ESCAP
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

SESSION 2

BACKGROUND NOTE

Countries in Action: Building Policy Ecosystems and Whole-of-Village Support for Disability-Inclusive Economic Empowerment

Social Development Division
Wednesday, 9 December (09:50–12:00 UTC+7)
United Nations Conference Center, Conference Room 3
Bangkok, Thailand and Online

Context and Strategic Rationale

The Asia-Pacific Regional Forum on Investing in Economic Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, hosted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok on 9 December 2026, addresses a critical regional development mandate. Grounded in the *Jakarta Declaration on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2023–2032*[1], the

[1] Jakarta Declaration on the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2023–2032, adopted at the High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022, held in Jakarta and online from 19 to 21 October 2022 (see ESCAP/APDDP/2022/3), and endorsed by the Commission in resolution 79/5 of 19 May 2023.

Forum advances a fundamental transition from traditional welfare approaches toward systemic economic empowerment.

While policy frameworks across Asia and the Pacific increasingly acknowledge the rights of persons with disabilities, a substantial divide persists between national legislative mandates and everyday economic realities. Millions of working-age persons with disabilities remain excluded from formal labour markets, high-growth entrepreneurship, and inclusive corporate value chains. Across countries in the region with available data, the median labour force participation rate of persons with disabilities stands at 25.4 per cent, against 60.4 per cent among persons without disabilities.[2] Session 2, titled "Countries in Action", focuses on bridging this implementation gap by examining how countries strengthen policy ecosystems, build technical capacities, and mobilize multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Megatrends Driving the Urgency for Economic Empowerment

The mandate for disability-inclusive economic empowerment is further intensified by two overarching regional megatrends:

- **Population Ageing and Workforce Contraction:** Asia and the Pacific is experiencing unprecedented demographic ageing. Rapidly ageing populations are leading to a contraction of traditional labour force pools across key regional economies. The region's working-age population is projected to peak at about 3.3 billion in the mid-2030s and to decline thereafter, with decreases already projected in a growing number of countries and areas before 2050[3]. This workforce contraction exerts severe pressures on national productivity and corporate supply chains. In this context, expanding talent pools by integrating the region's 472 million working-age persons with disabilities[4], together with millions of older workers who could remain productive with similar support, requires comprehensive policy measures, not only to fulfil the rights of persons with disabilities, but also to respond to an urgent economic necessity. Tapping into this underutilized workforce provides essential talent, fosters innovation, and eases supply chain bottlenecks.

[2] ESCAP (2021), Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific (ST/ESCAP/2981). Medians are based on estimates for 23 countries in the region with available data.
[3] ESCAP (2023), Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023 (ST/ESCAP/3112) and ESCAP (2022), Asia-Pacific Report on Population Ageing 2022 (ST/ESCAP/3041).
[4] ESCAP (2021), Disability at a Glance 2021: The Shaping of Disability-inclusive Employment in Asia and the Pacific (ST/ESCAP/2981). The working-age estimate of 472 million is calculated as 15 per cent of the Asia-Pacific working-age population at mid-year 2020.

- **Digitalization as an Inclusive Catalyst**: Accelerating digital transformation is fundamentally reshaping the world of work. Digital technologies, e-commerce platforms, AI-powered workplace solutions, and flexible remote work architectures present unprecedented opportunities to dismantle physical and geographical barriers. When designed inclusively, digitalization enables persons with disabilities to access formal employment, launch digital enterprises, and participate in global value chains, offering scalable solutions to modernize labour markets.[5]

Effective economic empowerment requires an integrated ecosystem: skills development must align directly with market demand; entrepreneurship support must connect with financial services and procurement networks; workplace adaptations must leverage digital tools; and national policies must proactively respond to demographic shifts. By analyzing country-led innovations alongside practical support models, Session 2 establishes the operational foundation required to inform discussions on financing disability inclusion.

Regional Implementation Landscape, Facts, and Structural Friction

Since 2024, ESCAP's regional technical cooperation initiative has provided targeted in-country support across China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, and Viet Nam, complemented by digital inclusion projects in China, India, and Viet Nam.[6] These technical interventions demonstrate that advancing economic empowerment requires dismantling systemic friction points across five distinct operational domains:

- **Recruitment and Job Matching Friction**: Standard public employment services and corporate human resource channels frequently lack accessible formats, adaptive assessment tools, and specialized placement support, locking qualified job seekers out of formal and productive employment opportunities.
- **Workplace Accommodation and Retention Deficits**: Employers often perceive reasonable accommodation as prohibitively complex or costly, lacking practical guidance on workplace adjustments, assistive technology integration to support productivity, and job coaching for sustained transition to and retention at work.
- **Entrepreneurship and Market Access Barriers**: Entrepreneurs with disabilities face compounded obstacles, including restrictive credit assessment criteria, inaccessible financial services, and exclusion from mainstream commercial supply chains and e-commerce platforms.

[5] ESCAP, 'Regional Forum on Digital Transformation and Future of Work for Persons with Disabilities', Bangkok and online, 2 June 2025.
[6] ESCAP, 'Disability-inclusive development', available at www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/disability-inclusive-development (accessed 2 November 2026).

- **Institutional Coordination Gaps**: Fragmented mandates across labour ministries, social welfare departments, trade agencies, and vocational training institutions frequently result in piecemeal service delivery rather than coherent support pathways.
- **Capacity Constraints within Enterprise Ecosystems**: Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and local businesses often lack the technical tools and confidence required to implement disability-inclusive employment practices effectively.

The findings from ESCAP's country-level initiatives show that these gaps and structural barriers can be overcome by combining top-down policy incentives with bottom-up capacity building and cross-sector collaboration.[7] This will require intentional planning, deliberate action, and strategic multi-stakeholder collaboration, with organizations of persons with disabilities as core collaborators rather than consulted beneficiaries.[8]

Session Architecture and Discussion Directions

Session 2 is structured into two complementary segments led by moderator. Part 1 runs from 09:50 to 10:50 and Part 2, following the coffee break, from 11:05 to 11:50, with a plenary intervention segment from 11:50 to 12:00. Together, these segments examine national strategies, policy development and multi-stakeholder implementation models that hold promise for addressing structural challenges and realizing opportunities for Asia-Pacific developing countries.

Part 1: Trailblazer Presentations — Country Policy Ecosystems

Part 1 features 10-minute presentations from country representatives of China, Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, and Viet Nam, highlighting distinct national strategies, implementation challenges, and policy refinements. These presentations are guided by four strategic questions:

1. *What specific legal, structural, and operational barriers are being addressed in national policy execution?*
2. *Which inter-institutional approaches and multi-stakeholder partnerships are being deployed?*

[7] Drawn from ESCAP's country-level technical cooperation since 2024. See also ESCAP (2022), A Three-Decade Journey towards Inclusion: Assessing the State of Disability-inclusive Development in Asia and the Pacific.
[8] Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, article 4 (3); and Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General comment No. 7 (2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention (CRPD/C/GC/7).

3. *What tangible improvements have emerged, and what persistent difficulties remain unresolved?*
4. *What further regional technical cooperation and capacity-building support is required?*

Part 2: Building the Whole-of-Village Support

Part 2 is structured as four short Pathfinder opening pitches followed by an interactive panel discussion, examining how civil society organizations (CSOs), organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), social enterprises, and global business networks translate policy mandates into results on the ground.

The phrase "whole-of-village support" rests on a simple proposition: no single actor can deliver economic empowerment alone. A legal mandate without employer capacity, an employer commitment without accessible skills pipelines, or a training programme without market demand each stall in isolation. A whole-of-village approach assembles the complementary roles of Governments, employers, OPDs, service providers, and business networks into a continuous pathway from skills development through to sustained employment and enterprise growth.

The panel discussion is guided by four questions:

1. *Which roles in the support ecosystem are currently unfilled or underfunded, and who is best placed to fill them?*
2. *How do CSOs, OPDs and business networks build and sustain employer demand, rather than only supplying trained candidates?*
3. *What makes intermediary support financially sustainable beyond project cycles, and what does delivery at national scale actually cost?*
4. *What do Governments need to provide, in mandate, funding or data, for these models to operate at national scale?*

Anticipated Takeaways and Bridge to Session 3

Session 2 delivers actionable insights for delegates seeking to strengthen national disability-inclusive employment and business ecosystems:

- **Replicable Policy Toolkits**: Practical models for structuring inclusive employment services, job-coaching frameworks, and targeted entrepreneurship incentives adaptable to diverse economic contexts.
- **Cross-Sector Governance Frameworks**: Clear guidelines for structuring coordination mechanisms among labour and other line ministries, private enterprise networks, and OPDs.

- **Value Chain Integration Strategies**: Tested approaches for embedding disability-inclusive suppliers and entrepreneurs into national and regional corporate supply chains.
- **OPD Co-Design Principles**: Operational standards ensuring that persons with disabilities and their representative organizations actively shape, implement, and monitor economic inclusion initiatives.

The Bridge to Financing (Session 3)

The practical implementation needs identified in Session 2 directly establish the demand side for Session 3, Financing Disability Inclusion: Crossing the Impact Frontier. Expanding national job-coaching programmes, scaling inclusive business incubators, deploying accessible workplace technologies, and integrating entrepreneurs into corporate supply chains all require upfront, sustainable capital, as well as a transformed view of disability inclusion as not only an ethical practice but an economic imperative. By defining these concrete operational requirements, Session 2 sets the stage for Session 3 to explore how impact investment, blended finance, and market-based financial instruments can mobilize capital at scale.