

# The Changing Times #EqualWorld

Summit of the Future special edition

## Opinion

“An inclusive process of decision-making will lead to a more inclusive society”

## Ask the experts

What are the barriers preventing young people from being heard?

## How to...

Six recommendations to improve disability inclusion in global development

## Sport

Sporting icons and disability activists from Bangladesh to Zimbabwe

# Young people with disabilities call for action to achieve SDGs



**Y**outh activists from around the globe, in partnership with the Equal World disability rights campaign, have called on world leaders to consult people with disabilities in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, particularly the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Throughout 2024, in the lead-up to the UN Summit of the Future held in New York in September, campaigners have called for the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities at every stage of development policies and programmes.

Basiru Bah (pictured above), a youth activist and law student from Sierra Leone, has called for people with disabilities to be

“fully involved in all the activities of government”, particularly in relation to the 17 development goals. “We cannot achieve the SDGs if the issues of persons with disabilities, or young persons, are not fully addressed,” he said. “We can only achieve the pledge or the commitment to leave no one behind when we as young people with disabilities are in those positions, in councils, in parliament, to make those critical decisions that will benefit not only our lives but the life of every citizen.”

Equal World global youth champion Lydia Rosasi, an activist from Kenya, emphasised the importance of inclusion, saying: “Why should young people with disabilities be included in global development? Firstly, they are

human beings like anyone else, and deserve everything a human being deserves. Secondly, the youth have the energy but do not have the ‘how’. The older people have the ‘how’ but not the energy. So the ‘how’ combined with the energy of youth will help us achieve things faster.

“We need to combine the two to advance. That ensures mentorship, and that ensures that we are all advancing as a society. Young people have the skills to support the work that has been done by generations before.”

With the SDGs six years from their expiry date, many of the targets for each of the 17 goals are significantly off track. Few of the goals – including those focused on good health and wellbeing, inclusive education

and reducing inequality – are showing adequate progress in relation to disability rights.

Abia Akram, disability rights activist and Equal World ambassador, said: “We’re in danger of sleepwalking into disaster if we don’t act now.

“The central promise of the goals, to leave no one behind, is in peril. We must listen to the voices of those being left behind, and ensure their ideas are at the heart of the commitments made.”

Equal World is calling for world leaders to take action by listening to the recommendations of young people with disabilities and working with them at global, national and local levels to create a disability-inclusive future. Unless this happens, campaigners say, the SDGs cannot be achieved.

# “We are left out of decision-making because we are left out of society”



**Lydia Vlagsma**

**A** key factor in improving accessibility in health care, education, work and politics is representation of young people with disabilities. People with disabilities are underrepresented in politics, meaning that their experiences are not central to the discussion on what problems our politicians should prioritise, and their ideas on improving accessibility are not part of the debate around political solutions for these problems.

Being young means having to navigate big transitions: becoming an adult, going from school to work or day-care, or changing your living situation. These transitions are already difficult, but because of the highly fragmented and decentralised support structures, it becomes even more difficult.

Young people with disabilities are left out of decision-making because they are left out of society. Many people – including those within

decision-making positions – don't realise that young people with disabilities exist. They don't realise that their policies and decisions might be exclusionary, and the processes through which they come to policies and decisions are often inaccessible. Additionally, young people with disabilities, but also people with disabilities in general, are often considered as 'only a small group', meaning that their interests and voices can be set aside without too much electoral damage. Being disabled and having limited energy can also make it more difficult to protest this and advocate collectively.

Young people with disabilities should be included in decision-making for the same reason that young people without disabilities should be meaningfully included: because global decision-making

affects their lives and reality. It is a fundamental democratic value to be able to take part in decision-making processes that affect you.

Organising an inclusive process of decision-making, in which a diverse range of perspectives are represented and heard, will lead to a more inclusive society. A key question to ask yourself during decision-making is: whose perspectives are currently not represented? Which voices are excluded? And what can I do to proactively reach out so that they can take part in the process?

**Lydia is a disability rights campaigner from the Netherlands. She works for Leder(in), the Dutch umbrella organisation of persons with disabilities and chronic diseases. She is co-chair of the European Disability Forum, and a member of the International Disability Alliance Youth Committee.**



**James Casserly**

**I**t is important for young people to have a voice in global decision-making, because we are the voice of the future. We can bring our ideas and worries to the table so we can plan for a better, more diverse and inclusive for us all.

A more equal world is a world where people are aware of differences and that differences can bring new talents and new ways of thinking. I think an equal world looks like a world that wants to remove obstacles that stop people from being included and gives everyone a feeling of belonging.

My message to other young people is to use your voice, use your own way to be heard. When people understand more clearly, it is easier to be heard and more helpful to make positive change.

**James Casserly is an 18-year-old global youth advocate and student from Dublin, Ireland. His 'Jimbo's Accessible Adventures' blog and social media channels have gained thousands of followers for his accessible travel content.**



## Global Disability Summit

2-3 April 2025,  
Berlin

# Ask the experts: disability advocates share their views

**This week's question:** What are the barriers, challenges and opportunities facing young people with disabilities in having their voices heard?

These responses are taken from the global research report **Believe in Better: Shaping the future through the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities**.

## Barriers and challenges

"Pretty much youth with disabilities are missing from everything. And if they are present, I think it's because there are specific initiatives for persons with disabilities, but not necessarily in other spaces, which is problematic."  
**Youth, international NGO**

"I think that we have to go and raise awareness in rural areas where the concept of disability is still very, very, very much linked to ancestral practices, to mystical practices. So, I think that it is important to allow organisations and then allow associations that don't have a lot of resources to organise themselves."  
**Disability organisation representative, Mali**

"It is common to think that we need someone who would speak instead of us, that we are childish, we cannot take care of ourselves and if we cannot take care of ourselves, we cannot be in spaces on decision-making whereas, we mostly need accessible devices, using technologies for mobility and access to education."  
**Youth, international NGO**

"I am a beneficiary more often than an initiator or a person involved in decision-making ... I think that many young people with disabilities have the skills

and resources to not limit us to the role of a beneficiary and move to another level."  
**Youth, international NGO**

"Universal accessibility is not considered, adaptations are not functional, sometimes ramps are just ornaments."  
**Youth, Kenya**

## Opportunities and recommendations

"People think that meaningful youth engagement is about the outcome and how many young people are engaged; the reality is that meaningful youth engagement happens in the process, in the methodology, in the co-designing, in the co-ownership, in how you are adapting all the process for young people to be able to engage, how you build youth-friendly processes, how you ensure you're centring youth organising and all the challenges that come with youth organising at the centre."  
**Youth, international NGO**

"We must understand that youth with disabilities can raise their voice when they are educated, accessibility is most important to express their views... Education is one of the key equalisers that if we have that sorted out, then all these things will just flow."  
**Representative of adult-led OPD, Kenya**

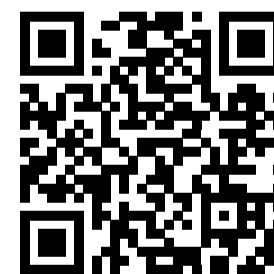
"For some reason the perception is that the disability community is not a weighty electorate. And on the other hand, everything concerns us, whatever happens in the country, good or bad, is also related to us."  
**Youth, Georgia**

"When we advocate for disability needs it gives us the chance to share what we think and gain knowledge and information from others too. So, it's an amazing experience ... I just advocate for changes."  
**Youth, Kenya**

**To make consultations meaningful, it is crucial to engage young persons with disabilities at every phase – from planning and design to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.**

**Moreover, consultations with young persons with disabilities should not be centred only around disability or youth matters but be extended to all areas, as there is no area of life that does not impact young persons with disabilities.**

Scan the QR code to read the report:



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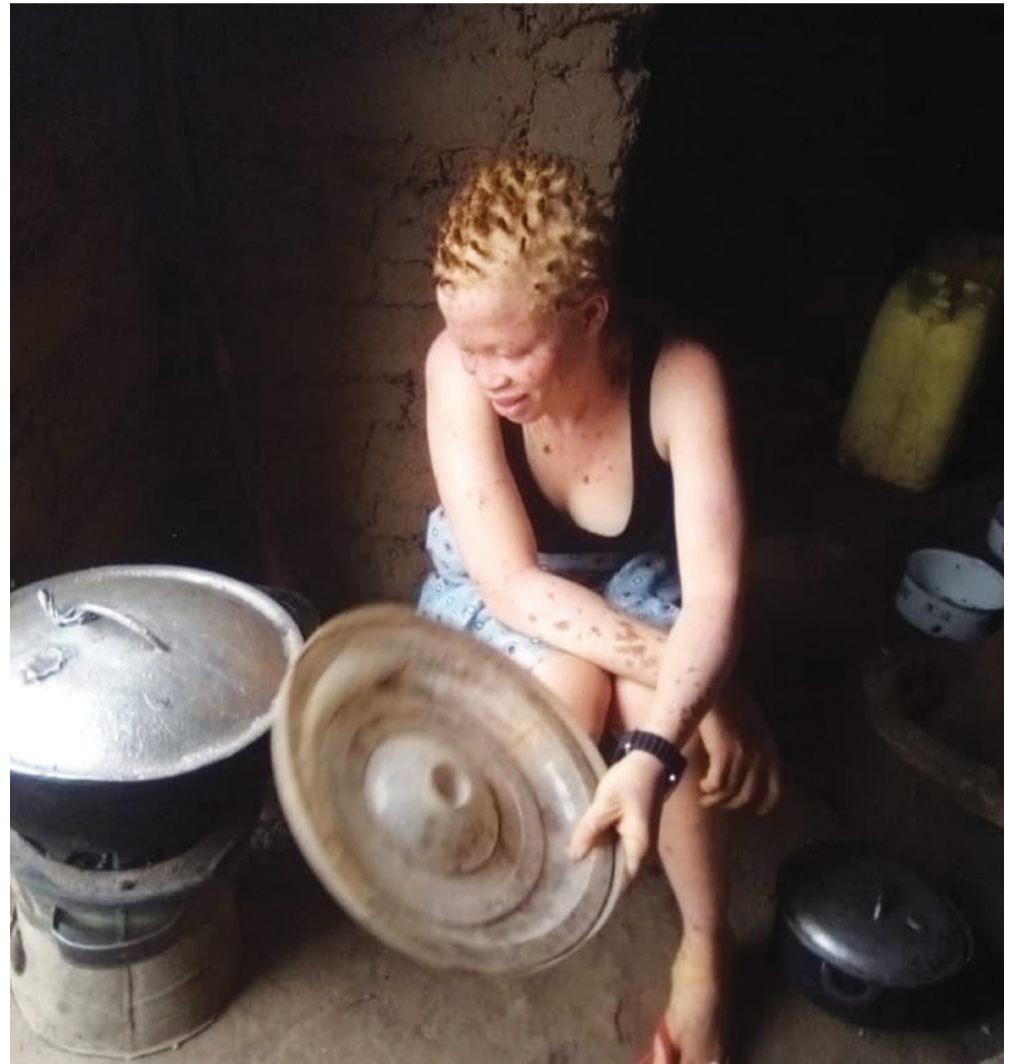


# The changemakers: participation and photography in Sierra Leone

Young people with disabilities in Sierra Leone are making positive change in their communities as part of Sightsavers' citizenship and political participation project funded by Irish Aid. Here, they share snapshots from their daily lives.



Sadah, 26: I lead a community group. We raise donations to fix water pumps, help sick people and celebrate marriages and graduations.



Josephine, 20: Daily life for me involves cooking. When I'm not at home I am at school, where I was recently elected deputy head girl.



Idrissa, 27: I am a pastor and was also recently a youth contractor in a community initiative to prevent swamp erosion. We fixed the drainage channel so the water can pass through.



Mamadu, 29: I am studying agriculture and very interested in farming. Here I'm serving as a helping teacher at a primary school during my university break.



Samuel, 29: As a community health worker, I am starting the measles vaccine roll out and mobilising others about its importance for children under five.



Mary, 30: I am on leave from my role as a teacher for visually impaired students to nurse my five-month-old child. Here I'm clearing the yard, which is part of my daily activities.



Sadah, 26: This is how I dry my groundnuts under the sun. It is part of my daily activities and income.

**Photography:** Samuel Santigie Kamara, Josephine J Conteh, Sadah Fofanah, Mamadu, Idrissa Samura, Mary Mamusu Koroma



**Irish Aid**  
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha  
Department of Foreign Affairs

# Letters to the editor

The African Disability Protocol, a human rights treaty addressing discrimination affecting people with disabilities living in African countries, has now been ratified by 15 countries, the required number to bring it into force. Young people and disability advocates share their responses to this achievement.

## A great milestone

We started working on ADP advocacy campaign in 2021, working with local organisations including the Deaf Zimbabwe Trust and the NASCH. We have been pushing for ratification for some time – this is a

great milestone for the country. Ratification was very important to us because of harmful cultural practices that the ADP has been trying to address. We're hopeful that we'll begin to see some of these issues being resolved for the benefit of people with disabilities here in Zimbabwe. **Samantha Nyathi and Isaacs Mwale, Sightsavers Zimbabwe**

## We will be better equipped to fight inequality

Ratification of the African Disability Protocol will avail a legal framework that will strengthen the provision and realisation of human rights for persons with disabilities across Tanzania. The protocol will make us better equipped and able to fight poverty, inequalities, and discrimination, as well as increasing opportunities for people with disabilities. In cases where people with disability don't have a voice, their voice will be backed up by the ADP. **Jazila, youth advocate, Tanzania**

## The ADP tackles double discrimination

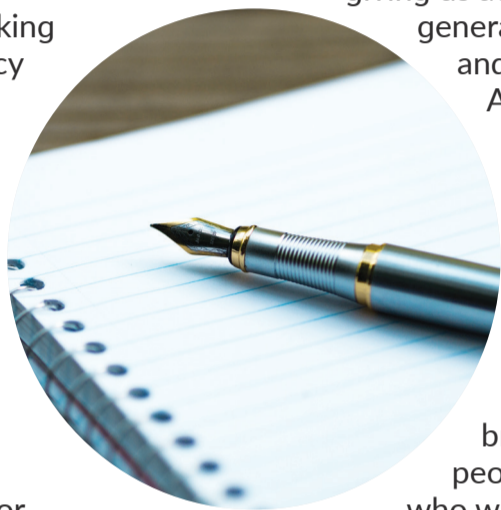
Speaking as a woman, this protocol keeps us away from double discrimination – on the one hand discrimination in relation to femininity, and on the other hand discrimination in relation to our disability – by giving us access to income-generating opportunities and credit facilities.

Also, this ratification will allow everyone to easily participate in the political, economic and social life of our communities. I also think of my brothers and sisters, people with albinism who will no longer be considered objects of sacrifice. **Xana, young person, Benin**

## The protocol is needed to address specific concerns

Although the CRPD remains the convention internationally on persons with disabilities, the ADP brings into focus human rights issues for persons with disabilities in Africa. There are areas of concern specific to the African context which are not explicitly in other disability rights instruments (such as issues on violence and abuse experienced by persons with albinism, and female genital mutilation); hence the need for its ratification and implementation to provide Africa's own comprehensive developed instrument. It complements the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and addresses continued exclusion, harmful practices, and discrimination affecting those with disabilities, especially women, children, youth and older people.

**Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, chair of UNCRPD committee**



## Call to action on the Summit of the Future:

Don't leave youth with disabilities behind!



**IDA**  
International  
Disability Alliance

## Today's word search

We've hidden the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in the puzzle grid below. Can you find them all?

N	E	D	G	D	C	L	I	M	A	T	E	C	K
B	N	I	E	P	R	O	D	U	C	T	I	O	N
H	E	M	N	D	Z	P	E	A	C	E	U	W	P
U	R	Y	D	S	U	F	G	L	I	D	Q	W	U
N	G	O	E	H	A	C	V	Y	V	L	U	A	Y
G	Y	E	R	E	W	N	A	F	N	F	A	T	K
E	C	O	M	M	U	N	I	T	Y	O	I	E	P
R	L	B	V	S	A	B	A	T	I	L	J	R	X
T	L	A	N	D	D	I	D	V	A	O	H	B	N
H	E	A	L	T	H	O	J	U	B	T	N	S	T
W	G	J	Y	N	V	O	Q	I	Z	A	I	F	R
O	G	O	P	O	V	E	R	T	Y	Z	Y	O	A
R	P	A	R	T	N	E	R	S	H	I	P	W	N
K	G	L	R	I	I	N	D	U	S	T	R	Y	F

Poverty  
Hunger  
Health  
Education  
Gender  
Sanitation

Energy  
Work  
Industry  
Inequality  
Community  
Production

Climate  
Water  
Land  
Peace  
Partnership

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# How to improve disability inclusion in development

The Inclusive Futures consortium tested ways to ensure disability inclusion in our projects in Bangladesh, Tanzania, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, and Uganda. Here are six key recommendations.



Hamidat, an activist from the Women with Disabilities Self-Reliance Foundation, one of the OPD partners in Sightsavers' inclusive family planning project in Nigeria.

Want your work to be inclusive? Start here!

**1 Be ambitious – build inclusion into every phase:** Have an inclusive project design process, reasonable accommodations for different needs, and inclusive safeguarding in project cycle management.

**2 If it's not working – change it:** Respond to what works and what doesn't, using ongoing feedback from people with disabilities to refine your approach to inclusion.

**3 Shatter stereotypes and break down barriers:** Through events, community influencing, mass media campaigns, training and social behaviour change.

**4 Collect precise data and track your spending:** Data collection about people with disabilities needs to be accurate, localised, and contextualised. Invest early and track your costs in detail.

**5 Capture changes and tell your story:** Co-design inclusion goals with people with disabilities and report on the steps your project takes to improve participation.

**6 Don't do it alone – form partnerships:** Collaborate closely with people with disabilities and their representative organisations (OPDs) and build partnerships with local and national decision-makers.

Inclusive Futures is a disability and development initiative with more than 20 partner organisations, led by Sightsavers and funded by the UK government and USAID.

We start with sight,  
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# Sports

## “ My disability is my motivation

Athlete Tapiwa Mutsikira is a youth champion for Sightsavers' Equal World disability rights campaign. He lives in Harare, Zimbabwe and works for the Disabled Women's Support Organization.

“I'm a long-distance runner: in 2020, I was elected Junior Sportsman of the Year with a Disability in Zimbabwe, and I've been world record holder for the Special Olympics.

“Our own communities do not accept us, and we face some obstacles, things like discrimination and segregation through our siblings and our friends. Sometimes, they don't want to play with us. They say, 'I'll get a disability if I'm playing with someone with a disability.' It was hard for me, so I said, 'Let me just start athletics or find something good for me.' It gives me power. It's a motivation to me. My disability is my motivation to say I can do it; I can do it.”

## “ I joined sports to prove society wrong



Husnah Kukundakwe, from Uganda, is a Paralympic swimmer. She was Uganda's youngest flag-bearer and the youngest athlete when she competed in at the 2020 Games in Tokyo. She is also a youth ambassador to the International Paralympic Committee.



Tapiwa Mutsikira taking part in a training session in Zimbabwe.

“Growing up I was faced with a lot of challenges, like discrimination and insecurity with myself because I used to be really very shy. I would always hide my hand so that people could not see it. I was always wearing long sleeved clothes to hide my hand and I used to keep my other hand in the pocket to hide the fingers.

“I joined sports to prove society wrong and show that they did not have to look at someone for the way they look but for who they are. When I joined swimming, I realised I had to take off my clothes and show my body to the world which eventually made me comfortable living with a disability. I have one hand up to below the elbow and the other hand has only three complete fingers. Swimming changed me so that I do not care anymore. Instead of taking pictures while hiding my hand, I raise it up to show people that I wouldn't be where I am without pushing through that barrier of disability stigma.”

## “ Cricket has had a significant impact on people's attitudes



Mohammad Mohasin is the captain of the Bangladesh wheelchair cricket team and founder of the Wheelchair Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh.

“When I used to play with my friends, I wondered if people with disabilities like us could also play

cricket. I started searching online about this... and [found out] there was no wheelchair cricket team in Bangladesh yet. So I started working on building one and organised the first tournament in September 2016.

“Cricket has had a significant impact on people's attitudes towards us. We can see the difference in how society accepts us now compared to when we were 'nobody'. For instance, Swapan, one of our players, used to experience rejection when trying to play anywhere. However, since he joined the Bangladesh team, his respect and acceptance by his family, relatives, and society have significantly increased.

“Initially, we started with just 36 players, but we now have expanded to include over 200 wheelchair cricketers, including a women's wheelchair cricket national team. Cricket has brought about many changes, and it is popular in Bangladesh and worldwide. As players, we now receive respect from people.”

Photography: Hickmatu Leigh, Tom Jenkinson, family of James Casserly, Kabantiok Solomon Kazahzachat, Sarah Bourn, family of Husnah Kukundakwe, Tafadzwa Ufumeli. Sightsavers and Equal World would like to thank all the young people with disabilities who contributed to The Changing Times. © 2024 Sightsavers/Equal World



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