

Featuring



Kathmandu



ANDE Asia Access and Opportunity Learning Lab

Learning from Challenges in Inclusive Event Planning and Entrepreneurship Program

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Accessibility is not an afterthought — it's a foundation for respect.

Rashi Maharjan, kept up the learning momentum of the cohort by sharing the practices and implementation within Impact Hub Kathmandu about creating an accessible, inclusive, and safe space for persons with disability. These learnings were derived from the learnings from their two programs, Nepal Assistive Device Makeathon 2025 and Building Entrepreneurial Access Model (BEAM).

Rashi began by conveying to the cohort that she wanted to create this space as a space where everyone understands and sees accessibility as not just an afterthought, but the very foundation of the work that we do, and of the people we reach out to. She emphasized that accessibility is a core principle that needs to be embedded from the beginning and not something that needs to be thought about later.

The first example that she shared was about the Nepal Assistive Device Makeathon that happened in February 2025. The event welcomed over 100 participants, including engineers, students, occupational therapists, and prosthetists, etc. This Makeathon was a collaborative innovation event focused on developing assistive devices for people with disabilities within three days through prototyping, rapid testing, and then creating products that would be easy for people with disabilities to use on a day-to-day basis.



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Throughout the event, Impact Hub Kathmandu experienced many exciting challenges. Those challenges included:

1) **Accessibility barriers in the venue:** This was the first and foremost problem they had. Despite their best efforts, the final venue was not fully accessible for participants with diverse disabilities, while the toilets and the stage were not accessible at all. This happened because the venue was chosen according to the ease for their government partners to reach rather than centering on people with disabilities.

As illustrated above, it is critical to assess the accessibility of the venue before holding events. An accessibility consultant can facilitate this auditing to determine whether the venue is accessible or not. Rashi highlighted the following questions for organizations to reflect on:

- Do you have an accessibility checklist?
- Are you collaborating with accessibility consultants or organizations working in this sector?
- Are you collaborating with persons with disabilities whose perspectives are essential for ensuring accessibility?



2) **Limited awareness of disability-centric design:** Many participants lacked prior exposure to designing with and for people with disabilities, leading to a steep learning curve at the beginning of the event.

3) **Prototyping material limitations:** Some designs required materials or components that were not readily available during the event time frame.

4) **Scalability questions:** Teams struggled to envision how their prototypes could be scaled, certified, or approved for real-world use, particularly for medical or assistive purposes, for which Nepal has stringent policies for assistive devices.

While there were a lot of challenges, the Impact Hub Kathmandu considered this a golden learning opportunity, and the takeaways they have embraced and found crucial in terms of becoming a more inclusive organization include:

1) **Co-creation is essential:** Involving persons with disabilities (PWDs) as co-designers when **we are developing solutions for them is critical**. We cannot see them as just end users; they need to be equally participating from the beginning, middle, to the end, and maybe afterwards as well. This will enable the development of solutions that are relevant, practical, and user-centered.

2) **Interdisciplinary collaboration works:** Diverse teams composed of engineers, designers, occupational therapists, and PWDs fostered creative, feasible, and empathetic solutions.

3) **Simple solutions have a big impact:** Many challenges faced by PWDs can be addressed through low-cost, frugal innovations using locally available materials.



When we think about digital solutions, when we talk about technology, sometimes we end up thinking about solutions that are over the top and something that we cannot afford. Impact Hub Kathmandu learned that most practical solutions were the ones that could be done in a frugal, low-tech environment.

Rashi Maharjan, Program and Research Officer
at Impact Hub Kathmandu



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4) **Inclusive design needs more awareness:** Participants and mentors realized the lack of exposure to inclusive design in formal education and professional training.

5) **Rapid prototyping accelerates innovation:** Access to tools like 3D printers and digital fabrication at spaces like FabLabs allows teams to quickly iterate and test ideas within 72 hours.

6) **User testing is crucial:** Real-time feedback from PWDs during prototyping was instrumental in refining designs for functionality, comfort, and safety.

7) **Scalability needs support:** While many prototypes were promising, scaling production and distribution would require funding, institutional partnerships, and certification mechanisms.

8) **Maker ecosystem can play a vital role:** Maker spaces like FabLabs proved to be valuable hubs for inclusive innovation and can be leveraged for ongoing assistive technology development.

Rashi concluded by sharing the learnings from the first program and leaving some thought-provoking tips and questions for the cohort regarding what is required as basic requirements to do a **short-term program**.

- 1) **Promotional material:** what is being used? How is information disseminated?
- 2) **Venue:** Is the event venue accessible? Can an accessibility audit be conducted beforehand?
- 3) **Partners:** Are **you collaborating** with Access Consultants or Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)?
- 4) **Audience focus:** Who is your target audience? What types of disabilities are you addressing?
- 5) **Pre-event sensitization:** Has the team undergone orientation or sensitization about disability inclusion?
- 6) **Post-event pathway:** Is there a clear follow-up or plan after the event?

Rashi then spoke of another example from a long-term project she is leading, Building Entrepreneurial Access Model (BEAM), a program focused on supporting and empowering entrepreneurs with disabilities, particularly women. It aims to improve access to resources, finance, and support systems within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The challenges for the BEAM project were:

- 1) **Finding entrepreneurs** with diverse businesses other than a few areas, such as agriculture, livelihood, beauty, and textiles.
- 2) **Communicating or interacting** with some of the applicants was complex, as some applicants had severe forms of neurodiverse conditions, and the Impact Hub team was not well-equipped to engage with these conditions. As such, Impact Hub Kathmandu is aiming to collaborate with persons with disabilities and organizations that work with neurodiverse conditions to address the gaps in their capacity.
- 3) **Societal, Infrastructure, information, finance, and digital** are some of the main barriers for women entrepreneurs with disabilities.
- 4) **There was discrimination** even within the cohort, i.e., internalized ableism, namely, some people compared their disability with that of others, and then opined that others have fewer difficulties.



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Impact Hub Kathmandu considered these challenges as a learning opportunity and found crucial and useful takeaways for them in terms of pivoting themselves for this long-term program. Some of the learnings derived from those identified challenges include:

- 1) There is a need to redefine and rethink entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship looks very different for people with disabilities, as many applicants were heavily reliant on it for their livelihoods. Now, who gives us the authority to decide one is an entrepreneur, and one is not simply because they're doing a livelihood program?
- 2) The scale of business, the sectors, and the capital are small and limited to sectors such as livelihood, agriculture, food, textile, and beauty.
- 3) Entrepreneurship often is the last resort. Many people with disabilities wanted to initially work in firms where they faced discrimination, or wanted to venture outside, but their families were not supportive. Thus, entrepreneurship often becomes their last resort.
- 4) Entrepreneurship and reasonable accommodation come at a minimal cost. Rather than monetary allocation, it's the mindset of the organizations that needs to change.
- 5) Infrastructures should be designed in such a way that people with disabilities can access them without compromising their independence. Rashi stressed that there is a difference between positioning yourself to be inclusive and being inclusive.



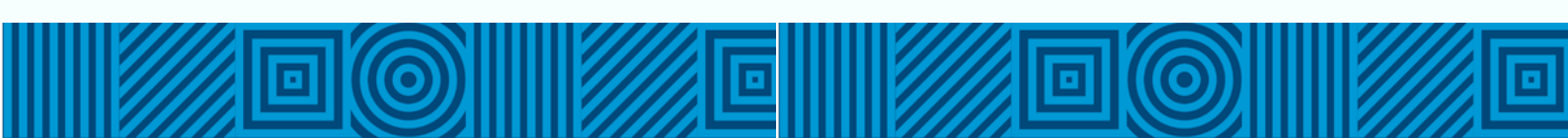
Rashi also shared thought-provoking tips and questions about the basic minimum requirements that the cohort members should consider when implementing **long-term programs**:

- 1) **Inclusive hiring:** Have persons with disabilities been considered or hired as staff? If you're undertaking a long-term program, why not have it led by someone with a disability? Have you considered or tried that approach?
- 2) **Inclusive communication:** Are all program visibility and promotional materials accessible and inclusive? How is the material being circulated outside? Is it accessible to all disabilities or not?
- 3) **Inclusive curriculum:** Are materials accessible and flexible for different learning needs?
- 4) **Accessibility consultant:** Have you hired or consulted an accessibility expert?
- 5) **Accessibility audit:** Have you conducted an audit of physical and digital spaces?
- 6) **Target audience clarity:** Is your target audience clearly defined?
- 7) **Team orientation:** Has the team been trained on inclusion and accessibility? The program staff needs to be equally aware of all these things.
- 8) **Inclusive budgeting:** Is the budgeting **flexible** to cater to the needs of the target audience in the midst of the program?



Respect and dignity are the first steps to true inclusion, and accessibility should be in movement and space, and information. This is something that needs to be planned; it's not something that we patch at the end, just to position ourselves as inclusive.

Rashi Maharjan, Program and Research Officer
at Impact Hub Kathmandu



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Rashi Maharjan's insights from Impact Hub Kathmandu's experiences with the Nepal Assistive Device Makeathon and the BEAM program offer a powerful blueprint for organizations seeking to embed true inclusivity into their work. Her journey reveals that accessibility cannot be treated as an afterthought—it must be incorporated as a foundation of program design, from venue selection and promotional materials to team training and budget allocation. The challenges encountered, from inaccessible venues to communication barriers with neurodiverse participants, transformed into invaluable learning opportunities that reshaped their understanding of inclusive practice. Perhaps most importantly, Rashi's work demonstrates that meaningful inclusion requires more than good intentions; it demands intentional collaboration with persons with disabilities as co-creators, not just beneficiaries. As organizations across sectors grapple with creating genuinely inclusive spaces, Rashi's message serves as both a challenge and a call to action: true accessibility begins with respect, dignity, and the recognition that inclusive design benefits everyone—making it not just a moral imperative, but a foundation for innovation and meaningful impact.

About

Asia Access & Opportunity Learning Lab

Asia Access & Opportunity Learning Lab is designed to facilitate active learning, experimentation, collaboration, and problem-solving, allowing participants to gain practical skills and knowledge through real-world scenarios with a primary focus on implementing disability and gender inclusion measures in an organization.

The sessions will be designed with participation in mind through a need assessment to understand the knowledge and capacity gaps in the ecosystem concerning disability and gender inclusion. Each session will build upon learnings from the previous one, with insights gleaned from post-session feedback surveys.

Rashi Maharjan, Program and Research Officer at Impact Hub Kathmandu

Rashi is a passionate advocate for disability inclusion and currently works with Impact Hub Kathmandu, where she leads efforts to create accessible, inclusive, and safe spaces for persons with disabilities. With a strong commitment to equity and community-centered design, she brings lived experiences, grassroots knowledge, and over four years of research experience to program development and facilitation. She is also a policy researcher, focusing on inclusive development and disability rights. Her work emphasizes embedding accessibility and universal design into organizational culture, ensuring that no one is left behind. She currently leads the Building Entrepreneurial Access Model, a program designed to support and empower women entrepreneurs with disabilities, enabling inclusive economic opportunities and leadership.



