

Pacific Civil Society Organisation a key partner in promoting Disability inclusion advocacy:

A case study about the Pacific Community- SPC's Pacific People Advancing Change program.

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Abstract

Persons with Disabilities constitute a significantly vulnerable population within Pacific Island countries, persistently encountering stigma, discrimination, and exclusion. While Pacific Island Governments demonstrate increasing recognition of these issues through regional commitments like the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD) and national efforts in enacting legislation and developing disability inclusion policies, often aligned with their ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), tangible financial commitments and the pace of implementation remain slow. Furthermore, deeply entrenched harmful social norms continue to resist the necessary social change to address the barriers faced by Persons with Disabilities.

Pacific Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a complementary role to government efforts in advancing disability inclusion. They raise awareness about national disability inclusion legislations and supports its implementation, contributes to the development and implementation of national disability inclusion policies, and provide essential social and psychosocial support services. This paper examines the Pacific People Advancing Change (PPAC) program of the Pacific Community (SPC), its support to CSOs and Organisations for Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) engaged in disability inclusion advocacy campaigns across several Pacific Island countries. Utilizing a Pacific style advocacy approach and the socio-ecological framework, coupled with the provision of small grants, and capacity building, the paper highlights the significant achievements made by these CSOs in legislation, policy, programs, and the transformation of behaviours and attitudes. It documents the achievement's enablers, challenges and the outlook of the PPAC program to advance disability inclusion in the Pacific region.

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Background

Persons with Disabilities represents an estimate of 15% of each Pacific Island's national population⁴ and are amongst the poorest and most marginalised in their communities and underrepresented in social, economic, and public life, including in national decision-making. Evidence shows that women with disabilities face unique, individualised barriers compared to both men with disabilities and people without disabilities⁵. To address these barriers, Pacific Island government are using a strength-based approach to develop policies and legislation that will provide guidance to enhance Disability Inclusive Development (DID). Pacific Islands leaders agreed to promote DID⁶ grounded in disability equity and rights through the endorsement of the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (PFRPD) 2016 -2025. PFRPD aims for an inclusive, barrier-free, and rights-based society for men, women, and children with disabilities, which embraces the diversity of all Pacific people. As international human rights obligations to promote disability inclusion, equity and rights gains visibility and currency in the region, a growing number of Pacific Island Governments ratified the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). To enhance the implementation of the UNCRPD, Pacific leaders developed the legal and policy measures at the national level post the ratification. For examples in the Federated States of Micronesia, the states of Kosrae⁷ and Chuuk⁸ used the UNCRPD ratification to inform the enactment of respective state disability inclusive legislations. Fiji's Rights of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2018 serves to make provisions of the protection for the rights of Persons with Disabilities in accordance with the UNCRPD⁹. Marshall Islands Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2015 was developed as

⁴ Framework for Resilience Development in the Pacific. Available at:

https://www.resilientpacific.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/FRDP_2016_Resilient_Dev_pacific_0.pdf.

⁵ Inclusion of Pacific Women with Disabilities. https://pacificdata.org/data/dataset/244be4b9-2a81-4876-a90b-e738390dd874/resource/a79842e8-761b-4c5c-b7df-5d2ed39dd57e/download/spc-pwl_thematicbrief_peopledisabilities.pdf

⁶ DID applies disability dimensions in all stages of international development program and policies. That is from the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Disability Inclusive Development. Disability Inclusive Development. Access here: <https://www.addc.org.au/home/disability-development/disability-inclusive-development-2/>

⁷New Disability Law for Kosrae State to enhance protection of persons with disabilities. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2022/02/new-disability-law-for-kosrae-state-to-enhance-protection-of-persons-with#:~:text=Among%20the%20significant%20change%20to,with%20disabilities%20of%20all%20ages.&text=Too%20often%2C%20we%20overlook%20the,in%20our%20countries%20and%20communities.>

⁸ Influencing legal frameworks to promote the rights of people with disabilities.

<https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2022/05/influencing-legal-frameworks-to-promote-the-rights-of-people-with-disabilities#:~:text=On%208%20February%202022%2C%20Chuuk,office%20to%20oversee%20its%20implementation.>

⁹ Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018 (Act No.4 OF 2018)

<https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/107420/FJI107420.pdf>

a step towards implementing the government's legal obligations under the UNCRPD¹⁰. The Vanuatu National Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2018 -2025 advances the Vanuatu government's commitment to promote disability inclusive development through the ratification of the UNCRDP¹¹.

Despite our leaders' legal and policy commitments, key challenges remaining in the implementation. Notwithstanding our leaders' political will, the full implementation of the legislations and policies to ensure the rights of Persons with Disabilities are promoted, protected, and realised continues to be met with social, cultural, religious, political, and economic challenges. Nonetheless the existing challenges, Pacific Organisations for Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) perform an important role in complementing the role of the government to promote disability inclusion by calling on the government to ratify the UNCRPD, develop and implement the national legislations and policies, sharing information and provide other social support services tailored to the needs of People with Disabilities.

About Pacific Community – SPC and the Pacific People Advancing Change Program.

The Pacific Community SPC is the principal scientific and technical organisation supporting development in the Pacific region. SPC applies collective capabilities in science, knowledge, and innovation to serve the Pacific people in all their diversities by placing Pacific people at the centre of our approaches and with our deep understanding of the Blue Pacific context¹². SPC's value proposition in its 2022- 2031 strategic plan committed the organisation to apply a People Centred Approach(PCA) to science , research, technology and serving our members by interweaving and harnessing the nexus of climate, ocean, land, culture, human rights, gender equality , social inclusion and good governance; through trusted partnerships; investing in Pacific people in all their diversities ; and understanding Pacific contexts¹³. PCA in SPC's ways of working in accordance with its Social and Environment Responsibility (SER) policy 2020, encompasses of human rights, gender

¹⁰ Republic of Marshall Islands. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 21015. https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2019/12/Marshall-islands_Rights-of-Persons-with-disabilities-Act-2015.pdf

¹¹ Government of Vanuatu. National Inclusive Disability Development Policy. https://mjcs.gov.vu/images/policy/DID_Policy_2018-2025.pdf

¹² About SPC's work. Available here: <https://www.spc.int/about-us/our-work>

¹³ SPC strategic plan 2022 -2031. Available here: <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/uzzya>.

equality, social inclusion, culture for development and environmental sustainability¹⁴. The SER policy mandated SPC to manage social and environmental risks ethically and sustainably through the PCA.

SPC acknowledges the commitment and recognises the continuous challenges of the Pacific leaders to promote disability inclusion. One of the measures taken by SPC is working with CSOs to enhance the work of the national governments to deliver programs and services that are meaningful and tailored to advance disability inclusion in the Pacific Island countries. The Pacific People Advancing Change (PPAC) program, a program under the Human Rights and Social Development Division aims to build the advocacy capacity among Pacific CSOs engaged with human rights and social development advocacy projects through small grants, ongoing capacity building and mentoring and regional exchange. It uses the Pacific style advocacy methodology and the socio ecological framework to empower the CSOs and OPDs it engages with to advocate for positive changes at the policy and legal, community and organisations, interpersonal and individual level.

Disability inclusion advocacy campaign achievements

Amongst the CSOs that PPAC engages with, majority are OPDs and CSO that developed advocacy campaigns focusing on disability inclusion through a twin track approach, either through developing mainstreaming or targeted disability inclusive interventions. Through the support of PPAC, positive strides have resulted in the enactment of disability inclusive legislations on the Federated State of Micronesia, which seen the enactment of disability legislations in the states of Kosrae¹⁵ and Chuuk¹⁶ and in 2018 Micronesian Productions, another PPAC grantee in Pohnpei State, leveraged the Government's ratification of the CRPD and successfully lobbied for the enactment of disability legislation. In Kosrae state, Kosrae Special Parents Network (KSPN) initially set

¹⁴ Social and Environmental Policy. Accessed https://spccfpstore1.blob.core.windows.net/digitallibrary-docs/files/04/04076b258862ba3af3cfd6b52f6178a.pdf?sv=2015-12-11&sr=b&sig=0XzNs9o2dH3fCILG0ImxvALRUNZWMEy9B%2F4uVvbynSM%3D&se=2024-05-15T02%3A27%3A21Z&sp=r&rsc=public%2C%20max-age%3D864000%2C%20max-stale%3D86400&rsct=application%2Fpdf&rscd=inline%3B%20filename%3D%22General_policies_Social_environmental_responsability_Politiques_generales_Responsabilite_sociale_environnementale.pdf%22

¹⁵ New Disability Law for Kosrae State to enhance protection of persons with disabilities. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2022/02/new-disability-law-for-kosrae-state-to-enhance-protection-of-persons-with#:~:text=Among%20the%20significant%20change%20to,with%20disabilities%20of%20all%20ages.&text=Too%20often%2C%20we%20overlook%20the,in%20our%20countries%20and%20communities.>

¹⁶ Influencing legal frameworks to promote the rights of people with disabilities.

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out to lobby for the passage of the Kosrae State Disability Act, which they achieved in 2021¹⁷. Once the Act was enacted, KSPN shifted their focus to implementation, advocating for and directly supporting the drafting of a Disability Act Implementation Plan for Kosrae State,¹⁸ and then subsequently successfully advocating for further amendments to the Act including for the establishment of a State-level Department of Social Affairs. KSPN was able to continuously review and evolve their objectives as their advocacy found success and the needs changed. In 2024 KSPN hosted the PPAC disability inclusion regional exchange and during the official opening of the exchange the governor of Kosrae state signed the executive order to commemorate international disability day as a public holiday in Kosrae state to continue the awareness raising to promote disability inclusion and rights¹⁹.

In Solomon Islands, achievements recorded saw how a participant after attending a basic awareness about the CRPD and disability inclusion explored and advocated for the possibility of adding a wheelchair ramp to the design of this project to ensure access for people and children living with disabilities, and Kakara Community High School in West Kwara'ae in the Malaita Province of Solomon Islands officially opened their new building, complete with a wheelchair ramp on 28 February, 2020.²⁰ In Vanuatu collaboration was formed between Vanuatu Disability Promotion and Advocacy and provincial governments to ensure new public buildings are accessible to People with Disability in Lugainville, Santo²¹. Melino moe Ofa in Tonga revealed in their 2022 grants report that they received government support to connect people with disabilities to government agencies responsible for disaster relief supplies post disaster.

Drivers of change that facilitate key achievements

The drivers of change that have facilitated the key achievements highlighted above can be examined from two interconnected perspectives: the programmatic approach of PPAC and the inherent strengths and strategies employed by the supported CSOs and OPDs.

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ For inclusivity and equality, the State of Kosrae takes a step forward in the disability accessibility programme. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/blog/2023/01/for-inclusivity-and-equality-the-state-of-kosrae-takes-a-step-forward-in>

¹⁹ Civil Society Organisations share best practices for better disability inclusion in the Pacific <https://www.spc.int/updates/news/media-release/2024/05/civil-society-organisations-share-best-practices-for-better>

²⁰ Solomon Island communities supporting people with disabilities and improving public markets. <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2020/06/solomon-island-communities-supporting-people-with-disabilities-and-improving>.

²¹ The Pacific Community supports discussions on disability inclusion in the Pacific <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/interactive-story/2023/03/the-pacific-community-supports-discussions-on-disability>

From the Program Perspective:

- **Flexible and Responsive Small Grants:** The provision of small grants allows CSOs and OPDs to initiate and implement targeted advocacy campaigns and projects that directly address identified needs and priorities within their specific contexts. The flexibility of these grants enables organizations to adapt their strategies and respond to emerging opportunities.
- **Continuous Mentoring and Capacity Building:** PPAC's commitment to providing ongoing mentoring and tailored capacity-building support is crucial. This includes strengthening organizational capacity in areas such as strategic planning, project management, financial management, advocacy techniques, human rights frameworks (particularly the CRPD), and effective communication. This sustained support empowers CSOs and OPDs to develop and implement more impactful advocacy initiatives.
- **Pacific Style Advocacy:** The program's emphasis on utilizing "Pacific style advocacy" recognizes the importance of culturally appropriate and contextually relevant approaches. This involves leveraging existing social structures, traditional leadership, community networks, and culturally sensitive communication methods to build support for disability inclusion and influence decision-makers.
- **Socio-Ecological Framework:** The application of the socio-ecological framework enables CSOs and OPDs to understand and address the multiple levels of influence that impact disability inclusion, from individual attitudes and behaviours to interpersonal relationships, community norms, organizational practices, and broader policy and legal frameworks. This holistic approach allows for the development of multi-faceted advocacy strategies that target change at various levels.
- **Regional Exchange and Networking:** Facilitating regional exchange opportunities allows CSOs and OPDs to connect with peers from other Pacific Island countries, share experiences, learn from successful strategies, build solidarity, and foster collaborative approaches to addressing common challenges. This cross-pollination of ideas and experiences strengthens the overall disability inclusion movement in the region.
- **Partnership and Collaboration:** PPAC fosters a collaborative approach, working in partnership with CSOs and OPDs rather than dictating their agendas. This respectful and empowering approach builds trust and ownership, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

From the CSO and OPD Perspective:

- **Strong Leadership and Commitment:** The dedication and unwavering commitment of leaders and members within CSOs and OPDs are fundamental drivers of change. Their personal experiences and passion for disability rights fuel their advocacy efforts.
- **Community Ownership and Engagement:** Successful advocacy initiatives are often deeply rooted in community ownership and actively engage Persons with Disabilities and their families in the advocacy process. This ensures that advocacy efforts are relevant, responsive, and truly representative of the needs and aspirations of the disability community.
- **Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration:** CSOs and OPDs that actively build partnerships with other civil society organizations, government agencies, traditional leaders, faith-based organizations, and the private sector are often more effective in achieving their advocacy goals. These collaborations broaden their reach, leverage diverse expertise, and build a stronger collective voice for disability inclusion.
- **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Utilizing data, personal stories, and research findings to support their advocacy messages strengthens the credibility and persuasiveness of their arguments when engaging with policymakers and the wider community.

- **Resilience and Adaptability:** The ability of CSOs and OPDs to persevere in the face of challenges, adapt their strategies as needed, and learn from both successes and setbacks is crucial for long-term impact.
- **Leveraging International and Regional Frameworks:** Effectively utilizing international and regional human rights frameworks, such as the UNCRPD and the PFRPD, provides a strong legal and policy basis for their advocacy efforts and helps to hold governments accountable to their commitments.

Challenges and strategies that address the challenges

Despite the significant progress highlighted, CSOs and OPDs engaged in disability inclusion advocacy in the Pacific continue to face a range of persistent challenges:

- **Limited Financial Resources:** Securing sustainable funding for advocacy initiatives and organizational operations remains a major challenge for many CSOs and OPDs. This can limit their capacity to implement comprehensive campaigns and maintain consistent engagement.
- **Strategies:** PPAC addresses this by providing small grants and also building the capacity of CSOs and OPDs in grant writing and resource mobilization. Encouraging collaboration and joint funding proposals among organizations can also enhance resource access.
- **Prevailing Stigma and Discrimination:** Deeply ingrained negative attitudes, stereotypes, and discriminatory practices towards Persons with Disabilities persist within communities, hindering social inclusion and creating barriers to participation.
- **Strategies:** PPAC supports CSOs and OPDs in developing and implementing targeted awareness-raising campaigns that challenge harmful social norms, promote positive portrayals of Persons with Disabilities, and educate the public about disability rights. Engaging community leaders, religious figures, and the media can amplify these messages.
- **Weak Implementation of Laws and Policies:** While legal and policy frameworks for disability inclusion may exist, their effective implementation is often hampered by a lack of political will, inadequate resource allocation, and limited enforcement mechanisms.
- **Strategies:** PPAC supports CSOs and OPDs in advocating for the allocation of sufficient budgetary resources for disability-inclusive programs and services. Strengthening their capacity to monitor the implementation of laws and policies and hold governments accountable is also crucial.
- **Limited Data and Evidence:** The lack of comprehensive and reliable data on Persons with Disabilities in the Pacific region makes it difficult to effectively advocate for their needs and track progress in disability inclusion.
- **Strategies:** PPAC encourages and supports CSOs and OPDs in collecting and utilizing available data, as well as advocating for improved data collection mechanisms at the national level. Building their capacity in research and data analysis can strengthen their evidence-based advocacy.
- **Geographical Isolation and Logistical Challenges:** The vast distances and logistical complexities within the Pacific region can pose significant challenges for CSOs and OPDs in reaching remote communities and coordinating regional advocacy efforts.
- **Strategies:** PPAC facilitates regional exchange and networking opportunities to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing across different islands. Supporting the development of accessible communication technologies and platforms can also help to overcome geographical barriers.

- **Limited Capacity and Technical Expertise:** Some CSOs and OPDs may have limited organizational capacity and technical expertise in specific areas of disability inclusion advocacy, such as legal reform, policy analysis, or inclusive service delivery.
- **Strategies:** PPAC's ongoing mentoring and tailored capacity-building support directly addresses this challenge by providing training and technical assistance in areas identified by the CSOs and OPDs themselves. Facilitating access to external expertise and resources is also important.
- **Political Instability and Shifting Priorities:** Political instability and changes in government priorities can sometimes undermine progress in disability inclusion efforts.
- **Strategies:** Building strong relationships with policymakers across different political spectrums and raising awareness among political leaders about the importance of disability inclusion can help to ensure sustained commitment. Emphasizing the alignment of disability inclusion with broader national development goals can also be effective.

PPAC program outlook to advance disability inclusion.

Looking ahead, the PPAC program remains committed to its mission of empowering Pacific CSOs and OPDs to be effective advocates for disability inclusion. The program's outlook is guided by the following key priorities:

- **Deepening Engagement and Strengthening Partnerships:** PPAC will continue to foster strong and collaborative partnerships with existing and new CSOs and OPDs across the Pacific. This includes providing more tailored and sustained support based on the specific needs and contexts of each organization.
- **Focusing on Sustainable Impact:** The program will increasingly emphasize building the long-term sustainability of supported CSOs and OPDs. This includes strengthening their organizational structures, governance processes, and resource mobilization capacities.
- **Promoting the Implementation of Existing Frameworks:** A key focus will be on supporting CSOs and OPDs to advocate for the effective implementation of existing national disability legislation and policies, as well as the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This will involve monitoring progress, identifying implementation gaps, and advocating for necessary actions.
- **Addressing Emerging Issues:** PPAC will remain responsive to emerging issues and challenges related to disability inclusion in the Pacific, such as the impact of climate change and disasters on Persons with Disabilities, the need for inclusive education and employment opportunities, and the importance of accessible technology.
- **Enhancing Regional Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** The program will continue to facilitate regional exchange and networking opportunities to promote the sharing of best practices, lessons learned, and innovative approaches to disability inclusion advocacy across the Pacific. This will also involve fostering stronger regional networks of OPDs and disability advocates.
- **Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation:** PPAC will continue to strengthen its monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to better track the impact of its support and identify areas for improvement. This will involve working closely with supported CSOs and OPDs to develop relevant indicators and collect data on their advocacy outcomes.
- **Advocating for Increased Resource Allocation:** PPAC will continue to advocate at regional and national levels for increased financial and human resource allocation towards disability inclusion initiatives by governments and development partners.

- Promoting the Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities: Recognizing the unique challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities, PPAC will continue to support targeted advocacy efforts to address gender-specific barriers and promote their full and equal participation in all aspects of life.

By continuing to employ its successful approach of providing small grants, ongoing capacity building and mentoring, and utilizing Pacific style advocacy within a socio-ecological framework, the PPAC program aims to further empower Pacific CSOs and OPDs to drive meaningful and lasting change towards a more inclusive and equitable future for all Persons with Disabilities in the Pacific region.