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**Matters related to the implementation of the Convention:
round table 3**

Enhancing the accessibility of information and technology and inclusive development

Note by the Secretariat

The present document was prepared by the Secretariat on the basis of information available to the Secretariat in order to facilitate the round table discussion on the theme “Enhancing the accessibility of information and technology and inclusive development”, to be held at the ninth session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

* [CRPD/CSP/2016/1](#).



Introduction

1. The present paper provides an overview of how accessibility, including accessibility of information and technology, is essential for the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for all, including persons with disabilities. The term “accessibility”, as used in the present paper, describes the degree to which an environment, service or product allows access by as many people as possible, including persons with disabilities. Enormous potential and opportunities exist for promoting accessibility as an integral part of urban and rural development policies and programmes. While recognizing the different levels of development and the varying economic challenges faced by Governments in advancing inclusive development, universal design concepts¹ and relevant technical standards concerning accessibility should be promoted actively in urban planning and development as a first step.

2. Environments can impede or enable, perpetuating exclusion or fostering participation and inclusion. This applies particularly to the issue of access to information and communications technologies (ICTs). All too often, for the world’s 1 billion persons worldwide living with a disability, the widespread barriers or lack of accessibility in the environments related to information and communications and relevant technologies and services have been a major challenge for the enjoyment of universal human rights and for full participation in society and development on an equal basis with others.²

International normative frameworks³

3. Under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessibility is regarded as an enabler for persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of society and development. Accessibility, as a cross-cutting issue, is a general principle (art. 3) and a general obligation of States parties (art. 4), under which States parties are required to proactively promote accessibility in the design and development of new technologies, including ICTs, as well as their availability for persons with disabilities. The Convention has a stand-alone article on accessibility (art. 9). Article 21, devoted specifically to freedom of expression

¹ “Universal design” means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaption or specialized design. Universal design shall not exclude assistive devices for particular groups of persons with disabilities where this is needed (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 2).

² World Health Organization and World Bank, *World Report on Disability 2011* (Geneva, 2011).

³ The Tunis Commitment and the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (see [A/60/687](#)), adopted at the World Summit on Information Society in 2005, reaffirmed the desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society, strived to promote universal, ubiquitous, equitable and affordable access to ICTs, including universal design and assistive technologies, for all people, especially those with disabilities. Recognizing the role of ICTs for economic growth and development, the Tunis Plan of Action for the Information Society further committed to building ICT capacity for all and confidence in the use of ICTs by all, including people with disabilities, through the improvement and delivery of relevant education and training programmes and systems, including lifelong and distance learning, and paying special attention to the formulation of universal design concepts and the use of assistive technologies that promote access for all persons, including those with disabilities.

and access to information, requires States to promote access for persons with disabilities to new ICTs and systems, including the Internet.

4. More recently, the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the realization of the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed development goals for persons with disabilities resulted in an action-oriented outcome document⁴ that stressed the importance of ensuring accessibility for and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of development, including in the context of an inclusive 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In the outcome document, Heads of State and Government called for actions to ensure accessibility, following the universal design approach, by removing barriers to the physical environment, transportation, employment, education, health, services, information and assistive devices, such as ICTs, including in remote or rural areas, to achieve the fullest potential throughout the whole life cycle of persons with disabilities.

5. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁵ commits Member States to the advancement of accessibility in many occasions, for instance in Goal 11, in providing access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, including persons with disabilities (target 11.2); and in providing universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for persons with disabilities (Goal 11.7). In other cases, the Agenda contains universal targets that apply to persons with disabilities, for example targets 3.8 (universal health coverage for all), 9.c (significantly increase access to ICT and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in the least developed countries by 2020) and 11.1 (ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and upgrade slums).

Issues and challenges

6. Information empowers individuals to make their decisions and to participate in and contribute to society and development in a meaningful manner. Accessibility of information and relevant technologies is of critical importance in the era of the information society. It has the potential to generate new opportunities for people, in particular persons with disabilities, who are often challenged by barriers to access to ICTs and inaccessibility in physical and virtual environments.

7. Although much progress has been made in raising awareness on the rights of persons with disabilities following the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, significant gaps remain in the accessibility of information and relevant technologies. In many parts of the world, persons with

⁴ General Assembly resolution 68/3.

⁵ The 2030 Agenda provides for equal access to information and promoting accessibility of relevant technologies by all people, whether disabled or not. For example, under Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels), the Agenda commits to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements (target 16.10), and, under Goal 9 (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation), to develop quality, reliable, sustainable and resilient infrastructure, including regional and transborder infrastructure, to support economic development and human well-being, with a focus on affordable and equitable access for all (target 9.1).

disabilities still continue to experience barriers or inaccessibility in physical and information and communication environments, such as inaccessibility of information or lack of information in accessible formats, such as Braille, sign language, or screen-reader-friendly websites.

8. One stark example is limited access to published books for blind persons and persons with visual impairments and print disabilities. According to the World Blind Union, prior to 2013 only 7 per cent of published books had ever been made accessible (in such formats as Braille, audio and large print) in the world's richest countries, and less than 1 per cent in poorer ones.⁶ In response, a World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) treaty⁷ adopted in 2013, which will enter into force when 20 ratifications are obtained, sets out to solve this "book famine" by creating a copyright exception to facilitate the cross-border transfer of books to over 280 million blind persons and persons with visual impairments or other print disability.

9. Progress in digitally connecting persons with disabilities has also been slow, especially in many developing countries. For instance, in Africa, the level of online services for disadvantaged and vulnerable groups remains lower, with only 4 per cent of countries offering online services for the poor and persons with disabilities. In Oceania, 14 per cent of countries offer services to older persons and persons with disabilities, and services for the poor are available in 21 per cent of the countries. Finally, in the Americas, 31 per cent of countries provide services for persons with disabilities and older persons.⁸

10. A number of factors contribute to the inaccessibility or lack of accessibility of ICTs. First, policymakers and other stakeholders still need to recognize that accessibility is not a matter of an add-on or of meeting merely specific needs of "special groups". Universal design and its applications to ICT facilities and services benefit all and should be an integral part of development policies. Second, although many countries have enacted legislation concerning persons with disabilities, not all ICT sectors are covered under such legislation. Third, rapid development in the ICT sector often leaves existing regulations outdated. For instance, mobile phones and Internet-based services are often not covered. Technical standards for the development of ICTs often lag behind. In addition, available assistive technologies and devices for accessing ICT could quickly become obsolete as new technology develops at an increasing pace, because few ICTs are designed to be inherently accessible following a universal design approach. Finally, the high cost of many ICTs also limits access for persons with disabilities who need them, in particular in low-income countries. Many assistive devices are often unaffordable or unavailable.

11. Owing to inaccessibility or lack of accessibility to information and information-related technologies, facilities and services, persons with disabilities in many parts of the world have been experiencing difficulties, disadvantages and exclusion in social, economic and political life to a great extent.

12. In extreme situations, such as natural disasters, lack of access to ICTs could be a matter of life or death. Available data reveal that the mortality rate among persons

⁶ International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, "IFLA welcomes WIPO treaty for blind and print disabled people", 27 June 2013. Available from www.ifla.org/node/7811.

⁷ Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled.

⁸ *United Nations E-Government Survey 2014: E-Government for the Future We Want* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 14.II.H.1), chap. 6.

with disabilities in natural disasters is two to four times higher than that of the general population in the same affected region. For example, during the great east-Japan earthquake and tsunami, lack of access to early warning information and responsive support and services was found to be one of the major contributors to the higher mortality rate among persons with disabilities, especially those with visual and hearing impairments.⁹

The way forward

13. Initiatives and good practices have emerged in recent years in promoting accessibility to ICTs for disability-inclusive urban and rural development worldwide. Progress has also been made within the United Nations system. The Secretary-General issued the first-ever Secretariat policy (by means of a Secretary-General's bulletin) on employment and accessibility for staff members with disabilities and appointed a Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility. The Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, as the global focal point on disability within the United Nations system, has been promoting accessibility as an integral part of inclusive development, supporting capacity-building of Member States and organizations of persons with disabilities in promoting accessible society and development. Building on the experience in supporting the General Assembly Ad Hoc Committee that drafted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Conference of States Parties to the Convention has been pioneering concrete steps to improve accessibility and reasonable accommodation to meet the needs of delegates and observers with disabilities in the Conference. In recent years, the Division has organized a series of panels and expert group meetings on accessibility issues. For example, in April 2012, the Division, in collaboration with the United Nations Information Centre and the Nippon Foundation, organized an expert group meeting on ICT accessibility in Tokyo to explore ways of advancing accessible ICTs to promote an inclusive society and development, including in the context of natural disasters and emergency responses. These initiatives helped to raise awareness and strengthened the knowledge base among stakeholders concerned to promote accessibility to information and ICTs and disability-inclusive development.

14. As mentioned in paragraph 8 above, the WIPO Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled was adopted in Marrakesh, Morocco, in 2013. The Treaty focuses on copyright exceptions to facilitate the creation of accessible versions of books and other copyrighted works. The ratification of 20 States is still required for the entry into force of the Treaty.

15. Building upon the accumulated experience of 10 years in the implementation of the Convention, and with the momentum from the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community is well positioned to advance ICT for disability-inclusive development in the forthcoming United Nations conferences on global development issues, such as the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) to be held in Quito in October 2016, aimed at promoting an inclusive urban development agenda in the world in the next two decades.

⁹ See [E/ESCAP/CDR\(4\)/INF/4](#), para. 5.

16. To achieve the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ensuring that no one will be left behind, it is imperative that ICTs and other technologies be made available to all, in particular to persons with disabilities. It also requires the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations as agents and beneficiaries of development during all stages of the development process.

17. As we move forward, the following may be of importance for enhancing accessibility to ICTs and inclusive development for all:

- Governments and other stakeholders should recognize accessibility as essential to all processes of sustainable, equitable and inclusive development and of ICT development policy and programmes.
- Governments should support the development of accessible ICTs, including mobile applications, government websites, public kiosks and automated teller machines, and accessible ICT services in their urban and rural development plans.
- Governments should promote research and mainstreaming of accessible ICTs by including accessibility requirements in public procurement exercises for ICT products and services used by public organizations or their customers or staff.
- Many national telecommunication authorities have universal service goals that recognize affordability and access to networks as a right; consideration shall be accorded urgently to accessibility as another universal service goal.¹⁰

Questions for consideration

1. In the era of the information society, technological advances have brought both challenges and opportunities for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development. What measures have been taken by Member States to ensure the accessibility to information and communication by all, including persons with disabilities?
2. To what extent have the universal design approach and concept been incorporated in current national development policies and programmes?
3. What would be required to integrate accessibility to ICT and other relevant technologies in development policies?
4. What are good practices for such inclusion that benefit all?
5. Innovative approaches, including through public-private partnerships, can play an important role in promoting accessibility in society and development. What can private-public partnerships do to promote accessible ICT and other technologies as an integral part of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?

¹⁰ Recommendations from a group of experts present at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Forum on Disability and Development held in Nairobi from 28 to 30 October 2015 on the theme “Disability inclusion and accessible urban development”. For more details, see www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/about-us/undesadspd-forum-on-disability-and-development-28-30-october-2015.html.