



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
20 November 2013

Original: English

Commission for Social Development

Fifty-second session

11-21 February 2014

**Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and
the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly:**

**priority theme: promoting empowerment of people
in achieving poverty eradication, social integration
and full employment and decent work for all**

Statement submitted by World Blind Union, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Promoting the empowerment of persons with visual disabilities in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all, including persons with visual disabilities

Introduction

The *World Report on Disability*, published by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank in 2011, states that 1 billion persons experience some form of disability, constituting 15 per cent of the total population of the world. The well-established facts reveal that 80 per cent of them live in developing countries and that the same proportion live in rural areas with chronic poverty conditions. The lack of rehabilitation facilities, basic infrastructure and access to essential human needs and services has aggravated the condition, which has resulted in the exclusion and impoverishment of this most excluded and poorest section of the society.

Our primary mandate is to ensure the representation and participation of an estimated 285 million blind/partially sighted persons in all the actions and processes of multiple stakeholders at all levels which affect their lives in order to reflect their perspectives, concerns and issues. We have been striving to promote empowerment, inclusion, holistic development and the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with others through a wide range of actions.

Objective and purpose

The main objective of the present statement is to apprise the stakeholders of the strategic importance of the issues and concerns of persons with visual disabilities, the poverty that they experience, the barriers that they encounter, the discrimination and exclusion that they suffer and the deprivation that they face. Its purpose is to urge the stakeholders to develop an inclusive policy and a strategic framework for the empowerment of people with a view to the eradication of extreme poverty and the achievement of inclusion and decent livelihood opportunities for persons with visual disabilities.

Overview

Poverty and disability in general and visual disability in particular are inextricably linked. Both poverty and visual disability reinforce each other. Poor persons are most likely to become blind/partially sighted, and blind/partially sighted persons are most likely to become poorer. Increased dependence on family members and a lack of independent mobility, accessible transport, built environment and access to publicly available information in accessible formats, such as Braille, large print, audio and electronic formats, further contribute to denial and deprivation of access to education, health care, livelihoods and recreation.

Chronic poverty conditions, a low literacy rate, the apathy of the family and negative attitudes of the community towards persons with visual disabilities, and the lack of access to adequate food and nutrition have posed a serious threat to the right to life of blind/partially sighted persons, which has been exhibited through high

rates of infant mortality, infanticide, starvation and unnatural deaths. Blind and partially sighted children face significant disadvantages. In many developing countries, approximately 60 per cent of children who are born blind or who acquire blindness at a very young age do not survive to adulthood. Hence, infant mortality programmes need to specifically target blind children and their families.

Up to 60 per cent of children in low-income countries are likely to die within one year of becoming blind. Moreover, about 500,000 children become blind each year. Many of the conditions associated with childhood blindness are also causes of child mortality (e.g. premature birth, measles, congenital rubella syndrome, vitamin A deficiency and meningitis). There should be a universal prohibition of compulsory abortion at the instance of the State based on the prenatal diagnosis of a disability. The right to life as a full member of society is integral to the realization of all the rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other human rights instruments.

The lack of rehabilitation and support services and an accessible transport system; chronic poverty conditions; and negative attitudes towards persons with visual disabilities deprive them of access to rehabilitation services, including assistive devices, technology and support services, in order to maximize their potential and cope with their impairment.

Education is one of the fundamental and basic human rights enshrined in various United Nations instruments, but unfortunately persons with visual disabilities have fewer chances of accessing quality education owing to a lack of adequate support services, trained teachers and teaching and learning materials in the regular schools; the non-existence of special schools in rural areas; increased vulnerability to sexual and physical abuse in residential schools in urban areas; and negative attitudes, fear and apathy of family members towards persons with visual disabilities. In developing countries, less than 10 per cent of blind children get to go to school, hence the need for inclusive, "Education for All" programmes with appropriate resources and support. Access to assistive devices and technology is a distant dream for persons with visual disabilities owing to their unavailability and unaffordability and the negative attitudes of family members. This has significantly contributed to their limited functional abilities, dependence and isolation.

Persons with visual disabilities have the lowest health outcomes as a result of the lack of health-care services, the low level of awareness and the apathy of health-care personnel. They have increased risk of and vulnerability to morbidity, mortality, communicable and non-communicable diseases, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. The lack of accessible information on general, sexual and reproductive health further contribute to their exhibiting very low health outcomes. Health personnel are not equipped to deal with the specific needs of persons with visual disabilities. Nor are the training programmes on health care accessible to them, since the programmes are largely based on visual media to cater to the needs of illiterate rural populations or those with a low literacy rate.

Persons with visual disabilities have very low economic outcomes as a result of the lack of opportunities for education, vocational training, employment and livelihood. They have been excluded from microfinance, savings, credit and self-employment ventures, since the existing programmes do not meet the specific needs of persons with visual disabilities. The existing skill development and microcredit programmes have viewed them as liabilities and defaulters. They do not even have

access to ancestral property. In some cases, they have access to property but do not have possession rights or the title in their name. There are instances where family members, in particular non-disabled siblings or relatives, have murdered blind/partially sighted persons for property matters. In other cases they were forced to leave home and become destitute.

Experience during recent humanitarian emergencies has revealed that existing emergency preparedness measures do not adequately meet the needs of blind and partially sighted persons and that mainstream emergency aid providers are ill prepared to address their needs. All the relevant stakeholders need to ensure that their emergency preparedness plans consider the unique needs of blind and partially sighted persons.

It has been found that blind and partially sighted persons face higher levels of exploitation, violence and abuse. This is particularly true for blind and partially sighted women, children and older persons, and this exploitation, violence or abuse can often come from family members or caregivers. All the appropriate stakeholders need to ensure that information on how to recognize and deal with abuse is available in accessible formats and that help is available through trained and accessible services.

Blind and partially sighted women face many additional barriers imposed as a consequence of being both blind and female. These include reduced access to education, health care and rehabilitation and a reduced likelihood of securing employment. In addition, they are highly vulnerable to abuse and violence and are more likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS or other infectious diseases. WHO now estimates that approximately two thirds of the world's blind persons are women. Any programmes, therefore, must ensure that the unique needs of blind and partially sighted women are addressed so as to ensure their equitable access and participation.

Policy-related specific challenges

Neither policies and programmes nor internationally agreed goals and targets are inclusive of persons with disabilities in general and persons with visual disabilities in particular. The mechanism and systems monitoring these goals and targets are not inclusive of blind/partially sighted persons. Visual disability is not a priority agenda; nor are persons with visual disabilities the priority target group of the development actions and processes of agencies and national Governments. A lack of political will on the part of Governments towards the empowerment and development of persons with disabilities has resulted in the exclusion and impoverishment of persons with visual disabilities. Attitudinal, institutional, informational and environmental or structural barriers to access to development programmes have largely excluded them.

Recommendations

On the basis of the above-stated facts, challenges and issues with regard to persons with visual disabilities, World Blind Union makes the following recommendations:

(a) To call upon stakeholders to develop an inclusive framework for empowerment and poverty eradication with specific goals, targets and indicators for

persons with visual disabilities through the explicit mention of disability in general and persons with visual disabilities in particular;

(b) To call upon stakeholders to work towards an inclusive post-2015 development agenda with specific goals, targets and indicators for persons with visual disabilities in accordance with the recommendations of the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, reports of the Secretary-General and the outcome document of 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: the way forward, a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond;

(c) To launch a mass awareness-raising campaign in fully accessible formats through public and private media on fulfilling the potential of persons with visual disabilities, in accordance with article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other appropriate provisions of human rights instruments;

(d) To call upon stakeholders to prepare comprehensive action plans with specific strategies and focus on persons with visual disabilities through community-based rehabilitation and other approaches with enhanced access to rehabilitation services, eye health care, assistive devices and technology for the empowerment and holistic development of persons with visual disabilities;

(e) To call upon stakeholders to adopt specific strategies and measures to promote livelihoods, self-employment, skill development, access to credit, and appropriate social security measures for persons with visual disabilities, in accordance with articles 27 and 28 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

(f) To build human resources and infrastructure, in particular a sensitive and accessible transport system, in order to facilitate the access of persons with visual disabilities to appropriate rehabilitation services and facilities in a timely manner, in accordance with article 26 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

(g) To ensure the appropriate and adequate representation and active participation of persons with visual disabilities in the decision-making processes which affect their lives, in accordance with article 4 (3) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

(h) To ensure the full and effective inclusion of persons with visual disabilities in all the development actions and processes of state, bilateral, multilateral and United Nations agencies, in accordance with article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.