

Evidence-Based Recommendations and Lessons Learned towards Genuine DPO Engagement

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ABILIS FOUNDATION

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1. Introduction to Abilis Foundation

Abilis Foundation is a grant-maker whose main goal is that persons with disabilities are aware of their human rights and act for the realization thereof, and are in every way equal to their peers without a disability. Abilis Foundation closely collaborates with the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Abilis work is guided by 1) the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and thus a human rights-based approach, and 2) Sustainable Development Goals where leaving no one behind is a key. That is, Abilis Foundation tries to reach the most marginalised groups as its priority. For instance, overwhelming majority of Abilis funding goes to so-called grassroots persons with disabilities and their groups and organisations in “least developed countries” and fragile states.

One of the specificities of the Abilis Foundation is the fact that it explicitly focuses on human rights realisation of persons with disabilities in the Global South through **a triple-track approach**: 1) disability-specific capacity building and empowerment, 2) disability mainstreaming, and 3) policy dialogue. This approach is actively promoted by the Finnish government. Abilis Foundation applies the approach as follows:

- **Disability-specific capacity building** through provision of project grants to groups and organisations of persons with disabilities especially at the grassroots in the Global South,
- **Disability mainstreaming** into development and humanitarian work through information dissemination and collaboration with various actors, and
- **Policy-dialogue** through advocacy work on global disability rights.

2. Grant-making based on a human rights-based approach

In the last 20 years since its establishment in 1998, Abilis Foundation has funded and managed more than 4,000 projects in 80 countries. Today Abilis Foundation has about 250 on-going projects in 25 countries reaching 25,000 persons with disabilities per year. Abilis Foundation has a record of high performance where administrative costs of all total expenses are maximum 10%. It pays careful attention to 1) decision making by persons with disabilities, 2) engagement of grassroots groups and organisations of persons with disabilities, 3) support even to non-registered groups, and 4) affirmative action policy. Grant-making directly to DPOs in the Global South has been proved to be an effective way to contribute to capacity building of both rights-holders and duty-bearers. This will be explained more in details below with evidences.

Decision makings by persons with disabilities

Abilis Foundation is a DPO itself where its board and staff members both in Finland and in the Global South consist mainly of persons with disabilities. This means in practice that **strategic decision makings of the Foundation work have been done by persons with disabilities.**

Evidence on decision making involving DPOs:

1) Grassroots groups and organisations of persons with disabilities plan, receive funding from Abilis Foundation, implement, monitor and evaluate their own projects based on their identified needs specific to their contexts.

2) Local review board consisting of local DPO representatives evaluate applications and make their recommendation statements to Abilis Foundation headquarters based on their local insight.

3) The Abilis board consisting of Finnish disability activists representing different DPOs make preliminary recommendations to the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs based on the statements by the local review board.

Evidence-based recommendation:

DPOs at different levels are recommended to systematically exercise their decision-making power at suitable and strategic stages by taking advantage of their respective knowledge, experiences and network.

Engagement of grassroots groups and organisations of persons with disabilities

The main activity of Abilis Foundation consists of providing small grants to groups and organisations of persons with disabilities for their projects promoting human rights, equal opportunities and independent living of persons with disabilities. **Even those grassroots groups that have not been registered at the time of application stage are also technically supported and considered for funding.** This is a unique approach of Abilis Foundation that complements work of other donors and actors to maximise the effects.

Evidence on engaging grassroots groups and DPOs:

Abilis Foundation makes deliberate efforts in outreaching grassroots groups and DPOs through country coordinators and country programmes, because national-level DPOs started to attract attention of other donors and Foundations, while grassroots DPOs do not yet have access to external funding still today. In Abilis programme countries, country coordinators are local persons with disabilities, mostly women with disabilities. They outreach groups of persons with disabilities in rural areas, conduct trainings on project and financial management, and provide technical support in application making even before they become the grantees of Abilis Foundation. Subsequently, Abilis grantees are provided with technical support of the country coordinators also in registering their groups and/or making official reports to the local government when required. All such technical support is provided in local languages. Similarly, project forms and different guidelines are available in local languages. The fast-track small grants (up to 3500 EUR) are meant for groups that receive external funding for the first time and the project forms are much simpler than those of the regular grants (up to 10,000 EUR). The decisions for the fast-track small grants are made quickly, which thus have been a good modality for engaging grassroots groups and DPOs also in natural and humanitarian disasters. During the last years, Abilis Foundation quickly made funding decisions to projects pertaining to Ebola epidemic in the West-African countries (2015), earthquakes in Nepal (2015) and drought in the East- and Horn of Africa (2017).

Evidence-based recommendation:

The weaker capacity of grassroots groups and DPOs needs to be paid serious attention to and grant-making mechanisms (and development and humanitarian work) need to be structured accordingly so that project grants (and interventions) are genuinely accessible to them in practice. More efforts in outreaching unreached marginalised grassroots groups and DPOs is needed to Abilis Foundation (and perhaps also to others).

Support to non-registered groups and organisations of persons with disabilities

Abilis Foundation trusts the capacity of groups and organisations of persons with disabilities and has supported even non-registered groups and DPOs.

Evidence on supporting the African Disability Forum:

In 2013, Abilis Foundation decided to support the project to create the African Disability Forum when it was not registered yet. Then there was no other donor who was interested in funding this interim working group to establish the Forum, as it was neither registered nor established. However, without preparation meetings, a Forum cannot be established in a democratic and transparent manner. And yet, there are 55 countries in Africa and mobilisation of representatives from African continent requires a lot of money. As the time was ripe, Abilis Foundation, as a flexible donor who could support an important initiative for the disability movement, decided to support this group for the big cause as the first donor. The African Disability Forum was officially established in 2014 and is an important actor in the global disability movement and has been supported by many donors today.

Evidence-based recommendation:

The first funding is very difficult to get for many groups and organisations of persons with disabilities. It is particularly so when they are not officially established and registered. Flexibility to some extent is an important lesson learned in grant-making for those groups and organisations of persons with disabilities to build their capacity so as for them to grow into agents of change.

Affirmative action policy

Abilis Foundation makes deliberate efforts in applying affirmative action policy into practice. This is because experiential knowledge on disability is indispensable for peer support and role model that are identified as effective ways to contribute to human rights realisation of persons with disabilities.

Evidence on affirmative action policy especially to women with disabilities:

In addition to priority put to grantees that are groups of women with disabilities, Abilis Foundation has also deliberately recruited local women with disabilities to play the role of Abilis country coordinators to contribute to the change of status quo where the male-dominancy as well as ableism are prevalent in all the programme countries. Typically leaderships of partner DPOs have been males with disabilities, which has created difficulties with Abilis country coordinators who are women with disabilities. However, the deliberate efforts have been visibly increasing the capacity and opportunities of the

women with disabilities in the Global South. They have played a great role model for grassroots persons with disabilities, DPOs, communities and even national level politics in some countries.

Evidence-based recommendation:

It does take time to contribute to changes. However, experiences show that women with disabilities show their potential to increase own capacity and impact on positive changes in their environment, when opportunities are provided. In this regard, affirmative action policy is a relevant strategy in a long run.

Grant-making is a way of building capacity of both rights-holders and duty-bearers

Through the ownership in the grant-making mechanism of Abilis Foundation, persons with disabilities and their groups and DPOs are provided with an opportunity to become equal members of their society. In Abilis-funded projects, persons with disabilities as rights-holders are the agents of change for their own lives and for their communities. Through planned projects implementation with provided technical support on organisational and project management, both individuals and groups and organisations of persons with disabilities increase their capacity, while families and community members change their attitude positively. Duty-bearers at different project contexts are also informed of evidences of disability inclusion and mainstreaming through the project activities and/or advocacy work.

Evidence on awareness-raising of local duty-bearers in Nepal:

Abilis Foundation provided funding to a project of bee-rearing of persons with disabilities in a rural area in Nepal. With the project, the group members started to produce honey at home, which was particularly important in physically inaccessible and mountainous environment where they lived. With the help of family members, they could sell the honey to generate income for their households. The Abilis country coordinator informed this story to local authorities who then changed their mind-set that persons with disabilities cannot work and generate income. Subsequently, the local authorities started to provide local funds to groups of persons with disabilities for generating income. The local fund had been made available in different localities by then, and yet was not much utilised by groups of persons with disabilities without knowledge of this fund by groups of persons with disabilities and without confidence of the duty-bearers to local groups. Success stories are an important means to deliver the message of disability inclusion and mainstreaming both to peers with disabilities and to duty-bearers.

Evidence-based recommendation:

Grant-making directly to groups and DPOs through engagement of DPOs in strategic decision makings has been an important strategy for building capacity of both rights-holders and duty-bearers.

3. Disability mainstreaming and policy dialogue

In addition to the mainstreaming that has been taking place through grantees' funded projects mainly in the project localities, Abilis Foundation has been making parallel efforts in promoting disability mainstreaming elsewhere through information dissemination,

international cooperation, and policy dialogue. Abilis Foundation has been closely collaborating not only with actors in the disability sector such as Finnish and Nordic DPOs but also with other foundations, bilateral and multilateral donors, and international agencies.

Information dissemination and mutual learning

Evidence on the series of activities for the inclusive WASH handbook¹ with Finnish actors:

Abilis Foundation was part of the initiative to publish a handbook on inclusive WASH activities in the Global South in collaboration with different Finnish actors including Finnish Disability Partnership, DPOs, WASH sector actors, Ministry for Foreign Affairs and university researchers together with Nepalese and Tanzanian DPOs and NGOs. The Finnish-Nepalese bilateral WASH project and Abilis Foundation staff members conducted exchange visit for mutual learning. The implementer of the bilateral project subsequently adopted its own guideline of accessibility. A seminar was organised at the Ministry inviting both WASH actors and disability actors to continue dialogue and further collaboration. Practical trainings and academic lectures organised by Abilis Foundation followed the launch of the handbook which has contributed to information dissemination on disability mainstreaming in the WASH sector and beyond in Finland.

International cooperation

Evidence on disability-sector collaboration in Uganda:

In Uganda, Abilis Foundation shares the same office space with like-minded actors including Disability Rights Fund and Danish DPOs. This physical proximity has brought a lot of positive experiences in sharing not only the space but also vital information and experiences of Ugandan groups and organisations of persons with disabilities to maximise efforts of and complement each other.

Policy dialogue

Abilis Foundation earmarks certain resources for policy dialogue with different key actors.

Evidence on international cooperation towards the Humanitarian Disability Charter:

Representatives of the Abilis Foundation participated in the preparatory work for the Humanitarian Disability Charter in collaboration with many like-minded actors such as OSCE, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, DFAT, Handicap International, IDA, CBM and so forth. In the Global Humanitarian Summit in 2015, an Abilis representative was part of the official Finnish delegation led by the Prime Minister so as to contribute to flag disability inclusion high on the political agenda.

Private sector collaboration

Dialogue is important not only with decision makers but also with many other actors including private sector actors. Abilis Foundation has been trying to accumulate experiences of private sector collaboration with a Finnish company, SERA Helsinki, regarding an Ethiopian Abilis grantee and its project.

¹ Guzman, et. al. (2014) Inclusive WASH Activities in the Global South. Finnish Disability Partnership. Helsinki. Available at: https://www.vammaiskumppanuus.fi/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Inclusive_WASH_Activities_in_the_Global_South.pdf

Evidence on private sector collaboration:

Abilis Foundation started collaboration with SERA Helsinki in the end of 2016. SERA is a Finnish company that sells woollen carpets and towels made from ecological materials and produced by empowered artisans living in Ethiopia. Abilis Foundation has served as a bridge between SERA and several groups of Ethiopian persons with disabilities who run small businesses on carpet making. This cooperation has benefitted many Ethiopian persons with disabilities, who have increased their income through carpet making. At the same time, SERA has been able to deliver socially and environmentally responsible products to its customers. Currently, this collaboration is intensifying since Abilis Foundation and SERA are looking for new strategies and business models to engage more DPOs interested in the carpet business along the whole value chain, meaning from sheep raising, to carpet making and delivering.

Evidence-based recommendations regarding disability mainstreaming and policy dialogue

*International cooperation is stipulated in **Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** and thus is an important duty for all. All actors are recommended to allocate enough resources for international cooperation. Result-oriented, targeted activities and meetings are highly recommended. Trust is often built through concrete collaborations.*

***Mutual learning** with non-disability actor is a step forward towards disability mainstreaming. Abilis Foundation and other DPOs shall benefit from increasing skills and expertise on other sectors to identify common interests and human resources to create impact towards disability mainstreaming.*

*Abilis Foundation has been **training persons with disabilities** also in Finland to build their capacity in playing the role of disability experts. As the human rights-based approach and the Sustainable Development Goals have been gradually increasing involvement of DPOs in different work, DPOs and persons with disabilities need to correspond with the needs and to play the role of professional experts. Their experiential knowledge as well as built knowledge will fill the important gap in the efforts of leaving no one behind.*

4. Concluding remarks

Sustainable, positive change to the lives of persons with disabilities in the Global South is the most important result for the work of Abilis Foundation. Abilis Foundation is committed to realisation of human rights of persons with disabilities. Therefore, we would like to conclude this paper by presenting a few evidences also at an individual level:

“After the group got funding from Abilis [Foundation], we were also able to start producing other construction inputs like precast and tiles. After some time my salary rose to a level that is high enough to cover my personal expenses, to contribute to my family and to meet my friends for a coffee. These things I was not able to do before our funded project. The project has also created an opportunity for me to meet different people in the process of making market linkages and selling products on behalf of the group. This has been an opportunity for me to develop my communication and negotiation skills” (Meskerem Tabor, a woman with a disability from Ethiopia).

“[the DPO funded by Abilis Foundation] gave me a goat and my life changed. I have no feeling of disability or deafness anymore. The income from the goat has lifted up my living standard because I can earn more money from the baby goats that the goat gives me. Me and my work are praised by the same people that used to tease me. I inspire other people to follow my work” (Maya Pariyar, a deaf woman from Nepal).