



## **EMPOWERING COMMUNITY- BASED ORGANIZATIONS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES TO FOSTER INCLUSIVE PROTECTION FROM FORCED DISPLACEMENT**

**A Promising Practice  
in Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD)  
in Honduras**



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**Cover photograph:** Youth from the Community Youth Center of the San Buenaventura neighborhood after participating in workshops to promote inclusion and skills development.

**Photo credit:** ©UNHCR/Gabriela Villeda

**Title:** Empowering community-based organizations of persons with disabilities to foster inclusive protection from forced displacement

**Type of practice:** Emerging Practice

**Programme objective:** To ensure the meaningful inclusion and engagement of persons with disabilities in UNHCR's work on forced displacement in Honduras

**Dates:** 2020-2021

**Population groups:** Internally displaced persons with disabilities, at risk of displacement, and host community members in Honduras

**Partners:** Save the Children, the Honduran Deaf Association (ASH), the Honduras Union of the Blind (UNCIH), the Honduran Federation of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (FENOPDIH), the Government and national institutions, and organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs)

## Programme overview

UNHCR's work with persons with disabilities is an integral part of the humanitarian response in Honduras. Through community-based protection work and participatory assessments, UNHCR learned that persons with hearing and visual impairments were experiencing issues understanding the information UNHCR was providing in relation to forced displacement. Hence in 2021, UNHCR partnered with Save the Children, the Honduran Deaf Association (ASH), and the Honduras Union of the Blind (UNCIH) to develop specific training material on forced displacement for persons with visual and hearing impairments. This included the development of disability-inclusive training, disability-sensitive educational materials, and it involved the establishment of a direct and regular relationship with persons with disabilities. In September 2021, UNHCR, Save the Children, the Honduran Federation of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (FENOPDIH), ASH and UNCIH launched a series of protection and disability-inclusive information and education products on forced displacement including a special edition of the "Honduran sign language dictionary. Special edition on protection, forced displacement and rights" (*Glosario de Lengua de Señas Hondureña (LESHO). Edición Especial. Conceptos de Protección, Desplazamiento Forzado y Derechos*), with new signs for protection-related concepts, and pre-recorded training materials that are inclusive of persons with disabilities. Awareness materials were then adapted to expand the target and reach out to communities, the government and partner organizations.

## Context

Honduras is one of three countries of the “Northern Triangle,” alongside Guatemala and El Salvador. Decades of civil war and political instability planted the seeds for the complex criminal ecosystem that continues to afflict the region today.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most visible sign of it is the homicide rate, which has been the world’s highest in the past three decades,<sup>2</sup> with Honduras on top with 39 homicides every 100,000 people and the highest rate of femicide in the whole of Latin America, together with El Salvador.<sup>3</sup>

Among the factors behind this high level of violence are strong gang presence in and around urban areas,<sup>4</sup> which often results in competition for territorial and economic control through extortion, kidnapping and the sale of illegal drugs; drug trafficking; and high levels of poverty.<sup>5</sup> The region is among the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Inequality and indigence grew during the COVID-19 pandemic. In July 2021, the Honduran government estimated that more than 73 per cent of the country’s population lived below the poverty line, with nearly 54 per cent living in extreme poverty.<sup>6</sup> These factors, coupled with the weak capacity of the law enforcement institutions and the high levels of corruption and penetration

of the state by criminal groups, render impunity for crime extraordinarily high (95 per cent or more). As a result, public confidence in law enforcement is low and crime often goes unreported.<sup>7</sup>

Altogether, these factors have been driving Hondurans away from their homes both internally and across borders. According to the latest available data, 247,090 people (2.7 per cent of the overall population of Honduras) were affected by internal displacement between 2004 and 2018.<sup>8</sup> This means at least one displaced household member for approximately 58,500 households. However, data on displacement is not necessarily accurate or comprehensive. Displacement in fact remains invisible for most of the population in Honduras, including data on persons with disabilities.

Among the main triggers of displacement are threats (55%), murders (40%), and mobility restrictions (24%) by criminal groups.<sup>9</sup> Restrictions enforced by criminal groups take the form of limitations on certain styles of clothing or shoes, curfews, and arbitrarily established and invisible borders for entering and staying in urban communities. By establishing invisible borders, criminal groups mark specific locations within communities to delimit the presence of opposing groups, while at the same time limiting the population’s access to health, education and recreational spaces. In some sectors, police officers are not allowed to enter.

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1 UNHCR (2022). Report on the consultations to IDPs and persons at risk of displacement in Honduras. Inputs for the UN Secretary-General’s Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. March-April 2022.

2 According to available data, the three countries of the Northern Triangle have been in the top 10 countries in the world for homicide rate since 1990. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/homicide-rate?tab=table&time=earliest..latest>

3 As cited in Cheatham, A. and Roy, D. (2022). Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>

4 Human Rights Watch (2021) World Report 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/honduras#:~:text=Covid%2D19%20outbreaks,-Gangs,extort%20residents%20throughout%20the%20country>

5 Eguizábal, C. et al. (2015). Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved (No. 34). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>

6 Cheatham, A. and Roy, D. (2022). Central America’s Turbulent Northern Triangle. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle>

7 Eguizábal, C. et al. (2015). Crime and Violence in Central America’s Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved (No. 34). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/crime-and-violence-central-americas-northern-triangle-how-us-policy-responses-are>

8 Comisión Interinstitucional para la Protección de las Personas Desplazadas por la Violencia-CIPPDV, ACNUR & Secretaría de Derechos Humanos. (2019). Estudio de Caracterización del desplazamiento interno por la violencia (p. 103). Tegucigalpa. See also <https://www.jips.org/jips-country/honduras/>

9 Investigación sobre la violencia sexual y feminicidios como causas del desplazamiento forzado. <https://gruposociedadcivilhn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Manual-sobre-desplazamiento-forzado-completo.pdf>



People, specifically children and youth, live at risk of forced recruitment, criminal gang activity or association; dispossession of housing, land and property following forced displacement; gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls and LGBTIQ+ persons.<sup>10</sup> Structural and social causes such as unemployment, lack of access to basic services such as health and education also contribute to a state of general fragility. This coupled with the lack of effective protection by the State and the high rates of impunity for acts of gender-based violence, have led to the normalization of violence.

In this context, persons with disabilities face significant barriers in access to justice, protection, healthcare, education and employment or economic opportunities, and in receiving differentiated treatment according to their specific requirements.<sup>11</sup> For example, during the 2021 general elections,<sup>12</sup> persons with hearing and visual impairments could not vote as there were no braille ballots and no interpreters available in voting centres to provide information and guidance to deaf persons. Similar challenges were reported in health facilities, where in the absence of adequate support, persons with hearing or visual impairments could not express their needs to the healthcare staff, thus limiting their opportunities to receive adequate and differentiated care and treatment. The use of facemasks during the COVID-19 pandemic made it even harder for persons with hearing impairments to understand what the healthcare staff were communicating in the absence of lip reading.

According to UNHCR experience, persons with disabilities are also often at higher risk of exploitation, abuse, and violence, for example, when using sign language in high-risk communities, due to confusion with the hand signals used by street gangs.<sup>13</sup> They are often further exposed to the risk of various criminal activities, including robberies, when outside their communities and far from their common protection mechanisms. They therefore tend to self-restrict their movement through unknown parts of the city and avoid public transport. At the same time, they may be forced into illegal activities such as collecting money from extortion, or taking drugs, weapons or mobile phones to prisons as they are less likely to be searched by the police. Finally, women with disabilities are also at risk of gender-based violence; they are forced into sterilization or to use contraceptives by the Government, and they are often exposed to other various forms of GBV.<sup>14</sup>

UNHCR applies a comprehensive approach to the protection of forcibly displaced and stateless persons, to ensure access to rights, protection, livelihood opportunities, and essential services. This is achieved through technical and financial support to and partnerships with critical stakeholders such as the national government, and national non-governmental organizations in order to strengthen their capacities for the development and implementation of projects for the assistance of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers. It is within this context that UNHCR's work towards the empowerment and strengthened self-reliance of persons with disabilities is situated.

10 A total of 442 violent deaths of LGBTIQ+ persons has been registered since 2009. Red Lésbica Cattrachas - Gráfica General de Estadísticas de muerte violentas de personas LGBTIQ+ <https://www.cattrachas.org/sistemas>

11 The terminology used in the description of this practice is in line with the terminology suggested in the IASC Guidelines on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action. [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Guidelines%20on%20the%20Inclusion%20of%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action%2C%202019\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Guidelines%20on%20the%20Inclusion%20of%20Persons%20with%20Disabilities%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action%2C%202019_0.pdf)

12 European Union Election Observation Mission (2022). Honduras, General Elections 28 November 2021. Final Report. Available at: [https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu\\_eom\\_honduras\\_2021\\_final\\_report\\_english.pdf](https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_eom_honduras_2021_final_report_english.pdf)

13 UNHCR (2021). UNHCR HONDURAS. Community Consultations – April 2021. Fact sheet.

14 <https://proceso.hn/onu-honduras-debe-abolir-las-esterilizaciones-forzadas-de-los-discapacitados/>

- CRPD/C/HND/CO/1 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/110/97/PDF/G1711097.pdf?OpenElement>

- Informe Anual sobre la situación de derechos humanos en Honduras 2021 [https://oacnudh.hn/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRADUCCION-NO-OFICIAL\\_-INFORME-DEL-ALTO-COMISIONADO-DE-LAS-NACIONES-UNIDAS-PARA-LOS-DERECHOS-HUMANOS-SOBRE-LA-SITUACION-DE-LOS-DERECHOS-HUMANOS-EN-HONDURAS.pdf](https://oacnudh.hn/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TRADUCCION-NO-OFICIAL_-INFORME-DEL-ALTO-COMISIONADO-DE-LAS-NACIONES-UNIDAS-PARA-LOS-DERECHOS-HUMANOS-SOBRE-LA-SITUACION-DE-LOS-DERECHOS-HUMANOS-EN-HONDURAS.pdf)

- CIDH, Informe No. 204/21, Caso 11.545. Solución Amistosa. Martha María Saire.

Honduras. 4 de septiembre de 2021 <http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/decisiones/2021/HOSA11.545ES.pdf>

## Programme background

UNHCR's work with persons with disabilities is an integral part of the humanitarian response in Honduras. In the context of its work on community empowerment and self-reliance, participatory assessments revealed that persons with hearing and visual impairments were experiencing issues understanding UNHCR's communications in relation to forced displacement. Hence, UNHCR decided to partner with Save the Children and the organizations of persons with disabilities ASH and UNCIH to ensure that key concepts related to forced displacement were adequately and appropriately explained to and understood by persons with disabilities. This work also provided the opportunity to support persons with disabilities in better understanding their rights during the cycle of forced displacement, and the specific risks they were facing in relation to the interaction of their impairments with different contextual risk factors, such as the increased risks of forced recruitment by criminal groups, gender-based violence and human trafficking.



*Public officials participate in a workshop on capacity building to assist people with disabilities in the application of the National Emergency Response Route. ©Save the Children*





*Presentation on the needs of people with disabilities by a representative of the National Union of the Blind of Honduras (UNCIH) to contribute to the construction of the National Emergency Response Route. ©Save the Children*

## ➤ Resources and partnerships

UNHCR started working with Save the Children in 2021 to protect persons with disabilities from forced recruitment, including establishing contact and developing a common strategy with the government. To strengthen inclusion in Honduras, UNHCR and Save the Children are also coordinating with UNCIH and ASH and FENOPDIH as reference institutions on disability inclusion, acknowledging the key role that organizations of persons with disabilities can play in fulfilling the rights of persons they represent. In 2021, these organizations trained national institutions such as the Permanent Commission of Contingencies of Honduras (Comité Permanente de Contingencias, COPECO), which is responsible for Risk Management in Honduras, to also adapt their response to the specific needs of persons with

disabilities. The objective of this work is to include a disability focus within the humanitarian response by UNHCR at national and local levels. Furthermore, the plan is to expand this kind of training to other institutions such as the police and the national fire department.

In 2021, the UNHCR field unit in Tegucigalpa started directly funding activities such as trainings in order to complement the work with Save the Children and organizations of people with disabilities (OPDs). Trainings targeted UNCIH and ASH members in Tegucigalpa and continued through 2022.

## Process and activities

In 2020, UNHCR and Save the Children developed a strategy and a workplan to familiarize persons with disabilities with the realities of forced displacement, with the participation of the ASH, and UNCIH.<sup>15</sup> The plan included the following activities:



### Activity 1 – Outreach and familiarization

Since this was the first time UNHCR and the above-mentioned OPDs had the opportunity to work together in Honduras, the first step was to get in contact, familiarize the organizations with each other's work, mandate, and possible areas of collaboration. Once a relationship

was established, the organizations started working on identifying the additional protection needs of the target population in situations of forced displacement and violence, including accessibility and inclusion in responses, protection and other services.



### Activity 2 – Training and awareness-raising

OPDs proceeded with the development of a tailored training journey targeting persons with hearing and visual impairments, to be delivered in separate sessions depending on individuals' type of disability. After initial consultation and validation with the boards of the organizations, delivery of a six-module training course began. The modules cover the following topics: hygiene, protective measures and home care for COVID-19; Gender-Based Violence (GBV); forced displacement; psychological first aid; rights of persons with disabilities; and human trafficking. The facilitation was closely coordinated between UNHCR and Save the Children, while other UNHCR partners, such

as COPECO, the National Commissioner of Human Rights (CONADEH), the Interinstitutional Commission against Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking of Honduras (CICEST), *Dirección de Niñez, Adolescencia y Familia (DINAF)*, *Ministerio Público*, *Dirección de Policía de Investigación (DPI)*, *Policía Militar*, *Ciudad Mujer*, *Bomberos*, as well as the state in the role of guarantor of rights also attended.

Since then, the training targeting persons with hearing and visual impairments has been delivered at the request of ASH on a rolling basis throughout 2021.

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<sup>15</sup> UNHCR (n.d.). Concept note. Internal document.





## Activity 3 – Development of audio-visual material for information and training purposes

Understanding that persons with visual and hearing impairments did not know about UNHCR, its protection mandate, and issues related to forced displacement, due to lack of inclusive information sharing methods and material, i.e. Braille, descriptive audio and sign language, and in line with the Do No Harm

approach, UNHCR and partners decided to prioritize the preparation of information and educational material.

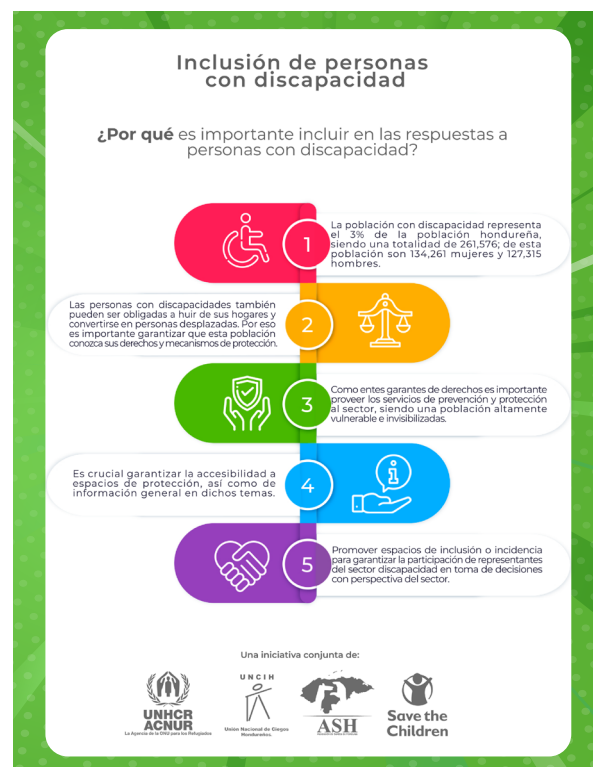
### The work focused on the following:

- ▶ Classes on topics of particular interest to be replicated, all with interpretation in sign language, descriptive audio and subtitles.
- ▶ A mini glossary with the new signs to be integrated into Honduran Sign Language (LESHO), covering the concepts of protection and forced displacement. This allowed persons with hearing impairments, interpreters, and future learners of LESHO to incorporate them into their vocabulary. A [video recording](#) of the glossary was also made for accessibility purposes.
- [Glosario de Lengua de Señas Hondureña \(LESHO\)](#)
- See also a [video](#) about peace, featuring girls who are deaf in Honduras, and what it means to them.



Example of the Honduran Sign Language (LESHO) Glossary.

- ▶ Videos of emergency reception for persons with hearing impairment into services, to be used in the absence interpreters or people familiar with LESHO, or as an additional resource. These include messages such as: "Calm down, we understand that you are at possible risk, afraid and worried. At the moment we don't have anyone who speaks LESHO, but we are doing our best to find someone. You are in a safe place, we understand that you are seeking our help. Please, if this is an emergency, use drawings, signs or writing to communicate with us and we will do our best to support you"
- ▶ Infographics on the correct approach and care for persons with hearing and visual impairments.



*Infographic on the inclusion of displaced persons in Honduras.*



*Blind students of "Pilar Salinas" school participate in activities to promote social cohesion.*

©Save the Children



## Activity 4 – Replication and consolidation

In 2021, in continued coordination with the boards of directors of both ASH and UNCIH, training and capacity building continued and was replicated for the subsidiaries of each organization.<sup>16</sup>

This process allowed the identification of further risks according to the type of disability and geographical area, for inclusion in the agendas for organizations and state offices to provide the necessary responses.

The board of directors of each subsidiary also continued to build their capacity on organizational processes and local response management, and the National Federation of Organizations for

Persons with Disabilities of Honduras (FENOPDIH) was also included in all these interventions in order to have greater reach at national level, since it comprises all the organizations of persons with disabilities in Honduras.

In addition, in 2021, Save the Children Tegucigalpa replicated the intervention in other cities such as San Pedro Sula, Marcala, Tela, and La Ceiba, which resulted in the socialization of the UNHCR mandate and the work on displacement in relation to disability. The identification of other problems, such as the violation of rights and barriers to access to justice due to disability, was also included.

## Participation and accountability

For all these interventions, UNHCR and Save the Children have been working primarily with two organizations, the Association of the Deaf of Honduras (ASH) and the National Union of the Blind of Honduras (UNCIH) as well as with the national Federation (FENOPDIH). The latter is UNHCR's main interlocutor on these initiatives together with the *Coordinadora de Instituciones y Asociaciones de Rehabilitación de Honduras*

(CIARH) and the *Federación Nacional de Padres de Personas con Discapacidad de Honduras* (FENAPAPEDISH). Other participating organizations are CONADEH, SEDH, COPECO, CICEST, *Ciudad Mujer*, *Ministerio Público*, and DINAf, while the ultimate accountability is to the persons that UNHCR serves.

<sup>16</sup> Partner organizations have been training staff in their sub-offices. In Puerto Lempira, in coordination with organizations of persons with disabilities, training was conducted with AMHBLI – Asociación Misquita Hondureña de Buzos Lisiados, while additional training are planned in Copán and El Progreso.





*Persons with disabilities participate in online forced displacement training during the lockdown.*  
©Save the Children

## ➤ Achievements, results and impact

After two years of implementation, a total of 140 people, 75 persons with hearing impairment, 50 persons with visual impairment, and 15 persons with reduced mobility – 60 per cent women and 40 per cent men – have been reached across the five locations targeted.

While, to date, there is no formal system in place to monitor these specific activities, as a result of this initiative a higher level of awareness was observed among the participants, with some realizing that they are survivors of violence and trafficking. Moreover, persons targeted by

these initiatives have been ambassadors in their neighbourhoods and workplaces, and have started identifying cases at risk and referring to UNHCR and relevant partners.

In addition to positioning and recognizing the institutional response mandate and being able to identify the differentiated risks they face as persons with disabilities, this work provided the opportunity to adapt the information available to allow persons with disabilities to access responses in an inclusive manner.



## Lessons

Importantly, Save the Children's work in Honduras with persons with disabilities in collaboration with UNHCR has become a good practice benchmark in the Latin America and Caribbean Region.

Reflections by the office on the activities undertaken thus far have led to the identification of some initial lessons, which however will need to be further developed as implementation continues and the project becomes more institutionalized. The initial lessons include the importance of making participatory assessments fully and truly

inclusive and targeted at all relevant groups within the population of concern in order to provide the forums for specific issues to be raised and addressed. Also, partnership with persons with disabilities and the organizations representing them throughout the design and implementation of the activities ensure the understanding and expertise necessary to make them relevant for the persons that they were target.

## Tips for replication and scaling up

In line with the above lessons, should the experience in Honduras be replicated in other contexts, it is important to take the following into consideration:

- ☑ It is absolutely critical to engage directly with persons with disabilities, as they are best positioned to identify and prioritize their needs, and to identify the most appropriate solutions.
- ☑ Working with the authorities is also key, both because the State holds the primary

responsibility for the well-being of persons with disabilities and to overcome the general level of mistrust in the capacity of the institutions to support and address the needs of persons with disabilities in an inclusive and meaningful manner.

The above well complement the recommendations made by persons with disabilities gathered and analysed in a regional report on disability and human mobility.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/es/docid/610d766c4.html>  
<https://www.acnur.org/61a7c0f74.pdf>

## Next steps

In 2022, UNHCR's work with persons with disabilities in Honduras is continuing by strengthening the ASH and UNCIH at national level, including through the improvement of their office facilities, and joint work with these organizations to influence the approval in the Honduran Congress of the law on displacement and ensure inclusion of the risks faced by persons with disabilities.

In the future, the idea is to expand the work started in 2022 with state authorities, including the police, the army, and firemen. Other state entities with which it would be good to start working are the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Migration and the academic community, both universities and research centres.

Moreover, by linking these initiatives with RIADIS, the *Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families*, the idea is to exchange views and experiences and create further opportunities for learning and improving the current implementation.

### **UNHCR and partners recommend the following actions in order to build upon and expand this initiative:**

- Link state offices with representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities, to share best practices, experiences, and results.
- Map the municipalities or departments with the largest population of people with disabilities at risk of being displaced to measure the impact of the replications from the trainings and reach more participants.
- Work hand in hand with municipalities and organizations of people with disabilities to create adequate and lasting solutions to their needs for protection and access to livelihoods.
- Form a working group, ideally under the leadership of persons with disabilities, to design a toolkit of inclusive materials and methodologies to be used in each of the branches for replication or reinforcement when necessary.



*Honduras. Social worker wins UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award regional prize for the Americas*  
©UNHCR/ Nicolo Filippo Rosso

## More information

Government of the Republic of Honduras, Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (2013), “Política Pública para el Ejercicio de los Derechos de las Personas con Discapacidad y su Inclusión Social en Honduras [Public Policy for the Exercise of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and their Social Inclusion in Honduras]”. Available [here](#).

National Congress of Honduras (2005). “Ley de Equidad y Desarrollo Integral Para las Personas Con Discapacidad [Law of Equality and Integral Development for Persons with Disabilities]”. Available [here](#).



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