



► The ‘Why’ and ‘How’ of National Business and Disability Networks

1. Why are NBDNs needed?

Companies – independent of their size, industry sector or geographical location – increasingly recognise that the inclusion of persons with disabilities is an economic and ethical imperative. Typically, like other societal actors, enterprises are on a learning journey regarding the way disability inclusion, including the employment of persons in their own workforces, can be made effective and sustainable. National Business and Disability Networks (NBDNs) can provide non-judgmental and encouraging employers-led platforms at country level. At the end of 2023, some forty NBDNs in all world regions existed, with almost all of them also being members of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network (GBDN) – which acts as a network of networks to facilitate the peer-to-peer sharing and adoption of good practices in managing NBDNs.



World map indicating countries with NBDNs that are members of the ILO Global Business and Disability Network

2. What are NBDNs doing?

NBDNs can facilitate peer-to-peer learning among businesses and the mutual exchange of good corporate policies and practices on disability issues. Several mechanisms can be employed for enabling the direct learning by companies from other companies, including working groups on particular topics – e.g. accessibility, inclusive recruitment, collaboration with non-business actors – workshops, webinars, conferences and the development of publications compiling good practices.

Further, NBDNs can lead on developing and providing technical guidance to their corporate members on the many areas enterprises can tackle to become more inclusive of persons with disabilities. The ILO GBDN offers a free self-assessment tool, which companies apply at country level, so NBDNs can serve as facilitating entities for enterprises to use the tool, encourage them to share the identified key areas that need improvement and prioritise NBDNs’ areas of work.

In addition, NBDNs have the potential to serve as the single voice of businesses at country level on disability issues vis-à-vis other societal actors, including Ministries of Labour, vocational training institutions, trade unions, and organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) – with the view of contributing to a conducive and enabling environment for companies to promote disability

Business Talent Compacts: “Digital in Demand” in China

Business Talent Compacts are business-led groupings of relevant labour market actors at national level to reshape how companies can tap into a pipeline of persons with disabilities who, on a regular basis, graduate from mainstream providers of vocational skills training with particular skill sets sought by local employers.

Such a Business Talent Compact was established in 2022 within the framework of the NBDN for China, i.e. the ILO GBDN-China Chapter, focusing on the digital skills that are in demand by companies locally. “Digital in Demand” in China contributes to making mainstream training providers on digital skills inclusive of trainees with disabilities, and facilitates their employment after graduation in the company members of the Business Talent Compact.

inclusion, including a more equitable national labour market for people with disabilities. NBDNs can build the bridge between enterprises committed to employing people with disabilities and job seekers with disabilities.

3. Who are the members in NBDNs?

3.1. Companies

NBDNs are spaces for and by enterprises. Therefore, the primary – and sometimes only – membership category in NBDNs is the one for companies, which can include both private and public sector companies.



Stalls featuring business partners and assistive technology start-ups at the 2023 conference of the India Business and Disability Network, hosted by the Confederation of Indian Industry, and initially supported financially by the German government

The size – e.g. small and medium-sized enterprises, nationally operating companies or local branches of multinational enterprises – or industry sectors companies pertain to are not of importance for belonging to an NBDN. Rather, a genuine willingness to improve their disability inclusion policies and practices is the most basic requirement for companies to jointly establish or join existing NBDNs.

NBDNs, either from the beginning or at a later stage, can formalise membership for companies, including through the requirement to have company CEOs or other managers sign membership agreements or Charters – inspired by the ILO GBDN Charter that CEOs of the multinational enterprise members have to sign when joining the ILO GBDN.

3.2. Non-business entities

Whether or not non-business entities, including OPDs and disability NGOs, should be able to become (associate) members of an NBDN should remain a decision by the corporate members of the respective NBDN and depends on the particular local context and dynamics.

However, NBDNs certainly benefit from having consultation mechanisms with non-business actors in place. Further, an NBDN might also decide at a later stage to open itself up to membership by non-business actors. If non-business entities are part of an NBDN, it is crucial to define their specific roles and contributions to the NBDN to ensure continued business ownership of the NBDN.

4. Who hosts NBDNs?

Examples of the type of entities that are hosting NBDNs are diverse and include national employers associations, (national or international) disability NGOs with business expertise and United Nations Global Compact local networks at country level. Typically, having national employers federations hosting NBDNs has seen several advantages, including benefiting from a broader general membership base, as well as its credibility and contacts in the national business community.

Effective governance: Nigeria Business and Disability Network

Incubated by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria and the Sightsavers country office, the Nigeria Business and Disability Network's first executive board was nominated by general members in 2020, with board members' roles and responsibilities assigned based on interests and capacities. There are five directorates headed by a board member each, with general members as directorate members and clearly defined Terms of Reference. Membership is strictly corporate and not individual.

Further, for its membership base, the network established certain shares per entity type, i.e. 70% for private sector companies, 20% for OPDs, and 10% for development partners and international NGOs.



5. How are NBDNs governed and run?

5.1. Strategic leadership by companies

To ensure business ownership and alignment of an NBDN's work with companies' needs on disability issues, it is essential that corporate members are enabled to assume decision-making responsibilities and set the strategic direction of the NBDN. Typically, a sub-set of enterprise members comes together in a steering committee, which meets on a regular basis and whose decisions inform the day-to-day management of the NBDN.



Members of the Steering Committee of the Kenya Business and Disability Network, December 2021, which was created with financial support from the UK government

If the NBDN also comprises non-business members, their potential role in a steering committee should be clearly defined. For instance, it is essential that an NBDN is always chaired by a corporate and not a non-business member. In any case, the NBDN governance structure should be put in writing and agreed upon by the NBDN founding members.

5.2. Day-to-day coordination

A technical secretariat is needed to lead on the implementation of NBDNs' activities on a daily basis, such as peer-to-peer learning and capacity building events for companies, development of technical guidance on disability issues, awareness raising campaigns, external communications about the NBDN and its members' work, recruitment of members, resource mobilisation, linking the NBDN with strategic partners, and convening meetings of the NBDN's steering committee. The more human resources can be dedicated to the technical secretariat, the more impactful and successful the NBDN will be. Organisations that host NBDNs, e.g. national employers federations, typically also act as the technical secretariat of the NBDN.

Employers associations hosting NBDNs: Federation of Chilean Industry (SOFOFA)

The Chilean Network of Inclusive Companies (*Red de Empresas Inclusivas de Chile*) is an initiative of the Federation of Chilean Industry (*Sociedad de Fomento Fabril (SOFOFA)*). Since the establishment of the network in 2015, it has attracted close to a hundred company members.

6. Who supports NBDNs?

If they do not already act as host organisation for the NBDN or are members in the NBDN, national employers federations, United Nations Global Compact local networks, chambers of commerce, industry-specific associations, OPDs as well as (national or international) disability NGOs with business expertise can be important strategic allies in both getting an NBDN established and contributing to its long-term sustainability and success. Initially, the NBDN might lack basic disability inclusion expertise, so establishing or reinforcing relationships with OPDs and disability NGOs can be crucial.

Moreover, public authorities, e.g. dealing with employment or disability issues, philanthropic foundations, bilateral and multilateral development cooperation partners as well as ILO country offices can be partners to launch and sustain NBDNs. The ILO GBDN can also facilitate contacts at national, regional and global level that can be beneficial to NBDNs. For instance, country-level counterparts of the global focal points in the ILO GBDN multinational enterprise members can be encouraged to join new or existing NBDNs on behalf of their companies.

7. How are NBDNs created?

The establishment of NBDNs does not follow a strict pattern and is rather dependent on the dynamics in any given (national) context. However, experience has shown that there are factors that increase the

likelihood of establishing a NBDN that delivers added value to businesses on disability issues in the long run.

It is important to identify a core group of businesses committed to disability inclusion at country level. These companies might have already done leading work on other diversity factors like the promotion of gender equality. The ILO GBDN, through its membership base of multinational enterprises, can support in identifying local branches of such global companies in the country.



Participants of a two-day ILO GBDN workshop for NBDNs in Latin America, September 2017

In addition to bilateral meetings with companies committed to disability inclusion, discussions with groups of business representatives can prepare the groundwork for identifying the key areas an NBDN in the country should work on as well as for starting to develop a robust governance structure. For these initial discussions, some of the supporting entities mentioned above can play an essential role in facilitating them and ensuring an approach that does not leave out key actors in the NBDN development process.

8. How do NBDNs sustain themselves?

Reflecting on how to ensure the sustainability of NBDNs from the outset is key. Preparations for an official launch of a new NBDN should not distract from the long-term planning on how the NBDN will deliver added value to its membership base in the time following its launch.

At a fundamental level, funding is needed for the human resources of the NBDN's technical secretariat and the implementation of essential activities. While some seed funding might be available for launching and running NBDNs during their initial phase, it will be important to diversify NBDN's funding streams. This can include funding from domestic and international partners, charging fees for NBDN's activities and membership, and linking the NBDN's work to development programmes in which NBDNs can play the role of implementing partners.

In addition to financial sustainability, NBDNs need to pay attention to expanding its membership base after the initial attention received when launched and to the continued provision of activities and services that are perceived as relevant and of high quality.

The ILO GBDN, as network of networks, also facilitates the exchange of good practices among NBDNs and has organised regional and global workshops dedicated to improving NBDNs' performance in a sustainable manner.

Ensuring financial sustainability: Bangladesh Business and Disability Network

The Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) was established as a non-profit trust under the Bangladesh Employers' Federation. It has different categories for annually paid membership, including companies and not-for-profit organisations. The fees collected have created a reserve for the network to fund core activities, overheads, and bridge periods between externally funded projects. BBDN has successfully attracted funds from international development partners for the implementation of several projects - most notably two funded by the UK government, three funded by the German government, four ILO projects - which were in turn funded by the government of Canada, the European Union and the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD)'s Multi-Partner Trust Fund - as well as one funded by the Standard Chartered Bank Global Foundation.

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