

Empowering Disability Advocates in Rural and Remote Communities

Persons with disabilities and disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) advocate for the removal of barriers so that all citizens can realize their rights. In rural and remote communities, such as in the Pacific Islands region, persons with disabilities encounter additional marginalization as a result of their geographic location.

What are the barriers to disability inclusion in rural and remote communities?

The barriers that persons with disabilities experience in urban areas are magnified in a rural or remote setting.

Stereotypes and stigma

One key barrier to rights in rural and remote areas is discrimination. In places that are geographically distant from educational and other opportunities, persons with disabilities may encounter stigma as a result of community members' lack of interaction with persons with disabilities. There may be misinformation about disability. As Bani Alfred of Disability Promotion and Advocacy Association in Vanuatu described, "[Persons with disabilities] are being looked down [on] as someone who is not able to do something or just can't do it. Persons with disabilities are left behind and not [given] a chance to enjoy their human rights as other people in the community."

Lack of awareness and services

Persons with disabilities may not know about the services that are available to them. Programs and other services designed to support persons with disabilities, whether through government agencies or aid from other entities, is largely concentrated in cities, towns and other urban areas. This is compounded by the charity model that often is used by nongovernmental organizations implementing projects, according to one Fijian with a disability.

Lack of data

Data collection methods are less likely to take into account in rural and remote areas, which compounds challenges to accuracy, such as persons who do not self-identify as having a disability (thereby making disaggregated data less accurate) and infrastructure that is not maintained (creating additional obstacles to collecting samples).



Men and women with disabilities from the Pacific Islands region discuss barriers at the Pacific Regional Disability Rights Dialogue in Nadi, Fiji, in May 2016.

Source: IFES

Political Participation in the Pacific Islands Region

During the Pacific Regional Disability Rights Dialogue organized by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF), advocates from around the Pacific Islands region noted that rural and remote communities face additional challenges to voting in elections and participating in political life.

Ruci Senikula, secretary of the United Blind Persons of Fiji, described how barriers in these communities restrict integration of persons with disabilities into political life:

“Elections for persons with disabilities living in the rural areas in Fiji has a lot of challenges. Women with disabilities face barriers in accessing their rights to vote as many a times, the voting venue is either not accessible or too far from their homes, therefore, not allowing them to exercise their rights. In the outer islands, sign language services are not provided and in the case where deaf voters wish to take someone whom they know and trust to help them cast their votes, this is strictly forbidden.”

Inaccessible transportation

Rural areas often have fewer transportation options, and in many countries, those areas are not as well maintained. This can make it more difficult for persons with disabilities to take part in community life and supports assumptions and stereotypes.

How can these barriers be addressed?

While recognizing that these barriers exist is important, it is even more critical to begin working to change structures that restrict access to rights.

Training and awareness campaigns

Many of the barriers that persons in the Pacific Islands region encounter result from a lack of information about disability, services, and rights. Providing training in rural and remote areas by persons with disabilities about disability rights not only expands the reach of information to persons who are more likely to be marginalized from services but also serves as an opportunity for leadership within the community.

Improve reach of services

When international organizations and governments design interventions, it is important that they take into account which groups of persons with disabilities will be reached. Through advocacy, DPOs can affect which communities are served through these programs.

Learn from good practices

Sharing experiences in rural and remote areas is critical for ensuring that those persons who are marginalized not only because of their disability status but because of factors such as geographic isolation have access to advocacy tools. Persons with disabilities living in these communities share common challenges, and targeting remote communities may help to break down communication barriers that restrict their ability to transfer knowledge.