

#3 Inclusion in ecosystem building



Designing an Inclusive Energy Innovation Network - What Works in Practice?

A case study prepared under the Disability Support Service (DSS) for the Transforming Energy Access (TEA) platform.

Ben Hardman,
Head of Innovation, Global Disability Innovation Hub.

Shantosh Cumarasurier,
Innovation Advisor, Global Disability Innovation Hub.

Bala Nagendran Marimuthu,
Senior Researcher, Climate and Cities, Global Disability Innovation Hub.

Cover source: Prosperity School.

To cite this document: Cumarasurier, S., Hardman, B., and Marimuthu, B. (2026) Designing an Inclusive Energy Innovation Network – What Works in Practice? Global Disability Innovation Hub for the Transforming Energy Access platform.

Acknowledgement: This material was funded with UK aid from the UK government via the Transforming Energy Access (TEA) platform.

Disclaimer: This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.

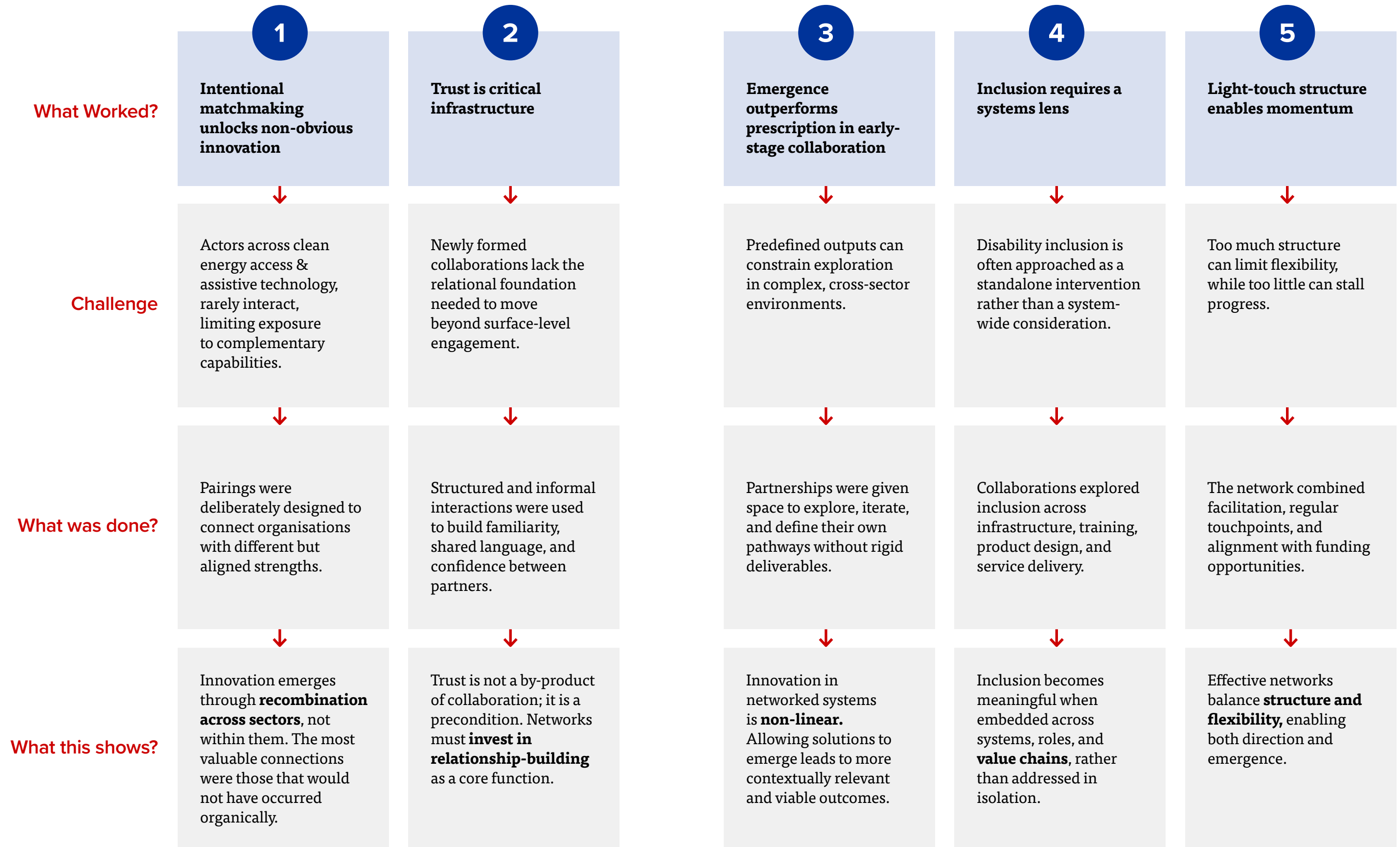
Case Study Summary

This case study **captures early insights from eight innovation partnerships formed between actors from the clean energy and assistive technology sectors.** Facilitated by the Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub), the intervention drew on the networks, partnerships, and ecosystem-building approaches developed through AT2030, GDI Hub’s flagship programme funded by UK aid, and wider disability innovation initiatives to connect stakeholders who would not typically operate within the same innovation ecosystem. Designed as a structured innovation network, the intervention enabled collaboration across traditionally siloed sectors through targeted matchmaking, facilitated engagement, and exploratory partnership development. The findings highlight that innovation is often constrained not by a lack of solutions, but by the absence of enabling scaffolding, spanning connections, capital, awareness, and technical support. The partnerships demonstrate how intentional network design can unlock new pathways for embedding disability inclusion within clean energy systems while surfacing opportunities for innovation that neither sector may have identified independently.

Disability Support Service (DSS)

Transforming Energy Access (TEA) platform, supported through UK aid from the UK government and led by the Carbon Trust, developed the Disability Support Service (DSS) in partnership with the Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub) to co-design and deliver disability-inclusive, accessible, and affordable clean energy solutions for equal socio-economic participation of people with disabilities. DSS is a cross-platform delivery service that offers training, innovation support, and technical assistance (TA) and produces practical knowledge outputs for the TEA network by blending expertise in disability inclusion, innovation, assistive and accessible technology (AAT), and inclusive design. The DSS seeks to maximise access and impact for people with disabilities by sharing knowledge and alignment between the TEA platform and GDI Hub’s flagship AT2030 programme, also funded by UK aid.

Key Lessons Learned



Challenge

Clean energy access actors and assistive technology innovators rarely operate within the same ecosystems. While both sectors engage with disability inclusion, their approaches often remain siloed, with the former focused on products and infrastructure and the latter on accessibility tools or service delivery. The core challenge addressed through this innovation network was not a single product or pilot but a systems-level question:

How can cross-sector collaboration unlock more inclusive, scalable clean energy solutions?

Without facilitation, cross-sector partnerships are difficult to initiate. Organisations lack visibility into complementary capabilities, shared incentives, and viable funding pathways. Inclusion measures risk being treated as an add-on rather than embedded within infrastructure design, workforce development, and community energy models. The network sought to create **a structured space for connection, experimentation, and translation** across sectors, enabling innovation at the intersection of clean energy and disability inclusion.

Approach

At its core, the **Disability-Inclusive Energy Innovation Network** was built around a structured matchmaking process that connected organisations from the assistive technology and clean energy sectors. Rather than simply introducing participants to one another, the process guided them through a series of facilitated conversations to understand each other's work, identify common challenges, and explore opportunities for collaboration. This helped participants **move beyond networking** towards concrete partnership and joint problem-solving.

This protocol guided participants through three stages:

1. establishing mutual context (who they are and what they do),
2. identifying shared friction points (what is not working), and
3. exploring collaboration pathways (what could be done together).

By structuring conversations in this way, the network enabled participants to move quickly from introductions to problem alignment and potential co-creation.

Through formal and informal communication channels assistive technology innovators shared expertise on disability inclusion, accessibility, and user-centred design, while clean energy organisations contributed knowledge on energy systems, service delivery models, and community engagement. Together, these activities **fostered trust, strengthened relationships, and supported the development of cross-sector partnerships** that may not otherwise have emerged.



Interventions

GDI Hub designed the innovation network to reduce barriers to cross-sector collaboration by building relationships, creating opportunities for experimentation, and supporting promising partnerships beyond initial matchmaking.

Intervention	Purpose (Why?)	How was it delivered (What?)
 1. Broker cross-sector connections	Connect organisations that would not typically collaborate and surface complementary capabilities	Facilitated innovation pairings and structured partnership discussions between clean energy and assistive technology organisations
 2. Build trust and collaboration	Develop the relationships, shared language, and confidence needed for collaboration	Ongoing facilitation, advisory support, WhatsApp groups, and regular partner engagement
 3. Strengthen the innovation ecosystem	Create opportunities for peer learning and expand collaboration beyond individual partnerships	Convened a LinkedIn community, peer learning sessions, opportunity showcases, and the ideathon
 4. Enable experimentation	Support partnerships to test ideas and refine collaborative opportunities	Technical advice, iterative coaching, and light-touch support throughout the partnership journey
 5. Support pathways to scale	Help promising collaborations transition from ideas into pilots and longer-term opportunities	Introduced funding opportunities and continued support through the TEA Scale-Up & Pivot funding

Programme outputs

8 innovation pairings	18+ facilitated partnership discussions	130 community members
3 ecosystem learning sessions	Dedicated communication channel via WhatsApp groups for all partnerships	2 innovation pilots progressing through TEA Scale-Up

Representative Innovation Pairings

The innovation pairings were designed to bring together organisations with complementary expertise to explore new solutions at the intersection of disability inclusion and clean energy. The examples below illustrate the diversity of opportunities that emerged through these collaborations.

Other innovation pairings explored include accessible e-mobility and inclusive product design; reliable powering of hearing assistive technologies; and bundled distribution models for clean energy and vision assistive products.

01

How might we integrate accessible communication into clean energy training to expand participation of people with disabilities in the workforce?

02

How might reliable energy infrastructure enable inclusive digital learning in underserved communities?

03

How might we enable reliable, portable, and clean energy-powered rehabilitation solutions for low-resource settings?



Innovation pairing

Renewable energy training provider × Sign language technology platform

Community clean energy platform × Inclusive education provider

Clean energy solutions provider × rehabilitation technology provider



The collaboration

This partnership explored how sign language interpretation technologies could be embedded directly into renewable energy training programmes. Rather than adapting training after it had been developed, the partners worked together to consider accessibility as part of the design process, enabling more inclusive vocational training for Deaf learners.

Partners explored how solar-powered community infrastructure could support inclusive education services in areas where unreliable electricity limits access to digital learning. The collaboration combined expertise in community energy systems with inclusive education to examine new service delivery models.

This partnership investigated how portable battery and inverter systems could power neuro-rehabilitation technologies in clinics and community settings where electricity is unreliable. The collaboration extended beyond technical integration to consider logistics, deployment, maintenance, and usability within real-world healthcare environments.



What emerged?

The collaboration identified opportunities to integrate accessible communication into workforce development, demonstrating how disability inclusion can strengthen talent pipelines for the clean energy sector rather than being treated as a separate intervention.

The partnership reframed energy infrastructure as an enabler of educational inclusion, highlighting how investments in reliable power can unlock broader social outcomes beyond electricity access alone.

The partnership demonstrated how combining clean energy expertise with rehabilitation technology can expand access to essential healthcare services, particularly in off-grid and resource-constrained settings where conventional deployment models are often not viable.

Impact

The network has **generated early-stage outcomes across both collaboration and system understanding**, while also building a growing ecosystem of engagement. To date, the innovation network includes over 141 participants, with more than 100 individuals engaged through webinars and drop-in sessions, and 16 energy access and assistive technology innovators directly supported through structured pairing and collaboration.

Emerging outputs include inclusive training pilots, early solution concepts, and initial pathways for joint funding and implementation. More importantly, the network has shifted how participating organisations understand their role within inclusive energy systems.

Clean energy actors began to see inclusion as integral to program and workforce design, while assistive technology actors identified new applications within energy transition contexts. These shifts reflect a broader impact: expanding how problems are framed and how solutions are designed across sectors.

The value of the network lies not only in immediate outputs but also in enabling new forms of collaboration that would otherwise not have emerged.



Inclusion is often framed as a social objective, but this collaboration taught us that it's also a systems design challenge. Engaging with Build Education revealed how innovation can help in making education mainstream for all."

Charles Bradshaw-Smith, SmartKlub



Integrating sign language accessibility positions deaf individuals as recipients of services and as active participants in the clean energy economy. From the engagement with Signvrse, we see Sirius X Energy having a clear pathway to deliver clean energy vocational training to deaf individuals."

Winnie Ongiri, Head of Operations, Signvrse

Way forward

The partnerships emerging from this initiative demonstrate that disability inclusion and energy access are not separate challenges, but interconnected opportunities for innovation. While the network successfully catalysed new relationships and collaboration pathways, longer-term impact will require moving beyond individual partnerships towards a more sustained ecosystem approach.

Future efforts could focus on strengthening the foundations established through this network by creating ongoing mechanisms for collaboration, knowledge exchange, venture support, and market development. This would enable stakeholders from the various ecosystems to continue engaging with shared challenges and opportunities beyond the duration of a single programme.

Key priorities include:

- **dedicated catalytic funding** to support partnership pilots and proof-of-concept collaborations
- **longer engagement timelines** to enable partnerships to mature from exploration to implementation
- **continued peer learning and knowledge-sharing** opportunities across sectors
- **greater participation** of organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and end-users in shaping innovation priorities
- **stronger connections** to investors, funders, and ecosystem partners to support scaling pathways
- **sustainable structures** for maintaining relationships and collaboration beyond initial matchmaking activities

The findings suggest that the greatest value of the network lies not only in the partnerships it created, but in its potential to evolve from a network of connected organisations into a community of mission-aligned collaborators. By strengthening relationships, building trust, and creating opportunities for joint experimentation, the network is laying the foundations for collective action across disability inclusion and clean energy. Over time, this transition has the potential to unlock more inclusive, resilient, and scalable innovation pathways that neither sector could achieve independently.



Source: GDI Hub.

Note

GDI Hub acknowledges the contributions of the entrepreneurs and Carbon Trust programme teams, whose collaborative leadership and commitment enabled the reach and impact of the innovation network.

All self-identifying data or testimonials in this case study were included with explicit permission of concerned individuals or institutions. Information collected from surveys was either anonymised or consolidated.

References

1. Lisa Harris, Anne-Marie Coles & Keith Dickson (2000) Building Innovation Networks: Issues of Strategy and Expertise, Technology Analysis & Strategic Management, 12:2, 229-241, DOI: 10.1080/713698468
2. The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI). (2023). Building networks for systemic impact. Australia

