

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE for Persons with Disabilities

Swisscontact in collaboration with The Daily Star organised a roundtable titled 'Equity in ICT: Inclusive Training Pathways for Persons with Disabilities' on December 4, 2024. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



Nadia Afrin Shams,
Team Leader,
Swisscontact

The Building Youth Employability through Skills (BYETS) project is a skill development initiative targeting three key sectors: ICT, RMG, and agro-processing. Spanning 12 districts across 4 divisions, the project aims to provide vocational training to 25,000 youths by 2026.

December 3 marks the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, a day observed globally for over three decades to celebrate the abilities of people with disabilities. It serves as an opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and to address the barriers they encounter in our society. While significant progress has been made, there remains a considerable journey ahead, with substantial ground still to cover.

As implementers, our decision to organise this roundtable stems from a shared understanding: any development project that fails to uphold the principles of inclusion will inevitably struggle to achieve its objectives. From its inception, the BYETS project has prioritised addressing various dimensions of inclusion. ICT was identified as a crucial focus area, given its potential to act as a catalyst for individuals with mobility restrictions, enabling them to work as freelancers and earn a livelihood from their homes.

Initially, we faced challenges at every stage, from identifying suitable partners and addressing infrastructure and capacity gaps to finding qualified trainers and reaching target groups. Ensuring regular attendance in training programmes for individuals with mobility challenges was particularly problematic.

To address these challenges, we partnered with the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP). Together, we designed a pilot project targeting at least 20 people with disabilities. However, due to capacity limitations at CRP's lab, we could only accommodate 10 participants at a time.

As the project progressed, feedback revealed that the existing curriculum lacked full inclusivity, indicating areas for improvement. In response, we collaborated with ICT Industry Skills Council under NSDA to refine the curriculum. Each step of the journey brought new challenges. Furthermore, training alone is insufficient. Aspiring freelancers need access to essential tools such as computers, which many participants cannot afford. This presents yet another obstacle that must be addressed.

Our current focus is specifically on inclusion for individuals with mobility disabilities. However, inclusion is a much broader issue that encompasses many other aspects.

Through our experiences, we have realised that this journey cannot be undertaken by a single organisation, individual, or project alone. It requires collaboration. With this in mind, we have identified organisations working on similar initiatives and recognised the importance of engaging with them.



Prof. Dr. Mohammad Sohrab Hossain,
Executive Director,
Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed (CRP)

Equity is crucial in every sector as we strive to build a more equitable Bangladesh. However, the disability sector remains particularly challenging and has not progressed as it should, especially in terms of creating a skilled workforce through collaborative approaches. Advancing this sector will be difficult without collective initiatives.

The BYETS project, initiated by Swisscontact in collaboration with CRP, marks a promising milestone, signalling the beginning of a journey with aspirations for meaningful outcomes.

At CRP, we rehabilitate approximately 1 lakh individuals annually, confronting numerous challenges. Health, rehabilitation, and education must be integrated as core pillars of equal rights for people with disabilities (PWD). However, when it comes to building a skilled workforce among PWD, we often struggle to find



candidates who meet eligibility and compatibility criteria. Moreover, those who complete training frequently lose interest if they fail to secure suitable employment opportunities.

In our vocational training programmes, 50-60% of participants successfully secure jobs or become entrepreneurs, while the remainder do not. To address this, post-training initiatives must focus on sustainability by developing facilities, providing devices, offering logistical support, and ensuring continuous encouragement.

Recent research by CRP has highlighted that even when individuals with disabilities receive health and rehabilitation support along with skill development training, many still struggle to find employment. Technological barriers further exacerbate this challenge. For example, a quadriplegic person with a spinal cord injury requires different training from someone whose spinal cord injury affects only their lower body. Their capabilities, activities, and daily living needs vary significantly.

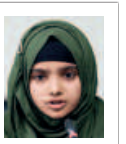
Research also suggests that when direct training cannot be provided to a person with a disability, training their caregiver can be an effective alternative. We have implemented similar training models in ICT, prioritising PWD while considering this alternative approach.



Riduan Rahman,
Trainee, Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed (CRP)

I am currently participating in a five-month training programme at CRP titled MS Office and Digital Marketing. The programme includes residential facilities that provide accommodation and meals for trainees. During the initial two months, we focused on mastering MS Office applications, such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, which are indispensable for any professional role. The subsequent months have been dedicated to digital marketing, encompassing tools such as SEO, social media marketing, SMS, and email marketing. These skills align with current job market trends while also opening opportunities for freelancing, an especially viable avenue for individuals with disabilities.

While these training initiatives are empowering, significant challenges persist. Many skilled individuals with disabilities, including graduates from previous cohorts, struggle to secure employment due to inaccessible workplaces, such as buildings that lack wheelchair-friendly designs. Moreover, although CRP provides devices during the training period, access to such essential resources post-training is often unaffordable, limiting progress in freelancing and IT-related work. CRP's inclusive training model is commendable; however, trainees coming from rural area still struggles. Expanding such initiatives with inclusive residential facilities is crucial.



Mahinur Akhtar Maisha,
Trainee,
Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed

Despite my disability, I have gained substantial knowledge and skills since joining CRP. However, increasing CRP's capacity through enhanced funding could enable more individuals like me to benefit from its comprehensive training programmes, which include residential and meal coverage.

After completing the course, establishing oneself in a specialised field such as digital marketing necessitates sustained effort over four to six months. During this

critical period, financial support is indispensable but currently unavailable. Additionally, many workplaces remain inaccessible to individuals with disabilities, further limiting employment opportunities.



Birendra Nath Adhikary,
CEO, ICT
Industry Skills Council
(ISC)

Formal skill development initiatives in Bangladesh began in 2011 with the launch of the National Skills Development Policy (NSDP), which led to the establishment of the National Skills Development Council and, subsequently, the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) in 2018. The NSDP was revised in 2022, introducing 15 sector-specific Industry Skills Councils (ISCs).

The policy emphasises training marginalised populations, including persons with disabilities, to transform them into a skilled workforce. However, addressing high dropout rates and unemployment requires collaborative efforts across sectors. Expanding resources and facilities, such as those at CRP, is critical for scaling such initiatives.

The ICTISC, in partnership with the NSDA, plays a pivotal role in advancing skills development. Its efforts include creating competency standards, developing competency-based curricula and learning materials, and ensuring the proper registration and operation of training centres.



Aziza Ahmed,
Head of Operations,
Bangladesh Business
& Disability Network
(BBDN)

BBDN aims to integrate persons with disabilities into mainstream income-generating jobs by bridging the gap between their skills and available job opportunities. Through partnerships like our MoU with BASIS, we regularly organise job fairs and receive vacancy announcements. However, a major challenge remains: the disconnect between ICT sector job opportunities and the preparedness of disabled candidates with market-relevant skills.

Currently, two types of institutions focus on skills development for disabled individuals: disability-specific centres like CRP, which offer basic training, and mainstream centres that provide market-driven training in areas such as graphic design and network analysis. Unfortunately, many disability-focused centres do not align with market needs, limiting their impact.

To address this, disability-focused centres must collaborate with mainstream institutions to offer inclusive classrooms with mid-to-advanced-level, market-aligned skills. Training should go beyond entry-level competencies to empower disabled individuals for freelancing or IT careers. Expanding training capacity, improving accessibility, and fostering collaborations with freelancers and market-driven programmes are key steps to enabling disabled persons to succeed in competitive IT professions.

It is also vital to ensure proper accessibility to training centres. Despite our MOU with BASIS, we've encountered challenges with the BASIS Institute of Technology & Management (BITM), where trainees often face accommodation issues.



Vashkar Bhattacharjee,
National Consultant -
Accessibility, A2i

As a person with a disability, I owe my current privileges to assistive technology, particularly talking software. Laptops and

smartphones have radically transformed my life, highlighting the critical importance of digital inclusion. Recently, I participated in over ten national and international webinars, demonstrating the power of these technologies.

At A2i, our focus is on blended learning, with an emphasis on e-learning. We have developed Muktopaath, a platform specifically for differently-abled citizens. A2i is dedicated to promoting digital inclusion, digital literacy, and accessibility training.

While I have access to global news like BBC and The New York Times, such opportunities are rare in Bangladesh. It is crucial that assistive technologies, such as screen magnifiers, AI tools, and screen reading software, are universally available, regardless of socio-economic background.



Ruhi Murshid Ahmed,
Advisor,
Bangladesh Steel
Rolling Mills Limited
(BSRM)

People with disabilities must be integrated into the broader workforce. To facilitate this, labour laws need to be updated to ensure priority access to government offices and services. I would also humbly suggest that The Daily Star feature the remarkable achievements of differently-abled citizens on a monthly basis, as part of a national motivational initiative.

The Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP) regularly offers skill development programmes. However, what often goes unaddressed is the crucial question: What happens after individuals acquire these advanced skills? The focus should not merely be on imparting skills but also on creating opportunities for their real-world application and employment.



Shamsin Ahmed,
Founder and CEO,
Identity Inclusion

When discussing the empowerment of differently-abled individuals, it is essential to consider the classical economic principle of supply and demand. Currently, there exists a significant mismatch between the number of trained differently-abled individuals and their employability.

Recently, we conducted a project with Swisscontact, which revealed the poor rate of financial inclusion for differently-abled individuals. While agent banking has helped address this to some extent, it remains inadequate. Moreover, ATMs are not designed with the needs of differently-abled users in mind.



Asif Siddique Tarafder,
Senior
Specialist, BRAC,
Skills Development
Programme

As a person with a disability, I am actively engaged in empowering differently-abled individuals at BRAC by equipping them with market-relevant skills. Our approach includes technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial training. Through our nationwide ICT programme, facilitated by 15 centres, we consistently focus on building competencies, ensuring accessibility, and creating employment opportunities for differently-abled individuals.



Shararat Islam,
Communications
Analyst, UN Women

I want to emphasise intersectionality, as women with disabilities face compounded

challenges linked to caste, class, race, and ethnicity. In a recent project with the ILO and seven OPDs (Organisations of Persons with Disabilities), we identified significant policy gaps and a lack of awareness, echoing concerns raised by others.

While laws like The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act exist, their implementation remains insufficient. Access to resources and knowledge continues to be a major barrier, especially for women with disabilities.

There is a pressing need to raise awareness about the abilities of persons with disabilities and how

To further enhance participation, waiving NSDA assessment fees for persons with disabilities would encourage greater involvement in evaluations conducted by training providers.



Fahim Mashroor,
CEO and Co-founder,
Bdjobs.com

Physical disability poses significant challenges in the ICT sector, requiring

tailored accommodations. Flexible options, such as e-learning, empower individuals to pursue training without mobility barriers. Hybrid work models

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Collaboration among stakeholders, including expertise and financial resources, is essential to achieving a greater impact in addressing the needs of persons with disabilities.
- » To tackle mobility-related challenges, in-house facilities, accessible accommodations, and disability-friendly transport must be established and incorporated into training programmes.
- » To ensure sustainability, post-training initiatives should focus on providing critical resources such as device accessibility, logistical support, and consistent encouragement.
- » The job sector must embrace inclusive workspaces to create equal employment opportunities for skilled and competent individuals with disabilities.
- » Collaboration between disability-focused and mainstream training centres is imperative to expand capacity and deliver market-driven training.
- » Training centres should be made more accessible to a diverse population of disabled individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.
- » Development projects and initiatives supporting persons with disabilities must prioritise their voices, choices, and agency at every stage of planning and implementation.
- » All governmental and private sector initiatives must ensure adequate representation from the community of persons with disabilities.
- » Banks and private sector can take special initiative as part of their CSR to provide easy EMI based loan or other provisions so ICT devices are readily available to PWD.
- » Providing access to personal computers, internet packages, and reliable connectivity is crucial for individuals with disabilities, particularly when required for training and skill development.
- » Comprehensive data on the July protests must be collected and analysed to facilitate effective rehabilitation and support measures.
- » Make the tax rebate policy more effective and appealing to better incentivize employers to hire individuals with disabilities.

to collaborate effectively with them. Unfortunately, education systems and cultural practices often perpetuate misconceptions.

The diverse nature of disabilities—spanning at least 12 types—often goes unacknowledged.



Hari Pada Das,
TVET Institutional
Strengthening Expert,
European Union

Our collaboration with the European Union focuses on a government budget support programme for mainstream education, which includes both government institutions and private TVET facilities. As part of this initiative, two sub-indicators were introduced to promote disability inclusion. These indicators aim to encourage the government to improve accessibility, upgrade physical infrastructure in public institutions, and train teachers to better support students with special needs. Unfortunately, progress in these areas has been limited.

The high cost of assistive devices remains a major barrier. Instead of relying solely on donations, these devices could be provided through mortgage schemes or bilateral agreements.

One of CRP's core areas of expertise is training individuals with spinal cord injuries, who are wheelchair users and face significant accessibility barriers when seeking employment. Digital marketing training offers these individuals a viable pathway to work remotely from the comfort of their homes.



Md. Mahbubul Islam,
Principal, CRP MM
Vocational Training
Institute

A significant challenge lies in encouraging women with disabilities

to step out of their homes. Our centres in Manikganj and Gonakbari are dedicated to addressing this issue. At Gonakbari, we operate a facility capable of training 40 girls, generously supported by Marks & Spencer since 2006. Despite this, many women remain hesitant to attend. In Manikganj, our centre accommodates 30 trainees, but limited residential facilities currently restrict housing to just 10 girls. To address this, plans are in place to construct an additional floor to expand capacity.

One of CRP's core areas of expertise is training individuals with spinal cord injuries, who are wheelchair users and face significant accessibility barriers when seeking employment. Digital marketing training offers these individuals a viable pathway to work remotely from the comfort of their homes.

should be selectively implemented, allowing persons with disabilities to choose what suits them best.

Bangladesh's ICT training landscape already includes noteworthy efforts from organisations like Programming Hero and Ostad, offering affordable online programmes. However, widespread lack of access to computers, smartphones, and affordable internet hinders progress. Around 80-90% of households lack computers, and 50-60% do not own smartphones, while high internet costs exacerbate the digital divide. To bridge this gap, donor agencies and policymakers must align support with these pressing needs.

Loan-based systems, offering repayment plans over three to five years, could enable individuals to acquire essential devices and connectivity. Existing policies, such as mandatory in-person assessments by the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA), must be revised to accommodate non-mobile participants in e-learning initiatives.

To tackle high unemployment rates among graduates, particularly those with disabilities, entrepreneurship should be actively promoted. A reliable database of disabled individuals, including July protest survivors, is crucial for connecting them with employers.



Tanjim Ferdous,
In-Charge, NGOs &
Foreign Missions,
Business Development
Section, The Daily Star,
& Moderator

Today's discussion underscores the need to address barriers to skill development, expand work opportunities, and prioritise inclusive approaches across training initiatives, infrastructure development, policy execution, and public-private partnerships.

The discussion also emphasises that the tax rebate policy should be more practical, incentivizing employers to hire people with disabilities and benefit from the rebate. However, the existing rebate structure is not encouraging employers to adopt it and employ people with disabilities. According to the current tax rebate policy, if any employer hires 10% or more than 25 individuals from the physically challenged or third-gender community, the employer is entitled to a rebate of 75% of the salary paid to these individuals or 5% of the tax payable, whichever is lower.