



Dial shifting investments:

UNLOCKING ACCESS TO ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY IN THE PACIFIC REGION

Assistive technology (AT) transforms lives. Through timely access to appropriate and affordable AT, people experiencing functioning difficulties - due to disability, ageing, injury, illness - can have greater dignity, independence, and participation in all aspects of life. Appropriate AT contributes to health and wellbeing across the community and for all ages.

An estimated 2.4 billion people globally use some form of AT. As the global population continues to age, that number is only expected to exacerbate existing need among older people. Older people, and particularly older people with disabilities, face increased risk of social exclusion, poverty, and violence. As such, targeted investment to unlock access to AT and assistive service for this cohort can deliver significant improvements in safety, wellbeing and participation.

AT includes items such as wheelchairs, glasses, hearing aids, prosthetics, and white canes as well as the services required to access them, like assessment, provision, maintenance, repair and referral. AT removes barriers and is an important piece to support people of all ages to participate in and contribute to their communities.

Yet, all too often these vital products and services are out of reach for those who

need them. The Global Report on Assistive Technology showed that in low- and middle-income countries, as few as 10 percent of people can access the AT they need. In some cases, this is as low as three percent.

Throughout the Pacific, the products are often not available nor the services to deliver them. The result: people who need AT are locked out of opportunities and left behind. Unable to work, learn as effectively as they could, maintain basic hygiene, interact with friends and family, or participate in their communities.

Access to AT is preserved as a right in Articles 9 and 20 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities and is described by the Pacific Disability Forum, the peak body for Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) in the Pacific, as a 'precondition' for inclusion. The Implementation Plan of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent commits to a twin track approach to disability inclusion as a central pillar. It calls for a regional procurement facility for AT for people with disabilities and meeting preconditions for disability inclusion as key to this.

Australia can change lives by supporting access to AT. An investment of \$12m over four years delivered in partnership with Pacific governments, OPDs and service providers across the region would support catalytic improvement in access to assistive technology.

What's needed – Right AT, right need, right time

Australia has a strong history of supporting effective access to AT throughout the Pacific region and beyond. The latest investment partnering with ATscale to embed screening and provision of AT for school children with vision, hearing and mobility impairments is a welcome program in the Pacific.

However, the need is far greater. Australia's history of support has demonstrated an understanding of the transformative power of AT, however there is much to be done to ensure the right AT gets to the right person at the right time. This means AT is available when it is needed, is matched to a person's need, is suited to a person's environment, is monitored and adjusted over time, users are supported in using their AT effectively, and mechanisms are available for maintenance, repair or replacement. This requires both products and expertise, and a plan that coordinates efforts and transforms the delivery and access to AT for all who need it.

Much work is already under way to understand access to AT in Pacific Island Countries. Actions are being undertaken to establish a procurement hub and provide AT access as part of emergency response.



Image: Vicky Sire has a physical disability and relies on her AT (wheelchair) and extended family to navigate her village's hillside terrain. Goroka, Papua New Guinea. © Photography by Erin Johnson for Room3.com.au

"One way we'll know that the new International Disability Equity and Rights strategy has been successful in 2030 is that people with disabilities in the Pacific are able to access assistive technology that is affordable and appropriate. This means more opportunities for education, training and employment."

Setareki Macanawai
Former Chief Executive Officer,
Pacific Disability Forum

Further, Australia has played a leading role for over a decade in partnering with OPDs through their international development and human rights efforts. OPDs have an important role to play in the development of systems for the access and delivery of AT in the Pacific.

Australia has the opportunity to bring existing knowledge together and build on capability that already exists in Ministries of Health, NGO's, OPDs and older person's networks, to establish coordinated systems that enable appropriate and effective access to AT.

An investment of \$12m over 4 years delivered in partnership with representative organisations and partners across the region would lay the foundation for catalytic improvement in AT access, workforce development, training, service coordination, and scalable pilots in the Pacific. It can create a foundation for greater regional cooperation and economic opportunities in the region.

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