



**Policy Brief:
Let's make Official
Development
Assistance to disability-
inclusive education
count**

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2025

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1. Introduction

Why is change needed?

Tangible investment – and our collective action to make this happen – could change the life trajectories of the 240 million children with disabilities worldwide. These children are currently denied the opportunity to benefit from the transformative power of quality inclusive education. Girls and boys with disabilities are 49% more likely never to attend school and 42% less likely to have foundational reading and numeracy skills than their peers without disabilities.¹

If education funding continues to decline, we risk reversing the improvements made in access to education and will fail to scale up efforts to improve quality teaching and learning outcomes for children with disabilities. New challenges – like climate-driven food insecurity, the rise in conflict, and advancement in digital technologies – require us to take twin-track actions to ensure learners with disabilities are not left behind. Both system-wide actions for inclusivity and disability-specific actions are needed to close the equity gap.

Regrettably, investment in disability-inclusive education is woefully falling short of what is needed to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Where disability inclusion is a requirement in programmes, the allocation of funds is insufficient to meet the needs of the 15% of learners with disabilities. The allocation also cannot support systemic reforms such as comprehensive teacher training to improve competencies. There is an urgent need for renewed commitment and for new actors to engage, to accelerate change together.

Tangible commitment is needed now, in terms of financial investment to disability inclusion. This leads us to question what Official Development Assistance is being used to make disability-inclusive education and SDG 4 a reality.

The rapid study gives a snapshot of progress so far by analysing data from the OECD Creditor Reporting System database for 2019 and 2022 (latest available data in September 2024).

Why is tracking investment vital?

In 2018, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) introduced the 'disability policy marker'. This tool monitors the extent to which Official Development Assistance (ODA) aims to be inclusive of

¹ UNICEF. (2022). *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities*. United Nations Children's Fund. <https://bit.ly/UNICEFSeenCountedIncluded>

persons with disabilities. It is available in the OECD-DAC Creditor Reporting System (CRS),² a publicly accessible database that allows external stakeholders to analyse data in a comparable manner across countries.

The marker allows DAC members to track their projects and see – on a scale from 0 to 2 – how much they focus on persons with disabilities. This helps members align with Article 32 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which promotes the inclusivity and accessibility of international cooperation programmes for persons with disabilities.

Definitions

As part of the annual reporting of their aid to the OECD-DAC, DAC members indicate whether each project or programme has disability inclusion as a policy objective.

They use a three-point scoring system for this:

- **Principal (score 2):** This means that inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities are the principal objectives of the project or programme and are fundamental in its design and expected results.
- **Significant (score 1):** This means that inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities are significant objectives but not the principal reason for undertaking the project or programme.
- **Not targeted (score 0):** The project or programme does not focus on disability inclusion.

Use of the disability policy marker is voluntary, so not all ODA projects are scored against it. Therefore, when looking at ODA data in the CRS, it is possible to ‘score’ a blank because the ODA is not marked at all (i.e., the disability marker is not applied).

More detailed information can be found on the marker in the [OECD-DAC Handbook](#).

Several advocates have already trialled the disability policy marker for specific donors (e.g., for the EU)³ and have explored the best ways to use the resulting data to advocate for change overall.⁴ This brief adds to the body of knowledge by spotlighting ODA specifically in the education sector. It sheds light on how ODA supports SDG 4, which commits states to

² See: <https://bit.ly/OECDlibraryCRS>

³ See the publications from the European Disability Forum, here: <https://bit.ly/EDF-OECDDACmarkerreports>

⁴ We acknowledge the work of Polly Meeks which has enabled us to understand how to analyse the data in this report. She also gave us invaluable advice before embarking on this project. See Meeks (2020) Getting the Data: How much does aid money support the inclusion of persons with disabilities? See: <https://bit.ly/Meeks2020>

achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. In most low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities are more likely to be out of school than any other group of children.⁵ Consequently, all donors must prioritise inclusive education to ensure that children and young persons with disabilities access and participate in a good-quality education and are not left behind.

2. Disability-inclusive education remains underfunded by donors

The 32 official DAC members⁶ disbursed to the education sector almost US\$11.5 billion of allocable⁷ aid in 2022. Figure 1 shows that, on average, only 14% of this aid aimed to be disability inclusive: less than 1% was marked with disability as a principal objective, and 13% as significant. In volume terms, this equates to just under US\$1 billion of aid to education that aimed to be disability inclusive.

Strikingly, the marker was not applied to more than half of this ODA. Another third was scored as not having any objectives relating to the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities.

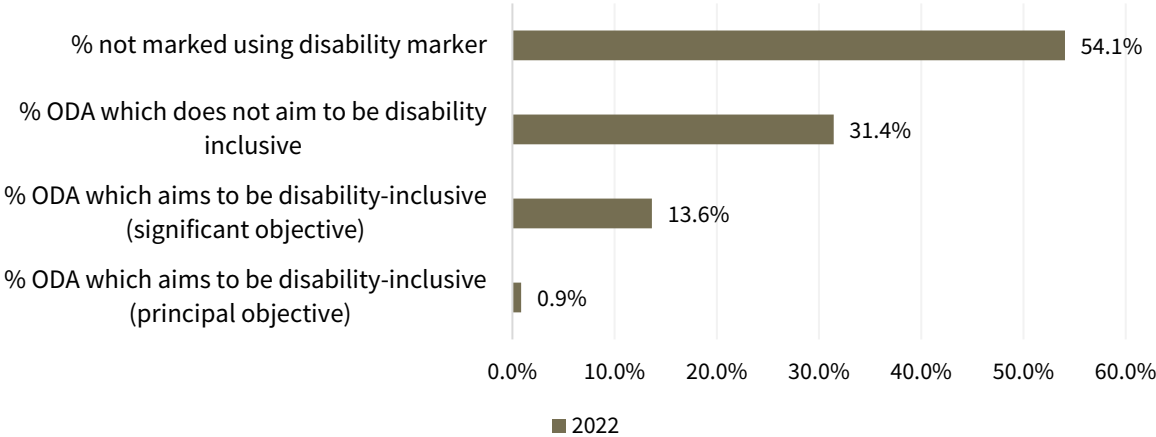


Fig.1: Share of ODA to education which aims to be disability inclusive.

When looking at aid disbursements, it is noticeable how little has changed across the ODA of the whole DAC membership since the introduction of the disability marker. Between 2019, the year after its introduction,⁸ and 2022, the latest year of available data, the average shift is almost imperceptible across OECD-DAC donor countries and the European Union (see Figure 2). Indeed, the percentage share of disbursed ODA marked as having a

⁵ UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2018) Education and Disability, Analysis of Data from 49 Countries.

⁶ As of 4 July 2023, there are 32 members of DAC, including the European Union, which is a full committee member. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_Assistance_Committee

⁷ See Annex 1 for an explanation of allocable aid.

⁸ As this study used disbursement data, we decided to use data from after the first year of the marker's use to allow time for the marker to be applied to actual expenditure.

principal objective to support disability inclusion in the education sector remained stagnant. There was only a slight increase in those marked as having disability inclusion as a significant objective. As such, there was a slight increase in the share of disbursed ODA that aimed to be disability inclusive in the education sector, from 13.2% in 2019 to 14.5% in 2022.

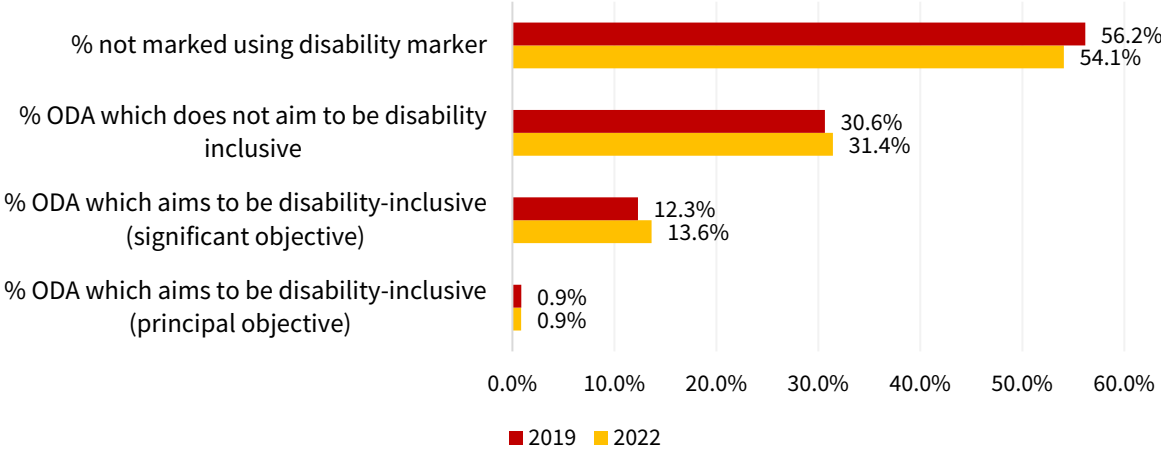


Fig.2: Share of ODA to education that aims to be disability inclusive and/or use the disability marker, showing change over time.

3. Which countries are leading the way or falling behind?

Selecting countries to analyse

To examine the education sector ODA of individual DAC countries in more detail, we selected the top 20 bilateral donors in terms of their ODA to education during 2021–2022.⁹ We then excluded any that were not using the disability marker to any significant degree (i.e., not using it on more than half of their ODA projects). We drew on a 2022 analysis of total ODA carried out by Sightsavers.¹⁰ For more details, see Annex 2.

This process automatically excluded the following DAC bilateral donors: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland and the USA. None of these was using the marker at all in 2022 on their ODA, except Poland which used it on just 11% of ODA. The remaining bilateral donors to be analysed were: Austria, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. To this, we added the EU institutions as they are both a DAC member and the only multilateral currently using the disability inclusion marker.

The first thing to note is that, in terms of the total volume (USD) of ODA to education, the top three bilateral donors during 2021–2022 were automatically excluded from the

⁹ Commitments, ODA averaged over 2021-22.

¹⁰ The following useful slide deck by Sightsavers was used: <https://bit.ly/SightsaversDACslides>

analysis. Germany, the USA, and France (in this order), committed close to 40% of *all* aid to education during this period. Hence, in overall volume terms, a *significant share* of the total ODA to education was not marked at all regarding whether it aimed to be disability inclusive. This remains a crucial concern if we are to ensure that education aid supports more inclusive education.

The second thing to note is who else is omitted. Other than the EU, no other multilateral was using the marker. It is unclear why UNICEF, for instance, which already has an ‘in-house’ disability marker very similar to the DAC one, was not using this.

Performance by share

In Figure 3, we show the share of ODA disbursed to education in 2022 that aimed to be disability inclusive, at the significant and principal levels. Sweden ranked first among DAC members, with 66% of its ODA aiming to be disability inclusive. Australia and Canada came next; around 50% of their ODA disbursed in the education sector in 2022 was seeking to be disability inclusive. They were followed by the EU at 38%.

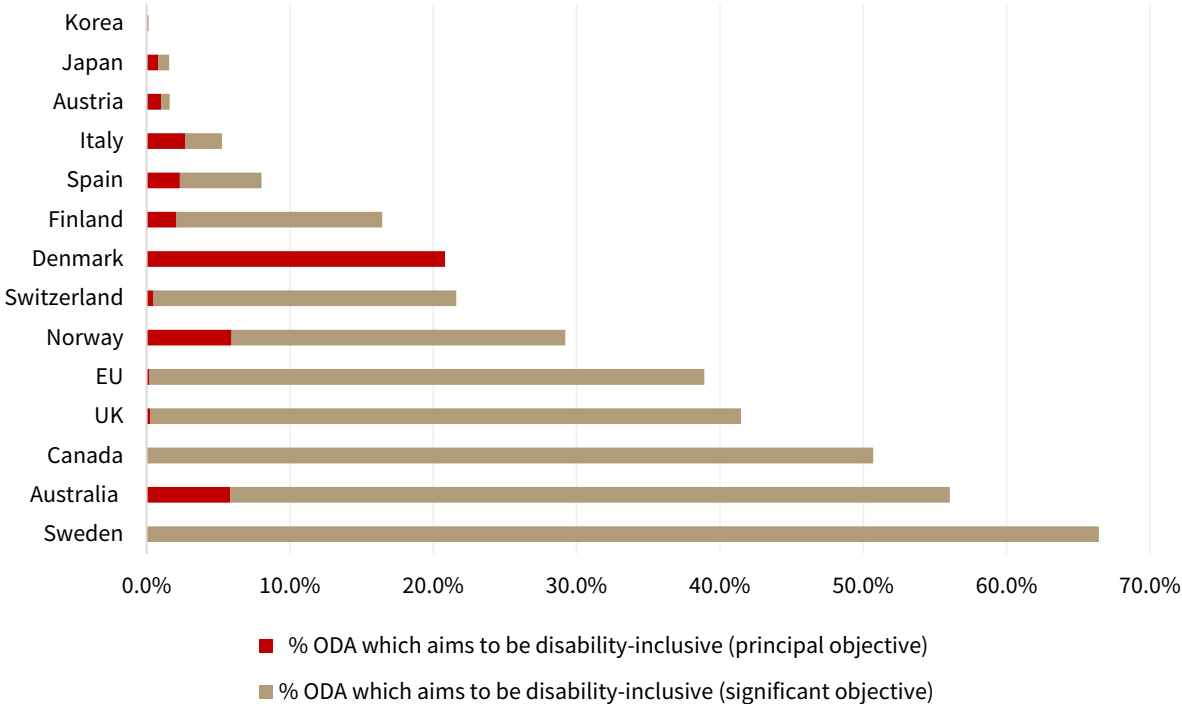


Fig.3: ODA disbursements (by share) to education that aimed to be disability inclusive in 2022.

It is notable that some donors were ‘punching higher’ by having a more significant share of scores that were 2. Denmark stands out, for instance, because all of their 20% share had a principal objective to support disability-inclusive education. Nevertheless, the fact that

only 20% of their ODA was disability inclusive remains disappointing, even if that 20% was more intensively disability inclusive.

Performance by volume

The share of ODA allows us to measure each donor’s relative effort to shift their aid to education and support disability-inclusive education. An analysis of the total volume enables analysis of both overall ODA volumes *and* the relative effort toward shifting education aid to be more disability inclusive. Figure 4 gives this overview.

The EU stands out as the donor with the largest volume of ODA disbursements in education that aimed to be disability inclusive.

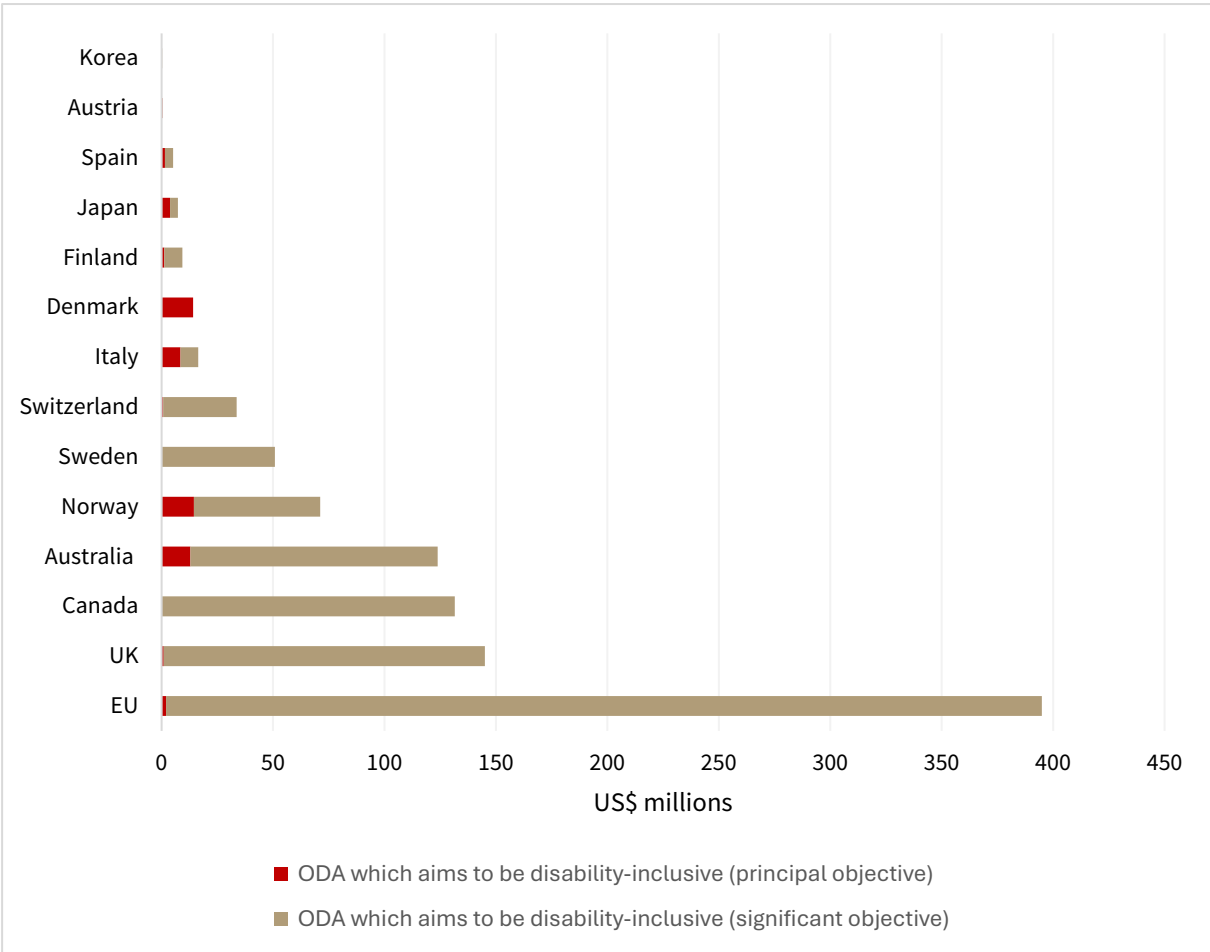


Fig.4: ODA disbursements (by volume) to education that aimed to be disability inclusive in 2022.

4. Changes over time across DAC donors

Looking at the same set of DAC donors and analysing changes since 2019, a few key highlights emerge. First, there was a significant increase in the use of the marker (see Table 1) between 2019 and 2022. Denmark and Canada, for instance, went from not using the marker at all in 2019 to using the marker on 100% and 92%, respectively, of their aid to the education sector in 2022.

Table 1: Changes in the use of the marker over time.

	2019 % ODA marked using disability marker	2022 % ODA marked using disability marker
Australia	0.0%	0%
Austria	1.6%	25%
Canada	0.0%	92%
Denmark	0.5%	100%
EU	0.0%	4%
Finland	0.1%	50%
Italy	4.0%	48%
Japan	35.7%	58%
Korea	49.4%	73%
Norway	0.0%	0%
Spain	0.0%	0%
Sweden	0.1%	1%
Switzerland	0.0%	66%

The share of ODA that aimed to be inclusive over this same time period is shown in Figure 5. Overall, the trend among this group of DAC donors was towards increasing the share. Denmark, the EU, Canada, and Sweden all significantly increased their shares. However, the UK’s share of ODA that aimed to be disability inclusive slipped backwards.

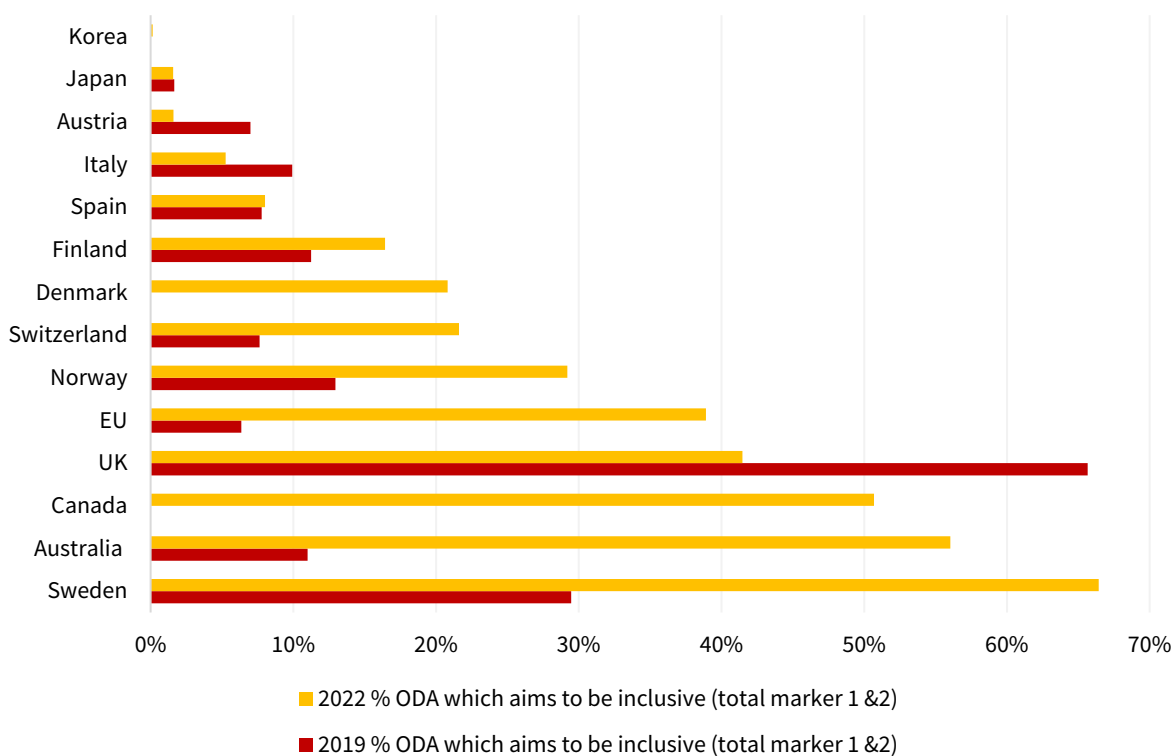


Fig.5: Share of ODA distributed to education that aimed to be disability inclusive in 2019 and 2022.

5. Spotlight on critical subsectors and areas

We shone a spotlight on a few issues relating to the kinds of projects, programmes and activities marked as supporting disability inclusion. We also carried out rudimentary word searches within data sets to explore areas that might warrant deeper investigation. This was not a robust process with an exhaustive search list, but it enabled us to draw tentative conclusions that may benefit from further analysis.

Spotlight on ODA supporting early childhood education

Early childhood education (ECE) remains a vastly underfunded area of education. This is also true in aid to education. When looking at allocable aid disbursed to ECE in 2022, only \$1.8 million scored 2, and only \$12.3 million scored 1 on the disability marker. This represents just 0.1% of all allocable aid disbursed to education in 2022, and around 1.5% of all aid to education which aimed to support the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Spotlight on ODA supporting organisations of persons with disabilities

When looking at the 2022 figures for allocable aid from DAC members used for core support to NGOs (i.e., not just using NGOs as channels for projects), ideally we would see the funding going to a number of projects supporting organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). Supporting OPDs is a valuable strategy in efforts to include persons with disabilities. OPDs in the Global South need core support so they can engage in the development of inclusive policy and practice.

However, the word search revealed only one project from the entire DAC country list of projects that mentioned ‘OPD’ (or ‘DPO’).¹¹ Only Ireland, Italy, and Japan supported projects with a principal objective (i.e., score 2) of helping the inclusion or empowerment of disabled persons through core support to NGOs, although not necessarily DPOs. Ireland funded the vast majority of projects with a score of 2 in this area.

Spotlight on the principle of ‘do no harm’

The OECD-DAC handbook on the disability inclusion policy marker lists ‘do no harm’ as a recommended principle that is necessary for all programming.¹² However, as Meeks’ 2020 analysis showed:

“it does **not** mention doing no harm as an explicit requirement in the section of the guidance that deals with the marker itself, as opposed to good programming practices in general.¹³ This is puzzling, since OECD-DAC handbook on the gender equality marker **does** include ‘do no harm’ as a minimum threshold for all marker scores.”¹⁴

It was beyond the scope of this project to carry out an extensive analysis of what education sector ODA is channelled in a way that adheres to this principle. However, there is some concern that the lack of the ‘do no harm’ principle in the marker may lead to exclusionary practices in the education sector. Indeed, with more than two-thirds of allocable aid to education disbursed in 2022 either not using the disability marker or getting a zero score (see Fig.1), there is significant scope for this aid to ‘do harm’.

A cursory look at most aid to education projects and programmes not marked as inclusive clearly suggests that many are likely to perpetuate the segregation of persons with disabilities and thus work *against* inclusion and the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities. Indeed, misunderstanding of the disability marker means that even some

¹¹ Also sometimes known as ‘disabled persons organisations’ (DPOs).

¹² OECD-DAC, 2020, The OECD-DAC policy marker on the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities: Handbook for data reporters and users, p.15. See: <https://bit.ly/DisabilityMarkerHandbook>

¹³ OECD-DAC, 2020, The OECD-DAC policy marker on the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities: Handbook for data reporters and users, pp.13-14. See: <https://bit.ly/DisabilityMarkerHandbook>

¹⁴ OECD-DAC, 2016, Handbook on the OECD-DAC gender equality policy marker, p.10

initiatives that score 1 or 2 may be segregatory, in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or ‘doing harm’, requiring further scrutiny.

This highlights the need for clear guidance and training on the usage of the marker.

Spotlight on systemic change

Across all DAC bilateral projects, no aid was disbursed in 2022 that supported the principle aim of inclusion for sector budget support. Only the EU had any projects in this category. One was in support of youth employment in Moldova (which appeared to have few inclusive education components) while another was in support of inclusive teachers in South Africa.¹⁵

Sector budget support aims to contribute financially to a recipient government’s budget for sector-wide change to public education systems. Undoubtedly, to ensure disability-inclusive education in low- and middle-income countries, governments need to implement sector-wide (systemic) change. It is, therefore, concerning that so little donor support is going to an area that might enhance systemic change.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

Some DAC donors have significantly increased their use of the disability marker since its introduction in 2018 and are also slowly scaling up aid which aims to be disability inclusive. However, even the best performers still have a long way to go. In 2022, only three donors – Canada, Sweden, and Australia – had more than half their aid to education being spent in a way that aimed to support disability inclusion in education (Canada and Australia only just passed the halfway mark at 51% and 56%, respectively). However, far too few countries have any significant share of funding directed at projects that “principally and directly promote disability inclusion.” More must be done in this area.

There was a significant uptake in the use of the marker among the individual donors we studied, but we cannot ignore the fact that major donors like the USA and France were not using the marker at all. France recently launched its new International Strategy on Basic Education¹⁶ with stronger actions promoting disability inclusion. This is promising, as measuring success could involve the systematic use of the DAC disability marker. Germany has started using the marker in January 2024 and is publishing first data using the marker on its own transparency portal but had not submitted data to the OECD-DAC database, at the time of the study. We hope these steps in the right direction mean we will get a more

¹⁵ The project is named ‘Strengthening teaching for children with profound hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities in South Africa’. For more information, see: <https://bit.ly/EU-SAfricaTLDP>

¹⁶ See: <https://bit.ly/FranceBasicEdStrategy>

comprehensive picture of donor activity in future. The EU is the only multilateral donor to use the marker.

The fact that so few ODA projects and programmes aimed to support the inclusion and empowerment of persons with disabilities suggests the need for substantial change in donor criteria setting. Ensuring that aid to education is disability inclusive by design, particularly for emerging areas such as EdTech and climate change education, is vital. However, the voluntary nature of the disability marker, unlike the compulsory DAC gender and climate markers, remains a barrier to guaranteeing its widespread use.

The following recommendations offer a starting point for priorities:

Recommendation 1: Reach

Expand the use of the disability marker across all donors, including multilateral donors.

- All bilateral donors need to start using the marker. Those currently not using it should set a timetable for its introduction into their systems.
- Multilateral donors other than the EU need to start using the marker to allow for comparable data. UNICEF, with its own marker already in place, should show leadership in this area.
- Donors already using the marker should work towards 100% of their ODA being marked.

Recommendation 2: Quality

Improve the quality of the marker

- The disability policy marker should move from voluntary to mandatory in the next two years.
- Clearer guidance and training on the usage of the marker is needed that provide real scenarios of projects that support segregated education and approached that are misaligned with the tenants of the UNCRPD. Capturing evidence of education projects that do not uphold the 'do no harm' principle (e.g., projects that increase exclusion or segregation and arguably 'do harm'), would be helpful for capacity building purposes.
- DAC should introduce a purpose code in the marker relating to support to OPDs, bringing more focus to participation and leadership by persons with disabilities.

Recommendation 3: Purpose

Increasingly use the marker to promote inclusive education

ODA needs to embrace the twin-track approach, supporting both disability-specific and system-wide actions towards inclusion. Increasing the share of funding allocated to

education projects that score significantly or principally on the disability marker is a vital step in achieving this. Projects where disability inclusion is principal will help redress historic and pervasive exclusion in areas such as bilingual education and literacy for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, capacity development of specialist teachers, the empowerment of youth with disabilities and OPDs, and research.

- All donors should set the target of 50% of their education ODA receiving a positive disability marker score.

Final thoughts

The futures of millions of children with disabilities hinge on us taking action now to invest in disability-inclusive education. ODA plays a vital role in building this future in which no one is left behind, which is why we need a concerted effort to improve and increase education funding. We need consistent investment, with clear, ambitious and rigorously measured disability inclusion targets. We need all governments and all donors to get on board, embrace the use of the disability policy marker, and support its constant development and improvement. We need education ODA to really mean something for children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries.

Annex 1: Methodology note

We analysed the OECD Creditor Reporting System database. We used 2019 and 2022 data to take a snapshot of progress. This choice of years allowed one year for ODA disbursements to be registered at the start of the marker (between 2018 and 2019) and allowed us to use the latest year of data available (2022).

The OECD statistics are:

- available in either aid disbursements (annual expenditures) or commitments (total multi-year value of a project in the year that the commitment is made);
- available in current or constant (accounting for inflation and exchange rate changes) US dollars;
- based on a calendar year.

All the data used in this report are in constant 2022 US dollars and are disbursements. We used constant figures to identify changes over time and allow for inflation. We decided to use disbursements to determine what was actually spent in each year. A commitment is a firm obligation by a donor, expressed in writing and backed by the necessary funds, to provide specified assistance to a country or multilateral organisation. Disbursements record the actual international transfer of financial resources, goods, or services. As the aid committed in a given year can be disbursed later, sometimes over several years, the annual aid figures based on commitments cannot be directly compared to disbursements.

All analysis of ODA is based on allocable ODA, which is only the following modalities:

- “basket funds/pooled funding”;
- “contributions to specific-purpose programmes and funds managed by implementing partners”;
- “core support to NGOs, private bodies, PPPs and research institutes”;
- “donor country personnel”;
- “other technical assistance”;
- “project-type interventions”;
- “sector budget support”.

This is in line with the DAC marker recommendation of the ODA modalities that must be marked.

All calculations are the authors' own. **All data was accessed in September 2024.**

Annex 2: Deciding which bilateral donors to analyse

To identify which bilateral donors to study, we took the top 20 bilateral donors to education over 2021 and 2022 (the latest available two years, using the average over the two years). We then matched with those we know are using the marker in more than 85% of their projects (see analysis in table below).

This left us with the following list: Austria, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, and Switzerland. Added to this list was the EU, the only multilateral consistently using the disability inclusion marker.

Country *	% share of projects using disability marker (commitment)	% disbursements using disability marker (disbursements)
Germany	0%	0%
France	0.1%	0.2%
United States	0%	0%
Japan	99.7%	97.5%
Canada	100%	100%
Norway	100%	100%
Italy	77.30%	72.4%
Switzerland	100%	100%
Korea	76.7%	70.3%
Australia	99.7%	100%
United Kingdom	81.2%	76.3%
Austria	99.7%	96.8%
Sweden	89.7%	89.4%
Poland	11.1%	15.5%
Hungary	0%	0%
Finland	86.2%	90.9%
Belgium	0%	0%
Spain	100%	100%
Netherlands	0%	0%
Denmark	91.2%	94.9%
Multilateral		
EU	100%	100%

Annex 3: Further reading

CBM Switzerland (2021) Factsheet: OECD DAC Disability Policy Marker and its application in Switzerland's ODA reporting. <https://bit.ly/CBMSwitzerlandDisabilityMarker>

CBM Global (2024) Tracking aid for persons with disabilities: Why the OECD-DAC Disability marker can be a powerful advocacy tool for organisations of persons with disabilities – and recommendations on how to make it even more effective.

<https://bit.ly/CBMDACMarkerReport>

Loryman, H. (n.d) Donor's spending on disability inclusion. Sightsavers' input into the Special Rapporteur's report on international cooperation. Sightsavers.

<https://bit.ly/SightsaversDonorSpending>

Meeks, P. (2023) Re-establishing DFAT's leadership on disability equity and rights. How the OECD-DAC disability marker can help. CBM Australia. <https://bit.ly/CBMAusDisabilityMarker>

Meeks, P. (2023) Making the most of the OECD-DAC disability inclusion policy marker to promote equality and inclusion in international development and humanitarian assistance. Atlas Alliance. <https://bit.ly/AtlasAllianceDisabilityMarker>

Nilsson, A (2024) Mapping of Danish efforts to include persons with disabilities in development cooperation and humanitarian action. <https://bit.ly/DanishMapping>

Norad (2022) Evaluation of Norway's inclusion of persons with disabilities in development cooperation. Desk report. <https://bit.ly/NoradInclusionDeskReport>