

Experts urge support for most marginalized persons with disabilities, as UN forum begins

13 June 2017 – As the largest and most diverse international disability meeting in the world kicks off at the United Nations in New York, leading experts in the field are calling for greater recognition of a range of human rights and fundamental freedoms for persons with disabilities while focusing on helping the most vulnerable among them.

“This conference needs to achieve a clear understanding on how to reach the most vulnerable among disabled persons, those who are affected by humanitarian crises and natural disasters and military conflicts,” says Theresia Degener, Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

“Most often [the most vulnerable among disabled persons] are disabled women and disabled girls. And if we do not tackle multiple discrimination, we don’t reach these most vulnerable groups of persons with disabilities,” she added in an interview with UN News ahead of the 10th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The Conference of States Parties is held each year to exchange experience and ideas for implementation of the Convention, which was adopted in December 2006 with the aim of promoting full equality and participation of persons with disabilities in society. There are currently 174 States Parties to the Convention, making it one of the most widely ratified international human rights instruments.

Over one billion people in the world live with some form of disability. Persons with disabilities continue to be subject to stereotypes, prejudices, harmful practices and stigma.

“It is important to acknowledge that since the adoption of the Convention, 11 years ago, a lot of things are changing around the world,” Catalina Devandas Aguilar, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, told UN News.

“We are seeing more accessibility, so it is easier for persons that use wheelchairs to move around. It is easier to have access to services, and that is fantastic.”



Catalina Devandas Aguilar, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is in New York to attend the tenth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. UN Photo/ Alban Mendes de Leon

Referring to her own day-to-day life, she defines the city in which she is based – Geneva, Switzerland – as fully accessible. Public transportation provides her with access to any place she wants to go, enabling her to benefit from all services that are available in her community. “I did not have that kind of access when I was little growing up in Costa Rica,” she says, recalling her childhood.

Ms. Degener also noted the progress made in recent years. “We can see that many countries have changed their laws, especially in respect to guardianship laws, mental health laws and voting laws.”

As a result, she added, “persons with disabilities have achieved more access to the election process and have achieved more freedom.”

Both women acknowledged that while progress has been made in a number of areas, several challenges still remain.

Support for women and girls with disabilities

One of the areas that requiring greater attention is creating the conditions that would enable women to work, given that the employment rate for women with disabilities is much lower than that for men. In this regard, Ms. Devandas called on all parties to step up efforts in this area, saying that “urgent action is needed.”

“There is very little attention [paid] to the dramatic situation that women with disabilities as well as girls with disabilities face in their daily lives. Not only in regards to employment, in regards to violence and in regards to education. You can add and add, because multiple layers of discrimination apply to women with disabilities.”

We cannot forget that to talk about inclusion, we need to be inclusive ourselves

“To change that, we need to increase the awareness and put more effort into recognizing the support that women with disabilities need to exercise their rights,” she stated.

She went on to say: “When we are talking about the rights of persons with disabilities, we are not talking a man in a wheelchair. We are talking about a very diverse group of people. And we need very diverse solutions. We cannot forget that to talk about inclusion, we need to be inclusive ourselves.”



Theresia Degener, Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. UN Photo/ Kim Haughton

The Convention and the Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), the

universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Ms. Degener noted that there is much in common between the Convention and the 17 Goals.

“Most of the rights enshrined in the Convention are also found in the Sustainable Development Goals. Whereas the Millennium Development Goals did not include disabled people, the [SDGs](#) do that now. Disability is mainstreamed.

“So, by trying to implement the SDGs, States Parties try to implement the purpose of the CRPD.”

She continued: “Also, we need to remember that a fifth of very poor populations in the world, those who live on less than a dollar a day, are made up of disabled people and their families. So when States Parties work towards eradication of poverty of disabled people they also implement the Convention by ensuring that disabled people can live a life which that has an adequate standard of living.”

Inclusive social protection

With the start of the second decade of the Convention, Ms. Devandas cited two areas where advancement would be particularly beneficial. “The first one is if social protection policies are fully inclusive of persons with disabilities. The second one is to guarantee that support networks will be available for persons with disabilities.

We live in a world that is designed to support able-bodied people, but persons with disabilities as part of diversity also need support, and their support is different

“This means that persons with disabilities will be covered by universal health coverage, that we will have access to pensions, will have access to a specific benefit to support income, but also to recognize that we have additional costs for participation.

“At the same time, there should be this acknowledgement that support needs to be provided,” stressed Ms. Devandas. “In our societies everyone is supported. We do not notice anymore. We live in a world that is designed to support able-bodied people, but persons with disabilities as part of diversity also need support, and their support is different.

“We need to make sure that personal assistant devices and technology is provided to persons with disabilities so that we can fully participate on an equal basis with others. I think that if we have those things, it will make a dramatic difference in the lives of persons living with disabilities.”

Mine action vital to success of UN peace mandates, Security Council told

13 June 2017 – The mitigation of the threats posed by landmines and other explosive remnants of war is vital to the success of United Nations peacekeeping and special political missions, as well as to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, the return of displaced persons, and sustainable development, a senior UN official told the Security Council.

As an integrated component of peacekeeping and special political missions, mine action is critical to the safety, security and mobility of mission personnel and to effective and efficient mandate implementation along with its critical importance for protection of civilian populations, especially children and women, said Alexander Zuev, Assistant Secretary-General for Rule of Law and Security Institutions, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, during a thematic debate.

The debate, titled ‘Comprehensive Approach to Mine Action and Explosive Hazards Mitigation,’ was proposed by Bolivia, which holds the Council’s presidency for the month. Explosive hazards have been a key concern, especially for troop contributing countries. Nathalie Ochoa Nina, of the UN Mine Action Service in Colombia also addressed the meeting.

Explaining how mine action contributes to UN activities on the ground, Mr. Zuev said that, for example, in Iraq, risk education campaigns and humanitarian clearance of improvised explosive devices allows the safe return of displaced populations and delivery of humanitarian assistance. In South Sudan, the use of explosive detection dogs ensures that the sites sheltering civilians are free from explosive hazards, he added.

He went on to explain how the destruction of anti-personnel mines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices is vital to conflict prevention because those explosive materials could be “recycled” to construct new improvised explosive devices.

He also said that employing former soldiers in the field of mine clearance could help create conditions conducive to peace.

UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) is also coordinating development of standards for the disposal of improvised explosive devices. These standards, expected to be completed by the 72nd session of the General Assembly, will ensure conformity in training, equipment and operations, Mr. Zuev said.

Protection of migrant and refugee children must be at core of new global compacts – UN agency

13 June 2017 – Amid [ongoing discussions towards](#) the first-ever global compacts on refugees and migration, the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) joined other United Nations agencies meeting in Berlin today stressing that all parties involved in these talks must work together to address the needs of migrant children, consistent with their human rights.

“Every day at [IOM], we work with migrant children. Some have been compelled to move accompanied by relatives or guardians or on their own due to conflict, disasters, fear and despair,” [said](#) William Lacy Swing, IOM Director General, when discussing preparations for the Global Conference on Children on the Move.

He explained that other children migrate in search of better socio-educational opportunities and ultimately to pursue their own development and that of the society they live in.

With more than 250 participants from States, civil society, academia, UN agencies, private sector and individual experts, the conference takes into account children’s priorities and concerns, with the aim of assuring separate [global compacts](#) covering migrants and refugees.

“We want to ensure that child migration is always in the best interests of the child and that when it is not, sustainable solutions are found for children and their families both at home or in a new home elsewhere. These solutions should ensure that children are not left behind and that they are not exploited or even worse: trafficked. All migrant children are entitled to care and protection regardless of their migratory status,” concluded Mr. Swing.

In the [New York Declaration](#) Refugees and Migrants, adopted in September 2016, the UN General Assembly decided to develop a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. The process to develop this global compact for migration started in April 2017. The Assembly will then hold an intergovernmental conference on international migration in 2018 with a view to adopting the global compact.

Different factors contribute to migrant children’s situations of vulnerability, including their age, risk factors at individual, household, community and structural levels, the reasons why they have migrated, and the conditions they face during travel, transit, and at destination.

IOM underscores that it will continue to strive for migrant children’s wellbeing and best interests across the wide spectrum of activities the Organization is pursuing in support to all Governments, who are ultimately

responsible for their protection.

The UN migration agency values this inclusive partnership and its goals, especially as the consultations progress for the global compact on safe, orderly and regular migration – a major global process, to which IOM is extending technical and policy expertise as requested by UN Member States.

Polluted environments kill 1.4 million in Europe annually; UN agencies urge stepped-up action

13 June 2017 – As some 1.4 million people in Europe and Central Asia die prematurely each year from polluted environments, United Nations agency heads at high-level meeting call for regional leaders to scale up action to stem environmental deaths and diseases.

“In the era of Sustainable Development, we can prevent the 1.4 million environment related deaths by making health a political choice across all government sectors,” said Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, World Health Organization Regional Director for Europe (WHO/Europe), at the opening of the Sixth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

European citizens annually lose 50 million years of healthy life due to environmental risks, corresponding to at least 15 per cent of Europe’s total deaths – around half of which are due to outdoor and indoor air pollution.

“We urge all European leaders to take this opportunity for more sustainable policies to address the health challenges of the 21st century,” he underscored.

WHO/Europe, the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), joined approximately 500 representatives from the 53 countries of the European Region together with international and non-governmental organizations, to commit to prioritizing action on environmental risks to health.

“We have enough evidence. We have solutions at hand. What we need is action,” agreed Olga Algayerova, Executive Secretary of UNECE. “Examples of solutions developed over the past 20 years by UNECE and WHO/Europe with a proven track record include the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution, the Protocol on Water and Health and the joint Programme on Transport, Health and Environment. But we must do more to fulfil their potential to clean the air and water and promote smart cities and clean transport systems. And while doing more, we must build on the synergies

embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals.”

Environment-related non-communicable diseases

Environmental risk factors are responsible for around 26 per cent of ischemic heart disease, 25 per cent of strokes and 17 per cent of cancers in Europe. Cardiovascular deaths and diseases from environmental exposures are three times higher in low and middle income countries than in high income ones.

Air pollution is Europe's leading environmental killer, responsible for 620,000 deaths every year from both outdoor and indoor exposure.

“Successful cooperation among UNECE member States has led to significant reductions of air pollution in the region – thereby saving lives,” stressed Ms. Algayerova. “All recent studies show that this work needs to continue and be strengthened, and lessons learned should be shared with other regions,” she added.

Other environmental factors, such as chemical pollution, occupational risks and unsafe water and sanitation account for more deaths and diseases and road traffic injuries kill 85,000 people per year.

Extreme weather events from climate change, rapid urbanization and unprecedented levels of migration further exacerbate Europeans' health.

Investing in cities

By 2030, eight out of 10 Europeans will be living in cities, making them one of the main priorities in Europe's agenda at the Ministerial Conference.

A new WHO report, *Environment and health for European Cities in the 21st century: making a difference*, developed jointly with UNECE and UNEP, makes the case for investing in cities to improve people's health and reduce inequalities.

The Environment and Health Ministerial Conference in Ostrava, organized by WHO/Europe, in partnership with UNECE and UNEP is hosted by the Czech Republic and runs until 15 June.

[Conflict in Ukraine enters fourth year 'with no end in sight' – UN report](#)

13 June 2017 – Warring parties in eastern Ukraine have repeatedly failed to implement ceasefire agreements, allowing hostilities to escalate and the cumulative death toll to exceed 10,000 as the conflict entered its fourth year, a new United Nations report reveals.

The report, published today, covers the three months through 15 May 2017, during which the UN human rights monitoring mission in Ukraine recorded 36 conflict-related civilian deaths and 157 injuries, a 48 per cent increase from the previous three-month period, according to a [news release](#) from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

The report finds that there were daily ceasefire violations and routine use of small arms and light and heavy weapons in the conflict zone. Such attacks and the resulting damage to critical infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and water facilities, raise serious concerns for the protection of civilians, the report notes, warning that, as summer approaches, there is a risk of further escalation in hostilities, as in previous years.

From the start of the conflict in mid-April 2014 up to 15 May 2017, at least 10,090 people, including 2,777 civilians, have been killed, and at least 23,966 injured, according to a conservative estimate.

RELATED: [Conflict-displaced Ukrainians struggling to survive – UN](#)

More than 1.6 million people fled their homes and became internally displaced, while some three million remained in territory controlled by armed groups, the report notes.

Among the issues highlighted in the report:

- The socio-economic deprivation in the east of the country has been deepening. A cumbersome verification procedure introduced in 2016 deprived more than 400,000 citizens of Ukraine of their pensions. The report recommends abolishing the requirement that pensioners from armed-group controlled territory should register as internally displaced persons to receive their pension;
- The contact line continues to divide families and communities, infringing daily the right to freedom of movement. Long queues at the checkpoints reached a record peak in March and April, with over 900,000 crossings each month, compared with 550,000 in February;
- The report contains new cases of individuals unlawfully or arbitrarily deprived of their liberty or subjected to enforced disappearances and abductions, particularly in the territory controlled by armed groups. In a number of cases, the victims' families did not have access to those detained and had no information on their whereabouts; and,
- The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine observed systemic violations of the right to a fair trial on conflict-related charges.