**Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child**

**on draft General Comment no 26**

**LEFT OUT AND LEFT BEHIND**

submitted on behalf of:

**Pacific children and youth with disabilities &**

**the Disability Rights Fund / Disability Rights Advocacy Fund**

**February 2023**

**Introduction**

The present submission is made on behalf of Pacific organisations of persons with disabilities, including children and youth with disabilities, and the Disability Rights Advocacy Fund (DRAF) and the Disability Rights Fund (DRF). These organisations are governed and led by persons with disabilities from the following Pacific Island countries: Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and include:

1. Tonga National Visual Impairment Association
2. Kiribati Association of People who are Blind or Vision Impaired
3. Kiribati Deaf Association
4. Disability Pride Hub (Fiji)
5. Samoa Blind Persons Association
6. Persons with Physical Disabilities Association Samoa
7. Nuanua O Le Alofa (Samoa)
8. Deaf Association of Samoa
9. Papua New Guinea Blind Union (PNGBU)
10. Blind and Visually Impairment Solomon Islands
11. Fusi Alofa Association (Tuvalu)

DRF/DRAF serve to resource, strengthen, and connect organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) through participatory grantmaking, advocacy, and technical assistance. DRF/DRAF support OPDs in the Global South to advance the recognition of rights as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and to engage in human rights, inclusive development, climate action, and peace and security at local, national, and global levels, for the equal and full participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in society.

**Methodology**

Two consultations were undertaken in January 2023 to gather the views of children and youth with disabilities from Pacific Island countries. First, an in-person consultation workshop was conducted in Apia, Samoa on 20 January involving eight participants ranging from the ages of 13 to 25 years, coming from different islands. Second, an online consultation was held on 23 January gathering 31 participants from Fiji, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tonga. Written inputs were also received from Papua New Guinea. The participants ranged from the age of 12 to over 30 years with the majority between 18-25 years.

Overall, the two consultations had equal representation of female and male participants, including transgender individuals, with a mix of disability constituencies, including blind and low vision participants, deaf and hard of hearing participants and participants with physical disabilities. Participants represented both urban and rural zones of the Pacific, with a strong composition of participants identifying as Indigenous people.

Consent forms were gathered from all participants and for those under 18 years, parental consent was also obtained. Facilitators adhered to the recommendations made by the Children’s Advisory Team within the Consultation Toolkit to create safe spaces for children to permit open and consensual exchange, and measures were in place to ensure accessible communications, including the provision of language interpretation, sign language interpretation, captioning, and support persons for participants who requested it.

**Background: climate change and persons with disabilities in the Pacific**

The Pacific Islands are one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change.[[1]](#footnote-1) Impacts include rising sea levels, increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters, ocean acidification, impacts on livelihoods and economies, and changes in patterns of vector borne disease. These adverse effects significantly impact the human rights of children and adults with disabilities, who are disproportionately at risk of harm, neglect, violence, and abuse.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Climate change is contributing to more frequent and intense typhoons, hurricanes, and other extreme weather events in the Pacific, which presents significant difficulties for people with disabilities, including children and youth, during emergencies. Their access to accessible information, assistance, and safe shelters is limited, making them more susceptible to harm, illness, and death during environmental extremes like floods, heatwaves, and hurricanes.[[3]](#footnote-3) The aftermath of these events can also impede their access to fundamental necessities such as food, water and toilets, and the destruction or damage of assistive devices can leave them exposed.

The impact of gradual environmental changes like air pollution, limited access to water, rising sea levels and land degradation has an overwhelming effect on children and youth with disabilities and their families, making existing disparities even worse.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Pacific is particularly vulnerable to sea level rise, which can lead to coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources, and increased flooding during storms. Climate change is also affecting the range and distribution of disease-carrying insects, with children with disabilities being at a higher risk of getting water-borne and insect-borne diseases.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In addition, slow-onset events can affect the availability of basic necessities like food, water and means of livelihood. Livelihoods of many people in the Pacific region, particularly those who rely on fishing, agriculture, and tourism, are being affected by climate change, which can hit people with disabilities particularly hard as they are more likely to be in poverty and marginalized.

Furthermore, the lack of participation of persons with disabilities in climate action threatens to leave them behind in the transition to low-carbon economies. A lack of consideration for disability inclusion in sustainable climate action, research and investment initiatives can lead to additional barriers for people with disabilities leaving children and adults with disabilities behind in sustainable development.

**Consultation findings**

1. **Concerns**

“The barriers we face are multiplied through none other than the general assumption that whatever is planned for the community is good enough for persons with disabilities.”

At the outset, participants shared their worries about climate change. Kuini from Fiji shared that,

“Our development is being destroyed here because of how climate change and disasters restrict our opportunities”.

And Beia from Kiribati underlined that,

“We are in tough times; because of climate change we live in vulnerable conditions. As youth, we are continuously concerned there will be more difficulties that we must face in the future”.

*Health*

The increase in heat and wildfires as a result of climate change brings increased risk to respiratory health as well as higher threats of transmitting infectious diseases which affects children with disabilities disproportionately due to weaker immune systems. Participants from Tonga reported that,

“We face a big challenge- disabled people are more vulnerable to various diseases that are more widespread because of climate change.”

Participants also raised contamination of drinking water by soil erosion that affects health, as well as the destruction of seedlings that threatens the ecosystem, nutrition and livelihood of communities. Several participants raised the immediate issue of food security, and one participant shared:

“If I am thirsty and I need a drink, if the water is dirty, I would not be able to know that the water is dirty because I am totally blind. It affects my health.”

Participants from the Kiribati Deaf Association stressed concerns about their health, that they do not receive timely news and information about climate change in their native language, i.e. sign language, which impedes them from taking the appropriate measures for their health and well-being. They raised the fact that in Kiribati, there are no sign language interpreters on TV, including for public service announcements, and information in newspapers are not accessible to Deaf persons who do not read. As a result, Deaf persons are not kept informed nor made aware of climate change impacts on an equal basis with others.

*Relocation*

Participants recognized that climate change affects all Pacific populations, particularly as many communities need to relocate from coastal regions to higher inland areas. This has several consequences on all populations including the loss of livelihood (farming, fishing, tourism), however for children and youth with disabilities this requires living in new environments that are not accessible. As Vatau, an 18 year-old Samoan girl with low vision shared;

“It is not easier for persons with disabilities when we must relocate. People who live in the coastal area are those who are most affected. When they move inland this is the safest area for them, but it may not be accessible for persons with disabilities and it will be hard for them to adapt to the new environment. For people without disabilities they are free to move around and can easily adapt to the new environment. But not persons with disabilities, environments are not accessible and there are barriers to mobility and orientation for blind people.”

*Evacuation and emergency response*

Participants also raised that unlike for children and youth without disabilities, families of children and youth with disabilities have extra responsibilities that weigh on them. Taimane, a young wheelchair user shared that;

“If there is a natural disaster, you tend to be forgotten. Without help of other people, I cannot go to evacuation centre. For us people who are using wheelchairs, we rely on the support from our family members to assist us to evacuate.”

Another participant, Matthew, 25 years old, added that;

“We are more likely to face violence in the family and exclusion. Families will think we are a burden and it leads to further exclusion and priority is given to children with no disabilities. We are the last one that they might think about in times of climate change.”

Several other participants raised the central role of families in ensuring the safety of children and youth with disabilities. They all agreed that,

“There are no resources, no support for persons with disabilities during natural disasters except what is being provided by their own families. It is up to the family to provide support.”

*Protection from violence and sexual and reproductive health*

With respect to women and girls with disabilities, participants agreed they face greater barriers due to climate change, particularly during emergencies triggered by climate-related disasters. Several raised that women and girls with disabilities face more threats of violence during emergencies, including sexual violence and abuse in evacuation centres where there is no security and little privacy which leads to higher rates of teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Another participant raised that women and girls with high support needs may not have access to the support nor space required to change their dressings or menstrual pads in evacuation centres or crowded homes during emergencies, creating unhygienic conditions and leading to infections and emotional stress.

*Information and education*

Participants were asked about how they learned about climate change and what kind of actions were being taken to prepare and equip their communities against climate-related hazards and natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, flooding, etc.).

Most participants said that little was taught in schools about climate change. A few participants noted that they learned about climate change and its causes and impacts, e.g. deforestation and soil erosion. Participants from Tonga agreed that information and stories about climate change should be inserted in school curriculum so all children and youth could learn about climate change and challenges facing different groups including persons with disabilities.

Several participants said they got information from TV and social media, yet most information was not accessible. Participants from Kiribati shared that a lot of information is only available in English, and other participants raised that information was not shared in child friendly formats, making it difficult to understand specialized terminology. One deaf participant shared:

“There is a lot of information on websites, but it is not easy to access by Deaf people. Luckily for me I can read, and my literacy is OK, but for Deaf people who cannot read, it is hard to access information on websites as it is not translated into sign language.”

Another deaf participant added that the lack of information in sign language and child friendly mode contributes to a lag in understanding and generates exclusion and often makes young people feel depressed and left out. Eve a Deaf participant from Fiji highlighted that,

“A lot of youth are at a loss because we don’t get that information, we’re not educated about it, on how to make adaptions in our lives. Youth are often left out and left behind.”

Participants noted that on TV and the radio, information is shared about climate change and emergencies, but it is not fully accessible for those who do not see nor those who do not hear. A participant with low vision said:

“Most information I got on climate change was not in school but on TV, radio and social media. However, some of the practical information is visual and I cannot access it.”

A participant from Papua New Guinea shared that children and young people with disabilities needed capacity building around climate change issues so they can be prepared and take part like everyone else in climate action.

*Consultations*

“We are all human beings and we should be equal so therefore our voices must be heard. We are made more vulnerable and have greater need for services.”

Concerning involving children and youth with disabilities in government and community-led consultations, most participants had not been invited to any consultations on climate change or the environment. Those that had been involved raised that information and communications were only available in English, making it hard to follow for those whose mother tongue was another language. Some participants from Fiji said they had been involved but the consultations were not accessible nor child friendly. Some other participants from Fiji had participated in consultations through invitations from the National Youth Council. Taimane from Samoa shared that;

“Sometimes when there is a workshop by an organization working on climate change, they do not invite us, they think it is too much hassle, it takes too much effort to organise reasonable accommodation for us to participate and it expends a lot of resources and money. That’s why they invite one person to tick the box.”

Another participant reiterated that,

“There is not enough resources to fund the participation of children and youth with disabilities nor reasonable accommodation. They [the government] think lightly about inviting persons with disabilities, they think that when there is a drill or simulation, persons with disabilities will not be able to participate. The government does not understand what we need. The government does not understand the services we need.”

1. **Recommendations**

“A standalone paragraph in the General Comment will support and generate debate and evidence of the difficulties faced by children and young persons with disabilities in the context of climate change.” – participant from Samoa

“We do believe in disability community that there should be a paragraph dedicated to the rights of children with disabilities, in order to protect us, respect us and to have access to the same information and services from our society, community and local government in the face of climate change.” – participant from Tonga

On behalf of children and young people with disabilities in the Pacific, we would like to make the following proposals to the CRC Committee for the text of the General Comment:

1. **Add a new paragraph dedicated to children with disabilities in the General Comment.**

In the same vein as part F, paragraph 49 of the current draft text dedicated to Indigenous children, the General Comment should entail a stand-alone paragraph on children with disabilities as they are disproportionately affected by climate change. All participants agreed that having a specific paragraph on children with disabilities will elevate their concerns among governments and other stakeholders working on climate action. This paragraph should highlight the specific impact on children and youth with disabilities including the barriers they face in accessing information and education, support in preparedness and response, need for provision of accessible services for evacuation, shelter, food, water, security and protection from violence, and ensuring their participation in consultations, decision-making and designing preparedness and response plans, including by data collection and disaggregation by disability.

1. **Recognise how age, gender, disability, indigenous membership, and other layers of identity intersect to compound barriers and challenges in the face of climate change through carrying out child rights impact assessments (inclusive of gender, disability, and other grounds and their intersections) on climate change, environmental and disaster risk policies, plans and protocols.**
2. **Ensure disability-inclusive climate mitigation and adaptation efforts by:**
   1. Strengthening the adaptive capacity and resilience of children and young people with disabilities and their families through investing in green and accessible infrastructure and services;
   2. Providing disability-inclusive social protection and supports to guard against loss of income and livelihood;
   3. Ensuring that the transition to low carbon economies is disability-inclusive.
3. **Promote education, information, awareness-raising and capacity building of children and young people with disabilities on climate change**
   1. Ensure that climate change education is embedded into all core curricula across all schools and that classes and learning materials are accessible to children with disabilities in all their diversity, and that this also includes information on the effects of climate change on persons with disabilities.
   2. Conduct awareness-raising campaigns and disseminate information and materials on climate change and the environment, including the impact on children and youth with disabilities. Ensure that campaigns, information and communications are accessible including through the provision of sign language interpretation, alternative and augmentative communications, easy read documentation, Braille, translation into local languages and child friendly formats.
   3. Call on governments to conduct active outreach and consultations with children and young people with disabilities on climate change and the environment, including through collaborations and partnerships with organisations of persons with disabilities, providing accessible venues, transportation, communications, information and the provision of reasonable accommodation to ensure their participation on an equal basis with other children and young people.
4. **Ensure accountability for the rights of children with disabilities**
   1. Strengthen research, data collection and disaggregation by age, sex, disability, geographical region, among others, to better track the impact of climate change and disaster on children and young people with disabilities, and ensure that data and research are available and accessible by all.
   2. Ensure targeted action by the State, the private sector, development actors, environmental actors and humanitarian responders through the adoption of impact assessments, indicators and targets inclusive of children and young people with disabilities.

1. <https://beta.nsf.gov/science-matters/pacific-islands-front-line-battle-against-climate> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Human Rights Council, Analytical study on the promotion and protection of the rights of persons with disabilities in the context of climate change, Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, A/HRC/44/30, 22 April 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mann, M., McMillan, J. E., Silver, E. J., & Stein, R. E. K. (2021). Children and Adolescents with Disabilities and Exposure to Disasters, Terrorism, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Scoping Review. *Current psychiatry reports*, *23*(12), 80. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-021-01295-z>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. UNICEF, Fact Sheet Children with Disabilities, August 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)