

## Preconditions to Inclusion Issues Paper:

# Accessibility

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*The development of these issues papers has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with technical support from CBM Australia Inclusion Advisory Group. The views expressed in this publication are the Pacific Disability Forum's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government*

### What is accessibility in the Pacific?

Accessibility refers to the right of persons with disabilities to access built environments, information and communication, transport, and services open to the public, on an equal basis with others. This requires that governments and other organisations take measures to ensure accessibility: applying universal design principles, consulting with persons with disabilities about their accessibility needs, and allocating adequate budgets towards these measures. In the Pacific context, accessibility is the difference between whether or not persons with disabilities can effectively use schools, hospitals, evacuation centres, important information such as public health advice and extreme weather warnings, and accountability mechanisms such as complaints hotlines, all on an equal basis with other people.

### Role of accessibility as a pre-condition in the Pacific

Accessibility is described by the United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) as a precondition to persons with disabilities being able to live independently, participate in society, and enjoy other rights such as freedom of movement and freedom of expression.<sup>1</sup> In relation to the built environment, transport and services, full accessibility facilitates an 'unrestricted chain of movement' from one space to another with no barriers. In the Pacific, this means persons with disabilities should be able to do things such as attend education, employment, health services, and community events, go shopping, collect payments from cash machines, attend government services and appointments, visit with extended family – all with independence, dignity and ease. In many areas in the Pacific, there is no or limited accessibility, meaning persons with disabilities are often prevented from doing these activities entirely, or they incur much higher costs or inconvenience in doing so (e.g. the cost of taxis, having to travel further, or waiting for people to come to them). They may otherwise rely on family members to assist them with the activities, which in turn can involve an opportunity cost to their family member, such as lost wages. Forgoing or delaying activities or relying on family members for activities due to their inaccessibility, has many flow-on affects for persons with disabilities and their families.

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<sup>1</sup> CRPD Committee, [General Comment No. 2 on Article 9: Accessibility](#)

Accessibility also requires an unrestricted chain in terms of connection to communication and technology. Persons with disabilities require access to many forms of information in order to be able to equally participate in everyday life, such as public information and news, or materials for their education, employment and recreation. This area strongly links to the other preconditions on support services and assistive technology, in working to ensure supply of Sign Language interpreters, screen readers, etc. The precondition on non-discrimination is also interlinked here, as it guarantees the right to reasonable accommodation for individuals where these are required for their equal access.

The vulnerability of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) to the impacts of climate change and disasters is a pertinent area that brings together all these aspects with high urgency. Evacuation centres must be designed using universal design principles to ensure that persons with disabilities can access them, and accessibility of roads, footpaths and transport must be ensured so that persons with disabilities can get to them in the event of an emergency. Moreover, disaster alerts, warnings, evacuation plans and updates must be delivered through a variety of accessible communication methods so that all persons with disabilities receive information equally.

### Accessibility under the CRPD

Under the United Nations' CRPD, accessibility is both a right (Art 9) and also a principle (Art 3) and a general obligation (Art 4). As a right, persons with disability are to be afforded the same opportunity to participate, on an equal basis with others, in the physical environment, transportation, information and communications, including information and communications technologies (ICT), and other facilities and services open to the public.<sup>2</sup> As a principle, accessibility underpins each article in CRPD, so that accessibility needs to be embedded within other rights, whether those be education, employment, political participation and so forth.

### Current status of accessibility in the Pacific

The *Pacific Regional Accessibility Blueprint* regarding the built environment are under development and awaiting final approval. There has been some good progress in recent years in terms of adoption of built environment policies and legislation by some PICTs, including the Fiji Building Code; the development of building codes in Kiribati and Tuvalu, supported by the World Bank; and revision of the Solomon Islands National Building Code, supported by the Australian Government. Despite these achievements, there remain many challenges, including the many countries with no built environment policies, and whose codes lack legal components to effectively require contractors to build with accessibility for persons with disabilities in mind.

In terms of implementation, particularly in urban areas, work has been done in a number of PICTs to improve accessibility of the built environment through the installation of tactile pathing, reviewing of national building codes and retrofitting of infrastructure. However, government bodies that carry out these works continue to neglect a consultative process

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<sup>2</sup> Further reading on the UNCRPD can be accessed using the link provided [enable convention cover \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/enableconvention/)

with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) that could provide sound advice on accessibility relating to various disability groups and issues.

In relation to accessible information and communications, for some PICTs such as Fiji there has been improved practice since the COVID-19 pandemic, with public announcements provided with Sign Language interpreters and in Easy Read infographics – however, there is much more progress needed, including ensuring public websites, materials and announcement comply with accessibility standards, and improving practices across all PICTs.

Transport is still largely inaccessible in the Pacific, with both areas requiring much more focus and improvement in coming years. The 2020 report<sup>3</sup> by the Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF) on improving accessibility in transport in the Pacific is a strong starting point on this area.

### Key issues for accessibility in the Pacific

- Understanding accessibility still remains a challenge in many parts of the Pacific. One critical issue is that many countries only focus on physical access or built accessibility without taking into consideration access to public transportation, road infrastructure like footpaths, and to information and communication technology (ICT).
- Lack of awareness of the actual requirements for accessibility, or lack of resources to properly comply with these, leads to only partially meeting accessibility standards. This means that environments, transport or communications may still remain inaccessible, even though they may appear to be. For instance, service providers assume their services are accessible by the provision of ramps, however, if the ramp is incorrectly placed or has a steep gradient, this means the person with physical impairment cannot fully access services independently.
- The release of the *Pacific Regional Accessibility Blueprint* regarding the built environment is highly anticipated, as these will assist PICTs in development of national frameworks. Similar standards for ICT, as well as resources to facilitate PICTs, OPDs and other stakeholders to implement these, would overcome significant barriers preventing progress in these domains.
- Increased resourcing needs to be allocated across budgets for all infrastructure projects – transport, facilities, ICT and built environment – to ensure these address accessibility, and consult adequately with OPDs. Addressing accessibility from the outset is much more cost-effective than retrofitting. Opportunities should be taken to build capacity of staff and OPDs in relation to accessibility where required in keeping with a localisation approach.
- There is a need for technical advice setting out clear, practical steps regarding what PICT governments, donors and other stakeholders should do to progress meaningful action in relation to transport and information and communications in particular.

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<sup>3</sup> Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility (PRIF) 2024, [Improving accessibility of transport infrastructure projects in the Pacific](#)

- The Pacific lacks technical expertise and resources to promote and implement accessibility across all the domains covered within Article 9 of the CRPD. Capacity building for PICT staff, workforce planning for relevant professionals, as well as delivery of investment, are all required to help deliver accessibility at the pace needed to ensure this precondition is in place and can sustainably continue to be implemented as an ongoing element of all the governments' undertakings. The PRIF is a strong stakeholder and resource to support this area of work.

### Further resources:

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2014, [\*General Comment No. 2 on Article 9: Accessibility\*](#)

World Health Organization (WHO) & World Bank, 2011, [\*World report on disability\*](#), WHO, Geneva – refer to Chapter 6: Enabling environments

OHCHR (undated), [\*Human Rights Indicators on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Facilitating a Disability-Inclusive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development\*](#)– refer to Article 9 – Illustrative indicators on accessibility

World Blind Union and CBM Global Disability Inclusion, 2020, [\*Accessibility GO! A Guide to Action\*](#)

International Organization for Standardization (ISO), n.d., [\*ISO Standards\*](#)