

Quality support key for people with disabilities to fully participate in their communities – UN rights expert

3 March 2017 – Access to good and safe support is of great importance for people with disabilities, as it helps them become independent and gain human rights, a United Nations independent expert said today, urging Member States to take legal, policy and financial actions to ensure their adequate support.

“Guaranteeing their access to support is not only a human rights obligation, but also a prerequisite to ensure that no one is left behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda,” Catalina Devandas Aguilar, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, said today while presenting her report to the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council.

However, she stressed, in practice, people with disabilities have limited or no access to the support they need.

“Many have been segregated and disempowered in traditional care services, explained Ms. Devandas, adding that “for them, the very notion of ‘care’ bears a heavy historical connotation associated with oppression and invalidation.”

Today, people with disabilities still risk having their decisions overridden by the “caregivers,” the human rights expert underscored.

“This must stop,” said Ms. Devandas, while emphasizing that “States must promote support services that allow for the independence, autonomy and direct participation of all and invest resources in this.”

Voicing concern that not enough is being done to make sure persons with disabilities are getting support, as well as the fact that the demand for support is rising, her report offers guidance to Member States on how to best provide human rights-based support services.

She urged government authorities to develop legislation, implement policies and allocate funds to make support services available, accessible, adequate and affordable.

“States should guarantee the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms of persons with disabilities in the provision of support,” Ms. Devandas concluded.

Intra-Syrian talks conclude in Geneva with 'clear agenda' and plans to resume later this month

3 March 2017 – The United Nations-facilitated intra-Syrian talks are “moving in the right direction,” the UN Special Envoy for Syria said today, wrapping up the latest round of discussions in Geneva with counter-terrorism added to the agenda and plans to resume in late March.

Staffan de Mistura told journalists that participants had engaged in “serious” discussions and said that the sides would be invited to continue discussions later this month.

“It is now clear to everyone and that is beyond dispute that we are here to implement UN Security Council resolution 2254,” Mr. de Mistura said, referring to the Council text approved in 2015 endorsing a road map for peace process in Syria, including specific language on governance, constitution and elections.

“I believe therefore and expect that the sides should now pursue a framework agreement with an agreed political package so a transition can be implemented in line with 2254 – we’re here to talk about that,” he added.

In addition to the issues previously on the agenda, as outlined in resolution 2254 (2015), counter-terrorism has been added at the request of the Government of Syria, according to the envoy.

The major issue of detainees and abductees was also raised by the delegation from the Syrian Government.

In parallel, the talks in Astana – convened by the Governments of Iran, Russia and Turkey – would continue to address issues related to the maintenance of the ceasefire and confidence-building measures.

“We have a clear agenda in front of us,” Mr. de Mistura told reporters, adding: “The train is ready; it is in the station [...] warming up its engine. It just needs an accelerator and the accelerator is in the hands of those in this round.”

At first 'playable' UN conference,

tech experts, gamers drive new thinking on global development

3 March 2017 – Hands-free gardening for a greener future, video gamers using their skills to help achieve the United Nations-led Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – these were just a few of the innovative and forward-looking ideas in the spotlight at the world body's first ever 'playable' policy conference, held in the German city of Bonn.

The Global Festival of Ideas for Sustainable Development, a UN conference that aims to chart a new way of thinking on addressing some of the world's most complex development challenges, wrapped up today, after three days of intense debates and 'game-playing.'

Among the technology experts, gamers and activists putting their heads together to figure out how to best to help countries implement the UN vision of a more just and equitable world where no one is left behind, was Ryan Hooks, manager of a software company called Huxley, who showed off his 'hands-free gardening' app.

"It's an AI (Artificial Intelligence) and augmented reality for plants. Greenhouses that use hydroponics to circulate the water are very complex systems and it's hard to scale water efficient food solutions. I've found that augmented reality and AI can be really useful for reducing labour cost," he told *UN News*.

To demonstrate the app's capabilities, Mr. Hook pointed his phone at a plant on the table and his app identified it as "apple mint."

"It's augmented reality, it knows what kind of plant it is, what percentage its health is, when to pick it, pack it, ship it and the environment (around it), so people can have hands-free augmented gardening," he explained.

The hands-free gardening app, Mr. Hooks continued, makes it more efficient to use hydroponics, a method of growing plants without soil, which also uses 95 per cent less water to grow plants.

2030 Hive Mind

Participants at the Festival were also engrossed in the 2030 Hive Mind game, where they played for a hypothetical country, planning policies, and convincing other players to join forces with them.

The Festival organizers stress that the game, which focuses on the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, and reveals the tough choices and trade-offs that might have been made along the road to sustainable development for all over the next 15 years.

Tom Juntunen, of the U Begin company, was playing for Goal 9, which focusses on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable

industrialization and foster innovation.

When Mr. Juntunen is not at his booth in the exhibit, walked around the conference centre trying to convince other players to support his policies.

“There’s a lot of negotiations, it’s a very robust simulation of real life dynamics with policy negotiation. Everyone has what’s important to them and what’s not important. In playing the game, you experience the parallel of that in a virtual environment. It is challenging as it is in real life,” he said of Hive Mind 2030.

‘Communicating the SDGs’ and the 2030 Agenda

“We have to make the world aware of this [...] agenda that is definitely going to transform the planet and that is going to ensure that no one is left behind,” Cristina Gallach, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, said yesterday.

“The more we communicate about the SDGs and make people aware of the agenda, the more the governments we will be accountable and will ensure that it is implemented,” she added.

The UN Department of Public Information (DPI), headed by Ms. Gallach, is the Organization’s entity tasked with informing the wider world on the SDGs and ensuring that the 17 goals are known and understood.

To that end, 17 ‘icons’ – each with a designated bright colour, short name phrase and single image – have been created to illustrate each Global Goal.

The icons have also been translated in over 50 languages, from Czech to Bahasa Indonesia, and the number is growing.

The Global Festival of Ideas, the first in a series of annual forums, is hosted by the UN SDG Action Campaign in partnership with the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) with the support of the German Government.

UN migration agency launches \$24.6 million appeal for drought-hit Somalia

3 March 2017 – To meet the emergency needs of over a million Somalis affected by drought, the United Nations migration agency is appealing to international donors for \$24.6 million in funding.

Humanitarian agencies worry that the situation has started to look increasingly similar to the 2011 famine in Somalia, in which over a quarter of one million people died, according to a press release from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

“We named this (2017) drought ‘Odi Kawayn,’ which is Somali for ‘something bigger than the elders,’” said drought victim Halima, explaining that none of the elders has ever seen a drought as severe as this one.

The IOM appeal has been designed to enhance the current response, and expand the agency’s geographic footprint within the northeast African country.

A massive increase in humanitarian assistance is urgently needed to avert a famine, with humanitarian agencies estimating that 6.2 million drought-affected Somalis are in need of assistance, including food, water and sanitation, health and nutrition, protection and shelter.

Iraq: 15,000 children flee west Mosul over past week as battle intensifies by the day, says UNICEF

3 March 2017 – Some 15,000 children have over the previous week fled the western section of Iraq’s Mosul city where fighting between the Government forces and terrorists is intensifying by the day, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has reported.

“UNICEF is responding to the immediate needs at the Hamam Al Alil camp, 20km from Mosul, where aid is provided to children upon their arrival,” UNICEF Regional Emergency Advisor Bastien Vigneau said over the phone from Iraq during the regular press briefing held in the UN Office at Geneva.

He noted that the children were very scared of the sound of the bombs, which was one of the main reasons their parents had decided to flee. They fled with very little luggage and in most cases with a bare minimum of clothes. The children and their families arrived mostly by buses organized by the military.

The main priorities, other than the first emergency response, included health, to ensure that children were immunized, primarily against measles and polio, said Mr. Vigneau.

Matthew Sarmash, spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said that a significant increase in displacement had been noticed in recent days and the Hamam Al Alil camp was close to reach its maximum capacity. At the moment, 150,000 places were occupied. He said construction under way to accommodate up to 250,000 people there.

UNICEF’s Vigneau said that more than 100,000 children have been displaced from Mosul since the military operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da’esh) began on 17 October 2016.

He said that 874 unaccompanied or separated children have been identified since mid-October, with half of them reunified with their families or taken care of by extended families, and the others being provided dedicated assistance until they reunify with families.