



## **Collaborating with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities to Strengthen Resilience and Inclusive Impact**

# Collaborating with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities to Strengthen Resilience and Inclusive Impact

## Table of Contents

Executive summary .....	3
Objectives and methodology of the synthesis brief .....	5
<b>1. Collaboration with OPDs improves the relevance and effectiveness of humanitarian and development work.....</b>	<b>6</b>
1.1 Value and practical integration of collaboration with OPDs .....	6
1.2 Quality, depth and sustainability of OPD partnerships .....	6
1.3 FRC collaboration with Abilis on disability inclusion.....	8
<b>2. Experience demonstrates collaboration with OPDs strengthens inclusive impact.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 TAJIKISTAN: From capacity building to institutional change.....	9
2.2 NEPAL: Collaborating with self-help groups of persons with disabilities.....	11
2.3 SOUTH SUDAN: Institutionalising disability inclusion beyond individual projects.....	13
2.4 ETHIOPIA: Finding the right OPD to partner with.....	15
<b>3. Common key enablers, challenges and lessons learnt .....</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Positive outcomes and key enablers .....	18
3.2 Challenges and lessons learnt.....	20
<b>4. Recommendations for strengthening partnerships with OPDs .....</b>	<b>22</b>
4.1 Clarify purpose and roles .....	22
4.2 Support and capacity strengthening.....	22
4.3 Contextualise, formalise and resource partnerships .....	23
4.4 Integrate OPD collaboration throughout the project cycle .....	24
4.5 Strengthen institutionalisation and sustainability.....	24

## Executive summary

The Finnish Red Cross and its partners are committed to advancing disability-inclusive resilience strengthening by ensuring the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in humanitarian and development work. Central to this is collaboration with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), ensuring that programmes reflect lived experiences and uphold rights.

This brief synthesizes lessons from four National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – Tajikistan, Nepal, Ethiopia, and South Sudan – that partnered with OPDs through Finnish Red Cross supported projects. It highlights key enablers, challenges, and recommendations to strengthen disability inclusion within FRC programmes, the work of the National Societies and the broader humanitarian and development community.

### Key lessons learned

#### Strategic partnering is key

**Meaningful collaboration with OPDs is essential for effective and sustainable inclusion.** OPDs, grounded in the principle of “nothing about us without us”, ensure persons with disabilities actively shape decisions affecting them. Where OPDs are absent, self-help groups can offer vital lived expertise.

**Projects engaging OPDs early – in design and planning – achieved stronger, more relevant outcomes.** This brief suggests that the most meaningful approach to promoting stronger inclusion is to invest in OPD capacity, formalise partnerships, include OPDs in strategic planning, support network building, ensure flexible and accessible funding, and embed OPDs in monitoring and evaluation processes.

**Mutual learning through joint capacity-building activities further enhanced these partnerships.** Trainings delivered collaboratively by National Societies and OPDs led to notable shifts in attitudes and practices, fostering understanding of disability rights within National Societies and increasing the credibility and expertise of OPDs. **When persons with disabilities served as facilitators or trainers, they directly challenged stigma**, inspired confidence, and demonstrated leadership capacity within their communities.

#### Inclusion often remains project based

While achievements were notable, several challenges limited broader and sustained impact.

**Disability inclusion at times remained confined to specific projects, driven by dedicated teams or external partners** rather than being embedded as an institutional priority within National Societies. **Partnerships with OPDs were informal or short-term, lacking formal agreements or memoranda of understanding (MoU).** Such arrangements made it difficult to sustain collaboration beyond the project lifecycle and hindered institutional learning. However, in some cases partnerships have also continued beyond the project lifecycle and led to institutional changes within National Societies.

A further challenge was the weak linkage between national and local levels of OPD engagement. While National OPDs were often involved in consultations or trainings, their reach rarely extended to local branches or remote communities, where capacity and contextual understanding were most needed. Geographic and capacity constraints further limited OPD involvement, and in

some areas, OPDs were absent altogether. Data collection on disability inclusion remained inconsistent due to limited technical expertise and use of monitoring tools. Operational barriers—such as unclear roles, language differences, and coordination gaps—also delayed progress.

These challenges highlight the need for systemic investment in institutional capacity, partnership frameworks, and communication mechanisms to ensure effective and lasting inclusion outcomes.

## Leadership and key partners

The commitment and leadership of the Finnish Red Cross were key enablers of disability inclusion and collaboration with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) across all countries. In several contexts, the FRC was the first National Society working internationally to actively explore structured engagement with OPDs, while strong leadership commitment within the supported National Societies also played a critical role, highlighting that **institutional commitment is often a decisive factor in the success of disability inclusion initiatives**.

External expertise on disability inclusion played an important role. In 2022, Finnish Red Cross established a four-year consultancy agreement with Abilis Consulting Ltd, through the Finnish OPD Abilis Foundation. The agreement aims to strengthen disability inclusion within FRC's Ministry for Foreign Affairs-funded programmes and build institutional capacity across FRC and its partner National Societies. **A core focus has been supporting the design of new projects to be disability inclusive from the outset**, including training of management, technical staff, and volunteers during the inception phase. This collaboration helped bridge technical gaps and facilitated OPD engagement, especially in countries where National Societies had limited prior experience.

## Recommendations

**Meaningful OPD collaboration not only enhances disability inclusion outcomes but also strengthens community ownership, accountability, and sustainability.** The following recommendations build on the key enablers and lessons identified across the four countries, with the aim of supporting more systematic, equitable, and sustainable OPD partnerships:

- Clarify the purpose, scope, and expectations of OPD collaboration from the outset.
- Ensure capacity for selecting OPD partners and defining their roles.
- Work with OPDs at different levels, recognising their diverse strengths and managing expectations accordingly.
- Formalise partnerships and allocate adequate resources.
- Embed OPD collaboration across all phases of the project cycle – from planning and assessments to implementation, monitoring, and learning.
- Institutionalise disability inclusion and OPD collaboration for long-term sustainability.

## Objectives and methodology of the synthesis brief

**Organisations of Persons with Disabilities** (OPDs) are representative organisations that are led, governed, and staffed primarily by persons with disabilities. They operate at local, national, and/or international levels, and their work spans advocacy, policy influence, capacity building, and community mobilisation. Collaboration with OPDs is crucial for development and humanitarian actors to ensure accountability, local ownership, effectiveness and inclusive impact.

The objective of this synthesis brief is to generate practical insights from four National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies that have engaged with OPDs in selected African and Asian countries. The synthesis brief aims to strengthen future collaboration and scale up inclusive practices across Finnish Red Cross (FRC) supported programmes. The findings and recommendations are intended to inform the wider Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) and other partners interested in advancing disability inclusion and OPD collaboration.

The synthesis brief focuses on four countries – Tajikistan, Nepal, Ethiopia, and South Sudan – selected for their diverse contexts and emerging experiences with OPD collaboration from which to draw practical lessons. It is based on 11 Key Informant Interviews with 16 FRC and National Society staff, and OPD representatives. It also draws on FRC and IFRC policy documents, as well as sectoral guidance on OPD partnerships and disability inclusion. The analysis explores:

- The role of OPDs in project planning, implementation (e.g. training), and monitoring;
- The quality and depth of collaboration;
- Key enablers, challenges, and lessons learned; and
- Recommendations for strengthening partnerships with OPDs.



*Droupati Devi Rajbhar, a member of a self-help group in Nepal collaborating with the Nepal Red Cross Society in inclusive disaster risk reduction.*

# 1. Collaboration with OPDs improves the relevance and effectiveness of humanitarian and development work

FRC, together with its partners, promotes the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities as a means to build resilient communities that have the capacity to prepare for, act in advance of and respond to protect all persons in the event of disasters. Central to this approach is collaboration with OPDs.

International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Humanitarian Disability Charter, and the IASC Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, emphasise the centrality of OPDs in driving inclusive action. It is also aligned with key Red Cross and Red Crescent policies, including the IFRC Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) Policy (2022), PGI Operational Framework (2022–2025), and the Strategic Framework on Disability Inclusion in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2015). They call on National Societies to actively engage OPDs throughout the programme cycle and recognise that such partnerships significantly enhance the relevance, accountability and effectiveness of humanitarian and development efforts.

## 1.1 Value and practical integration of collaboration with OPDs

Persons with disabilities form one of the largest and most diverse minority groups globally. To ensure their meaningful and effective inclusion, collaboration with OPDs is essential across all stages of humanitarian and development programming.

Partnering with OPDs contributes to inclusive and effective programming in several ways. It helps uphold human dignity and rights by ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping the decisions and actions that affect their lives. It enhances the effectiveness and accountability of assistance, as OPDs are well-positioned to identify barriers and propose practical, locally grounded solutions. Their involvement also promotes social inclusion and community resilience, empowering persons with disabilities to participate in decision-making and strengthening solidarity within communities. Finally, OPDs support localisation, inclusion, and equity by mobilising community networks and ensuring that disability inclusion is integrated from the outset of any intervention.

The **Building Blocks for Disability-Inclusive Programmes** (FRC/IFRC, 2024), aligned with the **Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action**, outline four key actions that embed OPD collaboration into the project cycle: ensuring meaningful participation, building capacity, identifying and removing barriers, and collecting and using disaggregated data. By embedding OPD collaboration into every stage of programming, the FRC/IFRC approach moves beyond policy commitments to practical, inclusive action – ensuring that persons with disabilities are not only considered but actively shape the humanitarian and development responses that affect their lives.

## 1.2 Quality, depth and sustainability of OPD partnerships

Partnerships with OPDs can vary in depth depending on the degree of involvement, influence, and shared responsibility. These range from consultative relationships – where OPDs provide input with limited decision-making power – to collaborative arrangements, where OPDs are

actively involved in implementation. The most empowering level is equal partnership, where OPDs are recognised as co-creators and co-leaders. Equal partnerships are characterised by shared power, mutual respect, transparency, and long-term commitment. It includes OPDs participating in governance structures, receiving fair compensation, and engaging through formalised multi-year agreements.

Collaboration with OPDs is distinct from partnerships with other organisations because OPDs are highly diverse: they represent different disability groups, some function as umbrella bodies, and their capacity levels and mandate vary widely.

OPDs contribute critical insights based on lived experience, and play a crucial role in promoting inclusion, accessibility, and equality. Unlike general disability service providers, OPDs are rooted in the principle of **“nothing about us without us”**, ensuring that persons with disabilities are actively involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

In geographical areas without formal OPDs, self-help groups – community-based and led by persons with disabilities – play a vital role in peer support, advocacy, and empowerment. Collaboration with both OPDs and self-help groups is key to ensuring persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping inclusive policies and programmes.

Unlike most Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), OPDs are rights-holder organisations, with a mandate to represent their constituency – and this advocacy and representation role is usually their primary activity. Yet, disability is often associated with negative stigma, which means others frequently speak on behalf of persons with disabilities instead of enabling them to lead. OPDs are also often under-resourced and face structural discrimination, which can limit their participation unless partnerships intentionally work to address these barriers. This makes OPD collaboration not only good practice but also an obligation under the CRPD, which requires governments and organisations to closely consult and actively involve OPDs in decisions affecting their lives. Effective partnerships therefore require recognising OPDs' expertise, shifting unequal power dynamics, and ensuring their voices are central in decision-making.

Strong partnerships involve two-way learning, mutual capacity strengthening and co-developed monitoring frameworks, reinforcing trust and shared ownership of outcomes. Long-term and quality collaboration not only supports OPDs in building institutional capacity, sustaining advocacy, and strengthening their role as trusted local actors, but also benefits development actors by enhancing programme quality, continuity, and local relevance. It fosters deeper relationships, builds institutional memory, and enables access to OPDs' evolving expertise and community networks.

To support this, organisations should invest in OPD capacity, formalise partnerships, include OPDs in strategic planning, support network building, ensure flexible and accessible funding, and embed OPDs in monitoring and evaluation processes. At the same time, while the IFRC PGI Policy and other Movement policies emphasise the importance of forming external partnerships and collaboration, National Societies' neutrality and independence obligations require thorough due diligence for any partnership to safeguard these principles. Such safeguarding can lengthen and make partnership processes more deliberate and sometimes slower to conclude. At times, due to contextual sensitivities and complexities, these principles may make it very challenging for National Societies to establish formal partnerships with external organisations, such as OPDs. For many National Societies, formal collaboration with external partners is still relatively new and represents an area to be further explored and strengthened.

### 1.3 FRC collaboration with Abilis on disability inclusion

In 2022, FRC formalised a four-year consultancy agreement with Abilis Consulting Ltd. (owned by the Finnish OPD Abilis Foundation). While FRC and Abilis had collaborated previously on individual initiatives, this agreement marked a shift toward more strategic and sustained cooperation. The consultancy aims to strengthen disability inclusion in FRC's Ministry for Foreign Affairs-funded development cooperation programme and to build the institutional capacity of FRC and its partner National Societies. Under this agreement, Abilis also subcontracts CBM Global IAG in countries where Abilis is not present or where specific technical expertise is required. A key component of the partnership is to facilitate relationships with local OPDs in FRC programme countries and support them in guiding National Societies on inclusive programming.

A strategic focus of the collaboration has been to support the design of new projects to be disability-inclusive from the outset. During the inception phase, Abilis and local OPDs have delivered training for management, technical staff, and volunteers. This approach was first piloted in Zimbabwe, and a standard training package was developed as a result. It was later also tested in South Sudan and Ethiopia.

At the start of the partnership, most of FRC's host National Societies had no prior experience working with OPDs, and none had formalised such partnerships. Challenges included limited awareness of the added value of OPD collaboration and concerns related to the RCRC principle of neutrality. Over the course of the partnership, Abilis has supported OPD engagement and disability inclusion in several countries, including Nepal, Zimbabwe, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, as well as countries outside the Ministry for Foreign Affairs-funded development cooperation programme such as Tajikistan and Syria.



*Anan Kebede from Ethiopia has become a role model in her community, demonstrating that women with disabilities can play an important role in their communities and earn their own livelihoods.*

## 2. Experience demonstrates collaboration with OPDs strengthens inclusive impact

Four case studies from Tajikistan, Nepal, Ethiopia, and South Sudan highlight how National Societies have collaborated with OPDs in FRC funded projects. Each case offers practical insights into how partnerships were initiated, implemented, and adapted to local contexts. The examples illustrate both the benefits and challenges of OPD collaboration and provide lessons for strengthening inclusive programming across the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

### 2.1 TAJIKISTAN

#### From capacity building to institutional change

The collaboration between the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan (RCST) and the OPD *Ishtirok* – League of Women with Disabilities, began in 2022 under the FRC-supported European Commission’s Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) – Partners’ Preparedness Programme (PPP). Cooperation with *Ishtirok* was considered a pilot initiative within the PPP framework, implemented at a time when RCST was at an early stage of systematically integrating disability inclusion as part of broader Protection, Gender and Inclusion approaches. *Ishtirok* was identified as a suitable OPD partner, as it is a pioneering cross-disability organisation advocating for the rights of women with disabilities in Tajikistan, and a partner organisation of *Abilis*.

Initially, the cooperation focused on ensuring that water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure built by RCST would be inclusive, with *Ishtirok* tasked with reviewing the assessment tools. However, following continuous discussions between RCST, FRC and *Ishtirok*, the scope expanded to include broader support for disability inclusion. This included conducting an assessment



*Zulfiya Sharipova, a volunteer from the Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan, serves as a role model for disability inclusion. Through collaboration with OPDs such as Ishtirok, disability inclusion has become more embedded in RCST programming, strengthening inclusive services and community resilience.*

on inclusiveness of the project area, facilitating disability inclusion training for RCST staff, and developing a disability inclusion manual to guide RCST programming. The cooperation began in the second year of project implementation, was initially planned for a few months, but extended to approximately one year. It was formalised through a service contract covering these specific activities.

## Benefits

**The partnership marked a first-time collaboration between RCST and an OPD, creating new opportunities for both organisations.** This was RCST's first experience working with an OPD in its programming. Although RCST was aware of Ishtirok prior to the partnership, collaboration had not been considered due to limited understanding of each other's roles and capacities. For Ishtirok, this was also the first time entering into a service agreement with a mainstream organisation.

**Joint activities led to capacity building, attitude shifts, and the development of practical tools for inclusion.** RCST staff and volunteers participated in disability inclusion training, which introduced practical concepts such as accessibility audits and respectful engagement with persons with disabilities. For many participants, this was their first exposure to such training, and it helped shift attitudes and increase awareness. The development of a disability inclusion manual was a key achievement, providing RCST with a concrete tool to guide future programming. As a result, disability inclusion has become a more visible priority within RCST.

**Ishtirok's involvement enhanced its credibility and fostered mutual learning between the organisations.** RCST gained insights into national disability legislation and inclusive practices, while Ishtirok learned more about RCST's humanitarian work and community outreach. Trust between the organisations grew through ongoing dialogue and shared activities, strengthening Ishtirok's visibility and credibility as an expert organisation.

## Country-level lessons learned

**Initial challenges around roles, communication, and stakeholder coordination delayed progress.** There was a lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and expectations among the partners, which delayed the start of activities and required multiple rounds of discussion to resolve. The involvement of multiple stakeholders added complexity to the process and led to delays and for example conflicting feedback during the development of the disability inclusion manual. Language barriers also posed difficulties, as work had to be conducted in Russian, English, and Tajik, increasing costs for Ishtirok and slowing communication – this was also not clearly agreed from the start.

**Limited involvement and short contract duration restricted Ishtirok's influence and long-term planning.** Ishtirok's involvement was limited only to the implementation phase, which restricted their ability to influence project design and monitoring. The short duration of the contract further constrained the depth of engagement. Additionally, the absence of a broader agreement or MoU, hindered strategic planning and long-term collaboration.

**Despite limitations, the partnership initiated a shift in RCST's approach to disability inclusion.** The collaboration helped shift RCST's approach from viewing persons with disabilities as passive recipients to recognising them as active contributors – a significant and lasting mindset change. Both organisations recognised the mutual benefits and expressed interest in continuing cooperation.

**As a result of the pilot collaboration under the PPP project, the partnership has expanded to include new areas of cooperation.** For example, RCST and Ishtirok, with support from UNFPA,

developed Guidelines on Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities who have Survived Gender-Based Violence (GBV), including recommendations for mobile outreach teams and capacity-building for service providers. In addition, Ishtirok and RCST delivered a series of trainings for NGOs, civil society actors, and government representatives, including a seminar in Dushanbe to strengthen feedback mechanisms to be more inclusive and promote PGI standards. These activities have laid the foundation for improving the quality, accessibility, and inclusiveness of services for persons with disabilities who have survived GBV.

**The sustainability of collaboration has improved and there is strong commitment towards inclusion from RCST.** While there is still no long-term agreement, ongoing cooperation and concrete plans—such as the systematic use of Disability Inclusion Guidelines in RCST programming developed with Ishtirok, and their integration into SOPs for emergency preparedness and response, planned joint grant applications, and specialized trainings—indicate strong commitment to inclusion principles at RCST and potential for scaling up. These steps suggest that the partnership is moving beyond its initial pilot nature toward a more strategic and institutionalized collaboration.

## 2.2 NEPAL

### Collaborating with self-help groups of persons with disabilities

Disability inclusion is not new to The Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS), as it has previously implemented projects focusing on disability inclusion, in collaboration with the Danish Red Cross, Hong Kong Red Cross and FRC, and worked with the National Federation of the Disabled, Nepal (NFDN), an umbrella association of OPDs in the country.



*Members of a self-help group in Nepal take part in community activities supporting inclusive disaster risk reduction in collaboration with the Nepal Red Cross Society.*

Currently, FRC supports the **Reducing Disaster Impact through Inclusive Preparedness and Anticipatory Actions (REDI) project**, where disability inclusion and OPD engagement are core components and were built into the project from the start. During the inception workshop, two OPDs, Abilis Nepal and the NFDN were consulted, leading to a district-level OPD mapping and inclusion of OPD partnerships in the project plan and budget. Disability issues were also addressed in the Enhanced Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment and baseline survey, and inclusion was emphasised across staff and volunteer engagement.

Despite this strong foundation, the first-year implementation review meeting identified limited engagement with persons with disabilities and no continued collaboration with OPDs. The gap was attributed to attitudinal barriers within both the project team and the community. To address this, NRCS revisited the OPD mapping and partnered with the **Karuna Foundation** - a local NGO focusing on disability prevention, community-level rehabilitation, and supporting self-help groups of persons with disabilities. Although located in the project district, this marked the first formal collaboration between Karuna and NRCS. Their self-help groups were integrated into the project, significantly improving inclusion.

### Benefits

**Existing community structures and Karuna's expertise enabled effective and trusted inclusion efforts.** These existing structures provided NRCS with easier access to community members with disabilities, saving time and effort, and ensuring community acceptance and trust. Karuna also contributed valuable disability data and insights on the barriers they face, which would have been difficult and time-consuming for the NRCS team to obtain otherwise.

**Joint efforts with OPDs and SHGs led to inclusive practices and improved early warning systems.** Together with NFDN, Karuna organised inclusion related training to local NRCS staff together with community awareness sessions, which helped to make many activities more inclusive. An important result of the project and the engagement of the self-help groups in the project activities is the establishment of accessible early warning communication channels in the communities. These channels are now part of the formal early warning system and are being used as a primary means of receiving alerts before anticipated disasters. The self-help group members play an important role in ensuring the inclusion in early warning systems, and this inclusion has contributed to the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Overall, the collaboration benefited all parties, with mutual learning and clear improvements for community members with disabilities.

**Community-level training contributed to positive shifts in attitudes and empowerment.**

Trainings conducted at all levels – especially within communities – led to visible shifts in attitudes towards persons with disabilities. These findings underscore the importance of starting all disability inclusion projects with empowerment and confidence-building for persons with disabilities.

### Country level lessons learned

**OPD consultations were conducted at the national level during the inception phase but could have also taken place locally.** National OPDs lacked sufficient contextual understanding of the project areas, which limited the relevance of their input.

**The partnership with Karuna was largely reactive and needs-based; a more strategic and planned approach from the beginning would have strengthened the collaboration.** Early engagement and localised actions demonstrate more effective partnership.

**Although budget was allocated for OPD collaboration, it was underutilised.** The teams collaborated in a flexible way and most of the joint activities did not require the use of funds. The project team believed it was still valuable to have funds allocated to ensure the issue was not forgotten.

**Despite close and effective collaboration, the partnership with Karuna remained informal** as no MoU was made during the project implementation, due to operational challenges and limited prioritisation. In addition, Karuna has recently phased out of the project area ending hopes for sustained partnership at the project or branch level, but NRCS's continued engagement with self-help groups in the project area offers a promising path for sustained inclusion. The collaboration with Karuna enabled the project to take a big step towards meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, despite being an organisation working for persons with disabilities, not a representative OPD.

## 2.3 SOUTH SUDAN

### **Institutionalising disability inclusion beyond individual projects**

In South Sudan, FRC currently supports the **Integrated Health Improvement Project**, focusing on sexual and reproductive health and rights and water, sanitation and hygiene in Rumbek, the capital of the Lakes State. Disability inclusion was built into the project design from the outset, including partnership with a local OPD, Disabled Agency for Rehabilitation and Development (DARD) at the branch level, and broader institutional capacity building of the South Sudan Red Cross (SSRC) through training and engaging with the management team. FRC also aimed to foster partnerships with OPDs at the national level and support SSRC in mainstreaming disability inclusion beyond the Rumbek project. As disability inclusion and OPD collaboration were new to SSRC, FRC planned to pilot this approach in its project first to lay the foundation for wider institutionalisation in the National Society. The work at these two different levels has continued since the inception of the project.

At the headquarters and institutional level, disability inclusion work began in 2023 with trainings at three different levels: for senior management of SSRC, for programme staff at the headquarters (including other Partner National Societies supporting SSRC in other regions), and at the Rumbek branch for staff and volunteers. While the initial plan was to engage a local OPD to lead these trainings with Abilis support, no suitable OPDs with sufficient experience could be identified in the capital. To ensure quality and local contextualisation, the training was led by two national disability experts selected by Abilis. Although the training quality was appreciated and perceived as particularly valuable and relevant by SSRC and FRC, this strategy did not foster partnerships with OPDs or build OPD capacity.

At the field level, Rumbek branch had identified the local OPD, DARD, but it was only in this project with the FRC support that the partnership was initiated. DARD focuses on empowering persons with disabilities, rehabilitation, and community level advocacy, and has prior experience working with other mainstream organisations. Meetings with DARD were held during the planning and inception phases of the project. DARD also co-facilitated the disability inclusion training at the branch level, after which a plan of action for inclusion was developed. An MoU with DARD was signed to formalise the partnership, with clear responsibilities and expectations for implementation, planning, and monitoring, as well as budget for them. DARD and SSRC also co-chaired the International Day of Persons with Disabilities and led a one-day dissemination workshop of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for key line ministries

in the State. The Union of Persons with Disabilities in Rumbek was also consulted and included in project activities, although the formal partnership was with DARD.

### Benefits

**The OPD's involvement at the branch level significantly strengthened disability inclusion in project implementation.** DARD has in-depth knowledge of the situation of persons with disabilities in the area and has strongly supported the identification of persons with disabilities, mainstreaming disability issues in project deliverables, conducting an accessibility audit of the branch, and building the capacity of volunteers. The partnership helped break the "chain of silence," leading to increased empowerment and inclusion – such as parents enrolling children with disabilities in school. The accessibility audit revealed gaps in infrastructure, prompting improvements such as wheelchair access and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

**Dedicated project staffing ensured that inclusion was integrated beyond OPD collaboration.**

Importantly, disability inclusion efforts were not fully outsourced to DARD, but there were also other deliberate efforts put in place. The project team included a dedicated disability inclusion officer responsible for planning and monitoring inclusion, as well as coordination with DARD, which helped embed inclusion more systematically across project activities. Having focal points at branch level has proven essential for coordination and sustainability.

**SSRC's Action Plan sets a strong foundation for institutionalising disability inclusion.** Following national-level training and the pilot in Rumbek, SSRC developed an ambitious Disability Inclusion and Mainstreaming Action Plan in 2025, with FRC support and OPD consultation. The plan aims to embed disability inclusion across SSRC's policies, programmes, systems, and culture, and promotes meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and OPDs in planning and decision-making. It includes provisions for formalising OPD partnerships through MoUs and shared workplans in each operational area, and where OPDs are not present, supporting local networks and disability champions.



*Village Savings and Loan Association members and community members with disabilities engaging in a focus group discussion in Rumbek to identify challenges and develop inclusive solutions within their groups.*

**A key enabler of success has been the strong ownership, leadership, and interest of the SSRC Protection, Gender and Inclusion department and management team.** Their commitment has helped prioritise disability inclusion and drive institutional change, making SSRC's approach unique among FRC host National Societies. Strong support from FRC and SSRC senior management, combined with branch-level leadership commitment, has created an enabling environment for inclusive programming. Positive community feedback and increased visibility of persons with disabilities have further reinforced the value of inclusion and helped shift perceptions at all levels.

### Country level lessons learned

**SSRC's experience highlights the need for multi-level OPD engagement tailored to different operational contexts.** One of the most important lessons is the recognition that no single OPD can support a National Society across all levels – headquarters, branch, and community. Different levels require different expertise. SSRC's strategy to engage different OPDs in each operational area, and to support local networks where OPDs are not present, is both practical and resource-intensive. This approach is closely tied to SSRC's leadership commitment and may not be feasible in all contexts. Other National Societies may adopt parts of this strategy, but it is essential to understand the varying capacities of OPDs and manage expectations accordingly.

**Accurate disability data collection remains a challenge despite increased efforts.** While SSRC has made progress in identifying persons with disabilities, collecting reliable disaggregated data continues to be difficult. Tools such as the Washington Group Questions, a standardized set of short questions to identify persons with disabilities in surveys and censuses for better data collection and inclusion planning, are not consistently applied, and both SSRC and DARD are still building capacity to use them effectively. This limits the ability to monitor inclusion outcomes and plan targeted interventions. Capacity building and ongoing technical support from FRC are needed to strengthen OPD contributions and ensure sustainability.

**Community awareness and understanding of disability is low, affecting participation of persons with disabilities.** Many persons with disabilities are unaware of their rights or even the nature of their impairments. This lack of awareness contributes to stigma and exclusion, particularly for children with visual or hearing impairments who are often left out of education and social activities in Rumbek. Advocacy and rights-based education are essential to shift perceptions and promote inclusive participation.

**Although inclusion has been prioritised, the budget allocated for disability-specific activities remains small.** This limits the ability to implement accessibility improvements, support children with disabilities in schools, or provide incentives for participation. Increased and flexible funding is needed to deepen impact and respond to emerging needs.

## 2.4 ETHIOPIA

### Finding the right OPD to partner with

In Ethiopia, FRC has several projects ongoing with the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS). In the last few years there has been increasing focus on ensuring disability inclusion and OPD collaboration within these projects. FRC supports the resilience of pastoralist communities in drought and conflict affected Afar region through the **"Towards Resilient Communities' project"** and in Tigray the focus has been on emergency response and support to sexual and gender-based violence survivors by providing cash assistance and by supporting a safe house.

As part of the development project in Afar, in 2024 two trainings were conducted with the support of Abilis Ethiopia staff: one at the headquarters level for programme staff and regional PGI staff, and a second one at Afar branch for staff, volunteers, and key stakeholders.

The emergency response project in Tigray also included a deliberate focus on disability inclusion, and collaboration with a local OPD, The Organisation for Women with Disabilities of Tigray. It was identified as a key partner during the project planning phase and selected due to their focus on women with disabilities, which complemented the project theme well.

## Benefits

### **Training in Afar led to a positive shift in staff attitudes and practical improvements in inclusion.**

Their understanding of how to mainstream and target persons with disabilities improved, particularly for the income-generating activities and water, sanitation and hygiene accessibility. The experience of Abilis Ethiopia of working with local OPDs, and groups of persons with disabilities in communities was highly effective for the team.

**In Tigray, OPD collaboration significantly enhanced the inclusiveness of emergency response activities.** The OPD was involved from the inception phase and played a critical role in ensuring practical inclusion in some of the project activities, such as ensuring access to support for gender-based violence survivors with disabilities, improving the accessibility of the safe house for survivors, and access to cash and voucher assistance. The OPD supported the project through trainings, awareness raising and advocacy on inclusion, identification and targeting of beneficiaries with disabilities, as well as sign language training for safe house staff. The fact that the OPD partner was women-led and had a specific focus on gender issues, increased its relevance and ability to support the project and reach survivors in very vulnerable situations who would normally remain invisible to mainstream actors.



*Representatives of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, Red Cross staff, and partners gather in Ethiopia to strengthen collaboration and institutionalise disability inclusion across programmes. Joint planning and leadership have supported more sustainable and inclusive approaches.*

### Country level lessons learned

**Limited OPD presence and capacity in Afar hindered sustained collaboration despite initial training efforts.** Afar is not one of the operational areas of Abilis, and Abilis's limited contextual knowledge, combined with the low number and capacity of regional OPDs, made it difficult to initiate formal collaboration. As a result, Abilis' support remained limited to training and informal communication, and no local OPD partnership was established at the project or branch level.

**Institutional commitment is key to sustainability in disability inclusion efforts.** The training remained a standalone activity under FRC-support project work, without leading to sustained collaboration or systemic change. A PGI Organisational Assessment in 2024 identified disability inclusion as an area requiring further attention. Strengthening leadership commitment and fostering alignment with Partner National Societies could help embed disability inclusion more consistently across institutional priorities.

**Deepening and formalising emerging partnerships can enhance sustainability and impact of OPD collaboration.** The Collaboration with the OPD was something new for the Tigray branch, and working with a mainstream organisation was also new for the OPD. The collaboration with the branch was very much appreciated by the OPD as they were the first humanitarian organisation to reach out to them to consult them and to collaborate on inclusion. However, the partnership would have benefited from more structured joint planning, monitoring, and mainstreaming across project components. The absence of a formal agreement and sustainability planning limited long-term impact. Strengthening connections between the OPD and other stakeholders – such as government offices, RCRC Movement partners, and local women's organisations – could have further supported sustainability and capacity building.



*Experiences from trainings and consultations show that meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations strengthens programme relevance, ownership and sustainability.*

### **3. Common key enablers, challenges and lessons learnt**

These cross-cutting insights from the four country cases identify key enablers that contributed to successful OPD collaboration, as well as common challenges and lessons learned. The findings aim to inform future practice and institutional learning across FRC-supported programmes.

#### **3.1 Positive outcomes and key enablers**

##### **Strategic support from global expert organisations**

The involvement of experienced disability actors Abilis and CBM Global IAG helped bridge technical gaps and facilitated OPD engagement, especially in countries where National Societies had limited prior experience. Their support was instrumental in initiating partnerships and building capacity.

##### **Strong leadership and institutional commitment (FRC and National Societies)**

FRC's focus, leadership, and commitment to disability inclusion and OPD collaboration were key enablers across all countries. FRC's engagement was built on extensive background work and consultations with host National Societies before any training or project activity took place.

Equally important was the leadership commitment within the National Societies themselves. In most countries, FRC was the first Partner National Society to actively explore structured engagement with OPDs. Apart from Nepal, this was the first time National Societies engaged with OPDs in their projects. In South Sudan, the support from FRC contributed to institutional level changes, as the National Society now aims to ensure all programming is disability-inclusive in partnership with OPDs. This reflects a careful, deliberate process and represents a significant achievement.

##### **Early and meaningful engagement of OPDs**

Projects where OPDs were engaged from the outset achieved stronger inclusion results than those where collaboration began mid-implementation. Early participation allowed OPDs to shape project design, data collection, and community outreach, ensuring that interventions reflected lived experiences of persons with disabilities.

##### **Capacity building and mutual learning**

Disability inclusion trainings organised in collaboration with OPDs were conducted in all four countries and led to visible shifts in attitudes and improved practices. These trainings were most effective when delivered at multiple levels – headquarters, branch, and community. For OPDs, this was often their first engagement not only with the RCRC Movement, but also in supporting mainstream organisations in disability inclusion. This engagement increased the capacity, visibility, and expertise of the OPDs. At the same time, National Society staff and volunteers gained practical knowledge and greater awareness of disability rights and inclusion.

##### **Persons with disabilities as facilitators and trainers**

Including persons with disabilities as trainers and facilitators in disability inclusion trainings proved highly impactful. For many participants, it was the first time they had interacted with



*South Sudan Red Cross staff member and an OPD representative participate in a radio talk show campaign on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) in Rumbek, raising awareness on disability rights and inclusion.*

a person with a disability in a leadership or training role, which helped challenge stigma and promote inclusive attitudes. Their insights illustrated real-life barriers and solutions in ways that theory alone cannot, making discussions more concrete and relatable. Involving persons with disabilities in facilitation roles also builds their visibility as experts, strengthens OPD collaboration, and contributes to broader representation within programmes.

### **Flexible and adaptive approaches**

In Nepal, the project team recognised after the first year that disability inclusion targets were not being met. This prompted a review of project data and a shift in implementation strategy, including renewed engagement with OPDs and self-help groups. This adaptive approach significantly improved inclusion outcomes and serves as a strong example of how flexibility and responsiveness can enhance impact.

### **Improved identification and targeting of persons with disabilities**

Across all four countries, OPD collaboration (and the wider efforts towards disability inclusion) increased the identification and targeting of persons with disabilities. More persons with disabilities were able to access assistance and benefit from the FRC projects' support. In Nepal, working with local self-help groups was a highly effective strategy.

Without the support of the OPDs, it would have been significantly more difficult and time-consuming for the National Society to achieve the inclusion at a similar level (or in some cases at all). The country teams especially appreciated the local OPDs' in-depth knowledge of the situation of persons with disabilities and the barriers they face in their daily lives in the specific project locations. In Ethiopia, the partnership with a woman-led OPD supported the project in reaching survivors of gender-based violence with disabilities. Without their expertise on both disability and gender, it is unlikely that women and girls with multiple intersectional vulnerabilities would have been reached.

## 3.2 Challenges and lessons learnt

### **Limited institutional ownership and sustainability planning**

In some cases, disability inclusion was primarily driven by project teams or external partners, rather than being embedded within the broader institutional priorities of the National Society. This limited the allocation of resources and reduced the likelihood of long-term integration of inclusive practices. While project-level efforts were often strong, they did not always translate into sustained institutional change. Without senior leadership buy-in and cross-departmental engagement, inclusion risks remaining a project-specific initiative rather than a core organisational commitment.

### **Lack of formal agreements and continuity**

Across the case studies, OPD partnerships were often informal, short-term in nature, or limited to the FRC project. In most cases, there were no formal Memoranda of Understanding or long-term collaboration frameworks in place. Instead, partnerships were typically based on service contracts or ad hoc arrangements tied to specific project activities. This limited the depth of collaboration and made it difficult to sustain partnerships beyond the project lifespan. The absence of formal agreements also reflected broader challenges in institutionalising OPD collaboration within National Societies.

### **Unequal and limited OPD engagement**

OPD involvement was frequently consultative rather than collaborative and often limited to specific activities such as training delivery. In many cases, OPDs were not engaged during the planning or design phases of the project, and their participation in monitoring and evaluation was minimal or absent. This limited their ability to influence project direction, assess inclusion outcomes, or contribute to adaptive learning. Where OPDs were engaged late or inconsistently, their contributions were less impactful, and opportunities for mutual learning were reduced.

### **Challenges in linking national and local OPD engagement**

Efforts to initiate OPD collaboration often began at the national level, through trainings or consultations with OPDs based in capital cities. However, these efforts did not always translate into sustained partnerships at the branch or community level. National OPDs were sometimes unfamiliar with the local context or unable to support practical implementation in remote areas. Conversely, local OPDs or self-help groups had valuable contextual knowledge but often lacked the capacity or recognition to engage in formal partnerships. This disconnect between centralised and local engagement limited the effectiveness and reach of inclusion efforts.

### **Geographic and capacity constraints**

In several contexts, the availability of strong, well-established OPDs was limited – particularly in remote or underserved regions. Where OPDs did exist, they often had limited resources, staff, or experience working with mainstream organisations. This constrained their ability to engage meaningfully in project planning, implementation, or monitoring. In some cases, the absence of OPDs altogether required alternative approaches, such as working with disability service providers or informal self-help groups. In addition, disability data collection remains a challenge: tools like the Washington Group Questions are not consistently applied, as both National

Societies and OPDs may lack the capacity to use them effectively, limiting the ability to monitor inclusion outcomes. At the same time, where OPDs help identify and refer individuals, both OPDs and National Societies need guidance on safeguarding, confidentiality, consent, and safe handling of sensitive data.

### **Operational and communication barriers**

Language differences, unclear roles, and limited coordination mechanisms sometimes created misunderstandings or delays in implementation. In multi-stakeholder environments, the absence of clearly defined responsibilities and communication protocols led to conflicting feedback or duplication of efforts. These challenges highlight the importance of investing in relationship-building, joint planning, and clear documentation of roles and expectations from the outset.



*Participants of the South Sudan Red Cross Disability Inclusion Plan of Action validation workshop in Juba.*

## 4. Recommendations for strengthening partnerships with OPDs

The experiences across the four countries demonstrate that meaningful OPD collaboration not only enhances disability inclusion outcomes but also strengthens community ownership, accountability, and sustainability of resilience strengthening efforts. Continued investment in institutional frameworks, mutual learning, and locally led approaches will be key to ensuring that these partnerships move from project-based engagement to long-term strategic collaboration.

The following recommendations build on the key enablers and lessons identified across the four countries, with the aim of supporting more systematic, equitable, and sustainable OPD partnerships. These recommendations are meant to guide FRC and its partners in their future programming but can also support the programming of other National Societies, the IFRC, or other development or humanitarian organisations.

### 4.1 Clarify purpose and roles

#### **Ensure clarity in purpose, scope, and expectations of OPD collaboration from the outset.**

- In the planning phase, initiate an internal reflection process within FRC and together with the National Society to define the specific purpose and scope for OPD engagement, which acknowledges the importance of flexibility and genuine partnership. This should involve a range of staff and partners to ensure shared ownership, understanding, and expectations.
- Continue this reflection with OPDs to clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations of all parties involved.
- Clarify the role, objectives, and added value of the FRC–Abilis partnership, including how it supports OPD collaboration in programme countries and within host National Societies.
- Ensure disability inclusion is not outsourced solely to OPDs. National Societies should allocate sufficient resources and assign a dedicated disability inclusion focal point within the project team to coordinate and mainstream inclusion effectively.
- Clarify communication and coordination mechanisms early in the partnership to support smooth collaboration.

### 4.2 Support and capacity strengthening

#### **Ensure capacity for the selection of the OPD partner, and in defining their purpose, scope and role in the project (and more widely at the institutional level)**

- Recognise that for many National Societies, their staff and volunteers, partnering with OPDs is a new experience. Provide internal guidance in identifying appropriate OPD partners and clarifying their potential contributions.
- Encourage mutual learning between OPDs and National Societies to build trust and shared understanding of each other's mandates, capacities, and ways of working.

### 4.3 Contextualise, formalise and resource partnerships

#### **Work with OPDs at different levels, recognising their diverse strengths and managing expectations accordingly.**

- Tailor collaboration to the strengths of OPDs based on their level and location. National-level OPDs may offer experience in organisational capacity building, while local OPDs bring valuable contextual knowledge.
- Manage expectations by recognising that OPDs have varying capacities. Avoid overburdening them and ensure collaboration is realistic and mutually beneficial.
- Ensure OPD engagement reflects diversity. One OPD may not represent all persons with disabilities – especially under-represented groups such as persons with psychosocial disabilities, those who are deaf-blind, or those with intellectual disabilities.

#### **Formalise partnerships and allocate adequate resources.**

- Aim to formalise OPD collaboration and establish partnerships that are collaborative and mutually reinforcing, moving beyond one-off activities or service contracts.
- Localisation entails building meaningful, long-term collaboration with OPDs that supports their leadership and ownership in inclusion efforts.
- Consider including capacity-building support for OPDs and encourage the formation of both formal and informal groups of persons with disabilities.
- Build flexibility into plans and budgets and review them regularly to adapt to evolving needs and opportunities.

#### **Even if OPDs are not found in the project area or at national level, it is necessary to find ways to engage with persons with disabilities.**

- In areas where OPDs are not present, engage with disability service providers or organisations working for persons with disabilities. These actors can support outreach, help identify local self-help groups and provide insights into barriers and enablers affecting participation.
- Identify and involve informal self-help groups of persons with disabilities in project activities where formal OPDs are not present. National or regional umbrella organisations of OPDs are typically a good starting point in identifying local OPDs and contacts.
- If no groups of persons with disabilities or disability organisations can be found in the project area, it is still a must to involve individuals with disabilities throughout the project cycle (see section 5.5 below). While this situation is rare, persons with disabilities may be socially isolated or not publicly visible, so proactive outreach is essential.

## 4.4 Integrate OPD collaboration throughout the project cycle

### **Ensure OPD involvement in planning, assessments, and design.**

- Involve OPDs in inception workshops, baseline surveys, and vulnerability assessments to ensure disability-specific needs are captured and addressed.

### **Embed OPDs in implementation, monitoring, and feedback processes.**

- Include OPDs in monitoring and evaluation teams and processes: Invite OPDs to participate in monitoring visits, evaluations, and feedback mechanisms to assess inclusion quality.
- Collaborate with OPDs to assess physical and informational accessibility.
- Ensure regular and meaningful engagement and consultation with OPDs: Move beyond one-off training to continuous collaboration throughout implementation. Ensure OPD support for mainstreaming, not only a few activities.
- Avoid outsourcing inclusion solely to OPDs: Disability inclusion should be a shared responsibility across the project team, supported by dedicated staff and resources.

### **Use data and resources to strengthen inclusion and impact.**

- Periodically analyse the project's data on disability. If the project is not reaching persons with disabilities, consider how collaboration with OPDs could support this work.
- Focus data-related capacity building here: Support OPDs and National Societies in building capacity to collect and analyse disaggregated disability data, including use of tools like the Washington Group Questions.
- Include OPD collaboration in project budgets: Allocate resources for OPD participation, reasonable accommodation, and disability-specific activities based on assessment data.
- Train and sensitise staff and communities in collaboration with OPDs: Trainings should include persons with disabilities as facilitators to challenge stigma and promote inclusive attitudes.
- Include rights-based awareness activities to empower persons with disabilities and shift community perceptions, especially in areas with low understanding of disability.

## 4.5 Strengthen institutionalisation and sustainability

### **Embed disability inclusion and OPD collaboration within institutional frameworks to ensure long-term sustainability.**

- Where there is willingness and commitment, develop institutional disability inclusion strategies in collaboration with OPDs.
- Institutional change requires senior management buy-in and prioritisation. Encourage leadership to champion disability inclusion beyond project-level activities.
- Ensure inclusion within the Protection, Gender and Inclusion framework by actively engaging OPDs and other disability-focused actors throughout the project cycle. Their involvement in assessments, planning, implementation, and monitoring helps identify barriers, co-design solutions, and embed inclusion as a shared responsibility.
- This approach strengthens the relevance and quality of PGI programming and contributes to long-term institutionalisation of inclusive practices across FRC and National Society teams.

### **Key recommendations:**

- Clarify the purpose, scope, and expectations of OPD collaboration from the outset.
- Ensure capacity for selecting OPD partners and defining their roles.
- Work with OPDs at different levels, recognising their diverse strengths and managing expectations accordingly.
- Formalise partnerships and allocate adequate resources.
- Embed OPD collaboration across all phases of the project cycle – from planning and assessments to implementation, monitoring, and learning.
- Institutionalise disability inclusion and OPD collaboration for long-term sustainability.

**Finnish Red Cross International Aid  
International Knowledge Development and Advocacy Unit**

**Photos:** Ethiopian Red Cross Society, Finnish Red Cross, Nepal Red Cross Society, South Sudan Red Cross, Red Crescent Society of Tajikistan

**March 2026**

**ISBN 978-951-658-231-6**



With support from  
Finland's development  
cooperation