



OPD engagement in inclusive micro-enterprise programmes: Lessons from the TO50 Inclusive Business Initiative in Kenya

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Context

Persons with disabilities make up over 1.3 billion people worldwide, with approximately 80% of them residing in the Global South (World Health Organization, 2022). In Kenya, the 2019 Census reveals that 2.2% of the population, or 0.9 million people, have some form of a disability with the prevalence being higher in women (2.5%) compared to men (1.9%). Additionally, the disabilities are more common in rural areas, where 2.6% (0.7 million) are affected, compared to 1.4% (0.2 million) in urban areas (Ministry of Public Service, Gender, Senior Citizen Affairs and Special Programmes, 2021). Persons with disabilities are a heterogeneous population, with multiple intersecting identities based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, culture, religion, migration status, and socioeconomic background. Due to deep-rooted stereotypes, prejudice, social attitudes among other factors, persons with disabilities continue to face barriers in their participation as equal members of society and are often excluded from decision-making processes on issues that impact them. Their exclusion weakens the design and implementation of policies and programmes meant to address barriers to inclusion. As a result, inclusive development efforts often fall short and may perpetuate existing attitudes and stigma towards persons with disabilities.

The full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in the society on an equal basis with others is recognised as a general principle under Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (General comment No. 7, 2018). Article 4.3 of the CRPD further obligates States to closely consult and actively involve persons with disabilities through their representative organizations in all decision-making processes.

The CRPD underscores the value of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) as representative organisations. OPDs are formed, led and governed by persons with disabilities. They are primarily established to collectively act, express, promote, and pursue the rights, interests and voices of persons with disabilities (General Comment No. 7, 2018). In line with this Convention, the TO50 Programme has been implementing the OPD engagement programme which aims to enhance the inclusion, representation, and economic empowerment of persons with disabilities by strengthening their participation in policy-making, governance, and development initiatives. TO50 is an Inclusive Business (InBusiness) Initiative, which supports microentrepreneurs (MEs) with disabilities and caregivers in growing and sustaining their businesses. The project is being implemented by four consortium partners working in 13 counties of Kenya. Light for the World is the TO50 Consortium Lead and implementer of the model and works in Meru, Laikipia, Nairobi, Kiambu, Machakos, Homa Bay, Migori, and Kakamega. Humanity & Inclusion (HI) implements the model in a refugee context in Kakuma, Turkana County. Sense International Kenya (SIK) implements the model to persons with complex disabilities. United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK) is the umbrella Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPD), taking lead in the advocacy roles within the consortium. OPD engagement in the project was guided by a plan developed by the consortium partners. The engagement sought to contribute to improved social and economic well-being of persons with disabilities.

This insight brief assesses approaches to OPD engagement that have successfully facilitated business growth for microentrepreneurs with disabilities in Kenya. OPDs are expected to perform various roles including voicing the concerns of persons with disabilities, providing peer support, facilitating access to information services, and providing technical guidance on disability on the rights of persons with disabilities (Cote, 2020). OPDs should be distinguished from organizations “for” persons with disabilities, which provide services and advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities.

The development of the learning brief was based on data from document review of CRPD project reports and case studies, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with government officials and OPD leaders, and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with selected Micro Entrepreneurs (MEs) and OPDs. Additional insights were also received from the quarterly project meeting bringing together consortium partners, OPD leaders and members, micro entrepreneurs and government officials.



This insight brief considers three OPD engagement approaches that have been successful in supporting microentrepreneur programme under the T050 programme. They include; Regional Approach to OPD engagement, Capacity Strengthening of OPDs and; Advocacy. We first discuss the structure of OPDs in Kenya and how OPDs represent their members at different levels. We then present the successes and barriers of the OPD engagement approaches. The brief also provides lessons for strengthening OPD engagement processes and inclusive programming.

OPD Structure in Kenya

A representative and inclusive OPD model is essential for implementing programmes collectively and equitably among persons with disabilities.

United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK) is a network of over 200 OPDs drawn from across the country. To qualify for membership in UDPK, an OPD must be a legally recognized entity representing and advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities. The OPD should be committed to promoting disability inclusion, empowerment, and advocacy. It must adhere to UDPK's core values and objectives, which include advancing disability rights and improving access to services, education, and employment for persons with disabilities. The OPD should demonstrate some organizational capacity. The groups are grassroots networks that draw their memberships from local communities. Each grassroots OPD is organised into larger umbrella networks at the county level (Figure 1).

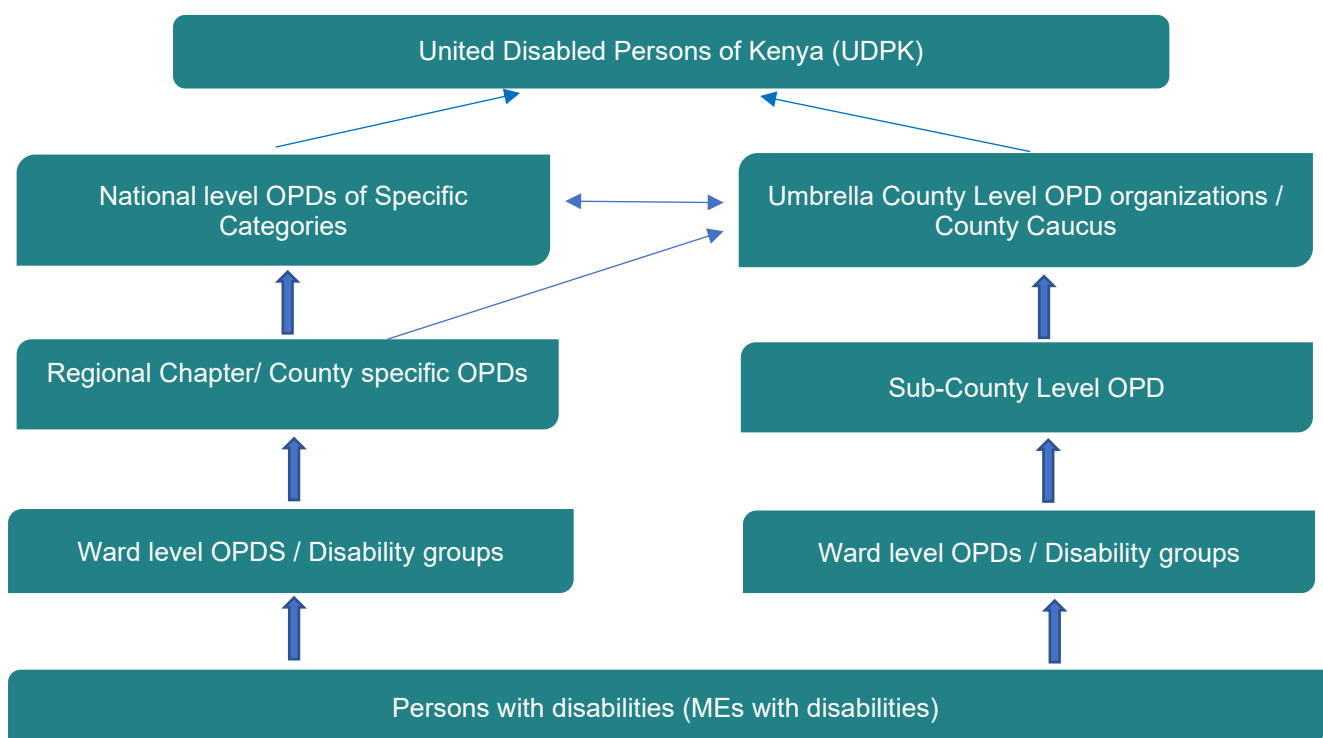


Figure 1: Organizational structure OPDs in Kenya

The OPD organization has two strands. The first strand consists of national level OPDs, representing specific categories of disabilities e.g. Kenya Union for the Blind, Kenyan Paraplegic Organization, Cerebral Palsy Society of Kenya, Kenya National Association of the Deaf, and Albinism Society of Kenya. Other organizations support specific groups or domains such as gender (e.g. Women Challenged to Challenge (WCC) and religion (e.g. Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network). These organizations have regional or county chapters that represent the interests of their members.

The second strand consists of umbrella organizations that bring together different OPDs at the county level, either as a single network or a caucus. A single network brings together all OPDs in the county and represents their interests as one entity. For example, Homa Bay and Migori have a single network that represents all OPDs in the county. These umbrella bodies are often managed by an executive committee and a board composed of members from lower-level OPDs. On the other hand, a caucus brings together different OPDs to jointly address their interests at the county level. A caucus was established in Kakamega and Machakos Counties since the OPDs did not embrace the idea of a single network. The formation of caucus became a cordial way of ensuring joint and united representation at the county. However, in cases where a network and a caucus are both active, potential for rivalry in representation of persons with disabilities is high and could undermine the value of OPDs. Efforts to harmonise and streamline county representation can avert possible competition in representation and advocacy efforts.

In most cases, OPDs also work with organizations “for” persons with disabilities in their programming. Such collaboration is especially effective when organizations “for” persons with disabilities bring valuable local knowledge and experience to the advocacy efforts.

As OPD leaders, we work with all organizations carrying out the interests of persons with disabilities regardless of whether they are OPDs or not. We have learnt a lot from organizations for persons with disabilities and will seek to partner with them as we strengthen our OPDs –
OPD leader, Machakos County

OPDs are organized down to the lowest levels of national and county government administration, and they don't need formal registration to represent their members' interests. Aligning the OPDs with existing administrative units, allows them to more effectively influence service delivery, access to opportunities, and ensure public participation and representation within the existing governance structures. While this structure is designed to promote inclusivity, many OPDs still experience inequitable participation, particularly among youth and women, in both membership and leadership roles. Men often occupy senior positions, such as chairperson or director, while women are typically assigned to less influential roles. However, there are notable exceptions in certain counties, like Kakamega, where women have successfully held top leadership positions, demonstrating that women are equally capable of driving the OPD agenda.

Among OPDs, there is also observed low participation of youth in the OPDs. Most of the youth lack confidence as persons with disabilities and less likely to enrol in these networks. While some counties have active women chapters in OPDs, there is lack of organised youth OPD chapters to address youth-specific issues such as access to education, digital skills and improved self-confidence. Establishing and strengthening youth-focused OPD chapters while ensuring their active participation in decision-making processes within the broader OPD structure is important for inclusion.



Approaches to OPD Engagement with MEs

The T050 programme used three approaches to OPD engagement; Regional Approach, Capacity Strengthening of OPDs and; Advocacy. The approaches are interlinked where the selected regional OPDs are strengthened to support advocacy and business growth of MEs.

Regional Approach

A regional approach ensures that OPDs actively engage with and advocate for microentrepreneurs, ensuring sustainable program impact.

The InBusiness Programme adopted a regional approach to engage MEs, focusing on strengthening county umbrella Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), who, in turn, work to extend the process to lower levels at the sub-county and ward. This approach contrasts with the alternative model, where the programme could work directly with ward-level OPDs to support MEs. The implementation of this approach had two important steps:

The first step was to map out the umbrella OPDs to be engaged by the project in the target counties. UDPK conducted a mapping of potential OPDs to be supported based on specific set of criteria including; whether OPD is organized at county level, led by persons with disabilities and is active and vibrant. Potential OPDs also needed to have at least ten members actively involved in advocacy work, with a diverse membership that included women, men, and youth with disabilities.

These factors ensured that the engagement would be more inclusive and sustainable beyond the life of the project.

UDPK was well-suited for the mapping exercise due to its deep understanding of the OPD context in the target counties and extensive experience working with persons with disabilities. This knowledge was crucial, as OPDs varied significantly in their level of organization, ranging from those with no structure at the county level to well-established networks that required coordination through a caucus. UDPK's familiarity with these dynamics enabled it to effectively navigate and assess the needs of diverse OPDs, making it the ideal organization for this task. While the mapping was largely successful, it was not exhaustive with some grassroots level OPDs being missed out. In the future, continuous financial and technical support is needed to map more OPDs to guarantee broad representation and long-term impact of their work. Without ongoing financial and technical support, mapping more OPDs could face challenges, limiting broad representation and the long-term impact of their work.

The second key step was convening a multi—stakeholder inception meetings bringing together selected OPDs, consortium partners and government officials. The meetings helped clarify the roles between the identified OPDs and the consortium partners, thereby enhancing understanding and commitment between UDPK and the OPDs. This alignment fostered stronger collaboration and a shared sense of purpose. For inclusivity, future meetings would also include officers from the national and county government, particularly the labour and social development officers.

The regional approach has supported the ME programme in two main ways:

Identification and registration, and onboarding of MEs into the Programme: OPDs leverage on their network and information to identify MEs who would benefit from the InBusiness programme with the support from UDPK. UDPK helps to cover expenses including transportation, data collection tools, internet access, and accessibility to accommodations where necessary, to facilitate smooth registration. UDPK also assists in organizing registration drives, networking events, and accessibility support to ensure smooth onboarding of MEs. OPDs also support MEs in counselling to encourage self-acceptance. This is done by approaching the people close to the persons with disabilities. They also support facilitate assessment at the hospitals and at the Educational Assessment Resource Centres (EARCs). In addition, OPDs support registration at the National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD). These activities facilitate acquisition of documents for compliance with InBusiness requirements and inclusion in development programmes.

To bring on board new members, we approach the close relatives/friends, take them for hospital assessment, get the certificate, look for the well-wishers to support in the assistive devices, go for the education assessment in EARC, inquire what they would like to do in terms of business, and support them to start a business – OPD leader, Migori

OPDs play a crucial role in the application process. Most MEs do not have smartphones for application. So, I used my phone to register over 600 persons, and only 20 people got the support in Cohort 2. This time round, Cohort 3 was chosen from the remaining people, and we as the OPDs were involved in the verification process, facilitated by UDPK – OPD leader, Machakos

Provision of accurate and complete Information about the InBusiness programme: OPDs provide MEs with information and requirements of entry into the program, as well as opportunities that can complement the InBusiness project such as public procurement and business grants. OPDs are also a key source of information for the people at the grassroots level through face-to-face interactions, calls and text messages. The information flow begins at the national level with UDPK, which develops policies, advocacy messages and capacity-building initiatives for persons with disabilities. UDPK disseminates this information to county umbrella OPDs through workshops official reports, and digital platforms (websites and social media platforms). At the county level, the umbrella OPDs organize meetings, collaborate with the local county governments, and relay information to the ward-level OPDs, who in turn engage directly with grassroots members through community meetings and tailored SMS updates, to ensure the information reaches individual persons with disabilities at the lowest level possible. In addition, OPD representatives use radio talk shows to discuss disability rights, policies, and opportunities on local stations. This structured communication ensures that information flows effectively from the national level to the grassroots, hence empowering persons with disabilities with relevant business knowledge and resources.

Capacity Strengthening of Regional OPDs

A robust engagement design ensures the OPDs are properly identified, their needs assessed, and their capacity strengthened.

Following selection of regional OPDs, the capacity strengthening approach was based on the plan formulated after a structured organizational capacity needs assessment. This was necessary to ensure that the capacity strengthening processes were not generic but rather aligned with the outstanding needs across OPDs. The assessment was carried out using the Three Circles Tool (ADD International, 2019). The tool assesses how the OPDs are able to discharge their mandates in terms of; organisational systems, ability to deliver activities and, linkages with external organisations to increase the impact of the organisation's work. The assessment led to the development of capacity strengthening plans around governance, financial management, safeguarding and, advocacy among the OPDs.

The curriculum delivery involved workshop training of OPD leaders using adult learning methodologies. OPDs with training have already demonstrated greater independence during advocacy activities, including engaging their respective county governments on issues relating to disability or representation. While most of the participants were satisfied with the content, there was an indication that training days were not sufficient to synthesise the curriculum.

In 2024, nine OPDs networks received training on safeguarding, advocacy, governance and financial management. A total of 159 OPD leaders and members received training with selection achieving near parity between men (78 persons) and women (81 persons). However, at the OPD level, some counties such as Homabay and Migori had more than 65% of participants being men. Conversely, in Nairobi, 68% of the participants were women. These gender inequities stem from election of OPDs with rural counties having more men than women in the leadership committees. In urban counties like Nairobi, there more women involved in the OPD leadership. This suggests the need for inclusive design to ensure men and women participate equitably. In addition, the model can ensure that youth and those with multiple disabilities are not excluded from the training, since most participants were above 35 years. The trainings also need a robust sustainability

mechanism to ensure that MEs who are not part of the OPDs also benefit from these capacity strengthening initiatives.

Scale up and sustainability would require a design that uses Trainer of Trainers (ToT) models, which have been shown to be successful in similar contexts. For instance, CBM Global Disability Inclusion supported a ToT program targeting leaders of disability groups under the Kakamega County Disability Caucus. The trained leaders were equipped with knowledge on leadership and governance, aimed to encourage their members to seek leadership positions and ensure their representation in various committees from the grassroots to the county level. Therefore, OPD leaders can be equipped to deliver similar relevant training at sub-county and ward levels. This can be integrated into their regular meetings, ensuring cost-effectiveness.

To track the impacts of the capacity strengthening plan, a framework for monitoring OPD activities was developed by UDPK. The framework assesses the progress of OPDs following implementation of the capacity strengthening including safeguarding, advocacy and advocacy plan development, finance, governance and organizational planning, gender inclusion, resource mobilization and, fundraising. Before implementation, baseline data and information were collected from each OPD to form a basis of monitoring and evaluation of progress. This plan ensures that the consortium can track the impact of capacity strengthening activities on their mandate. This activity is critical for sustainability. Many OPDs reported that the programs established are highly donor dependent and tend to collapse post-funding. However, having OPD-led business initiatives can help these networks to generate own revenue to support their activities. For example, United Disabled Persons of Laikipia (UDPL) coordinates honey processing, yoghurt making and soap making ventures for the benefit of the network and the members.

Through the capacity strengthening, two achievements have been realised;

Business growth associated with business training, access to business information and business support: The business training and information provided by various organizations complement the InBusiness Programme by equipping MEs with essential skills and knowledge. OPDs have a structured way of providing timely information and collaboratively working with various organizations to offer this training to the members. In Machakos, OPDs are collaborating with financial institutions such as Equity Bank to offer business training to MEs. OPDs also act as referees when it comes to recommendations for jobs or business opportunities to their members. They provide written recommendations to lobby for more opportunities for the MEs, which ensures access to grants, and contracts. OPDs have also supported and encouraged MEs to formalize their operations, which in turn has enabled them access better business opportunities.

My perception and approach of the business has changed from the trainings. I am good at bookkeeping, customers relations, and I have benefitted more from the referrals due to quality services that I offer to my customers. I also learned the importance of time management, cost minimization and value addition in business. Our OPDs have been supported the delivery of these trainings – ME, Kakamega

Access to formal procurement opportunities: OPDs help microenterprises (MEs) navigate and access formal procurement opportunities by emphasizing business compliance. Through training and support, OPDs ensure that MEs meet the necessary legal and regulatory requirements, such

as tax compliance, business registration, and certification, which are prerequisites for participation in formal procurement processes. OPDs also leverage "political goodwill" or "soft power" to secure business opportunities and ensure proper representation for MEs. By using their networks, influence, they help navigate the bureaucratic or societal barriers, hence opening up more opportunities for the MEs. In addition, MEs have been able to attend trade fairs and shows, where they not only showcase their products but also gain insights and learn from other MEs across different regions. This exposure enhances their market visibility, promotes networking, and fosters knowledge-sharing, contributing to access to formal business opportunities.

Advocacy Approach

OPDs employ advocacy to engage government and other stakeholders to promote disability inclusion, accessibility, and economic empowerment.

OPDs engage in advocacy by actively influencing policies, legislation, and public engagement to promote the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. They collaborate with government agencies, civil society, and international partners to push for inclusive policies in education, infrastructure, and employment opportunities. OPDs also conduct awareness campaigns, community engagements, and legal interventions to challenge discrimination faced by persons with disabilities.

OPDs use two broad strategies to advocate for the needs and opportunities for MEs:

A. Fostering systemic changes in access to opportunities

Influencing public and private partnerships (PPPs): OPDs act as liaison between the MEs and public and private organizations, aiding linkages to business opportunities. They play a key role in linking the MEs with services and opportunities provided by other disability stakeholders such as NCPWD registration, tax registration and access to assistive devices. Some of OPDs, sit in public spheres of influence (e.g. Hospital and School Boards of Management), where they can influence and advocate for access to opportunities by MEs. The OPD representatives use "soft power" to ensure MEs get opportunities. Through engagement with OPDs, some MEs have successfully enrolled in or joined business networks and programs such as the Kenya Chamber of Commerce (KNCCI) and County Ajira programs. OPDs work with county government officials supporting persons with disabilities to obtain requisite information about these programs. In turn, the OPDs help to sensitize and encourage their members to join these programs and networks.

Registered members are prioritized when it comes to opportunities. Currently, 12 names of the most vocal persons with disabilities have been forwarded the county government to always be part of the public participation meetings, to articulate the issues regarding persons with disabilities – OPD leader, Kakamega

Legal support and advocacy on rights of MEs: OPDs advocate for policies, programs, and services that are inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities. Through strategic

engagement with policymakers and stakeholders, OPDs ensure that disability rights are prioritized in the development of national and local policies. For example, OPDs in Homabay lobbied for the County Government to publish a Service Charter for persons with disabilities. The Charter provides information on the services provided, costs and timelines, therefore improving information and service delivery. Some Counties such as Kakamega and Machakos have established and sustained policies and laws that support persons with disabilities.

Moreover, OPDs are represented through the County Disability Board which advocates access to services, businesses and rights. For instance, OPDs actively engaged the Nairobi County Government through lobbying, petitions, and stakeholder meetings in order to provide information and experiences to demonstrate the financial barriers faced by MEs in the county. In response, the County Government is waived business fees for persons with disabilities. The waiver is between 50 and 100% depending on the circumstances of the MEs.

B. Leveraging the disability networks

Research driven advocacy: OPDs, through the opportunities given by different organizations collect information, and experiences of the MEs at the grassroots and share during the national or regional workshops. For example, OPDs in Kakamega collect data on the ground and share with County Disability Caucus to help lobby for more opportunities for MEs in the region. Also, OPDs provide information to county governments on what works and what does not work in promoting the growth of MEs in the county. For instance, in Meru, regular meetings are organized by the Disability Network, facilitated by UDPK, where MEs share their experiences and challenges.

Formation of new associations of persons with disabilities in business; Through the training received from the InBusiness Programme, OPDs play a role in encouraging the MEs to form new associations to obtain opportunities both at the county and national government. A few youths led OPD chapters have been formed within some of these umbrella bodies, which could begin to help bring the issues of youth engagement much more strongly. In Machakos, disability organizations have a forum through which MEs are trained on their rights, as well as how to lobby for economic opportunities.

Through advocacy, some achievements emerge:

Higher sense of self-confidence: OPDs work closely with MEs and groups to encourage persons with disabilities to embrace self-acceptance and gain a deeper understanding of their rights. This approach has led to increased awareness and motivation among persons with disabilities about the importance of being part of an OPD association. By fostering a sense of belonging and empowering MEs with knowledge about their rights, OPDs have contributed to building confidence and encouraging greater participation in economic and social activities.

Monitoring implementation of development programmes and policies: OPDs have been able to monitor how government programs are being implemented to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded. They advocate for the fair and inclusive implementation of government policies and programs that can benefit MEs and also provide feedback to government authorities when necessary. OPDs efforts have led to the enactment of laws that protect the rights of persons with disabilities and promote their inclusion in all aspects of life. For instance, in Machakos, OPDs have enabled the operationalization of the Machakos Disability Act through the Disability Board. The county umbrella OPDs have been more vocal in either pushing for establishment or effective implementation policies supporting persons with disabilities. Meru,

Machakos and Kakamega OPDs have sustained implementation of these policies. Policies on inclusive procurement, representation access to finance are already helping MEs to access business opportunities especially public entities.



Barriers to Effective OPD Engagement of MEs

Effective OPD Engagement of MEs is hindered by barriers in access to information and resource constraints.

Information deficits among OPDs and microentrepreneurs: Awareness of InBusiness programme activities among grassroots-level OPDs, remains limited, suggesting that there are barriers to information flow to local level OPDs. It was observed that some OPDs, not affiliated with selected networks or caucuses, did not fully benefit from the support provided by the umbrella OPDs. Consequently, MEs in OPDs that were affiliated with these networks or caucuses received full support in information access, business assistance, and networking, while those in non-affiliated OPDs did not. Additionally, the inclusion of OPD leaders in the ME programme introduces a potential risk of limiting opportunities for regular OPD members, highlighting the need for a more equitable selection process. Therefore, providing ongoing support and closer oversight of the OPD activities can enhance the effectiveness of the regional approach. A combined design that

integrates the regional approach and direct involvement by project partners can be effective in ensuring that OPDs support persons with disabilities.

Delayed capacity strengthening workshops: While capacity-strengthening workshops are a crucial aspect of OPD engagement, their delayed implementation later in the project cycle points to missed opportunities for enhancing the social and economic well-being of MEs. Priority should be given to scheduling capacity-strengthening at the appropriate time within the project cycle to ensure smoother implementation and allow OPDs to effectively engage MEs throughout the project period. Capacity development should also extend beyond traditional workshop formats. It should embrace diverse models that allow MEs to engage with the training material at a practical level. These models should enable participants to apply what they've learned to their own contexts, facilitating knowledge transfer and fostering deeper integration of skills. Additional skill sets that could be considered include;

- Resource mobilization and fundraising training for OPDs; this would help make them self-sufficient to avoid relying more on the donor organizations.
- Capacity building for data collection and effective M&E mechanism to equip OPDs with the tools and knowledge to conduct effective data collection, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Technology integration; leverage on the existing technologies i.e. SMS and social media to communicate and share information with the MEs.
- Inclusive human resources management training; this will ensure equal access to the training for both women, men and youth.

Weak monitoring and evaluation mechanism and inadequate post-training follow-ups: The effective delivery of training requires mechanisms for sustained follow-up to ensure long-term impact. While initial training is provided, minimal follow-up during and after the program limits opportunities for sustained growth. Although OPDs have the potential to offer long-term support, their capacity and resources are often insufficient. To address this gap, the program design should incorporate regular, ongoing interactive feedback loop throughout the capacity development cycle. This will allow for dynamic adjustments to training and capacity development, ensuring the process remains aligned with evolving needs. By integrating robust evaluation mechanisms, the program can pinpoint areas of success and opportunities for improvement, ultimately enhancing the quality and impact of future training activities.

Digital access barriers: Access to digital tools remains a big barrier for both application into the InBusiness program and its use for business growth. Digital application processes present challenges, as only few MEs have access to smartphones. In addition, limited knowledge on the use of different mobile phone platforms or digital community hubs means that MEs cannot have access to procurement opportunities requiring digital access therefore missing out. Future support should incorporate inclusive digital hubs and champions within OPDs to enhance access to digital services for persons with disabilities. Additionally, OPDs can advocate for governments to establish inclusive hubs, ensuring broader access and utilization of these services. There is also need to recognize that accessibility barriers do not just apply to the built environment; and mobility solutions but also relate to communication and consultation strategies and tools, and digital technologies including mobile apps, software, IT equipment, audiovisuals, and digital aids like screen readers, captions, and adapted keyboards.

Limited budget for OPD capacity strengthening: Following capacity strengthening plan of OPDs, it became apparent that the resources allocated to the program were limited to meet the needs. This has led to delivery of condensed capacity strengthening programs for a few OPDs and at the county level. Reflecting on the resources needs at program design can deliver OPD strengthening initiatives at wide scale. OPDs struggle to expand their services to rural and marginalized areas due to inadequate funds for transportation and outreach programs. They also lack the resources to track the impact of their programs and improve service delivery.

The process of accessing public opportunities is very complex for the MEs: While OPD engagement has enabled some MEs to benefit from preferential procurement opportunities, particularly under the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program, the overall uptake has been low, with only a few success stories. MEs associate public tendering with high capital requirements, complex paperwork, and a lack of information. Additionally, OPDs lack the capacity to finance or provide the necessary technical support, making it difficult for MEs to fully access these opportunities. This limitation underscores the need for OPD and ME support to enable broader participation in the AGPO program. Potentially, having OPD champions (designated individuals within the OPDs with training in procurement) can help MEs navigate complex procurement processes.

The resources allocated for the OPDs operations are inadequate to meet the growing demands among the MEs: OPDs operate with limited resources, which hinders their ability to support the members, run programs independently, and engage in advocacy. Similarly, MEs led by the persons with disabilities face high costs for marketing, transportation, and regulatory compliance, which makes it difficult to sustain and grow their businesses. Attending training, accessing markets, and meeting legal requirements require financial investment that many cannot afford with support from the development partners. Addressing these barriers through funding for accessibility needs, tailored resources, and mobility assistance is essential for increased and meaningful participation of the MEs in development programs.

Lessons Learned

Information access and sharing: Enhancing information access at the grassroots level is critical in fostering self-advocacy and unlocking opportunities for MEs, particularly women and youth. Strengthening county-level OPDs, can improve information dissemination, advocacy, and market linkages. However, they need sustained capacity-strengthening in communication, use of digital platforms for real-time updates, and partnerships with stakeholders to ensure that MEs receive timely and relevant business support. There is also need to embed inclusive digital hubs and champions within OPDs which can support access to digital services for persons with disabilities.

Inclusion of youth and women: The existing OPD structure does not equitably include youth and women in leadership and membership of OPDs. There is need to strengthen inclusion mechanisms for OPDs to ensure more involvement of youth and women into top leadership where gender-responsive decisions can be made. Strengthening women and youth chapters can also ensure meaningful engagement of all persons within OPDs.

OPD support and MEs' inclusion: OPDs are central in providing business support to MEs in the InBusiness programme. However, MEs who are not part of the OPDs in the programme may not

receive full support leading to exclusion. For inclusion, regular monitoring of umbrella OPDs is necessary to ensure all MEs are supported regardless of their OPD affiliation or status. At the same time, monitoring would ensure equitable balance in selection of MEs from both OPD leaders and members into the development programs. Combining the regional and direct approaches may be useful in engaging OPDs to support MEs especially where exclusion challenges arise.

Strengthening post-program support and building local capacity for sustainable impact:

Effective post-program support is critical for ensuring the long-term success of MEs. While OPDs can be trained to provide continuous business support through regular visits and follow-ups, their ability to reach a wider population of MEs is often limited by resources. By providing OPDs with adequate training, tools, and financial support, they can broaden their reach and engage more MEs effectively, ensuring that businesses remain on track for sustained growth.

Trainer of trainers: Trainings for microentrepreneurs conducted by organizations should leverage the existing strengths of OPDs. Instead of bringing in external trainers, already trained OPD members could be engaged as trainer of trainers. The TOT partnership between CBM Global and Kakamega Caucus could be strengthened and scaled up to the other counties. This approach would build local capacity, reduce training costs, and promote sustainability by fostering knowledge transfer within the OPDs and MEs. In addition, OPD capacity programs could empower its leaders to be trainer of trainers to support activities especially at sub-county and ward levels.

Engagement with government and private sector: OPDs spearhead the engagements with the national and county governments in a range of activities that support businesses. OPDs aid NCPWD registration, tax registration and business licencing to ensure business adhere to trade requirements. OPDs who sit in public organizations are able to influence and advocate for access to opportunities by MEs. Ensuring representation of OPDs in various organizations and in public participation fora can support access to business opportunities. Also, pro-active engagement with the private sector can promote access to information and business opportunities. Training OPDs on effective stakeholder engagement is central to achieving these objectives.

Developing and operationalizing the disability laws and policies: Having a conducive policy environment will facilitate improved business operations and access to the opportunities by the OPDs and MEs. There is need to support OPDs to push for the implementation of the laws and policies especially in counties to drive access to business and procurement opportunities. Counties could benchmark from those that have been successful in pushing for operationalization of policies and laws like the case of Kakamega and Machakos. This would include quotas on procurement and establishment of service charters to enhance service delivery.

Embedding capacity development to the program for sustainability: Integrating capacity development within the TO50 programme has helped OPDs to better manage their financial affairs, streamline organization development enhance governance and, advocate for their members within government and private sector. For sustainability, OPDs could embed relevant capacity development in their activities from the federation level all the way down to the ward level. Also, organizations working with OPDs can intensify capacity strengthening activities and use umbrella OPDs as an anchor for widescale capacity development efforts. With the issue of

inadequate funding of OPDs operations being a challenge to effective OPDs engagement, there is need for sustainability plans including; establishing own sources revenues e.g. through business ventures; advocating for inclusive budgeting and programming from government; developing business champions and trainer of trainers to support MEs and; establishing business hubs within OPDs to sustain the learnings from the InBusiness Programme. OPDs operations could also be embedded in the existing government funded programs or initiatives within the Counties that would facilitate various OPD engagement activities e.g. the County Integrated Development Plans as the case of Homabay.

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