



**TOWARDS
DISABILITY
INCLUSIVE
FOOD
SECURITY**

We are able!

Policy paper: Insights in effectivity and sustainability of Disability Inclusion Facilitators



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Introduction

Within the We Are Able! (WaA!) project the Disability Inclusion Facilitator (DIF) model was implemented, an innovative, rights-based approach that places persons with disabilities or local disability champions at the center of the food security system (13, 14). DIFs are trained, community-based (semi-) volunteers, often with lived experience of disability, recruited through local Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). Their responsibilities include:

- Raising awareness of disability rights and inclusive practices.
- Advocating for the participation of Persons with disabilities in decision-making bodies.
- Mobilizing communities for inclusive food security programs.
- Facilitating linkages between Persons with disabilities and services such as land allocation, agricultural inputs, and market access.

The DIF model ensures advocacy and inclusion at the grassroots, fostering trust, leadership, and reducing stigma while strengthening the participation of persons with disabilities in food systems (13, 15). While the *We Are Able project* demonstrated the value of DIFs, questions remain about stakeholder perceptions, policy impact, and whether their contributions are institutionalized or remain project-dependent.

The study conducted addressed the evidence gaps by evaluating the DIF model's effectiveness, the factors associated with its effect, and its long-term sustainability. The findings are intended to guide governments, OPDs, donors, and development partners in scaling and institutionalizing the DIF approach in disability inclusion food security systems.

Key Messages

- Disability Inclusion Facilitators (DIFs) have proven to be a low-cost, high-impact solution for promoting disability-inclusive food systems in six African countries.
- Their interventions have led to tangible progress: persons with disabilities (Persons with disabilities) now have access to land, water, agricultural cooperatives, and decision-making spaces that were previously inaccessible to them.
- Despite 87% of DIFs expressing willingness to continue their efforts, sustainability is uncertain as fewer than half of the OPDs and WaA! Staff were confident that the model could survive without funding or structural support. This highlights the gap between DIF commitment and systemic readiness.
- Without policy integration and dedicated resources, these gains risk being lost. Integrating DIFs into government, OPD, and NGO systems is essential to secure a sustained impact.

About the We Are Able! project

The We Are Able (WaA) project is a five-year project (2021-2025) that aims to strengthen community-based, participatory, disability-inclusive food security initiatives. The project is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and implemented by a consortium of six partners, namely African Disability Forum, ZOA, The Leprosy Mission, Netherlands (TLM-NL), Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten Internationaal (VNGI), See You Foundation (SYF), and The Hague Academy for Local Governance (THA). The project is implemented across ten sites in six African countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda, to ensure disability-inclusive food security initiatives.

Background

Globally, over 2.3 billion people experience food insecurity, and more than half are Persons with disabilities (1-4). Food insecurity and disability are bidirectionally linked: malnutrition and poor access to nutritious food can lead to impairments, while disability limits access to livelihoods, land, water, and decision-making platforms, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas (5). Persons with disabilities face intersecting barriers, including limited access to agricultural inputs and facilities, physical inaccessibility, stigma, exclusion from cooperatives and councils, and weak policy enforcement. This cycle of disadvantage reinforces generational exclusion and remains largely unaddressed. In Africa, Persons with disabilities bear a double burden of poverty and food insecurity (6, 7). They are twice as likely to experience food insecurity and remain underrepresented in local governance structures that shape food systems (8-10).

Methodology

Insights in the effectivity and sustainability of DIFs was obtained through a multi-country, transdisciplinary mixed-methods study conducted from February 2025 to June 2025. The study used triangulated quantitative surveys, in-depth interviews, and case studies to evaluate the DIF model's effectiveness, challenges, facilitating and hindering factors, and sustainability.

- Surveys: 50 respondents (23 DIFs, 11 OPD representatives, 16 WaA staff).
- Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): 13 with consortium partners, OPDs, and DIFs.
- Case Studies: 18 detailed narratives documenting successes, challenges, and sustainability mechanisms.
- Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data guided by the DIF Theory of Change.

Key Findings

The key findings highlight evidence of the effectiveness of DIF, barriers to sustained effectiveness, enabling and hindering factors, and sustainability of the model.

Effectiveness of DIFs

- 100% of OPDs and 81.3% of WaA Staff reported DIFs as *effective or very effective* in promoting disability inclusion and food security.
- 82% of OPDs reported greater visibility and participation of Persons with disabilities in food security programs due to the DIF's efforts.
- Stakeholders reported that DIFs contributed to improved access to resources and services, increased community participation, enhanced disability rights awareness, stigma reduction, and policy advocacy. Case studies demonstrated tangible outcomes such as land restitution, inclusion in cooperatives, and new livelihood opportunities.
- key policy and practice changes included the integration of Persons with disabilities into Sangwe agricultural cooperatives (Burundi), the Installation of accessible water points (Ethiopia), and securing land inheritance rights for women with disabilities (DRC).

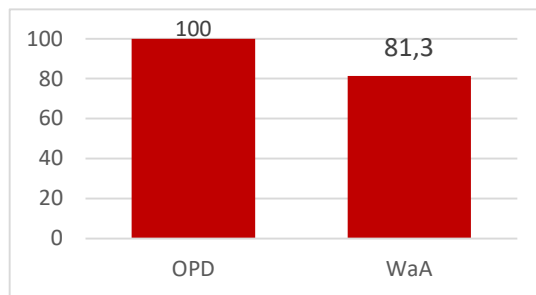


Figure 1 DIF's effectiveness as perceived by OPDs and Project staff in food security (%)

Barriers to Sustained Effectiveness

- **Environmental and Infrastructure Challenges:** Nearly 70% of DIFs reported inaccessible terrain, poor roads, and a lack of transport, that limited their ability to reach remote communities in rural & under-resourced areas.
- **Insufficient Funding and Resources:** Lack of stipends, mobility support, and operational budgets was highlighted by 63.6% of OPDs. Without financial backing, DIFs were unable to carry out training, advocacy, and household visits consistently.
- **Policy Gaps and Weak Enforcement:** Although disability policies exist in several countries, DIFs noted limited implementation and weak accountability mechanisms. As a result, advocacy efforts often fail to translate into lasting institutional change.
- **Social Stigma and Limited Local Authority Support:** Despite the DIF model's effectiveness in reducing societal stigma, negative perceptions of disability continue to limit its influence in some places. In some cases, DIFs were invited to meetings but excluded from real decision-making processes, undermining their role and credibility.

	OPD	WaA	DIF
Lack of training	18.2	31.25	13
Limited cooperation	45.5	12.5	26.1
Stigma and discrimination	27.3	31.2	30.4
Inadequate funding for field activities	63.6	43.7	34.8
Political barriers	27.3	25	43.5
Legal/policy gaps	45.5	31.25	52.2
Environmental barriers	27.5	43.75	66.6
Technological barriers	37.5	37.5	43.5

Figure 2: Challenges & Barriers reported by Stakeholders (%)

Enabling Factors

- **High-quality training:** Over 90% rated capacity building and training as highly effective in building advocacy, mobilization, and coordination skills.
- **Community engagement:** Most DIFs spend > 10 hours/week in fieldwork, engaging not only Persons with disabilities but also local leaders, schools, religious institutions, and OPDs, demonstrating a central role in fostering inclusive governance and food security systems.
- **Lived experience:** DIFs' disability backgrounds foster trust, credibility, and community legitimacy.
- **Collaborative partnerships** between DIFs, OPDs, local governments, and NGOs increase access to resources for persons with disabilities and strengthen policy implementation in the community.

Sustainability of the DIF model

- **High Motivation:** While 87% of DIFs expressed willingness to continue beyond project funding, only 46% of OPDs and 56% of WaA staff believed the model could sustain without external support. This gap highlights the difference between DIF commitment and systemic readiness.
- **Risks to Sustainability:** Role overload, lack of formal recognition, and limited institutional support pose the risk of burnout and a loss of momentum once project funding ends.
- However, there are promising examples of emerging Sustainability Mechanisms:
 - Embedding DIFs in disability mainstreaming committees (South Sudan).
 - Linking DIFs to cooperatives and group businesses (Burundi, Uganda).
 - Formal recognition of DIFs in local councils (Ethiopia).

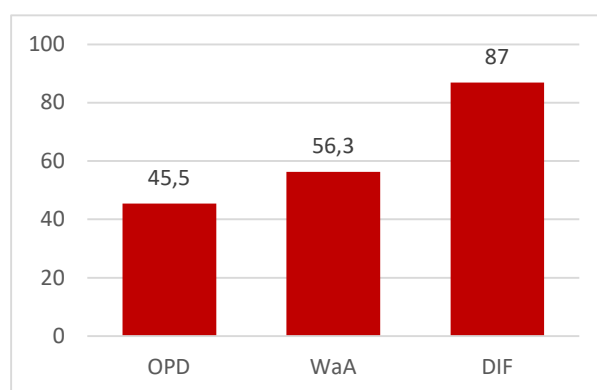


Figure 3: Reported Sustainability of DIF work (%)

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations for scaling and sustaining the DIF model are based on ideal contexts and conditions. Implementation timelines are context-dependent and may be set by governments and implementing partners.

Stakeholder	Action	Expected Outcome
Government	Formally adopt DIF roles into local government staffing and agricultural extension systems.	- DIFs recognized as formal actors - Sustainable financing secured - Disability inclusion mainstreamed into Disability inclusive food security governance.
	Allocate 1–2% of district food security budgets to DIF stipends, transport, and training.	
	Create a structure and mandate for OPD and DIF representation and meaningful participation in (local) planning	
WaA Consortium & TLM (Including other donors)	Allocate a fixed percentage of the annual program budget to the disability-inclusion program, especially for DIF activities such as training, mobility, and mentoring.	- Continuity of DIF activities during transition - OPDs equipped to manage DIFs - Reduced dependency on project cycles. - DIF model scaled and institutionalized - Raised visibility among policymakers and donors - Strengthened cross-country learning and solidarity.
	Provide capacity-building grants to OPDs for DIF supervision and accountability systems.	
	Lead national policy advocacy campaigns (2025–2026) with Ministries of Agriculture, Social Development, and Disability Council in respective countries, which can include sharing the success of DIF methodology and sustainability; <i>High motivation of DIF facilitating the sustainability of the model</i>	
	Publish and disseminate country-specific DIF papers / briefs and case stories to inform and advocate with policymakers and donors.	
	Facilitate one cross-country DIF learning exchange annually.	
OPDs & Local NGOs/Implementers	Build on existing integration efforts, formalise the DIFs into OPD governance with defined roles (advocacy focal point, community mobilizer).	- Increased organizational visibility and strengthened leadership and advocacy capacity. - OPDs coordinate and supervise DIFs - Financial sustainability mechanisms initiated - Stronger community ownership.
	Establish quarterly accountability mechanisms (joint review meetings, reporting templates).	
	Scale up and create sustainability funds (cooperative income, membership fees, donor matches) in all countries.	

Further Important Considerations

- Cross-sector potential: The DIF model is adaptable beyond food security. It can be applied in health, education, and social protection sectors, strengthening inclusion across multiple development areas.
- Gender inclusion: Women DIFs and persons with disabilities often face double discrimination yet demonstrate strong leadership potential. Ensuring their representation within DIF structures is critical for gender equity and empowerment.
- Cost-effectiveness: DIF stipends and training account for only a small share of program budgets yet deliver significant returns in terms of social inclusion and community participation.

Conclusion

The Disability Inclusion Facilitator (DIF) model, as implemented under the *We Are Able* Project, has proven to be an effective, community-rooted mechanism for advancing disability inclusion in food security initiatives across six African countries. By drawing on their lived experience, trust, and legitimacy within their communities, DIFs have successfully bridged the gap between persons with disabilities, service providers, and decision-makers. Nevertheless, the sustainability of this model depends on shifting from a time-bound, project-based approach to a system-anchored framework. Policy integration, resource allocation, and strengthened partnerships with OPDs, local governments, and other stakeholders are critical to institutionalizing DIF roles and ensuring sustainability. Without such integration, the model risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. Integrating the DIF model within existing governance structures will not only guarantee its impact but also ensure that disability inclusion in food systems is participatory, equitable, and continues to deliver on the global commitment to leave no one behind.

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