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**Bridging the Gap stories: Melaku Tekle,
Executive Director of the Ethiopian
Center for Disability and Development**



My name is Melaku Tekle and I am the Executive director of the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD) (<https://www.ecdd-ethiopia.org/>), which is a development **NGO** working to promote and facilitate the mainstreaming of **disability inclusion**.

As for my personal history, I contracted polio when I was 3 years old and, since then, I have been using crutches to move around more easily. I went to school like any other child although I faced some **accessibility barriers**, for example, I had to walk too far to go to the toilet or I couldn't reach the library books by myself, along with a misconception of disability that, unfortunately, is not much different today. So, it was a challenge to overcome all those barriers but, as it is said, facing those difficulties usually makes one stronger and, despite all that, I managed to get a BA in Public Administration and Development Management, an LLB in Law, and then I did my master's degree in Social Work.

I always wanted to work in the area of **social welfare** and development area and, therefore, I started a path of education in cooperation. Once I finished my studies, finding a job was not easy. It took me two years from my graduation to get a job even though I applied for many positions. Thus, during that time I engaged in some business activities together with friends

and family. But I always knew that education is a weapon to overcome any challenge and that one day I would be able to do the work that I really wanted. So, at one point I met this organization that I now run. And that's where my career began.

I started as a part-time assistant, then I was lucky enough to find a position as a coordinator in an **inclusive livelihood** project. Thanks also to the good mentors and good colleagues who gave me the opportunity to get involved, take on different important positions and achieve good results, I was able to grow professionally to the position I have now. The ECDD focuses on livelihoods, education and disability rights, **social inclusion** and protection, and humanitarian assistance and emergency response. It is a leading organisation with 4 offices in different parts of the country and manages 15 programs supported by many donors around the world.

We invite people to join our group and become more and more united because the unity of persons with disabilities is very necessary. Not only in Ethiopia, but it is a global situation. Together we are stronger, we can truly achieve important goals and have more opportunities to be heard by policymakers and community members and even high-level decision-makers.

I strongly believe that persons with disabilities should be involved and given the opportunity to stand up for things that matter to themselves. The motto '**nothing about us without us**' is actually an essential point, because we know what is really important to us and how to move on. In this sense, we also work to empower our fellows and improve the capacity of advocacy.

Ethiopia is a large nation, and the number of persons with disabilities is equally large. In a population of more than 100 million people, we estimate that between 17 and 18 million live with some form of disability. This is a huge number, and therefore working on the rights of this large group is a must, we cannot do without it. To this end, I would like to draw attention to the fact that persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, but a rich and diverse group. Within this group, some people are more difficult to reach than others and therefore we must consider the needs and the challenges they face.

Most services are not accessible in this country and that is why we have to work hard in that direction, especially to improve the lack of accessibility in



the information. There is also a considerable lack of work among persons with disabilities and this is related to the fact that 85 per cent of persons with disabilities in the country live in poverty. So, the challenge is not in one area or another but is total. Of course, there has been a lot of progress in recent years and we keep on working to improve much more.

Our goal is to achieve an inclusive society and for this purpose **awareness-raising** among both citizens and institutions is really important. We need to work together to push the media to change the way they talk about disabilities and make them more disability-inclusive, we need to use them on a larger scale and in ways that are functional to our messages.

We have come a long way to get here. Persons with disabilities have been seen as subhuman, people who have no dignity, who have no rights, who are objects of charity. However, our rights must be respected like any other member of society. One way to do this is to translate the commitment we have on paper into action and to understand not only the needs but also the abilities that persons with disabilities have. I am optimistic about our capacity to make Ethiopia a more inclusive country. Together we can achieve it.

Melaku Tekle, Executive Director of the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development.

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