



National Business and Disability Networks

Principles & Guidelines

Purpose

National Business and Disability Networks (NBDNs) are forums where companies and other organizations come together to work towards further employment and social inclusion of persons with disabilities. These are often unique spaces where companies share peer-to-peer at the same time as being linked with the disability sector and other important stakeholders.

Promoting formation and development of NBDNs requires cooperation between the private sector, civil society and the ILO. This document sets out a shared framework for how this cooperation can be taken forward. These efforts are particularly focussed on middle- and low-income countries.

Rationale

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) makes explicit the rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of life, as well as in employment and work. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also make explicit that persons with disabilities are an important part of the development agenda and, in target 8.5, the goal of full work for all, including persons with disabilities.

In developing countries there have been a range of private sector initiatives for employment of persons with disabilities but these are often isolated and limited in nature. There is, however, desire from the private sector, both in national and international companies, to take further initiatives on employment of disabled people.

Furthermore, international cooperation and donor organizations themselves are increasingly focussing on the role of the private sector in sustainable growth. Employment for persons with disabilities, and inclusive supply chains, contribute to bringing a vulnerable minority into the labour market as well as improving working conditions for all.

NBDNs are one solution to promote employment of disabled people while responding to the needs of the private sector. This approach is often different from those currently taken by government and civil society. The networks give a platform for companies' mutual learning and inspiration, as well as context-based solutions and engagement with other stakeholders. These are things that cannot be done without the private sector, and are difficult for an individual company to do by itself.

Context

Internationally, the [Global Business and Disability Network](#) (GBDN) brings together multinational businesses, employer federations, civil society and other stakeholders. The GBDN's purpose is to promote employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the private sector and beyond. GBDN Company membership is based on committing to a [charter of principles for disability inclusion](#).

The GBDN works closely with national-level networks, which often also are members of the GBDN. GBDN members are looking to both strengthen existing as well as develop new national-level networks.

Currently there [are over 20 national and business and disability networks](#) across the world, in developed and developing countries. ILO has directly supported the creation or strengthening of many of these networks. To build these efforts further, a wider collaboration is needed.



Principles of National Business and Disability Networks

1. National-level initiatives.
2. Employer-led: the majority of the members and the majority in governing structure are businesses.
3. Open: to any company that is committed to disability inclusion, including subsidiaries of global companies. Often networks have other types of members, including civil society organizations.
4. Neutral: networks provide objective advice. In terms of a neutral platform, the focus should be on “encouragement” rather than “blaming” companies. In terms of financial neutrality, networks may charge a membership or other fees, but they do not require or push members to purchase services from one provider.
5. Legitimacy: ultimately, networks achieve legitimacy through their membership. But this may be complemented, especially initially, by endorsements from existing employer federations, the government, and/or the ILO.

Understanding the roles of National Business and Disability Networks

NBDNs make important contributions to achieving inclusion of persons with disabilities as well as bringing benefits to the businesses themselves. They play different roles in terms of different audiences.

For persons with disabilities, and in order to achieve their inclusion, private-sector employment is essential in terms of human rights as well as broader economic and social inclusion. For progress to be made, businesses need to be more aware and better informed on disability issues. Experience has shown that companies learn best from each other and from practical examples where their peers have made steps in this area. The heart of Business and Disability Networks is in this dialogue between businesses.

For businesses, there are many different motivations for working on disability inclusion. The growing “business case” on inclusion of persons with disabilities sees how this area offers advantages to the business in terms of improving the workplace, employee retention, its products, and brand. Companies can be interested in disability-inclusion for many reasons, and these networks provide motivation, know-how and partnerships to support them acting on this issue. The networks, and partnership with ILO, among others, also gives companies a chance to highlight a different side of their business. NBDNs also advocate for a more enabling environment for private sector inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Other members of NBDNs, including civil society organizations also benefit through the partnerships that it offers, including the often-unique opportunity to access private sector actors. In many contexts, this is a new space for organizations working on disability, and will open new dialogue and engagement. This is an opportunity for disability organizations to respond to private sector concerns and provide encouragement, guidance and support.

National Networks’ Approach and Programming

The heart of national networks is about approaching businesses in a new way on disability. The combination of [business and human rights cases](#) for inclusion of persons with disabilities changes a subject previously seen as challenging into one that is an opportunity. This change is a move away from concerns or fear of a different approach, feelings of guilt, charitable approaches and mere compliance. We move towards opportunity, innovation and alignment with business interests.

To be convincing on these issues requires peer-to-peer exchange, where companies learn from each other. Rather than being lectured by outsiders, companies exchange practical achievements and techniques to achieve them. This approach often requires new advocacy techniques from organizations that work on disability (more below, in the section on role of civil society).



Recruiting and engaging company members should be done on these grounds – a combination of business and human rights cases, and a peer-to-peer forum. Often this is done through one-on-one meetings initially, and demonstrating other companies' successes. Multinational companies may already have internal policies and their national branches might need support for implementing them at local level.

Areas of programming that NBDNs engage in, and activities that newly-established NBDNs may want to consider, include:

- Strengthening the network itself
 - Communications on the network. For example: brochures, establishing a website, social media activities.
 - Developing a Charter for endorsement of NBDN members. This Charter could be inspired by the ILO GBDN Charter.
 - Reaching out to further company and non-company membership.
- Sensitization, technical development, and advocacy
 - Organization of thematic workshops on issues of interest to its members.
 - Events to present the NBDN to different stakeholders, in particular business as well as disability organizations.
 - Communicate with relevant public authorities in order to start a dialogue on how to make the legal and policy environment more enabling and what services would be required.
- Providing services to member companies
 - Providing technical advice such as strategic directions, accessibility audits, or other services for members.
 - Providing disability awareness activities for key staff. For example, through Disability Equality Training.
 - Support to member companies on recruiting candidates with disabilities.
 - Training courses or other job preparation targeting persons with disabilities.

Membership and Partners of National Networks

The principle members of national networks are companies that are interested in promoting disability inclusion. Often, a public commitment of interest is sufficient, and it is not expected that companies would go through an audit to “make sure” they are being inclusive in practice. Some networks would have membership fees, or a charter for members to commit to.

Beyond companies, there are a wide range of relevant stakeholders on disability and employment issues. It depends on context, and judgement of the network itself on whether to include these as members, affiliates, or whether they remain external partners or targets of advocacy. These include employer federations, disability organizations, and government agencies or other organizations responsible for disability, training, employment and work. These are relevant for both practical solutions as well as policy change.

Often there is a facilitating or lead organization. This could be the national employer federation, an NGO, a government agency, or the ILO country office. In many cases, the lead is taken by a close partnership through two of these organizations. It is important that the facilitating organization(s) ensure the principles of NBDNs through not basing membership on service-delivery and working in open partnership.

In some cases, the networks are hosted by employer federations. In Bangladesh, Mauritius and Sri Lanka, the national employer federations have started and host the NBDN. In these cases the network might take the form of a committee or a working group. The employer federation can provide a very important



institutional base, at the same time as the work on disability provides the federation an opportunity to enter a new area of action and influence.

How National Networks start and grow

Each network starts in its own way, but here is a common trajectory. The first steps bring together a coalition and see if there is interest to form a network:

- A facilitating organization. (As described in the previous section.) Facilitating organization(s) are often crucial in the start of a network because they offer a consistency of resources and vision to initiate and guide the network.
- Identifying a core group of businesses. Finding and engaging businesses that have experience or interest in disability inclusion. The GBDN can support these initial steps through contacting subsidiaries of member companies in the country.
- Engaging businesses bilaterally. Meeting directly with companies to see their interest in sharing their experiences and joining a national initiative.
- Initial meetings. Developing momentum through introductory meetings that promote exchange of experience and explore feasibility of promoting a network.
- Legitimacy. It can help to have endorsement from the ILO, an employer federation, and/or government.

After this initiatory phase, there are key questions to define as the network is formed:

- Structure of the network. Operational procedures can be drafted to define the structure of the NBDN and the conditions for membership. Two common options are:
 - A committee/working group under a national employer federation.
 - A member-supported network, with meetings hosted on a rotating basis.
- Leadership and committee. Identifying chair or co-chairs, and other companies that serve on the board of the network.
- Conditions of membership. A set of principles for members to commit to might be developed, like the GBDN's charter. Experience suggests that a membership fee at the beginning is not appropriate as it probably stops companies growing interest. In the case where networks are hosted by employer federations, it would be worth considering a type of membership for companies that do not belong to the federation.
- Action plan. To define objectives and activities of the network, with budget allocations and timelines.
- Funding. Sometimes the lead organization(s) come with their own resources, or use projects or grants to accompany initial activities. In other cases, company members might host and support activities directly themselves.

Most NBDNs are not legally registered entities. However, there are also some examples of NBDNs that were set up as or have developed into legally established organizations with membership fees, a small secretariat.

Role of Civil Society and Disabled People's Organizations

NBDNs provide a new bridge between the private sector and civil society, in particular organizations or specialists that work on disability. This bridge has to be maintained carefully, however. Companies do not have the experience that disability organizations have on disability, and need a safe space to learn. This means that some of the traditional, more confrontational, methods of advocacy or "holding to account" are less appropriate. Advocacy needs to be more in terms of positive engagement supporting a combined business and human rights case.



The disability sector has important contributions to make in the creation of NBDNs. International disability organizations are increasingly recognizing this methodology and institutions, and considering how to invest in promotion of NBDNs. Nationally, disability organizations have expertise and often the ability to facilitate recruitment of persons with disabilities

Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) – led *by* persons with disabilities themselves, and different from other disability organizations – have a vital, and required, role in all work on disability issues. Making “nothing about us without us” real in the context of promoting private sector employment of persons with disabilities is challenging even in the best cases. DPOs may not have the interest or capacity to input, and other stakeholders may not be ready to hear their input anyway. It is important to approach DPOs that exist, and to invest in facilitating their entry into the dialogue with the private sector.

How the global network works with national networks

The GBDN and its members closely cooperate with formation and strengthening of national networks. The ILO and GBDN members are active in supporting new networks as well as national-level initiatives on disability and business. As national networks develop, they can consider membership of the GBDN itself.

In particular, there are a range of ways that the GBDN can support national-level networks:

- Inspiring national companies, organizations or individuals to work further on these issues.
- Ensuring that GBDN members' subsidiaries/offices are involved when they are active in that country.
- Facilitate connections with other organizations and networks.
- Tools, resources and participation in GBDN events.
- Support search for resources to run the network.
- Facilitate cooperation and exchanges between NBDNs.
- Endorse NBDNs in their beginning stages, according to principles described above;
- Coordinate allies and supporters of NBDNs for joint initiatives;

Members of the GBDN will find different advantages in supporting NBDNs. For company members of the GBDN, the national networks will create a more enabling environment as well as practical solutions on disability for their national operations. This is particularly important in countries where there are few established services supporting employment of persons with disabilities. For civil society members of the GBDN, the national networks provide an important vehicle to achieve better results for employment of persons with disabilities.

Challenges of forming national networks

Some of the challenges that networks have found include:

- Sustaining and growing the network after it starts, or the lack of resources for activities. Some networks say that they need to get registration before donors will consider grants.
- Transition to company leadership of the network, as well as maintaining interest and commitment from member companies;
- Increasing membership and defining responsibilities for recruiting new members. Reaching different types of employers, including small and medium-sized enterprises.
- Link disability and business sectors. Disability organizations may need to change the way they do advocacy and avoid a confrontational style.
- Need to strengthen training and job-preparation of disabled people, to respond to employer demand.



Working together to go forward

This document was produced as the result of a webinar with NBDNs, and subsequent meeting with GBDN non-company members and other organizations¹ in May 2017. As such, it is a result of existing interest and collaboration of going forward on this issue in a collaborative way.

Internationally, more work is required to convince and coordinate between wider range of actors, including donor organizations of this approach. This document provides a common framework, which needs to be realised further. The meeting in May also suggested developing guidance on the concepts for further civil society and DPO engagement with the private sector.

Nationally, it is necessary to coordinate input to support existing and develop new initiatives for NBDNs. International donors, local and multinational companies, as well as civil society all have contributions to make to create the opportunities for further employment and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the private sector.

¹ Attendees at the meeting were representatives from: Adecco (GBDN chair), Atlas Alliance, CBM, Disabled People's Organization Denmark (DPOD), Handicap International, Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD), Light for the World (LFTW) and Ibero-American Social Security Organization (OISS).