



Expert Group Meeting on the Participation and Leadership of Persons with Disabilities in Building a Disability-Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable post-COVID-19 World

I. Introduction

UNDESA/DISD and UN-Women/DIIP¹ in collaboration with the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on the CRPD (IASG-CRPD), will organize an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) entitled: “The Participation and Leadership of Persons with Disabilities in Building a Disability-Inclusive, Accessible and Sustainable post-COVID-19 World” in a virtual format, from 25-27 May 2021.

The EGM will include expert participants from around the world, in their individual capacity, including those with experience in: disability and development, gender equality, humanitarian emergencies and the leadership of disadvantaged groups at the local, national and global levels.

The Meeting is expected to result in a set of practical recommendations to advance the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, at all levels of COVID-19 recovery toward the further realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results of the Meeting are also expected to contribute to the international policy discourse on the disability-inclusive global agenda, including through the intergovernmental meetings, such as the General Assembly and the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

II. Background

The COVID-19 Crisis and disability

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the extent of the marginalization and inequalities faced by persons with disabilities. It heightened existing barriers to accessing basic necessities and raised new ones against the inclusion of persons with disabilities in responses to the COVID-19 crisis. These are even more exacerbated for women and girls with disabilities, who face increased risk while living under lockdown.

Yet, the current recovery process is rife with opportunities to set new standards and norms, forge partnerships and strengthen institutions to build bulwarks against the devastating impact of the pandemic and other, future, crisis situations. The recovery process should inspire solidarity, flexibility and motivation, thus, shaping the post-COVID-19 world in line with the Convention on

¹ Disability Inclusion and Intersectionality Portfolio, UN-Women

the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One of the key cross-cutting principles of the SDGs is to leave no one behind. In the current phase of the COVID-19 crisis, the agency and leadership of persons with disabilities is not being secured. In fact, they are frequently “absent” in response and recovery measures and processes. But, to create a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world – one in which no one is left behind – at least two shifts in approach are necessary: the rights, perspectives and well-being of persons with disabilities should be reflected in each step of the recovery process; and their capacity as leaders and agents of change should be strengthened. This should be the case especially for those who are furthest left behind, such as women and girls with disabilities.

Disability-inclusive response to the COVID-19 crisis: participation and leadership of persons with disabilities

The UN General Assembly, in 2020, adopted resolution 75/154 on “Inclusive development for and with persons with disabilities,” calling upon Member States, the UN system and other partners to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the CRPD through disability-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery that mainstreams the rights, well-being and perspectives of persons with disabilities. The resolution specifically requests a focus on promoting the participation and perspectives of persons with disabilities in this phase. The UN system and its partners, in this context, have been undertaking a series of initiatives to explore these pathways in different contexts, including in government and the private sector.

The international community is in the process of identifying and activating key enablers for the leadership of persons with disabilities, in particular, the leadership of those who are furthest left behind, including women and girls with disabilities. So far, its work has highlighted four key pathways to transformative leadership: (1) growing consciousness and capabilities; (2) accessing resources and opportunities; (3) shaping and leveraging policies, laws and relevant guidelines; and (4) transforming social norms and exclusionary practices, as well as creating inclusive cultures.

UN entities, working in tandem and with multi-stakeholder partnerships, have been taking action in this phase for better recovery.

The Office of the Secretary-General issued the policy brief, “A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19” and a time-bound task force was created for its mobilization. The UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, adopted in 2019, continues to advance disability inclusion across all pillars of the UN’s work, with key components to render the UN’s COVID-19 response work disability-inclusive. UN-Women launched its corporate disability inclusion strategy in 2018 – ‘The empowerment of women and girls with disabilities: Towards full and effective participation and gender equality’. Other UN entities have contributed through a series of disability-focused events, conferences, publications and programmes, created in cooperation with stakeholders. For example, the WHO, OHCHR, UNHCR, UN Women and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have addressed disability-inclusive recovery from their respective mandates in health, humanitarian emergencies, gender, and economic issues.

Leveraging partnerships, such as through the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), the UN system is strengthening its knowledge management on

inclusive COVID-19 response and recovering better, including a series of policy briefs on the socio-economic and gendered impacts of the crisis, all the while applying disability inclusion as a cross-cutting principle. Through the 13th session of the Conference of States Parties (COSP) to the CRPD and its related events, many stakeholders came together to take stock of lessons learned, the opportunities provided by COVID-19 recovery and Building Back Better and frameworks to seize them. The upcoming 14th session of the Conference of States Parties is expected to address next steps under the specific themes of humanitarian action, independent living and being included in the community and education, with a particular focus on persons with disabilities as agents and leaders of the transformative change much needed for Building Back Better.

Participation and leadership of persons with disabilities in the response, recovery and Building Back Better toward an inclusive, accessible and sustainable 2030 Agenda

The undertakings of the UN system to advance a disability-inclusive recovery from COVID-19 have been made possible by the research, advocacy and coordination work of organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). Persons with disabilities and their representative organizations have overcome many of the obstacles created by the COVID-19 crisis to defend the rights and well-being of those left furthest behind in emergency situations. OPDs are best equipped to recognize and advocate on behalf of the diverse needs of their communities and develop strategies to ensure that they are met.

Persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, as agents of change in their communities, have been leading many of the community-led initiatives to enable access to fundamental necessities and services, as social systems were disrupted by the pandemic. For example, OPDs have engaged with individuals with disabilities, especially those who are furthest left behind, including women and children with disabilities, to gather necessary information and data; they have advocated for the needs of constituents with disabilities to their local and national governments; they have raised awareness of the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 on persons with disabilities and have campaigned for persons with disabilities to be included as participants and leaders in the design, implementation and monitoring of response and recovery policy.

Global, regional, and local networks of persons with disabilities are leading many initiatives to include persons with disabilities; these include the International Disability Alliance (IDA), the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), and groups of women leaders in the Global Forum on the Leadership of Women and Girls with Disabilities. OPDs have played leading roles in many UN COVID-19 response initiatives; they have done so by taking both targeted and mainstreaming approaches to disability inclusion through, among others, consultation, data collection and analysis, and support with advocacy and accountability efforts. At the country level, OPDs have worked with UN Country Teams to build capacity, facilitate the systematic engagement with persons with disabilities and develop country profiles and case studies to support inclusive recovery and strengthened preparedness for future health emergencies.

III. Expert Group Meeting

This Expert Group Meeting, in the form of a virtual expert discussion, will take stock of successes, obstacles and systemic barriers faced by persons with disabilities, reflecting on the past year. It

will facilitate the development of a set of recommendations to advance the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, in COVID-19 response and better recovery, as well as in setting the ‘roadmap’ for their implementation. In this regard, the meeting will explore the challenges of addressing intersectionality in pandemic response and beyond.

Another objective of the Meeting is to develop a basis for dialogue among stakeholders, including policymakers, persons with disabilities, expert communities and other community leaders, on the participation and leadership of marginalized populations. The goal of this exchange is to identify obstacles and essential components to ensuring the leadership of those who are furthest left behind, in particular, those with disabilities, in future contexts beyond the COVID-19 crisis. The Meeting will also provide an opportunity for experts to jointly analyse whether/how specific strategies should be adapted to include persons with disabilities facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women and girls with disabilities.

The EGM will include 12 to 15 expert participants from around the world, representing different stakeholder groups, including those who tend to be furthest left behind, in close collaboration with representatives from OPDs and other key organizations, academia, the UN system and the private sector. The Meeting will be led by global experts/specialists in global health and disability-inclusive development.

IV. Objectives

The objective of the EGM is to:

1. Develop an overview of the barriers and obstacles faced by persons with disabilities and specific challenges women and girls with disabilities confronted, and good practices for enabling the participation/leadership of persons with disabilities in COVID-19 response and recovery, as well as in the current process of Building Back Better; and
2. Formulate a list of practical recommendations for the implementation of strategies for the promotion of the leadership of persons with disabilities in the aforementioned initiatives.

The EGM will undertake the following activities:

- Discuss experiences and documented information concerning the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities in the processes relating to COVID-19 response and recovery during the past year;
- Break into moderated groups by subject area (e.g., strengthening policy, mobilizing resources and building networks) and review key issues and good practices, drawing lessons learned from experiences in implementing strategies for the promotion of the leadership of persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups;
- Identify persistent barriers, including from the pre-COVID-19 period, and take stock of existing mechanisms and strategies to promote the leadership of persons with disabilities, including existing funding mechanisms, targeted interventions and mainstreaming efforts; and

- Discuss how to use existing mechanisms and frameworks in COVID-19-related mandates to support the implementation of strategies to promote the leadership of persons with disabilities.

Key outputs of the EGM include:

- Formulation of a set of practical recommendations for key stakeholders, including the UN system, national governments, national mechanisms and legislative bodies that target key issue areas in promoting the leadership of persons with disabilities and set a ‘roadmap’ for their implementation; and
- Establishment of new networks to ensure the leadership of persons with disabilities in COVID-19 response and recovery.

V. Organization

The programme on disability/DISD/Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in partnership with UN Women and in collaboration with the IASG-CRPD, will organize the Meeting in a virtual format from 25-27 May 2021.

The experts will be invited by the DISD/DESA will participate in this Meeting in collaboration with civil society organizations with expertise in disability, development, gender and women’s empowerment, humanitarian emergencies and other SDG-related issues.

VI. Language of the Meeting

The working language of the meeting will be English. Documentation for the meeting will be provided in English.

VII. Other Links and Documentation Sources for the Meeting