

(An Online Event)

May 30, 2023

Timings: Session 1: 8.00 to 11.0 (UTC); Session 2: 13.00 to 16.00 (UTC)

Background and Preamble

The Global Report on Assistive Technology (GReAT)¹ was launched in May 2022 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). It notes the number of people in need of one or more assistive products is likely to rise to 3.5 billion by 2050. Globally, only a small percentage of people who need assistive technologies are able to have them. There is huge opportunities and immense challenges for G20 countries. The report also notes very few countries have a national assistive technology policy or program. Even in developed countries that have provisions, the assistive technology services are stand-alone. In many countries, people with disabilities face difficulties in availing state provided benefits and integrating them into their lifestyles. Hence, there is an acute need for developing innovation ecosystem and promoting startups that are designing and building assistive technologies and thus actively working towards making the world more inclusive.

In this context a dialogue of G20 countries is planned to discuss innovation and startup ecosystem in the space of assistive technologies. Some of the points which needs to be discussed are outlines below.

Funding support and Tax Incentives: New funds/grants need to be established by governments/government aided organizations/private sector to support assistive technology startups. Such financial support could enable these startups to overcome early-stage funding challenges and to overcome valleys of death. This could be in the form of seed funding, grants, low-interest loans, or other forms of flexible financial support. Further, investment into assistive technology startups could be considered as social impact investing and could be linked to the CSR initiatives, encouraging more stakeholders to support such startups. It is suggested that countries create special innovation zones and "Assistive Technology Startup Fund" to accelerate this process. Tax incentive and rebate programs could be introduced to encourage investments into the assistive technology space. Additionally, venture capital funds that focus on investing into such startups could also be given same benefits. Beyond investment, direction needs to be provided to emphasise impact and service delivery of the ATs to targeted areas. Innovative business models are seen as less risky compared to innovative products that need a longer incubation time. New mechanisms to support AT development by bringing in industrial expertise and demonstrating profitability are crucial.

Development of assistive technology standards: Interoperability and compatibility across different devices and platforms is a key challenge for assistive technology startups. G20 nations could support development of assistive technology standards that can increase the ability of assistive technology devices and applications to operate in conjunction with each other. This could help startups to focus on innovation, rather than spending time on interoperability issues. There are also a lot of existing international standards on specific ATs such as the WCAG, WHO Wheelchair Standards etc. As a first step, implementation, utility and iterative improvement of these standards through global collaboration that brings in local experiences and diversity will help in advancing global standards.

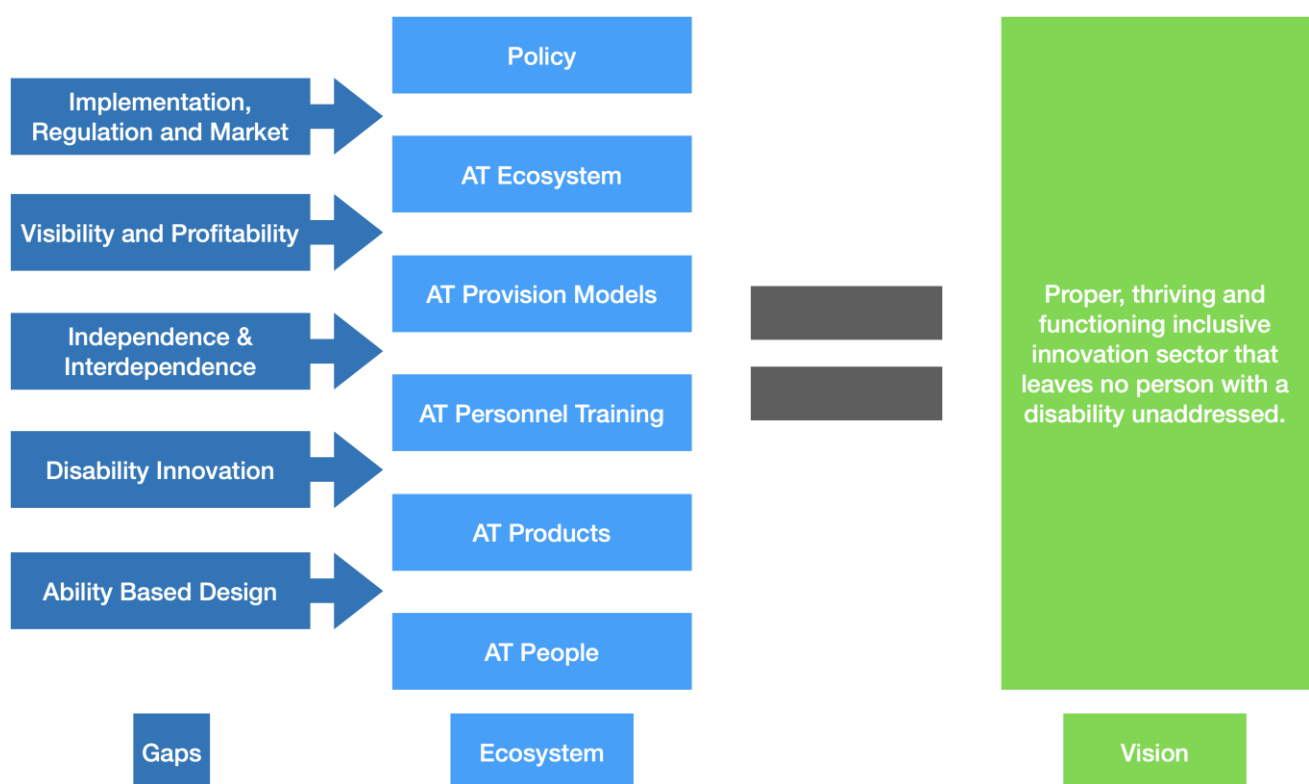
Regulatory clarity: There are several barriers to entry for assistive technology startups to enter global market due to complex regulatory environment in each of G20 nations. This can be resolved by having more clarity on regulatory frameworks, well-defined quality assessment systems and benchmarks for assistive technologies, harmonization of laws pertaining to people with disabilities and streamlined regulatory pathways that enable startups to bring these products

¹ Global Report on Assistive Technology (GReAT)

into market more quickly². As AT encompasses multiple sectors covering medical devices, edtech, digital tech, transportation, architecture sports etc., national and international mechanisms to communicate among these sectors to ease the regulatory systems for AT will be useful.

International Collaboration: Collaboration between startups, academic institutions, industries and social enterprises is key and is necessary to accelerate the development and growth of assistive technology startups. Cross border collaboration need to be fostered, wherein, success story of one nation could be leveraged by another.

Provisioning and Procurement policies: Many people with disabilities are not aware of the assistive technologies available to them, Governmental schemes from which they can acquire and marketplaces from where they can procure. Provisioning and procurement policies could be curated that promote the use of assistive technologies developed by startups in government-funded programs, and incentives could be provided to businesses that leverage such assistive technologies.



Promote Accessibility: Accessibility guidelines need to be developed and promoted across all ecosystems, such as public buildings, transportation systems, and public spaces to incorporate infrastructural changes that adhere to universal design principles, thereby, increasing accessibility. There is a need for strong regulatory mechanism to keep audit and checks on all accessibility requirements in both cyber and physical worlds.

AT Personnel: Very few countries have trained AT personnel sufficient in numbers. AT personnel who are bridge between products and people, are most important stakeholders in the AT innovation ecosystem. G20 countries would be interested in discussing educational and training programs in place in and the new ones to be introduced in training AT personal of high quality and in sufficient numbers.

² The Global Alliance of Assistive Technology Organizations. (2020). Policy and Advocacy.

Points for Discussion

In the proposed dialogue, G20 countries and their representatives can present covering one or more of following questions relevant to their countries:

- In activities of daily living, what are the major barriers which people with disabilities and elderly face in accessing products, services, applications and environments? What are the important unaddressed accessibility challenges which people of your country face in activities of daily living?
- How prevalent are laws/guidelines for inclusive/universal design of products, services, applications and environments? Highlight some challenges and best practices that have worked.
- What is the current innovation and startup ecosystem for AT innovation? Are there any special incentives/funds from the government to promote and incentivise start-ups to take up design and manufacture of ATs in your country?
- How do people with disabilities and elderly source their AT requirements? Who pays? What is the role of government in improving access to ATs? Are ATs a part of universal health coverage in your country?
- Comment on current system of regulation for ATs in your country? Currently, how are ATs assessed for safety and quality? Are there enough AT personnel who are trained to assess user requirements and recommending appropriate ATs?

Link for Registration

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BG9HNPP>

Link for Attending

Will be shared soon.