

## **Accessibility and Disability Inclusion in Urban Development**

Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>1</sup>

*About 6.25 billion people, 15 per cent of them persons with disabilities, are predicted to be living in urban centres by 2050. Urbanization has the potential to be a great engineer for achieving sustainable and inclusive development for all. The current lack of environmental accessibility faced by people with disabilities in particular in many cities in the world presents both a major challenge and strategic opportunity to promote an accessible and inclusive Urban Agenda, as the international community prepares for the 3rd Global Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III), which will take place in Quito, Ecuador in October 2016.*

*An inclusive New Urban Agenda would be greatly supported by promoting accessibility and disability inclusion. This requires strong commitments in concrete terms, proper urban policy, regulatory norms and standards, "universal design" or "design for all" approaches in planning, mobilization/allocation of sufficient resources, and a broad-based partnership that involves and engages all members of society, including persons with disabilities.*

### **Accessibility and disability inclusion in urban development**<sup>2</sup>

Urbanization is currently one of the most important global trends of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Urbanization *has the potential to be* a great engineer to achieve sustainable and inclusive development for all. About 6.25 billion people, 15 per cent of them with disabilities, are predicted to be living in urban centres by 2050.<sup>3</sup> Urban environments, infrastructures, facilities and services, depending how they are planned and built, can impede or enable access, participation and inclusion of members of society. For the 15 per cent of the world's population who live with a disability, (many of whom live in urban areas), available evidence reveals a 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 and disaster response and resilience building and access to information and communications. These accessibility limitations contribute greatly to the disadvantage and marginalization faced by persons with disabilities, leading to disproportionate rates of poverty, deprivation and exclusion. This situation also impedes the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and other internationally agreed development goals.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared by the Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations (DESA), with inputs from offices of UN-Habitat and the Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, with a view to contributing to the global policy discourses on urban development leading to Habitat III and its outcome, the New Urban Agenda. Comments and enquires may be sent to the Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities via email at [enable@un.org](mailto:enable@un.org).

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

<sup>3</sup> The World Urbanization Prospects (2014). United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Initiatives and good practices have emerged that successfully promote accessibility and disability inclusion in cities and towns in all parts of the world. Available evidence illustrates that urban infrastructures, facilities and services, if designed and built following accessibility or inclusive “universal design” principles from the initial stages of planning and design, bear almost no or only 1 per cent additional cost.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, progressive realization of accessibility in urban development is not beyond reach for low-income countries. 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, (as well as older persons and parents with young 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 share.<sup>5</sup>

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. This is of particular relevance in low-and middle-income economies where limited available resources need to be allocated in a way that maximizes utility and inclusion. Costs associated with the exclusion of a single group, namely persons with disabilities, from the labour force could lead to a loss of up to around 7 per cent of national GDP<sup>6</sup>, for instance. The positive externality or spill-over effect of accessibility on a broad spectrum of the population at large should never be overlooked. For urban development to be sustainable and inclusive for all, accessibility must be given serious consideration and proactively promoted in the Habitat III related discourses. Accessibility is a matter of human rights, and it is also an economic and social development imperative.

### **International policy frameworks**

The current international policy framework guiding disability-inclusive urban development is largely based on a number of instruments concerning persons with disabilities. 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.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) further strengthened the international normative framework for the advancement of the rights and socio-economic development of persons with disabilities. Accessibility is established in the Convention as a cross-cutting issue 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. Accessibility is a general principle (Art. 3) of the Convention and is notably included as a general obligation of States Parties (Art. 4) in relation to proactively promoting

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<sup>4</sup> The World Bank. (2008). Design for All: Implications for Bank Operations. From [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Universal\\_Design.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Universal_Design.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Sakkas (2004).

<sup>6</sup> 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](http://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/WCMS_140958/lang--en/index.htm)

accessibility in design and development as well as the availability of new technologies, including those of information and communication technologies (ICTs).<sup>7</sup> The Convention also provides guidance for accessibility and reasonable accommodation in Article 9 (accessibility), Article 19 (living independently and being included in the community), Article 20 (personal mobility) and Article 21 (freedom of expression and access to information).

In 2013, the United Nations High-level Meeting on Disability and Development and its action-oriented Outcome Document<sup>8</sup> stressed 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 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Outcome Document further called for 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 ICTs, including in remote or rural areas, to achieve the fullest potential throughout the whole life cycle of persons with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

The commitment of the international community to advance accessibility and the mainstreaming of disability in development was further strengthened and reflected in the recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Disability is specifically mentioned 11 times in target areas in the 2030 Agenda, and is specifically mentioned in the target relating to accessible and inclusive habitat and human settlements.<sup>10</sup>

### **United Nations promotes accessible and inclusive urban development**

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

The Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, since his appointment in 2013, has attached great importance to the promotion of accessibility and disability inclusion in development, including in the Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>11</sup> Notably, the Secretary-General issued the first ever Secretariat-wide policy bulletin on "Employment and accessibility for staff members with disabilities in the United Nations Secretariat" in June 2014. UN system organizations have made progress in establishing internal policies aimed at promoting built environments and facilities and services that are accessible and inclusive for all.<sup>12</sup>

The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and UN-Habitat, have been actively promoting accessibility and disability inclusion in contexts of sustainable and inclusive development for all. For example, DESA has organized expert group meetings on accessibility in built environments (Washington D.C., 2010) and on accessible ICTs,

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<sup>7</sup> Article 9, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

<sup>8</sup> General Assembly resolution A/RES/68/3, the United Nations

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., A/RES/68/3

<sup>10</sup> Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/7891Transforming%20Our%20World.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, 8th session of the Opening Working Group of the General Assembly on the Sustainable Development Goals, Feb 2014

<sup>12</sup> Secretary-General's Bulletin on Employment and accessibility for staff members with disabilities in the United Nations Secretariat (ST/SGB/2014/3).

including in the situation of disasters and crises preparedness and responses (Tokyo, 2012). Together with Member States, UN entities and other major stakeholders, DESA and UN-Habitat have also organized DESA Forums on accessible and disability-inclusive urban development (New York, June 14 and Nairobi, 28-30 October 2015), have published analytical research and guidance on accessibility and development, and facilitated and supported intergovernmental processes and bodies to advance accessibility.

### **Ways forward: accessible and inclusive New Urban Agenda for all**

In October 2016, the Third Global Conference on Housing and Sustainable Development (Habitat III) will design a “New Urban Agenda”, focused on policies and strategies that can result in effectively harnessing the power and forces behind urbanization. The New Urban Agenda will provide the international community with a distinct opportunity to transform current patterns of urbanization by fully incorporating principles of accessibility and disability inclusion in urban development.

With the recent adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the New Urban Agenda presents another opportunity to begin to operationalize its targets by promoting accessibility and inclusion of persons with disabilities as a precondition for inclusive, sustainable and equitable development and poverty eradication for all. A truly inclusive New Urban Agenda also needs to, and can be pursued by, actively including and engaging persons with disabilities.

The following findings and policy approaches may be helpful in furthering the advancement of accessibility and disability inclusion in the contexts of the New Urban Agenda as recommended by the global experts at the recent Forum on accessible and disability inclusive urban development in Nairobi:

- Accessibility is a collective good that benefits all. It facilitates full and effective participation of all and should therefore be considered a central component of good policy to achieve inclusive and sustainable urban development. A city that is well designed is well designed for all.
- Accessibility is a precondition for the enjoyment of human rights of persons with disabilities and is a means for economic, social, cultural and political empowerment, participation and inclusion.
- An accessible and disability-inclusive urban development agenda can be realized everywhere. This requires strong commitments in concrete terms, which include inclusive and disability-responsive urban policy frameworks, appropriate regulatory structures and standards, "design for all" approaches in planning and design, and predictable resource allocations. It also requires active and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations, as rights-holders and as agents and beneficiaries of development during all stages of the urbanization process.
- Accessibility is broadly understood as products, services, built environments and ICTs that respond to the interests, needs and capabilities of a wide range of end users, and persons with disabilities in particular.
- The Sustainable Development Goals message to “leave no one behind” seeks to ensure that the targets are met for all peoples and segments of society, including persons with disabilities in cities.

- Achievement of a truly inclusive New Urban Agenda, where no one is left behind, requires a holistic and people-centred approach that informs, engages, and involves persons with disabilities and their organizations in all aspects of urban development, in particular in their access to adequate housing.
- The New Urban Agenda should further the advancement of accessibility for all with respect to the right to adequate housing, the built environment, public spaces, transportation, facilities and services and ICTs.
- A New Urban Agenda cannot be achieved unless it responds to the needs and rights of everyone, including the estimated one billion people with disabilities.

### **Housing as a key element of inclusive cities**

- Integrated approaches to housing, and positioning housing at the centre of inclusive urban development, need to take account not only of environmental sustainability, diversity (including disability) and financial aspects, but also human rights.
- Universal design, as a concept and principle, should be reflected in designs and plans for new built environments and in renovations to existing buildings and facilities to ensure they are accessible for all.
- Building standards, laws and effective enforcement mechanisms are essential to ensure accessibility, availability, affordability and quality of housing and public services for all, including persons with disabilities.

### **Transportation and public services**

- Integrated transportation facilities and services not only provide accessibility for all but are also reliable and affordable. They drive sustainable and inclusive growth and change.
- Inclusive transportation requires continuity of accessibility throughout travel chains, meaning all elements of a journey from the starting point to the final destination include accessible entranceways.
- Integrated urban policy and plans must identify and address gaps in accessibility in public spaces and from one built environment to another.
- Social equity requires that the costs of accessible transportation and basic public services shall not be borne fully by users who require services since these are essential to ensure opportunities for full and effective participation in social, economic, cultural and political life for persons with disabilities.

### **Information and communication technologies (ICTs) for building inclusive, resilient smart cities**

- Governments should develop accessible ICTs, including mobile applications, government websites, public kiosks and automated teller machines, and should include the use of accessible ICT services in their urban development plans.
- The rapid pace of development and innovation in ICT products and services means that assistive and adaptive devices and technologies are not always compatible and the cost of many such technologies limits access for persons with disabilities, particularly in low-income and middle-income countries. Governments should promote and facilitate research, development and mainstreaming of accessible ICT products and services by including accessibility requirements in public procurement exercises for ICT products and services used by public organizations or their customers or staff.

- Many national telecommunication authorities have universal service goals which recognize affordability and access to networks as a right; consideration shall be accorded urgently to accessibility as a third universal service goal.

The upcoming Habitat III and its New Urban Agenda have the potential to set the stage for future rapid urbanization to create an accessible, inclusive and enabling environment for all, including the world's over one billion persons with disabilities.

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