN organisations at local and international level;
- Virtual learning forum for OPDs / DPOs . The forum created a space for peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing among those OPDs / DPOs involved in BtG-II activities in the five partner countries as well as OPDs / DPOs and CSOs from other countries in Latina America, Africa and Asia. After the event, participants felt better equipped to engage with public institutions and donors and they strengthened their knowledge about how the EU works at local level. This forum also contributed to reinforcing synergies and connections with EU and international actors.

In two of the five partner countries, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, four IDDC members, supported BtG-II and its partner agencies in the implementation of grants to strengthen the capacity development of OPDs / DPOs. Activities included the organisation of trainings and workshops about realising the CRPD and country level as well as the creation of spaces for dialogue and peer exchange.

Thanks to the multi-collaborative character of BtG-II, IDDC has been able to strengthen its advocacy capacity, but above all, has amplified and reinforced the dissemination and sharing of knowledge, practical experience and key messages, contributing thereby to bridging the gap between the CRPD adoption and the actual realisation of rights at national levels and among international development actors.

## **What comes next?**

A message on Bridging  
the Gap's sustainability  
from the Project Director



# Looking ahead: Beyond Bridging the Gap

## Federico Martire



An unforgettable journey is coming to its destination. Bridging the Gap ends its implementation, but this is no reason for regret: much has been achieved, much more could have been done, for sure, and it is now time to freshen our minds, reflects on what has been carried on over these past four years and what the future may bring.

I do not want to use this space for a mere recollection of project outputs or outcomes, let alone to describe the different actions our project carried on. That would be unfair and biased. I want instead to leave a personal reflection on what the Bridging the Gap experience has represented and may represent for the future of disability-inclusive development.

When Bridging the Gap kicked off in mid-2017, we lived in a different world. Geopolitical shifts and of course the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically changed the global context. Yet, the journey to the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to leave no one behind must continue, no matter how many bumps in the road. And on we went, until today.

The CRPD and the SDGs have been our compass throughout these years of work. Looking at the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups of people, we knew that advancing a “leave-no-one-behind” agenda required a consistent effort joining public administrations, organizations of the civil society, and international cooperation practitioners.

In this, the Bridging the Gap’s approach showed all its potential: only through strengthened dialogue and partnership, results can be achieved. The implementation of the CRPD and the achievement of disability-inclusive SDGs can be turned into reality only if we understand that it is everybody’s responsibility to act. Because in building more inclusive societies we make the world better not only for persons with disabilities but for each and every one of us.

This message matters to me more than any other project product or result. Bridging the Gap has been a whole greater of the sum of its parts, made of professionalism, mutual understanding, mediation, discussion, technical capacity, and personal touch. All facets of humanity engaged for and committed to a better future for all.

Sure, our project course has not lacked difficult moments and setbacks, but isn't that part of life, too? And weren't we together to face dire straits and turn poison into medicine? The willingness to cooperate, the good faith, and the helping hands of all the people that have been involved in the project are my best memories of this experience. And to these people - from the European Union to the consortium members, from the amazing project team to our counterparts in the five participating countries, from the technical experts to the service providers – goes my wholehearted gratitude.

It is on these principles that I believe we shall build the future of inclusion in international cooperation, and the European leadership of the sector. Advancing on the path to inclusion requires an open-minded, collective effort: the experience of Bridging the Gap proves that this is possible. Wasting this know-how and not learning from it would be an incommensurable error. We shall build on what Bridging the Gap has achieved over the years: undoubtedly the policy advancements, the studies, the analysis, the contributions to inclusion, but first and foremost on the gluing fabric of the partnership approach.

This is, in a nutshell, the legacy that I hope Bridging the Gap is leaving and will leave to future, better, wider initiatives for disability-inclusive development. A message of celebration of humanity, of diversity. A message of positivity in times when optimism and kindness seem banned from our vocabulary.

Thank you for following and supporting us during these four years. I hope our work was up to your expectations.

Ad maiora!



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