**RI’s Legacy Project from its 23rd World Congress in 2016**

**Venus Ilagan**

*(VI’s presentation at the DESA forum on accessible urban cities at COSP10)*

**Good afternoon.** I wish to thank the organizers of this event, for the opportunity to speak in this panel today. My organization, Rehabilitation International, is a global network of experts, government organizations, members of the academe, persons with disabilities and various stakeholders working in the field of disability and rehabilitation. Established in 1922 in the United States, Rehabilitation International has members across the world. One of the accomplishments of Rehabilitation International that we are so proud about is that RI created the original version of the International Symbol of Access in 1968. The wheelchair sign is said to be one of the five most recognized symbols in the world.

Rehabilitation International holds its governing assemblies annually and its world congress every four years – in various parts of the world. Our most recent world congress was held in Edinburgh, Scotland in October 2016 which brought together participants from 60 countries. Our local organization in the UK, Shaw Trust, worked very closely with Convention Edinburgh, member of the BestCities Global Alliance, to organize RI’s 23rd World Congress in the fall last year. Today, I would like to share with you this example of an innovative approach by RI and its partners to promote and support the creation and development of accessible urban cities. RI’s vision is to ensure that when it holds its world congresses, it should leave a legacy behind – one that will equalize opportunities for communities not only to appreciate but continue building their shared environment for all – build their cities for everyone to live in and enjoy.

It was not expected but our 23rd World Congress has broken new grounds and has realized Rehabilitation International’s vision of not only promoting equal opportunity for persons with disabilities to have access and productively participate in events and conferences. Our congress in Edinburgh also helped us achieved the goal to leave something behind - a legacy that local organizers can pursue and benefit from, after we shall all have left the host-city of our event. Our congress last year went far beyond having an economic impact and a global prestige for the city, it fundamentally changed Edinburgh’s and Scotland’s approach to accessibility and inclusion and in shaping a better future for all.

The work to build a lasting legacy to make Edinburgh an accessible city for all did not come by accident. It was a result of forward thinking and collaboration, of the shared goal to make a difference. As the work to prepare for RI’s 23rd World Congress went high-gear, our local partners noted a significant increase in awareness of disability and persons with disabilities among local authorities and the general population. They realized that changes have to be transformational. They then decided to embark in the initiative to change the mindset of the local tourism industry by letting it have a closer look into the potentials of accessible tourism as a revenue generating initiative. With this realization came the understanding that accessible tourism goes far beyond the issue of compliance. VisitScotland then started to see *accessible tourism* as part of the competitive marketplace, a potential money maker and a vehicle to influence disability and inclusion policies at the global level.

Convention Edinburgh and host-venue Edinburgh International Convention Centre recognized that the RI World Congress provided the perfect impetus and a manageable timeline to drive change forward, strengthening collaboration with local organizations such as local disability charity, Edinburgh Tourism Action Group and VisitScotland, among others. Their collaborative work has made the City of Edinburgh a lot more prepared to have welcomed our congress participants who were so impressed at how well the city has made itself accessible and inclusive of people with disabilities.

At the opening of our congress with the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, and the First Prime Minister of Scotland as guests, the Equality and Diversity Manager of VisitScotland, made a statement that was repeatedly quoted by several of the over 1,000 participants to our congress. He said: “Visitors with disabilities are not about risk management. They are valuable customers who require new and innovative customer service to enable them to enjoy their right to meaningful and satisfying travel, leisure and recreation activities on equal basis with others.”

He went on to explain that VisitScotland’s programme aims to harness the growing high-value accessible tourism market and for Scotland to become internationally recognized as a leading destination for people with access needs and travelers with disabilities. Coming for the congress, we have seen and we were convinced that Scotland was making great progress in its effort to enable locals and visitors with disabilities have access to the country’s 1.3 billion British Pound accessible tourism market.

Clearly, Scotland’s initiative to promote accessible tourism is forward thinking considering that there are one billion persons with disabilities in the world, definitely a huge market just waiting to be tapped for its full potentials.

Our congress ended with a resounding success. Now you may want to know what have we left behind?

As a legacy from the RI World Congress, there has been a destination –wide working group that was created, focusing on accessible and inclusive tourism. *Everyone’s Edinburgh* (so it is called), aims to identify opportunities to increase Edinburgh’s share of the accessible tourism market and to develop a destination-wide coordinated action plan which will enable Edinburgh to maximize the market opportunity. As one of its activities, a destination-wide accessible tourism audit was initiated following RI’s World Congress, which has identified areas of best practice as well as the challenges and barriers faced by visitors with disabilities, which will serve as the basis for prioritizing key areas of action. There were changes in policy, too, with a proposed amendment in Edinburgh City’s 2020 Tourism Strategy. Overall, the different actors in the community are creating a better city, one that provides access to all, a city that embraces diversity and includes all.

We have already started the preparatory work for our next world congress in 2020 to be held in Denmark. We’re working very closely with our local organizers to hopefully replicate the legacy project that was started at our 23rd World Congress in Edinburgh aimed at opening opportunities and creating higher awareness on the importance of institutionalizing the provision of access in the built environment not only for those with disabilities but for all people. After all, building accessible cities that are inclusive of all, is both a human rights imperative and an exceptional business opportunity that is often taken for granted. It’s time we appreciate the fact that access in the context of tourism is not just a compliance issue, it is a market issue, an economic development issue. And access does not just benefit people with disabilities, it benefits us all. Thank you.