YOUTH2030

United Nations Youth Office

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

International Labour Organization

UNPRPD FUND — Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

unicef — for every child

UNFPA

UN WOMEN

unitar — United Nations Institute for Training and Research

IDA International Disability Alliance

GN YPWD — GLOBAL NETWORK OF YOUNG PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Believe in Better:

Shaping the future through the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities

December 2023

Foreword

An estimated 16% of the world's population—approximately 1.3 billion people—live with some form of disability.[i] As of 1990, the estimated number of young persons with disabilities aged 10-24 years old was 180 to 220 million,[ii] with 80% estimated to live in developing countries. However, updated data on young persons with disabilities remains scarce. Engaging with the perspectives of young persons with disabilities introduces invaluable depth, creativity, and energy, ensuring that policies and decisions resonate with their specific interests and needs. By centering the voices of young persons with disabilities, we not only diversify and rejuvenate activism in the respective sectors, but also strengthen solidarity for more inclusive solutions and sustainable development within society. This is why it is essential that we commit to meaningfully engage young persons with disabilities, and to identify and address the multi-faceted barriers that they face.

To do this, we must start by strengthening the evidence base, especially in developing countries where the majority of young persons with disabilities live. Having consistent, updated, and reliable data is a prerequisite for the meaningful engagement of youth in all their diversity. In this context, this timely research seeks to begin the process of establishing a solid basis for informed and evidence-based decision-making and policymaking, in a way that builds on the experiences and expertise of young persons with disabilities.

With ongoing conflicts, rising geopolitical tensions, and increasing inequalities, 2024 is a critical year for multilateralism. As we shape the future we want, including through the Pact for the Future, it is integral that we put young people who are left furthest behind at the center of these efforts. Young persons with disabilities remain among the least represented in national, regional, and international decision-making spaces. Persistent social stigma, marginalization, and lack of accessibility severely limit their access to inclusive education, dignified employment, humanitarian assistance, and political participation. This further affects their rights to exercise their agency and autonomy, and to enjoy a life free from violence. Despite these structural barriers, this research shows how young persons with disabilities around the world are leading bold and transformative initiatives, not only related to disability inclusion, but also on peacebuilding, gender equality, health and wellbeing, climate action, and innovation.

This report is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), and Youth2030, the UN Youth Strategy. The document provides an overview of statistics on young persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24, identifies the main barriers for their participation in decision-making spaces, and highlights the efforts and challenges of the UN system in promoting their rights. The targeted recommendations pave the way for UN and government entities alike to work together with young persons with disabilities and bolster their meaningful engagement in decision-making processes at all levels—with social accountability at the heart of these efforts.

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[i] World Health Organization (WHO). Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities. Available online: ▶ www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600.
[ii] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "Disability: Youth with disabilities."
    Available online: ▶ www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/youth-with-disabilities.html#prevalence.

We recognize that young people are a diverse social group, and we are committed to understanding more about how age, disability, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and migratory status (among other factors) impact their lived experiences and the barriers they encounter in fulfilling their potential, and the capacities they hold to survive, thrive, and transform their lives and their communities.

We hope that this report will inspire action by all stakeholders to reassess their own work for youth engagement, disability inclusion, and gender equality, and to work alongside with young persons with disabilities. This document should bolster proactive changes that put the needs and expertise of youth with disabilities front and center, ensuring that no young person is left behind.

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Acknowledgements

This report was developed within the framework of Youth2030, the United Nations (UN) Youth Strategy launched by the Secretary-General in 2018. It represents the third instalment in the series of "Believe in Better" reports, continuing the UN's commitment to empowering young individuals globally.

The development and coordination of this report was led by the UN Youth Office, the Youth2030 Joint Working Group, and their Task Team on Young People with Disabilities. This task team includes representatives from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA); the UN Youth Office; the World Health Organization (WHO); the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); the International Labour Organization (ILO); the International Telecommunication Union (ITU); the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO); the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC); the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance (DMSPC); the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR); the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) Multi-Partner Trust Fund; the International Disability Alliance (IDA)'s Youth Committee; and the Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities (GNYPWD).

This process was led by the United Nations Youth Office: the leading team was comprised of Manuela Rubianogroot Arias (Disability Inclusion and Gender Focal Point), Marija Vasileva-Blazev (Special Adviser), and Sudha Balakrishnan (Youth2030 Team Lead). The report was researched and written by the Center for Inclusive Policy (CIP). The research team was comprised of Alberto Vásquez Encalada, Daniel Mont, María Antonella Pereira, Jaclyn Lourdes Yap, Maia Bagrationi, and Maia Tsuladze. Additional research support was provided by Sabitri Dahal, Stephanie Willman Bordat, Saida Kouzzi, and Silvana Queija de la Sotta.

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Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CFM	Child Functioning Module
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
DMSPC	Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance
EPR	Employment-population ratio
GDP	Gross domestic product
GNYPWD	Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health
ICT	Information and communication technology
IDA	International Disability Alliance
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPUMS	Integrated Public Use Microdata Series
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex. The 'plus' is used to signify all of the gender identities and sexual orientations not specifically covered by the other five initials.
MICS	Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPD	Organization of persons with disabilities
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UNCT	United Nations Country Teams
UNDIS	United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNITAR	United Nations Institute for Training and Research
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNPRPD	UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi-Partner Trust Fund
WG	The Washington Group on Disability Statistics
WG-SS	Washington Group Short Set of Questions
WHO	World Health Organization
WIPO	World Intellectual Property Organization
YPS	Youth, Peace, and Security

Executive summary

This "Believe in Better" report focuses on young persons with disabilities, situated at the intersection of youth, disability, and gender equality movements, yet often overlooked in these sectors. The experiences of this social group, marked by the dynamics of youth, disability, and gender, among others, are pivotal for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and building an inclusive society, as per the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The report aims to map the global prevalence and key socio-demographic characteristics of young persons with disabilities (aged 15 to 24), identify the principal challenges and barriers for their meaningful participation in decision-making spaces, underscore the efforts and challenges of the UN system in addressing their rights, and offer targeted recommendations for improving their engagement in decision-making processes.

Commissioned by the UN Youth Office, the Youth2030 Joint Working Group, and their Task Team on Young People with Disabilities, the report aligns with the UN Youth Strategy (Youth2030) and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS). It was developed through a consultative process involving UN entities, government entities, youth organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), and young persons with disabilities.

The report is divided into six chapters. The first chapter describes the research methodology. The second chapter presents demographic and socio-economic data about young persons with disabilities. The third chapter explores how young persons with disabilities participate in decision-making. The fourth chapter identifies the challenges and barriers they face in participation. The fifth chapter discusses promising strategies to increase their involvement. The sixth chapter proposes recommendations to enhance the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making.

Methodology

The preparation of this report involved a comprehensive research process conducted from June to October 2023. This process combined various methods, encompassing desk research, secondary data analysis in 46 countries, an online survey in 40 countries, and a deep-dive analysis with focus group discussions and key informant interviews in six countries.

Young persons with disabilities: Who and where are they?

Despite increased data on children and adults with disabilities, information on young persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24 is scarce. This report aims to fill this gap using censuses and household surveys with internationally comparable disability questions, focusing on disability prevalence rates; education, labour, and communication indicators; and gender inequalities. The report utilizes the Washington Group Short Set of Questions (WG-SS)[1] and the WG/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (CFM)[2] to identify young persons with disabilities.

The prevalence of disabilities among young persons aged 15 to 24 in 46 countries, where data was available, varies. The estimates range from less than 1 per cent to 7.6 per cent, with median disability

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[1] Washington Group on Disability Statistics, WG Short Set on Functioning (WG-SS), ▸ www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/.
[2] Washington Group on Disability Statistics, WG/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (CFM), ▸ www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-unicef-child-functioning-module-cfm/.

prevalence of 2.3 per cent and a population-weighted average disability prevalence of 1.9 per cent. While these estimates are generally comparable to other studies looking at a similar age range, they may underestimate disability among young people.

Socio-demographic indicators reveal disparities in education, employment, and information and communication technology (ICT) access. Young persons with disabilities are less likely to have received formal education, with an average of 29 per cent never attending school. They also face challenges in literacy, employment, and access to ICT, with significant gaps between them and their peers without disabilities. Young women with disabilities often face more challenges because of the combined impact of their gender and disability. The report highlights the need for more comprehensive data collection tools and emphasizes the disparities in education, employment, and ICT access for young persons with disabilities.

How do young persons with disabilities participate in decision-making?

This report also explores how young persons with disabilities contribute to decision-making processes. Meaningful youth engagement is defined as active and effective involvement in processes impacting young people's lives, characterized by information sharing, dialogue, mutual respect, and shared decision-making.

The report reveals a perceived infrequency in government interactions with young persons with disabilities, with a divergence in perspectives between the youth and government representatives. Most young persons with disabilities report low levels of engagement from the government, with 57.9 per cent stating that it happens rarely or never, 33.9 per cent sometimes, and only 8.3 per cent very often. Young women with disabilities report lower government engagement than their male counterparts. Government engagement often focuses narrowly on disability or youth-related issues. A limited understanding of meaningful engagement among government representatives and a lack of standardized procedures and motivation are significant barriers.

The report notes the UN's role in fostering disability inclusion and engaging young persons with disabilities in decision-making. While the UN is perceived by young persons with disabilities as more inclusive than governmental agencies, there are still areas needing improvement, such as sustaining engagement and broadening participation beyond disability-focused programmes. The adoption of the UNDIS has seemingly instigated greater attention to disability issues and a change in ways of working.

Most young persons with disabilities who participated in the survey reported active engagement in civil society and youth movements. OPDs were rated more positively than youth and women's organizations, highlighting the need to promote engagement outside disability-focused circles.

Challenges and barriers to participation: What needs to change?

The challenges in engaging young persons with disabilities in decision-making are multifaceted. The stigma and stereotypes associated with both disability and youth are significant barriers. The prevailing medical and charity approaches to disability view persons with disabilities as mere recipients of protection or assistance. Young persons are often seen as inexperienced or immature, leading to the devaluation or dismissal of their inputs. Moreover, the prevalent culture of overprotection towards young persons with disabilities, particularly young women with disabilities, significantly hampers their involvement in decision-making processes.

Other barriers that hinder the creation of youth-friendly processes include gender-based discrimination, lack of awareness, lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodation, multiple layers of marginalization, barriers to adequate representation, and legal and policy barriers. Tokenistic approaches, narrow thematic focus, and superficial levels of engagement are prevalent. There is also a

disparity between the engagement levels of OPDs and young persons with disabilities themselves.

The report emphasizes the need for consistent and comprehensive engagement across all sectors to ensure meaningful participation. The deep-dive analysis in the six selected countries points to a need for awareness raising, better support mechanisms, including funding, and more expertise on meaningful engagement with young persons with disabilities.

Supporting the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities: What works?

The report discusses strategies to enhance the engagement of young persons with disabilities. These include:

◆ Ensuring close consultation across different thematic initiatives
◆ Fostering dialogue opportunities
◆ Inviting young persons with disabilities into coordination and advisory structures
◆ Inviting young persons with disabilities into programmatic and project structures
◆ Fostering partnerships and collaboration
◆ Promoting capacity building and training
◆ Supporting youth-led initiatives

The UN's role is highlighted as crucial and case examples are provided. There is a call for more sustained and inclusive programmes, and formal mechanisms for decision-making and youth leadership. Moreover, the report underscores the need for a more robust, self-sustaining engagement framework that extends beyond the good intentions of UN staff.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are presented to governments and UN Country Teams:

Disability-inclusive national policies

(a) Conduct comprehensive data collection and research on the situation of young persons with disabilities, particularly young women with disabilities, covering both urban and rural areas.
(b) Review and update existing legislation and policies to eliminate discrimination against young persons with disabilities, including young women and LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities. Collaborate with young persons with disabilities and their organizations to identify policy gaps and promote policy change.
(c) Increase investments and enhance access for young persons with disabilities to rights and services, particularly in education, sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial support, and employment, strengthening policy responses to provide inclusive education, prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and develop community support systems.[3]
(d) Foster the inclusion of young persons with disabilities in all government and UN initiatives, adopting a twin-track approach for effective inclusion, building partnerships with local authorities and civil society organizations, and promoting the employment of young persons with disabilities, including through paid internships and volunteer programmes.

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[3] Community support systems refer to a network of services, people, and products that enable persons with disabilities to carry out activities of daily living and actively participate in their communities. See, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Support systems to ensure community inclusion of persons with disabilities, including as a means of building forward better after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, A/HRC/52/52, 2023.

Meaningful engagement in decision-making

(e) Actively prioritize the rights and interests of young persons with disabilities by meaningfully engaging them in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes. This should involve implementing an intersectional approach that encompasses their diverse experiences, including those from underrepresented groups.

(f) Promote and value the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making structures, such as advisory boards and councils. Their involvement should be acknowledged through appropriate recognition and compensation.

(g) Facilitate platforms and forums where young persons with disabilities can engage with each other, deliberate on public policies, share their insights on both disability-specific and general topics, and connect with wider networks for youth, persons with disabilities, and women's rights.

(h) Guarantee the full accessibility of all decision-making processes, including information, communications, digital platforms, and physical environments. Provide the necessary support and accommodations for the full participation of young persons with disabilities, accounting for factors such as gender, age, disability, and location.

(i) Support initiatives and projects led by young persons with disabilities, including through training, technical assistance, and financial support.

(j) Allocate adequate funding to secure the sustained engagement of young persons with disabilities and establish robust follow-up mechanisms to oversee the fulfilment of government and UN commitments to young persons with disabilities.

Awareness and capacity building

(k) Elevate public awareness on the rights and dignity of young persons with disabilities, including among families, policymakers, and the media, challenging societal norms that perpetuate ableism, adultism, gender-based discrimination, and other forms of oppression and stigma.

(l) Conduct capacity-building initiatives aimed at cultivating young people's skills in leadership, advocacy, communication, and technology, and train government and UN representatives to engage effectively with them.

(m) Extend technical assistance to young persons with disabilities in their advocacy, including support for establishing youth-led disability organizations.

UN mechanisms and processes

(n) Review UN Country Teams strategies, procedures, focal point roles, and procurement processes to bolster the engagement of young persons with disabilities, including those from underrepresented groups.

(o) Ensure the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in UN Country Team processes, including Cooperation Frameworks, Common Country Analysis, and the implementation and monitoring of Youth 2030 and the UNDIS.

(p) Enhance coordination and monitoring mechanisms to assess the involvement of young persons with disabilities in UN programmes and projects, emphasizing accountability and encouraging synergies among thematic groups.

(q) Raise awareness of UN partners to prioritize the involvement of young persons with disabilities in programmes and projects.

Introduction

Young persons with disabilities stand at the critical intersection of youth, disability, and gender, among other dynamics. Yet, they are often overlooked within those broader movements and fall in the gaps of policy frameworks, leaving their views unexpressed and their concerns unmet. Additionally, while persons with disabilities represent an estimated 1.3 billion people worldwide,[4] the lack of harmonized data concerning youth aged 15 to 24 impedes a consistent understanding of their situation, further emphasizing the need for focused attention on this group.

The experiences of young persons with disabilities, which reflect the dynamism and challenges of both being a young person and having the experience of disability, are essential for achieving the commitment to "Leave No One Behind" as set forth in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These experiences are also crucial to construct an inclusive society that embraces human diversity, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Engaging with young persons with disabilities introduces invaluable depth, creativity, and energy, ensuring that policies and decisions resonate with their specific interests and needs. By centring their voices, we not only diversify and rejuvenate activism in the respective sectors, but also strengthen solidarity for more inclusive solutions within society. To achieve true equality, an intersectional approach is necessary, recognizing that social challenges cannot be simply separated nor addressed by siloed group identities. This perspective is crucial for advocacy in human rights, especially for youth with disabilities.

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[4] World Health Organization. (2022). *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons With Disabilities*. Geneva. Retrieved from ▶ www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600.

This report presents an overview of the situation of young persons with disabilities and their engagement in decision-making processes, emphasizing the vital intersection between youth, disability, and gender. It further seeks to strengthen the capacities of the UN system and governments to meaningfully engage with young persons with disabilities, and support initiatives that address their specific experiences and needs.

The report's objectives include:

◆ **Mapping the global prevalence and key socio-demographic characteristics of young persons with disabilities.**

◆ **Identifying the principal challenges and barriers for the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making spaces.**

◆ **Underscoring the UN system's efforts and challenges in addressing the rights of young persons with disabilities.**

◆ **Offering targeted recommendations for the UN system and governments, and spotlighting opportunities and good practices, to improve the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in decision-making.**

Commissioned by the UN Youth Office, the Youth2030 Joint Working Group, and the Youth2030 Task Team on Young People with Disabilities, the report is a part of the "Believe in Better" series of publications and aligns with the UN Youth Strategy (Youth 2030) and the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS). Both frameworks emphasize the principle of equality and inclusion. The research in this report was developed through a consultative process involving UN entities and UN Country Teams, government entities, youth organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities, and young persons with disabilities.

The report is divided into six chapters. Chapter I elaborates on the research methodology, encompassing research design, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations. Chapter II provides insights into the demographics and socio-economic circumstances of young persons with disabilities. Chapter III explores the role of young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes and activism. Chapter IV identifies the challenges they encounter and evaluates the barriers to their participation. Chapter V discusses promising practices that bolster their engagement. Finally, Chapter VI concludes with strategic recommendations to enhance the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making.

1. Methodology

The preparation of this report involved a comprehensive research process conducted from June to October 2023. This process combined various methods, encompassing desk research, secondary data analysis in 46 countries, an online survey in 40 countries, and a deep-dive analysis with focus group discussions and key informant interviews in six countries. This chapter elaborates on the research methodology.

1.1.   Research design

The research design was comprised of four main components:

◆ **Desk research** of relevant reports, documents, and literature on participation of young persons with disabilities.

◆ **Secondary data analysis** of available census and survey data pertaining to persons with disabilities.

◆ An **online survey** targeting various stakeholders to understand challenges and barriers related to the rights and participation of young persons with disabilities.

◆ **Qualitative data collection** involving a diverse set of stakeholders, aiming to provide a broad range of perspectives.

1.2.   Data collection and analysis

Desk research

This component included two main steps: (1) a rapid literature review in English, Spanish, and French concerning the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making (major databases reviewed included ERIC, Scopus, CINAHL, PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, and Cochrane Library); and (2) a review of grey literature centred on UN reports, documents, and other pertinent materials, including content from organizations representing persons with disabilities and youth networks.

Secondary data analysis

This component sought to determine the disability prevalence in individuals aged 15 to 24 using internationally standardized censuses and household surveys. It also compared education, labour, and communication indicators between those with and without disabilities, and emphasized gender disparities.

The analysis included only censuses and surveys that utilize (1) the Washington Group (WG) Short Set (WG-SS) questions[5] covering six domains (seeing, hearing, walking, cognition, self-care, communication); (2) functional difficulty questions similar to WG-SS that cover four to six domains of the WGSS, but may differ in the wording of the question or responses (modified WG-SS); and (3) the WG/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (WG/UNICEF CFM)[6]. An initial list was identified using the following portals and reports: Disability Data Initiative 2021 and 2022 Report; UNICEF Seen, Counted, Included Report 2021; UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2020; UN Disability and Development Report 2018; the Disability Data Portal; and UN Statistics Division Disability Statistics.

[5] Washington Group on Disability Statistics, WG Short Set on Functioning (WG-SS), ▶ www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/.
[6] Washington Group on Disability Statistics, WG/UNICEF Child Functioning Module (CFM), ▶ www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-unicef-child-functioning-module-cfm/.

The WG/UNICEF CFM for youth aged 5 to 17 covers 11 domains: six core functional domains (with separate questions on remembering and concentrating) and domains on accepting change, controlling behaviour, making friends, anxiety, and depression. For the current research analysis, only the six core functional domains (a subset of the WG/UNICEF CFM that covers the WG-SS domains) were used to ensure uniformity of the instrument when aggregating at the age group of interest. Surveys that use questions such as the general disability questions, activities of daily living (ADLs), and broad activity limitation were excluded for uniformity. Another consideration for exclusion was the sample size of the age group of interest.

Based on these criteria, the dataset for analysis was shortlisted to the Census, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), and the Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey (MICS) wave 6, collected from 2009 to 2021. These publicly available data were retrieved from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) website, and the UNICEF website. A total of 46 country datasets representing different regions and collected between 2009 and 2019 were included in the study **(Table 1.1).**

Table 1.1. Number of countries in sample, by region

Region	Number of Countries
Africa	22
Asia Pacific	12
Europe and Central Asia	2
Latin America and the Caribbean	10
TOTAL	**46**

Some censuses adjusted the WG-SS questionnaire in terms of question phrasing, response options, and functional domains. Only those that aligned with the United Nations Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses were analysed. For data on youth aged 15 to 24 from the MICS, information from the WG/UNICEF CFM (age 15 to 17) and WG-SS (age 18 to 24) was combined, emphasizing the six core functional domains present in both tools for consistency. The prevalence rates for the different samples were first estimated separately and then aggregated using demographic weights to come up with a single prevalence rate for the sample country.

While the MICS datasets aid in estimating disability prevalence for the age group of interest, they were not used for further disaggregation due to two main challenges: (1) the design of the MICS diminishes the sample size, especially for certain age groups; and (2) the segregation of disability questions across different questionnaires complicates the computation of accurate standard errors. Notwithstanding, it is important to clarify that the MICS collects information on a wide variety of indicators, including education and communication. Moreover, because the main objective of the MICS is to collect information to monitor the progress of SDGs aimed at improving the situation of women and children around the world, disaggregation by disability status for women and children is possible, but is beyond the scope of this study.

For the analysis of the socio-demographic indicators, only estimates for indicators with at least 100 observations in each group of young persons with disabilities and without disabilities are presented to ensure reliable estimates and to minimize sampling errors. The sample size condition becomes restrictive when different intersectionalities are considered (for example, with young women with disabilities). Further, the MICS data is excluded in the disaggregation and, as such, analyses for education and information and communication technology (ICT) indicators were limited to DHS and census data with sufficient sample size. Additionally, for employment indicators, estimation is only feasible using census data due to sample size constraints in other surveys. Simple averages are calculated across available sample countries and are presented in each figure/table.

Online survey

An online survey targeting young persons with disabilities, UN Country Team representatives, and government representatives was distributed in 40 countries **(Table 1.2)**. These countries were selected based on regional balance; within-region variation, including geographic, language, income, and population size; consideration of humanitarian contexts; Youth2030 and UNDIS reporting, which track progress in the implementation of these system-wide strategies;[7] availability of United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) country analysis; and feasibility of implementation.

Table 1.2. Selected countries in the online survey

Africa	Asia Pacific	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and the Caribbean	Arab States
Angola	Bangladesh	Georgia	Argentina	Iraq
Cameroon	Cambodia	Kyrgyzstan	Bolivia	Jordan
Democratic Republic of the Congo	China	Moldova	Brazil	Mauritania
Eswatini	Fiji	North Macedonia	Colombia	Somalia
Gambia	Nepal	Uzbekistan	Guatemala	Tunisia
Ghana	Mongolia		Haiti	
Kenya	Philippines		Mexico	
Mali	Viet Nam		Trinidad and Tobago	
Mozambique				
Sierra Leone				
South Africa				
South Sudan				
Tanzania				
Togo				

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7 See, United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, Secretary-General's Report, ▶ www.un.org/en/disabilitystrategy/sgreport; United Nations, Youth2030: A Global Progress Report, 2023, ▶ www.unyouth2030.com/progressreport.

The survey was made available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic. Overall, a total of 608 individuals from these 40 countries participated in the survey, including 285 young persons with disabilities, 174 UN Country Team representatives, and 149 government representatives **(Table 1.3)**.

Table 1.3. Participants in the online survey

	Young Persons with Disabilities	Government Employees	UN Country Team Employees
Female	133	75	113
Male	139	65	59
Non-binary / other	2	1	0
Indigenous persons	114	N/A	N/A
LGBTQI+ persons	11	N/A	N/A
TOTAL	**285**	**149**	**174**

Note: Among the respondents, 22 did not declare their gender; this includes 11 young persons with disabilities, 8 government employees, and 3 UNCT staff.

Qualitative data collection

This component of the research design included a deep-dive analysis in six of the 40 countries from the online survey: Georgia, Guatemala, Jordan, Kenya, Mali, and Nepal. This ensured representation from each of the five regions.

Activities involved 19 focus groups and eight in-depth interviews with target groups, including young persons with disabilities, organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), youth networks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UN staff, and government officials. Two additional focus groups were held with international stakeholders, including UN representatives and international OPDs and youth networks. A total of 118 individuals participated in the focus groups and interviews. This included 27 young persons with disabilities, 40 UN staff, 11 government representatives, and 40 representatives from NGOs, OPDs and youth networks **(Table 1.4)**.

Table 1.4. Participants in focus groups and interviews

	Young Persons with Disabilities	UN Employees	Government Employees	NGOs/OPDs/ Youth Networks
Female	15	9	9	27
Male	12	31	2	13
TOTAL	**27**	**40**	**11**	**40**

1.3.   Ethical considerations

Throughout the research, adherence to ethical standards was paramount. Consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities and data were kept confidential. Every participant in the study received an informed consent form ahead of their engagement. This form detailed the research's objectives, its broader application, and contact information for the research team. Additionally, it outlined the measures in place to safeguard the confidentiality of the participant's data. When involving participants under age 18, consent was diligently obtained from both the individual and their parent or guardian. Special care was taken to respect the autonomy, freedom of choice, and expression of these younger participants.

Ensuring the accessibility and understanding of survey tools was a priority. Throughout the research, efforts were made to ensure accessibility and provide reasonable accommodation, allowing all participants, regardless of their disabilities, to partake comfortably and safely. For this purpose, a web platform with advanced accessibility functions was used for the survey. Likewise, an easy-to-read version of the survey was developed. With the support of Inclusion International, focus groups were held with persons with intellectual disabilities to better understand the accessibility needs of that group.

1.4.   Limitations

While every effort was made to avoid limitations and biases during the research, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this report. The existing literature lacks data regarding the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making, a limitation observable even in UN reports. Consequently, grey literature became a valuable resource to bridge this information gap and provide additional insights.

While recognising that the meaning of "youth" varies across the world, this study used the UN definition: persons aged 15 to 24. Therefore, the data collection and analysis for this report was limited to this age group.

For the secondary data analysis, obtaining censuses and surveys focusing on young persons with disabilities was challenging due to their limited availability, public access, and sample size. This means that the countries included are non-random and may vary widely in terms of population size, income, level of development, and legislation, among other factors. Moreover, although the WG/UNICEF CFM includes additional questions for those aged 15 to 17, only the six core functional domains were included in the estimates here to maintain a consistent definition of disability and thereby allow for aggregation and comparison. This unavoidably excludes persons with functional difficulty in other domains, such as the psycho-social domain, which includes anxiety and depression, thereby underestimating the disability prevalence.[8,9] Finally, the censuses and household surveys used do not cover individuals who do not reside in a household, such as those who are in social care or mental health institutions or are unhoused.

The analysis censuses and surveys also have some limitations. First, since the number of national datasets is limited, it is not possible to generate statistics on young persons with disabilities that are regionally or globally representative. Second, because large-scale household surveys and censuses were used to estimate basic indicators such as education and employment, the results may not be

[8] UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included: Using Data to Shed Light on the Well-Being of Children with Disabilities,* 2021.

[9] Cappa, C., Mont, D., Loeb, M., Misunas, C., Madans, J., Comic, T., & de Castro, F. (2018). The development and testing of a module on child functioning for identifying children with disabilities on surveys. III: Field testing. Disability and health journal, 11(4), 510–518.

Photo credit: © UNFPA Mozambique / Mbuto Machili.

directly comparable to other statistics estimated using specialized surveys (such as labour force surveys or education-focused surveys) designed primarily to capture nuances in these subject areas. For example, determining literacy in education-focused surveys uses various tools, whereas literacy is often self-reported in censuses.

More work needs to be done in analysing the situation of young persons with multiple functional difficulties by types of difficulties, and among those experiencing functional difficulties that are not at the level used internationally to identify persons with disabilities in surveys (i.e., answering they have "some difficulty" rather than "a lot of difficulty").[10] Other intersectionalities beyond age and gender – such as immigration status, race, and ethnicity – should also be considered.

The online survey's sample size is not statistically significant to infer quantitative conclusions about stakeholders. However, it facilitates the identification of emerging trends and challenges. This limitation, along with varying response rates among different stakeholders and countries, rendered some assessments unfeasible. In addition, employing online surveys which are reliant on self-reporting and internet access may induce sampling biases. The predominant access to participants through UN Country Team networks may have further influenced respondent demographics. It is plausible that the experiences of those facing severe adversities, including institutionalization,[11] remain unrepresented. Furthermore, the provision of the online survey in seven major languages (English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, and Arabic) could not cover every language of the potential participants, posing an additional hurdle. Consequently, this may have dissuaded some from participating or compelled others to use a non-preferred language, potentially impacting response precision and subtlety.

Lastly, while focus groups and interviews strived to encompass diverse viewpoints from young persons with disabilities, UN staff, government officials, and various advocates, significant efforts were indispensable to secure participant engagement. To enhance participation tracking, local languages of each country were utilized. However, some participants abstained from attending focus groups. Although a spectrum of perspectives was recorded, dialogues with more representatives without disabilities would have been beneficial to gain broader insights.

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[10] Hanass-Hancock, J., Kamalakannan, S., Murthy, G. V. S., Palmer, M., Pinilla-Roncancio, M., Rivas Velarde, M., Tetali, S., Mitra, S. (2023). What cut-off(s) to use with the Washington Group short set of questions? *Disability and Health Journal,* 16(4), 101499. ▶ https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2023.101499.

[11] Institutionalization refers to being placed in an institution where residents are often isolated from the broader community and do not have choice and control over their lives and decisions affecting them. Institutionalization contradicts the right of persons with disabilities to live independently and be included in the community. See, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies, 2022.

2. Young persons with disabilities: Who and where are they?

Despite the recent increase in standardized data on children and adults with disabilities, data on young persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24 remains limited. This chapter aims to fill this gap by documenting the prevalence of disabilities among young persons aged 15 to 24 using censuses and household surveys with internationally comparable disability questions. In addition, it examines disability prevalence rates and compares education, labour, and communication indicators between persons with and without disabilities, while also highlighting gender inequalities in these areas.

2.1.   Defining and measuring disability

Disability is a social construct and results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.[12] This notion of disability is rooted on the human rights model of disability embedded in the CRPD, which represents a paradigm shift from medical and charity approaches to disability. The human rights model of disability recognizes persons with disabilities as rights-holders with equal rights, and emphasizes eliminating barriers and combatting discrimination.

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[12] CRPD, Article 1.

This understanding of disability implies that the experience of young persons with disabilities is diverse. Some persons with disabilities experience more restrictions due to the intersection of their experience or identity of disability with other factors, such as gender or age. For example, young women and girls with disabilities are less likely to attend school, hindering their literacy and formal employment opportunities. Consequently, this increases their likelihood of living in poverty. Further, compared to their male counterparts and young women without disabilities, girls with disabilities face a higher risk of experiencing all forms of violence, particularly sexual violence.[13] An intersectional approach recognizes how different factors like gender, race, ethnicity, and disability intersect to impact people's rights and daily experiences.

Identifying persons with disabilities in censuses and household surveys poses a major challenge because of a lack of consistent definitions of disability and differences in data collection methodologies across surveys.[14] This study focuses on surveys that use the WG-SS for individuals aged 15 to 24, and the WG/UNICEF CFM for those age 15 to 17.

The WG-SS reflects the concept of disability based on the ICF. It was adopted by the WG for household surveys and censuses in 2006 to address the need for reliable and internationally comparable measurements of disability. The strength of the WG-SS is its simplicity and brevity, making it suitable for both censuses and surveys.[15] However, the WG-SS was found to insufficiently identify children with developmental and psychosocial disabilities.[16] Therefore, in 2016, the WG collaborated with UNICEF to develop the CFM to identify children with disabilities aged 2 to 17.[17] The WG/UNICEF CFM is more comprehensive than WG-SS since it covers domains beyond the six core functional domains and is designed to be consistent with the notion of disability reflective of the developmental stages in a child's life.[18]

2.2.   Disability prevalence

Figure 2.1 presents the prevalence of disabilities among young persons aged 15 to 24 in 46 countries, accounting for approximately 22 per cent of the global population within the age range. The estimates range from less than 1 per cent in several countries to 7.6 per cent in Puerto Rico and 6.6 per cent in the Central African Republic. **The median disability prevalence is 2.3 per cent, the average across countries (simple average) is 2.7 per cent, and the population-weighted average is 1.9 per cent.** The population-weighted average prevalence is similar between young men and women (1.9 per cent and 1.8 per cent, respectively), although the median prevalence is higher among young men (2.5 per cent) than young women (1.8 per cent).

[13] UNFPA. (2018). *Young Persons With Disabilities: Global Study on Ending Gender-Based Violence, and Realising Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights.*

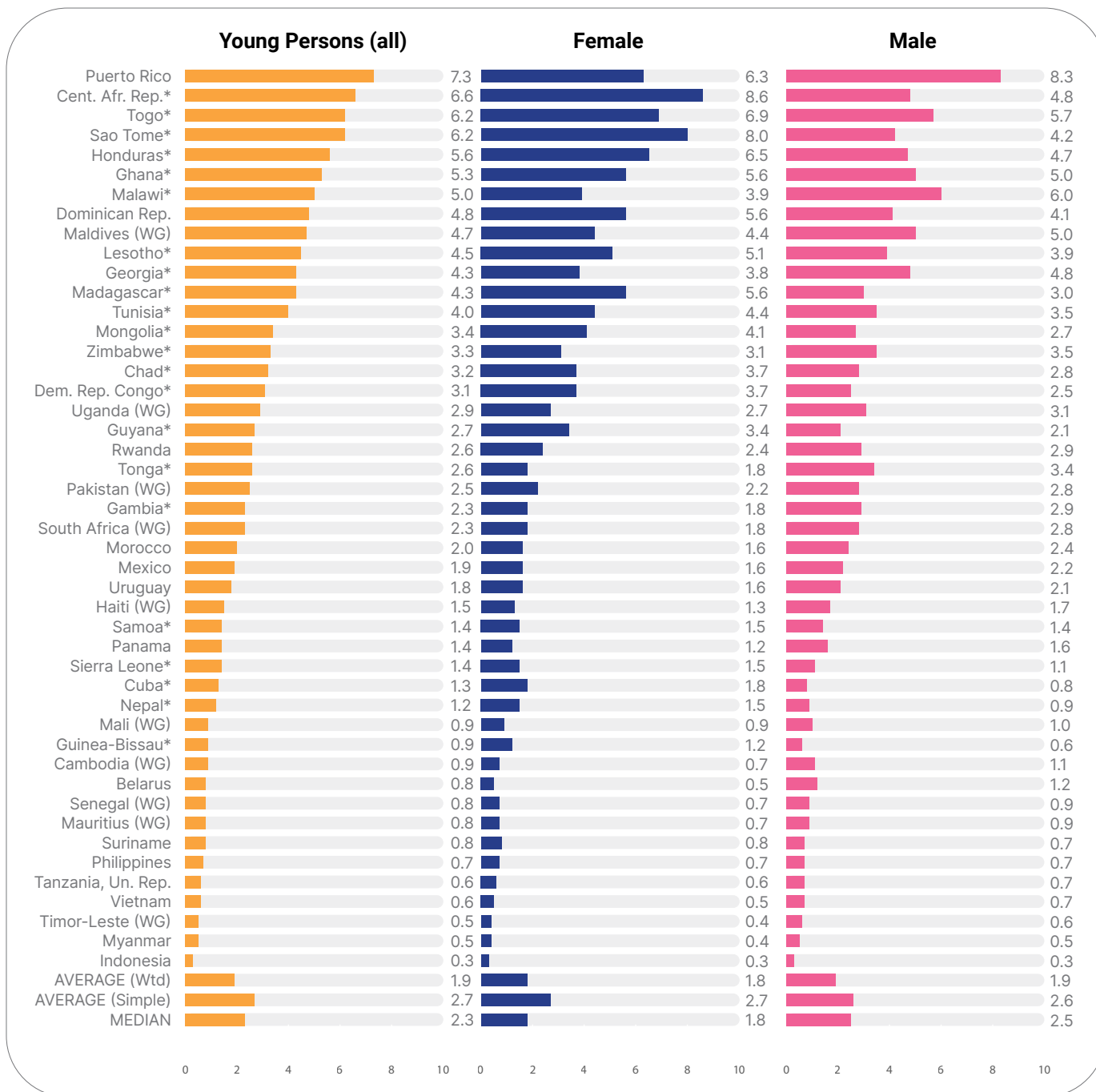[14] Cappa et al., Navigating the landscape of child disability measurement, 317–330.

[15] Washington Group on Disability Statistics. (2022). The Washington Group on Disability Statistics: Background Document. Retrieved from ▶ www.washingtongroup-disability.com/.

[16] Loeb, M., Mont, D., Cappa, C., De Palma, E., Madans, J., & Crialesi, R. (2018). The development and testing of a module on child functioning for identifying children with disabilities on surveys. I: Background. Disability and health journal, 11(4), 495–501.

[17] There are two types of WG/UNICEF CFM tools, one designed for children under age 5, and the other for older children aged 5 to 17. Throughout this section, the WG/UNICEF CFM tool for older children is what is referenced.

[18] Cappa et al., Development and Testing, 510–518.

Figure 2.1. Disability prevalence among young persons, overall and by gender

	Young Persons (all)	Female	Male
Puerto Rico	7.3	6.3	8.3
Cent. Afr. Rep.*	6.6	8.6	4.8
Togo*	6.2	6.9	5.7
Sao Tome*	6.2	8.0	4.2
Honduras*	5.6	6.5	4.7
Ghana*	5.3	5.6	5.0
Malawi*	5.0	3.9	6.0
Dominican Rep.	4.8	5.6	4.1
Maldives (WG)	4.7	4.4	5.0
Lesotho*	4.5	5.1	3.9
Georgia*	4.3	3.8	4.8
Madagascar*	4.3	5.6	3.0
Tunisia*	4.0	4.4	3.5
Mongolia*	3.4	4.1	2.7
Zimbabwe*	3.3	3.1	3.5
Chad*	3.2	3.7	2.8
Dem. Rep. Congo*	3.1	3.7	2.5
Uganda (WG)	2.9	2.7	3.1
Guyana*	2.7	3.4	2.1
Rwanda	2.6	2.4	2.9
Tonga*	2.6	1.8	3.4
Pakistan (WG)	2.5	2.2	2.8
Gambia*	2.3	1.8	2.9
South Africa (WG)	2.3	1.8	2.8
Morocco	2.0	1.6	2.4
Mexico	1.9	1.6	2.2
Uruguay	1.8	1.6	2.1
Haiti (WG)	1.5	1.3	1.7
Samoa*	1.4	1.5	1.4
Panama	1.4	1.2	1.6
Sierra Leone*	1.4	1.5	1.1
Cuba*	1.3	1.8	0.8
Nepal*	1.2	1.5	0.9
Mali (WG)	0.9	0.9	1.0
Guinea-Bissau*	0.9	1.2	0.6
Cambodia (WG)	0.9	0.7	1.1
Belarus	0.8	0.5	1.2
Senegal (WG)	0.8	0.7	0.9
Mauritius (WG)	0.8	0.7	0.9
Suriname	0.8	0.8	0.7
Philippines	0.7	0.7	0.7
Tanzania, Un. Rep.	0.6	0.6	0.7
Vietnam	0.6	0.5	0.7
Timor-Leste (WG)	0.5	0.4	0.6
Myanmar	0.5	0.4	0.5
Indonesia	0.3	0.3	0.3
AVERAGE (Wtd)	1.9	1.8	1.9
AVERAGE (Simple)	2.7	2.7	2.6
MEDIAN	2.3	1.8	2.5

Source: author's calculation based on IPUMS, DHS, and MICS data.

Notes: Estimates were calculated using WG-SS or modified WG-SS only. WG stands for datasets with WG-SS questions. *Estimated using MICS data. The estimations were calculated using WG-SS questions from the adult male and female modules (aged 18 to 24) and a subset of the CFM for children aged 15 to 17, which were then adjusted using demographic weights to arrive at an estimate for the age group 15 to 24. Average (Wtd) is the population-weighted average, and Average (simple) is the mean prevalence across the 46 sample countries.

While these estimates are generally comparable to other studies looking at a similar age range, they may underestimate disability among young people. Overall, the simple and population-weighted average estimated for 46 countries is generally comparable to the calculation in UNESCO's Education and Disability: Analysis of Data from 49 Countries (UNESCO 2018)[19] and The Disability Data Report 2021 by Mitra and Yap (DDR 2021).[20] Both reports use data on disabilities using WG-SS for young adults aged 15 to 29. In UNESCO 2018, the simple average prevalence for 31 countries with WG-SS is 2.3%, and in DDR 2021, the simple average prevalence for 35 countries is 1.4%.[21]

However, it is difficult to compare the results here to those published in the WHO Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities (WHO 2022) and the UNICEF report Seen, Counted, Included (UNICEF 2021) for the age group of interest. The WHO 2022 report includes disability prevalence for persons aged 15 to 59 while the UNICEF 2021 report's disability estimates are for children under 18.

Photo credit: © UNCT Guatemala.

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[19] UNESCO (2018). *Education and Disability: Analysis of Data from 49 Countries.*

[20] Mitra, S., & Yap, J. (2021). *The Disability Data Report 2021. Disability Data Initiative, Fordham Research Consortium on Disability.* New York. Retrieved from ▶ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3871045.

[21] Mitra and Yap (2021) also explored alternative cut-offs for a subset of countries that did not ask yes/no answers for functional difficulty questions. Among the age group 15 to 29, they find that the median prevalence rate of "some" functional difficulties were slightly higher at 3.8% and for those with at least "a lot" of functional difficulty, the median prevalence is 1.1%.

Photo credit: © UNFPA Asia and the Pacific.

There are also differences in the tools and methodologies for defining disability, which contribute to the variance in the estimates. The data for the WHO 2022 report comes from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study conducted by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME). Whereas the WG-SS directly asks about difficulty for six core functional domains, the GBD combines data on disease conditions and injuries from multiple sources and assigns severity levels to the conditions and injuries to model disability rates.[22] The data for the UNICEF 2021 report comes from the WG/UNICEF CFM in MICS datasets. The WG/UNICEF CFM is similar to the WG-SS in its approach to measuring disability, but the number of functional domains included in the WG/UNICEF CFM is more comprehensive. The WG/UNICEF CFM was designed to address functional domains specific to children. In addition to including psychosocial domains such as anxiety and depression—the most prevalent functional difficulties among children aged 5 to 17—it also includes areas of learning and behaviour relevant to child development.[23]

To illustrate the impact of the question set used for the age group, it is helpful to compare the estimates calculated using the six core functional domains in the WG/UNICEF CFM vis-à-vis those calculated using the full WG/UNICEF CFM among persons 15 to 17. The results in **Figure 2.2** show that, across the 23 MICS countries in the sample, disability prevalences estimated using the six core functional domains in the WG/UNICEF CFM are consistently lower than those estimated using the full WG/UNICEF CFM. The estimates differ widely: disability rates calculated using the six core functional domains in WG/UNICEF CFM range between 1 and 6 per cent, whereas those estimated using the full WG/UNICEF CFM range between 4 and 28 per cent. There is also substantial variation in the difference between the two methods within each country, ranging from 3 percentage points for Belarus and Lesotho to 22 percentage points for the Central African Republic, which suggests that the level of disability prevalence that is unaccounted for when using only the six core functional domains may be large in some countries. In addition, these findings demonstrate that using the WG-SS may insufficiently identify those with disabilities among young persons. Utilizing the WG-SS Enhanced or the WG-SS Extended versions for young persons may help account for a broader definition of disability, as these data collection tools are more similar to the WG/UNICEF CFM in terms of domains covered, but they do not include domains specific to children.

[22] World Health Organization. (2022). *Global Report on Health Equity for Persons With Disabilities*. Geneva. Retrieved from ▶ www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600.
[23] UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included*.

Figure 2.2. Disability prevalence estimated using the full WG/UNICEF CFM and the six core functional domains in the WG/UNICEF CFM among persons aged 15 to 17
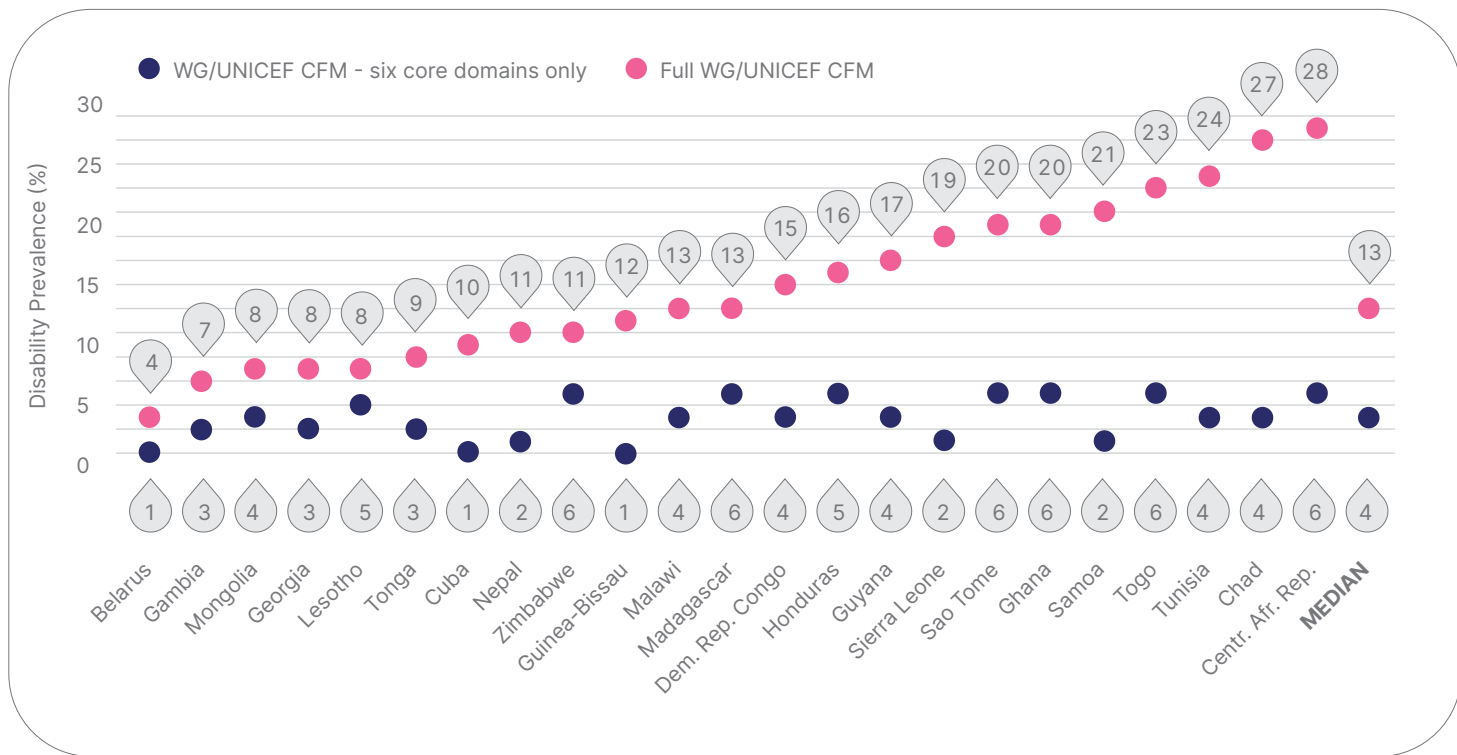
Source: MICS wave 6 data.

Note: The CFM's six core functional domains are seeing, hearing, mobility, self-care, communication, and cognition. These are the same functional domains as the WG-SS, although the questions are different as WG/UNICEF CFM was designed specifically for children. The full WG/UNICEF CFM consists of 11 domains, including the six core functional domains.

Even though the WG-SS, modified WG-SS, and the WG/UNICEF CFM questions are deemed to be comparable among the countries in the sample, differences in the method of data collection and diverse interpretations among the respondents contribute to the variation in the prevalence estimates. In some surveys, non-response may also be an issue because the respondent might not be able to participate, for instance, due to intellectual difficulties or lack of appropriate accommodations. There may also be differences regarding the interpretation of the questions in terms of awareness of the condition or other factors that the researchers do not observe.

2.3.   Socio-demographic indicators

Disability is often linked to differences in socio-economic outcomes. The following sections analyse the relationship between having a disability and access to education, employment, and information and communication technology (ICT) among young persons.

2.3.1. Education

SDG 4 calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all, including young persons. Access to quality education is essential to improving individuals' social and economic lives, gaining access to opportunities, and achieving empowerment. However, data shows a considerable educational gap between young persons with and without disabilities.

Many young persons with disabilities have not received any formal education. In all countries in the sample, the share of young persons with disabilities who have never attended school is disproportionally higher than those without disabilities. **On average, 29 per cent of young persons with disabilities have never attended school compared to 6 per cent of those without disabilities.** The share of young persons with disabilities who have never attended school ranges from 5 to 57 per cent **(Figure 2.3).**

Figure 2.3. Share of young persons who have never attended school by disability status
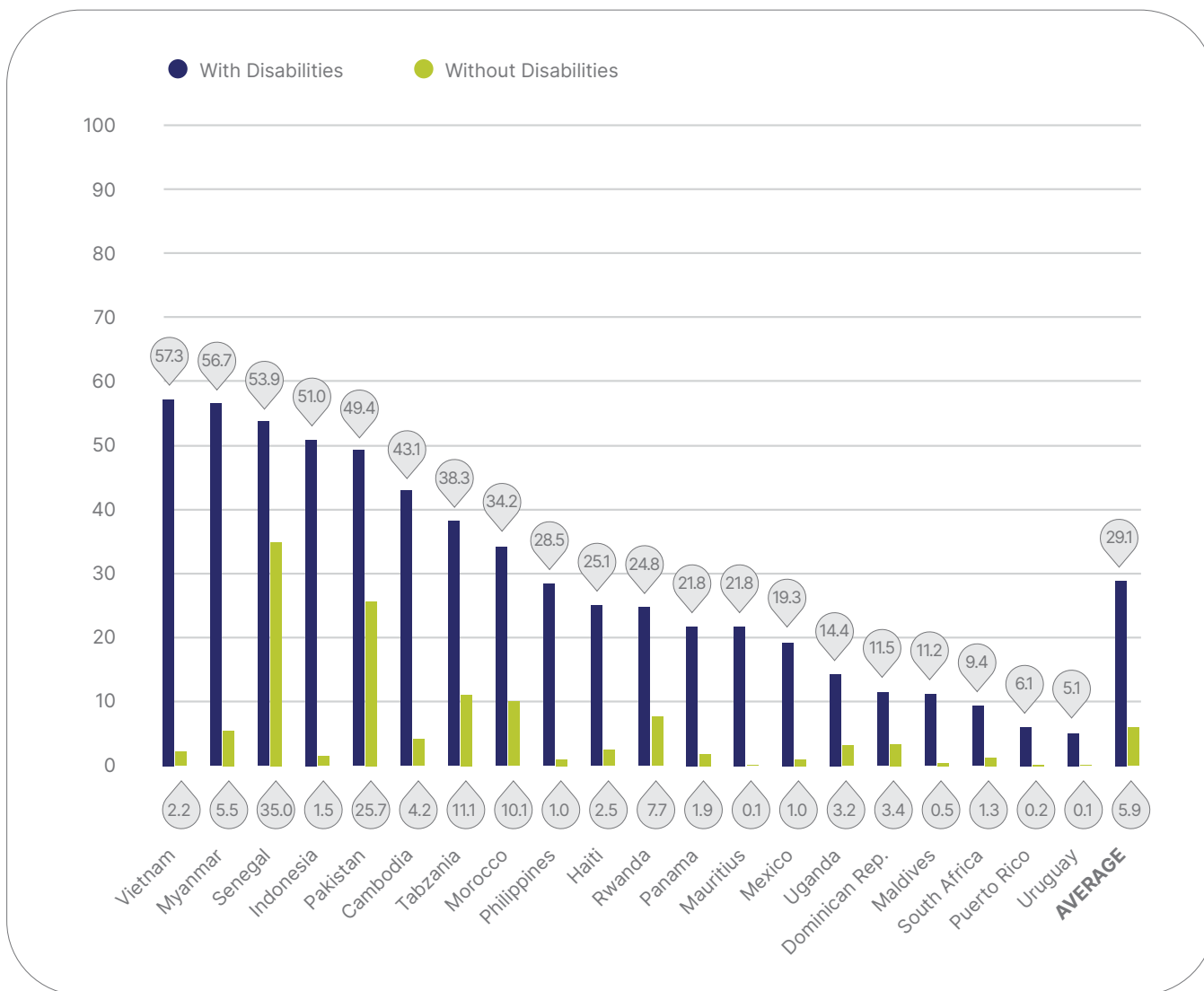
Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

In addition, young persons with disabilities who reside in rural areas are even more likely to have never attended school (35 per cent) than young persons with disabilities residing in urban areas (25 per cent) **(Table 2.1).** In the majority of the countries, the share of young women with disabilities who have never attended school is higher (ranging from 4 to 62 per cent) than young men with disabilities (ranging from 6 to 55 per cent) **(Table 2.2).**

Table 2.1. Average share of young persons who have never attended school by area of residence and disability status

	Rural			Urban		
	With Disabilities (%)	Without Disabilities (%)	Percentage Point Gap	With Disabilities (%)	Without Disabilities (%)	Percentage Point Gap
AVERAGE	35	9	26	25	4	21

Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

Table 2.2. Average share of young persons who have never attended school by gender and disability status

	Male			Female		
	With Disabilities (%)	Without Disabilities (%)	Percentage Point Gap	With Disabilities (%)	Without Disabilities (%)	Percentage Point Gap
AVERAGE	28	5	23	30	7	23

Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

Among those who are attending or have attended school in the past, gaps in education levels by disability status persist. In all sample countries, **young persons with disabilities are more likely to leave primary school without graduating than those without disabilities (Figure 2.4).** Consequently, they are less likely to complete secondary schooling or higher compared to those without disabilities **(Figure 2.6).** In addition, young persons with disabilities residing in rural areas tend to have lower levels of education than those who reside in urban areas, as living in rural areas poses significant barriers to education access, such as poverty, inadequate infrastructure (such as roads and electricity), and lack of access to public services.[24]

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[24] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Social Report: Reconsidering Rural Development,* 2021.

Figure 2.4. Share of young persons who have some primary schooling (incomplete primary) among those who have ever attended or are in school, by disability status
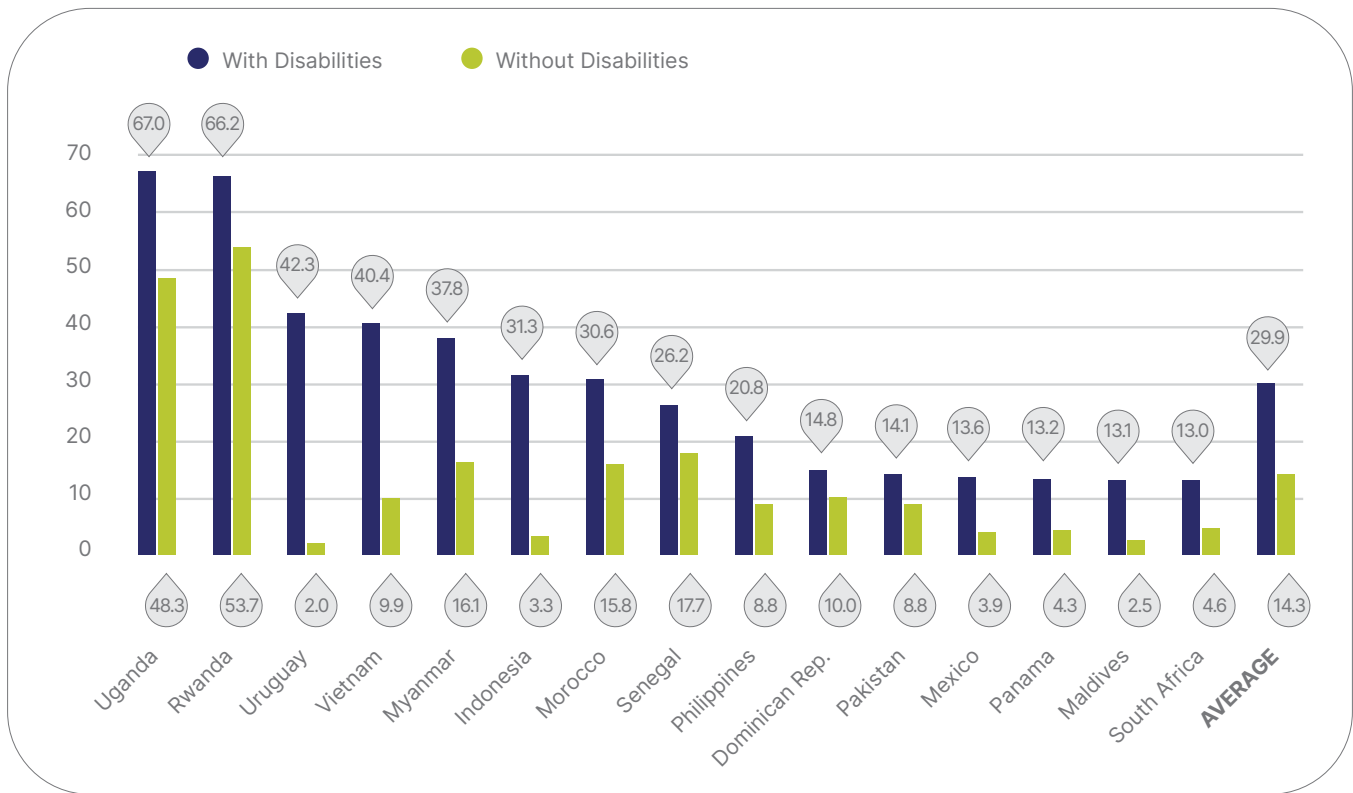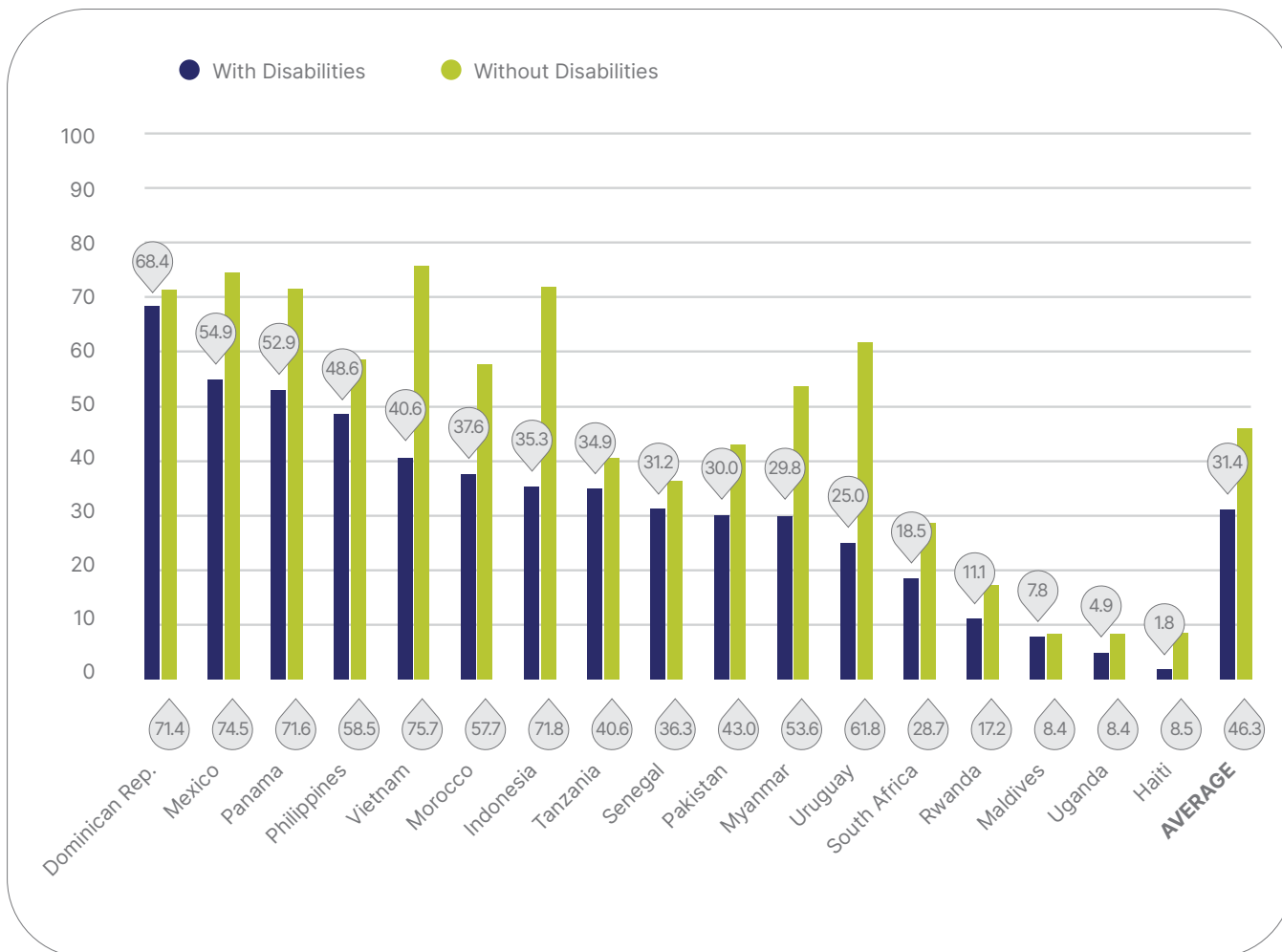

Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

Figure 2.5. Share of young persons who completed primary schooling and some secondary among those who have ever attended or are in school, by disability status
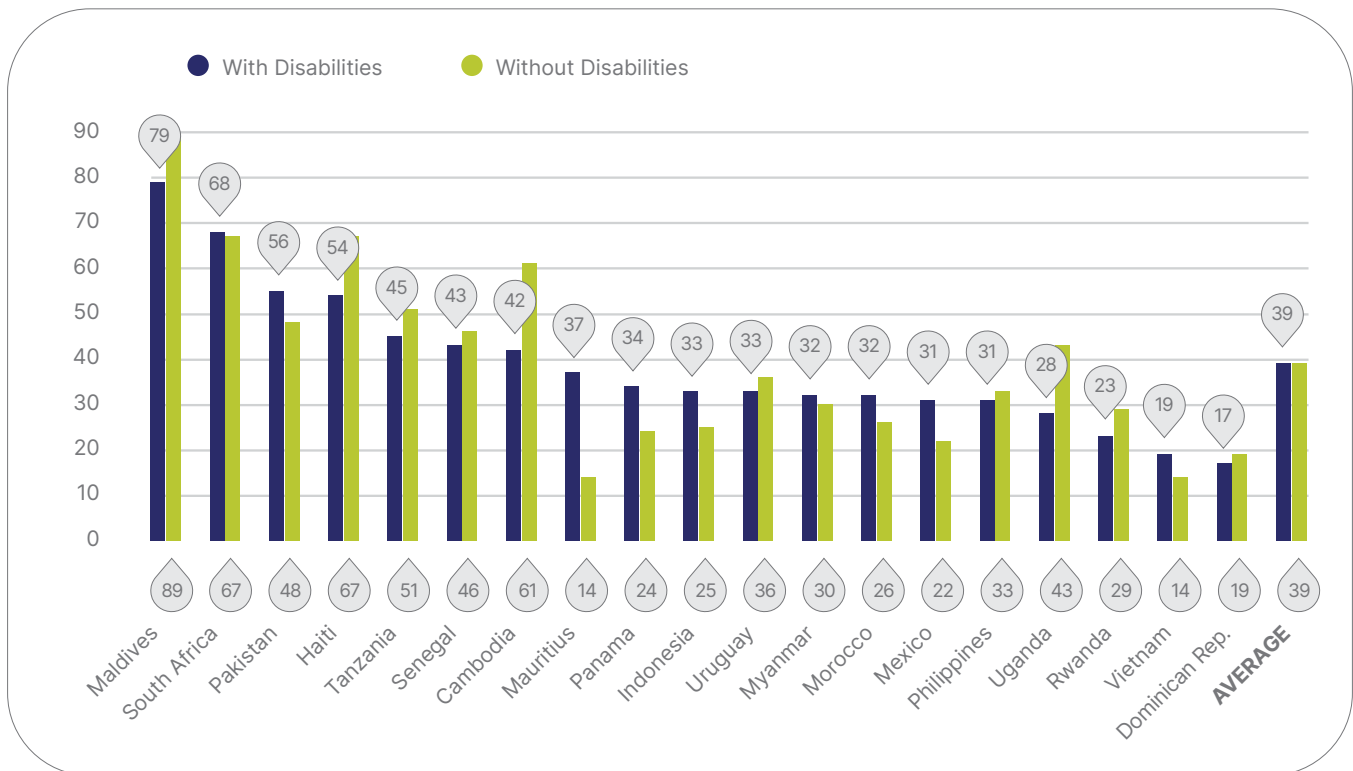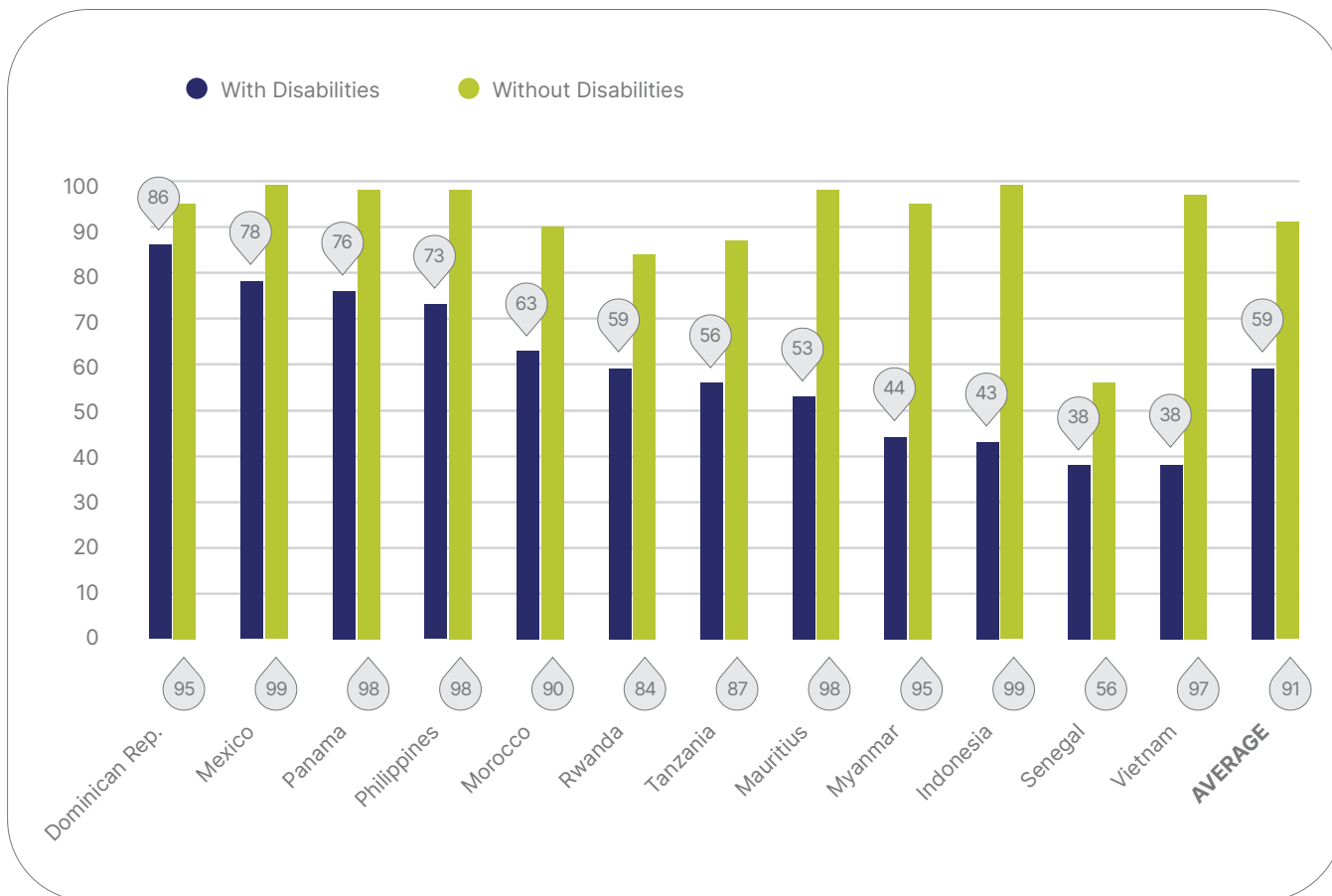

Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

Figure 2.6. Share of young persons who completed secondary schooling or higher among those who have ever attended or are in school by disability status

Source: DHS and IPUMS Census Data.

Literacy is broadly defined as the ability to read and write in one's primary language. Literacy is crucial to advancing other SDG goals such as healthcare and food security, decent work, and poverty eradication. It enables individuals to access healthcare and other public services, participate in the labour market, access information, and be part of meaningful civic and political discourse.[25] **Yet, on average, only 60 per cent of young persons with disabilities are literate, which is two-thirds of the literacy rate among young persons without disabilities (Figure 2.7).** Literacy rates among those with disabilities are consistently lower than those without disabilities across all sample countries. Gaps between the two groups vary widely across the sample countries and range between 9 and 60 percentage points.

25 UNESCO, What you need to know about literacy, 2023, ▶ www.unesco.org/en/literacy/need-know.

**Figure 2.7. Literacy rate of young persons by disability status**

Source: IPUMS Census Data.

2.3.2. Employment

SDG 8 promotes sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all, including persons with disabilities. However, young persons with disabilities face many environmental and structural barriers in society, such as lack of inclusiveness in access to education, along with stigma and discrimination, including the denial of reasonable accommodation, leading to a lack of work opportunities, and impinging on their right to work on an equal basis with others.

The employment-population ratio (EPR) is the share of young persons who work for pay relative to the total population aged 15 to 24. In **Figure 2.8, the EPR among young persons with disabilities is, on average, 23 per cent, which is 17 percentage points lower than the average share of young persons without disabilities, and is consistently lower in every country in the sample.**

Figure 2.8. Employment-population ratio of young persons by disability status
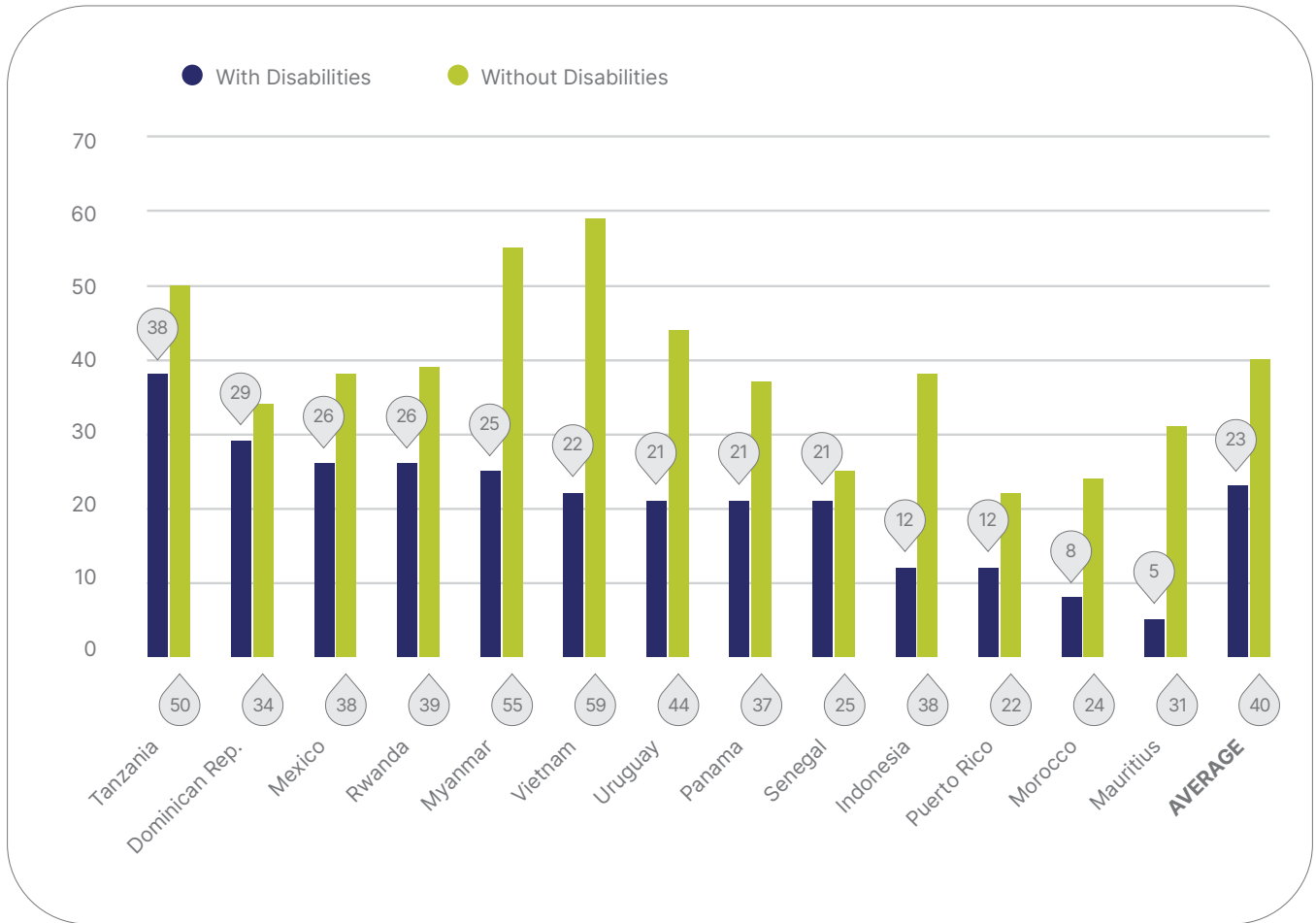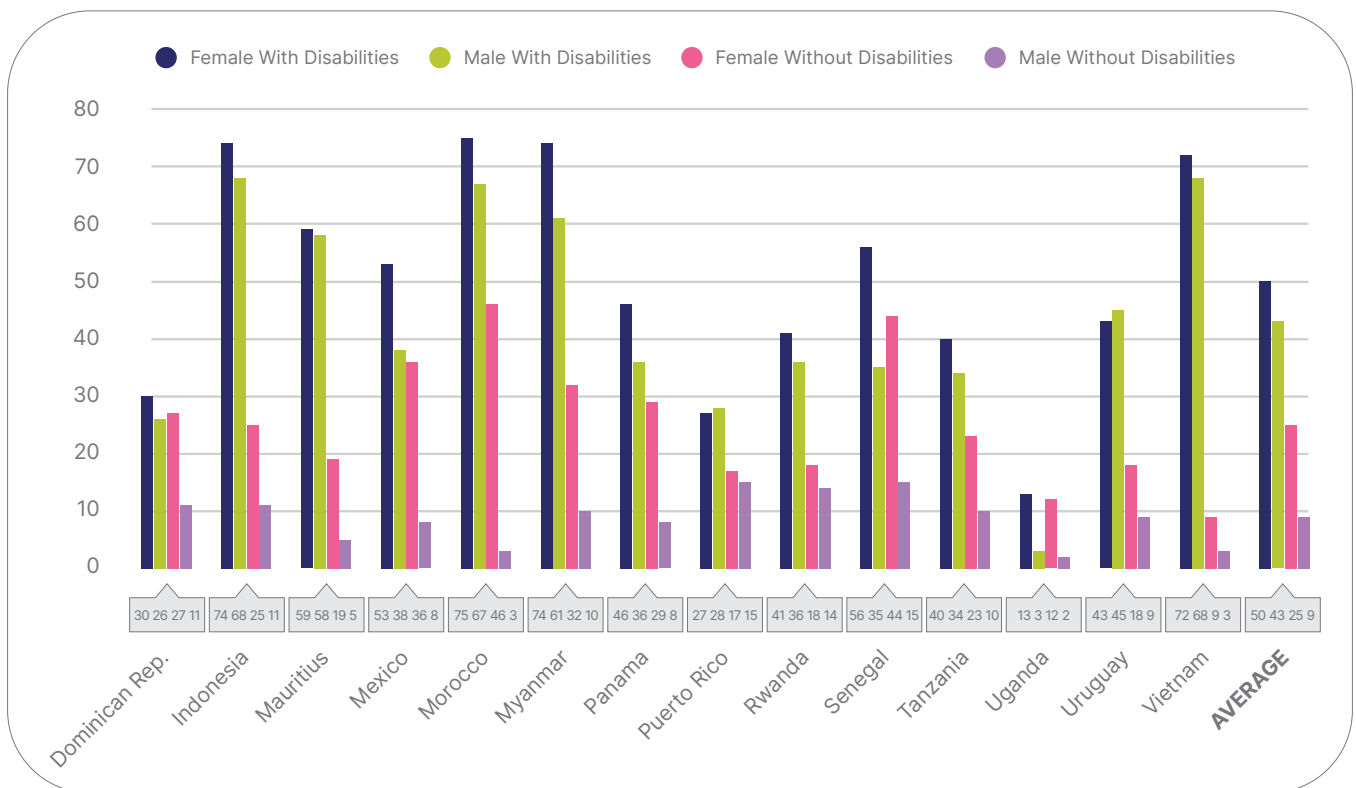

Source: IPUMS Census Data.

Figure 2.9 illustrates that **the share of young persons with disabilities who are out of school and not employed (not employed includes those who are unemployed and out of the labour force) is, on average, twice as high as those without disabilities** (49 vs. 18 per cent, respectively). In low-income countries, the rates are higher for young women with disabilities than for young men with disabilities **(Figure 2.10).**

Figure 2.9. Share of not employed and out-of-school young persons by disability status
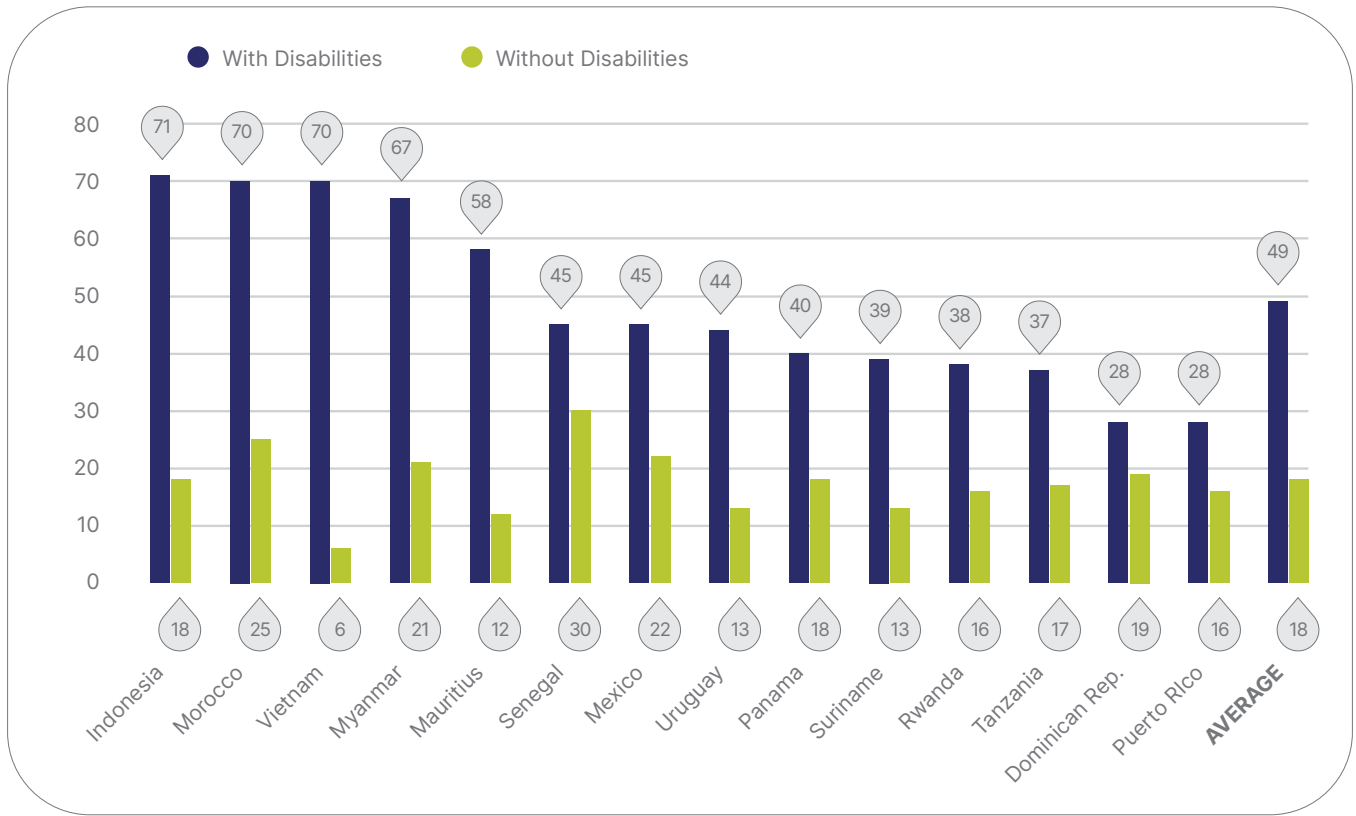
**Figure 2.10. Share of not employed and out-of-school young persons by gender and disability status**

In **Figure 2.11**, among those who are employed, young persons with disabilities are also more likely to work in the agricultural sector, especially in countries with a larger share of agriculture (relative to their gross domestic product or GDP). For example, agriculture makes up 29 per cent of GDP in Myanmar, 25 per cent in Rwanda, and 19 per cent in Viet Nam, compared to the Dominican Republic and Mexico where it is 6 and 3 per cent, respectively).[26] In countries with a larger share of agriculture, the share of young persons with disabilities working in agriculture is over 65 per cent, whereas among those without disabilities, the share is over 50 per cent.

Figure 2.11. Share of young persons working in the agricultural sector by disability status

Source: IPUMS Census and DHS Data.
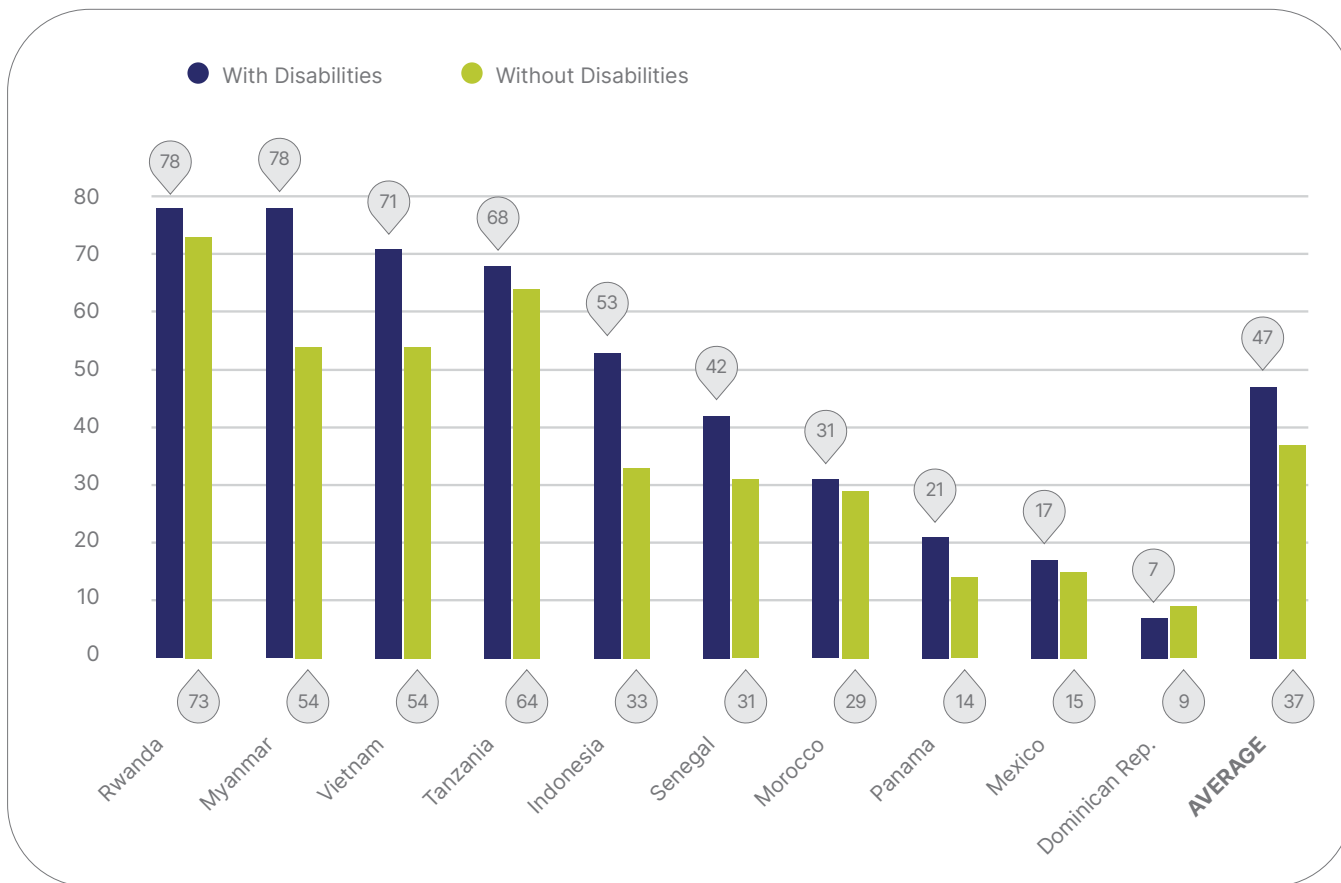
Faced with economic, social, and political barriers to joining the formal economy as well as high rates of youth unemployment causing increased labour market competition, **the share of employed young persons with disabilities engaging in self-employment in non-agricultural sectors is overall higher than employed young persons without disabilities** in the sample countries (on average, 39 vs. 28 per cent, respectively), as shown in **Figure 2.12.**

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[26] The World Bank, *World Development Indicators.*

Figure 2.12. Share of self-employed young persons among those employed outside the agricultural sector by disability status
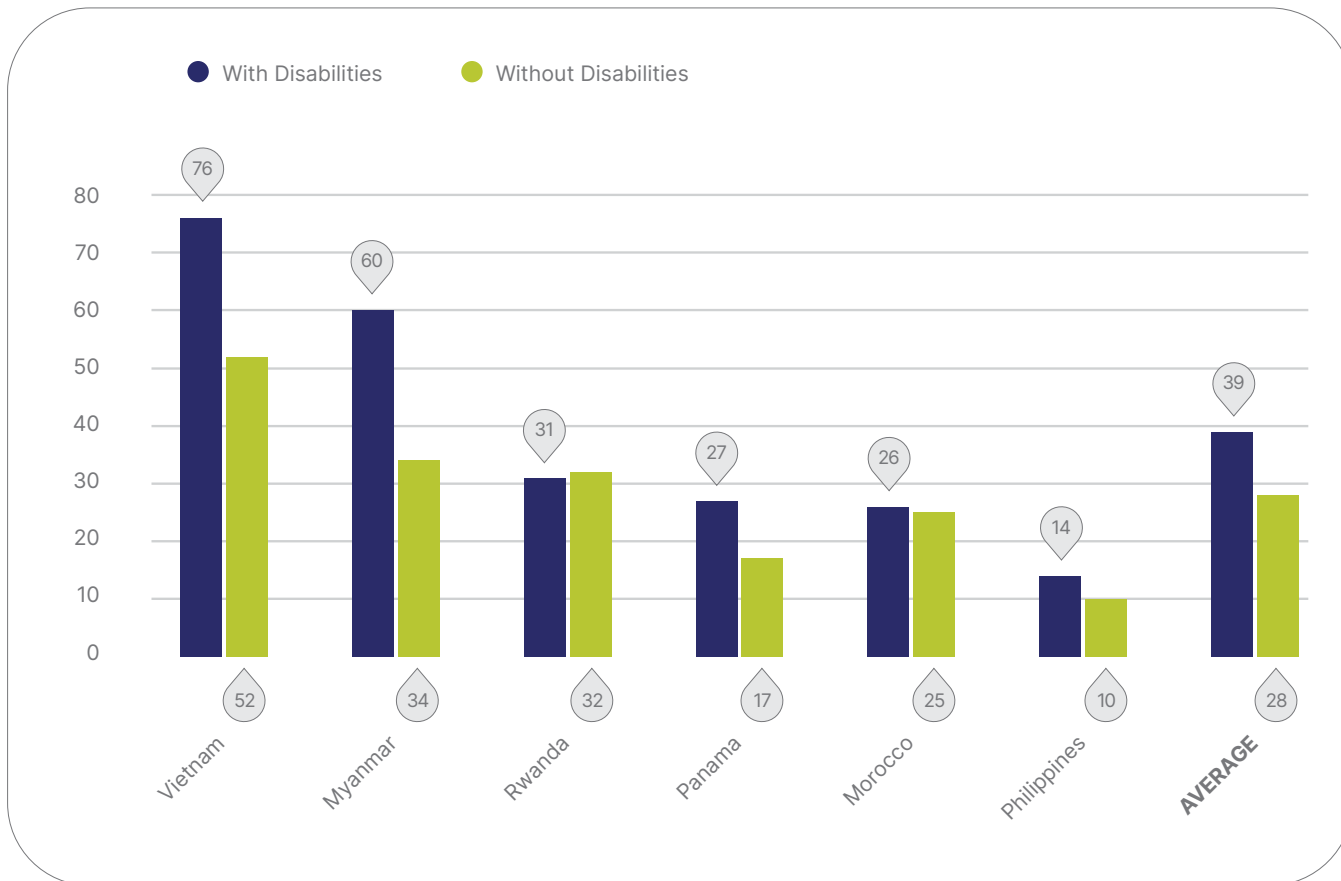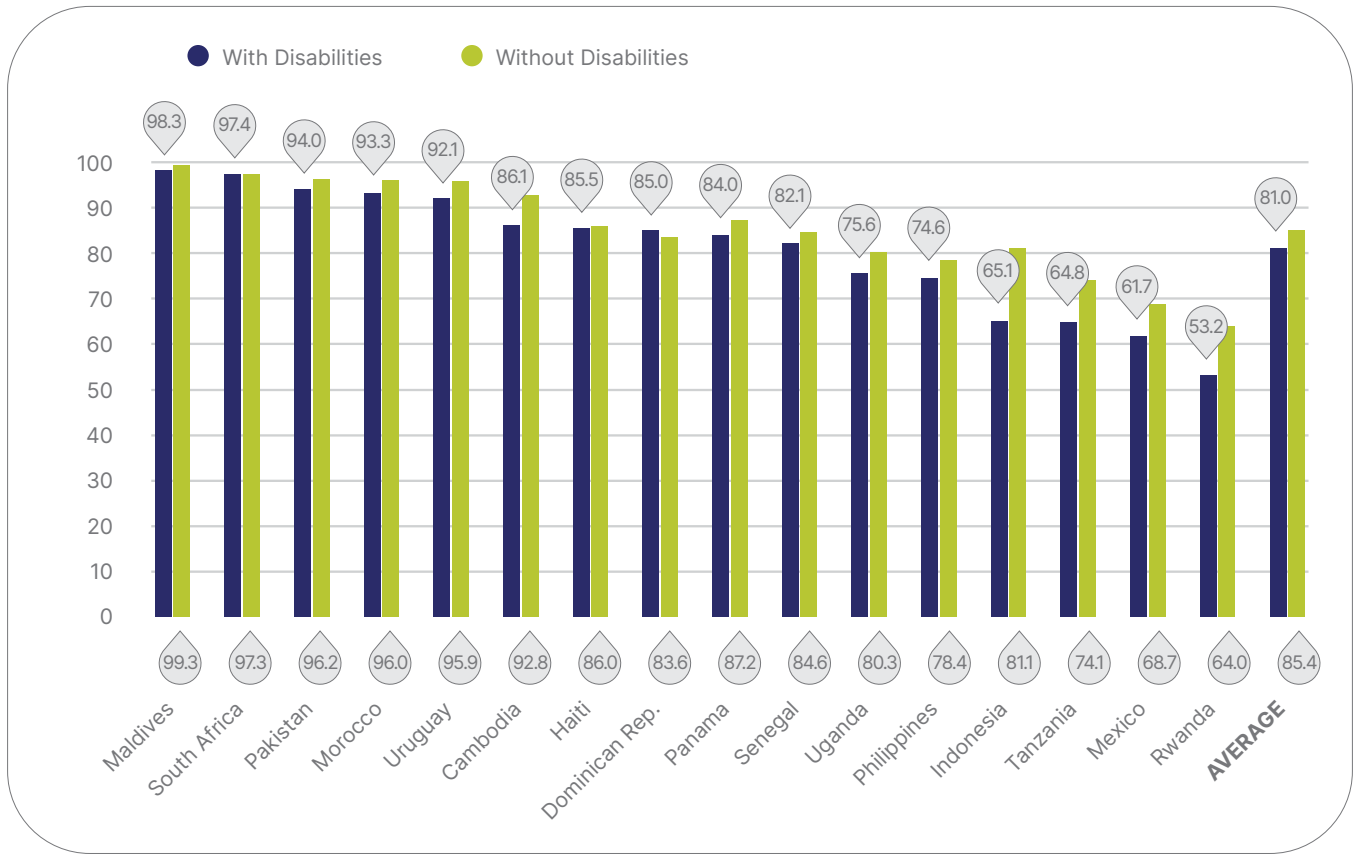

Source: IPUMS Census and DHS Data.

2.3.3.   Information and communication technology (ICT)

ICT is vital to achieving the SDGs in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, knowledge sharing. It also serves as a means for young persons to access information (including on humanitarian emergencies and protection services), connect to others around the world, participate in civic and political discourse, and give a platform to engage on advocacy issues.

In most of the sample countries, the majority of young persons own a mobile phone **(Figure 2.13).** Although the rate of mobile phone ownership among young persons with disabilities is lower than those without disabilities, the gap is narrow at 4 percentage points. By contrast, access to the internet is more limited in low- and middle-income countries **(Figure 2.14).** On average, only about one in six young persons with disabilities (17 per cent) has internet access, compared to over one in five young persons without disabilities (22 per cent). In high-income countries such as Panama and Uruguay, inequalities in internet access among young persons by disability status are wider.

Figure 2.13. Share of young persons who own a mobile phone by disability status

Figure 2.14. Share of young persons with access to the internet by disability status
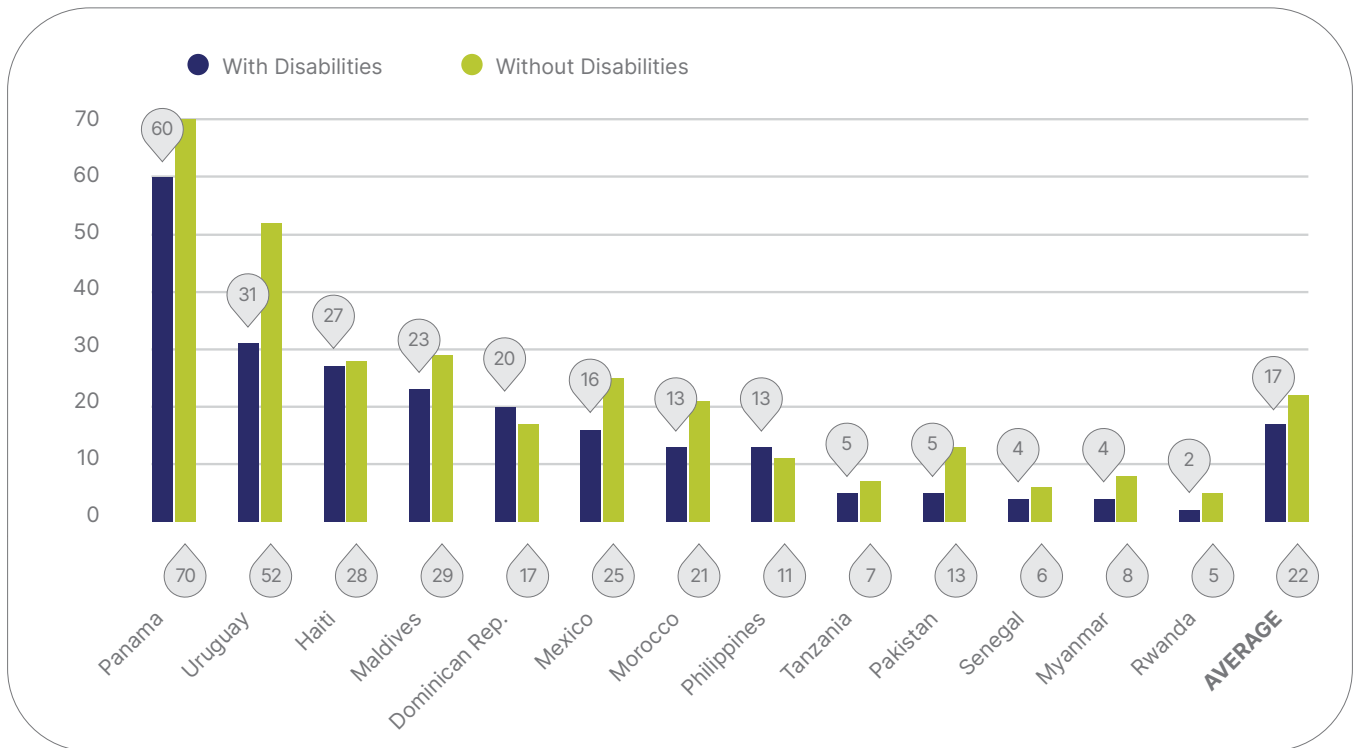
2.4.   What does all this data imply?

This study estimated disability prevalence rates across 46 countries using census data and surveys like DHS and MICS, which utilize the WG-SS or WG/UNICEF CFM. It found that the population-weighted average disability prevalence is 1.9 per cent for young persons aged 15 to 24, which matches previous estimates for young adults aged 15 to 29 using the WG-SS. This study points out the need for more comprehensive data collection tools that go beyond the six core functional domains in the WG-SS, considering the WG-SS may underestimate disability among young people.

The secondary data analysis also provided a disaggregation of indicators by disability status for more than 20 countries. **The overall results demonstrate that young persons with disabilities are lagging behind their peers in the areas of education, employment, and ICT access. These disproportionalities can have rippling effects in other aspects of their lives, including in their participation in other sectors of society and the exercise of their freedoms. They can have long-lasting impacts that place young persons with disabilities in lower life trajectories than those without disabilities as they grow older.**

In all sample countries, young persons with disabilities are less likely to be in school or to have attended school than those without disabilities. This aligns with the findings in the UNICEF 2021 report, which uses the full WG/UNICEF CFM and shows that children with disabilities have lower attendance rates than other children.[27] **Among those who have attended or are in school, young persons with disabilities are less likely to pursue higher levels of education than other young persons. They are also less likely to be literate.** Several economic, social, and cultural factors contribute to the lack of education or low education levels among young persons with disabilities. These factors include stigma and discrimination, households experiencing poverty, the extra cost for children with disabilities to attend school,[28] and education systems that are inadequately prepared to meet the needs of learners with disabilities. This lack of preparation often stems from the lack of physical and virtual infrastructure, and a lack of awareness of the rights and needs of students with disabilities among policymakers and school staff.[29] Over the years, there has been an increase in legislation to promote and raise awareness of inclusive education; make schools more accessible; build capacity among teachers, school administrators, and policymakers; and offer financial support to offset schooling costs; however, the data show that more needs to be done to close the gap in schooling outcomes between students with and without disabilities.[30]

Young persons with disabilities are more likely than other young persons to be out of school and not employed, depriving them of the opportunity to earn an adequate living and the ability to live independently. While this may be partly due to disparities in educational outcomes, in many societies, young persons with disabilities continue to be dissuaded from pursuing employment, and often face discriminatory labour practices during the hiring process and in the workplace, as well as inaccessible workspaces.[31] Among those employed, young persons with disabilities are more likely to work in the agricultural sector in rural areas, where poverty is widespread and work is seasonal, making them among the most vulnerable to the risks of natural disasters and climate change. In addition, among those who work outside the agricultural sector, young persons with disabilities are more likely to engage in self-employment, which tends to have large variability in earnings and long working hours, than those without disabilities. This is mainly due to barriers to formal employment.[32] More data is needed to assess the participation of young persons in the informal employment sector, where labour protection and social safety nets are lacking.

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[27] UNICEF, *Seen, Counted, Included.*

[28] UNICEF, *The Cost of Raising a Child with Disabilities in Georgia: The Good and Services Required For the Equal Participation of Children With Disabilities,* 2023.

[29] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for, and with Persons with Disabilities,* 2018.

[30] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All,* 2020.

[31] Lindsay, S., Fuentes, K., Tomas, V., & Hsu, S. (2023). Ableism and Workplace Discrimination Among Youth and Young Adults with Disabilities: A Systematic Review. *Journal of occupational rehabilitation,* 33(1), 20–36. ▶ https://doi.org/10.1007/s10926-022-10049-4.

[32] United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, *Disability at a Glance* 2015: *Strengthening Employment Prospects for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific,* 2015.

Photo credit: © UNFPA Asia and the Pacific.

Skills training, stronger equal opportunity employment measures, and disability-inclusive labour policies are needed to ensure that young persons with disabilities are fully integrated into the labour market. Agricultural and self-employment programmes must also ensure that initiatives, social safety nets, and communication policies are inclusive.

The intersectionality of gender and disability places a double burden on young women with disabilities, who are more likely to be out of school and have lower literacy rates than young women without disabilities or young men with disabilities. They are also more likely to be out of school and not employed, but engaged in unpaid care work, with significant health and economic disparities.[33] Crucially, young persons with disabilities, and particularly young women with disabilities, often face barriers to even engaging with disability inclusion programming itself, further limiting their access to support systems and services. These trends adversely impact many aspects of their lives, such as their health, civil participation, economic empowerment, and ability to live independently and make decisions for themselves. This places them at a higher risk of living in poverty and being subjected to gender-based discrimination and violence.[34] More dedicated research is needed to understand the situation of young women with disabilities beyond education and economic dimensions, including in humanitarian contexts. This also calls for gender-responsive policies that are disability-inclusive, including on care and support systems, to ensure that no one is left behind.

[33] National Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Family Support, Caregiver Profile: A Closer Look at Spousal Caregivers, University of Pittsburgh, 2022.
[34] Mitra, S., & Yap, J. (2022). The Disability Data Report 2022. *Disability Data Initiative, Fordham Research Consortium on Disability.* ▶ https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4492005.

The analyses presented are by no means exhaustive. More work needs to be done in examining other indicators of well-being, such as multidimensional poverty, food security, and access to social protection programmes. In addition, alternative cut-offs for determining who has a disability should be further explored. Mitra and Yap (2021) showed that, in most countries, for several indicators of well-being, including multidimensional poverty headcount and the rate of out-of-school and unemployed, young persons with "some" functional difficulties fared much worse than those with no functional difficulties, but much better than those with "a lot of difficulty" or more.[35] Discounting those with "some" functional difficulties in certain research and policy efforts may put them at risk of falling behind.

Another point to consider is that the population of young persons with disabilities is not a monolith. The differences in outcomes could differ by type of disability, which is beyond the scope of this study. Young persons with different types of disabilities confront different barriers, which may be stronger or weaker depending on their context. For example, while building accessible infrastructure in schools, such as ramps, may increase the attendance of those with physical disabilities, it may not be as helpful for those with difficulty hearing or seeing, or those who have intellectual disabilities. This emphasizes the environmental aspect of the concept of disability beyond the individual's impairments, and the fact that policy responses need to meet specific needs, based on the local context.

Photo credit: © UNFPA Asia and the Pacific.

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[35] Mitra, S., & Yap, J. (2021). *The Disability Data Report* 2021.

3. How do young persons with disabilities participate in decision-making?

This chapter explores the various pathways through which young persons with disabilities contribute to decision-making processes, underscoring the significance of their active engagement and the imperative of fostering inclusive environments for their engagement to be meaningful. By presenting and analysing the research's survey outcomes, taking into account existing literature, and integrating insights from focus groups and interviews, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of participation by young persons with disabilities, both in government and UN decision-making processes. This chapter's focus is on describing the dimensions of youth engagement currently underway. The barriers inhibiting their meaningful engagement, and potential solutions to overcome these barriers, will be explored in the following chapter.

3.1.   Understanding meaningful youth engagement

Meaningful youth engagement is defined as active and effective involvement in processes impacting young people's lives and in the communities to which they belong, encompassing aspects of information sharing, dialogue, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. This engagement is not just about being heard, but ensuring that their ideas, expertise, experiences, and perspectives are actively sought, valued, and integrated within programmatic, policy, and institutional decision-making.[36]

Over the years, youth-led groups, civil society, governments, and United Nations entities have formulated principles to foster meaningful and effective youth engagement in decision-making. These principles include rights-based approaches, safety, institutional mandates, designated youth seats, appropriate resourcing, transparency, accessibility, voluntary participation, informed engagement, reciprocal accountability, diversity and inclusion, and the recognition of youth as equal partners.[37] When neglected, decision-making processes risk becoming tokenistic and may produce decisions that do not align with the real-world experiences and insights of young persons, thus compromising policy effectiveness and eroding trust in institutions.

The degree of youth engagement can take many forms:[38]

◆ In a **consultative** approach, youth are invited to share their insights and ideas. This gives young persons the ability to influence proceedings but without holding direct control over the outcomes.

◆ When youth **contribute**, youth play a more defined role in certain aspects of a project or initiative, such as planning or implementation, though they do not retain complete control over outcomes.

◆ In a **partnership** model, youth are actively engaged in all decision-making stages, from planning to evaluation. This counters tokenism by ensuring youth's active participation, allowing them to influence and even challenge both the process and the results.

◆ When youth engage as **leaders**, they drive the process from start to finish, determining concerns and controlling both the process and outcomes. In this model, the agency takes a backseat, acting as a facilitator, providing resources, guidance, and connections to help youth achieve their objectives.

Youth consulted ▶ **Youth contributing** ▶ **Youth as partners** ▶ **Youth as leaders** ▶
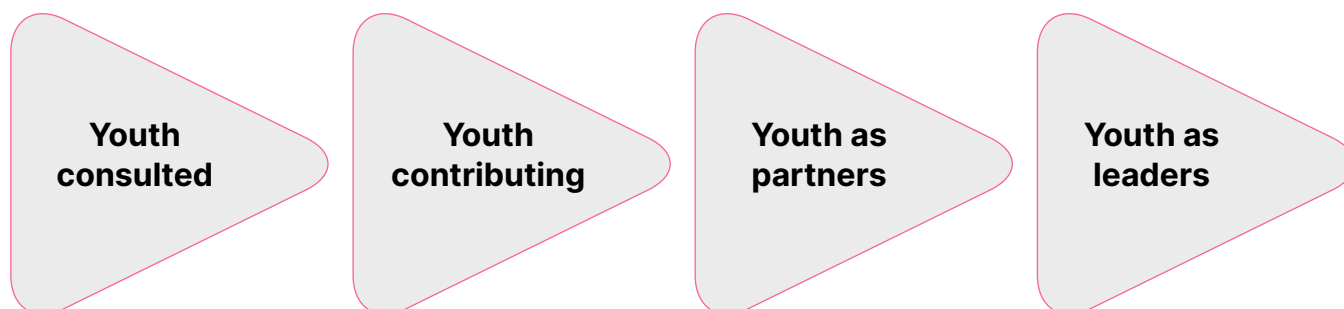
[36] Youth Coalition & others, Manifesto on meaningful youth engagement for youth with disabilities, 2023. ▶ www.youthcoalition.org/our-toolkits-advocacy-resources.
[37] United Nations, Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3, Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policy and Decision-making Processes, 2023.
▶ www.un.org/en/common-agenda/policy-briefs; United Nations, Youth2030, UN Entities Scorecard, ▶ www.unyouth2030.com/entities-scorecard, and UNCT Scorecard,
▶ www.unyouth2030.com/unctsscorecard.
[38] UNESCO, Meaningfully engaging with youth. Guidance and training for UN staff, 2019.

Participation in decision-making is mandated by international human rights law. The CRPD stipulates close consultation and the active involvement of persons with disabilities, including children, in decision-making processes that concern them (art. 4(3)). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) affirms that children have the right to engage in decision-making processes relevant to their lives. They should be able to influence decisions made about them, whether within the family, school, or community (art. 12). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) calls for the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making systems (arts. 7, 8, and 14 (2)(a)). For young persons with disabilities, these obligations are pivotal. Their unique perspectives are vital for shaping youth-friendly, disability-inclusive and gender-sensitive policies. The CRPD, CRC, and CEDAW advocate a shift from viewing young persons with disabilities as passive recipients to recognizing them as active stakeholders, central to decisions affecting their lives.
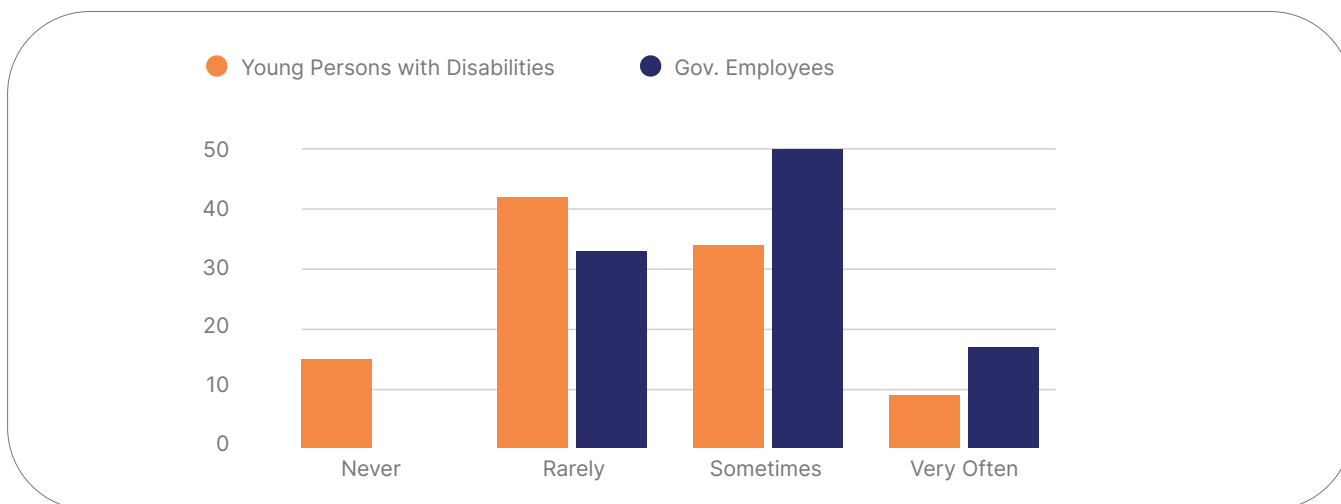
3.2.   Engagement with governments

Governmental bodies at various levels play a critical role in shaping policies, programmes, and regulations that impact the lives of young persons with disabilities. By engaging with these bodies, young persons with disabilities can influence agendas, contribute to policy formulation, and ensure that governmental actions are truly inclusive. This engagement can take various forms, from consultative forums and public hearings to formal representation in governmental committees. Through these platforms, young persons with disabilities can address systemic challenges, recommend reforms, and hold authorities accountable for the commitments made to their communities.

Survey results

When surveyed about the frequency of government engagement with young persons with disabilities in 40 countries, the perspectives of the youth and government representatives diverged **(Figure 3.1). Of all young respondents with disabilities, 57.9 per cent stated that the government rarely or never engages with them (15.7 per cent said never, 42.2 per cent said rarely) 33.9 per cent said sometimes, and only 8.3 per cent said very often.** In comparison, 33.3 per cent of government representatives said engagement with young persons with disabilities was rare, 50 per cent said sometimes, and 16.7 per cent per cent said very often. Despite these percentage point differences, both responses indicate a perceived infrequency in interactions between young persons with disabilities and government entities.

Figure 3.1. Perceptions of government engagement with young persons with disabilities

While the responses from young men and women with disabilities were broadly similar, there are gendered differences. **On average, young women with disabilities provided a lower rating of government engagement than their male counterparts (Figure 3.2).** However, these differences may not be statistically significant. This underscores the importance of considering gender-specific experiences and perspectives when evaluating engagement levels.

Figure 3.2. Perceptions of government engagement with young persons with disabilities, by gender
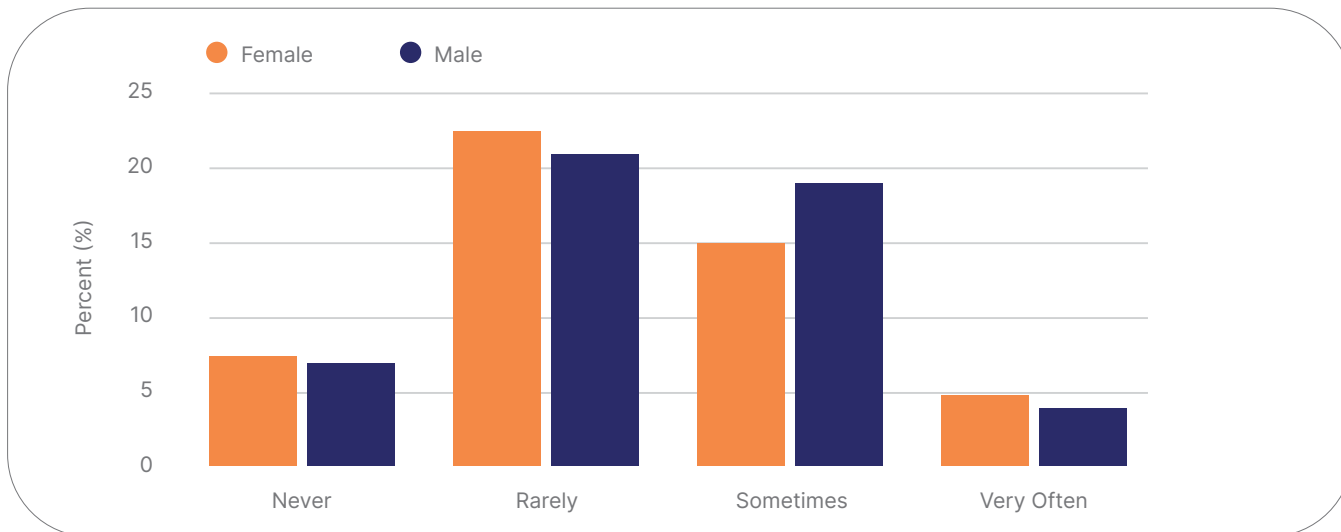
When observing regional variations in government engagement with young persons with disabilities, distinct patterns become apparent **(Figure 3.3).** Notably, young persons with disabilities in the Asia Pacific region reported a higher level of government engagement compared to other regions, showing a relatively more proactive approach in involving young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. Conversely, Eastern Europe and Central Asia displayed the starkest levels of low engagement, with a high majority of young persons with disabilities reporting "never" or "rarely" when describing the frequency of government interaction.

Figure 3.3. Perceptions of government engagement with young persons with disabilities, by region
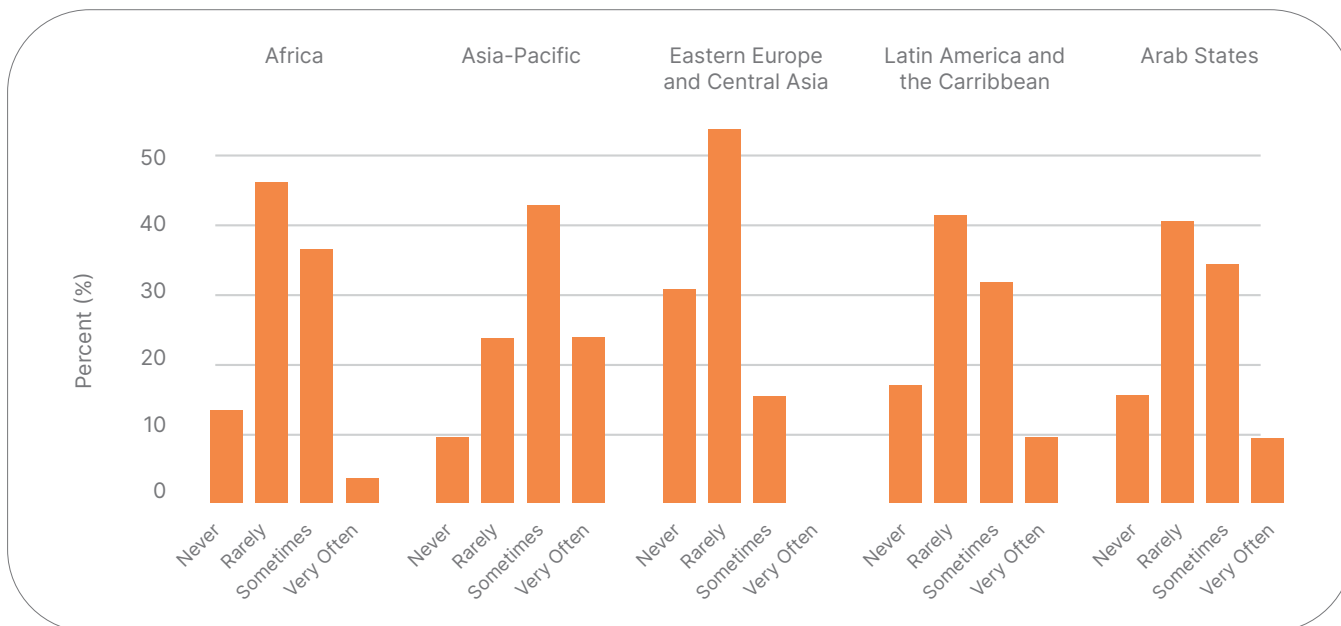
Regarding the specific issues on which the government engages with young persons with disabilities, the most frequently mentioned topics by young persons with disabilities were disability (41.8 per cent), education (40.7 per cent), social protection (26.7 per cent), and youth (24.9 per cent). Government representatives identified their areas of interaction as disability (61.7 per cent), youth (39.6 per cent), education (34.9 per cent), social protection (33.6 per cent), children (29.5 per cent), and gender (29.5 per cent). **These results highlight that disability, education, and social protection are the predominant areas of government engagement, suggesting that young persons with disabilities are often compartmentalized primarily within the disability agenda.**

The engagement of young persons with disabilities spans diverse governmental operations, albeit with varied levels of involvement. Young persons with disabilities reported that their most significant participation is in implementing the CRPD (24.9 per cent), followed by legislative processes (17.9 per cent), monitoring and evaluation (17.9 per cent), government planning (16.8 per cent), government budgeting (13.7 per cent), COVID-19 response and recovery (13 per cent), and implementing SDGs (11.9 per cent).

When government representatives referred to the processes or mechanisms through which they supported the participation of young people with disabilities, their responses varied. Their highest support was for Disability Councils (31.5 per cent), followed by monitoring and evaluation (26.8 per cent), Youth Councils (25.5 per cent), government planning (25.5 per cent), implementing the CRPD (22.8 per cent), implementing SDGs (16.8 per cent), legislative processes (15.4 per cent), COVID-19 response and recovery (12.8 per cent), and government budgeting (11.4 per cent). This data highlights the need for consistent and comprehensive engagement across all governmental sectors and processes, including budgeting, to ensure the active and meaningful participation of young people with disabilities.

In assessing how young people with disabilities perceive their level of participation in governmental decision-making, respondents rated their involvement on a scale from 0 ("very poor") to 4 ("very good") **(Figure 3.4).** Their median rating was 1.53, between "poor" and "acceptable." Moreover, young women with disabilities rated their participation as significantly lower than their male counterparts, with a notably higher proportion indicating "very poor" and "poor." This underscores the need for enhanced efforts to promote more meaningful inclusion of young people with disabilities in decision-making processes, while also addressing gender-specific challenges.

Photo credit: © UNICEF Mauritania / R. Pouget.

Figure 3.4. Rating of government engagement with young persons with disabilities, by gender
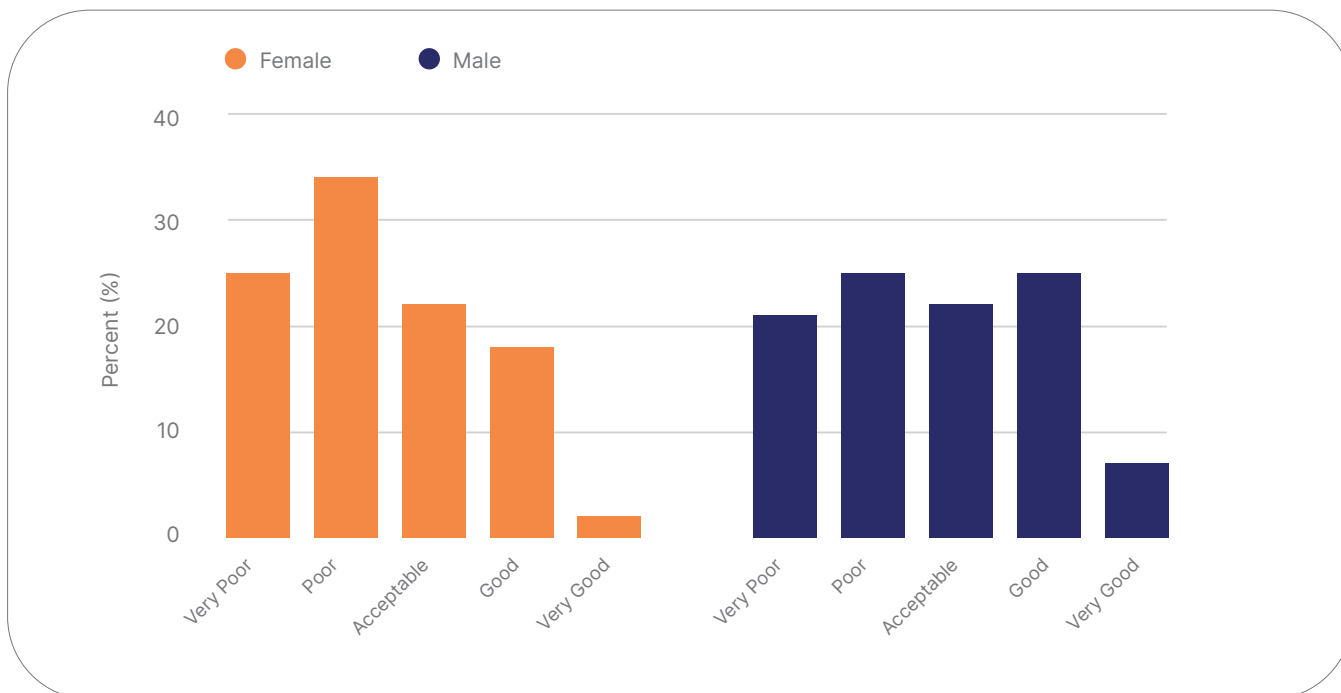
Interestingly, government employees themselves rated government engagement at 1.76 (closer to "acceptable" than poor"), while UN Country Teams representatives gave an even lower rating of 1.16 (closer to "poor" than "acceptable"). Even among government officials, only a minority considered their engagement "good" or "very good".

Insights from the deep-dive

The deep-dive analysis in six countries reveals a consistent theme with the survey results on the limited scope of government engagement for young persons with disabilities: Engagement, when it occurs, typically centres around areas of disability or youth. This is exemplified in certain countries where government agencies focusing on youth issues involve young persons with disabilities in advisory capacities, to assist in the development of youth empowerment policies and action plans. However, the extent of such practices varies significantly across, and even within, countries, reflecting a similar narrative to the unequal engagement levels indicated in the survey findings.

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

> *And the mantra Nothing about us without us, becomes something about us but we are not there.*
> *(Youth, International NGO)*

The overall lack of understanding regarding the true essence of meaningful engagement among government representatives emerges as a significant concern. When probed about their practices, the responses often revolved around including young persons with disabilities in programmes or, at best, in consultations, showcasing a narrow grasp of what meaningful engagement entails. This limited understanding can lead to tokenistic approaches to engagement with young persons with disabilities, where their involvement tends to be more symbolic rather than substantive. A superficial level of engagement undermines the potential contributions of young persons with disabilities and risks perpetuating the cycle of marginalization.

> *People think that meaningful youth engagement is about the outcome and like how many young people are engaged; the reality is that meaningful youth engagement happens in the process, in the methodology, in the co-designing, in the co-ownership, in how you are adapting all the process for young people to be able to engage, how you build youth-friendly processes, how you ensure you're centering youth organizing and all the challenges that come with youth organizing at the center.*
> *(Youth, International NGO)*

The deep-dive analysis raised instances of engagement in monitoring the implementation of the SDGs and the CRPD, aligning with the survey data where involvement was seen to be higher in implementing the CRPD and legislative processes. Yet, the thematic focus of engagement remains narrow, with government agencies often citing disability-focused or mainstream programmes related to education, rehabilitation, and economic empowerment. Despite these initiatives, young persons with disabilities report a lack of participatory roles in the development and evaluation of these programmes, a sentiment echoed in the survey results showcasing a perceived infrequency in government interaction.

> *As for the initiative, I generally think that our involvement in other political issues is very important. So that people can see that young people with disabilities are not only worried about the fact that we have certain challenges, but also about other things... We are also an electorate, because for some reason the perception is that the disability community is not a weighty electorate. And on the other hand, everything concerns us, whatever happens in the country, good or bad, is also related to us.*
> *(Youth, Georgia).*

The challenges unveiled in the deep-dive resonate with the broader obstacles highlighted in the survey. A lack of standardized procedures, experience, and motivation among both governmental bodies and young persons with disabilities stand as significant barriers to meaningful engagement. This mirrors the survey's indication of a need for enhanced efforts to foster a more inclusive environment for young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. The specific barriers—such as lack of accessibility, accommodations, and flexibility, which will be addressed in the next chapter—further indicates the gaps in creating youth-friendly processes, as emphasized in the survey findings.

The deep-dive also revealed a disparity between the engagement levels of non-youth-led organizations and young persons with disabilities in decision-making. **The more sustainable participation of OPDs in government-established committees contrasts with the sporadic and theme-restricted engagement of young persons with disabilities.** This narrative points to a compelling call, reiterated through the deep-dive insights, for a broader and more consistent inclusion of young persons with disabilities in decision-making across a wider array of topics, ensuring their voices are integral in shaping policies and programmes affecting their lives.
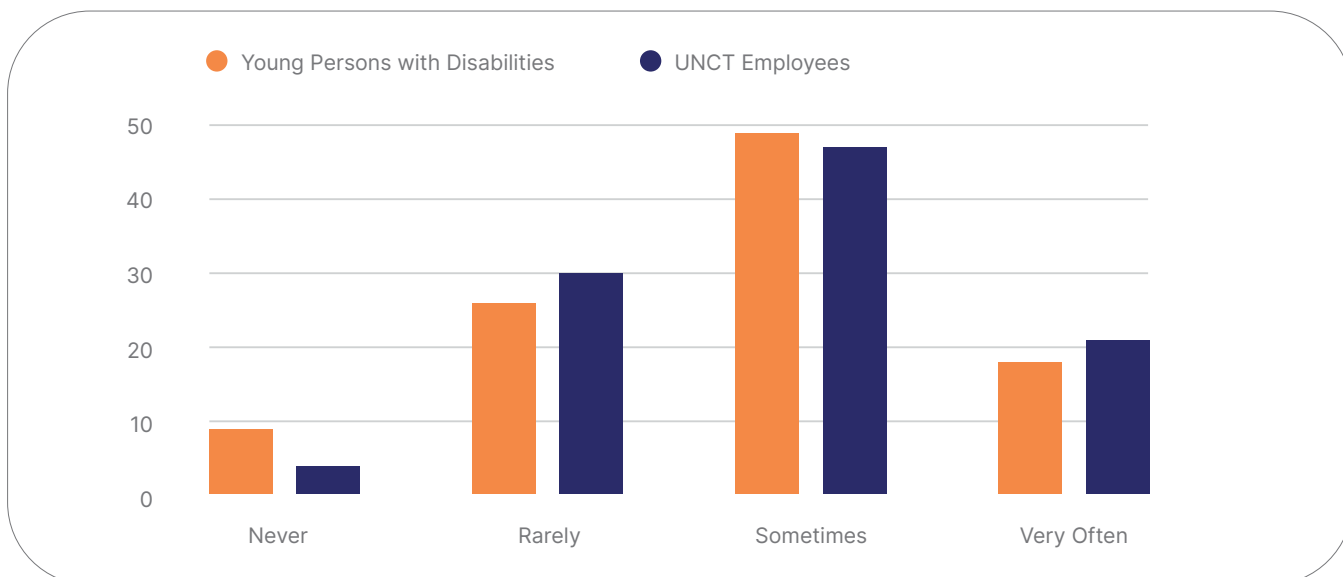
3.3.   Engagement with the United Nations

The UN, with its global mandate and reach, serves as a crucial platform for young persons with disabilities to make their voices heard. By participating in various UN forums, programmes, events, and human rights mechanisms, young persons with disabilities can play a key role in shaping global agendas and policies. Their active involvement guarantees that the rights and aspirations of persons with disabilities remain at the forefront of global dialogues on human rights, sustainable development, and peace. Moreover, through their UN Country Teams, the UN can amplify its efforts to support the participation of young people with disabilities in national and local decision-making processes. This partnership ensures a constant feedback loop, where ground realities inform global strategies, and best practices are shared.

Survey results

Regarding the frequency of interactions with the UN at the country level, **young persons with disabilities generally expressed a more favourable assessment compared to their engagement with governments (Figure 3.5).** Specifically, 16.7 per cent felt they are engaged very often, 48.6 per cent believed it happens sometimes, 25.7 per cent indicated it is rare, and 9 per cent reported that the UN never engages with them. According to UN Country Team representatives, 21 per cent thought they engage very often, 44.9 per cent believed it happens sometimes, 29.9 per cent perceived engagement as being rare, and 4.2 per cent reported that UN engagement with young persons with disabilities never happened. Even though the disparity in perceptions is not substantial, it underlines the ongoing need for UN Country Teams to bolster their engagement efforts with young persons with disabilities.

Figure 3.5. Perceptions of UN engagement with young persons with disabilities at country level

Regarding engagement with the UN, survey responses from young men and women with disabilities largely mirrored each other. However, similar to their experiences with government interactions, discernible gender differences emerged. **On average, young women with disabilities gave a lower rating than their male peers (Figure 3.6).** This difference highlights the additional barriers they face, emphasizing the need for more focused efforts to ensure meaningful engagement of young women with disabilities.

Figure 3.6. Perceptions of UN engagement with young persons with disabilities at country level, by gender
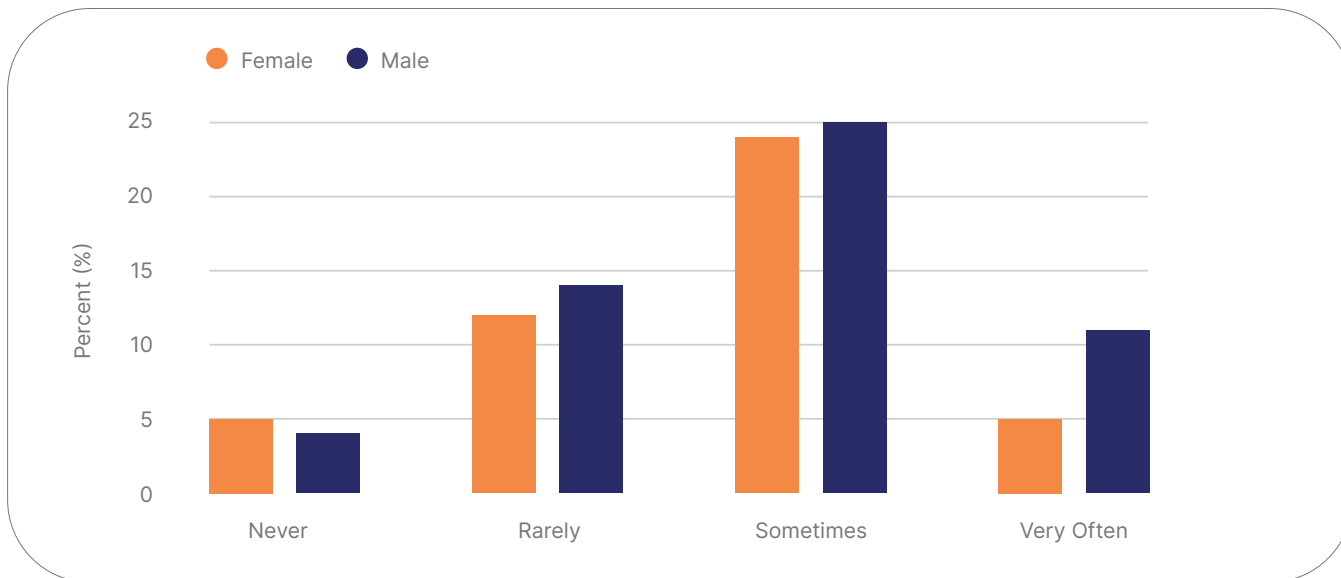
In terms of regional variation, survey responses indicate a generally higher level of interaction by the UN with young persons with disabilities across regions compared to government engagement **(Figure 3.7).** However, Eastern Europe and Central Asia stand out for having lower levels of reported engagement in contrast to other regions. Young persons with disabilities in these regions commonly reported less frequent interactions with the UN at the country level. This suggests a disparity in the extent to which young persons with disabilities experience inclusive participatory processes within the UN framework, highlighting a need for focused efforts to enhance engagement in regions where it is lagging.

Figure 3.7. Perceptions of UN engagement with young persons with disabilities at country level, by region
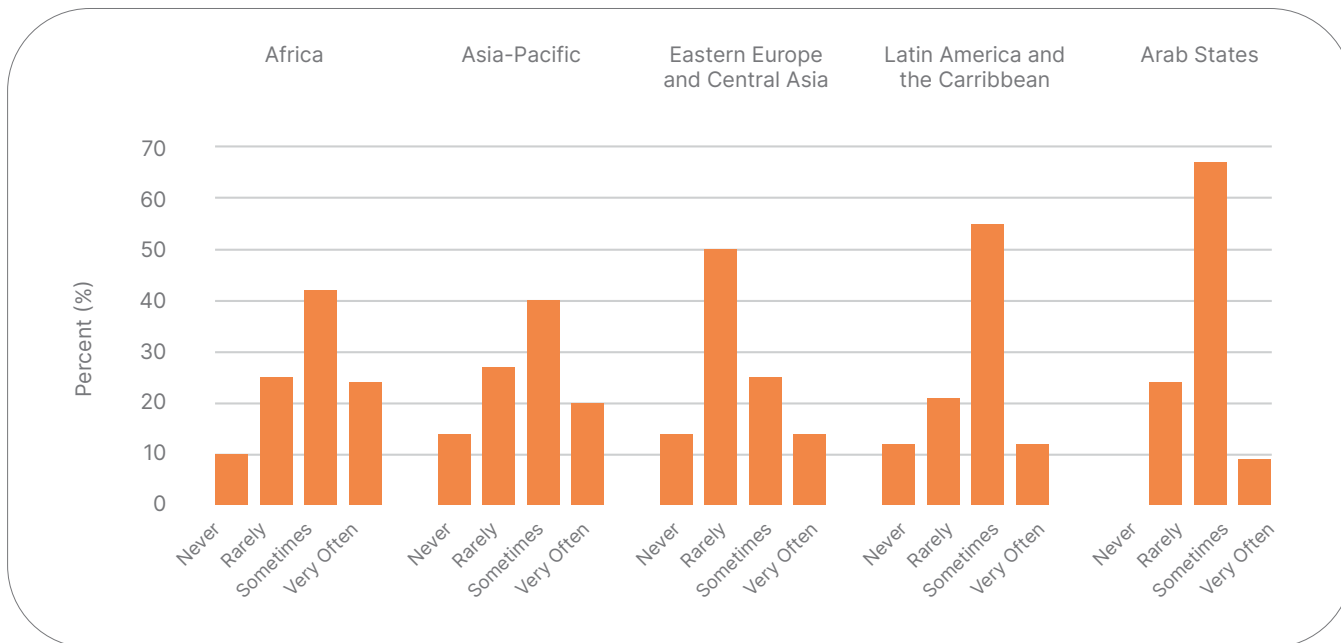

Regarding the specific issues addressed during engagement with young persons with disabilities, different focuses emerged from the youth and UN representatives. Young persons with disabilities most frequently cited topics such as education (37.9 per cent), disability (36.8 per cent), youth (27.7 per cent), human rights (24.9 per cent), and social protection (24.9 per cent). When UN representatives weighed in, they highlighted youth (60.9 per cent), disability (59.8 per cent), gender (54.6 per cent), social protection (33.9 per cent), and education (31.6 per cent) as their top areas of focus. Notably, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian assistance was least mentioned by young persons with disabilities at 8.8 per cent, while culture and sports garnered the least attention from UN staff at 7.5 per cent.

When considering the methods through which UN Country Teams engage with young persons with disabilities, UN staff reported various avenues. Partnerships were the most frequently cited means of engagement (54.6 per cent), closely followed by meetings (53.4 per cent), and the provision of information (52.9 per cent). Public consultations were reported by 35.6 per cent of respondents. UN Country Teams' participation mechanisms, designed specifically for such interactions, were mentioned by one third of respondents, at 33.9 per cent. The data highlights the multifaceted approach taken by the UN Country Teams in their efforts to involve young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.

When assessing the frequency of engagement between the UN Country Teams and young persons with disabilities in various internal processes, the median responses from UN staff fall between "rarely" and "sometimes" **(Figure 3.8).** The highest engagement reported was in relation to the support they provide to governments on youth policies and programmes, with a median score close to "sometimes." This was closely followed by UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks and UNDIS implementation and monitoring, which also have a median score close to "sometimes." These scores highlight that while engagement exists, there is potential for deeper and more consistent interaction with young persons with disabilities in UN Country Teams' endeavours.

Figure 3.8. Perceptions of UN engagement with young persons with disabilities in UN processes
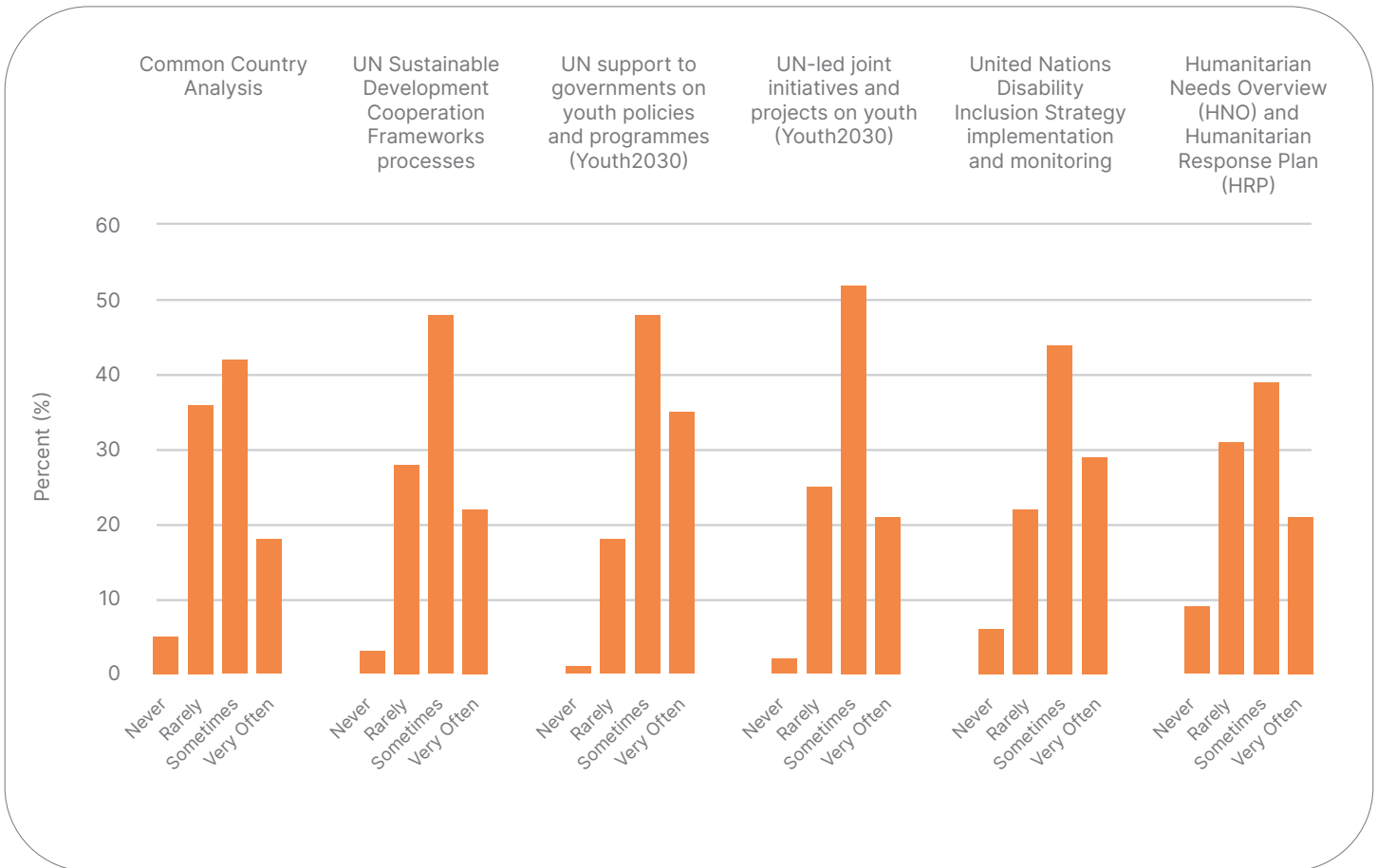
When asked about youth interaction with various UN mechanisms at the country level, responses from UN staff indicate sporadic engagement **(Figure 3.9).** The Youth Advisory Boards or Youth Sounding Boards and Humanitarian Country Teams seem to experience engagement that mostly occurs mostly "sometimes." Similarly, engagements with Disability Task Forces and the Gender Coordination Mechanisms appear to occur between "rarely" and "sometimes." These results suggest opportunities exist for enhancing participation within various coordination mechanisms.

Figure 3.9. Perceptions of UN engagement with young persons with disabilities in UN mechanisms
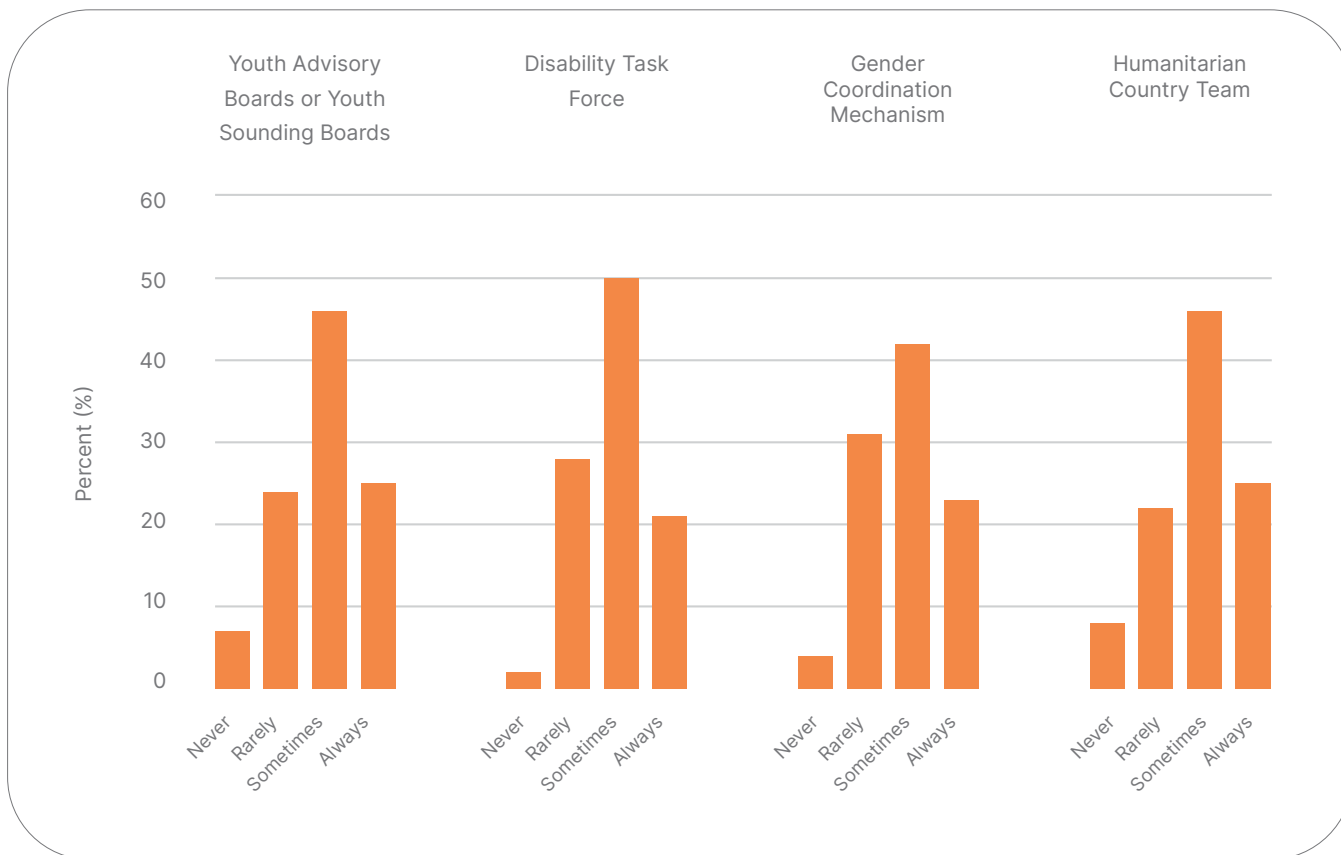
The areas in which the UN reports offering support for the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes are varied, with some receiving more emphasis than others. Youth Councils emerge as a predominant area of focus (26.4 per cent), followed by the implementation of SDGs and CRPD (25.9 per cent each). Conversely, government budgeting is the least supported area (3.4 per cent), highlighting a crucial gap in support.

Examining how the UN supports the participation of young persons with disabilities reveals a difference in perception between youth and UN staff. Young persons with disabilities primarily highlighted the provision of information (16.8 per cent) and training/capacity building (11.9 per cent) as the main support avenues. In contrast, UN staff reported a broader spectrum of activities, but again provision of information (42.5 per cent) and training (34.5 per cent) led the responses. This disparity may suggest a need for improving communication about the available support mechanisms the UN offers to young persons with disabilities.

When it comes to the focus of training provided by the UN Country Teams to young persons with disabilities, disability training tops the list with both young people (74.3 per cent) and UN Country Teams' employees (70.5 per cent). Youth training comes second, with young persons with disabilities reporting receiving this training (48.6 per cent), a lower percentage compared to UN Country Teams' employees (65.6 per cent). Both groups report gender and access to information as other focal topics of training. Training in climate change is rated the lowest by young persons with disabilities (8.6 per cent), while budgeting is rated the lowest by UN staff (6.6 per cent). The fact that climate change training is not a priority, despite the overrepresentation of young persons with disabilities working in agriculture, draws attention to a significant oversight.

In assessing how young persons with disabilities perceive the level of their participation in UN decision-making, using a scale from 0 ("very poor") to 4 ("very good"), the median response stood at 2.10, above "acceptable" **(Figure 3.10).** There were not significant differences between men and women. However, the Asia Pacific region and Latin America and the Caribbean received higher ratings than other regions. Interestingly, UN staff rated UN engagement in this lower than young persons with disabilities, with a median response of 1.96, slightly below "acceptable."

Figure 3.10. Perceptions of UN engagement with young people with disabilities, by region
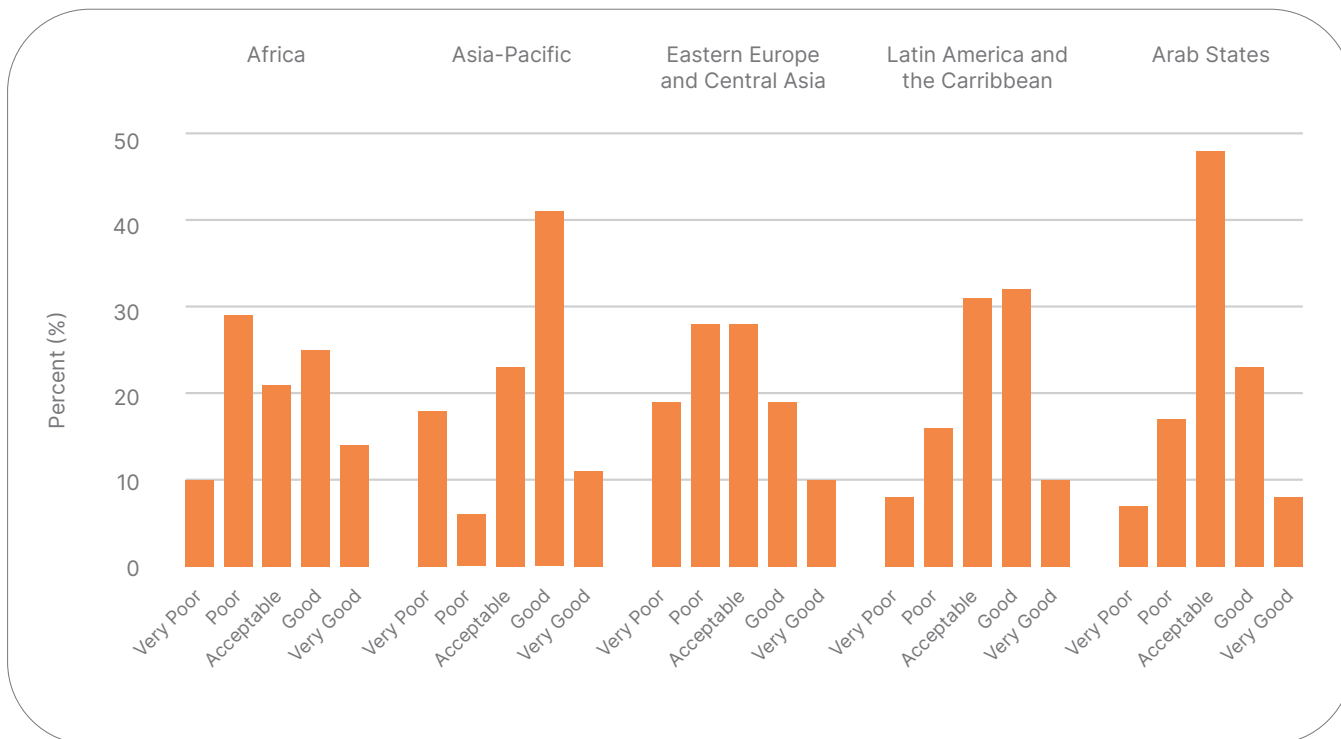
Insights from the deep-dive

The deep-dive affirms a positive transition in the approach of UN entities at the country level. **The adoption of the UNDIS has seemingly instigated greater attention to disability issues and a change in ways of working.** There seems to be a shift from merely consulting with NGOs and service providers to directly engaging with persons with disabilities, including young persons with disabilities. Moreover, some UN Country Teams and entities reported taking initial action to become inclusive workplaces and make their facilities more accessible. These measures not only echo the call for meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities, but also indicate steps towards fostering such engagement at a structural level within the UN.

A promising aspect is the aspiration expressed by UN staff to foster disability inclusion across their initiatives. Indeed, some UN entities reported adopting a twin-track approach, which encompasses both mainstreaming disability inclusion and having targeted actions. However, similar to the survey results, the deep-dive suggests that disability-focused programmes are the ones providing greater opportunities for the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in decision-making, indicating a need to mainstream a disability-inclusive approach across all programmes. Furthermore, efforts to engage young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes are particularly noticeable in UN entities that have active disability focal points. However, the absence of such focal points in some UN entities hints at a potential systemic gap, which could sideline the engagement of young persons with disabilities due to a lack of dedicated capacity and resources.

The deep-dive shows a varied range of initiatives aimed at elevating public awareness on disability issues and empowering young persons with disabilities. The emphasis on capacity-building, leadership development, and enhancement of decision-making skills through tailored workshops and training is positive and valued by young persons with disabilities. However, training sessions are mostly related to disability-specific issues. A notable exception is the reported emphasis on sexual and reproductive health and rights among many UN entities, particularly UNFPA. The gap in training topics is recognised by UN staff, who believe that enhancing the participation of young people with disabilities in non-disability-specific fields (such as migration, climate change, humanitarian response, and gender equality) is important.

Some UN entities reported measures to include young persons with disabilities in various decision-making processes, such as involving them in the development of strategic documents, international forums, or advisory committees, councils, or boards within UN entities. To support this engagement, some UN entities at the global level have created resources such as handbooks on meaningful engagement in decision-making processes, standard operating procedures, guidance notes, and assessment tools. These efforts to enhance the accessibility of learning platforms and to engage young persons with disabilities in strategic document development highlights the UN's increased commitment to promoting a participatory environment.

> *Build their capacity (of young persons with disabilities), because once it's built, it is for life and they will continue using it. It is essential to raise the next generations to be able to advocate for themselves. It is so key within our programs.*
> *(UN Country Team, Kenya)*

Nonetheless, there are areas that signal a need for a more intensified and effective engagement strategy. Despite the established programmes and platforms, there is a call for more sustained engagement with young persons with disabilities. **Overall, there is a lack of sustainable programmes specifically tailored for young persons with disabilities, necessitating more focused efforts to ensure broader consideration of disability issues across various areas of work. There is also a lack of formal mechanisms for engaging young persons with disabilities in decision-making.** Often, UN entities resort to well-known existing youth or disability networks, which can inadvertently limit the diversity of voices and priorities of young persons with disabilities, particularly those from underrepresented groups, such as persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, autistic persons, deafblind persons, indigenous persons with disabilities, and persons with disabilities from minority communities. Additionally, the high standard requirements set by the UN for organizations to qualify for partnerships could pose a barrier to small, youth-led organizations, further curbing the variety of voices and experiences.

> *If we are looking for diversity, then young people are a part of this diversity.*
> *(Youth, Kenya)*

> *I am a beneficiary more often than an initiator or a person involved in decision-making ... I think that many young people with disabilities have the skills and resources to not limit us to the role of a beneficiary and move to another level.*
> *(Youth, Georgia)*

The critical reflections on the UN's work highlight an existing gap between the efforts and the actual engagement of young persons with disabilities. The concerns extend from the adequacy and appropriateness of support and accommodations provided, to the recognition and utilization of the capacities, leadership, and expertise of young persons with disabilities. The need for more UN expertise on different disability constituencies, better communication, and a broader spectrum of support mechanisms emerged as significant pointers for enhancing the effectiveness and meaningfulness of engagement.

The UN's role in liaising between governments and youth with disabilities is particularly significant. The deep-dive demonstrates instances where the UN has facilitated platforms for direct dialogues between governments and young persons with disabilities, thereby playing a pivotal role in promoting their meaningful participation in policy discussions. However, the uncertainty about the sustainability of these practices without the UN's involvement shows the need for a more robust, self-sustaining engagement framework that extends beyond the good intentions of UN staff. This could be addressed by fostering stronger partnerships and collaborations with OPDs, including youth-led organizations, thus ensuring a more sustainable and meaningful engagement beyond the UN's facilitation.

3.4.   Engagement in civil society and youth movements

Young persons with disabilities aspire to play an active role in civil society and youth movements, aiming to contribute their unique perspectives and advocate for inclusive agendas. These movements—inclusive of OPDs and women's rights organizations, whether disability-specific or broader in scope—hold significant potential in raising awareness, instigating policy changes, and advocating for the rights of all members of society. Through collaboration with other youth activists, young persons with disabilities can amplify their voices, ensuring that disability rights are intertwined with broader agendas and goals.

Survey results

Most young persons with disabilities who participated in the survey reported active engagement in civil society and youth movements. **A significant 47.7 per cent of respondents are involved in OPDs, 24.9 per cent participate in youth networks and movements, and 10.9 per cent are involved with girls' and women's organizations and movements.** These profiles may reflect a sample bias but also reinforce a notable trend towards disability-focused advocacy identified throughout the research.

When asked about their perceptions of participation in varying spheres, young persons with disabilities assigned a median rating of 2.40 (between "acceptable" and "good") to OPDs, contrasted with 2.01 ("acceptable") for girls' and women's organizations and 1.86 (lower than "acceptable") for youth networks and movements. This pattern of more substantial participation within disability-centric spaces compared to youth movements is a sentiment that is concurrently held by government representatives and UN staff. **This draws attention to the prevailing limitation in opportunities available for young persons with disabilities to engage in dialogues and activities outside disability-focused circles, highlighting an area for expansion and collaboration between different constituencies.**

Insights from the deep-dive

Youth movements and networks have a positive impact on young persons with disabilities, providing a space for them to connect with peers and engage in collective problem-solving. The structure of these networks, be they disability-specific or broader, plays a significant role in training and equipping young persons with the necessary skills for advocacy and engagement with authorities. Workshops and meetings are identified as crucial venues for empowerment where young persons can learn about their rights and opportunities. However, challenges persist in building self-confidence and convincing others of their abilities.

> *I am grateful, because I have an opportunity to join workshops and more in this space that I am sharing with you, I feel very happy to be able to demonstrate and to be able to comment on what one as a young person and as a person with disabilities, can achieve in the future.*
> *(Youth, Kenya)*

In most of the deep-dive countries, the lack of active participation of young persons with disabilities in youth movements was noticeable. However, **some youth-led organizations exhibit a proactive approach, setting a positive example. These organizations prioritize meaningful youth engagement, recruit young persons with disabilities to lead the disability agenda, and ensure the process is participatory and respectful of their leadership.** The initiatives extend to formalizing collaborations, recognizing the expertise of young persons with disabilities, and compensating them accordingly. Moreover, they highlight the importance of enhancing representation in mainstream women's and youth associations.

> *In many cases, even the activists have not fully understood what they are asking for. For example, if I ask for employment, this is the last point, that is, my request should not start from employment, but should start from education, because if I ask for employment, I should be a qualified one. We have these gaps in the community about what to ask for.*
> *(Youth, Georgia)*

Adult-led disability organizations articulated a responsibility towards raising disability awareness and expertise in society, championing the rights of individuals with disabilities, including youth. They expressed a commitment to nurture the leadership of young members by providing mentorship, sharing experiences, and involving them in decision-making processes both internally and externally. Engagement begins with mobilization for training and education to equip them with essential knowledge on their rights and various disability issues. Efforts also extend to promoting youth involvement in diverse platforms such as conferences, seminars, political dialogues, and UN activities, with empowerment strategies tailored to specific projects and concerns. However, a noted generational

gap in some organizations deters the full realization of youth-led initiatives. Young respondents expressed scepticism towards the senior members of OPDs, fearing a lack of support or understanding for their initiatives. This generational gap sometimes results in disagreements between youth and older members, indicating a need for a paradigm shift from an adult-centric approach to one that is intergenerational and more youth-oriented.

> *We are not able to see the needs of young people, because we are over that age, right? And, of course, although we make efforts to incorporate young people, we always do it from an adult-centric point of view and not as young people, so I think there is a need for a change of paradigm.*
> *(Representative of adult-led OPD, Guatemala)*

Furthermore, **affiliation with adult-led organizations often serves as a bridge between young persons with disabilities and governmental and non-governmental entities, enhancing the likelihood of influencing decision-making processes. Although this affiliation can bolster advocacy efforts, youth have expressed a preference for independent activism.** They appreciate the autonomy it offers from the oversight and control of adult leaders, enabling them to align their activism more closely with their concerns and aspirations. This sentiment reflects a desire for a more autonomous advocacy approach, where youth can lead initiatives and champion changes within their communities independently.

> *They do a great job, but they may not agree with you on many things, their words may control you. In the future, I am also thinking of becoming an independent activist and using my resources to do what needs to be done in our community... In general, I appreciate their achievements and the work done; however, we have other initiatives, and we want to do all this with independent activists.*
> *(Youth, Georgia)*

The deep-dive highlights the various advocacy domains young persons with disabilities are engaged in, such as disability rights, assistive technologies, and youth entrepreneurship. They also exhibit a drive towards mainstream activism, enhancing their visibility in society beyond their disabilities. Their advocacy encompasses education, employment, and sexual and reproductive health, reflecting the interconnectedness of these areas in improving their quality of life. They are learning the nuances of effective advocacy, understanding the importance of a well-rounded approach. For example, they recognize that employment advocacy should be rooted in solid education advocacy. **Persistent demand and ongoing campaigns are seen as effective strategies, with social media emerging as a valuable tool for wider engagement and innovative expressions like slams, poems, and sketches used to demand accountability from authorities and reveal societal challenges.**

The path of self-advocacy and activism presents challenges, often forcing young respondents to choose between unpaid activism and paid employment due to the demanding nature of advocacy efforts. However, the drive for advocacy remains strong among them. They see advocacy as a means to change future realities and serve as role models for their peers. Despite the challenges, the belief that their efforts will contribute to a more inclusive society fuels their continued engagement.

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I am interested in being an activist, but I do feel, well, it is easier for me, and it is much easier to do activism on my own, that is, for me personally, to do it on my own, to be able to reach more people than by other means.
(Youth, Guatemala)

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Activism is very tiring in terms of time and energy, but you realize that you must do it because no one else will do what you must do… No matter where I am, if at that moment I find something that needs action, I immediately start reacting, thinking about who to report.
(Youth, Georgia)

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

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Photo credit: © UNFPA Asia and the Pacific.

4. Challenges and barriers to participation: What needs to change?

In this chapter, we explore the various challenges and barriers that young people with disabilities face in their efforts to participate in different aspects of society. The analysis will cover a range of obstacles, focusing on how societal norms, discrimination, and structural issues hinder the active and meaningful involvement of these young individuals. The aim is to highlight the critical areas that require attention and action.

4.1.   Societal and cultural barriers

Addressing societal and cultural barriers, particularly ableism and adultism, is fundamental in understanding the challenges faced by young persons with disabilities in participating in various societal spaces. Ableism refers to social prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities, based on deeply rooted negative perceptions about the value of the lives of persons with disabilities.[39]

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[39] Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, The impact of ableism in medical and scientific practice, A/HRC/43/41, 2020.

Adultism is closely related to ageism. It refers to behaviours and attitudes based on the belief that adults are superior to young people and have the right to make decisions affecting young people without their involvement.[40] These societal norms, which compound with other forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism, significantly shape perceptions and attitudes towards young persons with disabilities. This dynamic perpetuates power imbalances, often undermining their voices, rights, and contributions in decision-making processes and societal roles.

A significant barrier raised by study participants is the societal stigma and stereotypes associated with disability. The prevailing medical and charity approaches to disability view persons with disabilities as mere recipients of protection or assistance. These approaches undermine the expertise of young persons with disabilities and relegate them to passive participation or token roles in decision-making platforms, merely to fulfil diversity mandates. Deep-rooted ableism often results in these individuals being underestimated and marginalized, impacting their self-esteem and deterring them from seizing opportunities. This limits youth engagement with governmental entities and restricts their political engagement, which many young respondents deem essential.

Prevailing biases and outdated beliefs, particularly in certain areas or communities, also impede the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities. The culture of shame associated with having a family member with a disability often leads to social isolation, prompting families to keep such individuals secluded, thereby restricting their societal engagement. Mystical beliefs about disability, particularly in cases of albinism, further marginalize and endanger these young individuals, exposing them to violence.[41]

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

Adultism exacerbates these challenges, with young individuals often seen as inexperienced or immature, leading to the devaluation or dismissal of their inputs. In many countries, individuals aged 30 to 35 are still perceived as youth, with younger individuals often seen as immature. This ageist perspective is more pronounced towards young persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24, relegating them to the role of programme beneficiaries, thereby impeding their participation in decision-making platforms. This discriminatory treatment extends well into their thirties, delaying their meaningful societal engagement until they age out of this bracket. The varying age definitions for a young person with disabilities used by different stakeholders, while in some cases reflect different cultural dynamics around youth, also indicate a preference for engaging with individuals aged 25 to 35, rather than those aged 15 to 24.

The prevalent culture of overprotection towards young persons with disabilities, particularly young women with disabilities, significantly hampers their involvement in decision-making processes. This overprotection often stems from families and is mirrored within the wider disability community, where decisions are made for them, limiting their opportunities for self-representation and independent decision-making. This patronizing attitude perpetuates an infantilistic approach towards youths that undermines their desires for independence and self-advocacy.

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[40] Bell, J. (1995). Understanding adultism. YouthBuild. USA. Retrieved from ▶ http://actioncivics.scoe.net/pdf/Understanding_Adultism.pdf.
[41] UNFPA, Young Persons with Disabilities: Global Study on Ending Gender-based Violence and Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, 2018, p. 32.

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

> *I think that in general our culture is formed in such a way that no matter how true a young person is, we still have a childish attitude towards them, that is, it is not only a problem of the disability community, but also a problem of our culture in general.*
> *(Representative of adult-led OPD, Georgia)*

4.2.   Gender-based discrimination

Gender-based discrimination is another significant barrier for the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities. **Girls and young women with disabilities often face increased oppression and unique challenges due to the intersection between disability and gender, as well as their age, race, ethnicity, and nationality. This also entails an increased risk of abuse, violence, and neglect, which makes their equal participation in society more challenging.**

> *We know that we have a legal system that lacks many things and many times specifically women with disabilities do not have the right to real justice when their rights are violated.*
> *(Youth, Guatemala)*

A consistent issue highlighted by research participants is the marginalization of young women with disabilities from significant decision-making initiatives, due to gender and disability bias. This marginalization extends to training and capacity-building opportunities, where their participation is much more limited than that of young men with disabilities. Due to intersectional discrimination, young women with disabilities attain independence much later than their male counterparts; they are more likely to be unemployed, which makes transportation and other costs prohibitive; and they face more overprotection and are more reticent about communicating their own requirements. Additionally, their limited experience with participating in public spaces, which reduces opportunities for relating to others and building confidence, often hinders their ability to participate in decision-making processes. As a result, more young men than women with disabilities become visible and exercise greater social mobility. Also, young men's contributions are more commonly emphasized and acknowledged than those of women.

Patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes exacerbate the challenges faced by young women with disabilities, limiting their access to essential resources like education, health services, and employment opportunities. In certain areas, cultural or community norms can further constrain the mobility and independence of young women with disabilities. For instance, there might be places where young women are not allowed to leave home alone and are required to be accompanied by a family member, typically the mother, to attend meetings. These cumulative barriers significantly impede the active engagement and representation of young women with disabilities in societal discussions and decisions.

> *Most of the women are interested in knowing about Human Rights and disability issues, because most of them live locked up, most of them do not know about their rights. So, when we have talked to them about Human Rights, it is as if a woman is awakened to what has happened or to say, I have this right and I did not know it and now I can assert it before society and my family, which is basically, some did not know that being locked up and not being given permission to go out, can be considered a type of violence. So, at the moment of starting or doing this type of situation, they realize how they can be empowered through the defense of human rights. (Youth, Guatemala)*

The discrimination that young women with disabilities encounter often extends to the disability community itself, where gender equality may be sidelined or deemed unimportant. In some settings, OPDs and NGOs overlook girls and women with disabilities. For example, in certain countries youth organization representatives are predominantly male. When young women with disabilities attempt to raise their issues or discuss gender budgeting in local disability programmes, they may face dismissive attitudes, even from influential human rights defenders in the disability field. This dismissiveness sometimes extends to government officials, mirroring the patriarchal attitudes prevalent within their communities. In some cases, young women and girls with disabilities who voice critical opinions are advised to modulate their speech or are met with patronizing suggestions, further compounding gender discrimination with ageism. These attitudes among community and governmental bodies exacerbate the marginalization of young women with disabilities, underscoring the necessity for a gender-inclusive approach to advocacy and policymaking.

Despite prevailing gender disparities, some participants noted a positive shift towards the empowerment and visibility of young women with disabilities in disability advocacy movements and campaigns in recent years. There is a growing number of girls and young women accessing information, becoming aware of their rights, and stepping into leadership roles within disability advocacy circles. Their journey is often underpinned by a culture of mutual empowerment and peer support, marking a progressive stride towards gender equality. However, a parallel trend indicates a decline in activism and engagement among young men with disabilities. Some participants speculate this divergence is rooted in the relatively better higher education and employment opportunities available to young men with disabilities in certain regions. These opportunities possibly reduce their time and inclination towards voluntary activism, shedding light on the gendered dimension of participation within the disability community.

Entrenched traditional beliefs also intersect with and compound the challenges faced by young LGBTQI+ individuals with disabilities, who already grapple with stigma and discrimination due to their gender identities and sexual orientations. While in some countries there is a reluctance among these individuals to disclose their LGBTQI+ identities to avoid further discrimination, there seems to be progress in certain regions, where young LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities are forming networks, fostering mutual support and advocacy not yet observed among older cohorts within this group.

4.3. Lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodation

Accessibility is crucial for the participation of young persons with disabilities in society. It means ensuring the environment, transportation, information, communications, and services enable access and participation of persons with disabilities and people with other access needs. Lack of accessibility significantly frustrates the ability of young persons with disabilities to interact, communicate, and participate in different aspects of life, such as education, healthcare, employment, leisure, sports, or community activities. Additionally, the absence of accessible digital platforms and resources limit their ability to acquire information, connect with peers, and participate in the digitalized world. Therefore, the lack of accessibility imposes substantial limitations on the realization of their rights and potential.

Lack of accessibility is recognized as a significant barrier to the meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. Identified challenges include inaccessible buildings and facilities, lack of sign language interpreters, and limited accessible information, including ICT. Additionally, the absence of adapted equipment, easy-to-read materials, and transportation challenges hinder the meaningful engagement of young persons across all disability groups. While the UN appears to be more attuned to addressing the access needs of young persons with disabilities compared to some governments, the lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodation remains a key impediment to meaningful youth engagement. The intersection between gender, economic status, ethnicity, and geographical location further exacerbates accessibility barriers.

> *Universal accessibility is not considered, adaptations are not functional, sometimes ramps are just 'ornaments.*
> *(Youth, Kenya)*

Several factors contribute to accessibility problems. The complexity of bureaucratic procedures within State and UN entities often delays the provision of necessary support, especially for meetings not planned in advance. These processes, which require early budget allocation and extensive justifications, can be so time-consuming that staff ends up seeking donations or relying on voluntary support. Moreover, young persons with disabilities may require more assistance than adults, including accompaniment by family members, complicating the justification for personal assistant costs. The lack of standardized policies results in ad hoc solutions that depend on goodwill rather than a systemic, rights-based approach. Furthermore, limited budgets restrict necessary accommodations and the adoption of innovative and technological solutions. All these factors influence who is invited and actually contributes to decision-making processes.

The lack of awareness and understanding of universal design[42] and reasonable accommodation[43] is another major challenge. This often manifests in improper infrastructure arrangements, unsuitable venue selections for meetings, and the creation of web pages that are unresponsive to diverse needs. Ensuring accessibility and inclusive activities for persons with intellectual disabilities remains a substantial challenge. Young persons with disabilities have pinpointed the failure to prioritize reasonable accommodations as a primary factor hindering their meaningful engagement.

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[42] Universal design refers to the design of products, environments, programmes, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed. See, CRPD, art. 2.
[43] Reasonable accommodation refers to necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. See, CRPD, art. 2.

UN Accessibility: Perceptions from Young Persons with Disabilities

The online survey responses provide insights on how young persons with disabilities perceive the accessibility of UN facilities and services at the country level. When asked about the accessibility of various UN facilities and services, young persons with disabilities rated them just above "acceptable." The ratings from the UN Country Teams' employees were slightly less favourable, but also close to "acceptable." It should be noted that the 2022 UNDIS report highlighted a concerning gap in accessibility, with 54 per cent of UN Country Teams not meeting the set standards for the UNDIS accessibility indicator. This points to a pressing need for action at the country level to make the UN's work more accessible.

4.4.   Multiple layers of marginalization

Lack of opportunities, particularly in education and employment, is a structural barrier to the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making. The limited availability and accessibility of opportunities obstruct the development of young persons with disabilities, creating a continuous cycle of exclusion and marginalization in various aspects of their lives.

Education is crucial for enhancing the likelihood of representation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making spaces. Yet, many children and adolescents with disabilities lack access to adequate education, not only at higher levels but also during primary and secondary schooling. Some respondents noted that ensuring inclusive education poses a significant challenge, with few State schools adequately prepared to provide it. In some countries, young persons with disabilities aged 15 to 24 are often still in school due to delayed commencement and completion of their general education, a situation especially prevalent among young persons with intellectual disabilities. This becomes a roadblock when UN agencies set requisites for participation in their initiatives, as young persons with disabilities typically reach the required educational level around age 30, rendering them ineligible for participation due to age restrictions.

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

Limited educational opportunities keep young persons with disabilities in a cycle of social and economic inequality, leaving them further behind. Limited education often results in reduced employment prospects, while unemployment holds up access to further education and skills development. Systemic discrimination, restricted access to vocational training, and a lack of supportive and inclusive work environments exacerbate the issue. The scarcity of employment opportunities and workplace inclusion inhibits the economic independence and self-sufficiency of young persons with disabilities. This diminishes their capability to engage in advocacy and decision-making processes and adversely affects their overall well-being and quality of life.

Photo credit: © UNFPA Mauritania.

Language barriers are another obstacle to the active engagement and representation of young people with disabilities in international platforms such as the UN. In countries where English is not a primary or national language, lack of proficiency in English deters the active participation and partnership of young persons with disabilities with the UN, especially at the international level. Similarly, insufficient knowledge of the national or State language poses a participation barrier for young people from ethnic or indigenous groups. This language barrier marginalizes individuals from less privileged backgrounds, limiting their engagement and representation in important discussions and decision-making processes.

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The opportunities we sometimes give as organizations are biased in my opinion. Maybe it is our fault, and we need to reconsider this issue even globally. I mean, most of the people we choose to represent certain groups are the elite. In Jordan, the majority of those we pick to run in campaigns or be activists are from a financially stable background. They had enjoyed a decent education and have strong family support. They have certainly been through challenges, but there is a primary support circle around them. Many times, what helps them is their mastering of a language, mainly Arabic and additionally English, my focus here is on English…Those chosen to speak mastered English. And even locally, we tend to talk to those able to use English, or able to better express themselves. By that we cause more harm than good when we show favoritism and unequal opportunities. Young women with disabilities chosen to present are the same every time and they are few. How I see it is that we must build the capacity of other young women with disabilities as well to be just like those able to speak and present. We cannot only focus on the elite group and leave all the rest behind. I admit they will need more work, yet we must ensure equally given opportunities.
(OPD, Jordan)

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4.5.   Lack of knowledge and awareness about disability rights and inclusion

Research participants emphasized the crucial role that awareness and knowledge of rights play in facilitating the activism of young persons with disabilities. When appropriately informed and aware of their rights, individuals are better positioned to voice their concerns and take action. However, due to compounded disadvantages, not all young persons with disabilities have access to the necessary information, especially those living in remote rural areas and ethnic and indigenous groups. Additionally, the methods of information dissemination and the information itself are not always tailored to meet the diverse support needs of young persons with disabilities. Deaf youth were highlighted as a particularly marginalized group due to their restricted access to information.

> *Because people with disabilities are really marginalized, they are not confident in themselves, they are not confident in themselves to participate … they feel marginalized in fact. So, we can do training on this so that people with disabilities develop themselves, particularly in terms of personal development, to get out of their comfort zones, to reach out to people, to talk about their difficulties.*
> *(Youth, Mali)*

Addressing the right training needs is crucial for empowering young persons with disabilities. A respondent highlighted that training aimed at informing young persons with disabilities about legal frameworks that are not implemented is unlikely to impact their empowerment and skills development. Young persons with disabilities would benefit more from training that focuses on enhancing skills and devising strategies to effectively influence decision-makers.

While some UN entities and NGOs are supporting the development of advocacy skills among young persons with disabilities, addressing this gap is imperative. **Several UN representatives and youth organizations have expressed concern that UN staff often lack a thorough understanding of disability, as well as the concept of meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.** There is a prevalent concern regarding the system's readiness to cater to the diverse support needs of young persons with disabilities, including those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, and those under age 18. Indeed, despite advocating for child participation in governmental processes, some UN agencies have reservations about involving young persons with disabilities under age 18 in their own activities, unless an organization specializing in minors' affairs is also engaged.

This challenge is not confined to the UN; many government and civil society representatives acknowledge a similar knowledge gap on how to provide accommodations and support to young persons with different support needs. Some respondents expressed the need for enhanced awareness and understanding when interacting with persons with disabilities. This includes knowledge about the type of support and accommodations required, procedures, and budget allocations that ensure the active participation of young persons with disabilities.

> *Sometimes they [the government] do change, and I really appreciate this, because sometimes your effort is considered.*
> *(Youth, Kenya)*

4.6.   Inadequate community support

Respondents highlighted a pervasive lack of support across various levels, ranging from families and educational institutions to communities and governmental structures. This deficiency in support systems disrupts the ability of young persons with disabilities to navigate and engage with their communities, limiting their involvement in decision-making.

At the familial level, the support extended to young persons with disabilities significantly influences their societal engagement. Many may not receive the necessary encouragement, understanding, or resources to pursue their aspirations, often due to financial constraints, societal stigma, or inadequate knowledge about disability. This lack of support can adversely impact the emotional, mental, and physical well-being of young persons with disabilities, hindering their active engagement in society. Support from families is crucial for enabling them to lead independent lives and participate in the public arena. However, in communities with negative perceptions of disability, even relatives may hesitate to provide the needed support or accompany them in public.

At the community level, the absence of community support systems that enable persons with disabilities to carry out activities of daily living and actively participate in their communities, amplifies the obstacles confronting young persons with disabilities.[44] **The shortfall in services and networks—such as human support (e.g., personal assistance[45]), sign language interpretation, and accessible transport— obstructs real opportunities for young persons with disabilities to participate in events, consultations, and workshops.**

At the policy level, although legislation often affirms the equality of rights and opportunities, practical support from State institutions is inadequate. States entities often perceive engagement with youth with disabilities as a discretionary social responsibility rather than an obligation. While the UN occasionally facilitates the participation of young people with disabilities and provides support, there are no systematic efforts from both UN and governmental bodies to ensure their active involvement in decision-making.

4.7.   Lack of sustainable funding

One major challenge is the limited funding directed towards young persons with disabilities, especially impacting those from the Global South and low-income countries.[46] This shortage hinders the establishment and sustenance of youth-led organizations and restricts the engagement of young persons with disabilities with mainstream youth organizations. While some youth movements have managed to collaborate effectively with young persons with disabilities through UN support, these collaborations often lack sustainability due to general funding scarcities in youth movements. Consequently, the intent to strengthen the engagement of young persons with disabilities diminishes when specific projects and corresponding funds end. Unpaid volunteer work remains the primary avenue for engagement for young persons with disabilities.

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[44] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Support systems to ensure community inclusion of persons with disabilities, including as a means of building forward better after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, A/HRC/52/52, 2023.

[45] Personal assistance refers to person-directed, user-led, human support available to a person with disability and is a tool for independent living. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General comment No. 5 (2017) on living independently and being included in the community, 2017, para. 16(d).

[46] In general, States allocate very little budget to disability inclusion, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. See, Alexandre Cote and Meenakshi Balsubramanian, The new normal: Getting governments to spend (more and better) for (inclusion) of all persons with disabilities, Center for Inclusive Policy (CIP) and CBM Australia, 2020, ▶ www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/budget-advocacy-for-a-new-normal.

> "
> *There are a lot of young people who are coming up, I'm coming up with great innovations, great ideas. Others are starting up their new organization. They should look for, in partnership with them, supporting them and helping them to grow as well.*
> *(Youth, Kenya)*
> "

Youth-led OPDs face a significant funding disparity compared to well-established, adult-led OPDs. This disparity leads to OPDs being perceived as gatekeepers competing with youth-led organizations for funding, and reluctant to share resources and authority. This scenario forces young individuals to engage with larger, adult-led organizations as well as NGOs, diverting resources that could otherwise bolster youth-led initiatives. Ideally, funding should be allocated to youth-led organizations to enhance their capacity and prioritize youth-centric agendas. However, funds often end up with organizations that do not prioritize or understand youth agendas. The financial constraints also inhibit youth-led organizations from adopting necessary accessibility measures, like sign language interpretation, deafblind interpretation, closed captioning, and simultaneous interpretation.

4.8.   Barriers to adequate representation

The inadequate representation of young persons with disabilities curbs their participation in decision-making processes, which is reflected in their diminished visibility across various platforms. This lack of representation is particularly noticeable within youth organizations, where the absence of young persons with disabilities, especially in leadership roles, restricts meaningful youth engagement. Moreover, in some cases, youth organizations have leadership structures populated by individuals notably older than the conventional youth age bracket, some even in their forties, which curtails the shift towards a more youth-centric approach. This creates a compelling gap in understanding and addressing youth-specific issues, and discourages active engagement from young persons with disabilities.

Adult-led OPDs, while committed to promoting disability rights and inclusion, frequently do not capture the spirit of youth-led initiatives. They can be decisive in mentoring young individuals, sharing valuable life insights, and integrating them into decision-making processes. Nonetheless, their processes often reflect a more vertically structured and, perhaps, rigid framework, primarily geared towards educating and training young people.

The generational gap within these organizations emerges as a significant concern and reveals a divergence in opinions and visions between younger and older representatives. Young respondents expressed scepticism towards senior members' support for their initiatives. They perceive a lack of confidence in their success potential and overarching control by adult leaders. They also pointed to the failure of adult-led OPDs to provide them with meaningful participation opportunities. Specifically, senior members, being in a more advantageous position, often occupy seats in meetings and committees, which limits young members' participation in decision-making processes, larger-scale meetings, and advocacy spaces.

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> *If I speak on behalf of an organization and then they disagree with me, saying, 'she's a member of my organization, but I don't agree,' that can do more damage to the cause than if you voiced an opinion on your own.*
> *(Youth, Georgia)*
> "

Young respondents advocate for diversification of the OPDs' representatives to expand their opportunities for participation. They express a desire to establish their own organizations or youth sections, but often find their needs for guidance and other forms of support unmet by organization executives. A paradigm shift is needed from an adult-centric perspective to a more youth-inclusive approach. This shift should value and nurture the autonomy and innovative capabilities of young persons with disabilities. The aspiration for independent activism is apparent, reflecting a desire for self-driven advocacy, not bound by conventional frameworks of adult-led organizations.

In terms of representation, certain groups of young persons with disabilities are better represented than others, especially within UN entities and governmental platforms. A consensus among participants suggests that young persons with physical disabilities tend to have better representation. Similarly, young persons with visual impairments find better representation, though partially sighted individuals are represented more than blind individuals. However, the representation of young persons with hearing impairments is a mixed bag; they are often considered better represented, but the deep-dive reveals that the Deaf community might be underrepresented.

On the flip side, the representation of certain groups of youth with disabilities is significantly lacking. Young persons with intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, and autism are often relegated; their representation is usually mediated through parents or service providers. This lack of direct representation stems from widespread opinions that these groups might struggle with clear communication or meaningful contributions to decision-making. Additionally, young persons with psychosocial disabilities, deaf-blindness, or albinism find themselves scarcely represented. Individuals with albinism face an ongoing debate on whether albinism should be classified as a disability, further complicating their representation. Intersectionality also plays a pivotal role in representation, where gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intersect with disability, often amplifying the hurdles in achieving meaningful representation in decision-making.

Photo credit: © UNCT Kyrgyz Republic.

> *But what troubles me a little bit is that people with global development delays, like myself, feel like we're not represented enough. We don't have a voice. I have spoken to politicians, but I feel that the United Nations should also bring that as an awareness to the United Nations society.*
> *(Youth, International NGO)*

> *The more conditions of discrimination a person may face, the more difficult it is for them to be incorporated into decision-making processes.*
> *(UN Country Team, Guatemala)*

An intersectional, holistic, inclusive, and well-resourced approach should address the existing disparities and foster a more equitable representation framework.

4.9. Legal and policy barriers

Legal and policy barriers hinder the participation of young persons with disabilities. Existing laws and policies frequently fall short of international human rights standards, including the CRPD. This limits the access of young persons with disabilities to rights, opportunities, and protections. Moreover, the inadequacy of legal provisions often manifests in the lack of anti-discrimination laws or accessibility mandates, perpetuating systemic inequalities.

Discrimination in law, especially against women and LGBTQI+ people, is a glaring issue. While some countries address women's rights, the intersection of gender and disability often goes unaddressed. The same holds for the rights of LGBTQI+ persons, which are often inadequately protected by law. Despite certain countries recognizing disability issues in their legal frameworks, specific recognition of the different support needs of the disability community often remains absent in gender equality laws. For instance, the participation of migrant persons with disabilities is restricted in several countries due to legislative and policy gaps. The lack of a comprehensive legal framework that encompasses all aspects of diversity within the disability community exacerbates the discrimination.

The denial and restriction of legal capacity significantly affects the exercise of rights of young persons with disabilities. **In many countries, young persons with disabilities over age 18, particularly those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, can have their legal capacity limited and thus may not be free to exercise their right to participate in public affairs.** Moreover, they can be denied their right to vote, run for office, sign a contract, or live independently in the community, in contradiction with the requirements of the CRPD.

There are further challenges in translating laws into practice. Even when disability legislation exists, the lack of practical implementation of these laws is a major barrier. This is evident in the difficulty of enforcing regulations regarding infrastructure accessibility and provisions meant to facilitate the involvement of persons with disabilities in decision-making. Moreover, the enforcement of laws and regulations often varies between urban and rural areas, with rural areas facing greater challenges. Young respondents highlighted that they often rely on the personal judgments of authorities rather than legislation, emphasizing the need for strict monitoring and allocation of sufficient resources to ensure law enforcement.

Photo credit: © PNUD Guatemala / Fernanda Zelada.

"

My practice is that if we want to change the decision of the government, we must protest. (Youth, Georgia)

"

In relation to the UN, Country Team representatives identified a lack of specific regulations to enhance the participation of young persons with disabilities. The temporary nature of certain initiatives, like the establishment of advisory boards linked to specific projects, limits sustained engagement with young persons with disabilities. The lack of focus on young people within the CRPD also contributes to this shortfall. Respondents across different participant groups stressed the need for more straightforward UN regulations to monitor and follow up on work and programmes aimed at or involving young persons with disabilities. The lack of monitoring and evaluation at both global and local levels within the UN entities underscores a crucial gap in ensuring the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities.

5. Supporting the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities: What works?

Photo credit: © UNFPA Mozambique / Mbuto Machili.

In this chapter, we delve into the promising strategies and approaches that aim to support young persons with disabilities on their path towards effective engagement in decision-making. Ensuring such participation goes beyond mere inclusion; it entails reshaping systems, environments, and mindsets to recognize and amplify the voices of young persons with disabilities. Through an exploration of existing practices and insights from research participants, this chapter discusses various engagement strategies for empowering young persons with disabilities to influence decisions that impact their lives. Respondents from diverse participant groups have identified the factors that positively influence the meaningful participation of young people with disabilities in decision-making processes within governments and the UN, sharing insights drawn from their real-life experiences.

Identifying Priorities to Amplify Participation of Young Persons with Disabilities

The survey responses from young persons with disabilities show a need for more active involvement and recognition in society. In response to an open question about the most important issues that must be addressed to realise their rights, they emphasize engagement in decision-making, indicating the importance of having their voices heard in relevant matters. Additionally, there is a call for societal awareness and information on rights, highlighting the necessity for a cultural transformation about disability perceptions. Education, including higher education, and employment opportunities, covering vocational training and rehabilitation, are seen as essential steps towards inclusion. Lastly, capacity building and empowerment are seen as important for promoting self-reliance and ensuring young persons with disabilities have the necessary resources and skills to advocate for their rights and contribute to their communities meaningfully.

When asked about strengthening the involvement of young persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, the top priority for this group is raising awareness about their rights, with a significant 43.9 per cent preference. This is followed by the adoption of inclusive policies or procedures (13.7 per cent) and engaging them in planning as partners or leaders (9.8 per cent). The strong preference for awareness-raising reflects a crucial need for a broader understanding and recognition of the rights and capabilities of young persons with disabilities.

On the other hand, UN employees and government employees prioritize adopting inclusive policies or procedures when asked the same question, with 34.5 per cent and 27.5 per cent respectively, followed by raising awareness about the rights of young persons with disabilities. The agreement between these two groups on adopting inclusive policies or procedures shows a shared understanding of the structural changes needed. However, the lower emphasis on awareness-raising among UN and government employees compared to young persons with disabilities indicates a possible gap in recognizing the immediate societal barriers faced by the latter.

5.1.   Ensuring close consultation with young persons with disabilities

In the continuum of youth engagement, consultation stands as a preliminary step. Consultation refers to the process where governments or UN agencies seek advice, opinions, and perspectives from different stakeholders before making a decision in relation to a policy, programme, or initiative. While individuals are sought for their input, they are not necessarily part of the decision-making. Consultation continues to be the dominant way that public perspectives are collected, and conducting consultations for certain projects and processes remains a viable approach. For instance, a crucial indicator for the implementation of the UNDIS is consultation with OPDs. To steer clear of tokenism, which may result in youth feeling exploited merely to rubber-stamp pre-existing plans, it is important that these consultations are carried out with a high degree of accountability and transparency. This ensures that the voices of young persons with disabilities are genuinely considered and not just superficially acknowledged.

To make consultations meaningful, it is crucial to engage young persons with disabilities at every phase— from planning and design to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Moreover, consultations with young persons with disabilities should not be centred only around disability or youth matters but be extended to all areas, as there is no area of life that does not impact young persons with disabilities. It is also important to acknowledge the diversity among persons with disabilities, ensuring that consultations reflect this diversity for more nuanced insights. Accessibility is fundamental for the active participation of all individuals, regardless of their disability. Additionally, involving young persons with

disabilities in shaping the consultation processes can foster a sense of co-ownership, enriching the process. This collaborative effort not only improves the consultation process but also empowers young persons with disabilities, leading to more informed and effective decision-making.

5.2.   Fostering dialogue opportunities

Establishing regular channels for direct engagements, both online and offline, between young persons with disabilities and staff members at government and UN entities, including senior staff, is a crucial step towards meaningful engagement. Continuous interactions can help bolster mutual understanding and alignment on key issues, while also nurturing a culture of inclusivity and participation. These channels could be in the form of scheduled meetings, town halls, or virtual engagements where young individuals can openly communicate their concerns, ideas, and suggestions. Such channels can be facilitated by youth or disability focal points. Moreover, having senior staff involved in these dialogues underscores the importance placed on the inputs of young persons with disabilities, and can lead to more actionable insights and stronger relationships among all parties involved.

Promoting inclusive platforms, such as councils, forums, or virtual platforms, is another imperative to enhancing dialogue opportunities. Such platforms should be tailored to account for the various needs of young people with disabilities. Forums that encapsulate diversity and empower young individuals to share their own experiences, particularly in areas like accessibility and communication, provide a fertile ground for exchanging information, establishing priorities, and supporting the nascent growth of their organizations. These platforms serve as conduits for young persons with disabilities to engage in decision-making processes. By creating a conducive environment, young people are able to voice their concerns and ideas as well as actively partake in shaping policies and initiatives that directly impact their lives.

Nepal:
Promoting inclusive local governance

Since 2018, UN Women in Nepal has led a joint UNPRPD programme focusing on integrating gender and disability responsiveness within local governance. In collaboration with various UN agencies, this programme involves women and young persons with disabilities in advocating for inclusive planning and budgeting within local governance frameworks in Federal Nepal.

The initiative educates and engages participants on international norms, national laws, and governance structures to actively contribute to local planning and budgeting processes. UN Women has established local dialogue platforms for meaningful interactions between these individuals and local government officials, advocating for gender and disability-responsive budgeting. This effort has resulted in increased budget and programme allocation for persons with disabilities in selected local government units in the Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces, marking a step towards more inclusive governance.

Viet Nam:
Advancing disability inclusion in youth agendas

In Viet Nam, the UNPRPD programme, a collaborative effort between UNFPA, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and UNICEF, provided capacity-building for government officials and disability organizations to participate in policy dialogues. This engagement contributed to the development of the National Strategy on Youth Development 2021–2030 and the National Action Plan on Adolescent and Youth Sexual and Reproductive Health (2020–2025). Additionally, the programme facilitated the involvement of disability organizations in reviewing the Law on Persons with Disabilities, focusing on sexual and reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education. The capacity-building components targeted women, girls, adolescents, youth, and underrepresented groups within the disability community to better engage with the National Socio-Economic Development Plan.

Furthermore, the programme initiated several activities to promote sexual and reproductive health rights for young persons with disabilities in Viet Nam. This included forming youth advisory groups in different regions to advocate for better access to comprehensive sexuality education, life skills education, and sexual and reproductive health services. Safe spaces were established to support the rights of marginalized youth, especially those with disabilities. A key goal was to empower young persons with disabilities to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health rights. To connect with LGBTQI+-identifying young persons with disabilities, the programme collaborated with gender and LGBTQI+ activists, engaging a leader from the Deaf youth community identifying as LGBTQI+. In 2023, guidelines were developed on sexual and reproductive health and comprehensive sexuality education, addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQI+ young persons with disabilities.

5.3. Inviting young persons with disabilities into coordination and advisory structures

Inviting young leaders with disabilities to join various groups within government or UN structures is a positive step towards better engagement. By including them in advisory boards, councils, and committees, young people gain an opportunity to share their ideas and concerns, and, depending on the nature of the structure, to take a leading role in decision-making. This involvement also helps them acquire new skills and gain professional experience. When a young person with disabilities gets a chance to participate in a board or committee, it not only motivates other young persons with disabilities but also sets a precedent for allocating spots for them in similar roles in the future.

These structures can work in different ways. They may be youth-specific or youth-inclusive. Some may come together for a short time to give advice on a specific issue, while others may form long-term partnerships, providing advice on many aspects of the agency's work over time. The way young people and adults work together in these groups can also vary. Some groups might be organized and guided by adults, providing a structured environment for young people to contribute. Other groups might be led by young people, with adults there to provide support when needed. To ensure actionable sharing of power, it is imperative that traditionally dominant adult and non-disabled voices recede, creating space for young persons with disabilities.

> " *I want to say that probably when they started choosing me, when I filled out an application to the Public Defender's Council and then others got there on my recommendation, it was a good practice in the sense that now there is always a youth with a disability in the advisory council. The same is the case with the United Nations, that is, when they started offering me something, then other active young people appeared and now they are also being offered something like that. I can't think of a better practice than that.*
> *(Representative of OPD, Georgia)* "

Kyrgyzstan:
Mainstreaming disability in the UN Youth Advisory Board

In June 2023, the UN Country Team in Kyrgyzstan established the Youth Advisory Board to improve youth engagement within the UN activities in the country.[47] The board's purpose is to advise the Country Team on youth involvement and help integrate youth perspectives and rights into UN strategies and programmes. It aims to address the needs and concerns of young people and involve youth in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The board has 12 young activists selected based on diverse factors including gender, disability, geographic location, and ethnicity. The board includes three young persons with disabilities.

The Youth Advisory Board focuses on creating an inclusive society in Kyrgyzstan by involving and building the capacity of youth, including those with disabilities, in decision-making processes and the development of policies and programmes affecting them. The board has two main objectives: to promote youth inclusivity and disability inclusivity. The three members with disabilities play a crucial role in advocating for and promoting the human rights of young persons with disabilities, including the promotion of equality and non-discrimination, physical access, and access to information. By including members from diverse backgrounds, the board is promoting inclusivity in the country, ensuring that all youth have a voice in shaping policies and programmes that impact their lives.

Guatemala: Including young persons with disabilities in the UN Disability Advisory Council

In August 2022, the UN Country Team established an Advisory Council on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.[48] This Advisory Council commenced its operations, aligning its efforts with Indicator 5 of the UNDIS and the CRPD. The primary aim of the Council is to create a platform that promotes dialogue and active collaboration between the UN Country Team in Guatemala and OPDs. Twelve OPDs participate in the Advisory Council, each represented by a primary delegate and an alternate. While there is not a formally reserved space for organizations of young persons with disabilities, efforts have been made to encourage the participation of young persons with disabilities among the representatives.

47 United Nations, Kyrgyz Republic, Exciting news: Today, the United Nations Country Team in Kyrgyzstan established a Youth Advisory Board, 7 July 2023,
▶ https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/239151-exciting-news-today-united-nations-country-team-kyrgyzstan-established-youth-advisory-board.
48 ▶ https://guatemala.un.org/es/210508-consejo-consultivo-derechos-de-personas-con-discapacidad.

UNODC's Integrity Advisory Board

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) engages 25 talented young people with interest and experience in youth empowerment, sustainable development, integrity, ethics, and anti-corruption as members of their YouthLED Integrity Advisory Board to the Global Resource for Anti-Corruption Education and Youth Empowerment (GRACE) Initiative.[49] They provide feedback and inputs into a variety of UNODC's anti-corruption initiatives.

Two board members are young persons with disabilities who also advocate for disability inclusion. Their involvement in the creation of knowledge products is a standard practice, tailored to align with their schedules and interests. An example is the development of the UNODC YouthLED Toolkit, a resource written by and for youth. In this project, these board members have made significant contributions to the toolkit's drafting. They have utilized their personal experiences to impart knowledge on how disability intersects with issues of corruption, thereby enriching the content with their perspectives and insights.

5.4. Inviting young persons with disabilities into programmatic and project structures

Inviting young persons with disabilities into programmatic and project structures is another strategic way to foster their effective engagement in decision-making. Incorporating young persons with disabilities into the planning and execution of projects ensures that their unique perspectives and needs are addressed, leading to more accessible and beneficial outcomes for all. By actively participating in steering committees and other project structures, young people with disabilities can influence the agenda, advocate for necessary accommodations, and ensure that programmes are genuinely inclusive. This approach empowers them as well as enriches the programmes and projects with diverse insights, leading to innovation and improved effectiveness.

Montenegro:
Advancing inclusion through meaningful youth engagement

The UNPRPD programme in Montenegro, which focuses on deinstitutionalization[50] and the development of community-based services, supports State agencies and OPDs to advance CRPD implementation. The programme facilitates the meaningful participation of diverse disability organizations across all its activities and phases. This includes engagement with organizations representing underrepresented groups such as persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, women, youth, and children with disabilities, including the Association of Youth with Disabilities of Montenegro (AYDM) and the Initiative of Youth with Disabilities of Boka.

Governance within the UNPRPD programme is orchestrated through a steering committee that integrates various national OPDs, ensuring their engagement in guiding the project activities. This committee encompasses a blend of government and civil society members, including a youth-led OPD. Furthermore, a consortium of seven OPDs within the UNPRPD programme, including two youth-led organizations, has embarked on an initiative to evaluate the level of disability inclusion and the adherence to the rights of persons with disabilities within the UN Country Team in Montenegro.

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49 ▶ https://grace.unodc.org/grace/en/youth-empowerment/YouthLED.html.
50 Deinstitutionalization comprises interconnected processes that aim to restore autonomy, choice, and control to persons with disabilities as to how, where, and with whom they decide to live, including through reversing the detention of persons with disabilities in social care and mental health institutions. See, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Guidelines on deinstitutionalization, including in emergencies, 2022.

Bolivia:
U-Report on the rights of children and adolescents with disabilities

U-Report is an open-source mobile messaging tool and data collection system developed by UNICEF to improve youth engagement. In Bolivia, UNICEF alongside disability organizations and representatives of young persons with disabilities used U-Report for gathering insights about the perception of children, adolescents, and young persons with disabilities regarding their rights.[51] A committee of adolescents and young persons with disabilities was formed to co-create the questionnaire with the team, provide guidance on language and format, and assist in disseminating the survey and its results. This initiative took place in October 2022, and saw the participation of 403 children, adolescents, and young persons with disabilities. The collected data, which had nationwide coverage in Bolivia, highlighted the gaps these individuals face in exercising their rights, with discrimination, prejudice, and social stigma being the major barriers identified. The incorporation of digital tools like U-Report by UNICEF represents a significant advancement in amplifying the voices of youth, especially those with disabilities.

5.5.   Fostering partnerships and collaboration

Building youth-adult partnerships and collaboration is a crucial aspect of meaningful youth engagement. Such partnerships help challenge existing power dynamics, empower youth, and establish trust. By collaborating with youth organizations, governments and the UN can ensure their initiatives resonate with the real-life experiences of those they aim to serve, thereby enhancing the impact and relevance of their efforts. Hence, working alongside youth organizations led by or inclusive of persons with disabilities can enable governments and the UN to gain a more profound understanding of their demands and needs, advocate for their rights, and better fulfil their agency's mandate.

The involvement of young persons with disabilities is significantly enhanced when they are affiliated with youth organizations, acting on their behalf or with their support. Similarly, the activities and contributions of organizations and networks of young persons with disabilities can increase through partnerships with established disability organizations that prioritize meaningful youth engagement, have funding for youth programmes, and provide sub-grants to youth-led initiatives.

Bangladesh:
Partnering with young persons with disabilities

In Bangladesh, UNDP launched an initiative aiming to address the multifaceted needs of young persons with disabilities. The initiative seeks to enhance dialogue between policymakers and stakeholders through the advancement of knowledge and evidence, and also offers tailored soft skills training. A key partner in this venture is the youth-led organization, Physically Challenged Development Foundation, which has been instrumental in conducting research, implementing training programmes, and facilitating comprehensive discussions with policymakers and other stakeholders. The collaboration with a youth-led entity serves a dual purpose: leveraging their expertise while bolstering their organizational capacity, helping them establish a notable presence.

[51] U-Report by UNICEF, Bolivia, ▶ https://bolivia.ureport.in/story/1056/.

The initiative has successfully narrowed the gap between young persons with disabilities and policymakers, stimulating productive dialogues on a myriad of issues. By intertwining knowledge dissemination, skills enhancement, and policy discourse, a synergistic platform has emerged, contributing to the holistic empowerment of young persons with disabilities. This project highlights the importance of meaningful engagement, elevating the voices and aspirations of young persons with disabilities, thus acting as a catalyst for their empowerment.

Jordan: Collaborative research with young persons with disabilities

In Jordan, the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme[52] embarked on a participatory research venture engaging young persons with disabilities. This initiative utilized peer research and participatory photography as innovative tools to better understand the evolution of adolescent capabilities over time. Adolescents alongside their peers were involved in capturing the narrative, providing a deeper insight into their trajectories. By incorporating the lived experiences and perspectives of young people, particularly those with disabilities, this initiative in Jordan affirms the essence of inclusive research in shaping a better understanding of adolescent development.

Another valuable tool used in Jordan for fostering the active engagement of young persons with disabilities in participatory design is the Block-by-Block methodology.[53] Developed through collaboration between UN-Habitat, Mojang, and Microsoft, this approach harnesses digital participation and community involvement in the planning and design processes. UN-Habitat employed this method in the design of a park in Marka, Amman, where children and young participants with disabilities were able to understand each other's needs and consider them when designing the park. This included adding ramps and inclusive games. This innovative approach ensures a bottom-up methodology, amplifying the voices of the community and incorporating diverse perspectives into the design process.

Argentina: Deaf youth as content creators and audience to advance comprehensive sexuality education

In Argentina, UNFPA launched an initiative to foster comprehensive sexuality education among adolescents and young individuals within the Deaf community, utilizing Argentina Sign Language for engagement. A series of videos, created by and for Deaf youth, are designed to trigger discussions on sexual education in various settings like schools, youth centres, and clubs.[54] These videos, subtitled in Spanish, are culturally attuned to the needs and experiences of the Deaf community, making sexual education more accessible and relatable. Alongside the videos is a guide containing recommendations and questions to steer conversations and reflections on sexual education topics, offering a structured yet flexible approach to learning.

This initiative is part of the broader Spotlight Initiative, with UNFPA Argentina collaborating with Sordas Sin Violencia,[55] a women-led OPD, to address the unique needs of the Deaf community. By embracing a user-centric approach, where Deaf youth are both the creators and the audience, this initiative educates and empowers, fostering a sense of ownership and engagement among the participants.

[52] Gender And Adolescence: Global Evidence, ▶ www.gage.odi.org/.

[53] UN-Habitat, The Block by Block Playbook: Using Minecraft as a participatory design tool in urban design and governance, 2021,
   ▶ https://unhabitat.org/the-block-by-block-playbook-using-minecraft-as-a-participatory-design-tool-in-urban-design-and.

[54] UNFPA Argentina, Recomendaciones para trabajar videos accesibles de Educación Sexual Integral, 2021,
   ▶ https://argentina.unfpa.org/es/publications/recomendaciones-para-trabajar-videos-accesibles-de-educaci%C3%B3n-sexual-integral.

[55] Sordas Sin Violencia, ▶ https://sordassinviolencia.com/index.html.

5.6.   Promoting capacity building and training

Promoting the development of capacities and skills is key for empowering young persons with disabilities to actively participate in decision-making processes. Workshops, courses, and online resources to enhance participation and leadership skills can augment the capabilities of young persons with disabilities to engage in meaningful dialogues and contribute effectively to various societal platforms. Through these capacity-building initiatives, young persons with disabilities can acquire the necessary knowledge, confidence, and expertise to articulate their concerns, propose solutions, and collaborate with others to drive positive change.

Gender transformation should be an integral part of youth capacity building. Encouraging open discussions and education on gender issues within the disability sector can help debunk stereotypes, alter prejudiced attitudes, and foster a culture of respect and equality. This is critical for the broader recognition and inclusion of young women and LGBTQI+ individuals with disabilities. Safety and protection are principles of meaningful youth engagement. There is a need for safe and inclusive spaces that enable young persons with disabilities to voice their concerns and share their experiences, thereby aiding in understanding the specific challenges they face due to gender-based discrimination and its intersections with other forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize the importance of incorporating the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda into capacity-building efforts for young persons with disabilities. A central pillar of the YPS agenda is the active participation of young people in peace and security decision-making, with a strong emphasis on applying intersectionality, ensuring inclusivity, and embracing diversity.

We Decide: Women and young persons with disabilities: equal rights and a life free from violence

The We Decide Global Programme[56] is the UNFPA flagship initiative to promote rights and choices for women and young persons with disabilities. We Decide is a transformative initiative for promoting the principle of "nothing about us, without us." It addresses gender-based violence and promotes access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information for women and young persons with disabilities. The programme leverages partnerships to promote disability inclusion through resources to support evidence-based advocacy, capacity building, technical assistance, policy dialogue, data and evidence, and innovation and digitalization.

We Decide was built on the disability-inclusive work at UNFPA with the purpose of making it more systematic and human rights-based. The programme has been implemented at the global, regional, and national levels across UNFPA. It is recognized for its unique accomplishments in areas with impact and is prepared to scale up.

[56] UNFPA, The UNFPA We Decide Programme: A Catalyst for Disability Inclusion, 2023, ▶ www.unfpa.org/resources/%C2%A0unfpa-we-decide-programme-catalyst-disability-inclusion.

Tanzania:
The UN system and OPDs championing intersectionality

In Tanzania, the UNPRPD programme adopted an intersectional lens, focusing on gender and disability. UN entities collaborated with OPDs to address the rights of women and girls with disabilities within the national policy framework for Mainland Tanzania. This collaboration entailed close engagement with women-led OPDs, including those representing the rights of women, young women, and girls with disabilities. Through capacity building, these organizations were supported to actively participate in the policymaking process. Additionally, a collaborative effort among women-led OPDs, UN entities, and the government resulted in a gender-sensitive situational analysis to inform the National Disability Policy of Tanzania.

Furthermore, in Zanzibar, under the UNPRPD programme, the Zanzibar Association of Women with Disabilities (JUWAUZI) collaborated with UN entities and the government during the review of the National Plan of Action on Violence against Women and Children. This collaboration aimed at bringing the perspectives of women and girls with disabilities. JUWAUZI was also engaged in the development of the Zanzibar People with Disability Act (2022) alongside women and girls with disabilities from 12 other OPDs, ensuring a diverse representation and input at the intersections of disability, gender, and age.

Colombia: Empowering young Deaf women for rights advocacy in peacebuilding

Under a joint project from UN Women and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a youth-led disability organization, Fundación por la Juventud Sorda (JUVENSOR), received support to implement a project to strengthen the empowerment and organization of young Deaf women for the exercise of their rights in civic spaces within the Deaf community and the Pasto municipality. This project is supported by the Peace Building Fund and coordinated with the national Ombudsman's Office. The project initially focused on bolstering JUVENSOR's administrative and operational capacities, later transitioning to empowering Deaf women on their rights and increasing their visibility and engagement through various activities like training, workshops, and video creation.

5.7.   Supporting youth-led initiatives

Backing youth-led initiatives and projects is crucial. Highlighting and supporting initiatives led by young persons with disabilities showcases their potential and capabilities and also encourages agency and innovation. Youth-led initiatives provide a robust platform for young persons with disabilities to challenge preconceived notions, innovate, and contribute positively to their communities and beyond. Such support can come in the form of direct funding, scholarships, mentoring, technical assistance, or through platforms where these initiatives can be featured and young persons with disabilities are connected with further resources or opportunities. Through these concerted efforts, the empowerment and leadership of young persons with disabilities can be significantly reinforced, ensuring that they are at the forefront of shaping their future.

It is also crucial for UN Country Teams to endeavour to hire young persons with disabilities, in accordance with the UNDIS' commitments towards inclusive employment.[57] Doing so creates a conducive environment for young persons with disabilities to thrive, and brings a diverse range of perspectives to the table, enriching the decision-making process.

Mozambique: Hackathons to foster youth innovation

In Mozambique, UNFPA, in partnership with the Italian Association Amici di Raoul Follereau, and the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Action, organized a Disability and Inclusion Hackathon around the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in December 2021.[58] This initiative brought together young persons with disabilities and developers to devise solutions for three pressing challenges affecting persons with disabilities in Mozambique: access to essential services, humanitarian and emergency aid, and information and communications technology, particularly concerning e-health information. This hackathon journey continued into 2022 with a three-day hybrid boot camp at the University of Eduardo Mondlane Innovation Center in Maputo, hosting 12 teams from various provinces in March 2022.[59]

The International Disability Alliance's Youth Committee

The International Disability Alliance (IDA)[60] comprises eight global and six regional OPDs. In 2021, IDA established its Youth Committee, bringing together youth representatives from its member organizations. This committee maintains regular communication via social media and holds periodic meetings to discuss various issues pertinent to young persons with disabilities. Among its members are self-advocates with intellectual disabilities, whose active participation is facilitated through pre-meeting briefing sessions conducted alongside their support persons, the IDA Youth Fellows, and the Secretariat staff. IDA's Youth Committee has played an important role in informing several UN documents and processes.

In 2020, IDA members decided to include the issues and realisation of rights of youth persons with disabilities into IDA's Strategic Framework 2020-2023. Across its programmes, they apply a twin-track approach to the issues and rights of youth with disabilities and cross-youth movements. In the context of the 2022 Global Disability Summit, IDA, UNICEF, and the Atlas Alliance, represented by Youth Mental Health Norway, co-hosted the first Youth Global Disability Summit, a 24-hour online event.[61] The summit showcased regional events and round table discussions, all led by young persons with disabilities, including members from IDA's Youth Committee regional membership. These segments covered different thematic areas, providing a platform for youth with disabilities to engage, share, and discuss their experiences and perspectives. One of the main outcomes of the Youth Global Disability Summit was a call for action with 16 action points prepared by, with, and for youth that are linked with the SDGs and the CRPD.

[57] UNFPA, The UNFPA We Decide Programme: A Catalyst for Disability Inclusion, 2023, ▶ www.unfpa.org/resources/%C2%A0unfpa-we-decide-programme-catalyst-disability-inclusion.
[58] UNFPA, Mozambique, National Hackathon Launched for Young People on Disability and Inclusion, 8 December 2021,
　▶ https://mozambique.unfpa.org/en/events/national-hackathon-launched-young-people-disability-and-inclusion.
[59] UNFPA, Mozambique, Hackability4Moz: Innovation to leave no one behind, 31 August 2022, ▶ https://mozambique.unfpa.org/en/news/hackability4moz-innovation-leave-no-one-behind
[60] International Disability Alliance (IDA), ▶ www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/.
[61] Global Disability Youth Summit 2022, ▶ www.globaldisabilitysummit.org/pages/youth-summit.

The Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities

The Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities (GNYPWD)[62] was founded under the auspices of an UN interagency partnership on youth and disability inclusion. It aims to offer an advocacy space that ensures the inclusive participation and leadership of young persons with disabilities in the youth and disability rights agendas within the UN system and beyond. With over 500 members from 80+ countries, they are a fast-growing community and network.

The GNYPWD unites and empowers young persons with disabilities, focusing on the interconnectedness of youth, disability, gender, and leadership, aiming to promote inclusive decision-making. Through technology and community initiatives, GNYPWD supports young persons with disabilities globally in leading projects and sharing insights, thereby fostering a well-informed network. This initiative also enlightens the UN and other entities about the needs and contributions of this often overlooked group, advocating for a disability-inclusive approach in youth relevant agendas.

Photo credit: © PNUD Guatemala / Fernanda Zelada.

62 Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities, ▶ https://gnypwd.org/.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This "Believe in Better" report highlights the urgent need for active engagement and recognition of young persons with disabilities in society. Data suggest that these individuals lag behind their peers in education, employment, and ICT access. They are less likely to attend school or pursue higher education because of various socio-economic and cultural barriers. Employment disparities are evident; young persons with disabilities face discrimination in hiring and workplace practices, often turning to self-employment or seasonal agricultural work. Additionally, the intersectionality of gender and disability further marginalizes young women with disabilities, intensifying their challenges to access education, employment, and societal participation.

The results of the online survey further reveal the difficulties young persons with disabilities encounter in decision-making engagement. There is a pervasive lack of understanding about what constitutes meaningful engagement, and young persons with disabilities face numerous barriers for this engagement, including ableism, ageism, gender-based discrimination, limited educational and employment opportunities, and accessibility challenges. Their engagement with governments is limited, predominantly centred on disability, education, and social protection. While engagement with UN Country Teams is generally more positive, it still has challenges, particularly for young women, and often neglects underrepresented groups. Within OPDs and youth movements, there is a willingness to include young persons with disabilities. However, engagement in practice can be inconsistent and, at times, may lead to tensions, especially when it sidelines their voices.

Finally, the report identifies promising strategies to enhance the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in decision-making. It emphasizes the importance of facilitating close consultations and fostering opportunities for open dialogue. Additionally, it highlights the significance of their active inclusion in programmatic and project structures as well as coordination and advisory structures, fostering partnerships and collaborations, and offering capacity building and training. Support to youth-led initiatives can also ensure that young persons with disabilities remain at the forefront to actively participate and influence areas crucial to them. Survey data reveals that they prioritize decision-making engagement, societal awareness, and information about their rights. They also underscore the importance of education and employment opportunities as essential pathways to inclusion. In light of these findings, it is imperative that governments and the UN champion, implement, and broaden these strategies, ensuring a more inclusive future where young persons with disabilities are empowered and their voices are heard.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are presented to governments and UN Country Teams:

Disability-inclusive national policies

(a) Conduct comprehensive data collection and research on the situation of young persons with disabilities, particularly young women with disabilities, covering both urban and rural areas.

(b) Review and update existing legislation and policies to eliminate discrimination against young persons with disabilities, including young women and LGBTQI+ persons with disabilities. Collaborate with young persons with disabilities and their organizations to identify policy gaps and promote policy change.

(c) Increase investments and enhance access for young persons with disabilities to rights and services, particularly in education, sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial support, and employment, strengthening policy responses to provide inclusive education, prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and develop community support systems.[63]

(d) Foster the inclusion of young persons with disabilities in all government and UN initiatives, adopting a twin-track approach for effective inclusion, building partnerships with local authorities and civil society organizations, and promoting the employment of young persons with disabilities, including through paid internships and volunteer programmes.

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[63] Community support systems refer to a network of services, people, and products that enable persons with disabilities to carry out activities of daily living and actively participate in their communities. See, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Support systems to ensure community inclusion of persons with disabilities, including as a means of building forward better after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, A/HRC/52/52, 2023.

Meaningful engagement in decision-making

(e) Actively prioritize the rights and interests of young persons with disabilities by meaningfully engaging them in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes. This should involve implementing an intersectional approach that encompasses their diverse experiences, including those from underrepresented groups.

(f) Promote and value the participation of young persons with disabilities in decision-making structures, such as advisory boards and councils. Their involvement should be acknowledged with appropriate recognition and compensation.

(g) Facilitate platforms and forums where young persons with disabilities can engage with each other, deliberate on public policies, share their insights on both disability-specific and general topics, and connect with wider networks for youth, persons with disabilities, and women's rights.

(h) Guarantee the full accessibility of all decision-making processes, including information, communications, digital platforms, and physical environments. Provide the necessary support and accommodations for the full participation of young persons with disabilities, accounting for factors such as gender, age, disability, and location.

(i) Support initiatives and projects led by young persons with disabilities, including through training, technical assistance, and financial support.

(j) Allocate adequate funding to secure the sustained engagement of young persons with disabilities and establish robust follow-up mechanisms to oversee the fulfilment of government and UN commitments to young persons with disabilities.

Awareness and capacity building

(k) Elevate public awareness on the rights and dignity of young persons with disabilities, including among families, policymakers, and the media, challenging societal norms that perpetuate ableism, adultism, gender-based discrimination, and other forms of oppression and stigma.

(l) Conduct capacity-building initiatives aimed at cultivating young people's skills in leadership, advocacy, communication, and technology, and train government and UN representatives to engage effectively with them.

(m) Extend technical assistance to young persons with disabilities in their advocacy, including support for establishing youth-led disability organizations.

UN mechanisms and processes

(n) Review UN Country Teams strategies, procedures, focal point roles, and procurement processes to bolster the engagement of young persons with disabilities, including those from underrepresented groups.

(o) Ensure the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in UN Country Team processes, including Cooperation Frameworks, Common Country Analysis, and the implementation and monitoring of Youth 2030 and the UNDIS.

(p) Enhance coordination and monitoring mechanisms to assess the involvement of young persons with disabilities in UN programmes and projects, emphasizing accountability and encouraging synergies among thematic groups.

(q) Raise awareness of UN partners to prioritize the involvement of young persons with disabilities in programmes and projects.

Resource compendium

Author	Title
Executive Office of the Secretary-General	Our Common Agenda, Policy Brief 3, Meaningful Youth Engagement in Policymaking and Decision-making Processes, 2023 English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Arabic

Abstract
Building on Our Common Agenda and intergovernmental and extensive multi-stakeholder consultations, including with youth, this brief put forward recommendations to expand and strengthen youth participation in decision-making at all levels, make meaningful youth engagement a requirement in all United Nations decision-making processes, and support the establishment of a standing United Nations Youth Townhall and an integrated programme from the United Nations system to facilitate greater diversity, representativeness, and preparedness in youth participation.

How to access
▶ www.un.org/en/common-agenda/policy-briefs

Author	Title
Executive Office of the Secretary-General	United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) Guidelines on consulting persons with disabilities, 2021 English, French, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian Easy-to-Read version

Abstract
The purpose of the Guidelines is to provide guidance on how to consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all disability-specific and general decision-making processes across the UN's work, as mandated in the UNDIS' entity accountability framework and UN Country Teams accountability scorecard, in order to enhance the participation of persons with disabilities to reach programmatic and operational goals and leave no one behind.

How to access
▶ https://www.un.org/en/disabilitystrategy/resources

Author	Title
Global Disability Summit	Global Disability Youth Summit 2022, documents and recordings English

Abstract	

The GDS Youth Summit was held online on 14 February 2022. International Disability Alliance, UNICEF, and the Atlas Alliance, represented by Youth Mental Health Norway, co-hosted this Summit to ensure the inclusion of youth in the Global Disability Summit. All planning and decision-making around the Summit are being led by youth with disabilities, including through the design of a novel format to ensure the participation of youth from around the globe, from local to global. The Summit showcased the innovations of organizations led by youth with disabilities.

How to access	

▶ https://www.globaldisabilitysummit.org/pages/youth-summit

Author	Title
Griffiths, M.	Disabled youth participation within activism and social movement bases: An empirical investigation of the UK Disabled People's Movement. Current Sociology, 0(0), 2022 English

Abstract	

This article presents empirical data from the first study on young disabled people's contemporary position within the UK Disabled People's Movement. It critically assesses three areas pertinent to youth activism: activist membership, social movement organization, and future considerations for activism.

How to access	

▶ https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921221100579

Author	Title
International Disability Alliance (IDA)	Not just ticking the disability box? Meaningful OPD participation and the risk of tokenism, 2022 English Executive summary in International Sign, Spanish, French, and Arabic

Abstract
This report presents the findings of the 2nd IDA Global Survey led by organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs) on their participation in decision-making processes of governments, the UN system, and funding agencies. It assesses and compares the quality, depth, scope, and relevance of OPDs participation in programmes and policies, and offers recommendations to governments, the UN system, and funding agencies.

How to access
▶ https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/blog/%E2%80%9Cnot-just-ticking-disability-box-meaningful-opd-participation-and-risk-tokenism%E2%80%9D

Author	Title
International Disability Alliance (IDA)	Increasingly consulted, but not yet participating: IDA Global Survey Report on Participation of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in Development Programmes and Policies, 2020 English Easy-to-Read version Executive summary in International Sign, Spanish, French, and Arabic

Abstract
This report presents the findings of the first-ever global survey led by OPDs on their participation in decision-making processes of governments, the UN system, and funding agencies.

How to access
▶ https://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/blog/increasingly-consulted-not-yet-participating-ida-global-survey-report-participation

Author	Title
Leonard Cheshire Disability	Youth Briefing: The role of youth with disabilities in advocacy, 2019 English

Abstract
The role of youth with disabilities in advocacy

How to access
▶ https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/youth-briefing.pdf

Author	Title
Leonard Cheshire & others	Crisis talks. Raising the global voice of youth with disabilities on the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 English

Abstract
This research project was driven by a determination to understand how the pandemic has been experienced by the millions of youth with disabilities in Africa and Asia.

How to access
▶ https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Crisis-talks-report.pdf

Author	Title
Plan International	Guidelines for consulting with children and young people with disabilities, 2016 English, French, and Portuguese

Abstract
This document provides a guidance on the importance of consulting with children with disabilities. It provides practical suggestions for consulting with children and young people with disabilities in a variety of situations. It aims to equip individuals working on child rights with the knowledge and skills necessary to communicate with children with a variety of disabilities.

How to access
▶ https://plan-international.org/publications/guidelines-children-and-young-people-with-disabilities/

Author	Title
United Nations, Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	Youth with disabilities, CRPD/CSP/2014/4, 2014 English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Arabic

Abstract
The present document was prepared by the Secretariat on the basis of contributions of experts, received through the Bureau of the Conference of States Parties, to facilitate the informal panel discussion on the theme "Youth with disabilities", to be held during the seventh session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It addresses proactively involving them in development, including relevant policy and decision-making processes.

How to access
▶ https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/769728

Author	Title
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA)	UN DESA Policy Brief No. 149: Promoting Youth Participation in Decision-Making and Public Service Delivery through Harnessing Digital Technologies, 2023 English

Abstract
This Policy Brief examines how public institutions can more effectively engage youth and promote their participation in decision-making and public service delivery to build more inclusive and resilient societies.

How to access
▶ https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/publication/un-desa-policy-brief-no-149-promoting-youth-participation-in-decision-making-and-public-service-delivery-through-harnessing-digital-technologies/

Author	Title
UNESCO	Meaningfully engaging with youth. Guidance and training for UN staff, 2019. English

Abstract	
This toolkit is designed to promote meaningful youth engagement practices across the UN's work relevant to youth.	

How to access	
▶ https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2021/05/Meaningfully-engaging-youth-Guidance-training-UN-staff.pdf	

Author	Title
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	The UNFPA We Decide Programme: A Catalyst for Disability Inclusion, 2023 English

Abstract	
The We Decide Global Programme is the UNFPA flagship initiative to promote rights and choices for women and young persons with disabilities. This booklet displays the main achievements of the We Decide Programme in catalyzing change for disability inclusion in UNFPA.	

How to access	
▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/%C2%A0unfpa-we-decide-programme-catalyst-disability-inclusion	

Author	Title
UNFPA	The ABC of Bodily Autonomy for Youth with Disabilities, 2023 English
Abstract	

This publication talks about the experience of youth with disabilities and the barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health and rights. It also gives an introduction to tools like the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and to the basic rights necessary to guarantee the bodily autonomy of youth with disabilities.

How to access
▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/abc-bodily-autonomy-youth-disabilities

Author	Title
UNFPA	Advocacy brief: Disability and the Right to Bodily Autonomy, 2022 English, French, and Spanish
Abstract	

This advocacy brief on disability and bodily autonomy provides guidance to different actors on what are the main barriers preventing persons with disabilities from exercising bodily autonomy, as well as, on the actions that should be taken at different levels to ensure persons with disabilities have the power to exercise bodily autonomy in all circumstances, even during crises.

How to access
▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/advocacy-brief-disability-and-right-bodily-autonomy

Author	Title
UNFPA	Infographic: Key messages on Disability and the Right to Bodily Autonomy, 2022 English, French, and Spanish

Abstract

This infographic outlines the key advocacy and communication messages on bodily autonomy from the perspective of disability. It provides a broad range of audiences with an opportunity to understand the international normative frameworks governing the rights related to bodily autonomy and the main challenges persons with disabilities face when it comes to the power to exercise bodily autonomy.

How to access

▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/infographic-key-messages-disability-and-right-bodily-autonomy

Author	Title
UNFPA	Infographic: Let's work together! Empowering Women and Young Persons with Disabilities to Exercise Their Right to Bodily Autonomy, 2022 English, French, and Spanish

Abstract

This infographic invites a broad audience to understand what international agreements are in place to advance bodily autonomy of persons with disabilities and how different actors can engage in making these commitments reality when it comes to the power to exercise bodily autonomy by women and young persons with disabilities.

How to access

▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/infographic-lets-work-together-empowering-women-and-young-persons-disabilities-exercise

Author	Title
UNFPA, Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, and Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities (GNYPWD)	Manifesto on meaningful youth engagement for young persons with disabilities, 2023 English

Abstract

The Manifesto brings together a response to the exclusion of youth with disabilities, in collaboration with the Global Network of Young Persons with Disabilities and UNFPA. It elucidates on the barriers that young persons with disabilities face when engaging in advocacy and provides principles for meaningful youth engagement and recommendations.

How to access

▶ https://www.youthcoalition.org/our-toolkits-advocacy-resources

Author	Title
UNICEF	Engaging with organizations of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action. *Tip sheet* English

Abstract

This tip sheet presents some key steps for identifying and starting an engagement with OPDs. This tip sheet is part of the toolkit on including children with disabilities in humanitarian action, which provides a package of operational tools to strengthen disability-inclusive disability inclusion in emergencies based on the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/documents/engaging-organizations-persons-disabilities-humanitarian-action

Author	Title
UNICEF	Interagency coordination on disability inclusion at country level. *A short guide* English
Abstract	

This guide provides tips for more systematic efforts to improve cross-sectoral coordination on disability inclusion and coherence with other cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and accountability to affected populations. This guide describes disability working groups and disability focal points as two mechanisms to strengthen coordination on disability inclusion.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/documents/interagency-coordination-disability-inclusion-country-level

Author	Title
UNICEF	Take Us Seriously! Engaging Children with Disabilities in Decisions Affecting their Lives, 2013 English, French, and Spanish
Abstract	

The guidelines are intended for use by a wide audience, including governments, civil society organizations, disabled people's organizations, and UNICEF regional and country offices, to further enhance participation of children with disabilities in policies and interventions.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/documents/take-us-seriously

Author	Title
UNICEF	Accessible and inclusive digital solutions for girls with disabilities. *A literature review and recommendations,* 2022 English

Abstract

This brief provides evidence-based insights on the development of digital tools and platforms inclusive of and accessible for girls with disabilities. It explores disability and how it intersects with gender to exacerbate the digital divide for girls with disabilities. The brief explains the concepts of assistive technology, accessibility, and digital inclusion. It then describes how careful design can enable tools to be inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities and provides recommendations for creating them with and for girls with disabilities.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/reports/accessible-and-inclusive-digital-solutions-girls-disabilities

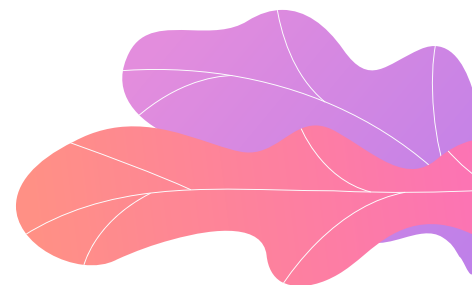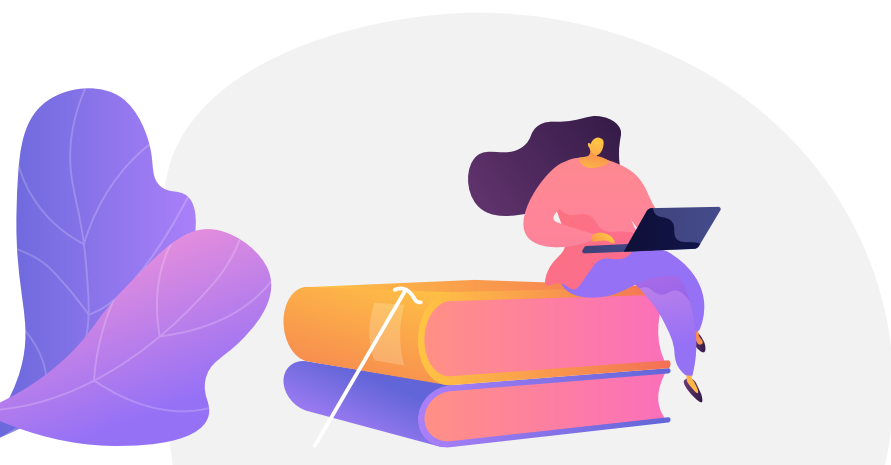| Author	Title
UNICEF	Engagement with Organizations of People with Disabilities. *Learning About Meaningful Engagement in Public Health Emergencies, Including COVID-19,* 2021 English

Abstract

This report was produced under a United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD) project to support countries in designing and implementing disability-inclusive response and recovery planning for COVID-19. Throughout this project, UNICEF documented examples of good practice and learnings from partnerships with OPDs in public health emergencies, including COVID-19.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/reports/engagement-organizations-persons-disabilities

Author	Title
UNICEF	Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation English with some components in Arabic and Bahasa

Abstract
The Adolescent Kit for Expression and Innovation is a package of guidance, tools, activities, and supplies to support adolescents aged 10 to 18, especially those who are affected by humanitarian crises. The Kit aims to bring about positive change in adolescents' lives through arts and innovation.

How to access
▶ https://adolescentkit.org/index.html

Author	Title
UNICEF Bolivia	Consulta a niñas, niños, adolescentes y jóvenes con discapacidad sobre sus derechos, desarrollo personal y barreras que enfrentan. Resultados. Boletín 017/2022 Spanish

Abstract
UNICEF Bolivia, in coordination with OPDs, used the U-Report tool to collect information on the perception of children, adolescents, and young people with disabilities on the exercise of their rights. The survey was conducted among persons with disabilities between 5 to 20 October 2022, therefore, it is not representative or random, with limited statistical value at the country or aggregate target group level, but with high referential value due to its nationwide coverage.

How to access
▶ https://bolivia.ureport.in/story/1056/

Author	Title
UNICEF Office of Research Innocenti	Thompson, Stephen; Cannon, Mariah; Wickenden, Mary (2020). Exploring Critical Issues in the Ethical Involvement of Children with Disabilities in Evidence Generation and Use, *Innocenti Working Papers,* no. 2020-04, UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, Florence English

Abstract
This paper provides an overview of the key issues drawn from the literature reviewed and suggests established and potential mitigation strategies that could improve ethical practices when involving children with disabilities in evidence generation activities.

How to access
▶ https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1110-exploring-critical-issues-in-the-ethical-involvement-of-children-with-disabilities.html

Author	Title
UNICEF Serbia	Youth in climate change action: Bringing young people to the decision-making table, 2022 English and Serbian

Abstract
Brief on UNICEF Serbia interventions to include young people in the sustainable climate response

How to access
▶ https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/youth-climate-change-bringing-young-people-decision-making-table

Author	Title
UNICEF Timor Leste	Operational Guidance for the Rights to Participation of Adolescents and Youth with Disabilities, 2022 English and Tetum

Abstract

UNICEF Timor-Leste developed this operational guideline for the right to participation of adolescents and youth with disabilities in collaboration with the Secretary of State for Youth and Sport Timor-Leste to provide useful guidance for all government entities, development partners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society organizations on how to involve youth and youth with disabilities in activities and events, in order to enable inclusive civic participation. It provides practical tips on how to successfully organize inclusive activities in Timor-Leste.

How to access

▶ https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/reports/operational-guidance-rights-participation-adolescents-and-youth-disabilities

Author	Title
UNICEF, UN Women, World Health Organization (WHO), International Labour Organization (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UNDP, UNFPA, and UNPRPD	Working together to ensure the right of girls with disabilities to live free from violence, 2023 English

Abstract

UNICEF, UN Women, WHO, ILO, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA, and UNPRPD worked together to develop an inter-agency statement on violence against girls with disabilities, listing the main rights violations they face, along with key advocacy messages targeting States, international organizations, civil society, and any other stakeholders, highlighting areas where the implementation of the right of girls with disabilities to be free from violence can be strengthened.

How to access

▶ https://www.unfpa.org/resources/working-together-ensure-right-girls-disabilities-live-free-violence

Author	Title
UNPRPD, Georgia	Guidelines. Meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, 2023 English and Georgian

Abstract
These Guidelines define essential activities to be carried out by responsible bodies at every decision-making level to ensure the substantial participation of persons with disabilities. It also details international and local standards and practical ways and possibilities for applying them.

How to access
▶ https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-10/undp-georgia-human-rights-pwds-participation-decision-making_2023-eng.pdf

Author	Title
UN Youth Office, UNFPA & others	Call to action. Meaningful Participation of Young Persons with Disabilities, 2021 English

Abstract
The call to action notes that ensuring equal rights and the full engagement and participation for all persons with disabilities is a cornerstone of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also broadly underscore the importance of disability-inclusive development.

How to access
▶ https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/CALL-TO-ACTION_YOUTH-WITH-DISABILITIES-1.pdf

Author	Title
UN Youth Office, UNFPA, Youth2030 Disability Task Team and Compact for Young People in Humanitarian Action	Checklist to ensure the meaningful engagement of young persons with disabilities in humanitarian action, 2023 English, Spanish

Abstract
This practical tool aims to provide guidance on how to ensure meaningful participation of young persons with disabilities in local humanitarian response. The expected users are humanitarian actors, especially those working in the field.

How to access
▶ https://reliefweb.int/report/world/checklist-ensure-meaningful-engagement-young-persons-disabilities-humanitarian-action-november-2023 ▶ https://reliefweb.int/report/world/guia-corta-para-asegurar-la-participacion-significativa-de-las-personas-jovenes-con-discapacidad-en-la-accion-humanitaria-noviembre-de-2023

Author	Title
VIPER	A literature review on the participation of disabled children and young people in decision-making, 2013 English

Abstract
This literature review set out to examine existing evidence concerning the participation of disabled children and young people in decisions about services – collective decision-making.

How to access
▶ https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/VIPER_literature_review%2520final.pdf