

Disability, Accessibility and Sustainable Urban Development

Introduction

It is estimated that by 2050, 66% of the world's population, will be living in cities. ¹ The United Nations' Third Global Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) will take place in 2016. A "New Urban Agenda" will be considered by the international community at the Conference. Habitat III therefore provides an important platform for the world's urban development policy makers and practitioners, as well as those working in the field of disability to review current progress and practices and consider opportunities for change.

Importantly, the New Urban Agenda needs to ensure that future cities, towns and basic urban infrastructures and services are more environmentally accessible, user-friendly and inclusive of all people's needs, including those with disabilities.

Accessibility² and disability inclusion in the contexts of urban development

Urban environments, infrastructures, facilities and services can impede or enable, perpetuating exclusion or fostering participation and inclusion of all members of society.

According to the World Bank and the WHO, globally, there are over 1 billion, or around 15 % of the world population, living with a disability. Available evidence reveals that for the more than 1 billion persons worldwide living with a disability, there has been a lack of accessibility in urban environments in many parts of the world. Too often, urban environments have served as a barrier to the inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in economic and social development in cities and communities.

Persons with disabilities face widespread lack of accessibility to built environments, from roads and housing, to public buildings and spaces and to basic urban services such as sanitation and water, health, education, transportation, and emergency response and resilience programmes. Barriers to information and communications, including relevant technologies and cultural attitudes including negative stereotyping and stigma also contribute to the exclusion and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in urban environments. ³

Lack of accessibility contributes greatly to the disadvantaged and vulnerable situations faced by persons with disabilities, leading to disproportionate rates of poverty,

¹ The World Urbanization Prospects (2014), United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

² "Accessibility," as used in this note, describes broadly the degree to which an environment, service or product, allows access by as many people as possible, including persons with disabilities. In a rather narrow and technical sense, it refers to standards that have been mandated nationally or internationally for the construction of the built or virtual environments.

³ World Health Organization and World Bank, World Report on Disability 2011. Geneva, 2011, p. 29 and p. 262-263.

deprivation and exclusion among persons with disabilities. This situation also impedes the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed development goals. For example, if persons with disabilities cannot access urban education facilities due to the lack of accessible transportation options, they are excluded from programmes designed to promote universal education. As the General Assembly has repeatedly highlighted over recent years, the MDGs and all internationally agreed development goals cannot be truly achieved without taking full account of the perspectives and concerns of the one billion persons with disabilities across the world.

While the cost of excluding persons with disabilities could lead to a loss up to around 7 per cent of national GDP, according to the ILO⁴, it is smart to invest in improvement of accessibility in urban environments and services. Available evidence told us, urban infrastructures, facilities and services, if designed and built following accessibility or inclusive “universal design” principles from initial stages of planning and design, bear almost no or only 1 per cent additional cost.⁵ It is a great deal more expensive rebuilding, renovating or redesigning existing inaccessible infrastructure or facility to make them more accessible and inclusive. The cost of not incorporating accessibility/universal design can also be significant. Taking into account the loss of human capital and opportunity cost incurred due to inaccessibility, economies stand to lose a great deal more when significant groups, such as persons with disabilities are excluded from participation.. Cities that depend on a tourism economy are also likely to pay high opportunity costs for inaccessible infrastructure and services if they exclude tourists with disabilities, (including older persons and parents with small children, who may experience accessibility limitations), who may otherwise visit these destinations. It is estimated that, in economic terms, this would equate to an opportunity loss of approximately 15- 20 per cent of the global tourism market share⁶.

International normative frameworks

The global normative framework and guidance on accessibility is provided by a number of international instruments concerning disability. The World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons views accessibility as an essential means to further its goals of “full participation” and “equality”. The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities identifies “accessibility” of the physical environment and of information and communication as two “target areas” to ensure equalization of opportunities. It also defines accessibility as a means and a goal of disability-inclusive development.

More recently, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006, strengthened the international normative framework for advancement of the rights and development of persons with disabilities. Accessibility is established in the

⁴ Murray, B. (2012). Brief profile on people with disabilities. Employment for social justice and a Fair globalization paper. International Labour Office, Geneva From http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/WCMS_140958/lang--en/index.htm

⁵ The World Bank. (2008). Design for All: Implications for Bank Operations. From http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Universal_Design.pdf

⁶ Sakkas (2004).

Convention as a cross-cutting factor that enables persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life. The Preamble to the Convention emphasizes the “importance of mainstreaming disability issues as an integral part of relevant strategies of sustainable development.” Also, accessibility is a general principle (Art. 3) of the Convention and is notably included as a general obligation of States Parties (Art. 4) to proactively promote accessibility in design and development as well as availability of new technologies, including those of information and communication technologies (ICTs).⁷ Article 9 sets out a range of measures to be taken by States to ensure persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, physical environments, transportation, information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas, to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and to fully participate in all aspects of life.

There remains a gap between the ambitions of the Convention (on safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities) and mainstream socio-economic development policy and practices on the ground. Accessibility and the rights, perspectives and concerns of persons with disabilities need to be further incorporated in development frameworks and efforts, including in strategies and policies for urban planning and development.

Recognising the existing gap, between international principles and practice, world leaders gathered at the 2013 UN High-level Meeting on Disability and Development and reaffirmed their commitment to advance disability-inclusive development, through the adoption of an action-oriented Outcome Document⁸. The Outcome Document stresses the importance of ensuring accessibility for and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of development and giving due consideration to all persons with disabilities in the emerging post-2015 development agenda. It further calls on Governments and the international community to take 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 information and communications technologies, including in remote or rural areas, to achieve the fullest potential throughout the whole life cycle of persons with disabilities.⁹ During the 2013 World Habitat Day, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon reflected this commitment, and called on the international community to make towns and cities accessible for all persons in society, ensuring inclusive development and participation.

As the world is now designing a post-2015 development agenda, the global community is presented with an opportunity to promote systematically accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the “New Urban Agenda” as a precondition for inclusive, sustainable and equitable development and poverty eradication.

⁷ Article 9, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

⁸ A/RES/68/3

⁹ Ibid., A/RES/68/3

In this context, there is a need to view accessibility as an investment in a public good that contributes to effective, sustainable and equitable development for all and not merely an issue of cost or compliance. This will involve fundamental reconsiderations of policies that address the objective of equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities, as a target group, and to focus on measures that contribute to accessibility to the general systems for all.

Dialogue should also address policy options that promote: (a) improvement of accessibility and progressive removal of barriers to opportunities for all; (b) participation on the basis of equality and as both agents of development and beneficiaries; and (c) mainstreaming and empowerment of persons with disabilities – women and men alike – in urban development.

Basic economics posit that any barrier to participation – of a physical, technological, cultural or institutional nature – affects efficient allocation of resources, organization of production, exchanges, consumption, and distribution of benefits. For urban development to be sustainable and inclusive for all, accessibility must be proactively promoted. Accessibility is a matter of human rights, but also a economic and social development imperative.

The Work of the United Nations

The work of the United Nations in promoting accessibility and advancement of persons with disabilities is deeply rooted in its Charter and commitment to promoting economic and social progress and human rights for all.

The United Nations system is taking concrete steps to make the UN environment more inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities. Accessibility is also a key goal and means for successful implementation of the Strategy and Plan of Action of the United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (IASG), now composed of over 25 UN agencies.¹⁰

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), as the UN disability focal point has been actively promoted accessibility in context of sustainable and inclusive development for all. DESA organised experts group meetings on accessibility especially on built environments (Washington DC, 2010) and on information and communication and ICTs including in the situations of disaster risk (Tokyo, 2012) and published analytical researches on accessibility and development facilitating and supporting intergovernmental processes and bodies. DESA in its capacity serving as the co-chair of the UN IASG group and the Inter-Departmental Task Force on Accessibility, has been also actively in promoting accessibility and disability inclusion within the work of the UN. Thanks to the collaborative efforts across the secretariat, the Secretary-General issued the first ever Secretariat-wide policy bulletin on Accessibility in April 2014

¹⁰ For more details of the IASG and its Strategy and Plan of Action, see UN Enable website at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=46&pid=323>

aimed at promoting the United Nations built environments and facilities and services to be more accessible and inclusive for all.¹¹

Ways forward

Following entry into force of the CRPD in May 2008, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a series of resolutions emphasizing the need for disability-inclusive development, “without which the internationally agreed development goals, in particular the Millennium Development Goals, will not be genuinely achieved.”¹² The General Assembly further encouraged States to ensure “accessibility and reasonable accommodation to enable persons with disabilities to realize their right to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, as well as to be agents and beneficiaries of development.”¹³

Initial discussions regarding global development priorities for the post-2015 framework suggest that sustainability, equity and inclusiveness shall be central considerations in the new development agenda. While accessibility is particularly relevant to persons with disabilities, it has implications and benefits for all. It is an essential aspect of inclusive and sustainable development, and also impacts economic development and growth, as barriers to participation can cause inconsistencies in allocation of resources, production of goods and services and distribution of benefits.

In July 2016, the Third Global Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) will take place in Quito to review the progress, experience and lessons learnt in the past and to design a “New Urban Agenda”, focused on policies and strategies that can result in effectively harnessing the power and forces behind urbanization.

The envisaged New Urban Agenda will provide the global framework for urbanisation for the next decade. It therefore presents an opportunity for the international community to consider the place of accessibility and disability inclusion in economic and social urban development. A New Urban Agenda, if well-planned, can be inclusive of and accessible to all, and could set the stage for future rapid urbanization to be used as a great opportunity to create an enabling and transformative environment for production capacities, inclusion and better lives for all, by including and engaging all persons in society, including persons with disabilities.

Resources

- 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-

¹¹ Secretary-General, Employment and accessibility for staff members with disabilities in the United Nations Secretariat (ST/SGB/2014/3)

¹² Resolutions 63/150, 64/145 and 65/186

¹³ A/RES 63/150

inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond (General Assembly resolution A/RES/68/3: see

http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/3)

- Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals (A/68/970),
(http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/970&Lang=E)
- Accessibility and Development (UNDESA publication(ST/EST/350), see http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/accessibility_and_development.pdf)
- UNDESA Forum on Development and Disability, see the UN Enable website <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=15&pid=1611>
- Third UN Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban development (Habitat III: to be held in 2016, <http://unhabitat.org/habitat-iii/>)
 - Read more about the relevant processes and the work of the Preparatory Committee for the Habitat III: <http://unhabitat.org/preparatory-process/>
- World Habitat Day (observed each year on the first Monday of October). <http://unhabitat.org/world-habitat-day/>
- World Cities Day (celebrated on 31 October 2014). <http://unhabitat.org/wcd/>