

**International Day of Persons with Disabilities:  
Making the MDGs Inclusive: Empowerment of persons with disabilities and their  
communities around the world**

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- Reference is often made to the MDGs as a stand alone instrument. Although often forgotten, we should remember that the MDGs are to be contextualized in the context of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. In this Declaration, commitment to the respect, promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for “all” is stated.
- Unless human rights and the principle of equality and non discrimination are fully integrated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), these development objectives will not be achieved and persons with disabilities and other groups will continue to be excluded from ongoing efforts.
- The 192 countries and over 20 international organizations that have signed up to the MDGs must ensure that all efforts and measures undertaken to achieve the MDGs do not discriminate against individuals on the basis of any prohibited ground of discrimination including disability, race or ethnic origin, age, place of residence or geographic location and sex.
- MDGs goals, targets and indicators, on the other hand, focus only on three marginalized groups, namely: children and youth, women and girls and slum dwellers. As revealed by MDG country reports, this has translated into the exclusion of many groups from the MDGs’ efforts including persons with disabilities,<sup>1</sup> despite representing 10 to 12 percent of the world population (670 to 800 million people)<sup>2</sup> and none withstanding the fact that around 426 million persons with disabilities in developing countries live below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>
- The international community can no longer afford to exclude or discriminate against persons with disabilities from the global efforts to achieve the Millennium

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<sup>1</sup> A number of countries have reported to be on track or have achieved certain goals without making any progress on those goals with regard to persons with disabilities (and minorities). Aggregate figures can mask gross discrepancies; they may falsely indicate more progress on the Goals that it has actually occurred. OHCHR, “Claiming the Millennium Development Goals: a Human Rights Approach”, page 9, available at [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Claiming\\_MDGs\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Claiming_MDGs_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Mont, D. 2007. *Measuring Disability Prevalence*. Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0706. Washington DC: World Bank.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Secretary-General, *Realizing the Millennium Development Goals for Persons with Disabilities*, through the implementation of the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, A/64/189, July 2009, para. 17.

Development Goals. Adopting a human rights based approach to the MDGs will ensure attention to the specific situation of persons with disabilities, and will address the discrimination they faced by ensuring their equal enjoyment of the progress achieved through the MDGs.

- Ongoing efforts to assess and guide progress towards the MDGs represent a timely opportunity to fully integrate a human rights based-approach in light of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with the view to ensure disability inclusive MDGs. In her intervention this morning, the High Commissioner provoked us with her proposal of an additional MDG postulating non-discrimination as a way ensuring that the development strategies are inclusive of all marginalized groups including persons with disabilities. It remains to be seen whether the international community is ready to take this on board.
- Allow me to briefly touch upon the benefits of ensuring such a human rights approach to the MDGs as an important vehicle of empowerment for persons with disabilities:
  1. Adopting a human rights approach to the MDGs will entail that each Millennium Development Goal, target and indicator must be interpreted in the light of human rights standards and principles, and in particular the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The CRPD provides important guidance as to the measures that need to be adopted and the process through which persons with disabilities can actually make steps towards enjoying progress on the MDGs on an equal basis with others. For example, MDG 2 on achieving universal primary education is not only about including the 40 million boys and girls with disabilities that are denied schooling.<sup>4</sup> Equally important, in light of article 24 of the CRPD, achieving the MDG 2 requires that children with disabilities have access to an inclusive, quality and free primary education, where support measures and reasonable accommodations are provided, and the teaching of Braille and sign language is facilitated.\

By way of another example, achieving MDG 1 on eradicating extreme poverty and hunger will not only require addressing poverty among persons with disabilities and their households.<sup>1</sup> A human rights approach to this MDG would also require additional targets addressing the need to eliminate discrimination in access to work and remuneration on the basis of disability in light of article 27 of the CRPD. Equally important, it would require indicators on unemployment rate and average wage rate be disaggregated by disability and other grounds for discrimination beyond the current disaggregation by sex and rural/urban areas.

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<sup>4</sup> OHCHR, *Claiming the MDGs*, 2008, page 26. Data from A/64/180 para. 19 reflects that i) children with disabilities represent one third of the 75 million children of primary school age who are out of school ii) 90 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. Equally recent studies show that that disability has stronger impact on school attendance than gender, see Filmer Deon, *Disability, Poverty and Schooling in Developing Countries: Results from 11 Household Surveys*, Social Protection Discussion Paper No. 0539. Washington DC: World Bank.2005, page 1, 15-16.

2. Moreover, a human rights based approach to the MDGs would also require disaggregating indicators on the basis of disability and according to all other prohibited grounds of discrimination. In some cases new indicators may also need to be added. The CRPD already foresees that States undertake “to collect appropriate information, including statistical and research data, to enable them to formulate and implement policies to give effect to the CRPD.” In light of lack of disability disaggregated data and information, it is clear that States need to strengthen their capacity to collect data on women, men and boys and girls with disabilities.
3. Also important, and in light of a human rights based approach, MDGs, targets and indicators should include a gender perspective and respect the human rights of women. For instance, the targets set out to implement MDG 3 on promoting gender equality and empower women have very narrowly focused on eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. Firstly, while it is true that equal access to education may be a precondition for women’s empowerment, it is not sufficient. Secondly, even within its narrow focus, this target and indicators has failed to ensure access of women and girls with disabilities to primary education, and continued to render them as well as other excluded groups visible.
4. Fourthly, a human rights framework also aims at involving rights-holders as active agents of development, rather than passive recipients of munificence bestowed from above. In turn, rights-holder’s participation fosters “ownership” of both development programs and their strategic objectives on the part of individuals, communities and national human rights institutions. If MDGs are to really work for persons with disabilities, we must be fully aware of the barriers persons with disabilities face in participating in society. Let us recognize in some cases persons with disabilities are simply not allowed to participate. Discriminatory laws that deprive persons with disabilities of legal capacity or place them in institutions prevent persons with disabilities from participating. In other cases, inaccessible physical environment or inaccessible information impedes participation. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes the full and effective participation and inclusion in society of persons with disabilities as a general principle of the Convention and as a right in several articles. Participation enables them to have a say and help shape the transformation of structures and policies that have created and contributed to poverty.
5. A human rights-based approach focuses also on building accountability for results and for omissions. Such accountability is crucial to ensure that gains are sustained and those unfairly excluded from the benefits of development policies have access to effective means of redress. The accountability perspective is essential to the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Yet, how can persons with disabilities hold duty-holders accountable when they are often excluded from political processes, do not have access to justice or simply cannot access information as no alternative means, modes and formats are made available?

6. Finally, human rights reinforce the notion of accountability in development cooperation globally. While States bear the primary responsibility for their own development as well as for the realization of human rights of their own populations, all States have a responsibility to create a just and favorable international environment for development. This perspective is reinforced in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that in article 32 recognizes the important of international cooperation in support of national efforts for the realization of the purposes and objectives of the Convention.