

Reflective narrative of OPD's and capacity building in Pakistan



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Executive Summary

The narrative explores the Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) ecosystem in Pakistan; highlighting the critical role of capacity building initiatives in fostering systemic change, improving access to life-changing Assistive Technology (AT) and amplifying advocacy efforts for People with Disabilities (PwD).

This narrative provides insights into Situation Analysis and Capacity Building. By drawing from a review of existing disability policies and legislation, needs assessment consultation sessions, OPDs and academic institutions, and private sector stakeholders, the report identifies challenges, evaluates opportunities, and outlines actionable recommendations to strengthen OPDs and enhance their ability to advocate for the rights of PwDs.

This initiative, part of the AT2030 programme, funded by UK International Development, focuses on testing scalable solutions to improve AT accessibility and create sustainable AT ecosystems globally.

Engaging Grassroots OPDs and AT Users:

The report examines practical approaches to engaging grassroots-level OPDs and AT users in advocacy and access-related activities. It seeks to answer the question, "What works in engaging OPDs and AT users to improve access to AT?" By focusing on community-led initiatives, the report provides insights into how OPDs can serve as effective conduits for change at the local level.

Exploring capacity Building and Connectivity:

The role of capacity building initiatives in enabling OPDs to address systemic barriers is also tested, to strengthen advocacy, while connecting PwDs with technological advancements in AT. This underscores the importance of fostering collaboration between OPDs, PwDs, and AT stakeholders to improve access in LMICs like Pakistan.

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Advocacy for Policy Reform and Sustainable Access:

By examining existing gaps in policies and legislative frameworks, this report emphasizes the need for OPDs to be at the forefront of advocacy for inclusive development, equitable AT access, and systemic reforms.

Key Findings

- **There is a fragmented AT ecosystem in Pakistan where OPDs struggle with insufficient resources, societal stigma, and limited awareness among policymakers and stakeholders.**

Despite these challenges, OPDs have shown remarkable resilience in advocating for the rights of PwDs and improving access to AT. The findings highlight disparities in AT accessibility between urban and rural areas, with rural PwDs facing greater challenges due to inadequate infrastructure, cultural barriers, and limited localised solutions.

- **OPD Ecosystem require cohesive strategies and systemic support to build collective impact.**

The OPD landscape consists of a mix of grassroots organisations, advocacy networks, and service providers. Key stakeholders, including government bodies, international organisations, and NGOs, have yet to fully leverage the potential of OPDs in driving systemic change.

- **Across advocacy and regulatory frameworks there are *gaps in enforcement, outdated policies, and limited focus on AT which restricts effectiveness.***

Pakistan's existing disability-related legislation, such as the ICT Disability Act and provincial disability empowerment laws, provides a foundation for inclusion – however the findings underscore the need for a unified national strategy to address key gaps in enforcement, outdated policies, and limited focus on AT.

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- **Challenges in Accessing AT include high costs, low awareness and limited innovation hubs.**

The limited availability of AT solutions is compounded by a lack of awareness about the benefits of AT among PwDs and their families. There is minimal involvement of local innovation hubs in developing sustainable AT solutions, creating barriers for low cost options.

- **Capacity building can *significantly enhance OPD effectiveness. By equipping OPDs with the skills, knowledge, and tools needed for impactful advocacy***

These initiatives have empowered OPDs to engage meaningfully with stakeholders, address systemic barriers, and drive change.

Recommendations

1. There is a need to advocate for policy reforms that prioritise the needs of PwDs

- To ensure equitable access to AT, while working towards the inclusion of AT-specific provisions in existing disability legislation.
- Gaps in policy implementation should be addressed through stronger enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures.

2. Strengthening OPD operations is required to build capacity and impact

- Targeted capacity building programs should be developed in advocacy, resource mobilisation, and stakeholder engagement.
- Partnerships between OPDs, government agencies, and private sector stakeholders should be developed to create a supportive ecosystem for AT accessibility.

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- OPDs should be encouraged to adopt innovative approaches for outreach and engagement.

3. Initiatives that connect OPDs, PwDs and AT providers should be adopted to enhance ecosystems and reduce barriers

- Support the development and commercialisation of affordable, locally produced AT solutions that cater to the specific needs of PwDs in Pakistan.
- Encourage the adoption of co-design approaches involving PwDs in the development of AT solutions.

4. Launch awareness campaigns to educate the public, policymakers, and stakeholders about the transformative impact of AT and the importance of inclusive practices.

- Address societal stigma and misconceptions about disabilities through advocacy and education programs



OPDs should consider launching campaigns to educate the public, policymakers, and stakeholders on the transformative power of AT and the importance of inclusive practices.

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
1 BACKGROUND	7
2 DISABILITY INCLUSION LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY LANDSCAPE	12
3 THE OPD ECOSYSTEM IN PAKISTAN	19
4 CHALLENGES FACED BY OPDS	27
5 CAPACITY BUILDING TRAINING TOOLKIT: DISABILITY INCLUSION AND ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES	37
6 OPD CAPACITY BUILDING AND ITS IMPACT	43
7 RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD	49
8 CONCLUSION	54
9 REFERENCES	57
10 APPENDICES	60

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1 Background

The GDI Hub / STEP – OPD Ecosystem and Capacity Building analysis is a foundational reflection designed to begin to address critical challenges faced by PwDs in Pakistan. Implemented by GDI Hub and STEP, this project serves to explore OPD networks alongside capacity building. Its core premise is that empowering OPDs through training, resource development, and advocacy initiatives can catalyse systemic change, ensuring equitable access to AT and the integration of PwDs into every aspect of society.

Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP)

STEP was conceived and initiated by persons with disabilities in 1997. Being a cross-disability organisation, STEP is committed to mainstreaming disability in development through empowering individuals and organisations of persons with disabilities as well as sensitising society about a rights-based approach.

STEP is envisioned to advocate the society about the rights of persons with disabilities; lobbying with policy makers in public, private and development sector for inclusion of disabled persons in overall development process; raising awareness and conducting consultations for empowerment of disabled persons; counselling development of accessible environment; and promoting accessible information by creating bridge between disabled persons and facilities of health, education and livelihood.¹

Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub)

GDI Hub is a global research and practice centre dedicated to driving disability innovation for a fairer, more inclusive world. Through cutting-edge research, policy engagement, and community-driven initiatives, GDI Hub works to ensure equitable

¹ <https://www.step.org.pk/>

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access to AT, foster inclusive policies, amplify the voices of PwDs, and create sustainable AT ecosystems.

Since 2018, GDI Hub has been at the forefront of disability inclusion and innovation, leading transformative global initiatives such as the AT2030 programme—a flagship effort to improve access to life-changing assistive technologies. Now entering its third cycle, AT2030 is expanding its impact by focusing on storytelling and regional capacity building, strengthening the bridge between research, advocacy, and real-world implementation.

As GDI Hub continues to expand its research and practice portfolio both geographically and thematically, it is actively working alongside global and local partners in Pakistan, fostering innovation and inclusion to drive meaningful change in the region.

In the context of Pakistan, where approximately 10% of the population lives with a disability, the need for such interventions is both urgent and critical. The fragmented AT ecosystem, coupled with limited awareness, insufficient policy frameworks, and societal stigma, has created significant barriers for PwDs. By building the capacity of OPDs, the project not only aims to address these challenges but also fosters grassroots leadership to advocate for sustainable solutions.²

1.1 Importance of Building OPD Capacity

OPDs play a central role in advocating for the rights of PwDs and ensuring that their voices are represented in policymaking, program implementation, and societal development. However, in Pakistan, many OPDs face operational challenges, resource constraints, and limited technical expertise, which hinder their ability to advocate effectively.

² <https://www.disabilityinnovation.com/>

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This project recognises the strategic importance of OPDs as change agents, and the opportunities created by equipping OPDs with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to:

- **Enhance Advocacy Efforts:** Empower OPDs to influence policymakers and stakeholders to address systemic barriers to AT access.
- **Improve Service Delivery:** Enable OPDs to connect PwDs with appropriate AT solutions, fostering independence and dignity.
- **Strengthen Networks:** Facilitate collaboration among OPDs, government agencies, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders to build a unified and sustainable AT ecosystem.

1.2 Objectives of the Report

The primary aim of this report is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the OPD ecosystem in Pakistan and its role in improving access to and advocacy for AT. The specific objectives include:

1. **Understanding the OPD Ecosystem:** The report seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the structural, operational, and systemic challenges faced by OPDs in Pakistan. By examining their roles, responsibilities, and interactions with stakeholders, the report highlights the potential of OPDs to drive meaningful change.
2. **Identifying Barriers and Opportunities:** The report focuses on identifying key barriers to AT access, including policy gaps, societal attitudes, and infrastructural challenges. Simultaneously, it explores opportunities for capacity building, advocacy, and technological innovation to strengthen the AT ecosystem.
3. **Offering Actionable Recommendations:** Drawing from consultations, workshops, and desk research, the report provides strategic recommendations

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for policymakers, donors, and OPDs to create an inclusive and sustainable framework for AT access in Pakistan. These recommendations are aimed at addressing systemic gaps, promoting innovation, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

1.3 Methodology

The findings and insights are based on a multi-faceted methodology including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Key components of the methodology include:

1. **Consultation Sessions:** Two regional consultation sessions, held in Islamabad and Nowshera, brought together representatives from OPDs, policymakers, academics, and industry experts. These sessions provided a platform for stakeholders to share their perspectives on challenges, opportunities, and strategies for improving AT access and advocacy.
2. **Capacity Building Workshops:** Capacity building workshops conducted alongside the consultation sessions focused on enhancing the skills and knowledge of OPD representatives. The workshops covered topics such as advocacy techniques, policy engagement, and the effective use of AT to empower PwDs.
3. **Interviews:** A series of interviews were conducted with OPD representatives, PwDs, and other stakeholders to capture personal narratives, success stories, and lived experiences. These interviews provided valuable insights into the practical challenges faced by PwDs and the transformative potential of AT.
4. **Desk Research:** A comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and global best practices was undertaken to contextualise the findings and provide a comparative perspective. The desk research also highlighted gaps in Pakistan's current AT ecosystem and identified strategies for addressing them.

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5. **Collaborative Analysis:** The project adopted a participatory approach, engaging OPD representatives and stakeholders in the analysis and interpretation of findings. This ensured that the recommendations were grounded in real-world experiences and aligned with the needs of the community.
6. **Focus on Impact Measurement:** For capacity building initiatives on OPD effectiveness, advocacy outcomes, and AT accessibility. This approach enables the project to identify scalable and replicable models for future interventions.



Participants at our Consultation Session in Nust

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2 A Review of Disability Inclusion Legislative and Policy Landscape in Pakistan

Disability inclusion legislation is pivotal in shaping societal attitudes, ensuring equity, and protecting the rights of PwDs. Effective legislative frameworks facilitate accessible environments, equitable participation in society, and protection against discrimination, significantly impacting the quality of life and empowerment of individuals with disabilities. Globally, numerous countries have adopted progressive legislation to address barriers faced by PwDs, with varying degrees of success. However, despite advancements, significant disparities and implementation challenges remain, particularly in countries like Pakistan, where comprehensive legislation exists but struggles with enforcement, resource allocation, and public awareness. Examining international benchmarks alongside Pakistan's legislative environment provides essential insights to identify gaps and recommend strategic improvements.

2.1 Global Disability Inclusion Legislative Frameworks

Disability inclusion has emerged as a critical focus in international policymaking, with numerous countries implementing robust legal frameworks that prioritize accessibility, rights protection, and equitable integration for PwDs. This section outlines key international legislative models to provide benchmarks and insights for disability inclusion.

1. United States: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), 1990

The ADA is a landmark civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against PwDs across all areas of public life, including employment, education, and transportation. It mandates reasonable accommodation and accessibility in infrastructure and technology, enforced by strict compliance mechanisms and dedicated federal funding. The law's success stems from clearly defined standards, comprehensive oversight, and consistent enforcement practices.

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2. United Kingdom: Equality Act, 2010

The Equality Act consolidates previous anti-discrimination laws, offering extensive protection for PwDs. It mandates inclusive education, employment opportunities, and accessible public services. The UK's AT initiatives integrate technology into public healthcare and education, supported by substantial government funding, fostering innovation and wider societal inclusion. (Council, Moving from the Margins: Mainstreaming Young Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan, 2019)

3. Australia: National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), 2013

The NDIS adopts a user-cantered approach, providing individualized funding packages that empower PwDs by enabling personal choice regarding services and assistive technologies. This model emphasizes autonomy and inclusive participation, supported by robust policy implementation mechanisms and accountability systems.

4. Japan: Act on Elimination of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, 2016

Japan's legislation emphasizes barrier-free environments and mandates reasonable accommodation to ensure PwDs live independently. A distinctive feature is Japan's emphasis on local AT production, significantly reducing costs and ensuring widespread availability, thus enhancing equitable accessibility.

5. India: Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

India's legislation offers comprehensive rights protections, emphasizing inclusive education, employment, and accessibility. Initiatives like the Accessible India Campaign target both physical and digital infrastructure, highlighting proactive governmental commitment and extensive public engagement. (Pakistan, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002)

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Pakistan has enacted disability inclusion laws, but their implementation and enforcement remain significant challenges, impacting many people with disabilities.

2.2 Disability Inclusion Legislative Framework in Pakistan

Pakistan's legislative and policy landscape for disability inclusion has evolved significantly but remains challenged by fragmented implementation and enforcement gaps.

1. The Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981

This legislation introduced employment quotas (2%) for PwDs within governmental and private institutions. While groundbreaking, enforcement remains inconsistent, undermined by weak monitoring, limited public awareness, and inadequate penalties for non-compliance. (Council, Moving from the Margins: Mainstreaming Young Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan, 2019)

2. National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002

Aiming to integrate PwDs socially and economically, this policy addressed education, employment, rehabilitation, and inclusion. However, the absence of defined

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implementation frameworks, insufficient resources, and fragmented stakeholder coordination has significantly diluted its effectiveness.

3. Accessibility Code of Pakistan, 2006

This code mandates accessibility standards for public infrastructure, including roads, buildings, and transportation. Implementation has remained sporadic, with persistent non-compliance due to limited enforcement, public unawareness, and resource shortages.

4. Provincial Disability Acts Post-18th Amendment

The 18th Amendment decentralised legislative powers, leading to distinct provincial laws, such as:

- **Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018:** Promotes comprehensive rights yet faces substantial enforcement gaps.
- **Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018:** Highlights rehabilitation and social inclusion but struggles with rural implementation.
- **Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2020:** Aligns closely with international standards yet suffers from inadequate practical execution. (ReLAB-HS, Pakistan Country Brief, 2023)³

5. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006

Pakistan ratified the UNCRPD in 2011, committing internationally to inclusive policies. Despite this commitment, tangible implementation in areas such as inclusive education, employment, and AT accessibility has been sluggish.

³ <http://www.relabhs.org/>

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6. Constitutional Provisions

Pakistan's Constitution provides fundamental equality provisions:

- **Article 25:** Ensures equality and prohibits discrimination.
- **Article 37(d):** Promotes equitable educational opportunities.
- **Article 38(d):** Directs social security and welfare for citizens, including PwDs.

However, translation from constitutional commitment to actionable policy remains deficient. (Pakistan, The ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020)

2.3 Comparative Analysis: Global vs. Pakistan's Legislative Landscape

Compared globally, Pakistan's legislative framework remains underdeveloped primarily due to inconsistent enforcement, limited policy integration, insufficient resource allocation, fragmented institutional coordination, and minimal emphasis on AT. (UNICEF, Global Report on Assistive Technology, 2022)⁴

Key gaps include:

- **Implementation:** Unlike its global counterparts, Pakistan lacks robust monitoring and compliance mechanisms.
- **Integration:** There is minimal incorporation of AT into broader disability legislation compared to comprehensive international standards.
- **Funding Models:** Pakistan relies heavily on international donor-driven initiatives without sustainable governmental budgeting.

⁴ <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/354357>

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- **Data Management:** Accurate data on disabilities is lacking, limiting evidence-based policy formulation and resource allocation. (PPAF, Disability Evaluation Report, 2012)

2.4 Recommendations for Strengthening Pakistan's Disability Legislative Framework

1. Comprehensive National AT Policy

Pakistan must develop an integrated national AT policy addressing production, distribution, affordability, and accessibility. Policy development should involve extensive OPD consultations and align strictly with UNCRPD standards, fostering a rights-based approach rather than a charity-based narrative.

2. Establishment of a Central Regulatory Body

A central regulatory authority dedicated to overseeing disability legislation implementation, compliance monitoring, and coordination across provinces is critical. This body should maintain robust oversight, impose clear penalties for non-compliance, and ensure accountability (UNFPA, Disability Accessibility Assessment of Government Gender-Based Violence Services, 2023).

3. Enhancing Implementation and Enforcement Mechanisms

Legislation must include clearly defined implementation strategies and enforcement guidelines. Establishing monitoring committees involving OPDs can enhance accountability and ensure meaningful participation by the disability community.

4. Promoting Sustainable Funding Models

Develop sustainable funding mechanisms through national budgets and incentivise public-private partnerships for local AT production. Transitioning from donor-dependent models to autonomous financial structures is essential for enduring policy impact.

5. Investing in Local Innovation and Capacity Building

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Encourage partnerships among academic institutions, OPDs, and the private sector to foster innovative AT solutions tailored to local contexts. Initiatives should be supported by government incentives such as research grants, tax reliefs, and innovation funding.

6. Public Awareness and Advocacy

Launch comprehensive, nationwide awareness campaigns addressing stigma and societal misconceptions about disabilities. Highlighting PwD success stories facilitated by AT can encourage positive societal shifts, enhancing overall policy effectiveness.

This expanded and targeted framework emphasises the specific legislative and policy gaps in Pakistan, strongly aligning recommendations with detailed, actionable insights for transformative impact. (Atif Sheikh, 2010)



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3 The OPD Ecosystem in Pakistan

The OPDs in Pakistan play a pivotal role in advocating for disability rights, enhancing accessibility, and bridging the gap between policy frameworks and the lived realities of PwDs. This chapter delves into the OPD ecosystem in Pakistan, analysing its key stakeholders, geographic distribution, and roles and responsibilities in advancing the accessibility and affordability of AT.

The OPD ecosystem in Pakistan is supported by a diverse network of stakeholders, each contributing to disability advocacy, policy development, and service provision. These stakeholders include governmental institutions, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs and INGOs), multilateral organisations, and grassroots OPDs.

3.1 Governmental Institutions

- **Ministry of Human Rights (MoHR):** Plays a central role in formulating policies for PwDs, monitoring compliance with international commitments such as the UNCRPD, and overseeing disability-related initiatives.
- **Provincial Departments of Social Welfare:** Tasked with implementing provincial disability laws and policies, these departments often manage welfare programs, vocational training centres, and disability certifications.
- **National Council for Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons (NCRDP):** Focuses on employment and rehabilitation opportunities for PwDs, enforcing the employment quota, and maintaining disability data.

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3.2 National, International NGOs, OPDs and Organisations Working in Disability Inclusion Landscape in Pakistan

STEP

STEP is a prominent OPD recognized for its extensive advocacy efforts aimed at fostering inclusive policies and empowering other OPDs through capacity building initiatives. STEP collaborates extensively with international organizations such as the Global Disability Innovation (GDI) Hub to drive advocacy and innovation in AT. STEP's key activities include policy advocacy, training workshops, AT awareness campaigns, and strengthening grassroots OPDs across Pakistan.⁵

Pakistan Disabled Foundation (PDF)

PDF plays a critical role in community-based rehabilitation (CBR), skill enhancement, vocational training, and creating awareness campaigns to reduce stigma surrounding disabilities. The foundation emphasizes empowering PwDs through tailored rehabilitation programs and practical skills training aimed at improving their economic independence and social integration.⁶

Pakistan Association of Blind (PAB)

PAB is specialized in supporting individuals with visual impairments, providing comprehensive services including Braille literacy, mobility training, vocational skill development, and advocacy for accessible education and employment opportunities.

⁵ <https://www.step.org.pk/>

⁶ <https://pdf.org.pk/>

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PAB actively engages in national-level dialogues to influence disability policies and improve societal attitudes toward visual impairments.

Pakistan National Federation of the Deaf (PNFD)

PNFD addresses specific challenges faced by individuals with hearing impairments, advocating for inclusive policies, promoting the widespread adoption of sign language, and ensuring accessibility in education, healthcare, and employment sectors. PNFD's campaigns significantly focus on educating the broader public about the rights and capabilities of individuals with hearing disabilities.

3.3 Multilateral Organisations

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP): Supports disability-inclusive development initiatives in Pakistan, focusing on accessibility and inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

World Health Organisation (WHO): Provides technical assistance and promotes AT accessibility through global initiatives such as the GATE program.

3.4 OPDs Across Pakistan

Pakistan has a diverse and expanding network of over 100 OPDs, each playing a pivotal role in promoting disability rights, accessibility, and inclusive development. These OPDs contribute significantly to advocacy, service delivery, and community mobilisation, particularly in the areas of education, healthcare, livelihood, and access to AT. Their work often bridges the gap between policy frameworks and the lived realities of PwDs.

The OPD landscape spans across all provinces and administrative regions. At the federal level, key organisations such as the STEP, Disabled People Development Organisation (DPDO), and Pakistan Foundation Fighting Blindness (PFFB) have led efforts to integrate disability inclusion into national dialogues. In Punjab, OPDs such as the Society for Special Persons (SSP), Rohi Welfare Organisation (RWO), and Voice

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Society for the Rehabilitation of Special Persons have been instrumental in grassroots advocacy and rehabilitation services. Sindh hosts several large and active OPDs, including the Disabled Welfare Association (DWA), All Sanghar Handicap Association (ASHA), and Barriers Free Life (BFL), each addressing regional challenges with innovative approaches.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), organisations such as the Nowshera Special People Welfare Organisation (NEPWO), Sayyad Welfare Organisation, and the National Forum of Youth with Disabilities (NFYD-Pakistan) are advancing inclusive education, disaster preparedness, and leadership development. Baluchistan's OPD ecosystem is supported by organisations like the Balochistan Disability Forum (BDF), Helpful Organisation for Special Talent (HOST), and the Special Ones Organisation (TSO), who are working in challenging environments to address social exclusion and promote AT accessibility. ⁷

As part of this project, collaborative efforts were established with numerous OPDs across various provinces to ensure a comprehensive understanding of regional diversity and disability inclusion dynamics. These included both longstanding and emerging organisations such as the National Forum of Women with Disabilities (NFWWD), Milestone Society for the Special Persons, Rights of Special Persons Welfare Foundation (ROSP), Shareef Chajra DPO, and Pakistan Independent Living Centre (PILC).

Engagements with these organisations provided valuable insights into systemic gaps, localised barriers, and best practices, while also strengthening networks and collective advocacy efforts to improve access to AT and inclusive policies nationwide. ⁸

⁷ The complete list of OPDs operating in Pakistan is provided in Annexure 1

⁸ Details of OPDs and Organisations working in disability inclusion engaged during the project are given in Annexure 2

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Geographic Overview

The distribution of OPDs across Pakistan is uneven, with significant disparities between urban and rural areas. While urban centres like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad have a higher concentration of well-established OPDs, rural areas face challenges due to limited resources, infrastructure, and awareness.

Urban Centres

Urban areas are home to larger OPDs with broader mandates and access to funding. For example, Islamabad hosts national-level organisations like STEP, while Karachi has a vibrant network of disability advocacy groups. These OPDs often benefit from proximity to government institutions, donors, and international organisations, enabling them to influence policy and access resources more effectively.

Rural Areas

Rural OPDs often operate with minimal resources, focusing on localized advocacy and service provision. They face significant challenges, including cultural stigma, lack of funding, and limited technical capacity. Examples like NEPWO in Nowshera highlight the potential of grassroots OPDs to make a tangible impact despite resource constraints. Their focus on vocational training, youth empowerment, and disaster management demonstrates the importance of tailored approaches to meet local needs.

Provincial Disparities

Provinces like Punjab and Sindh have more active OPDs due to better infrastructure and access to resources, while Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face challenges due to geographic isolation and limited government support. The development of provincial disability acts in Sindh and Balochistan highlights a growing recognition of disability rights but also underscores the need for equitable implementation across all regions. (Zubair, 2021)

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Roles and Responsibilities

OPDs in Pakistan play multifaceted roles, encompassing advocacy, capacity building, and service provision. These roles are critical in addressing systemic gaps in AT accessibility and ensuring the inclusion of PwDs in all aspects of society.

Advocacy

- **Policy Advocacy:** OPDs like STEP actively engage with policymakers to promote disability-inclusive legislation, advocate for the implementation of existing laws, and push for increased budget allocations for disability programs.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Grassroots OPDs conduct campaigns to combat stigma and educate communities about disability rights and the transformative potential of AT. These campaigns often focus on inclusive education, employment, and accessibility. (IFES, 2024)

Capacity Building

- **Training Workshops:** OPDs conduct training sessions for PwDs, caregivers, and other stakeholders to build skills in areas like advocacy, leadership, and AT usage. For example, the consultation sessions and training workshops under GDI Hub, and STEP project have emphasised capacity building as a cornerstone for empowering OPDs.
- **Technical Capacity:** Collaborating with international partners, OPDs are increasingly focusing on technical skills related to AT, such as identifying needs, sourcing affordable solutions, and ensuring effective usage.

Service Provision

- **Access to AT:** Many OPDs act as intermediaries between PwDs and AT providers, helping individuals navigate the challenges of affordability, availability,

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and suitability. Efforts like STEP's partnership with GDI Hub aim to scale these services.

- **Vocational Training and Employment:** OPDs play a vital role in equipping PwDs with marketable skills, linking them with employment opportunities, and advocating for inclusive hiring practices.
- **Rehabilitation Services:** Organisations like Rehman Welfare Trust offer rehabilitation programs, disaster management training, and drug rehabilitation services, addressing the holistic needs of PwDs.

Community Engagement

- OPDs foster grassroots engagement by forming committees and forums to ensure that PwDs' voices are heard. These platforms often serve as incubators for new ideas and initiatives, such as steering committees proposed during consultation sessions under GDI Hub, and STEP project. (UNICEF, Global Report on Assistive Technology, 2022)

Opportunities for Strengthening the OPD Ecosystem

1. **Enhanced Collaboration:** Strengthening networks among OPDs, government agencies, and international partners can lead to more effective advocacy and resource mobilisation.
2. **Capacity Building Programs:** Investing in training and development programs tailored to the needs of grassroots OPDs can empower them to expand their reach and impact. This includes technical training on AT, leadership development, and advocacy skills. (Zubair, 2021)
3. **Data Collection and Analysis:** Establishing a centralised database for PwDs and OPDs can provide critical insights into service gaps, resource allocation, and policy needs. This data-driven approach can strengthen advocacy efforts and improve decision-making.

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4. **Policy Alignment:** Aligning provincial and national policies with international frameworks like the UNCRPD can create a cohesive and comprehensive approach to disability inclusion.
5. **Local AT Innovation:** Encouraging local production of affordable AT solutions can address challenges of availability and cost while fostering innovation and economic growth. (Unit, 2014)



Lahore OPD Training Workshop

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4 Challenges Faced by OPDs

OPDs play a crucial role in advocating for the rights, inclusion, and empowerment of PwDs in Pakistan. Insights into the significant challenges faced by OPDs have been gathered through a review of existing literature, a needs assessment surveys, interactive workshops, training sessions, and direct consultations. This has allowed for a nuanced understanding of the practical barriers and systemic issues faced by OPDs in their efforts to promote disability rights, access to AT, and inclusive development.

4.1 Key Challenges Faced by OPDs

Following an extensive review of existing literature, national policy documents, and international frameworks, several recurring challenges faced by OPDs in Pakistan were identified. These challenges span operational, legislative, and socio-cultural dimensions, revealing systemic barriers that hinder effective advocacy, service delivery, and access to AT. The literature not only highlights gaps in policy implementation but also underscores the fragmented nature of institutional support for OPDs, particularly in resource-limited and underserved regions.

Advocacy for Assistive Technologies

Advocacy is central to the mission of OPDs, particularly in raising awareness about the potential of AT to transform lives. Despite their efforts, several challenges undermine their ability to advocate effectively.

OPDs, including Bioniks and Thardeep Rural Development Program (TRDP), emphasize the critical shortage and high cost of AT solutions. This shortage particularly impacts marginalized groups, intersecting significantly with socio-economic status, geographic location, and availability of resources, making equitable AT access a persistent challenge across diverse disability groups and geographic areas.

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Limited Awareness and Understanding of AT Among Stakeholders

- **Lack of Stakeholder Engagement:** Many policymakers, educators, and healthcare providers lack a clear understanding of the importance of AT in improving the quality of life for PwDs. This results in insufficient prioritisation of AT in development programs and national budgets.
- **Public Misconceptions:** The general public often perceives AT as a luxury rather than a necessity, further limiting its acceptance and usage. This misconception hinders efforts to integrate AT into mainstream service delivery systems. (Unit, 2014)

Insufficient Training and Resources for Effective Advocacy

- **Skill Gaps in OPDs:** Many OPDs lack the technical expertise and advocacy skills required to effectively engage with policymakers, donors, and other stakeholders. Without targeted capacity building programs, OPDs struggle to articulate the significance of AT in their advocacy campaigns.
- **Inadequate Resources:** Limited funding and technical tools restrict OPDs' ability to run awareness campaigns, host workshops, and produce informational materials that could enhance understanding of AT. (Smith, Network Analysis of Assistive Technology Stakeholders in Malawi, 2022)

Lack of Awareness and Social Stigma

Organisations including All Sanghar Handicaps Association (ASHA), Rights of Special Persons Welfare Foundation (ROSP), and Sakan-e-Sheza Trust (SST) report pervasive social stigma and lack of awareness as substantial hurdles. These societal barriers exacerbate exclusion, limit community acceptance, and restrict the willingness of PwDs and their families to seek support. For instance, Barriers Free Life (BFL) specifically struggles with encouraging families to allow disabled children to participate openly in societal and educational settings.

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Social and Cultural Challenges

Cultural stigma and societal misconceptions about disabilities remain pervasive in Pakistan, creating a challenging environment for OPDs.

Stigma and Misconceptions About Disabilities

- **Cultural Beliefs:** Disabilities are often viewed as a result of divine punishment or misfortune, leading to marginalisation and social exclusion of PwDs. This perception discourages families from seeking support or accessing AT for their loved ones.
- **Charity-Based Approach:** Traditional notions of charity often overshadow rights-based approaches to disability inclusion. This mindset undermines efforts to empower PwDs and shifts the focus away from systemic solutions like AT accessibility.

Barriers to Inclusive Education, Employment, and Societal Participation

- **Educational Gaps:** The lack of inclusive educational policies and accessible school infrastructure limits opportunities for PwDs to acquire the skills needed for meaningful employment. The absence of assistive learning technologies further exacerbates these challenges.
- **Employment Discrimination:** PwDs face significant barriers in the job market due to discriminatory hiring practices, inaccessible workplaces, and limited vocational training programs. (UNFPA, Disability Accessibility Assessment of Government Gender-Based Violence Services, 2023)

Social Exclusion:

Cultural norms and physical barriers prevent PwDs from participating in community activities, further isolating them and reinforcing negative stereotypes.

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To validate and deepen our understanding of these issues, we collaborated with a diverse group of OPDs across Pakistan's four provinces and the Islamabad Capital Territory. Through a series of structured consultation sessions, training workshops, and one-on-one engagements, we collected first-hand insights and documented the lived experiences of OPD representatives. This collaborative process enabled us to identify key barriers and capacity gaps, while also uncovering opportunities for systemic change, community mobilisation, and the promotion of inclusive development practices. The findings presented in this chapter are grounded in this empirical engagement and reflect the voices and realities of the OPDs involved.

Operational and Logistical Difficulties

Logistical challenges significantly affect service delivery for OPDs, including SAIRA Welfare Trust and TRDP. Difficulties in delivering AT, medical treatments, and essential resources to remote areas intersect with financial constraints, transportation barriers, and infrastructure limitations, creating compounded operational obstacles.

Communication and Connectivity Issues

Communication barriers and limited digital infrastructure affect organizations such as Reform Support Unit (RSU) and Saira Welfare Trust. Unreliable internet, insufficient digital literacy, and geographic isolation severely restrict effective communication and operational efficiency. These barriers intersect significantly with rural isolation, affecting service delivery, monitoring, evaluation, and timely response to beneficiaries' needs.

Funding and Operational Challenges

The financial and operational sustainability of OPDs remains a persistent challenge, exacerbated by limited local resources and dependency on external funding.

Almost all OPDs, including the Disabled Welfare Association (DWA), Milestone Society for the Special Persons, Sayyad Welfare Organisation (SWO), and National Forum of Women with Disabilities (NFWWD), highlight severe financial limitations. These financial

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constraints impede their operational capacity, limiting the sustainability and scalability of programs. Organisations like NEPWO emphasize reliance on volunteers and inconsistent funding streams as critical issues, creating difficulties in maintaining consistent service delivery and hindering the procurement and distribution of necessary Assistive Technologies.⁹

Reliance on External Funding Sources

- **Donor-Driven Models:** A significant proportion of OPDs depend on international donors for funding, which often leads to short-term project-based initiatives rather than sustainable, long-term strategies. (ReLAB-HS, Pakistan Country Brief, 2023)¹⁰
- **Inconsistent Funding Streams:** The availability of donor funding is often unpredictable, leaving OPDs vulnerable to financial instability and compromising their ability to plan and implement sustained programs.

Limited Access to AT Markets and Sustainable Operational Frameworks

- **Market Challenges:** OPDs often lack the knowledge and connections required to navigate AT markets effectively. Limited access to affordable, high-quality AT solutions restricts their ability to address the needs of PwDs.
- **Absence of Operational Models:** Many OPDs operate without clear business or operational plans, relying instead on ad-hoc strategies that limit scalability and impact. The lack of formalised frameworks also hinders

⁹ Based on the Needs Assessment Survey Forms (link attached to Annexure 2)

¹⁰ <http://www.relabhs.org/>

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collaboration with government bodies and private sector stakeholders.
(UNICEF, Global Report on Assistive Technology, 2022)

Policy and Legislative Barriers

Policy and legislative frameworks in Pakistan related to disability inclusion and AT remain fragmented, creating significant barriers for OPDs in their advocacy and operational efforts.

Despite existing legislative frameworks, organizations such as ConnectHear (CH), Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO), Voice Society for the Rehabilitation of Special Persons and NFWWD highlight inconsistent policy implementation as a major challenge. The absence of rigorous enforcement mechanisms and inadequate government support undermines efforts to ensure the rights of PwDs are protected and fulfilled. This gap in policy implementation significantly intersects with financial and infrastructural issues, compounding overall inefficiencies in OPD operations.

Gaps in Regulatory Frameworks for Ensuring Equitable Access to AT

- **Inadequate Implementation of Laws:** Despite the presence of disability-related legislation, such as the ICT Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and provincial disability acts, enforcement remains weak. This limits the practical impact of these policies.
- **Absence of AT-Specific Provisions:** Existing policies often lack specific guidelines or provisions related to AT, leaving OPDs without a clear framework to advocate for its accessibility and affordability. (ReLAB-HS, Policy Brief on Regulation and Standardization of Assistive Products, 2023)¹¹

¹¹ <http://www.relabhs.org/>

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- **Limited Interdepartmental Coordination:** Poor coordination among government departments responsible for disability affairs hampers the effective implementation of disability-related laws.

Policy Disconnects

- **Global Commitments vs. Local Implementation:** Although Pakistan has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the translation of these commitments into actionable policies at the national level remains limited.
- **Unclear Accountability Mechanisms:** OPDs often struggle to hold policymakers accountable due to vague mandates and overlapping responsibilities among government institutions. (Sheikh, Assessment of Approaches and Practices of Disability Network Organisations in Pakistan, 2010)

Structural Accessibility and Infrastructure

Organisations working with OPDs such as Bank Alfalah Limited (BAF) and Habib Bank Limited (HBL) consistently identify structural accessibility as a significant barrier. Many facilities remain inaccessible, limiting PwDs' full participation in societal activities and restricting OPDs' ability to engage effectively with their communities. These physical barriers intersect with other challenges, particularly impacting OPDs serving rural and remote areas, as exemplified by Saira Welfare Trust, which faces logistical complexities in delivering services and devices to geographically isolated beneficiaries.

Transportation Barriers

Transportation remains a critical concern for organizations like Pakistan Association of Blind (PAB) and PILC. Inaccessible public transportation disproportionately impacts women and residents of rural areas, intersecting notably with gender and socio-

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economic factors, limiting PwDs' ability to access essential services, employment, education, and community involvement.

Insufficient Capacity Building

A common challenge among OPDs, such as Hands Foundation, NEPWO, and SWO, is the insufficient availability of capacity building opportunities. There is a clear need for skill development in areas like disability rights advocacy, digital literacy, data management, and effective utilization of AT. This challenge intersects significantly with financial constraints and limited technology access, exacerbating the difficulties faced by OPDs in enhancing their capabilities and ensuring effective advocacy.

Gender-specific Challenges

Gender-specific barriers significantly impact organizations such as SST and NFWWD. Women with disabilities often face compounded marginalization due to societal attitudes, exposure to gender-based violence, and restricted access to health and economic resources. These intersecting challenges require specialized interventions that address both disability and gender-based discrimination simultaneously.

Challenges in Inclusive Education

Inclusive education remains problematic, with organizations like Right to Play Pakistan (RTP), RSU, and SWO highlighting issues such as inadequate teacher training, inaccessible school environments, and pervasive societal stigma. This challenge intersects heavily with social attitudes and resource allocation, limiting educational opportunities and societal integration for young PwDs.

Data and Documentation Gaps

Organisations such as NFWWD and SRSO point to significant gaps in data collection, documentation, and monitoring systems. These deficiencies hamper the effective

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evaluation of programs, limit informed decision-making, and weaken advocacy efforts aimed at influencing policy and securing funding.¹²

4.2 Intersectionality in Challenges

The challenges faced by OPDs are inherently intersectional, meaning multiple factors simultaneously exacerbate the exclusion and marginalisation of PwDs. Financial constraints intersect significantly with limited capacity building opportunities and access to AT, while structural accessibility intersects with geographic isolation and inadequate transportation. Social stigma and lack of awareness intersect with gender discrimination and insufficient inclusive education. Policy implementation failures intersect with data gaps, funding shortages, and operational inefficiencies. Recognizing and addressing these intersecting barriers is crucial for developing comprehensive, effective solutions that enhance the operational capabilities and impact of OPDs across Pakistan. (Khan, A Review: Protected Areas of Pakistan Management and Current Issues, 2022)

4.3 Opportunities to Address Challenges

Despite these obstacles, there are opportunities to strengthen the role of OPDs in Pakistan and address the challenges they face:

1. **Capacity Building for Advocacy:** Providing targeted training programs for OPDs on advocacy, fundraising, and technical skills related to AT can enhance their effectiveness and sustainability.

¹² Based on the Needs Assessment Survey Forms (link attached to Annexure 2)

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2. **Policy Reforms:** Advocating for the inclusion of AT-specific provisions in disability-related legislation can provide OPDs with a stronger legal foundation for their advocacy efforts.
3. **Awareness Campaigns:** National-level campaigns to educate the public and policymakers about the importance of AT can help shift perceptions and create a more supportive environment for PwDs.
4. **Collaborative Models:** Strengthening partnerships between OPDs, government institutions, and private sector stakeholders can create synergies and unlock new resources for disability inclusion initiatives.
5. **Local AT Innovation:** Encouraging local production of AT solutions tailored to the cultural and economic context of Pakistan can address affordability and accessibility challenges while fostering economic growth.¹³

Building upon the insights gathered from the consultations and the comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by OPDs, a tailored training toolkit was developed to address these gaps. The objective was to equip OPDs with the knowledge, skills, and practical tools necessary to enhance their advocacy efforts, strengthen organisational capacity, and promote equitable access to AT. The training toolkit serves as a strategic response to the identified needs, fostering inclusive practices and empowering OPDs to lead meaningful change within their communities.

¹³ Based on the key discussion during the 5 Consultation Sessions (Held in Islamabad, KP, Sindh, Punjab, Baluchistan)

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5 Capacity Building Training Toolkit: Disability Inclusion and Assistive Technologies

This training toolkit addresses the significant barriers faced by PwDs in Pakistan, such as societal stigma, infrastructural challenges, and limited access to quality AT. Initiated by the STEP in collaboration with the Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub), this program aims to enhance disability inclusion and promote the advocacy and use of affordable assistive technologies. The training objectives focus on fostering an understanding of disability from various perspectives, identifying barriers and strategizing solutions, exploring both national and international disability policy frameworks, understanding accessibility principles and accommodations, gaining comprehensive insights into assistive technologies, developing inclusive disaster and emergency preparedness strategies, and engaging in interactive activities that reinforce learning and application. The training toolkit consists of six comprehensive modules

Training Modules

Module 1: Understanding Disability

The first module, "Understanding Disability," covers fundamental definitions and models of disability, dispels common myths, and promotes a rights-based approach. Interactive discussions challenge perceptions, address stereotypes, and critically examine the influence of different disability models on policy formulation and implementation.

Module 2: Barriers Faced by Persons with Disabilities

The second module addresses the "Barriers Faced by Persons with Disabilities" including physical, attitudinal, and systemic challenges encountered in workplaces, transportation, education, and society at large. Through detailed case studies, participants analyse barriers and develop actionable solutions, focusing particularly on the vital role played by OPDs in advocacy and support. Discussions revolve around common accessibility barriers and how organisations can practically improve inclusivity.

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Module 3: Disability-Inclusive Disaster and Emergency Risk Strategies

In the third module, "Disability-Inclusive Disaster and Emergency Risk Strategies" participants learn the principles of designing inclusive disaster management plans, ensuring accessible communication during emergencies, and promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration for effective responses. Practical activities involve the creation of tailored disaster response plans, encouraging participants to critically assess the unique impacts disasters have on PwDs and identify necessary policy improvements to enhance inclusive preparedness.

Module 4: Policy and Legal Framework

The fourth module, "Policy and Legal Framework" examines national disability rights legislation alongside international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Participants engage in policy debates to explore the effectiveness of current laws and propose strategic improvements. Additionally, the module emphasizes the advocacy role of OPDs in influencing and shaping disability policies.

Module 5: Accessibility and Reasonable Accommodation

Module five, "Accessibility and Reasonable Accommodation" introduces participants to fundamental principles of accessibility within workplaces and public spaces. It clarifies the concept of reasonable accommodation, outlines existing compliance standards, and encourages participants to conduct practical workplace accessibility audits. Discussions are designed to distinguish clearly between accessibility and reasonable accommodation, emphasizing inclusive hiring practices and retention strategies.

Module 6: Assistive Technologies & Innovations

The final training module, "Assistive Technologies & Innovations" provides a comprehensive overview of available assistive devices, guidelines for their selection and maintenance, and emerging innovations in technology. Interactive sessions allow participants to explore various assistive devices hands-on, critically analysing how these

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technologies can significantly enhance independence and quality of life for PwDs, and what factors must be considered when selecting appropriate devices.

Closing & Action Plan Development

The training culminates in a comprehensive group activity where participants collaboratively create actionable plans tailored to their organisations. These action plans prioritise improvements in accessibility, the development and implementation of inclusive policies, and the integration of assistive technology solutions. A summary session highlights key learnings, enabling participants to outline individual and organisational commitments, along with establishing a follow-up mechanism to monitor and evaluate progress. Participants are also encouraged to provide detailed feedback through post-training surveys and open discussions, addressing any challenges encountered and key takeaways gained.

Key Takeaways and Advocacy Messages for PwDs

At the end of the training workshops, the participants are given handouts containing key advocacy messages to effectively access assistive technology, focusing on understanding their needs, exploring available resources, and advocating for their rights, ensuring equitable access to technologies that enhance independence and participation.

A breakdown of key messages:

1. Understand Your Needs and Goals

- **Self-Assessment:** Identify specific challenges you face in daily activities and pinpoint areas where assistive technology could be beneficial.
- **Define Goals:** Clearly articulate what you hope to achieve with assistive technology, whether it's improved mobility, communication, or access to information.

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2. Explore Available Resources

- **Local Organisations:** Reach out to disability organizations, rehabilitation centers, and government agencies in your respective areas that offer assistive technology services.
- **Online Resources:** Utilise online platforms and websites that provide information about assistive technology, including product catalogues, reviews, and support communities.
- **Consult Professionals:** Seek guidance from therapists, occupational therapists, and other professionals who can assess your needs and recommend appropriate devices.

3. Advocate for Your Rights

- **Know Your Rights:** Familiarise yourself with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and other relevant laws and policies that guarantee access to assistive technology.
- **Demand Accessibility:** Advocate for accessible environments, technologies, and services that meet your specific needs.
- **Participate in Decision-Making:** Engage in discussions and decision-making processes related to assistive technology policies and programs.

4. Focus on Affordability and Accessibility

- **Explore Funding Options:** Investigate government programs, NGOs, and other organizations that provide financial assistance for assistive technology.
- **Prioritise Needs:** Focus on acquiring the most essential assistive devices first, gradually expanding your toolkit as needed and as resources become available.
- **Consider Used or Refurbished Options:** Explore the possibility of obtaining used or refurbished assistive technology, which can be a more affordable option.

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5. Stay Informed and Connected

- **Attend Workshops and Seminars:** Participate in workshops and seminars on assistive technology to stay updated on the latest advancements and best practices.
- **Join Support Groups:** Connect with other persons with disabilities who use assistive technology to share experiences, learn from each other, and build a support network.
- **Share Your Experiences:** Advocate for better access to assistive technology by sharing your experiences and insights with policymakers, service providers, and the general public.

Key Takeaways and Advocacy Messages for OPDs

The WHO and UNICEF Global report on assistive technology (2022) offers recommendations for OPDs specifically intended to steer governments and other stakeholders towards achieving universal access to assistive technology. The OPD participants of the training workshops are provided handouts of these recommendations for future reference and advocacy. These 10 priority recommendations underline the ongoing efforts required by the OPDs to enhance access to assistive technology for all in need.¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/assistive-technology>

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Discussion at an OPD Training Workshop

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6 OPD Capacity Building and Its Impact

Capacity building has emerged as a foundational strategy for empowering OPDs and advancing the rights of PwDs in Pakistan. Under this project, a targeted approach was adopted to enhance the capacities of OPDs through systematic engagement, knowledge sharing, and participatory training. The initiative aimed to strengthen OPDs' roles in advocacy, service delivery, and policy dialogue—particularly in relation to disability inclusion and equitable access to AT. This chapter presents the key discussion themes and documented impacts emerging from the project.

6.1 Key Discussion Themes from Capacity Building Workshops

The major themes and insights presented here were extracted from five regional consultation sessions and five training workshops, conducted with the active participation of OPDs and key stakeholders across Pakistan. These sessions created collaborative spaces for dialogue, learning, and advocacy planning. They served not only as forums for identifying systemic challenges but also as platforms for building alliances and advancing inclusive development at regional and national levels.

Advocacy and Policy Engagement

A recurrent theme in the consultations and workshops was the critical role OPDs play in advocacy and influencing disability-inclusive policies. Across the national and provincial consultations, participants highlighted significant gaps between policy formulation and implementation, particularly referencing laws like the 1981 Special Education Ordinance, the Sindh Empowerment Disability Act (2017), and the Islamabad Capital Territory Disability Act (2018). (Pakistan, The ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020, 2020) There was consensus on the urgent need to strengthen OPD capabilities in legislative advocacy, emphasising strategies to engage policymakers, legislators, and government departments effectively. (Pakistan, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2002, 2002)

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Participants particularly stressed transitioning from **charity-based narratives to rights-based frameworks**, aligning closely with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Discussions indicated a need for more structured OPD engagement in policy dialogues, enhanced advocacy skills training, and proactive approaches to monitoring and enforcing disability laws at provincial and national levels.

Enhancing Access to Assistive Technology

Assistive Technology emerged as a critical focal point in all sessions, reflecting its transformative potential in empowering PwDs. Key issues discussed included the affordability, accessibility, customization, and local production of AT devices. OPDs, such as Bioniks, NEPWO, and PILC, underscored challenges stemming from high costs, limited local production capacities, and logistical issues related to distribution, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Participants strongly advocated localised AT production, emphasising the importance of culturally and contextually appropriate solutions rather than generic imported devices. Collaboration between government bodies, OPDs, academia, and the private sector was repeatedly cited as essential for building sustainable AT ecosystems that meet diverse disability needs.

Addressing Structural Accessibility and Universal Design

Structural accessibility and infrastructure were central concerns across consultations. Participants highlighted the persistent barriers posed by inaccessible public spaces, transportation systems, and buildings, significantly limiting social and economic participation for PwDs. The consultations underscored the adoption of Universal Design Principles as a vital strategy to ensure inclusive public infrastructure.

OPDs, including DWA, HANDS Foundation, and private sector organisations such as Bank Alfalah Limited, emphasised that addressing physical barriers through policy reforms and advocacy for inclusive design standards is crucial for fostering true

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inclusivity. The discussions consistently indicated a strong demand for training OPDs in advocating for and contributing to infrastructure modifications and universal design implementation.

Overcoming Social Stigma and Awareness Barriers

The capacity building sessions highlighted deep-rooted social stigmas and societal misconceptions as significant obstacles to disability inclusion. Discussions pointed out that societal attitudes towards disability often reinforce dependency, exclusion, and marginalization. Organisations such as ASHA, NFWWD, and Sakan-e-Sheza Trust emphasized the need for strategic awareness campaigns to educate communities and stakeholders, challenging stigma and promoting a more inclusive understanding of disability.

Participants advocated for structured training in community engagement, public awareness strategies, and media campaigns, enabling OPDs to effectively challenge discriminatory attitudes and amplify inclusive narratives.

Gender-Specific and Intersectional Challenges

The capacity building initiative revealed significant intersectionality in the challenges faced by OPDs, particularly regarding gender disparities. OPDs working with women with disabilities, notably NFWWD and SST, highlighted compounded vulnerabilities arising from intersectional discrimination related to gender, disability, socioeconomic status, and geographic location.

Discussions underscored the necessity of tailored advocacy and service delivery strategies addressing these complex, intersectional barriers. Recommendations included targeted capacity building programs that specifically address gender-based discrimination, enhance representation in decision-making processes, and improve access to gender-sensitive healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.

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6.2 Impact of Capacity Building Initiatives and Workshops

In parallel to these engagements, a comprehensive needs assessment survey¹⁵ was conducted with the participating OPDs to gather in-depth data on their institutional capacities, operational challenges, and perspectives on disability rights and AT accessibility. Combined with the content delivered through the training toolkit, this dual approach enabled the team to generate a nuanced understanding of OPD ecosystems and track the outcomes of the training interventions. The impacts outlined in this chapter reflect the synthesis of survey data, training inputs, and consultations.

Enhanced Advocacy and Policy Influence

Capacity building workshops have significantly enhanced OPD representatives' advocacy skills, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence to engage effectively with policymakers. Training sessions focusing on legislative frameworks, rights-based approaches, and strategic advocacy have improved OPDs' ability to influence policy discourse and advocate for robust disability legislation and policy implementation.

Strengthened Stakeholder Networks and Collaboration

These sessions have fostered meaningful connections among OPDs, government institutions, academia, private sector entities, and international organisations. The strengthened networks facilitate improved coordination and collaboration, essential for sustainable advocacy and effective AT ecosystem development.

Increased Awareness and Empowerment

Through interactive workshops and consultations, there has been a marked increase in awareness among stakeholders about the rights and capabilities of PwDs, the

¹⁵ Based on Needs Assessment Survey Forms (link is attached to Annexure 2)

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transformative role of AT, and the importance of inclusive development. This enhanced understanding is empowering OPDs to challenge exclusionary narratives and promote more informed community dialogues on disability.

Addressing Regional and Intersectional Disparities

The geographic diversity of consultation sessions allowed nuanced insights into region-specific barriers and opportunities. This understanding is essential for developing tailored strategies addressing local needs, including rural isolation, infrastructural challenges, and gender-specific issues.

Additionally, a series of success stories were documented from across Pakistan to showcase individual and institutional progress. These narratives highlight transformative journeys of key individuals who benefited from their involvement with the OPDs, whether through enhanced leadership roles, improved advocacy practices, or expanded access to AT. These stories offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of OPD representatives and demonstrate the tangible, human-centric outcomes of the capacity building initiatives, and use of AT.

6.3 Sustainability and Future Directions

To sustain and amplify the positive impacts of these capacity building initiatives, ongoing efforts must focus on scaling successful training models, deepening stakeholder collaborations, and fostering continued advocacy engagement. Policy advocacy remains a priority, with OPDs increasingly empowered to drive systemic changes necessary for long-term disability inclusion and AT accessibility. Continued support and investment in capacity building will be essential for OPDs to lead sustainable, inclusive development across Pakistan.

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Training Workshop for OPDs at the National Library of Pakistan



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7 Recommendations and Way Forward

The key findings from this project highlight critical gaps and emerging opportunities for enhancing the accessibility, affordability, and advocacy of AT in Pakistan. This chapter outlines actionable recommendations tailored to policymakers, international donor agencies, and OPDs, offering a roadmap for inclusive development and systemic change that addresses the multifaceted challenges identified through research, consultations, and capacity building engagements.

7.1 Recommendations for Policymakers

1. **Strengthen Legislative Frameworks:** Policymakers must undertake a comprehensive review and update of existing disability legislation to ensure explicit provisions for AT accessibility and affordability. A rights-based approach should be adopted, framing AT not as a privilege but as a fundamental right, in alignment with global standards such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In addition, the government should consider enacting tax exemptions and providing subsidies for both locally manufactured and imported AT products, making them more affordable and accessible for end-users.
2. **Develop National AT Standards and Guidelines:** There is a pressing need to establish national guidelines that define quality, safety, and efficacy standards for AT products. A centralized regulatory authority should be formed to oversee the implementation and enforcement of these standards, ensuring consistency with international best practices.
3. **Incentivize Local AT Production:** Governments can support innovation by offering grants, tax incentives, and dedicated research funding to start-ups, academic institutions, and innovation hubs focused on developing affordable and context-specific AT solutions. Public-private partnerships should be encouraged

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to scale production and enhance the distribution of AT, particularly in under-resourced regions.

4. **Promote Inclusive Policies Across Sectors:** AT accessibility should be integrated into broader national policies across sectors such as education, employment, healthcare, and transportation. Inclusive education policies must ensure the provision of accessible learning tools and infrastructure, while employment policies should mandate accessibility standards in workplaces to support meaningful economic participation by PwDs.
5. **Ensure Data-Driven Policy Decisions:** Developing a centralized and regularly updated database is essential for collecting and analysing data on PwD demographics, AT usage, and access barriers. Such data can be instrumental in designing targeted policies, evaluating program impact, and identifying service gaps.
6. **Allocate Sustainable Funding for AT Accessibility:** A national fund should be established to subsidize AT costs, supported by contributions from the government, private sector, and donor agencies. It is essential that these resources are distributed equitably across both urban and rural regions to address geographic disparities.

7.2 Recommendations for International Donor Agencies

1. **Invest in OPD Capacity Building:** Donors should provide both financial and technical assistance aimed at strengthening OPD advocacy capabilities, institutional development, and operational resilience. Grant programs should be designed to support long-term initiatives such as awareness campaigns, leadership training, and community engagement activities.
2. **Support Inclusive Research and Innovation:** Funding should be directed towards research projects that aim to develop low-cost, locally relevant AT

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solutions for LMICs. Collaborations with academic institutions and innovation hubs can play a pivotal role in piloting and scaling these technologies.

3. **Facilitate Knowledge Exchange:** International donors can organize forums and conferences to share global best practices, case studies, and lessons learned. These platforms should enable Pakistani OPDs to engage with global disability advocacy networks and promote cross-regional learning.
4. **Promote Multi-Sectoral Partnerships:** Donors should encourage collaborative efforts between governments, civil society organisations, and private sector entities. These partnerships are essential for establishing resilient and inclusive AT ecosystems and promoting policy change through coordinated influence.
5. **Monitor and Evaluate Funded Programs:** Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks should be developed to assess the effectiveness and impact of funded programs. Feedback from these assessments can guide strategic adjustments and ensure alignment with the evolving needs of PwDs and OPDs. (UNICEF, Global Report on Assistive Technology, 2022)

7.3 Recommendations for OPDs

1. **Focus on Advocacy Initiatives:** OPDs should prioritize advocacy campaigns that emphasize AT accessibility and affordability. These efforts should be supported by data, case studies, and testimonials to strengthen policy influence. Building coalitions with other OPDs can amplify their voices and enhance advocacy outcomes.
2. **Build Organisational Capacity:** Investment in skills development is crucial. OPDs should focus on leadership training, resource mobilization, governance, and project management. Strengthening internal governance and accountability will improve their legitimacy and effectiveness.

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3. **Strengthen Networks and Collaborations:** By forming partnerships with AT providers, manufacturers, private sector, and academic institutions, OPDs can enhance their service delivery and resource base. Participation in national and international networks enables knowledge sharing and expands opportunities for advocacy and collaboration.
4. **Engage Communities and PwDs:** Community outreach is essential to raise awareness and dismantle stigma. OPDs should facilitate the active involvement of PwDs in all planning and implementation processes, ensuring that initiatives remain relevant and responsive to their lived experiences.
5. **Embrace Technology for Advocacy:** Digital tools and platforms should be utilized for awareness campaigns, stakeholder engagement, and capacity building. Online resources, including training modules and virtual consultations, can extend the reach of OPD programming, especially in rural or hard-to-reach areas.¹⁶

7.4 Cross-Cutting Recommendations

1. **Promote Inclusive Design and Universal Accessibility:** It is essential to adopt co-design methodologies that involve PwDs in every stage of AT development. Universal design principles must be embedded into all aspects of public infrastructure, digital interfaces, and service delivery systems to ensure equitable access.
2. **Foster a Cultural Shift Towards Inclusion:** National campaigns aimed at challenging entrenched stereotypes and normalizing disability inclusion are

¹⁶ Based on the Key insights from the five consultation sessions and five training workshops conducted during this project

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critical. Publicizing the success stories of empowered PwDs and impactful OPDs can catalyse broader social acceptance and policy change.

3. **Integrate AT into Disaster Preparedness and Response:** AT must be included in national and provincial disaster response frameworks. OPDs and community actors should be trained in inclusive emergency preparedness, ensuring that the needs of PwDs are not overlooked during crises.
4. **Encourage Long-Term Sustainability:** Financial models such as microfinancing, community-based savings groups, or social enterprises should be explored to ensure sustainability. Local ownership and leadership of AT initiatives will foster resilience, accountability, and long-term viability of inclusive development efforts. (UNICEF, Global Report on Assistive Technology, 2022)
5. **Strategic Partnerships:** To enable access to affordable AT for PwDs, it is imperative to forge strategic collaboration between government, development sector partners, academia, private sector, NGOs/INGOs and PwDs.



Training Workshop for OPDs in Lahore

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8 Conclusion

The conclusion of this report underscores the central role of OPDs in promoting the accessibility, affordability, and adoption of AT in Pakistan. Drawing from the evidence and insights gathered through this project, it is evident that OPD capacity building initiatives have laid a strong foundation for systemic transformation. Yet, achieving sustainable, inclusive AT ecosystems across Pakistan remains a long-term endeavour that requires cohesive, cross-sectoral action.

8.1 The Importance of OPD Capacity Building

The empowerment of OPDs is vital for effecting meaningful change in Pakistan's disability inclusion landscape. OPDs serve as both representatives of PwDs and as catalysts for broader societal transformation. Strengthening their institutional and advocacy capacities enables OPDs to meaningfully participate in policymaking processes, lead community-based awareness campaigns, and challenge stigma and exclusion. Through enhanced capabilities, OPDs can initiate partnerships with government bodies, private sector stakeholders, and international donors, leveraging these alliances to advocate for equitable access to AT and disability-inclusive development.

Insights from this project affirm that capacity building initiatives significantly bolster OPDs' abilities to identify systemic barriers, mobilize resources, and influence inclusive policies. As OPDs become more resilient and well-equipped, their reach and impact are amplified, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society that embraces diversity and prioritizes accessibility. (Zubair, 2021)

8.2 A Call to Action for Stakeholders

Achieving equitable AT access in Pakistan is a shared responsibility that requires the coordinated efforts of policymakers, international donor agencies, OPDs, private sector

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actors, academic institutions, and the general public. This report sets forth a comprehensive roadmap for these stakeholders, emphasizing collaborative action and long-term commitment.

Policymakers are urged to reform and modernize legislative frameworks that explicitly prioritize AT access as a fundamental right. Efforts must also focus on allocating sustainable funding for the development, production, and distribution of AT, alongside the establishment of robust data systems that enable evidence-based decision-making.

International donor agencies have a pivotal role in supporting OPD capacity building, funding inclusive research and innovation, and facilitating cross-sectoral collaborations. Their support should be strategic and sustained, aimed at creating scalable and context-specific AT solutions while empowering OPDs to take leadership roles in advocacy and service delivery.

OPDs themselves are called upon to strengthen their internal governance structures, invest in leadership development, and expand their advocacy and community engagement capabilities. By acting as intermediaries between PwDs and AT service providers, OPDs can ensure that interventions remain user-cantered and contextually relevant. Moreover, their leadership in grassroots movements is vital to reshaping public perceptions and challenging exclusionary norms.

The private sector and academic institutions are encouraged to collaborate with OPDs and government actors to design and deliver affordable AT solutions tailored to local needs. They also play a key role in advancing disability-inclusive employment practices and contributing to the knowledge base through research and innovation.

The general public, too, holds an essential role in advocating for inclusive practices in educational institutions, workplaces, and public services. Public support for AT initiatives, as well as the amplification of success stories of PwDs, can significantly contribute to a broader cultural shift toward empathy, acceptance, and inclusion.

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8.3 Towards an Inclusive Future

While the challenges facing OPDs and PwDs in Pakistan are complex and multifaceted, the findings of this report affirm the transformative potential of strategic investment in OPD capacity building. OPDs are not only advocates but also changemakers, equipped to drive institutional reform and community empowerment when given the tools and support to do so.

The path forward calls for visionary leadership, consistent investment, and an unwavering commitment to inclusion and equity. This report is both a testament to the resilience and capacity of Pakistan's OPDs and a call to action for all sectors of society to join in creating a future where AT is not a luxury but a universally recognized right. Through collective effort and sustained collaboration, a more inclusive, accessible, and dignified future for all Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan is not only possible - it is within reach.



This report champions a future where assistive technology is a universal right, urging visionary leadership, sustained investment, and a collective commitment to inclusion, leveraging the resilience of Pakistan's disability organisations.

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10 Appendices

10.1 Annexure 1: OPD Ecosystem in Pakistan

The list of OPDs operating in Pakistan is as follows:

Islamabad (Federal Territory)

- STEP
- Disabled People Development Organisation (DPDO)
- Sir Syed Deaf Association (SDF)
- Pakistan Foundation Fighting Blindness (PFFB)
- Special Person Rehabilitate Independent and Game (SPRING)
- Empowerment for Special People (ESP)
- Nasir Mehmood Dar
- Rawalpindi Deaf Sports Association
- Saira Welfare Trust

Punjab

- New Sahara Special Sports and Welfare Organisation
- Zunnorain Welfare Society
- Society for Special Persons (SSP)
- Special People Welfare Society (SPWS)
- Mainstream Association of Persons with Disabilities
- Jannat Welfare Foundation
- Empower Welfare Foundation for Youth & Persons with Disabilities

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- Voice Society for the Rehabilitation of Special Persons
- DREAMS The Art of Living
- Special Persons Friendship Society
- Ehsaan Foundation
- Jazba
- Safia Foundation
- Pakistan Association of the Blind
- Rohi Welfare Organisation (RWO)
- Rights of Special Persons Welfare Foundation (ROSP)

Sindh

- Feenix Social Welfare Society for Persons with Disabilities
- Danishkadah
- Disabled Welfare Association (DWA)
- Association of the Physically Handicapped Adults (APHA)
- Gulistan-e-Mazooreen Mirpurkhas
- Nawabshah Disability Forum (NDF)
- Hayat-e-nau Rehabilitation with disabilities
- Apna Sahara
- All Sanghar Handicap Association (ASHA)
- NGO for the Development of Special Persons Khairpur
- HANDS Independent Living Centre

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- Darul Sukun
- Pakistan Independent Living Centre (PILC)

KPK & FATA

- Special Life Foundation (SLF)
- Special Person Development Association (SPDA)
- Malakand Special Life Foundation
- Ahsas Disabled People Organisation
- Nowshera Especial People Welfare Organisation (NEPWO)
- Special Welfare Organisation
- National Forum of Youth with Disabilities (NFYD-Pakistan)
- Pakistan Special Person Development Organisation (PSPDO)
- Special Abilities Development Association (SADA)
- Independent Organisation for Persons with Disabilities
- Association of Special Rights (ASR)
- Society for Promotion of Education & Employment for Disabled (Speed)
- Anjuman Bahali Mazooran Bajur (ABMB)
- Sayyad Welfare Organisation
- Collective Alliance for the Rights of Young Girls with Disabilities (CARY)
- Tahafuz Mazooran Welfare Foundation (TMWF)
- Association for the Rehabilitation of the Physically Disabled (ARPD)

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- Inception
- Socio Pak
- Development Organisation for Underprivileged Areas (DOUA)
- Balochistan Disability Forum (BDF)
- Quetta Online
- The Special Ones Organisation (TSO)
- New Life, Society for Special Persons, Balochistan (NLSSPB)
- Helpful Organisation for Special Talent (HOST)

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11 Annexure 2: OPDs and Organisations Working in Disability Inclusion Engaged during the Project

1. All Sanghar Handicaps Association (ASHA)

ASHA, symbolizing hope and aspiration, operates with a small staff of two and 12 dedicated volunteers in Sindh. It aims to empower PwDs, addressing all forms of disabilities. The primary challenges faced by ASHA include societal barriers and widespread lack of awareness.

2. Bank Alfalah Limited (BAF)

Bank Alfalah Limited, abbreviated as BAF, is a private sector organization committed to financial inclusion, employment, advocacy, and social and financial support for PwDs across all provinces of Pakistan. Their core challenge remains structural accessibility.

3. Barriers Free Life (BFL)

BFL is an INGO led by persons with disabilities, comprising six staff members. It operates in Sindh, dedicated to inclusive education, employment, rehabilitation advocacy, and empowerment. A major challenge is encouraging disabled children to leave their homes and advocate for their rights.

4. Bioniks

Bioniks provides specialized AT services with a staff of 30 and eight volunteers. The organization focuses on rehabilitation, employability, psychosocial support, and financial aid, particularly addressing mobility issues. Its future goal is the global export of accessible AT solutions.

5. ConnectHear (CH)

CH is an OPD led by persons with disabilities. With a staff of 18, it operates in Islamabad, KPK, Sindh, and Punjab, advocating for accessible spaces and inclusive

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disaster risk reduction, education, and employment. Key challenges include limited literacy among PwDs, poor policy implementation, and funding shortages.

6. Disabled Welfare Association (DWA)

DWA, a significant DPO in Sindh with 50 volunteers, focuses on advocacy and comprehensive support services for PwDs. Fundraising remains a critical challenge.

7. HANDS Foundation

HANDS Foundation is an NGO led by disabled individuals, with a large staff (1,000-5,000). It promotes equitable prosperity, providing inclusive education, psychosocial support, advocacy, and accessible transport. Challenges include inadequate budgets, limited sign language training, and insufficient investment in AT.

8. Habib Bank Limited (HBL)

HBL, a corporate entity with over 16,000 staff members, advocates for employability, rights-based advocacy, internships, and awareness for PwDs. Its primary challenges include education and fostering organizational acceptance.

9. Ida-Rieu (IDA)

IDA, a large NGO/INGO led by persons with disabilities, predominantly supports individuals with visual and hearing impairments, providing essential education and rehabilitation services.

10. Pakistan Association of Blind (PAB)

PAB, a small NGO operating primarily in Sindh with ten volunteers, is committed to education and awareness for the blind. Transportation and gender-specific challenges persist.

11. Pakistan Independent Living Centre (PILC)

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PILC, a medium-sized DPO with 25 volunteers, provides advocacy, accessible transportation, financial support, and empowerment for PwDs. Its main challenges are funding, training, and space limitations.

12. Reform Support Unit (RSU), Govt of Sindh

RSU, led by PwDs, aims to enhance educational access in Sindh for children with disabilities, addressing a range of conditions including ADHD, Autism, and Down syndrome. Challenges include limited digital literacy and poor internet connectivity.

13. Right to Play Pakistan (RTP)

RTP, an NGO with over 200 staff and 100 volunteers, enhances life skills through inclusive education programs nationwide, focusing on psychosocial disabilities.

14. Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO)

SRSO, an NGO led by PwDs in Sindh, addresses multiple disabilities through inclusive education, livelihood empowerment, and accessible transportation. Key challenges include physical and social barriers, lack of advanced data collection tools, and network issues.

15. SAFCO Support Foundation (SSF)

SSF, an NGO in Sindh with 250 staff and 3500 volunteers, emphasizes social and economic empowerment, disaster risk reduction, and infrastructure support, especially for older disabled individuals.

16. Sakan-e-Sheza Trust (SST)

SST, a registered trust with ten staff members and 50 volunteers, supports physically disabled women through rehabilitation, advocacy, and shelter homes. Major challenges include community cooperation and misunderstanding.

17. Thardeep Rural Development Program (TRDP)

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TRDP, an NGO in Sindh with over 400 staff and numerous community volunteers, enhances marginalized communities' livelihoods, employability, and disaster resilience, especially aiding individuals with hearing disabilities. Financial constraints and limited AT availability are significant challenges.

18. Wings on Wheels (WOW TV)

WOW TV, led by PwDs, is a small NGO in Sindh promoting awareness, rehabilitation, and psychosocial support for all disability types.

19. Nowshera Special People Welfare Organisation (NEPWO)

NEPWO, operating in KPK with 12 staff and 30 volunteers, empowers PwDs through education, livelihood training, and disaster management. Financial constraints, skills gaps, and limited digital literacy hinder their effectiveness.

20. Sayyad Welfare Organisation (SWO)

SWO, based in KPK with 15 staff and 45 volunteers, provides inclusive education and advocacy, facing challenges of limited finances, awareness, and sustainable funding.

21. National Forum of Women with Disabilities (NFWWD)

NFWWD, operating nationwide with six staff and 60-70 volunteers, empowers women with disabilities through inclusive education, advocacy, and capacity building. Major challenges include limited policy implementation, social stigma, financial constraints, and inadequate digital tools and training.

22. SAIRA Welfare Trust

SAIRA, based in Rawalpindi with two staff and 20 volunteers, focuses on rehabilitation, mobility improvement, and economic empowerment. Its challenges include remote beneficiary access, high device costs, and logistical difficulties in rural areas. SAIRA's future goals include expanding affordable treatments, providing assistive devices, and advocating for disability-friendly legislation.

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23. National Forum of Women with Disabilities (NFWWD)

NFWWD is an NGO based in Punjab, led by PwDs. With 15-20 staff members and more than 100 volunteers, the organization primarily focuses on advocacy and community sensitization, particularly addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) against women with disabilities. Their key services include rights-based advocacy and supporting social groups, specifically targeting blind, deaf, and individuals with mobility issues. A major challenge faced by NFWWD is the slow responsiveness of government departments, which hampers timely advocacy and intervention efforts.

24. Voice Society for the Rehabilitation of Special Persons (Voice Society)

Voice Society, operating in Punjab with a staff of 10 and supported by 15 volunteers, is dedicated to promoting inclusive education, rehabilitation, and rights-based advocacy. The organization emphasizes educational support, including long-term (10-year) leadership programs and food provision services, primarily assisting individuals experiencing mobility issues. The main challenges identified by Voice Society include negative social behavior towards PwDs, a lack of accessible infrastructure, and insufficient data on the disability demographics required for informed advocacy.

25. Rights of Special Persons Welfare Foundation (ROSP)

ROSP is an OPD, led by PwDs with a strong volunteer base of 378 individuals. The organization's central mission is to promote independent living and comprehensive support for PwDs, offering various assistance programs, including specialized employment schemes (Rozgar scheme). Despite extensive efforts, ROSP faces significant challenges primarily due to inadequate government policy implementation, which impacts the effectiveness of their programs and outreach.

26. Milestone Society for the Special Persons

The Milestone Society is an NGO with a substantial workforce exceeding 100 employees. It provides diverse services, including mental and psychological support, eye care, rights-based advocacy, education, employment opportunities, and access to

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assistive technologies. Unique among Pakistani OPDs, Milestone Society extends its operations internationally to Japan, Sri Lanka, and Turkey, aiding various disability groups. Their primary challenges are the pervasive lack of awareness about disabilities in society and persistent funding shortages, restricting service provision and expansion.

27. Shareef Chajra DPO

Shareef Chajra DPO, operating as an OPD in Punjab, is led by PwDs with an executive team of 35 staff members and a total staff of approximately 100, complemented by over 100 volunteers. The organization focuses on inclusive education, livelihood empowerment, rehabilitation, mental and psychosocial support, rights-based advocacy, disaster risk reduction, and personal assistance. The key challenges faced by Shareef Chajra DPO include societal misunderstandings regarding the lifestyles of individuals with disabilities, widespread myths and misconceptions about disability, and significant mobility barriers limiting PwD participation.

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12 Annexure 4: Success Story Podcasts



1. Yusra Gilani: Transcript. **AT Used:** Wheelchair

Why She Stands Out: As a woman with a disability, Yusra challenges societal stereotypes every day. Despite the barriers, she pursued higher education and is now an advocate for disability rights. Her work focuses on accessibility, policy reforms, and the empowerment of women with disabilities, proving that gender and disability are not limitations but sources of strength.



2. Muzammal Islam: Transcript. **AT Used:** Wheelchair

Why He Stands Out: Muzammil's story is one of perseverance and achievement. Coming from a marginalized background, he pursued higher education and secured a scholarship to study in Japan—a remarkable feat for a person with a disability from a rural area. Now employed at a renowned firm, he continues to work toward improving the lives of PwDs by advocating for better accessibility and inclusion.

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3. Abia Akram: Transcript **AT Used:** Wheelchair and Assistive Car

Why She Stands Out: A trailblazer in disability rights, Abia has spent the past two decades advocating for women and girls with disabilities, ensuring their voices are heard in policy reforms both in Pakistan and internationally. As a co-founder of the STEP and a leader in global disability inclusion, she has pushed for AT to be recognized as a fundamental right rather than a privilege. Her relentless efforts have shaped inclusive policies and empowered countless individuals.



4. Zubair Khan: Transcript **AT Used:** Crutches

Why He Stands Out: After suffering a spinal cord injury in childhood, Zubair refused to let his disability dictate his future. Despite facing societal and infrastructural challenges, he completed his intermediate education and later founded NEPWO (Nowshera Special People Welfare Organisation)—a grassroots OPD (Organisation of Persons with Disabilities) committed to providing education, skills training, and advocacy for PwDs in underserved communities.

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5. Tahira Naz: Transcript **AT Used:** Crutches

Why She Stands Out: As a woman with a disability and the sole breadwinner of her family, Tahira is the embodiment of resilience. She overcame societal and economic challenges to secure employment, supporting her ill mother and family while advocating for PwD empowerment. Her story is a testament to the independence and strength of women with disabilities.



6. Saira Qadir: Transcript **AT Used:** Wheelchair

Why She Stands Out: Disabled since early childhood, Saira defied all odds with the unwavering support of her parents. She completed her education, studied at a university, and later founded the Saira Qadir Welfare Trust, an organization dedicated to supporting and empowering PwDs. Her mission is to provide education, healthcare, and accessibility solutions to improve the quality of life for others facing similar challenges.

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7. Shahab-Ud-Din: Transcript **AT Used:** Wheelchair

Why He Stands Out: Despite severe physical disabilities, Shahab pursued higher education, won multiple awards, and founded the Pak Everbright Development Organisation (PEDO), where he serves as CEO. His dedication to disability rights, advocacy, and the empowerment of PwDs has created a lasting impact, paving the way for policy reforms, community development, and accessible infrastructure.



8. Ammar Jamal: Transcript **AT Used:** Mobile App to Communicate

Why He Stands Out: Ammar Jamal is a powerful advocate for accessibility and inclusive development in Pakistan. Having experienced first-hand the barriers faced by PwDs, he turned his challenges into fuel for activism. Ammar emphasizes that accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, and employment opportunities are essential for true empowerment. He believes that assistive technology is a tool for dignity and independence—not a luxury. His voice continues to echo in national

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advocacy platforms, calling for structural reforms and awareness that pave the way for a more equitable society.



9. Rizwan Rasheed: Transcript **AT Used:** Assistive Motorbike

Why He Stands Out: Rizwan Rasheed's journey from a special education student to an MBA graduate from Quaid-e-Azam University exemplifies what's possible when assistive technology meets determination. His mobility was transformed by an assistive motorbike, allowing him to complete his education and pursue a professional career. Rizwan advocates for inclusive education systems, equitable access to AT, and simplified processes for PwDs to acquire assistive tools. His story reflects the transformative power of enabling infrastructure, policy implementation, and the guiding support of OPDs like STEP.



10. Muzamil Tariq:

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Annexure 3: Session Briefs

National Level Consultation at National University of Science & Technology (NUST), Islamabad, Pakistan

Session Brief

Date: Friday, January 17, 2025

Venue: RIC Boardroom, NUST

The first national-level consultation session of the "Global Disability Innovation Hub x STEP – OPD Capacity Building and Impact Project," under the AT2030 programme funded by UK aid, was instrumental in involving OPDs in a strategic dialogue with key stakeholders for capacity building of OPDs to engage with PwDs and relevant stakeholders, ensuring access to AT in Pakistan. Hosted by STEP, in collaboration with NUST, the session brought together OPD representatives, policymakers, academics, and disability inclusion experts.

The session focused on fostering dialogue around capacity building, advocacy for disability rights, and the transformative role of AT in empowering PwDs.

Session Objectives

The consultation aimed to:

- Engage OPDs and stakeholders in identifying barriers to AT access.
- Highlight capacity building as a critical tool for effective advocacy.
- Develop actionable strategies for inclusion and equitable access to AT in Pakistan.

Highlights of the Discussions

1. Empowering OPDs and Shifting Narratives:

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- Participants emphasized the importance of transitioning from a charity-based approach to a rights-based framework for addressing disability inclusion.
- A "Person-First" approach was highlighted as essential for empowering PwDs and creating inclusive ecosystems.

2. Addressing Barriers to Accessibility:

- Key barriers, such as outdated policies, insufficient infrastructure, and societal biases, were identified as challenges to accessibility.
- The absence of comprehensive data on PwDs and the use of outdated disability-related Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) were noted as hindrances to effective resource allocation.

3. The Transformative Role of Assistive Technology:

- Discussions centred on the role of AT in enhancing independence, dignity, and inclusion for PwDs.
- Stakeholders underscored the need for locally developed, affordable solutions, including innovative tools such as bionic hands and smart wheelchairs.

4. Collaborative Solutions and Future Plans:

- Participants proposed forming a steering committee at National University of Science & Technology (NUST), with STEP as a secretary/chief convener, to ensure OPDs and PwDs, particularly women with disabilities, are included in decision-making processes.

Outcomes and Next Steps

The consultation session concluded with several key commitments:

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- Strengthening OPDs: Building their capacity to advocate for equitable access to affordable AT and disability rights.
- Enhanced Collaboration: Fostering partnerships among stakeholders to develop sustainable and inclusive AT ecosystems.
- Documentation and Reporting: The discussions and insights gathered will contribute to the development of the project's comprehensive report, *"Situation Analysis of OPDs in Pakistan: The Role of Capacity Building to Improve Access to and Advocacy of Assistive Technologies."*

Global Alignment and Project Impact

This consultation is a milestone in the *"GDI-Hub x STEP – OPD Capacity Building and Impact Project,"* part of the AT2030 programme funded by UK aid. The project aims to create scalable solutions, strengthen OPDs, and foster sustainable AT ecosystems worldwide.

Through this initiative, we are advancing a shared vision of a future where AT is accessible to all, empowering PwDs to thrive with dignity and inclusion. Together, we are building a world beyond barriers!

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Provincial Capacity Building Workshop: Karachi

Session Brief

Date: February 24, 2025

Location: Karachi, Pakistan

1. Event Overview

As part of the "GDI Hub / STEP – OPD Capacity Building and Impact Pilot", under the AT2030 programme funded by UKAid, a Capacity Building Workshop was successfully held in Karachi in collaboration with the Disabled Welfare Association (DWA) and the Pakistan Independent Living Center (PILC).

The session convened key stakeholders, OPD representatives, disability rights advocates, and experts to discuss critical issues surrounding AT, accessibility, and policy frameworks. The primary focus was to strengthen OPDs by equipping them with the knowledge and tools required to advocate for inclusive development and sustainable AT ecosystems in Pakistan.

2. Opening Session

Remarks by Usman Aslam (Project Consultant, STEP):

Highlighted the ongoing contributions of PILC towards disability inclusion and expressed enthusiasm for future collaborations.

Provided an overview of the project's objectives, emphasizing the importance of policy-level advocacy and grassroots capacity building.

Encouraged stakeholders to actively engage in discussions aimed at strengthening the role of OPDs in Pakistan.

3. Session Highlights

Facilitator: Mr. Atif Sheikh (Executive Director, STEP):

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The workshop featured an interactive and engaging discussion, covering key themes crucial to advancing disability rights and AT accessibility.

Key Discussions:

Affordable Assistive Devices

- Recognized Mr. Javed's contributions in making AT more affordable and accessible.
- Stressed the impact of cost-effective and quality AT, such as customized wheelchairs, in enabling independence and enhancing inclusion.

Understanding Disability & Inclusion

- Explored the concept of disability as a social construct, influenced by societal perceptions and infrastructure limitations.
- Identified two primary aspects of disability:
 - Mental Construct – How societal attitudes shape inclusion/exclusion.
 - Lack of Services – The impact of inadequate infrastructure, policies, and resources.

Role of Institutions in AT Advocacy

- Stressed the responsibility of government bodies, INGOs, and local OPDs in ensuring inclusive infrastructure and policies.
- Encouraged stronger collaborations between OPDs and policymakers to push for progressive disability laws and funding for AT accessibility.

Advocacy & Legal Rights for PwDs

- Guided participants on effective advocacy strategies, particularly in engaging policymakers.

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- Educated attendees on legal rights and disability laws in Pakistan, urging a unified effort for policy reforms.

Assistive Technology: Innovation & Accessibility

- Explained the definition and significance of AT, showcasing real-world applications.

Stressed the need for:

- Localized manufacturing of AT devices.
 - Improved sourcing & affordability.
 - Public-private partnerships to expand accessibility.
 - Universal Design & Accessibility
-
- Emphasized the importance of well-designed infrastructure, including ramps, accessible washrooms, and transport facilities.
 - Introduced universal design principles, ensuring AT and public spaces cater to diverse disabilities.

Interactive Engagement

- The session fostered collaborative dialogue, with participants—including visually impaired attendees—sharing their personal experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

Discussions centered on:

- Overcoming barriers to education, employment, and mobility.
- The importance of customized assistive solutions rather than one-size-fits-all medical aids.

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- The need for research-driven AT solutions aligned with local requirements.

4. Closing Session

Remarks by Mr. Rizwan

- Expressed gratitude to STEP, PILC, and DWA for organizing an insightful and impactful session.
- Recognized Mr. Atif Sheikh's contributions in advocating for disability inclusion and AT policy advancements.
- Encouraged ongoing engagement between OPDs and policymakers to drive meaningful change.

Cultural Highlight

- The event concluded with a vibrant Sindhi cultural performance, celebrating Pakistan's diverse communities and promoting cultural inclusivity.

5. Key Takeaways & Way Forward

Empowering OPDs Through AT & Capacity Building

- AT is a game-changer for PwDs, enabling independent living, education, and employment.
- Strengthening OPDs' advocacy skills will play a pivotal role in shaping inclusive policies.

Bridging Gaps in AT Accessibility

- There is a pressing need for affordable, need-based assistive devices tailored to local environments.
- Public-private partnerships must be strengthened to reduce import dependency and promote local AT development.

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Policy Reforms & Inclusive Infrastructure

- Policy loopholes need urgent attention, including outdated disability laws and weak enforcement mechanisms.
- Infrastructure modifications should prioritize universal design, ensuring independent accessibility for PwDs.

Sustaining Momentum Through Collaboration

- Future consultations, training workshops, and networking events should be prioritized to continue building stronger OPDs and expanding AT accessibility in Pakistan.
- This session was a significant step in advancing disability rights and inclusion in Pakistan, and we look forward to continued engagement with all stakeholders to drive meaningful impact.

This initiative is part of the AT2030 programme, funded by UK Aid, focused on testing scalable solutions to build sustainable AT ecosystems globally.

Together, we can create a future where Assistive Technologies are accessible to all!

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