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LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

# Rights and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities: Finland's Foreign Policy Approach



MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF FINLAND  
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# Finland's foreign policy approach to rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities

About 16% of the world's population are persons with disabilities, of which approximately 80% live in developing countries.<sup>1</sup> Persons with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty than persons without disabilities due to stigma, discrimination and physical, communication and information barriers to accessing employment, education and other basic services. Women and girls with disabilities, who constitute globally about 20% of all women, face even greater risks due to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.<sup>2</sup>

Rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, are a long-standing priority in Finland's human rights-based foreign and security policy, including in development and humanitarian policies. For decades Finland has recognised disability as a human rights issue. With its human rights-based approach, Finland aims to eliminate barriers to full, effective and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in society on an equal basis with others.

## Equality and non-discrimination of persons with disabilities

Finland's development policy priority on equality of persons with disabilities is based on its human rights-based approach and its overarching objective to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and achieve the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals. Its principle of Leaving No One Behind is inherent in the implementation of the development policy. In 2016 Finland ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Its article 32 obliges States Parties to ensure that international development is inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities.



Finland applies a triple-track approach in the implementation of the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities by 1) supporting disability-specific interventions; 2) mainstreaming disability inclusion across policies and programmes; and 3) actively promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in policy dialogue and global advocacy.

Non-discrimination as a core human rights principle and the emphasis on disability inclusion is one of the cross-cutting objectives in Finland's development policy. Its implementation is part of internal quality assurance and analysis of results data. In 2016, Finland was the first country to adopt a disability marker for monitoring this priority in development cooperation programming and financing.

## Rights of women and girls with disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities experience multiple and intersecting discrimination. As a result, women and girls with disabilities face increased risks of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, harassment exploitation and abuse.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, they are often excluded from sexual and reproductive health and rights services and comprehensive sexuality education.<sup>4</sup>

Finland supports gender equality mainstreaming in all aspects of foreign and security policy, including eliminating multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender and disability. Promoting the rights of women and girls with disabilities in gender programming and mainstreaming gender equality in disability programming are key priorities. Finland advocates for systems, structures and services that are inclusive and accessible to women and girls with disabilities. UN Women and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) are Finland's main partners in promoting gender equality. Finland funds programmes addressing sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. Disability. Key Facts. 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> UN Population Fund. Young Persons with Disabilities: Global Study on Ending Gender-Based Violence, and realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights. 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.





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# Meaningful participation of persons with disabilities

‘Nothing about us without us’ is the powerful slogan of the global disability movement. The human rights principles of participation and inclusion are realized in Finland’s foreign and security policy by ensuring the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in policy advocacy, decision-making and in programme and project planning, implementation and monitoring. This approach is largely a result of advocacy by the strong Finnish disability movement, which has significantly influenced the agenda of promoting the rights of persons with disabilities in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland (MFA).

The MFA’s Unit for Human Rights Policy coordinates an international disability policy group consisting of members from Finnish disability and development organisations, civil society organisations, academia and relevant public sector authorities responsible for implementation of the CRPD. The purpose of the group is to discuss current international disability policy issues, themes and events, consult with Finnish disability advocates, share information, learn from each other and plan joint policy priorities and activities. In addition to these meetings the MFA has a close relationship and maintains regular contact and coordination with Finnish disability and development organisations.

Finland’s unique approach is its strong focus on supporting the capacity of the organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), especially grassroots disability advocates in developing countries. The majority of Finnish support to rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities is channelled through civil society funding to programmes and projects that are fully designed and implemented by persons with disabilities themselves. This Finnish and Nordic model of partnerships between OPDs in developed and developing countries is internationally recognized as a good practice.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities. A/75/186. 2020.



# Strategic priorities and key partners in advancing rights of persons with disabilities

## Finland's international commitments

Finland is a global champion for disability inclusive policies, strategies and programmes as well as accountability mechanisms for respecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Finland has reaffirmed its commitment to promote the rights of persons with disabilities and made international commitments to this end e.g. in Global Disability Summits. These commitments include policy advocacy in the European Union (EU) and with bilateral and multilateral partners to promote disability inclusive and gender transformative policies; support to the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD); promoting disability-inclusive education; and strengthening disability inclusion in both disaster risk reduction and humanitarian action and in peace processes and peacebuilding.

## 1. Championing the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities

### International partnerships in global advocacy

Finland, together with a group of like-minded partners, established the Global Action on Disability (GLAD) Network in late 2015. GLAD members are committed to collectively increasing coordination of their disability-inclusive contributions, learning from each other by sharing knowledge and to strengthening partnerships and disability inclusion in global initiatives. As one of the founding members, Finland continues its active membership in the GLAD Network and its thematic working groups. Since 2020 Finland has been represented in the GLAD Network and other international fora by the Ambassador for Disability Inclusion.

The rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities are a consistent agenda point in Finland's interactions with multilateral organisations and participation in their governing bodies. For example, Finland





advocated for specific attention to the rights and inclusion of women with disabilities during its membership on the UN Women Executive Board in 2018-2021. Finland also played an active role during its membership of the International Fund for Agricultural Development Executive Board for making disability inclusion part of the replenishment cycle results and in advocating for the disability inclusion strategy endorsed in 2022. Finland has successfully promoted the inclusion of the rights of persons with disabilities in numerous World Bank's International Development Association replenishment negotiations. For several years, Finland has invested in seconding disability rights experts to multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank and the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Finland has also seconded several disability experts to international humanitarian organisations, such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Finland played a key role in ensuring the adoption of the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), a system-wide policy and accountability framework to mainstream disability inclusion throughout the UN. Finland has financed and continues to support the Strategy's implementation in international partnerships at all levels.

*Finland is known among Member States and officials of the Council of the EU for its expertise and support for rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, Finland took advantage of its Presidency of the Council to put disability on the agenda. Finland gained political support for disability-inclusive humanitarian action in the Council conclusions on humanitarian assistance and international humanitarian law. Finland also ensured progressive enabling language on multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender and disability in the EU Gender Action Plan II Council conclusions.*

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<sup>6</sup> MFA. Evaluation of the Finnish Development Policy Influencing in the European Union, Thematic Brief – Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2022.



## Accountability and human rights mechanisms

The Government of Finland 2022 Report on Human Rights Policies emphasizes its commitments to strengthening non-discrimination, equality and participatory rights of persons with disabilities.<sup>7</sup>

Finland is a long-time supporter of the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is an important human rights mechanism to support the implementation of the CRPD and the broader human rights framework as well as for addressing human rights violations that persons with disabilities face.

Finland advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities, including women and girls with disabilities, in resolution negotiations and speeches, and in organising thematic side events on current issues during UN Human Rights Council sessions and at the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD. For instance, during its membership of the Human Rights Council in 2022-2024, Finland prioritises intersections of gender and disability as cross-cutting issues. Finland's term in 2021-2022 as President of the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD saw an emphasis in civil society participation and increased accessibility throughout the UN system. Finland presided over the most accessible and inclusive Conference to date by providing easy-to-read versions of the Conference program and background notes. As part of the follow-up to Finland's Conference Presidency, the Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN together with International Disability Alliance (IDA) drew up a handbook on organising accessible meetings at the UN.

## Emerging issues: climate action, anti-corruption, trade

The rights of persons with disabilities are still not adequately respected and integrated globally in many sectors and thematic areas. Persons with disabilities are often overlooked and excluded from issues that affect them. Exclusion often leads to more harmful impacts on persons with disabilities compared to persons without disabilities. Finland's and other States' efforts are needed to draw attention to these gaps. With this intention, climate action, trade policy, anti-corruption and peace and security are areas where Finland is expanding its advocacy on disability inclusion.



Disability-inclusive climate action is an emerging area globally and in Finland's policy advocacy. Finland has supported the participation of OPDs in climate conferences and events that raise awareness of the disproportionate impact of climate change on persons with disabilities and the lack of disability-inclusive climate action.

The global inclusive trade agenda has thus far focused mainly on inclusion of women and youth, and has paid limited attention to persons with disabilities. In 2022, Finland commissioned a study on Inclusive Trade and Persons with Disabilities, which sought to increase knowledge and raise awareness on the multiple ways in which international trade can affect the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. Further, the study identified policies and programmes that could support persons with disabilities to benefit from trade opportunities.

At Finland's request, U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre conducted a first-of-its-kind study on how corruption affects the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities. As very little research exists on this issue, the study included interviews with OPDs to collect data on first-hand experiences of persons with disabilities. The study brought attention to how corruption is caused, enabled and exacerbated by discrimination against persons with disabilities.

## **2. Support to the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

Finland supports and cooperates with several organisations in order to strengthen the capacity of duty bearers to respect and protect human rights. One of these organisations is the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), a multi-partner trust fund managed by the UN Development Programme. The UNPRPD facilitates coalition building and capacity development at global, regional and country level. The focus is on supporting national stakeholders, particularly governments in collaboration with OPDs, to effectively implement the CRPD and achieve disability-inclusive internationally agreed development goals.

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<sup>7</sup> MFA. Government of Finland Report on Human Rights Policy. 2022.





*Women and girls with disabilities face higher rates of sexual and reproductive health rights violations compared to their peers without disabilities. Because of harmful norms related to gender and disability, women and girls with disabilities are forced and coerced into sterilisation, contraception and abortion. In the UNPRPD joint programme in Georgia, UN Development Programme, UNFPA, UN Human Rights Office, and the National Network of Women with Disabilities have collaborated to review health legislation and propose amendments to address multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Drafted amendments prohibit discrimination based on disability and ensure protection of the right to informed consent.*





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The MFA participates actively in the UNPRPD Policy Board, Management Committee and Donors Group. Finland's priority in UNPRPD programmes is the integration of transformative approaches that address the intersection of gender and disability. As a result, the UNPRPD has adopted its Guidance Note on Inclusive Gender Transformative Approaches, and in 2022, 32% of UNPRPD programmes included a specific focus on the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

Finland is the largest donor of the UNPRPD having funded the multi-partner trust fund since its creation. At the Global Disability Summit 2022, Finland renewed its long-term commitment to the implementation of the CRPD and inclusive development Agenda 2030 through support to the UNPRPD.

### **3. Inclusive education for persons with disabilities**

Finland has become a valued global leader in promoting the right to quality inclusive education. Despite Finland's relatively small size as a donor, it has been able to capitalise expertise and prestige in this agenda and made a difference in the global agenda of inclusive education.

Finland is committed to promoting inclusive education and the right to education for persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities. To achieve this, the MFA supports systemic transformation in inclusive education in cooperation with partner countries and through





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international partnerships. Finnish development cooperation aims to integrate disability-inclusive education as a key aspect in quality inclusive education throughout education sector programming.

In Finland's partner countries, inclusive education is a key policy dialogue objective in Ethiopia, Nepal and Palestine. In its policy dialogue with multilateral partners implementing education programmes funded by Finland, Finland consistently emphasizes the importance of prioritising the disability-inclusive education agenda. For example, Finland contributed to strengthening the commitment to disability-inclusive education in the Education Cannot Wait fund's strategic plan, and in dialogue with the Global Partnership for Education, the World Bank and the UN Children's Fund.

Finnish experts seconded to the World Bank have systematically promoted inclusive education within the World Bank's education programme. At the Global Disability Summit in 2018, the World Bank committed to making all its education sector projects inclusive by 2025. Inclusive education has become a central part of the World Bank's educational policy measures to respond to the learning crisis.

As a result of Finland's support and the long-term development cooperation of OPDs and civil society organisations, many countries now recognize the right to education of children and youth with disabilities. After three decades of numerous programmes, projects and activities, the attitudes of people towards disability and the lives of persons with disabilities and their families have been transformed.

*Finland's bilateral cooperation for inclusive education has had a significant impact in its partner countries' legislative and policy reforms, and in changing perception and attitudes towards disability. A good example of Finnish impact on the ground is the complementarity of different funding instruments and actors at the country level. Finland has supported education for persons with disabilities in Ethiopia since the 1980s. The MFA, Finnish OPDs and civil society organisations work towards the same goals through different means. One of the results is that a total of 625 schools have established inclusive education resource centres and the number of children with disabilities in schools has increased.*





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## 4. Disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction and humanitarian assistance

Disability inclusion has been a key priority in Finland's humanitarian policy over the last twenty years. Finland has invested in several key initiatives in order to advance the inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian action. For example, in 2013 Finland supported a seminal project implemented by UNHCR to improve disability inclusion in refugee operations. An external evaluation of Finnish humanitarian assistance noted the effectiveness of Finland's contribution and advocacy in promoting disability inclusive humanitarian action, which has led to significant normative achievements,<sup>8</sup> such as its funding to the development of the 2019 Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.







Finland is globally recognised as a leader for disability inclusive humanitarian action through its powerful global advocacy. For example, Finland supported the launching of the Charter for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. As co-chair of the Good Humanitarian Donorship in 2022-2023, Finland advocated for disability inclusion and commissioned a review of disability spending among its main international humanitarian partner organisations.

Disability inclusion is a priority agenda item in its regular bilateral dialogue with international humanitarian organisations, such as the World Food Programme, UNHCR, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In Geneva, Finland co-chairs the Group of Friends of the Charter for Disability Inclusion, which brings together humanitarian stakeholders, including OPDs. Finland has also sponsored numerous awareness-raising events at the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week, the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent and the Global Refugee Forum.

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<sup>9</sup> MFA. Catalysing change: Evaluation of Finland's Humanitarian Assistance 2016-2022. Volume I. Main report. 2022. (Commissioned external evaluation)



*Persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by disaster and armed conflict. They face many barriers in accessing information and life-saving assistance, and are often excluded from planning and implementation of humanitarian programmes. With funding from Finland, the World Food Programme has invested in adapting its systems to better identify and reach persons with disabilities in humanitarian contexts. For example, staff have gained information and technical advice on how to address barriers and improve accessibility through a helpdesk and training on disability issues. Evidence on good practices on disability-inclusive approaches and disability data collection is being developed in partnership with researchers to ensure a systemic approach.*

In its Global Disability Summit 2022 commitments, Finland expanded its humanitarian support to promote disability inclusive disaster risk reduction with the aim of increasing representation and participation of OPDs, including organisations of women with disabilities, in decision-making processes, policies and strategies at all levels. As part of this commitment, Finland provided financial support to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction to better integrate disability inclusion in their work, including ensuring the contributions of OPDs in the mid-term review of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.

## **5. Meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities in peace processes and peacebuilding**

Conflict prevention, peace mediation and peacebuilding are longstanding priorities in Finland's foreign policy. Inclusivity is an integral part of the implementation of these priorities. Finland has invested in advancing the Women, Peace and Security and the Youth, Peace and Security agendas. The lack of participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in global and national peace and security issues is a significant gap and a missed opportunity for rebuilding an inclusive society not only for persons with disabilities but for entire society.





It is important, that persons with disabilities are not seen only as victims in conflicts, but rather as actors, who can contribute to building sustainable peace. In 2022, Finland committed to advancing the rights and meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities in every stage of peace processes and peacebuilding. This means improving accessibility and ensuring the active participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organisations from conflict prevention to conflict resolution and in building sustainable peace.

To implement these commitments, Finland has actively advocated for the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities across UN meetings and negotiations related to peace processes and peacebuilding. Finland also highlighted the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities and OPDs in its national contribution to the UN New Agenda for Peace. Finland has strived to integrate language on the rights of persons with disabilities in negotiation processes related to peacebuilding, for example UN General Assembly negotiations on Peacebuilding Financing and the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. Part of the funding provided by Finland to implementation of the UNDIS targets peacekeeping operations.

In 2022, the MFA together with a consortium of Finnish civil society organisations working in the field of peace mediation, organised the Fifth National Dialogues Conference in Helsinki, and supported the participation and speaking engagements of disability advocates. The Conference included a dedicated session on rights of persons with disabilities, "Breaking the barriers to ensure the active leadership and participation of individuals with disabilities", and also produced key recommendations.

## **Key partners in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities**

Strengthening civil societies in developing countries is a key objective of Finland's development policy. Finland supports civil society actors in achieving sustainable development. Building the capacity of local organisations of persons with disabilities is not only central to Finland's policies but also a core principle of meaningful participation and representation of persons with disabilities.



Two major Finnish disability and development organisations, Disability Partnership Finland and Abilis Foundation, established by Finnish disability advocates, are the main partners of the MFA in its support to building the capacity of persons with disabilities and OPDs in developing countries. A large part of Finland's disability-specific funding is allocated to Finnish OPDs and to their partners in developing countries.

Disability Partnership Finland is an umbrella organisation formed by seven Finnish OPDs representing diverse disability groups and the broader Finnish disability movement. Disability Partnership Finland implements development cooperation programmes together with its Finnish member organisations and with OPDs in developing countries. It also offers expert services in disability inclusion and development to mainstream actors and cooperates with non-governmental organisations, companies, consultancies, public offices and education facilities.

*Persons with disabilities are often overlooked and lack representation in decision-making, for example, in national legislation, policies and development. Disability Partnership Finland strengthens local OPDs in developing countries to better advocate for rights of persons with disabilities. By supporting OPD's governance, management and advocacy skills, the number of local OPD partners contributing to reporting on the implementation of the CRPD has increased significantly during the programme period since 2018. Also, Disability Partnership Finland's technical advice to mainstream development CSOs has increased the participation of local OPDs in Finnish development cooperation.*

Abilis Foundation allocates funds to projects planned and implemented by persons with disabilities in developing countries. Abilis has developed an innovative grant-making mechanism that includes project management tools, country programmes, and a strong cooperation with local and international actors. Abilis also implements a Disability Diplomacy Programme, which is an advocacy initiative to share its expertise on disability inclusion to mainstream development, humanitarian and peace actors.



*The majority of persons with disabilities in developing countries live in poverty because of discrimination and inaccessible environments. Abilis Foundation supports building capacity of OPDs as well as professional training and small businesses of persons with disabilities. In 2021, 45% of Abilis grants supported livelihoods projects and short-term and informal vocational training. Almost 60% of persons with disabilities employed through grants were women with disabilities. In addition to improved income, many participants become active members in their communities.*

These two organisations are important national partners for Finland in advancing disability rights globally and they have demonstrated an important complementary role to other funding instruments of the MFA. This cooperation has been a unique model allowing the MFA to channel funds to local grassroots OPDs that otherwise face significant barriers in accessing donor funding. This approach has proven to be effective and gained attention among the international development community. In 2021 Finland continued funding to programmes of Disability Partnership Finland and Abilis Foundation with OPDs in partner countries. Central issues addressed in their programmes include the rights of women and girls with disabilities, income generation and livelihoods of persons with disabilities and capacity building of local OPDs as an integral part of civil society.

Finland also supports the global disability movement through funding to International Disability Alliance, which is an international organisation representing OPDs globally. It has a long-term programme aimed at building the capacity of disability advocates in developing countries to promote their rights in national policies and legislation. International Disability Alliance is an important partner to Finland in global advocacy and awareness raising, including coordination of the GLAD Network. It advocates at the UN and other international fora for more inclusive global policies for persons with disabilities, especially to ensure that the 2030 Agenda and humanitarian action are disability-inclusive and aligned with the CRPD.

Finland is a long-term donor to the World Federation of the Deaf, which headquarters are in Helsinki, Finland. The Federation is an international organisation representing deaf people's associations globally. It supports the capacity of its member associations and it advocates for the rights and equality of deaf persons, and recognition and respect for sign languages and cultures.



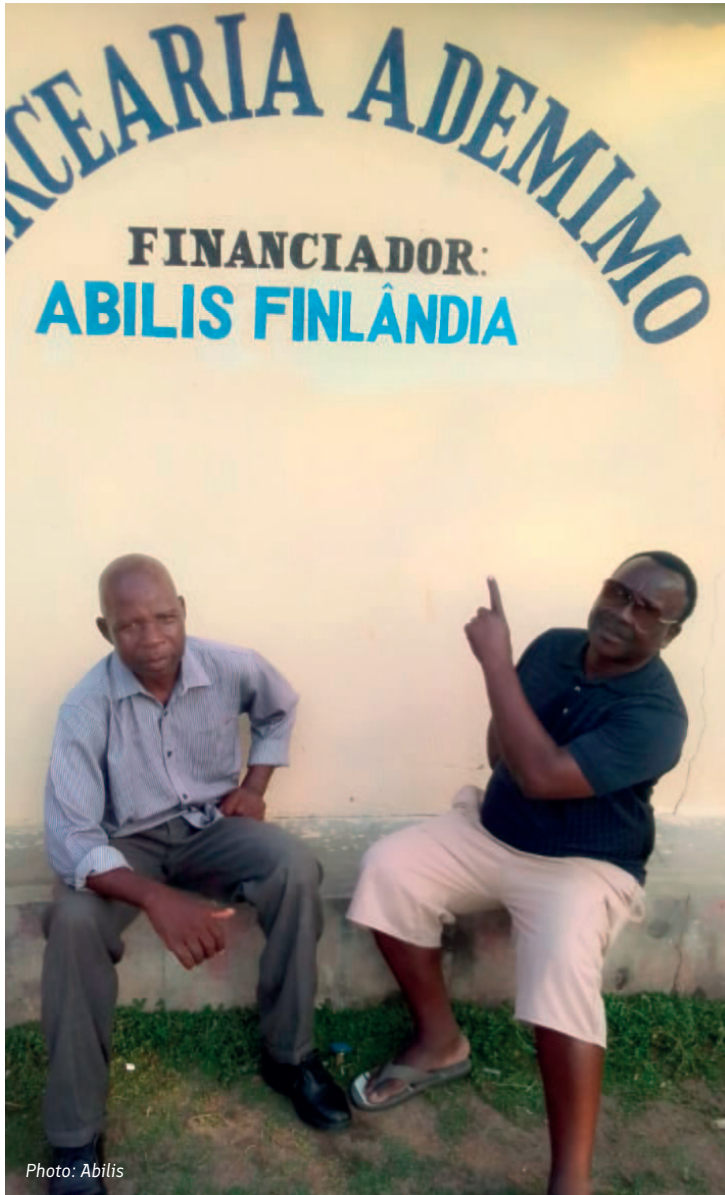


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