

Transcript of audio report

Conversation with Vladimir Cuk, executive director of the International Disability Alliance, and Dom Haslam, deputy chief executive of Sightsavers

Acronyms used in this recording

CRPD – Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

BRAC – international development organisation based in Bangladesh

DFID – Department for International Development

GLAD – Global Action on Disability network

IDA – International Disability Alliance

MDG – Millennium Development Goals

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

OPD or DPO – organisation of people/persons with disabilities

[Introductory male voice] Hi, and thanks for tuning in. You're listening to an Inclusive Futures audio report, brought to you by our global reporter Kim Middleton.

[Kim Middleton] Hello, and welcome to this Inclusive Futures audio report, where I have honest conversations about the successes and the challenges of disability inclusion projects. Today I'm joined by Vladimir Cuk, the executive director of the International Disability Alliance, and Dom Haslam, the deputy chief executive of international development organisation, Sightsavers.

Hi to you both and thank you for joining me today.

[Dom Haslam] Hi, Kimberly.

[Vladimir Cuk] Hello, Kimberly.

[Kim] So Inclusive Futures is a flagship disability inclusion program. It's bringing together 16 organisations, it's funded by UK aid and it is testing and delivering innovations for people with disabilities in education, healthcare, livelihoods and also tackling stigma and discrimination.

But seven years ago, it was just an aspiration that you both held. Can you take me back to that time – what was your idea? What was the problem that you'd identified that you wanted to solve?

[Dom] So I think we were coming into, and then coming out of the discussions around the Sustainable Development Goals, and Sightsavers worked very closely with IDA on trying to make those goals more inclusive than their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals, and I think had quite a lot of success with that. I think one of the things when Vladimir and I were talking about it was about, okay, well, if we're successful in this, then resources will come out from the other side. So governments will start to prioritise, people will start to want to see inclusive development in action. What do we want to do about it?

I think from the very early days, Vlad, you and I talked about Sightsavers and IDA forging a partnership to work together on the implementation of these promises that then came out for the SDGs, the promises to leave no one behind. I think there was a really clear sense, certainly in my view, that I really wanted IDA to be at the heart of anything that we chose to do around that programme implementation, because it's something where there'd perhaps in the past been a bit of a divide between the role of organisations of persons with disabilities and the role of NGOs.

I think we saw this as a real opportunity to bring those two groups of organisations together and work together on finding the solutions to the challenges of leaving no one behind. But what's your view on that, Vlad?

[Vladimir] Indeed, I remember very well, my first meeting with Dom it was in New York, before 2015. It must have been 2013 or '14. From that moment on, we started thinking about how we can collaborate to really make CRPD implementation operationalised. How can we make all stakeholders start taking CRPD implementation seriously? Because what we saw is that really there is a lot of political commitments, a lot of nice words everywhere, nice pictures taken [laughs] but not really real work, and that is where we found need to join forces between IDA and Sightsavers, and then there was indeed SDGs that gave us a framework for collaboration, and we recognised that we need to do something. Then we were lucky to have a leadership from DFID side back then, UK DFID, that was very committed to promote disability inclusive development. So, I think that everything somehow came together and resulted in this programme.

[Kim] Vlad, you touched there on the CRPD. Could you give me a brief overview, if that's possible, about what the CRPD is? And its role in terms of international development?

[Vladimir] Yeah, very simple. CRPD is the last human rights treaty. It is the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which defines the roadmap for governments how to implement the rights of persons with disabilities. It involved all rights and all people with disabilities. Link between CRPD and SDG or simply international development is simple. We can use CRPD to describe how we can implement certain Sustainable Development Goals. So we should be using CRPD, and maybe general comments because general comments of the CRPD committee further go into the details on how we should implement certain articles of CRPD. So, I will say, CRPD article plus general comment, always in combination, in tandem would provide beginning of information, or let's say, enough information if somebody is willing to implement, yes. Dom, do you have something to say? [laughs]

[Dom] I always agree with everything you say on the CRPD, Vlad. [laughs] Just building on that, I think that has been one of the really interesting parts of this programme.

So you have the MDGs and the SDGs for NGOs, and you have the human rights treaties for human rights bodies and for representative organisations like OPDs. So for me, bringing those two things together created a real dynamic for the conversations that we had and it's a difficult thing to do, to implement human rights-based approaches to development. Organisations have been talking about it for a long time.

It's challenging as well though because we use different language as a starting point. Vladimir will talk about articles and I'll talk about outcomes and objectives, and so even there you have a really straightforward kind of language exchange, and we need to understand

that and unpack that. What does that mean and how do we go about doing that? That's been a fascinating part of the process for me.

[Vladimir] Indeed, I think what is unique about this programme is that we came together different organisations, and to slowly move away from business as usual. Through trying to define what does it mean, inclusive programming? What does it mean, including CRPD into development? What does it mean in combining DPOs and the development stakeholders? What does it mean? By doing all of that, that became the goal in itself. And this is the first time that this is happening, or at least first time it is happening at such a scale and in such organised, structured way. In a structured way that we'll provide with the learning from it, and that is the best part out of it.

[Kim] Can I go back to the divide which you said that you'd identified between Organisations of People with Disabilities and the NGOs and the work that they're doing. How is this programme working differently with people with disabilities?

[Dom] I think an interesting starting point for me is two words that I don't think I've ever repeated two words as much in any one programme in the 25 years I've been working in development. And that's, "meaningful," and "participation." I think those two words are really at the heart of it.

So if you'd asked me seven years ago what we needed to do for Sightsavers in a disability focused programme, in order to make sure that we were taking people's views into account I would say, "Okay, let's make sure that we go through normal community participation processes, at the beginning of the programme. And then maybe halfway through maybe we'll go back and check in and see if things are working the way they should, and then maybe at the end of the programme." I'm not saying that's all we would do, but that would be seen as being a reasonable framework.

The conversations that have happened over the last two, three years around meaningful participation in this programme have taken us into an entirely different place. Issues around governance, issues around payment of people with disabilities, for the time that they provide to a programme and a project, so not assuming that people should give it free because they'll benefit from it, but actually saying, "This is your expertise, there's a value to that expertise." It's really embedding it all the way through, and that involves a constant conversation and constantly checking in, and people getting irritated and annoyed with each other at points about not feeling that they've been included sufficiently. Or people feeling, "Well, do you really need to be included in that? And if you're included in that, it's going to slow us down and we've got to get out there and do some things, because that's what development NGOs do, we do stuff." So, that one strand if you like, it's only an indication of the complexity of it, but I think it's a really important strand and that's been something that we'll continue to come back to. We haven't got the answer right yet, but I think we are definitely learning.

[Vladimir] Yes, I would say that this was indeed one of the biggest changes that this programme provided and the biggest successes, that indeed DPOs were recognised as meaningful partners in different activities, and they were paid for. So their budget allocation, this is what we insisted all of us, Sightsavers and IDA, as a government structure. When you look like Dom said, if you started from the governance of the programme, there is IDA and Sightsavers. Then you look at the implementation, you have [a] recognised role of DPOs,

and also there is a reporting line on reasonable accommodation. Just if we achieve that little thing in this grant, it is something. It is a big success.

[Kim] If someone asked you, "Why should I care about Inclusive Futures? What makes it different? Why is your programme more special or unique than another programme?" What is it? What's at the crux of it that you think people should really care about?

[Dom] So, for me I think there are two things about it. Possibly three. So the first one is what we've just been talking about, which is about having IDA involved at the governance level and having meaningful participation of DPOs or OPDs throughout the programme. I think that's really different to what a lot of other similar initiatives are doing, and I think that's really critical, and the fact that it was right from the very conceptual stage, before the money even existed, we talked about this programme before there was any money, and that's really unusual.

The second thing for me is the consortium, the nature of the consortium. We've talked a lot about IDA and Sightsavers, but there are nearly 20 organisations involved as consortium members across the programme, and it's such a wide range of consortium members as well. You have academic institutions, you have NGOs which are both mainstream NGOs and disability focused NGOs, you have DPOs as we've been talking about, but within that range of NGOs, you have specialists on communications, specialists on the hotel sector, and specialists in general development activity. That's really crucial, because if we can get those organisations to do things differently, we're already achieving scale up within the program. Because some of those organisations are enormous. BRAC is bigger than Sightsavers. So if we can get BRAC to do things differently across its programme and to be more inclusive across its programme, that's a significant shift in all of the development work that BRAC does.

I think that's really critical, and that's maybe a bit of the third one for me, which is the scale of it. I know there's been some Norwegian government funding announced recently which is great, but until then this was probably, if not the, certainly one of the biggest disability focused development programs in the world, in history. And it's only £30 million, or £40 million if you add the two programs together. That's not an awful lot of money once you start splitting it up amongst six, seven countries, 20 organisations and so on.

But even that gives you a sense of; there's more resources that are needed for this area of work, and once we have the learning that we're generating in this, I think there's an awful lot more that we can do. This programme should be running for 10 years.

[Vladimir] I agree with this. Yeah, it is the first, it was unique, it is unique. When we started indeed, through this collective agreement between different organisations that maybe never worked with people with disabilities, we had to make this collective agreement. They did not have to accept all of that, it was a general agreement that we need to do now disability inclusive programming. We had to define what it means. It was not easy, first couple of months, first year, I think it was a little bit challenging because it was a bumpy road, let's say. But now we established certain procedures, we put certain systems in place, and the people now know what they need to do. At the end of the day, a commitment that we took was collective, but responsibility lies within the individual members, how they will implement. I think that there will be a lot of learning out of this.

[Dom] You were a lot more diplomatic as always, Vlad, than I would have been about that first year. I think that's really important, that we recognise that as well. If nobody was doing anything different after this programme than what they were doing at the beginning, then we've failed. We've all failed. But I'm really hopeful because I think people have seen the benefits of working in this way.

[Vladimir] What is important also, that we are building capacity, so for organisations on both sides, on DPO side, especially, IDA definitely, but also at a national level. In Africa and elsewhere we are seeing that there are DPOs at a national level that are being recognised as national lead.

These are capacities that are now created for good, you cannot take this back. These are capacities also that are ready to work with any of the partners that are in the consortium, on any other possible funding or programme. Also, I believe that through this joint commitment from all members of consortium, we build also internal capacities that cannot be changed back.

I think that there is a lot of change that will be there.

[Kim] With a programme this innovative and complex inevitably you're going to have some challenges. What would you say the main ones have been?

[Dom] Maybe I'll kick off with one, so let's take the COVID pandemic. What the outbreak of the pandemic did was to force an entire rethink over all of our plans, all of our activities, all of the partnerships and what we were trying to do during the year. Of course, that came alongside a reduction in budget allocation for the year in both programmes.

But for me, what was brilliant, going back to what Vladimir said earlier about the difficulties and the difficult conversations that we needed to have in the first months and year or so of the programme, was the ability of the consortium to respond to that as a whole, it was phenomenal. I honestly can't think of it having gone any better, and what I mean by that is both that the relationships and the way that organisations approached the problem, and also what came out from the other side.

So we have some great examples of responses that we've had as a consortium to the COVID pandemic, but also we were able to have those conversations in a way which was constructive, which was ... yeah, respectful I think is probably the right way of putting it, but that was only possible because of the foundations that we'd built by having those tough conversations and the difficult bits at the beginning of the consortium.

So yeah, my view is if as a consortium you can survive budget cuts and a global pandemic and come out the other side in good shape, there's nothing you can't do, to be honest. So I was really, really heartened by that.

[Vladimir] I will just add on the COVID challenge that was, I feel that disability rights were going up and up from strength to strength over the last five years, let's say, six years, seven years, really it was spectacular to see. Every year brought significant new developments, and we were like celebrating and it was really going well. Then you saw in the first two weeks of pandemic, that disability discrimination is so much alive, and well, and kicking that people with disabilities were denied access to hospital, they were denied treatment because their lives were deemed less valuable, and so they were left to die.

There was absolutely everything was forgotten, and everything that we achieved, we, as a world, achieved over the last seven years. What does it tell us? Is that successes that were made over seven years are very fragile, they are very fragile and so even if we are

celebrating this project and this programme, Inclusive Futures, that is £40 some million, it's very small. We need much, much more to be done in this regard, so that the change is real. Now, that was really very harsh wake-up call and very harsh reminder that we have a long way to go, a long way to go.

Challenges beyond COVID, I would say that what we noticed is that by some partners, that the CRPD has been seen as something very dogmatic, there was not really true understanding, people simply wanted, like Dom said, checklists. Not to talk about human rights and conventions, but to talk about concrete implementation. This is my daughter crying.

[Dom] Luna is agreeing with you, Vlad.

[Vladimir] Yes, about challenges. She's good on that. Also, what was interesting, that we also start thinking about power dynamics between OPDs or DPOs, and the mainstream NGOs. I think this is something that is interesting and good conversation to have, and that is one challenge that we'll have for a long time and I think that we need to recognise it and to have it always there in the room and dedicate certain time to that conversation.

[Kim] And what about successes of the programme so far, what are you particularly proud of?

[Dom] I could jump in with one, Vlad. We've talked a lot about relationships and processes and structures and so on, and those are really important because they're about the systemic changes that we want to see. As Vlad's talked about, there's a really key word here of, "systematic." There's a big difference between doing it every so often and doing it right all the time.

But I want to focus on something which is programmatic, because I work for an NGO, that's what floats my boat. But I think some of the innovative work that we're doing, bringing new organisations into thinking about inclusive ways of working and so on are really brilliant, and just one example of that, looking at inclusive value chains.

We're doing that through this partnership with the East Africa Breweries Limited, part of the Diageo Group, we're supporting farmers with disabilities to engage in formally contracted sorghum farming. In October this year, farmers completed their first sorghum harvest which has now been formally weighed, acquired by East Africa Breweries Limited at a high-profile event in early October, so not just doing it but showing it and being proud of that.

I think that kind of thing is phenomenal, because again, it takes us away from this traditional community-based, development type approach from informal livelihoods type approaches and so on. This is talking about something which could fundamentally change the employment sector for a huge range of people in East Africa, and that's the kind of change that we should be looking at. There's an awful lot of other examples like that, but I just think that one for me is all about that kind of innovation and pushing the boundaries and saying, "Well, what really does need to change?" It can't just be about one project here and one intervention there, it has to be about systemic change and that kind of innovative approach for me, that innovative partnership, I think it's a brilliant example of the kind of work that the consortium can do.

[Vladimir] Yeah, I mean we mentioned already successes that this project resulted in, which needs to be really repeated, is that we created the space for organisations or persons with disabilities to engage in this process, and we did it through transparent processes so

basically, establishing a process for inclusion of variety, of organisations. So from national level to local level, and they could apply, they could be selected, et cetera, et cetera, and this is really irreversible, this is when you bring these people together, you'll create something that is there, that you'll create connections, networks, capacities that you cannot take away easily.

That is important, and for me also, the fact that programme established DPO engagement officer for each programme country to further insert connection between organisations and people with disabilities with different activities. That is also capacity that is there now, so I'm very pleased with the successes that this programme created, in terms of creating long lasting change, and the sustainable change. That is important that we lifted that capacity, that we, together, created some mechanisms and on top of that, succeeded to achieve results that Dom spoke about previously. So, I think that the combination of these two should be a model for replication.

[Dom] So I said at the beginning that Vladimir was all about systemic change and I was all about outputs and outcomes, and that's a brilliant example. [laughs]

[Kim] If there had to be a legacy from Inclusive Futures, what would you want it to be? What would you want the one thing to be that in 20 years' time you can say, "That is the legacy from Inclusive Futures?"

[Vladimir] I think the fact that we were the first mover on these levels to introduce CRPD into inclusive development programming, to define inclusive programming. First time at this scale that DPOs came together with international NGOs and were able to both change processes and deliver results.

[Kim] Dom?

[Dom] Yeah, I'd go along with that. I would go further than that as well and say we're no longer talking about inclusive development, because the way that the development is being done is inclusive, in and of itself. So if you like, getting to that point where it's just the way that organisations have to do business. If you call yourself a development NGO, or if you put yourself into a national government with development planning and so on, that you do things in an inclusive way because it's the right thing to do.

Much the same way as we hear about gender, we don't hear so much about gender inclusive development now because it's expected. I'm not saying it's always delivered by any stretch, but it's expected. I think we should be in the same position after that. I'm also planning to be retired by then, so hopefully I'll be watching someone else do the work. [laughs]

[Vladimir] Correct. [laughs]

[Kim] You won't be here either, Vlad, great. [laughs] My final question, I just wondered, professionally if you had [a] particular accomplishment that you were proud of.

[Dom] I honestly think bringing this group of organisations together and getting them functioning in the way that we've talked about over this, has to be one of my career highlights. To sit there seven years ago and say, "This is something we must do." It's easy to do that, but honestly, having seen how we weathered the storm of COVID, I know it's not

over yet by any stretch, but certainly the initial impacts of that means that we've put together something which is robust and that I very much hope, lasting. I think that's a brilliant achievement, and I'm not taking that as a personal achievement, but it's one that I have had some contribution to, certainly.

[Vladimir] Yeah, it's hard for Dom and I to speak about personal achievements because we see it as we are part of a bigger picture, of a bigger organisation, we are also part of the movement. I'm always feeling very uncomfortable to speak about my personal achievements. Not that I'm modest, I'm not but I just believe that I'm part of something bigger. But if I would to select something and I would select something that the other people told me, that it was my contribution to GLAD network formulation the conceptualisation of the GLAD donor network, to this day. Global Disability Summit contribution that I made, those two maybe.

If I can select one moment in time, it was the moment that I entered into the room in which Global Disability Summit is about to begin, in next couple of minutes and I felt literal chills from that room, and really understanding that this is something big. Because that was really a moment in which you have to stop doubting that your work is not important or anything like that, but this is a moment in which you really have to realise that something big is happening, that change is happening and that there are so many people that are there because you, in some small way, contributed to it.

[Introductory male voice] If you'd like to hear more, why not visit www.inclusivefutures.org