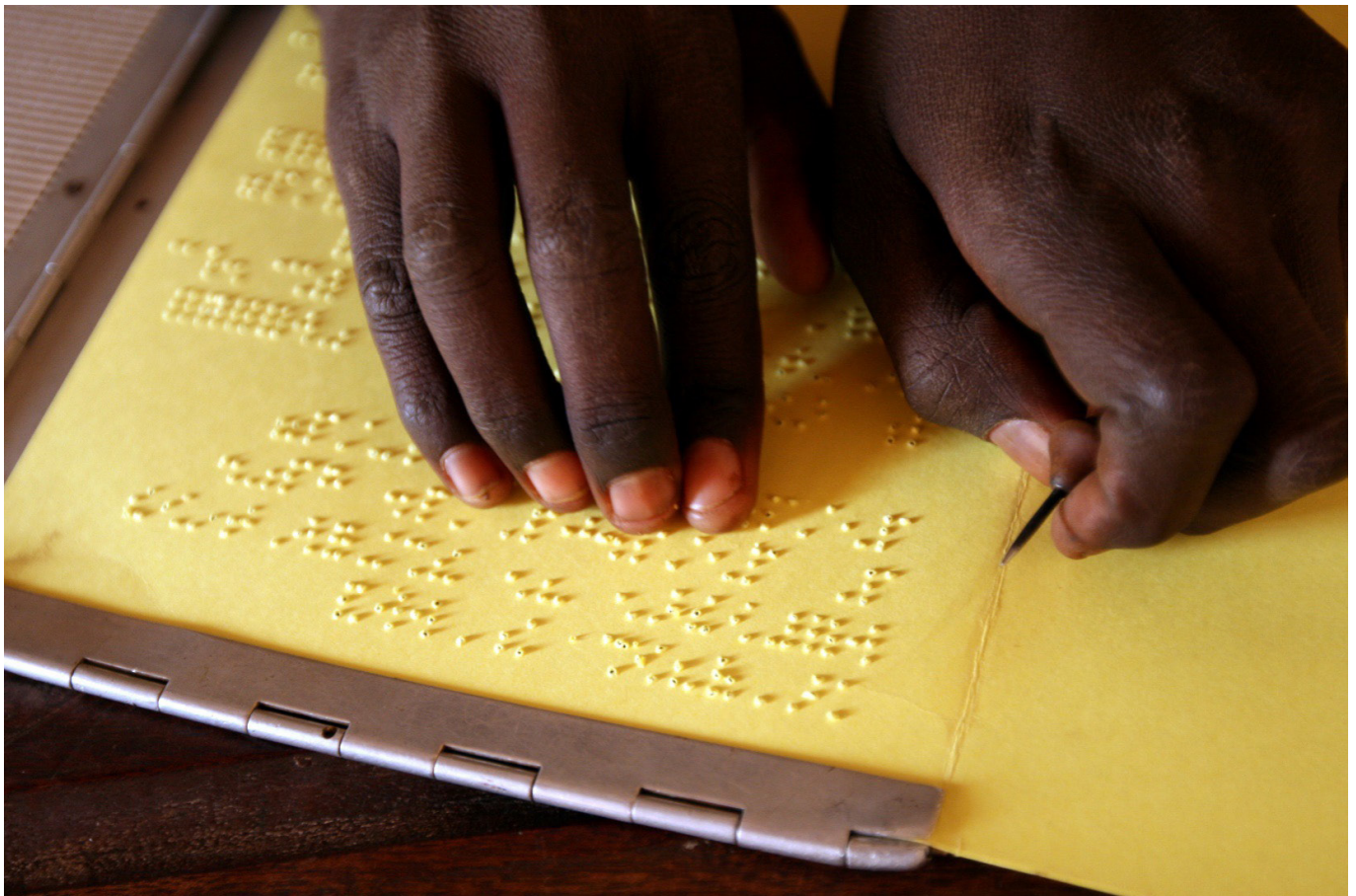


January 2023

# Inclusive Safeguarding



A girl writes braille with a stylus during a lesson in Mali.  
@ Sightsavers

## **Credits**

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## Acronyms

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Stands for</b>
<b>CHS</b>	Core Humanitarian Standard
<b>CPWG</b>	Child Protection Working Group
<b>CRPD</b>	Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities
<b>OPD</b>	Organisations of Persons with Disabilities
<b>DFAT</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
<b>FCDO</b>	UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
<b>IASC</b>	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
<b>IDDC</b>	International Disability and Development Consortium
<b>KCS</b>	Keep Children Safe
<b>NSPCC</b>	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
<b>SDG</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>SEAH</b>	Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation

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## Summary

The International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC) and its members aim to promote inclusive development by ensuring all people are treated equally and are fully included in human development outcomes of international development.

The consortium commends gains that have been made in disability-inclusive development but also recognises the risks for people with disabilities who are in programmes that do not safeguard them effectively.

People with disabilities often experience harm due to the structural exclusion, discrimination and injustices they experience because of their disability. These experiences are present in the work of international development practitioners and organisations. To help eradicate them, organisations and individuals are obligated to identify the ways their work specifically put people with disabilities at increased risk.

They must also adopt inclusive mitigation strategies that protect the dignity, wellbeing and safety of all people.

Organisations and their representatives are bound to safeguard people with disabilities due to the human rights conceptual framework, which is based on standards set out by universal human rights conventions.

**We are, therefore, duty-bound to safeguard people with disabilities at work by our commitment to uphold human rights, not simply as a risk mitigation exercise.**

This document states IDDC's stance on disability-inclusive safeguarding, acting as a point of reference for our members. It is also a position paper and advocacy tool for demanding disability-inclusive safeguarding.

## Background

For decades, the international development, aid and humanitarian sectors have developed various standards of safeguarding to protect those we work with from abuse.

These have been driven by several international instruments, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

International standards for safeguarding include the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) principles on preventing and responding to sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH); Keeping Children Safe (KCS), Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), Child Protection Working Group (CPWG), Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action and InterAction non-government organisation standards.

Until recently, existing guidance failed to address the specific challenges and approaches required to fully protect children, youth or adults with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, Able Child Africa and Save the Children International have published 'Disability-Inclusive Child Safeguarding Guidelines' for international development practitioners looking to better safeguard children with disabilities in their work.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Disability-inclusive child safeguarding guidelines. Appendix 1: Gaps in existing resources and guidance. [https://ablechildafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Able\\_Child\\_Africa\\_Save\\_The\\_Children\\_DiCS\\_Guidelines\\_Full.pdf](https://ablechildafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Able_Child_Africa_Save_The_Children_DiCS_Guidelines_Full.pdf), Able Child Africa and Save the Children, p.174 (2021).

2. Disability-inclusive child safeguarding guidelines. Appendix 1: Gaps in existing resources and guidance. [https://ablechildafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Able\\_Child\\_Africa\\_Save\\_The\\_Children\\_DiCS\\_Guidelines\\_Full.pdf](https://ablechildafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Able_Child_Africa_Save_The_Children_DiCS_Guidelines_Full.pdf), Able Child Africa and Save the Children, p.174 (2021).

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**Studies have shown that children and adults with disabilities face a higher risk of all types of abuse, neglect and harm when compared with their peers without disabilities.**

Women with disabilities are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than their peers who do not have a disability.<sup>3</sup> A report published by WHO (2012) indicated that children with disabilities are: ‘3.7 times more likely to be victims of violence than children without disabilities.’<sup>4</sup>

The same study also showed that children with disabilities are 2.9 times more likely to be victims of sexual violence.<sup>5</sup>

Studies show that children and adults with disabilities face higher risks of abuse, and they are also less likely to disclose abuse (Hershkowitz et al, 2007; Sullivan and Knutson, 2000).<sup>6</sup>

Reasons for this lower level of disclosure include: reduced opportunity to report, limited education on their rights and definitions of abuse, and unmet or lack of understanding around their communication needs. Fear of the consequences of reporting can also act as a disincentive for reporting.

Parents, educators and caregivers may choose not to educate children or young adults with disabilities about their rights, their sexuality or personal safety strategies in order to “protect” them or because they feel it is unnecessary. This means that individuals with disabilities who experience harm may not have the vocabulary to describe abuse or feel empowered to say no when someone does try to exploit or abuse them.<sup>7</sup>

According to WHO (2019), factors which place people with disabilities at higher risk of violence include stigma, discrimination and a lack of knowledge about disability. Crucially, organisations are all made up of individuals who are influenced by social norms that form unconscious bias, which may include harmful assumptions or attitudes about disability.

Discriminatory attitudes may include the misconception that people with disabilities require less protection, their lives have less worth than the lives of people without disabilities, and they feel or experience harm less acutely than others.

Compounding this, organisations that have failed to embed disability inclusion within their culture, or invest the time or resources needed to fully implement inclusion, are likely to be ill-equipped to develop a safeguarding environment that works for people with disabilities.

**Nevertheless, ignorance, inexperience or misunderstanding are not justifications for organisations putting people with disabilities at increased risk of harm or abuse.**

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3. UNFPA. (2018), Young persons with disabilities: Global study on ending gender-based violence, and realising sexual and reproductive health and rights

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final\\_Global\\_Study\\_English\\_3\\_Oct.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Global_Study_English_3_Oct.pdf) [online]

4. Hughes, K. et al. (2012), Prevalence and risk of violence against adults with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet*; doi:10.1016/S0410-6736(11)61851-5.

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(11\)61851-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(11)61851-5/fulltext) [online].

5. World Health Organisation (2012), Children with disabilities more likely to experience violence.

[https://apps.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2012/child\\_disabilities\\_violence\\_20120712/en/index.html](https://apps.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2012/child_disabilities_violence_20120712/en/index.html) [online].

6. Allnock, D, Baker, H, Miller P (2019), Key messages from research on identifying and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse. Coventry City Council (2022)

[https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/33091/key\\_messages\\_csa\\_disclosures](https://www.coventry.gov.uk/downloads/file/33091/key_messages_csa_disclosures) [online].

7. SafePlace: Domestic violence and Sexual Assault Survival Centre & Kid & National Resource Centre of Domestic Violence (2002), TeenSAFE: An Abuse Prevention Program for Youth with Disabilities.

[https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/NRC\\_KTSafe-full.pdf](https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/NRC_KTSafe-full.pdf) [online].

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The international community is becoming increasingly aware of the additional risks posed to people with disabilities when compared to their peers without disabilities. This is reflected in the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Sustainable Development Goals (2015), the Global Disability Summit (2017) and the development of national policies to safeguard people with disabilities from discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

It is time for international development organisations and practitioners to recognise their own role in upholding the rights of people with disabilities.

## Safeguarding People with Disabilities

IDDC aims to identify the social, physical and institutional barriers which put people with disabilities at higher risk. We work collaboratively with our partners to understand how these barriers challenge the ability of organisations to prevent harm to people with disabilities and to minimise the risk posed to adults and children with disabilities at work.

IDDC are committed to the key principles of safeguarding, which should underpin all safeguarding policies and procedures, as set out by the CHS Alliance, IASC and KCS.

Below we have outlined how these principles must be made relevant for the safeguarding of people with disabilities. To achieve a fully inclusive approach to safeguarding, IDDC members encourage all organisations to review the recommendations below and action them, where appropriate, so that people with disabilities can actively participate in inclusive development.

### 1. Empowerment.

IDDC acknowledges that enabling people with disabilities to fully understand and fight for their own rights is fundamental to ensure their protection.

The IDDC is aware that power imbalances, which are at the root of harm and abuse, can increase the risk of abuse for people with disabilities. For example, evidence has shown those who rely on formal care relationships are more vulnerable to abuse of power. We know that the perceived heroism of caregivers and support workers can, in some cases, embolden and protect perpetrators of abuse who work closely with people with disabilities.

According to MENCAP (2019), people with disabilities are not provided with the same sexual education as their peers. This lack of knowledge contributes to girls with disabilities being four times more likely to be sexually assaulted, as many will not even be aware that they can challenge the abuse that is happening to them.

We believe that having adults with disabilities, particularly women, in prominent positions and leadership roles can challenge harmful stigma that leads to increased risk of abuse among staff and stakeholders.

IDDC promotes people with disabilities having a central role in defining the ways in which they feel safe and identifying the ways in which they wish to be protected.

Safeguarding systems will be strengthened through the meaningful consultation of people with disabilities in the design stage, making it less likely that organisations will design

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8. The UK Disability strategy

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systems that fail to make people with disabilities safe. Furthermore, people with disabilities need to be equipped to hold practitioners and organisations to account on safeguarding commitments. For this to happen, they must be able to fully access, understand and engage with safeguarding policies, procedures and general guidance.

Finally, IDDC also recognises that people with disabilities will never be fully protected without concerted efforts to ensure they are included and empowered through the justice system. Failing to promote and support appropriate access to justice can sometimes be based on misconceptions that they are not relevant or suitable for people with disabilities. This can indirectly empower potential perpetrators and increase the risk of abuse for people with disabilities.

### **Recommendations:**

- Power imbalances must be proactively identified and risks mitigated accordingly.
- Recruit people with disabilities to represent disability perspectives, challenge harmful social norms and tackle power imbalances to prevent abuse.
- Organisations should educate all people with disabilities on their rights and how this relates to an organisation's responsibility to safeguard people with disabilities in its work.
- Where a safeguarding report includes a criminal offence, organisations have a responsibility to support people with disabilities to access justice systems.
- People with disabilities should be consulted in the design or adaptations of safeguarding policies and procedures and empowered to explain where current systems fail them.
- Ensure safeguarding policies are accessible in a range of formats. This includes easy-to-read, pictorial, symbol or sign-based formats.

## **2. Prevention.**

IDDC and its members support a risk-based approach to identifying the risk of harm that can occur because of an organisation's work, in terms of programme delivery and as a result of its campaigns and communications.

In our work, we know that people with disabilities have specific experiences that could put them at increased risk of harm, such as inaccessible training venues or discriminatory attitudes from staff.

Including children, youth or adults with disabilities in the process of identifying risks and potential harm caused by the work we deliver will better allow potential abuse to be effectively identified and mitigated.

### **Recommendations:**

- People with disabilities should be asked directly and in an accessible way what barriers and risks exist in relation to their protection. They should also be included in decisions concerning their own safeguarding.
- Safeguarding risk assessments templates must stipulate or require the mapping of the specific risks and experiences of children and adults with disabilities.
- People with disabilities must participate fully in the design of programmes, campaigns or communications to help establish initiatives, risks and mitigating measures.

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### 3. Accountability

All people with disabilities have a right to report abuse, harm and share feedback with our organisations. IDDC recognises that policies and procedures can never be fully accessible or appropriate unless people with disabilities have been given meaningful opportunities to assess their appropriateness and identify gaps in existing practices.

It is impossible to know if safeguarding systems are working unless we provide frequent opportunities for people with disabilities to hold organisations to account.

IDDC acknowledges that people with disabilities may have fewer opportunities to disclose abuse due to isolation and dependency on others, who may be the perpetrators of abuse.

Moreover, many existing reporting mechanisms do not consider universal design, accessibility or the intersectional barriers people with disabilities may experience when reporting concerns or giving feedback on safeguarding processes. People with disabilities may be unable to reach places where reports can be made or communicate effectively through the feedback mechanisms.

#### Recommendations:

- People with disabilities must be made aware of safeguarding reporting procedures and available feedback mechanisms. They should also be encouraged to hold organisations to account on their safeguarding practices for people with disabilities.
- People with disabilities must be given access to ample opportunities to provide meaningful feedback and to report safeguarding incidents. This includes ensuring feedback mechanisms are available in multiple formats and in accessible locations.

### 4. Intersectionality

The IDDC recognises that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group.

The intersection of disability, gender, age, socio-economic status, religion and ethnicity means the risks people with disabilities experience are complex and distinct.

We know that the intersection of age, disability and gender means girls with disabilities experience multidimensional discrimination and disadvantage. We also know that they are at increased risk of sexual abuse, violence and exploitation.

We know that the intersectionality of age and disability usually means children with disabilities are considered incapable of making their own choices. As a result, caregivers, duty bearers and practitioners speak on their behalf, making decisions and assumptions on what is in their best interests without consulting them, putting them at further risk of harm.

We also know that people with disabilities are more likely to be living in poverty with increased dependency on the services our organisations provide, creating a power imbalance that makes them especially susceptible to exploitation and abuse.

#### Recommendations:

- Raise awareness with organisational leaders, staff and project stakeholders of the intersectionality of disability, age, gender, socio-economic status, religion and ethnicity, and how combinations of these characteristics can compound the safeguarding risks individuals experience.
- Ensure a gender sensitive approach is taken to disability-inclusive safeguarding, highlighting the increased risks and unique experiences for women and girls with disabilities, including identifying appropriate and disability inclusive support services for girls and women with disabilities who have experienced abuse.



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- Design safeguarding training, materials, reporting mechanisms and response processes that make efforts to overcome the multi-layered systematic disadvantages many people with disabilities experience.

## 5. Proportionality.

Proportionality is important for disability inclusive safeguarding. Organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) are often smaller, volunteer-led organisations that have experience in keeping people safe, but they do not always have the resources or capacity to meet international safeguarding standards as they are interpreted.

OPDs need to be supported by those funding or partnering them to help safeguard people with disabilities within the scope and capacity of that organisation, recognising the approaches they already adopt to keep people safe or 'do no harm' (see Partnership below).

IDDC also supports a 'do no harm' approach while responding to safeguarding incidents involving people with disabilities. Protecting people with disabilities is complex. Stigma, increased levels of poverty and a lack of key medical and care services can sometimes mean that interventions meant to protect people with disabilities can put them at risk of further harm.

IDDC recognises that responding proportionally to safeguarding incidents concerning people with disabilities may differ from usual practice. When working with adults and children with disabilities, an individualised response that considers broader wellbeing is crucial.

IDDC believes that to 'do no harm', we need a 'survivor-centred approach', where action taken following an incident respects the wishes of the survivor. We know that preconceptions or unconscious bias relating to disability can lead to inappropriate responses that cause emotional distress or additional harm to people with disabilities.

The IDDC believes that consulting, listening to and empowering people with disabilities during the response process will mean that responses are more likely to be in their best interest.

### Recommendations:

- Recognise the experiences of OPDs in keeping people safe and provide the necessary support to strengthen them, in line with the organisation's capacity and resources.
- In line with a survivor-centred approach to safeguarding responses, people with disabilities should be meaningfully included in decision-making relating to safeguarding concerns that involve them.
- Those tasked with responding to safeguarding incidents must be sensitive to the specific experiences of people with disabilities and be provided with training on responding to incidents that involve people with disabilities.
- Conduct referral mapping with OPDs and disability-inclusive support services.
- All safeguarding responses should consider the best interests of the individual and actively challenge assumptions, prejudice or bias that may hinder the response process.

## 6. Protection.

The IDDC recognises signs of abuse may differ for people with disabilities. Signs that can be observed by a change in appearance or behaviour may differ, and signs that can be observed in the interaction between child and responsible adult may be more of a concern. Conversely, generally accepted signs of abuse can, but may not necessarily be, an indication of harm in people with disabilities.

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People with disabilities are more likely to exhibit nonverbal behaviours as signs of adverse experiences. It is important that individual behaviours of people with disabilities are recognised as communicative and interpreted as far as possible, not simply attributed to an individual's impairment (Taylor et al, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

It is equally important to emphasise that abuse and grooming can happen more easily with care providers responsible for protecting people with disabilities.

Those responsible for personal assistance or personal care for people with disabilities can make efforts to ensure colleagues see them as a 'good person' and convince others that concerning behaviour is harmless and part of their role.

The IDDC underlines that inappropriate, inaccurate and insensitive language is a form of abuse. Language, intentionally or unintentionally, can be derogatory, stigmatising or belittling, causing emotional harm to people with disabilities. This is particularly true for children with disabilities whose life-long self-esteem and self-worth may be determined by how they are characterised and described by others.

### **Recommendations:**

- Raise awareness in communities, institutions and with project stakeholders of the higher risks of abuse and particular signs of abuse with people with disabilities, and encouraging them to take action.
- Work with people with disabilities to identify correct terminology and to ensure they are treated with respect and have their dignity protected in programme delivery.
- Challenge assumptions that care providers are rarely perpetrators of abuse.

## **7. Partnership**

IDDC works with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) at a national, regional and local level to ensure our programmes are proportionate and meet the needs of the individuals where we work. IDDC believes respectful and professional partnership with OPDs for safeguarding will ensure the voices of people with disabilities are heard and reflected at all levels of the safeguarding process, which will help us meet our aim – to leave no one behind. We believe the involvement of representatives of people with disabilities when discussing safeguarding will ensure they are better safeguarded and that safeguarding processes are CRPD compliant.

IDDC believes that local government and national ministries have a vital part to play in preventing, detecting and reporting neglect and abuse of people with disabilities. Many of our member organisations also collaborate with governments to advocate for more accessible and inclusive national policies and services. This should also apply to child protection policies and survivor services for people with disabilities.

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9. Taylor et al. (2015), Key messages from research on identifying and responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse. [https://www.csacentre.org.uk/index.cfm/\\_api/render/file/?method=inline&fileID=7C7BB562-DB13-4C7E-B8C21D04920D6AEF](https://www.csacentre.org.uk/index.cfm/_api/render/file/?method=inline&fileID=7C7BB562-DB13-4C7E-B8C21D04920D6AEF) [online]

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## Recommendations:

- Safeguarding practices should be led by and informed by people with disabilities, including children.
- Engage OPDs as stakeholders and partners in all activities to address structural barriers and safeguarding risks which people with disabilities experience.
- National and regional legislation for protection should include accessible reporting at a community level.
- Special attention should be given to ensure the voices of organisations for women with disabilities are heard throughout the safeguarding process.
- Raise awareness with governments on the higher risks to and rates of abuse of people with disabilities, and lobby to ministries for disability inclusive protection policies and services.

To find out more about the IDDC, please visit our website  
<https://www.iddcconsortium.net/>

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