

## Case study



# Advancing accessible transport infrastructure through co-design in the Philippines

November 2025



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



Partnerships for  
**INFRASTRUCTURE**  
AN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVE

## Acknowledgement

This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) initiative. P4I partners with Southeast Asia to drive sustainable, inclusive and resilient growth through quality infrastructure. More information about P4I is available at [partnershipsforinfrastructure.org](https://partnershipsforinfrastructure.org).

Partnerships for Infrastructure acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of Country throughout Australia, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present. P4I also recognises early connections between Southeast Asia and the First Nations peoples of Australia.

## Disclaimer

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## About this case study

Across Southeast Asia, millions of people lack access to accessible and inclusive transport infrastructure. Australia, through Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I), collaborates with the Philippine Department of Transportation (DOTr) to embed gender equality, and disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) principles into infrastructure planning, policy reform and investment decision-making. A cornerstone of this work is fostering the active participation of civil society organisations, particularly organisations of people with disability, into infrastructure decision-making.

Through DOTr's leadership and in partnership with Queensland's Department of Transport and Main Roads, P4I brought together diverse stakeholders – including those most affected by government decisions – to co-design a framework for inclusive transport infrastructure. Co-design ensures accessibility and inclusion are considered from the outset, rather than as an afterthought.

This work aligns with Australia's International Development Policy and International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.<sup>1</sup> It demonstrates how integrating GEDSI into infrastructure planning can uphold human rights, expand access to education, health and economic opportunities, and drive systemic change across governance systems.

**Cover image:** Representatives from Queensland's Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR) visit Manila in April 2024 to better understand the Philippines' transport challenges and opportunities. Source: P4I

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Australia's International Development Policy*, DFAT, August 2023; DFAT, *Australia's International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy*, DFAT, November 2024.

## Key terms and definitions

**Accessible design** is aimed at improving access for people with disability. Improved accessibility also benefits the elderly, pregnant women, children, and people with a temporary illness or injury.

**Inclusive design** is a more comprehensive approach aimed at creating environments that work for everyone, encompassing a broader range of differences like age, culture, and economic status, with accessibility being part of the wider goal of inclusion.

**Co-design** is a collaborative approach where service providers and designers work together with diverse service users – particularly those with diverse accessibility needs – and other key stakeholders through all stages of the design and development of infrastructure, products, services and systems, to create solutions that better meet the needs of users.

## The state of accessible transport in Southeast Asia and the Philippines

While both ASEAN and the Philippines have strong policy and legislative foundations for providing accessible transport, challenges remain in meeting accessibility and inclusion standards.

### Challenges and commitments across Southeast Asia

Accessible transport remains a challenge across Southeast Asia. While transport systems are evolving, accessibility is often inconsistent and underprioritised – leading to exclusion or costly retrofits to ensure that no one is left behind. Some cities are adopting inclusive planning approaches – such as transit-oriented development and universal design<sup>2</sup> – but many lack clear standards and enforcement.

A FairPlanet investigation by Southeast Asian journalists revealed systemic barriers to accessible transport in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, where congestion, disorganised terminals, and a lack of interconnecting routes and transport options hamper mobility for all citizens.<sup>3</sup> These conditions make public transit almost unusable for many people, limiting access to education, health care and employment, and contributing to higher unemployment and poverty rates among people with disability. Additional costs – such as health care, daily assistance, and transport – further increase economic vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>

All ASEAN member states have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In response to persistent accessibility gaps, ASEAN adopted the Enabling Masterplan 2025 to embed disability rights across its regional frameworks.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> **Transit-oriented development** is an approach to urban development designed to bring people, services and activities together with quality public transport, supported by walking and cycling conditions to facilitate shorter trips, better lifestyles, and more efficient use of city resources. See Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), [What is transit-oriented development \(TOD\)?](#), ITDP website, n.d., accessed 26 September 2025. **Universal design** is the design of products, environments, programs and services that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design. It does not exclude assistive devices for people with disability where this is needed. See Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (New York, 13 December 2006), [2008] UNTS 15, [Article 2 – Definitions](#).

<sup>3</sup> L Galuh, LM David and S Wattanasukchai, [‘Accessibility lessons from Southeast Asia’](#), FairPlanet, 4 March 2023, accessed 15 September 2025.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank, [Disability inclusion](#), World Bank website, n.d., accessed 10 October 2025.

<sup>5</sup> ASEAN, [ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025: Mainstreaming the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), ASEAN Secretariat, February 2019.

National frameworks and realities in the Philippines

The Philippines has a strong legislative foundation for accessible infrastructure. The Accessibility Law 1982 requires that public and private buildings and facilities are accessible to people with disability. A decade later, the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons 1992 expanded this commitment, affirming rights in education, employment, health care and social participation.

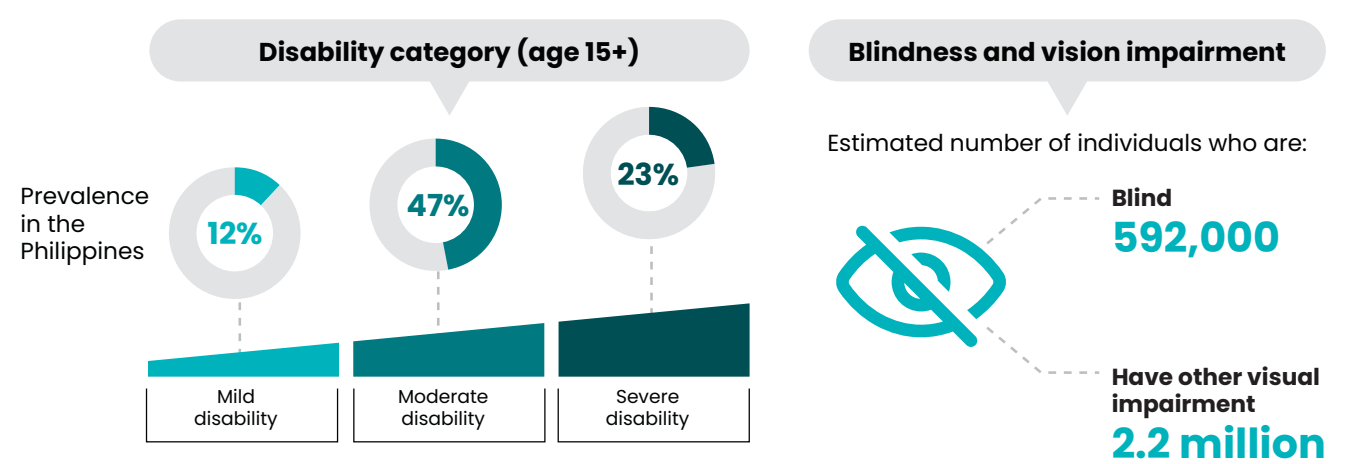
The National Council on Disability Affairs (NCDA) leads national efforts on disability inclusion, coordinating programs and monitoring compliance with these laws. In 2024, the Department of Transportation (DOTr) and the NCDA jointly introduced updated implementing rules and regulations. These require the application of universal design principles in all new, renovated and existing public-use buildings, transport terminals, public spaces and telecommunications infrastructure.

As part of its broader program design, Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) commissioned a series of gender equality, and disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) country context analyses and opportunity scans in 2022 and 2023 to inform engagement priorities across its sectors of focus: energy, transport and telecommunications. In 2023, P4I’s in-depth GEDSI study in the Philippines found that while the Philippines has a formal GEDSI policy framework, participatory planning is required but not consistently applied in practice.<sup>6</sup>

Metro Manila’s train stations remain largely inaccessible to people with disability. While most lifts are functional, inclusive features – such as tactile buttons, braille signage, and text-to-speech options for ticket vending machines – are often missing. Existing rail lines and elevated walkways built in earlier decades did not include accessibility features. In the 2024 Urban Mobility Readiness Index, Manila ranked 65th out of 70 cities globally for sustainability, public transport quality, social impact and innovation.<sup>7</sup>

This reflects longstanding fragmentation in the development of the country’s transport network, where multiple entities have separately managed design, construction and implementation. Such a disjointed approach has led to inconsistent attention to accessibility and inclusion, resulting in infrastructure and services that often fail to meet accessibility and inclusion standards – excluding many community members from full economic and social participation, particularly people with disability. The most recent National Disability Prevalence Survey by the Philippine Statistics Authority highlighted the relatively high prevalence of disability in the Philippines (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Disability in numbers – national estimates from the Philippines



Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), *Disability spares no one: A new perspective* [media release], PSA, 3 May 2019, accessed 29 September 2025; Philippine Blind Union, *Country report from the Philippines to the mid-term regional general assembly, Thailand, 27–29 November 2023*, World Blind Union – Asia Pacific, 4 August 2024, accessed 20 October 2025.

Institutionalising co-design across the infrastructure lifecycle is essential. It ensures that all agencies involved in transport planning, delivery and maintenance are accountable for meeting accessibility and inclusion standards – embedding inclusion into every stage of infrastructure development.

<sup>6</sup> Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I), *Philippines GEDSI Deep Dive*, P4I, unpublished, 2023.

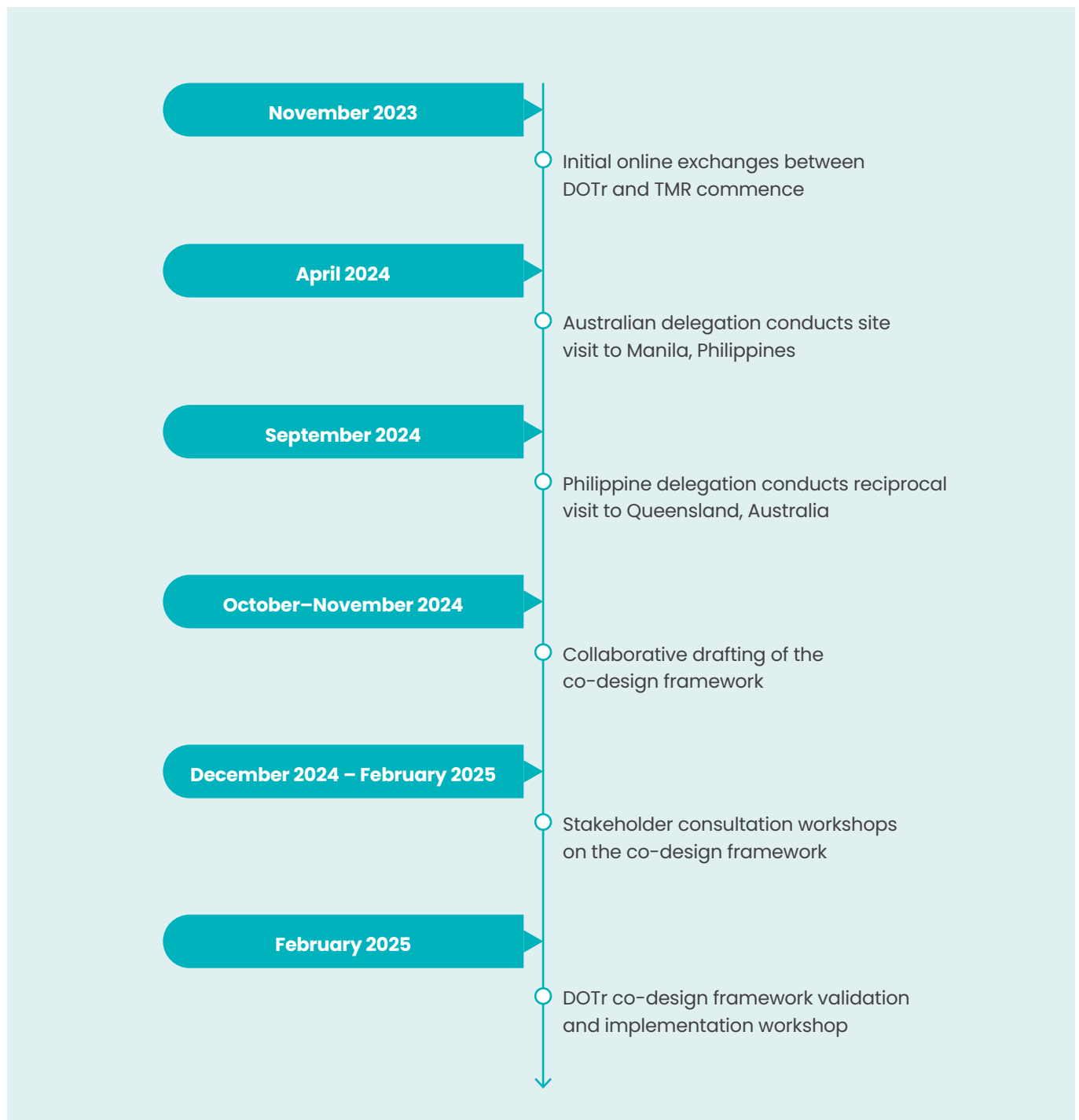
<sup>7</sup> Oliver Wyman Forum, *Urban Mobility Readiness Index 2024*, Oliver Wyman Forum, 2024.

# Co-designing for change with diverse stakeholders

In October 2022, P4I initiated what became a series of exchanges between DOTr and Queensland's Department of Transport and Main Roads (TMR). Among several areas considered for peer-to-peer learning, accessible and inclusive transport quickly emerged as a shared priority. DOTr was keen to understand how accessibility is embedded in Australian transport systems through standards, governance, strategic investment and participatory design.

In 2023, DOTr, in collaboration with P4I, initiated efforts to institutionalise inclusive transport planning through a co-design framework (Figure 2). Co-design places the lived experiences of marginalised groups – including people with disability, women, LGBTQ+ people, Indigenous communities, children and older people – at the centre of transport infrastructure design.

**Figure 2: Development of the co-design framework – timeline**





Australia and Philippines technical exchanges

The collaboration with TMR began with a series of online knowledge exchanges from November 2023, followed by an in-person visit to Manila in April 2024. These engagements enabled the Australian team to deepen its understanding of local challenges and priorities.

In September 2024, a Queensland technical mission convened DOTr, the NCDA, Philippine civil society organisations (CSOs) (Move As One Coalition and Life Haven Center for Independent Living), and government and non-government stakeholders from Australia.<sup>8</sup> The mission showcased Queensland’s co-design practices and provided a platform to explore their application in the Philippines. DOTr and CSO representatives shared experiences in public transport reform, particularly for people with mobility challenges and disabilities. Both teams identified key parameters to operationalise and sustain co-design in the Philippines (Table 1).

Table 1: Key parameters to operationalise and sustain co-design in the Philippines

Parameter	Current challenges	Pathways for change
1. Institutionalise a human rights-based accessibility and inclusion (A&I) culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Limited understanding of A&amp;I as a human right</li><li>Perception that co-design is unnecessary</li><li>Resistance to change and lack of awareness of broader benefits (beyond people with disability)</li><li>Inadequate legislation and compliance</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Secure senior leadership buy-in</li><li>Employ and empower people with lived experience (e.g. people with disability) in decision-making roles</li><li>Develop a clear A&amp;I vision and strategy</li><li>Promote awareness through training and storytelling</li><li>Improve interdepartmental coordination</li></ul>
2. Build capacity for A&I implementation, including emergency and resilience planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Limited internal expertise and resources</li><li>Lack of institutionalised feedback and monitoring mechanisms</li><li>Gaps in resilience planning, especially in rural and remote areas</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Appoint A&amp;I champions and establish dedicated teams</li><li>Allocate funding and create learning platform for staff</li><li>Institutionalise feedback and transparency in decision-making</li><li>Include people with lived experience (marginalised groups, people with disability, the elderly, women, Indigenous groups, etc.) in leadership and advisory roles, such as accessibility and inclusion reference groups, with appropriate compensation</li><li>Develop an A&amp;I action plan with standards and monitoring</li><li>Include considerations for A&amp;I rollout at provincial level</li><li>Incorporate inclusive early warning systems and unassisted emergency protocols</li><li>Engage rural communities in disaster planning</li></ul>
3. Integrate A&I into investment decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>A&amp;I seen as a cost, not a value-adding investment</li><li>Few compelling business cases in transport</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Frame A&amp;I as futureproofing and cost saving</li><li>Include A&amp;I in base case options and express costs as proportion of total project value</li><li>Highlight economic benefits (e.g. in terms of workforce, tourism, gross domestic product)</li><li>Use global case studies to show cost of not integrating A&amp;I from the outset</li><li>Communicate that inclusive transport benefits all, not just people with disability</li></ul>

Source: P4I mission report, unpublished, 2024.

After the mission, DOTr and P4I started putting together a draft co-design framework to discuss and refine with co-design stakeholders.

<sup>8</sup>The stakeholders were Brisbane City Council; the Australian Government Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts (now the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications, Sport and the Arts); the Queensland Reconstruction Authority; the Cross River Rail Delivery Authority (Queensland Government); Queensland Rail; and the Queenslanders with Disability Network.

## Co-design framework consultation workshops

P4I held 5 stakeholder consultations in the Philippines, including a public session promoted by DOTr on social media. These workshops introduced the draft co-design framework and gathered feedback to validate the framework's main principles (Box 2) and ensure it reflected the needs of diverse users. Accessibility was prioritised through inclusive venues, materials and communication platforms.

Participants included representatives from DOTr, the Public-Private Partnership Center of the Philippines, the private sector, organisations of people with disability, civil society, women's groups, LGBTQ+ communities, Indigenous peoples, children's advocates, older adults, and individuals with hearing impairments.<sup>9</sup> A focused session with DOTr helped shape the framework's implementation plan, outlining steps and resources for rollout.

Stakeholders validated the framework's structure and recommended clear roles for government, CSOs and the private sector. They also proposed indicators for participation and outcomes within the monitoring, evaluation and learning framework.

The co-design framework was widely welcomed. Participants called for stronger gender and social inclusion, deeper engagement with local governments, broader involvement of CSOs and GEDSI experts, adoption of global best practices, and fair compensation for lived-experience consultants and members of future accessibility and inclusion reference groups.

### Box 2

#### Co-design principles



**Participation** – The lead agency shall ensure that the co-design process provides support to include people with a wide variety of lived experiences and value lived experience in addition to data.



**Transparency** – All participants shall be provided with clear communication on the co-design process.



**Scope** – All participants shall be provided with the scope of their role, project scope and constraints, how their feedback will be used, and how outcomes will be communicated.



**Accountability** – The lead agency is accountable for ensuring that a genuine co-design process is followed, how feedback is acted upon, and communicating the outcomes of feedback.



**Equality and respect** – All participants in the co-design process are treated equitably and are treated with honesty, respect, dignity and cultural sensitivity.



**Consent** – Participants' feedback, stories and images are only used with consent and presented in a dignified way.



Representatives from Philippine CSOs, DOTr, NCDA, the Public-Private Partnership Center, the private sector, and P4I participate in consultation workshops to discuss the parameters of the co-design framework. Source: P4I.

<sup>9</sup> Consulted organisations include Move as One Coalition, Women With Disabilities Leap to Social and Economic Progress, Life Haven Center for Independent Living, Make It Safer Movement, Autism Society Philippines, School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies at De La Salle–College of Saint Benilde, Ateneo Public Interest and Legal Advocacy (APILA) at Ateneo de Davao University, United Architects of the Philippines, Davao United Deaf Association, Philippine Association for Citizens with Developmental and Learning Disabilities, Philippine Federation of the Deaf, and Filipino Sign Language National Network.

All these recommendations informed the final draft co-design framework. As it is put into action, its core mechanisms and practical components will come into sharper focus. Table 2 summarises key points raised during the consultation workshops and the actions taken to ensure their integration into the final framework.

**Table 2: Key consultation findings reflected in the draft co-design framework**

Theme	Key points raised	Integration in the co-design framework
Principles and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Institutionalise co-design across all transport planning and policymaking processes</li><li>• Integrate accessibility and inclusion from the outset to avoid costly retrofits</li><li>• Ensure meaningful participation and avoid tokenistic engagement</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Embeds co-design in all terms of reference and contracts</li><li>• Requires early-stage assessment of co-design suitability</li><li>• Includes guiding principles for inclusive and meaningful stakeholder engagement</li></ul>
Representation and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish diverse accessibility and inclusion reference groups (AIRGs)</li><li>• Position the Department of Transportation (DOTr) as the lead agency with civil society organisation (CSO) oversight and public accountability</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provides criteria and terms of reference for AIRGs</li><li>• Defines stakeholder roles: DOTr (oversight and compliance), CSOs (representation in AIRGs) and the National Council on Disability Affairs (participation in AIRGs)</li></ul>
Institutional challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Create robust accountability and enforcement mechanisms</li><li>• Build technical accessibility and inclusion (A&amp;I) expertise within DOTr</li><li>• Allocate dedicated funding for A&amp;I</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Integrates gender equality, and disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) expert input into project design</li><li>• Establishes mandatory feedback loop with documented responses from DOTr</li><li>• Identifies funding sources (e.g. Gender and Development Budget, and budget under the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities Amendment Act 2012) to support implementation</li></ul>
Accessibility in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Implement multisensory systems for deaf and blind passengers</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Requires reasonable accommodations in all consultations for active participation of people with hearing and vision impairments to inform design</li></ul>

Source: Final draft co-design framework document, unpublished, 2024.



Robert Siy of Move as One Coalition intervenes during one of the consultation workshops. Source: P4I



*It's significant that DOTr plans to finalise this co-design framework and embed it into its standard procedures for planning and delivering projects. The hope is that other government agencies – national and local – will adopt similar practices.”*

— Robert Siy, Co-Convener of Move As One Coalition



# Institutionalising co-design for accessible transport planning

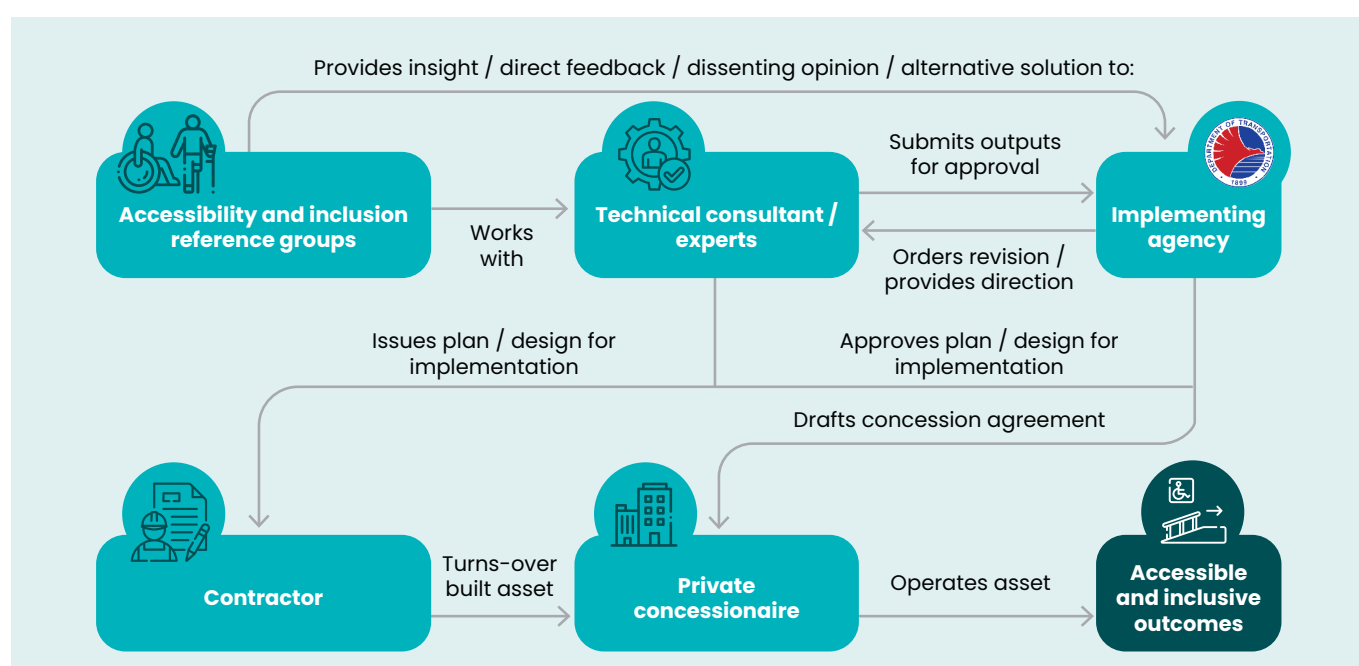
Co-design will transform the way DOTr undertakes planning for accessible and inclusive transport, providing a model for other public institutions in the Philippines.

## Transforming planning practice

To transition from blueprint to institutionalisation, DOTr must issue a department-wide policy or department order to formalise adoption of the co-design framework. The order is currently awaiting final approval. DOTr presented the framework at the Philippine Mobility Summit 2025, held on 15 September 2025 in Makati City.

Once adopted, the framework will guide all DOTr projects beyond traditional consultation toward genuine co-design, embedding accessibility and inclusion from the outset (Figure 3 and Box 3).

**Figure 3: How co-design will be applied in practice**



Source: DOTr.

## Box 3

### Co-design in action

For each project, an accessibility and inclusion reference group (AIRG) will be set up. The AIRG will serve as an independent advisory group that maintains regular and substantive engagement with the project. It will collaborate with technical consultants and subject matter experts to support feasibility assessments and the development of detailed engineering designs for passenger facilities and conveyance systems. Throughout this process, the AIRG will provide feedback and suggest alternative approaches for the implementing agency's consideration.

The implementing agency may then direct technical consultants to address the issues raised, either by incorporating the recommendations or identifying mutually acceptable solutions. This ongoing exchange of perspectives will contribute to a shared understanding of project challenges and support the development of more robust and contextually appropriate solutions.

This engagement will continue through subsequent phases of the project, including detailed design, implementation, the drafting of concession agreements for public-private partnership arrangements, and into operations and maintenance.

This marks a strategic shift in Philippine transport planning – from government-led delivery to a participatory model grounded in equity and accessibility. It aligns with national disability inclusion goals and the Philippines’ international human rights obligations.



Lucas Mangulabnan of DOTr presents the co-design framework at the Philippine Mobility Summit 2025. Source: AltMobility Philippines / GIZ Philippines



***DOTr is committed to build projects hand in hand with the very people who will use them, through an iterative process, shaping policies and infrastructure through lived realities rather than assumptions.”***

— Lucas Mangulabnan, Supervising Transportation Development Officer, Planning and Project Development Office, DOTr

The framework also addresses a longstanding challenge in the disability sector: consultation fatigue. Organisations of people with disability have often contributed to government initiatives without seeing their input reflected in implementation. The co-design framework establishes mechanisms to ensure stakeholder feedback informs both policy development and project delivery.

### **From partnership to institutional leadership**

Through its partnership with P4I and collaboration with TMR, DOTr has adopted co-design as both a technical method and an institutional practice. The NCDA provides policy guidance and technical support through participation in accessibility and inclusion reference groups, complementing DOTr’s implementation role. Together, they are creating a coordinated pathway to turn accessibility commitments into operational reality.

The co-design framework positions DOTr as a leader in inclusive and participatory governance. It provides a practical and scalable model that other public institutions can adopt – demonstrating how agencies can embed empathy, equity and accountability into their processes. It also creates a pathway for inclusive design to become a standard practice across the Philippine Government.

## Partnerships for Infrastructure

Partnerships for Infrastructure (P4I) is one of Australia's flagship infrastructure development initiatives in Southeast Asia. P4I partners with Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to attract quality investment, address infrastructure gaps, and drive inclusive and climate-resilient development.

P4I does this by providing infrastructure advisory services, facilitating technical knowledge exchanges, building partners' technical capacity, and supporting government-to-government and other partnerships between Australian and Southeast Asian organisations.

Delivered through a single team, P4I is led by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in collaboration with Ernst & Young, Adam Smith International, The Asia Foundation and Ninti One.



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