

18th session of the Conference of States Parties (COSP18) to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

Harnessing the power of assistive technology: addressing the disability employment gap for persons with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries.

Conference room 11 and live webcast

UN HQ New York,

Monday 9 June 2025, Time 4.45 - 6pm (New York time)

Speakers

- Moderator, TBC
- Opening remarks: Kathleen Bombell, Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Branch | Development Policy Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
- Representative from the Government of Zimbabwe - name tBC
- Representative from the Government of Nigeria - name tBC
- Pascal Bijleveld, CEO, ATscale, the Global Partnership on Assistive Technology hosted by UNOPS
- International Disability Alliance - AT user, TBC
- Jenny Lay-flurrie, Chief Accessibility Officer, Microsoft, TBC

Detailed description of the event

The global challenge of assistive technology access for employment

Globally, over a billion people live with disabilities, with a significant majority residing in low and middle-income countries (LMICs). Employment is a fundamental aspect of human dignity, self-sufficiency, and socio-economic participation. However, Assistive Technology (AT) users, especially persons with disabilities face significant barriers to entering and remaining in the workforce. Assistive technology (AT) is crucial for bridging accessibility gaps, fostering social inclusion, and enabling access to employment for this population. It has the potential to bridge this gap, providing crucial support that enables persons with AT users to perform job tasks, communicate effectively, and navigate their work environments. However, access to AT remains

severely limited in LMICs, with only 51% of those in need able to access these life-enhancing tools, compared to 90% in higher-income countries. This disparity, coupled with environmental, institutional, and attitudinal barriers, significantly restricts employment opportunities for AT users in LMICs.

Bridging the gap: The role of assistive technology for inclusive employment

The disability employment gap is a global concern, with only one in three persons with disabilities employed, and those who are employed often earn less than their non-disabled counterparts. Youth with disabilities face even greater challenges, with twice the risk of exclusion from education, employment, or training. While employment is a cornerstone of socio-economic inclusion, individuals with AT needs encounter significant barriers to workforce participation, including limited access to education, negative perceptions of disability, inaccessible workplaces, inadequate skills training, and a lack of reasonable workplace accommodations (such as environmental modifications and AT provision).

A call to action: Building a robust assistive technology ecosystem for employment

Addressing stigma and inaccessibility is crucial, and AT is a vital part of the solution to tackling socio-economic disparities and underemployment for persons with disabilities. AT empowers individuals to perform tasks, communicate effectively, and navigate workplaces with greater independence. However, systemic challenges such as limited availability of affordable AT and insufficient support services continue to hinder access, particularly in LMICs. Integrating the provision of AT into employment policies and programmes is essential to fostering inclusive work environments and mitigating these barriers.

This side event will present recent findings from a soon-to-be-published policy brief by the ILO and ATscale, highlighting the critical role of AT in enhancing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and other AT users in LMICs. The brief delves into the barriers faced by AT users and employers in accessing AT for employment purposes and the positive impact of AT on accessibility, performance, and career advancement.

Representatives from government, the private sector, users with lived experience, and international organizations will share their expertise on creating enabling workplaces that facilitate access to AT. The event will explore the policy and practical steps needed to build a robust AT ecosystem that supports both employers and AT users in obtaining affordable and appropriate AT.

Examples of progress: A global shift towards inclusive employment

Australia recognizes investments in AT as a strategic investment, with evidence supporting its economic and social benefits. Zimbabwe has taken a significant step by removing VAT on assistive products, making them more accessible and affordable. Nigeria introduced an "access to work" scheme, providing grants for assistive products in the workplace, demonstrating a growing commitment to inclusive employment practices. In Kenya companies such as Safaricom are spearheading initiatives to provide AT and the inclusion of AT in youth training programmes like the IT Bridge Academy.

This side event will provide a platform for sharing best practices, fostering collaboration, and advocating for policies that promote inclusive employment and ensure access to AT for all.

CO-SPONSORS AND PARTNERS

- Government of Australia
- Government of Zimbabwe
- Government of Nigeria / Kenya
- UNOPS
- ATscale, the Global Partnership for Assistive Technology
- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- International Disability Alliance (IDA)
- Microsoft

SIDE EVENT COORDINATION

ATscale:

- **Ceridwen Johnson**, Advocacy and Communications Advisor,
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