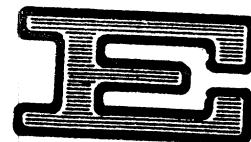




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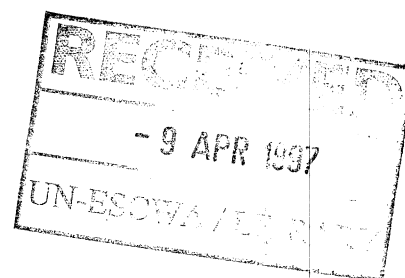
# UNITED NATIONS

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL

Distr.  
GENERAL  
E/ESCWA/SD/89/WG.1/21  
27 June 1989  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

### ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Conference on the Capabilities and Needs  
of Disabled Persons in the ESCWA Region  
20-28 November 1989  
Amman



#### OVERVIEW OF PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF DISABLED PERSONS - INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE -

Statement of the  
Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs

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It is estimated that 500 million of the world's total population are disabled as a consequence of mental, physical or sensorial impairments. By implication, 25 per cent of the population of every community is adversely affected by the presence of disability. Wars, violence, poverty, malnutrition, demographic and ecological trends account for the major factors which contribute to disability. It is feared that the number of disabled persons in the world will continue to increase rapidly if no counter-measures are taken to arrest this trend.

In 1976, the General Assembly of the United Nations decided to proclaim 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons. It marked one of the most successful international events in the history of the United Nations. It was observed in all countries and generated world-wide awareness of the rights and needs of disabled persons. For disabled persons themselves, it was a milestone in the long history of their struggle against discrimination and segregation and for equal rights.

In reviewing the problems and needs of disabled persons, it is essential to set the scene in a wider context. The disability issue can only be addressed in a comprehensive interdisciplinary perspective by the international community. Indeed, as early as 1949, resolutions adopted by the social commissions of the United Nations set the scene for co-ordinating plans and activities of the United Nations and leading national and international non-governmental organizations working in the field of disability. It is evident that the problems and needs of disabled persons cannot be isolated from those of the rest of the population as they are inextricably interwoven with the whole social and economic development process.

One important outcome of the International Year of Disabled Persons was the preparation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons which was adopted by the General Assembly at its thirty-seventh session in 1982 and 1983. The World Programme of Action is based on the principles of human rights, full participation, self-determination, integration into society and equalization of opportunities. It contains a set of guidelines for national, regional and international action. It represents a joint effort of Governments, United Nations organizations and bodies and non-governmental organizations to gain universal commitment to recognize the rights, and provide the services and opportunities for full, active participation of disabled persons in society.

This Conference on the Capabilities and Needs of Disabled Persons in the ESCWA Region, the Second Meeting of the ESCWA Inter-Organizational Task Force on Disability, is taking place at an important moment in the history of the United Nations' activities. After 40 years of existence, the United Nations is being scrutinized and critically evaluated by the international community. Member States have recognized the need to reform and restructure the Organization so as to make it more efficient and more readily responsive to the present needs of all countries. To this end, the Secretary-General decided, with effect from 1 March 1987, to concentrate in Vienna all activities on social policy and development under the authority of the

Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna and Head of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and Co-ordinator for all United Nations drug control-related programmes.

This arrangement has the advantage of clustering together all important interrelated activities in the social field and enables the Organization to speak with a more coherent voice on major social issues. It is hoped that this approach will confer on all concerned parties new direction and vigour in their work in the field of disability.

When adopting the World Programme of Action, the General Assembly also proclaimed the period 1983-1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. The Decade provides essentially a time-frame for Governments to commit themselves to intensify their efforts to improve the living conditions of their disabled citizens. Monitoring and evaluation are carried out at periodic intervals at international and regional levels, as well as at the national level, in order to assess the situation of disabled persons and to measure developments in this field.

In its capacity as the focal point within the United Nations system for global disability programmes and activities, the United Nations Office at Vienna, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, convened in Stockholm in August 1987 the Global Meeting of Experts; most of the participants were disabled persons. The purpose of the Meeting was to prepare a report that would enable the Secretary-General to help the General Assembly at its forty-second session to evaluate the implementation of the World Programme of Action at the mid-point of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. For the first time in the history of the United Nations, a precedent-setting decision was taken to make the documentation of the meeting available in Braille and audio-cassette form; sign language interpretation was also provided. It is therefore gratifying to see that the documentation of the present Conference is also available in formats accessible to disabled participants. It is hoped that these facilities can be further improved inside as well as outside the United Nations system, even in these days of constrained resources. The United Nations considers sign language interpretation and its teaching, as well as the use of Braille and easy access to barrier-free buildings, as part of the basic rights of disabled persons.

Following its review of the global situation of disabled persons, the Global Meeting of Experts adopted a report which outlines recommendations for further implementation of the World Programme of Action during the second half of the Decade of Disabled Persons. The report recognized the fact that the opportunities offered by the Decade of Disabled Persons to stimulate global implementation of the World Programme of Action had not been fully exploited. It noted that little progress had been made throughout the world, especially in the least developed countries where disabled persons are doubly disadvantaged by given economic and social conditions, and that the situation of many disabled persons may indeed have deteriorated during the first half of the Decade.

In today's world many Governments are deeply preoccupied with financial restraints and economic restructuring. The flow of resources to developing countries has decreased. Important regions of the world are facing hunger, malnutrition, endemic diseases, natural and man-made disasters. These factors, as well as wars and conflicts in different parts of the world, multiply the number of disabled persons. In many countries of the developing world, the heavy burden of foreign debts has a negative impact, especially on the underprivileged and the deprived. The number of impoverished families is on the increase. All this clearly indicates that disability policy should increasingly form an integral part of the overall socio-economic development.

Progress in realizing the high hopes engendered during the International Year of Disabled Persons has evidently not been at the desired pace. The results of the mid-Decade review reflected the gap between the just aspirations of disabled persons and their realization. However, before reflecting on the negative aspects, it is essential to take stock of the achievements. The creation of a global consensus in the area of disability has been a significant step forward. The World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons embodies this consensus. It reflects some of the most critical components of the normative framework which the United Nations has been formulating. The quest for equality of opportunities and the inalienable right of participation are two of the core values emphasized in the World Programme of Action. These values are critical for disabled persons.

The extraordinary progress made in science and technology and the break-throughs in electronics have opened marvellous opportunities for disabled persons, especially for prevention of disability and rehabilitation. The World Programme of Action directs attention to the fact that the technology which will prevent or control most disablement is available and is improving. The remarkable recent progress in biomedical research promises revolutionary new tools which could greatly strengthen all interventions. Both basic and applied research deserve our support in the coming years.

Knowledge about the problems and needs of disabled persons has increased considerably. Numerous strategies are being formulated and innovative approaches are being considered. New mechanisms for making them accessible for those in need are gaining strength daily. Required at the present is a common platform, firm political will and commitment backed by the necessary technique and the proper use of meagre resources. Some of the numerous ideas which have emerged as a result of the mid-Decade review include the following (to name but a few):

1. Solution to problems related to the basic needs of disabled persons should be found in an integrated perspective, embracing both economic development and social progress.
2. Policies, plans and programmes should be taken up by the disabled persons themselves.

3. The situation of disabled persons cannot be improved solely by strategies and policies, but also requires action-oriented programmes and projects aimed at the grass-root level and well co-ordinated nationally, regionally and internationally.

4. Concerted efforts are required to protect and preserve the rights of disabled persons and to create an environment conducive to equalization of opportunities.

In defining the agenda for future action and taking into account foreseeable economic situations and global social trends, the General Assembly at its forty-third session adopted resolution 43/98 of 8 December 1988 on the implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. In this resolution, the Assembly recommended priorities for global activities and programmes during the second half of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons. For Member States, which have the main responsibility for the implementation of the World Programme of Action, suggested priorities outlined in the annex to the resolution are as follows:

"(a) To develop and implement national plans of action, using a multisectoral, interdisciplinary approach in consultation with organizations of disabled persons;

"(b) To promote the development and functioning of organizations of disabled persons by providing technical and financial support;

"(c) To establish and/or strengthen national committees or similar co-ordinating bodies;

"(d) To launch a public information and education campaign in which disabled persons are portrayed as equal members of society;

"(e) To support cultural activities to promote awareness of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons by giving disabled people the opportunity to participate in musical, artistic and drama activities;

"(f) To review, update and, where necessary, improve national legislation to ensure general conformity with international standards;

"(g) To consider ... (including) in ... legislation and planning the rights of ... disabled (persons), including those of persons who are:

"(i) Hearing-impaired, including the right to have sign language (accepted as their official language, and to have sign language) interpretation;

"(ii) Visually-impaired, including access to Braille material, audio aids and large print information;

"(iii) Mentally-impaired, including access to easy reading materials;

"(iv) Speech-impaired, including access to new technologies;

"(h) To formulate and implement disability-related projects for inclusion in technical co-operation programmes financed by the United Nations Development Programme through the country programmes funded by the indicative planning figures;

"(i) To review and extend services and benefits available to disabled people and their families, aimed at ensuring basic level income maintenance and promoting self-directed personal assistance, housing, transport and other facilities needed for independent living;

"(j) To train personnel, including disabled persons, to build a national capability to deal with disability;

"(k) To establish machinery for appropriate data collection on disabilities, to be used in national planning;

"(l) To use indigenous raw materials, scientific expertise and production facilities for the manufacture and local repair of appropriate technical aids and appliances needed by disabled persons;

"(m) To accede to and implement the provisions of the Nairobi Protocol to the Florence Agreement concerning the duty-free international movement of equipment and material needed to assist the daily living of disabled people;

"(n) To ratify, if they have not yet done so, International Labour Organisation Convention No. 159 of 1983 on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons;

"(o) To support research into the special needs of disabled persons and into programmes to benefit them and their families;

"(p) To develop services and facilities to promote the rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities of disabled women, elderly disabled persons, disabled refugees and disabled migrants.

"... Intergovernmental organizations are urged to give priority to issues concerning disabled persons and to take (the) initiatives ... (in implementing) the World Programme of Action."

Non-governmental organizations are urged to do the following:

"(a) To establish regular and systematic contacts with the United Nations system and other non-governmental organizations in collecting and disseminating information and research findings, planning activities and sharing innovative experiences and in maximizing the use of available resources;

"(b) To mobilize their networks and resources to publicize the aims and objectives of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons;

"(c) To provide regular information on their activities and meetings to the Disabled Persons Unit of the Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat and actively to support its activities."

The outcome of this Conference on the Capabilities and Needs of Disabled Persons in the ESCWA Region will be valuable in orientating the Governments of the Western Asia region in their implementation of the above priorities and programmes during the second half of the Decade. Of vital importance for the new role on social policy and development assigned to the United Nations Office at Vienna is for this Conference to reflect on ways and means of integrating the problems and needs of disabled persons into the national development policies in the Western Asia region. One cannot fail to mention the collaboration with the Arab Gulf Fund for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), which has been essential in addressing some salient problems and needs of disabled persons. AGFUND support for United Nations activities has been tangibly demonstrated in a number of significant financial contributions to the Voluntary Fund for the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons for selected field projects. By way of example, co-financing arrangements were effected for six disability-related projects in the following developing countries: Djibouti, India, Lebanon, Swaziland, Tunisia and Uruguay. In addition, the Administrative Committee of AGFUND approved co-financing grants for disability-related projects in Jordan, Lebanon and Mauritania.

Following a request by the General Assembly at its forty-third session, the Secretary-General will conduct a feasibility study on the substantive, financial and administrative implications of alternative ways to mark the end of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons in 1992. The study, which will be submitted to the General Assembly at its forty-fifth session, will include a review of the global progress achieved and obstacles encountered during the Decade. It will also provide a mechanism for establishing the actions needed until the year 2000 and beyond. It is anticipated that regional meetings will be organized in connection with this activity. A regional meeting on this subject in the Western Asia region will be required in view of the success of a comparable technical meeting held in Kuwait in connection with the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons.

The General Assembly has given clear guidelines for priority activities and programmes devoted to the problems and needs of disabled persons. The guidelines should also help in the effort to revitalize the Decade for effective implementation of the World Programme of Action. In this regard, a comprehensive and well-co-ordinated information and education campaign in conjunction with the Decade is needed at the national as well as regional and international levels. Such activity could have significant impact on the success of the Decade in raising awareness of the problems and needs of disabled persons. Pragmatic and dynamic approaches are needed to raise funds and mobilize human resources where most needed in the disability field.



Furthermore, the need for assistance in policy formulation and in building structures for disability-related issues has been well identified and recognized. This calls for effective measures to strengthen the technical co-operation programmes and activities which have not been effectively carried out up to now for lack of resources. The practicability of organizing small-scale technical meetings before the end of the Decade - dealing with areas such as "prevention", "rehabilitation", "equalization of opportunities" as well as "human rights" - must seriously be considered in order to identify solutions to the problems and needs of disabled persons.

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