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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 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

The implications of Science, Technology, Innovation and culture for blind and partially sighted persons

The World Blind Union is a global organization that represents the worldwide community of 285 million blind and partially sighted persons. We envision a community where people who are blind or partially sighted are empowered to participate on an equal basis in any aspect of life they choose. We have been working for more than three decades to make a significant difference in the lives of millions of blind or partially sighted persons through our work in the areas of representation, capacity-building, resource sharing and accessibility, which includes our efforts to influence the policies and regulations of the United Nations and other international agencies to reflect the needs and views of blind and partially sighted persons. The organization operates through six regional unions, composed of organizations of and for the blind in some 190 countries.

The organization is one of the key, active and founding members of the International Disability Alliance and also has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, the World Health Organization and a number of other relevant United Nations and international agencies.

The World Blind Union sincerely welcomes and honestly appreciates the initiative taken by the Council towards inviting oral and written submission from civil society agencies, particularly the organizations of persons with disabilities in general and persons with visual disabilities in particular. We, the organization representing 285 million blind or partially sighted persons of the world, strongly feel that the issue under discussion is of strategic importance and relevance. We would like to draw your attention to the below matters of specific concern to the blind or partially sighted community of the world.

Science and technology plays a vital role in changing the life situation of persons with visual disabilities. Advancements in science and technology have the potential to contribute significantly to the empowerment, effective and meaningful inclusion and holistic development of persons with visual disabilities in all aspects of society at all levels. The advancement of science and technology has resulted in enhancing the employability and livelihood opportunities for persons with visual disabilities across sectors. It has increased the rate of employment and drastically reduced economic inequities.

Innovation in assistive devices and assistive technology, mobility and low-vision aids, electronic Braille and large print, screen reading and auditory applications, digitally accessible information system, mobile phone devices and media players are some of the important and significant contributions of the technological advancements that have changed the life situations of the blind or partially sighted community in the world.

Every day, a large number of devices are being introduced to the market as a result of science and technological advancement. Unfortunately, the majority of these devices are not accessible and not in compliance with universal design standards. Often, persons with visual disabilities will have to invest an additional cost that is disproportionate to the original cost of the devices and often devices cannot be made accessible with the adaptations available to us. The advancement of

science and technology has in one way significantly contributed to changing the life situations of persons with visual disabilities, but the advances have also presented new challenges of accessibility and universal design in order to enable the equal use of these devices without incurring additional cost.

A study conducted by the digitally accessible information system consortium in various developing countries reveals that less than 5 per cent of persons with visual disabilities have access to technologically advanced assistive devices and assistive technology due to factors of accessibility and affordability. The fact of the matter is that advancement in science and technology has yet to reach 95 per cent of persons with visual disabilities and make significant changes to their lives. Lack of access to assistive devices and technology by 95 per cent of persons with visual disabilities has resulted in preventing them from accessing quality education, updated information, livelihoods, participation and representation in decision-making processes. As revealed by the world report on disability, persons with visual disabilities have lower levels of education, health care and economic outcomes compared with other excluded and marginalized communities of society. The advancement in science and technology could significantly contribute to enhancing access to education, health care and economic outcomes for persons with visual disabilities if the technology were accessible, affordable and in compliance with universal design standards. Technology now enables accessibility features to be included at the design stage, thus eliminating the need for cumbersome and expensive retrofits. That should be the objective at all times.

Against the backdrop of the above-mentioned facts and the grim reality of persons with visual disabilities with regard to access to advanced technology and the mandate of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we make the following suggestions:

- All of the websites of States parties, private entities and civil society agencies should be in compliance with web content accessibility guidelines 2.0 and made fully accessible to persons with visual disabilities, as per article 9.1 (A), 9.2 (F), 9.2 (G), 21 (C) and 21 (D) of the Convention
- Scientific and technological advancements in the field of transport should take into account the accessibility needs and issues of persons with visual disabilities, such as Braille number plates, boards in large print, use of colour contrast and auditory signals, which should be fully in compliance with universal design, as per article 9.1 (A) of the Convention
- All products and goods based on advanced technology should be accessible to persons with visual disabilities and should be in compliance with universal design regardless of the nature and status of the organization that produces them, as per article 9.2 (B) of the Convention
- All stakeholders should promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at a minimum cost for persons with visual disabilities, as per article 9.2 (H) of the Convention
- The massive exchange and sharing of technological advancement among developing countries through international cooperation should be promoted, as

per article 32 of the Convention, in order to ensure that persons with visual disabilities have access to advanced technology at affordable cost

- States parties should abolish all import and export duties on assistive devices and assistive technology imported for the benefit of persons with visual disabilities and their development
- All stakeholders of strategic relevance, including private entities that produce and distribute technological products aimed at promoting accessibility and universal design for the benefit of persons with visual disabilities, should make systematic and conscious attempts to reduce the cost of the product in order to ensure its accessibility to persons with visual disabilities in developing countries at an affordable cost
- All players, including private and civil society agencies, should promote equal access to recreation, leisure, art and culture for persons with visual disabilities through the application of advanced technology in television, films in theatres and digital television sets for recreational and informational use. Audio descriptions, large print caption and digital Braille should be incorporated into the production and distribution of television and film
- All museums, cultural and tourism facilities should harness technology to make their programmes and cultural activities accessible to blind or partially sighted persons through audio, digital Braille and large print descriptions
- Universities, educational and academic institutions should promote research in the field of assistive devices, assistive and accessible technology in order to create access to technology at affordable cost for persons with visual disabilities
