COUNTRY BRIEF: PANAMA

Joint program on Unpaid Care, Disability, and Gender Transformative Approach

The global multi-country programme, funded by the Global Disability Fund aims to promote an intersectional approach on care and support systems. It seeks to understand and address the multiple barriers faced by women and girls, including those with disabilities, in achieving economic justice and accessing **necessary services** to choose, live independently and be fully included in the community. The programme will be implemented for 24 months (2025 and 2026).

This programme aims to transform care and support systems to advance gender equality and address women's time poverty. It also seeks to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to the support services they need to exercise their right to live independently and to participate fully in society and their communities. In doing so, the programme emphasizes the importance of recognizing the interdependence between caregivers and those who require care.

Implemented by: UNDP, UN WOMEN, ILO International Labour Organization, UNFPA, UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER, unicef

Funded by: Global Disability Fund

Why Panama?

➡ Expansion of the care and support offer

Panama offers several care-related services, including early childhood care, elder care, and programmes for persons with disabilities. Conditional cash transfers are also part of the social protection system. However, most services have limited reach, especially in rural and Indigenous communities, where accessibility barriers persist.

➡ Legal framework for the creation of the national care and support system

In Panama, care is increasingly prioritized on the public agenda, supported by growing political commitment, advances in gender-sensitive policies, and persistent advocacy by women's movements and feminist economists. Key steps have included drafting legislation, training caregivers, piloting local models, and fostering social dialogue. In 2024, Law 431 was enacted, formally establishing the Comprehensive Care System. The law guarantees the right to care, supports autonomy and well-being, and recognizes the rights of both paid and unpaid caregivers. Aligned with SDG 5, it emphasizes valuing unpaid care work, improving services and infrastructure, and expanding social protection. The Strategic Government Plan 2025-2029 establishes the development of a comprehensive care system for people in a situation of dependency, which would promote gender equity, taking into account that such (unpaid) care activities are usually carried out by women.

➡ Growing demand for care and support due to demographic shifts

INEC's 2021 projections indicate an ageing population, increasing the urgency to expand care coverage and infrastructure. The 2023 Census, using the Washington Group Questions, found 4.3% of the population (173,079 people) self-identified as having a disability, but applying the full methodology suggests a preliminary estimate of 10.1%. Other data sources include the 2006 National Disability Survey (PENDIS), which found 11.3% of the population had a disability (54% women and 46% men) with higher prevalence among Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, and in rural areas.

According to the 2023 Census, Panama has a population of 4,064,784 million people, of which 398,229 are over 65 years old, 322,449 are children aged 0 to 4 years, and 173,079 people live with some type of disability, which represents a total of 893,757 people (almost 22% of the population) who could need care services.

Overall objectives

The programme in Panama aims to address the undervaluation of care and support work, predominantly carried out informally by women, by promoting its recognition as legitimate, valuable employment with fair pay and decent working conditions. It seeks to enhance the autonomy, dignity, and agency of persons with disabilities by ensuring equitable access to quality care services and fostering their meaningful participation in society. By generating robust qualitative and quantitative evidence, piloting innovative service models, and developing practical policy recommendations, the programme drives systemic change to reward and formalize care work, improve its quality, promotes a cultural transformation towards elimination of gender discrimination and negative gender social norms around care and shifts societal perceptions, ultimately advancing equity and inclusion for women caregivers and persons with disabilities. The program also promotes the creation of inclusive social services from early childhood and throughout the life cycle, in order to foster a dignified and independent life, ensuring the inclusion of children with disabilities in the educational system and in society.

How will we do this?

i) Assessments and mapping:

To support the implementation of the pilots and generate updated evidence that reflects the perspectives of persons with disabilities, caregivers, service providers, and government actors, a series of studies will be undertaken. These include a comprehensive review of national and local care and support policies to assess their alignment with disability inclusion, complemented by consultations with government and civil society stakeholders. A mapping of care and support services will also be conducted to identify service gaps, disparities, and access issues, with the aim of producing actionable recommendations. In addition, a qualitative assessment of the needs and experiences of persons with disabilities in relation to unpaid care and support will help shed light on barriers to independent living and equitable access to essential services. A detailed gender assessment will examine the rights, wellbeing, and lived experiences of women unpaid care workers, including women with disabilities, to better understand prevailing gender norms, time poverty, and the specific needs of care workers in relation to their wellbeing and economic empowerment. In parallel, a dedicated study will analyze the risks of gender-based violence faced by women and girls with disabilities in unpaid care relationships, with the goal of strengthening protection systems and informing targeted policy responses.

ii) Capacity building

Raise awareness activities and training for public civil servants of territorial entities and organizations of persons with disabilities. Under this programme, the OHCHR developed a training on care and support which is based on experiential learning to foster knowledge-sharing and exchange of experiences. Over the course of three modules, the training covers the fundamentals of the care and support agendas, the transformation of conventional care systems, the 5Rs approach for care, and key policy priorities for a disability inclusive care agenda.

iii) Pilots and guidelines

Three pilots will be implemented to test innovative approaches:

- UN Women will implement pilot on localized care systems in three locations: La Chorrera (province of

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West Panama), and David (province of Chiriquí) will be initiated in 2025. The main objective of this pilot is to train caregivers in the chosen territories and give them a technical certification that qualifies them for the care and support of persons with disabilities. It will involve the active participation of OPDs and women organizations, working together with Mayors and representatives of the townships. Representatives of Ministries of Social Development, Minister of Women, and National Secretariat of Disabilities will be also associated to ensure replicability.

- UNICEF will pilot a community-level model of inclusive social services, including early childhood care and stimulation, education, and child protection. The initiative will involve 100 children with disabilities and aim to strengthen public support services for children with disabilities to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, particularly for women. Activities will be directly implemented by the Ministry of Social Development, with technical assistance from the UN through implementing partner Fundación Atena, in 13 communities located across Panamá Oeste Province and Emberá-Wounaan indigenous territory.

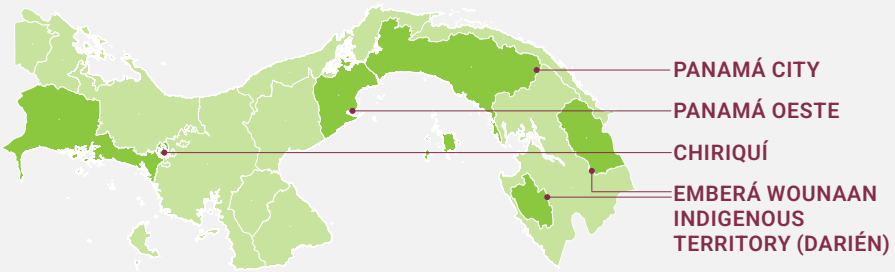
- UNFPA will implement a pilot focused on preventing, detecting, and responding to GBV against girls, adolescents, young people, and women with disabilities in the context of unpaid care work, with the ambition of developing standard practices and manuals that could be duplicated. The initiative will be implemented in the Municipality of La Chorrera through a direct intervention within the Community Care and Development Center, which operates as part of the coordinated action of the health, social, and judicial-police services led by the municipality, with the participation of Municipality senior officials and staffs from the center.

iv) Advocacy and public policy dialogues

The programme will organize participatory workshops with users of care and support systems, particularly adolescent girls and young persons with disabilities, to help articulate their requirements and ensure these are adequately reflected in local inclusive care management models. These workshops will prioritize lived experience to ensure that services are accessible, inclusive, and effectively responsive to expressed needs. The qualitative data gathered, combined with insights from pilots and assessments, will inform evidence-based guidelines for disability-inclusive and gender-transformative care and support systems. This evidence will directly feed into policy dialogues between government, OPDs, and service providers, ultimately helping shape the design and implementation of the national disability policy and ensuring that proposed options are both realistic and actionable.

Location of activities

Studies, mappings, and policy work will be conducted at the national level. Specific pilot interventions will be developed by UN Women, La Chorrera (Panamá Oeste Province), and David (Chiriquí Province); by UNICEF in Panamá Oeste Province and Emberá Wounaan indigenous territory; and by UNFPA in the Municipality of La Chorrera.



Who are our partners?

Government

Ministry of Social Development (MIDES)

National Secretariat for Disability (SENADIS)

Secretariat of Children and Adolescents (SENNIAF)

Women's Ministry (MIDEM)

Ministry of Labour (MITRADEL)

Ministry of Health (MINSA)

Ministry of Education (MEDUCA)

Ministry of Public Works (MOP)

Institute for Special Education (IPHE)

The National Advisory Council on Disability (CONADIS)

National Institute of Statistic and Census (INEC)

National Authority for Government Innovation (AIG)

Mi Bus

Metro of Panama

Tommy Guardia Institute

Offices of the Major of David, La Chorrera, Panama City, San Miguelito.

Representatives of local government.

Civil Society Organizations:

National Federation of Persons with Disabilities (FENAPEDI)

National Disability Network (REDIS)

Association for People with Disabilities and Mobility Difficulties (APEDIPROLOCHI)

Luz y Vida Board

Inclusión Panamá

National Federation of Associations of Parents and Friends of the People with Disabilities

Patronato Luz del Ciego

National Union of the Blind

Association of Autonomous Women with Disabilities of Panama (AMADIPA)

Special Olympics

Ayoudas Foundation

Caspan

Frater Foundation

Une Foundation

Espacio encuentro de Mujeres

Voices of Afro-descendant Women in Panama

Country contact

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Global Disability Fund