

# The World Blind Union

*"Changing What It Means to Be Blind"*

## Who we are

We are a worldwide movement of people who are blind or low vision, acting on our own behalf to:

- Eliminate prejudice;
- Promote belief in the proven abilities of blind and low vision persons; and
- Achieve full participation and equality in society.

Our work includes capacity building, leadership development, braille literacy, and empowerment for women, youth and indigenous people. It also includes the development and sharing of tools and resources, advocacy on key issues for people with vision loss and representing the views of and speaking on behalf of blind and low vision people at the international level to organisations such as the United Nations and its agencies.

We envisage ***a community where people who are blind or low vision are empowered to participate on an equal basis in any aspect of life they choose.***

In 2008, The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that there are approximately 161 million people with severe vision loss worldwide. An additional 153 million are estimated to have uncorrected refractive errors, resulting in correctable visual impairment.

## A universal voice

The WBU was formed in 1984 through the union of the International Federation of the Blind (IFB) and the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB). However, the WBU represents over a century of global co-operation on blindness issues - dating back to the first international conference on the subject in 1873 in Vienna.

Through the leadership of the WBU and the development of its constitution, one of its achievements to date has been to provide a forum where blind and low vision people established the right to speak for themselves. It was established as a worldwide movement that brought together the WCWB and the IFB but retained sufficient flexibility in its approach to embrace the wide range of realities in the world. The WBU complied with the requirement that the majority of national delegates must come from recognised movements of

blind and low vision people themselves. It is significant to highlight that when the WBU was established in 1984 it only had about sixty countries as members, but in 2008 membership now totals more than 170 countries – very close to the total United Nations membership.

The WBU quickly became a powerful voice in the worldwide disability movement. It adopted, in its work, the use of three world languages: English, French and Spanish. It was able to strengthen the activities of its six regional unions and soon became the authentic voice of blind and low vision people throughout the world.

This was undertaken by dealings with:

- United Nations;
- Intergovernmental agencies;
- Other organisations of people with disabilities; and
- Organisations in the international social development field.

The WBU provides a forum for the exchange of views and experience and sets standards of excellence in any issue relating to the provision of service to blind and low vision people. It also provides a unique partnership of organisations of blind and low vision persons and organisations providing services to blind and low vision people, who come together and work towards a common purpose.

### **The WBU team**

The WBU is managed by six table officers, five of whom are elected by the international membership at the general assembly held every four years, and the immediate past president. As set out in the WBU constitution, all table officer positions, except for the treasurer, must be held by a person who is either blind or low vision, as must the CEO.

The WBU is divided into six regions: Europe, Africa, North America and the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia and Asia Pacific.

A country is a member of the WBU, not individual organisations. To be a full national member of the WBU, at least 50% of the country's delegation must be from organisations of the blind and low vision.

The Officers Board consist of the elected table officers and the six regional presidents. The WBU Executive Committee which is the main administrative organ of the Union and supervises the work of the officers is comprised of the elected table officers, regional presidents, three representatives from

each region and two representatives from amongst the international members.

## **WBU achievements**

Since it was founded in 1984, the WBU has made significant progress towards its objectives in all areas of its work. The following are some of the most outstanding achievements:

- Establishment of the Institutional Development Program (IDP). With the support of Sight Savers International and the Hilton/Perkins Programme in the USA, the programme continues to undertake leadership training and organisational development work in many countries, particularly throughout Africa;
- Organisation of world forums on such issues as rehabilitation (Thailand, 1994), literacy (Uruguay, 1996) and human rights (Uruguay, 1998), as well as for blind and low vision women in 1996, 2000, 2004 and 2008 and a children's congress (Spain 2008);
- Retention of free post system for the blind. Had it not been for WBU intervention before the Universal Postal Union, this benefit would almost certainly have been withdrawn;
- Abolition of laser weapons as weapons of war, through the intervention of our human rights committee which was able to bring forward evidence of vision loss caused by laser weapons;
- Participation by WBU representatives in the drafting of a declaration including the aspirations and concerns of people with disabilities at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS);
- Instrumental in the World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) initiative to set up the Vision2020 programme, which is currently operating in many countries as well as globally and has already led to a reduction in avoidable blindness in the most vulnerable parts of the world;
- A key contributor to the development and monitoring of the Standard Rules for Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disability;
- As an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), the WBU was a key contributor to the development of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, lobbying for many articles to include protection for people who are blind or have low vision;
- Capacity building, and in particular supporting the development of well structured and strongly functioning organisations of the blind and low vision – bearing in mind at all times that "only blind and low vision persons can speak for blind and low vision persons"

- A voice in many areas of life as they affect people who are blind or low vision. The work undertaken by committees in many fields such as employment, human rights, literacy, education and women are examples of how these have been reflected;
- Special groupings that deal with pertinent issues that arise from time to time – services for the elderly (best practice), indigenous persons and sport and recreation (links with the International Blind Sports Federation - IBSA) are just three examples;
- A partner in the Education for All Visually Impaired Children (EFA-VI) Campaign in partnership with the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI);
- An arbiter of standards, for example in braille, technologies and international travel;
- Provider of scholarships through the WBU Hermoine Grant Calhoun and Pedro Zurita programmes;
- Working with UNICEF to ensure that the needs of blind and low vision children are addressed within their programmes and through the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Undertaking leadership development programmes for blind and low vision women at regional and national level to ensure they enjoy the opportunity for growth, self-determination and involvement in the organisation that represents them at all levels. This has included policy and constitutional changes to ensure gender equity within the WBU organisation itself;
- Urging developers of technology and everyday household goods to include requirements for people who are blind or have low vision at the design stage rather than looking to adapt what is already available;
- Physically support the maintenance and preservation of the Louis Braille Museum and activities to lobby the French Government and UNESCO to declare the birthplace a world heritage site;
- Gaining UNESCO recognition of braille as an official language in its own right;
- In partnership with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), and other international partners, advocating with the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) to ensure that accessible format books can be shared among countries, thus providing improved access to information for people who are blind or low vision.

## **Work in Progress**

Following the development of our new strategic plan we have identified some further areas of work in our three priority areas of: representation, capacity building and resource sharing.

Some of the specific areas of work include:

- Further strengthening organisations of the blind and low vision;
- Helping people who are blind or low vision to set up and develop their own organisations in countries where there are presently no WBU members;
- Strengthening our advocacy work with respect to developments in technology;
- Developing initiatives and solutions to improve employment opportunities for blind and low vision people, given the horrendous 75% unemployment rate even in industrialised countries;
- Improving access to braille instruction, equipment and materials;
- Helping WBU member organisations to understand what the UN - Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities means to them and working with them in their respective countries.
- Strengthening our partnerships and collaboration with the UN and its agencies and other international organizations
- Developing the Vision Alliance between the WBU, IAPB and ICEVI to strengthen our work and identifying synergies and opportunities for collaboration.
- Developing a resource bank to facilitate access to and sharing of information related to vision loss.

In undertaking its initiatives, the World Blind Union is committed to optimizing opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs, other UN Departments and Agencies with which we are involved and other international partners. We believe strongly in the value of partnerships and cooperation and that working together we all achieve more.