

Annex II – The UN and people with disabilities

United Nations Commitment to Advancement of the Status of Persons with Disabilities

More than half a billion persons are disabled as a result of mental, physical or sensory impairment and no matter which part of the world they are in, their lives are often limited by physical or social barriers. Approximately 80 per cent of the world's disabled population lives in developing countries.

Disabled persons often suffer from discrimination, because of prejudice or ignorance, and also may lack access to essential services.

This is a "silent crisis" which affects not only disabled persons themselves and their families, but also the economic and social development of entire societies, where a significant reservoir of human potential often goes untapped. Considering that disabilities are frequently caused by human activities, or simply by lack of care, assistance from the entire international community is needed to put this "silent emergency" to an end.

From its early days the United Nations has sought to advance the status of disabled persons and to improve their lives. The concern of the United Nations for the well-being and rights of disabled persons is rooted in its founding principles, which are based on human rights, fundamental freedoms and equality of all human beings. As affirmed by the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenants on Human Rights and related human rights instruments, persons with disabilities are entitled to exercise their civil, political, social and cultural rights on an equal basis with non-disabled persons.

The contribution of United Nations specialized agencies to advance the situation of disabled persons is noteworthy: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) by providing special education; the World Health Organization (WHO) by providing technical assistance in health and prevention; the United Nations International Children's Fund

(UNICEF) by supporting childhood disability programmes and providing technical assistance in collaboration with Rehabilitation International (a non-governmental organisation); the International Labour Organization (ILO) by improving access to the labour market and increasing economic integration through international labour standards and technical cooperation activities.

First Steps: Evolution of Human Rights of Disabled Persons

In the 1940s and 1950s the United Nations was active in promoting the well-being and rights of persons with physical disabilities through a range of social welfare approaches. The United Nations provided assistance to Governments in disability prevention and the rehabilitation of disabled persons through advisory missions, workshops for the training of technical personnel and the setting up of rehabilitation centres. Seminars and study groups were means of exchanging information and experience among experts in disability. Fellowships and scholarships were awarded for trainers. As a result of initiatives from within the community of disabled persons, the 1960s saw a fundamental reevaluation of policy and established the foundation for the full participation by disabled persons in society.

In the 1970s, United Nations initiatives embraced the growing international concept of human rights of persons with disabilities and equalization of opportunities for them. In 1971, the General Assembly adopted the "Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons". 1/ This Declaration stipulates that mentally retarded persons are accorded the same rights as other human beings, as well as specific rights corresponding to their needs in the medical, educational and social fields. Emphasis was put on the need to protect disabled persons from exploitation and provide them with proper legal procedures. In 1975, the General Assembly adopted the "Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons", 2/ which proclaims the equal civil and political rights of disabled persons. This Declaration sets the standard for equal treatment and access to services which help to develop capabilities of persons with disabilities and accelerate their social integration.

The International Year of Disabled Persons

In 1976, the General Assembly proclaimed 1981 as the [International Year of Disabled Persons \(IYDP\)](#). It called for a plan of action at the national, regional and international levels, with an emphasis on equalization of opportunities, rehabilitation and prevention of disabilities.

World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons

A major outcome of the International Year of Disabled Persons was the formulation of the [World Programme of Action](#) concerning Disabled Persons, adopted by the General Assembly in December 1982.

Women and Disability

The WPA recognizes women's needs as requiring special attention. The consequences of disablement are particularly serious for women, because disabled women are discriminated against on double grounds: gender and disability. Therefore, they have less access to essential services such as health care, education and vocational rehabilitation.

Women are also specially affected by disability because they are often entrusted with the responsibility of caring for disabled persons in the community. Furthermore, women are more exposed to the risk of becoming disabled because of neglect and certain forms of abuse and harmful traditional practices directed against them.

United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons

In order to provide a time frame during which Governments and organizations could implement the activities recommended in the World Programme of Action, the General Assembly proclaimed 1983-1992 the [United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons](#).

International Day of Disabled Persons

Marking the end of the Decade of Disabled Persons, the General Assembly proclaimed 3 December as the [International Day of Disabled Persons](#). The Day was initially established to commemorate the Anniversary of the General Assembly's adoption of the [World Programme of Action](#).

The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

Among the major outcomes of the Decade of Disabled Persons was the adoption, by the General Assembly, of the [Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities](#) in 1993. The rules serve as an instrument for policy-making and as a basis for technical and economic cooperation.

Recent Developments at the United Nations in Disability Policy

Recent United Nations World Conferences reflect the growing awareness that persons with disabilities have both special concerns and needs that require serious consideration of the international community. All of the recent conferences - United Nations Conference on the Environment (Rio, 3-4 June 1992), the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 14-25 June 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 5-13 September 1994), the [World Summit for Social Development](#) (Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 4-15 September 1995), Habitat II (Istanbul 3-14 June 1996) - have addressed the situation of people with disabilities and made recommendations to rectify past discriminatory practices as well as to protect and promote their rights to participate fully in all aspects of the society as citizens of their countries.

The United Nations and the specialized agencies continue their efforts to assist Member States in attaining the equality of all people, including persons with disabilities, in social life and development. The work of the United Nations concentrates on improving the situation of disabled persons by promotion and monitoring the implementation of the Standard Rules and the World Programme of Action. The United Nations continues to provide on request technical and financial support for national and international projects. The Statistics Division of the Department for Economic and Social Information and Policy Analysis plays an important role in developing statistical concepts and indicators, gathering relevant country information and preparing technical manuals and publications on disability statistics.

The work of the United Nations will increasingly focus on equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities. One of the most important concerns is accessibility: to new technologies, in particular information and communications technologies, as well as to the physical environment. The notion of "mainstreaming" will also be given prominence, that is, including a disability dimension in policy recommendations covering a wide spectrum of social and economic concerns.

The Special Rapporteur on Disability

In 1994, Mr. Bengt Lindqvist was designated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations as First Special Rapporteur on Disability of the Commission for Social Development. His duties are to assist in the monitoring of the implementation of the Standard Rules and, in the discharge of his functions, he divides his time between advisory functions and establishing a dialogue with States and local non-governmental organizations to further the implementation of the Standard Rules. The Special Rapporteur works closely with a panel of experts, composed of representatives of international organizations of persons with disabilities, and with the United Nations Secretariat.

In June 2003, Secretary-General Kofi Annan has appointed Sheikha Hessa Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani (Qatar) as the Special Rapporteur on Disability of the United Nations Commission for Social Development for the period 2003-2005.