

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.”