

BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW

The voices of young people with disabilities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the context of this International Year of Youth (12 August 2010 to 11 August 2011), the Division for Social Policy and Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has produced several papers and publications that bring attention to some of the key issues currently facing young people around the world. While each one of these documents maintains its own specific thematic focus, together they aim to inform readers about the importance of addressing youth issues across regions, sectors, and demographic groups. These papers and publications work in concert with many other global efforts of the United Nations at fostering youth development.

This particular publication, entitled: “Building a Better Tomorrow: The voices of young people with disabilities” draws attention to the rights of young people with disabilities to participate in all aspects of society on an equal basis with others. The young people with disabilities of today are all too often among the world’s poorest and most marginalized. This publication attempts to bring the voices, experiences and observations of young people with disabilities to the forefront. The publication aims to fill some of the knowledge gaps on young people with disabilities, and raise awareness of the specific issues facing them in order to encourage development actors to develop no gap policies and remove the many barriers that face young people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

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These young people contributed their time and views freely and provided some detailed and honest descriptions of their lives. We thank them very much for their willingness to provide information about their own experiences, which has helped to create a much richer publication. Your growing strength and visibility makes the goal of inclusive development increasingly possible. We hope that by encouraging more support for your development, and recognition of the contributions you are making, that future societies will become inclusive of everyone.

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WHAT IS THIS PUBLICATION ALL ABOUT?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Why focus on young people with disabilities?

Young people with disabilities are among the poorest and most marginalised of the world's youth. Estimates suggest that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide, and nearly 80 percent of them live in developing countries.¹

When a child is born or develops a disability, it is often seen as a tragic event by his or her family and community. In many countries, there are certain traditional beliefs associated with the causes of disability, such as curses and contagion, which results in these children and their mothers being shunned and isolated. Moreover, families tend not to prioritise the needs of children with disabilities, which is shown by higher levels of malnutrition, lower rates of immunisation, and higher rates of infection and communicable disease among children with disabilities.²

All of the issues that affect young people, such as access to education, employment, health care and social services, also affect youth with disabilities, but in a far more complex way. Attitudes and discrimination linked to disability make it much more difficult for them to go to school, to find work or to participate in local activities. In many communities, both rural and urban, the environment is immensely challenging with physical and communication barriers that make it hard for them to participate in social life.

¹ United Nations, Division for Social Policy and Development, Fact sheet on Youth with Disabilities, available at: <http://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/Fact%20sheet%20youth%20with%20disabilities.pdf>

² Yeo, R., and Moore, K., (2003) Including disabled people in poverty reduction work: "Nothing about Us, without Us" , *World Development*, Vol. 31, No.3 pp 571-590

There is a significant dearth of research on the prevalence and consequences of disabilities among youth. The data that does exist shows that young people with disabilities face many more challenges than their non-disabled peers. In addition, they may also have to cope with challenges linked to gender, poverty, ethnicity or sexuality.

This publication attempts to bring the voices, experiences and observations of young people with disabilities to the forefront. The publication aims to fill some of the knowledge gaps on young people with disabilities, and raise awareness of the specific issues facing them.

How and why this publication came about

This publication puts a spotlight of the lives, views and experiences of young people with disabilities from around the developing world. It presents a challenge to policy makers and development agencies to pay greater attention to their needs, concerns, and potential. Their voices shaped the content and priorities expressed in this publication and, wherever possible, direct experiences have been quoted or summarised.³

In order to generate the information included in this publication young people with disabilities from twelve developing countries took part in a consultation exercise through which they shared their thoughts and experiences on a range of important issues. The main tool for the consultation was an open-ended questionnaire,⁴ which was developed in collaboration with a group of young people with disabilities, the Division for Social Policy and Development at the United Nations Secretariat, and the international non-governmental organisation (NGO) Leonard Cheshire Disability.

³ Please note that in some cases actual names have been changed to protect individual identities. All contributors gave their permission to be quoted.

⁴ See appendix for a copy of the questionnaire.

Under a variety of themes, young people with disabilities were given the chance to talk about the areas of development that are most important in their lives. These ranged from topics such as education, health care and poverty, employment, information and communications technology and participation. All 15 of the WPAY priority areas were included in the questionnaire, giving young people with disabilities the opportunity to describe how these global issues affect them personally.

The respondents were members of ‘Young Voices’,⁵ a project that supports groups of persons with disabilities aged 16–25 years who, with the support of Leonard Cheshire Disability, now campaign and advocate for their rights. The groups’ members have a range of disabilities (such as physical, hearing, visual, intellectual, and albino), are of both genders and come from a variety of different geographical locations. In this manner, the consultation process was able to capture an array of individual experiences and views.

In total, 75 young people responded with their ideas, stories, photographs and comments, all of which are linked to the themes of youth in the global economy, youth and their well-being, and youth in civil society. This publication examines their experiences, recognises their diversity and accomplishments, and provides an opportunity for them to speak directly about the challenges they face and recommend effective solutions.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and why is it important for young people

Through the CRPD, we can actively participate in the programmes of non-disabled people and share our ideas and opinions. There will be less discrimination and non-disabled people will pay more respect to youth with disabilities. Dianne, Philippines

⁵ See www.LCDisability.org/youngvoices

May 2008 marked a turning point in the history of disability rights, when the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) came into force. There is now fuller understanding that it is not the physical limitations of persons with disabilities, but rather the physical, institutional and attitudinal barriers generated by society that create inequalities. Today, the CRPD provides young people with disabilities considerable potential for improving the opportunities available to them, and it provides support for all their efforts in working towards full inclusion. The CRPD calls upon its States Parties to make changes, adopt new measures, including legislative action to achieve the goal of full and equal participation in life and society for persons with disabilities

The CRPD covers the whole range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education, work, health, justice, life, independent living, personal mobility and participation in recreational activities. It emphasises that all development should be inclusive of, and benefit people with disabilities, making it the first international human rights treaty to highlight this need clearly.

What is disability?

The CRPD recognises people with disabilities as those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which when combined with negative attitudes or environmental barriers, prevent them from taking a full and active role in society. Often, it is the interaction between the individual and his or her environment that leads to disability, not that person's physical limitations. Such an understanding of the social nature of disability helps to promote disability as a human rights issue.

The CRPD emphasises that people with disabilities are an integral part of every society. It commands Governments and communities to identify and dismantle the many barriers that limit their chances to fully participate in society and community activities.

If well-implemented I know many young people with disabilities will have a good future because they will have access to everything including education, employment amongst other things advocated for in the CRPD.

Collins, Kenya

The Eight Guiding Principles of the CRPD

1. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons
2. Non-discrimination
3. Full and effective participation and inclusion in society
4. Respect for difference and acceptance of disabled people as part of human diversity and humanity
5. Equality of opportunity
6. Accessibility
7. Equality between men and women
8. Respect for the evolving capacities of disabled children and respect for them to preserve their identities.

Source: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Central to the CRPD are the overarching principles of non-discrimination; full and effective participation and inclusion; accessibility; and diversity. The rights of women and children with

disabilities are given special consideration, because these groups often face multiple forms of discrimination.

The drafting of the CRPD: the role of young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities played a significant role in discussions around the drafting of the CRPD. Well over 200 focus group meetings were held with young people with disabilities from 12 countries in order to identify the issues that were of most concern to them⁶. The ‘Young Voices’ groups were especially important in this process, and were some of the first to send representatives from developing countries to the discussions.

The active participation of people with disabilities and their organisations in the drafting process makes the CRPD the most participatory human rights document ever produced. As a result, the final Convention makes clear throughout that persons with disabilities – both adults and young people – must be actively involved in all decision making processes. It is no longer acceptable to exclude persons with disabilities from consultations; their participation should be anticipated and expected.

In many contexts, most especially in developing countries, young people with disabilities struggle to be heard. Their needs, aspirations and contributions are often overlooked and, as a group, they remain nearly invisible. The policy frameworks of the CRPD and the WPAY are both empowering young people with disabilities to tackle the multiple and interlocking challenges before them and influence policies and practices to their benefit. The IYY, in a more specific way provided young people with disabilities a platform to highlight the issues that are of importance to them.

⁶ UN Youth Flash, Jan 2007 Vol 4, No 1, available at:
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/flashjanuary07.pdf>

What are young people with disabilities most concerned about?

The young people who took part in this consultation discussed a range of areas in which they feel their opportunities are being denied due to negative attitudes, discrimination and barriers to access. Of all the concerns raised, the difficulty that young women with disabilities face generated the most commentary. Respondents noted that in addition to disability, gender often limits opportunities, so young women with disabilities face “double discrimination”. Moreover, there was great concern that many young women with disabilities are extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, especially those who find it hard to communicate or express their feelings. Education and access to health services (especially linked to HIV and AIDS) were major problem areas. Many of the young people who responded described significant barriers, which made it difficult for them to do well in school, or to receive high-quality health care.

More positively, a large number of young people with disabilities expressed how important new technology (including mobile phones and computers) has been in improving their lives. This seems to be one area where young people with disabilities are making considerable advances and, in many cases, technology is helping to reduce barriers and create more opportunities for them.

Perhaps one of the most important areas, however, is in awareness raising and campaigning. The CRPD is providing young people with disabilities around the world with an excellent platform from which to voice demands for their rights. An increasing number of countries are signing and ratifying this Convention, and young people are playing a key role in its promotion. Responses from many of the countries showed that young people with disabilities are actively campaigning together to promote the principles of the CRPD. The opportunity for creating more inclusive societies is being used by young people, and the CRPD is a key tool in helping to open up new doors.

Youth and the United Nations

The United Nations has long recognized that the vision, imagination, ideals and energies of young people are vital for the continuing development of the societies in which they live. Young people in all countries are both a major human resource for development and key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation.

With this view, the United Nations General proclaimed the year commencing on 12 August 2010 as the International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding (IYY). Under its theme, the IYY aimed to promote ideals of peace, respect for human rights and solidarity across generations, cultures, religions and civilizations. During the IYY, people across the world raised awareness about young people and their concerns, and examined how issues affecting young people can be included in development plans and activities.

In addition to the IYY, the United Nations' commitment to young people is enshrined in the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), a landmark international policy document that focuses on the development of young people. The WPAY provides a policy framework and practical guidelines for national action and international support to improve the situation of young people. It WPAY contains proposals for action which foster conditions and mechanisms to improve the well-being and livelihood of young people.

The WPAY also guides international efforts on youth issues. For instance, the WPAY provides practical guidance to help those responsible for providing services to improve the range of opportunities available to young people, so that they can fully contribute to and participate in society.

The WPAY has highlighted fifteen key areas of concern for young people, and has created a set of practical action points for each one. Around the world, governments actively use the WPAY as a guiding framework to develop their own national youth policies and programmes.

WPAY fifteen priority areas			
Education	Employment	Hunger and poverty	Health
Environment	Drug abuse	Juvenile delinquency	Leisure activities
Girls and young women	Full and effective Participation	Armed conflict	HIV / AIDS
Globalization	Information and communications technology	Intergenerational issues	

The CRPD and the WPAY are important tools, which help ensure that countries introduce laws that make it easier for children with disabilities to go to school; to receive the health care they need; to feel safe and protected; to be able to enjoy the benefits of group participation and new technology; and to learn about their cultural heritage. The CRPD mentions all of these issues and more, and emphasises that all development initiatives should be based on the principles of non-discrimination, full and effective participation, accessibility, and diversity. In addition, all of the issues contained within the WPAY also appear in the CRPD, which indicates both that young people with disabilities face the same challenges as their non-disabled peers.

DO WE LIVE IN AN EQUAL SOCIETY? SOME VIEWS ON BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

The effects of discrimination

When there is no discrimination, we all will be given the opportunities to learn and to grow together as one people.

Bindu, Liberia

Imagine being turned away from school because you are unable to see as well as your friends. Think about what it would feel like to be told the health centre will not be treating you today because you have a disability. Is it right that as a disabled woman you will not be allowed to benefit from the land distribution happening in Southern Sudan, or that you will not be invited to join the local women's savings group?

These are not just questions to provoke discussion. Each example is a recent experience from the lives of young people with disabilities around the world. They provide us with an insight into the types of challenges these young people face, challenges that have little to do with their physical limitations, but more to do with how they are treated by their families and communities.

Discrimination, or treating people unfairly because of prejudice, can make the lives of young people with disabilities very difficult. Despite having the same hopes and ambitions as non-disabled persons, they encounter barriers that make it much harder for them to succeed. Young people with disabilities experience significant discrimination in areas such as education, health, gender and equality. The types of discrimination they face can be linked to attitudes, the environment, local laws, or cultural practices.

People see and laugh at me because I am different, but I see and laugh at them because they are the same.

Vijaya, India

Barriers created by attitudes and the environment

My parents denied my right to education because I was disabled. It was through relentless effort that I became educated, though it was not easy.

Mohammed, Sierra Leone

Most young people with disabilities want to be able to attend their local school and to mix with non-disabled friends, but they are often unable to do so because of what parents, teachers, or other students think of them.

In fact, young people with disabilities are far less likely to attend school or to stay in school than their non-disabled peers.⁷ Even in countries that are close to achieving universal primary education, people with disabilities represent the largest group still out of school⁸. One issue seems to be that families are less likely to prioritise education for children with disabilities, believing they are not capable of learning.⁹

In a situation where a family is poor, children with disabilities often lose out because the family believes that it is not worth educating them. Although in most countries basic primary education is free, there are still several opportunity costs of attending school. School children often

⁷ World Health Organization, World Report on Disability 2011, available at http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789240685215_eng.pdf

⁸ UNESCO, Reaching the Marginalised: Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010 available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606e.pdf>

⁹ Groce, N.E. (2004) Adolescents and youth with disability: Issues and Challenges. *Asia Pacific Disability Rehabilitation Journal*. 15(2): 13- 32.

need practical things, for example uniforms and writing materials, which represent the direct cost of education. But there are many indirect costs too, some of which are greater for children with disabilities. For instance, in rural areas, going to school may involve travelling long distances and spending time away from helping out with family activities such as farming. Children with disabilities may need to be accompanied on their journey to school by an adult family member, or families may need to meet the costs of transport. The family may have to pay for assistive devices or mobility aids (such as wheelchairs or Braille stencils) to facilitate attendance at school.

Many families in poverty with children with disabilities lack an awareness of the benefits of education for children with disabilities. When these families are forced to make decisions about how they spend their resources many of them are choosing not to send their children to school. Regardless of the potential of the child, disability is often viewed as an inability resulting in lifelong dependency. These barriers are created by **negative attitudes** and result from a lack of understanding about the true causes of impairments and of the potential all children have.

Teachers may be reluctant to have disabled students in their classrooms because they are concerned that they do not have the special resources or training to teach them. This means many are simply turned away when they try to enrol. In line with the CRPD, increasingly, disabled children are being accepted into school, but because there are no adapted lessons or materials, classes can be difficult for them to follow. Moreover, isolation and bullying from other students can often force children with disabilities to drop out.

When I was in grade school my father used to lift me to the second floor just to attend my classes.

Brian, Philippines

The young man above was fortunate enough to have a supportive family, but his experience also illustrates how there are many **environmental barriers** that can discourage young people with disabilities from going to school. Sometimes, as in the case of young deaf students, teachers may be unable to communicate with them because they have no skills in sign language. When books are unavailable in Braille or large print, students with visual impairments cannot research for themselves. These are all examples of barriers in the environment that affect young people with disabilities who want to go to school.

Young people with disabilities also have serious concerns that they are not benefitting from general health care and awareness-raising campaigns because of the beliefs of families and health professionals. Some know they have been denied treatment because of their disability, with families choosing to prioritise their non-disabled brothers and sisters for medical help. However, the attitudes of health professionals are of greatest concern for many young people. Their lack of awareness means that they often fail to see how youth with disabilities are missing out on important information.

Staff are not well trained on how to take account of my needs. They sometimes explain things like tablets in colours which I don't even know how that looks.

Nondumiso, Swaziland

This quotation indicates a general disregard for how visual impairment might affect this young woman's ability to take her medication correctly. Other young people face issues around a lack of physical or communication access. Frequently, young people are not receiving treatment or general health information because alternatives are not being offered.

Several young people with disabilities are concerned, in particular, about not receiving information regarding HIV and sexual health. Many health and education professionals will not discuss sexual health issues with young people with disabilities because they do not believe they are, or should be, sexually active. Moreover, awareness campaigns are rarely fully accessible as few mainstream organisations consider designing campaigns for young people with disabilities.

Very little (HIV) information is in Braille form, this leaves many people with visual impairments with no information.

George, Kenya

This continues despite growing evidence suggesting that young people with disabilities are more vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.¹⁰

In general, the environment creates many challenges for young people with disabilities, making participation in everyday activities very difficult for them. When they cannot enter buildings, ride local transport or talk with service providers, then young people with disabilities are losing out on opportunities to learn and participate.

What is the experience of young women with disabilities?

Young women with disabilities encounter challenges greater than those facing men, and it is easy to see how vulnerable and at risk some of them can be. Women with disabilities do not have the same opportunities as men with disabilities, or even as their non-disabled peers. One of the issues that young women with disabilities talk about is the sense that their personal freedoms – their ability to move around freely, to dress, to eat, to choose their own friends – is more restricted than for men. Families often over-protect girls, and this has a big impact on their quality of life.

¹⁰ Groce, N.E. (2003) HIV/AIDS and people with disability. *The Lancet*. 361(9367): 1401–1402

However, it is the risk of abuse and exploitation that is a cause for greatest concern. Many female youth with disabilities from around the world have shared stories about rape, unwanted pregnancies, abuse, and abandonment.

This is a sad story from my village, when my friend was made pregnant by a man and after delivery she was dumped by him because she is disabled.

Sarah, Uganda

This is a complex area because as young people point out, there are many factors that contribute to this risk. For example, the lack of empowerment or not being given a voice, women and girls with disabilities often cannot talk about issues surrounding sexual or physical abuse. Moreover as girls with disabilities reach puberty, they may not understand what is happening to them, or be able to express how they feel to anyone because no one has talked to them about relationships or sex.

Even if they are aware of what is happening to them, they can still find it hard to gain protection because those in authority may be inaccessible.

Some of them are raped or abused and fail to report their cases. A girl who was deaf was raped and when she tried to report her case, the police officers could not understand her language.

Nora, Zimbabwe

The risk is so high because in many situations neither the family nor those in authority (for instance teachers, the police or health workers) are properly aware that young girls with disabilities

are particularly vulnerable, and therefore they do not take these matters seriously. This means that few people are stopped from mistreating girls with disabilities and the issue remains hidden.

In instances of armed conflict or general unrest, women and girls with disabilities face an even greater risk.

Young girls and women are subjected to various forms of sexual abuse during war.

Shona, Liberia

DO WE ALL HAVE THE CHANCE TO PARTICIPATE?

SOME VIEWS ON HOW OPPORTUNITIES TO GET INVOLVED CAN BE LIMITED

How young people with disabilities are being excluded from decision making

Worldwide, young people with disabilities are building their confidence, visibility and knowledge, but their opportunities for participating in decision-making forums or community activities are still severely limited. Large numbers of young people with disabilities feel that their ideas and views are often not taken seriously by decision makers or peers.

(The) Ministry of Planning conducted a week-long workshop at which time there were many group presentations in PowerPoint, which I can not see. The issue of accessibility, which was well illustrated by the lack of access during the workshop, was not highlighted however. The incident made me feel left out of national planning.

Francis, Liberia

Like most young people, young people with disabilities have a lot to contribute, but they can often be made to feel that their views do not count. Some of this is linked to gender and age, but there are also other elements of discrimination, which deny young people with disabilities from having a voice.

I have an aunt who has a daughter who is physically disabled. I told my aunt that she must send the child to school because she is nine years old. My aunt refused, she did not listen to me. I felt sad because I thought she was not listening to me because I am disabled.

Nondumiso, Swaziland

Helping families to communicate with and value their disabled children is one way to increase opportunities for the participation of disabled youth. There is a need to work with young people with disabilities to build their confidence and to encourage them to advocate more for themselves. The more visible they are, the more likely their ideas will start being integrated into mainstream processes.

How joining groups can be fun, but also a lonely experience

Most young people with disabilities choose to socialise and mix with non-disabled friends, even though this may not always be easy. Such experiences when positive, have helped young people with disabilities enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to be accepted and not treated as different.

It was fun at times because people understood me and accepted me. The group was terrific; they always find ways to include me in all activities. I rarely felt like I was left out.

Nancy, Zimbabwe

Everyone benefits when disabled and non-disabled people join together. There is a great deal to be learned from sharing personal experiences, and this will also create better links for the future.

We went hiking and I could not jump over stones to cross a river. The guys just supported me by suggesting we hold each other's hands to cross. In the name of team building I was comfortable.

Nelson, Kenya

Sometimes experiences can be mixed, especially in cases where disability is the reason why some young people are not being fully included.

Sometimes I cannot fully enjoy joining a group because of inaccessibility. Yes, I have felt left out as I do want to join in sometimes.

Roselyn, Philippines

When exclusion is most extreme, people with disabilities can be bullied to the point where they withdraw from group activities completely.

Non-disabled will not want to talk with you or sit down beside you.

Dixon, Liberia

When society breaks down, young people with disabilities become vulnerable

In situations of armed conflict, or during natural disasters, the situation for young people with disabilities becomes critical. Young people with disabilities become extremely vulnerable because their usual support networks break down and they lose access to support services and assistive technology. Furthermore, some of the most vulnerable groups within communities (especially children and girls with disabilities) find it hard to defend and provide for themselves.

My firsthand experience is the 14 years conflict (in Liberia). Many young people with disabilities were badly affected by rape, hunger and sickness.

Poppy, Liberia

Young people with disabilities are much more likely to be abandoned during armed conflict because of the tendency of people to look out for themselves first. Children with disabilities are especially at risk, and sometimes are abandoned by their parents and left to die.

I was a victim of abandonment. No food to eat. Women were indiscriminately raped. I walked a long distance that was not easy and had blisters. Communities should see us as members of the community and we should be the first to be considered in moving us from a war affected area.

Musharraf, Sierra Leone

Environmental barriers simply increase when conflict or natural disasters occur, making everyday tasks even more difficult. These barriers often multiply during relief efforts. Lack of attention to access means that many people with disabilities cannot use these relief services either.

By changing attitudes, you can increase the opportunities for everyone

Under stable circumstances, however, environmental barriers create fewer problems for young people with disabilities than do attitudes when it comes to taking part in groups or activities with non-disabled friends. Where there is acceptance, groups will change what they do and find ways to include the interests and capabilities of friends with disabilities. The challenge is in acceptance. Young people with disabilities believe a lot more awareness raising is required to open up more opportunities like this. Many young people with disabilities feel they would be more confident to join mixed activities if levels of discrimination were lower and there were a greater acceptance of disability in general.

The only experience I have is when I was 14 years old I went to the park with a playground. I wanted to try the swing, but the children who were at the park all gathered around me and

looked at me like I was an alien. I told them not to look at me that way but look at me as a person and told them if they were in my shoes how would they feel? Then all the children walked away but later they came back and apologised to me and then they all helped me to play on the swing.

Abdullah, Malaysia

It is critical to change perceptions about disability and encourage more non-disabled people to think about activities that are inclusive. The CRPD calls for greater recognition of the rights of people with disabilities to take part on an equal basis in cultural, sporting and recreational activities (Article 30), and it is an area that deserves much more attention from all those who plan and run youth groups.

I have gained immense strength to combat discrimination and exclusion with my Young Voices members.

Suman, India

The importance of respecting cultural rights

Principle 8 of the CRPD states, "respect for the evolving capacities of disabled children and respect for them to preserve their identities." In many contexts, however, many young people with disabilities, who come from a variety of cultural backgrounds, are not given the opportunity to learn about their cultural history or take part in important cultural milestones and ceremonies. In addition, many cultural events or venues remain inaccessible.

In other instance, there are many false beliefs around why disability happens, such as disability results from a curse or witchcraft, or that disability may spread or be caught by looking at

or touching a person. Often communities do not want to risk “spoiling” their ceremonies by including people with disabilities, so young people with disabilities are often excluded from such events.

Some people with disabilities are also denied access to their cultural heritage through the suppression of their language. Deaf people around the world have a strong cultural and linguistic identity, often separate from the local context, preserved and transmitted through the use of sign language and shared spaces. Where Deaf communities are strong, the opportunities young Deaf people have to participate in and contribute to development are high. In this regard ensuring young deaf people have the opportunity to learn the local sign language and to mix with the local Deaf community is extremely important.

Around the world however, many young deaf people are not being presented with the opportunity either to learn sign language or to meet other Deaf sign language users. In many countries sign language is not yet recognised as an official language – it is regarded merely as a set of gestures limited to individuals. Furthermore, it is not promoted as a language of instruction in schools and thus services such as sign language interpretation is not supported. Even where official recognition has been granted, it may take years for a national sign language to develop.

CAN INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES?

SOME EXPERIENCES ON THE BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY

How young people with disabilities are harnessing the power of new technology

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) makes it easier for persons with disabilities to communicate and share information. For example, deaf people use cell phones to communicate through text messages. Technology makes things easier for disabled people.

Pinky, Liberia

ICT has made a considerable impact on the lives of persons with disabilities around the world. Where available, ICT provides persons with disabilities the opportunity to communicate and connect with friends, which reduces their isolation and opens up more ways for them to participate. In many respects, it is improving life chances and expanding opportunities, because young people with disabilities are connecting to the world in ways that simply would not have been possible a generation ago. However, for those who have no access, such as those living in rural areas, or cannot afford it, lack education or because appropriately adapted devices are not yet available, there is frustration, and a sense of exclusion.

Many young people with disabilities believe that new technology is extremely useful and has improved their access to information. It also saves time and can make the work of producing written materials much easier.

As a student, I don't have to go to library to search information because through just one click in the computer everything is already given.

Carla, Philippines

ICT allows them to stay in touch with friends, make new connections and keep up-to-date on national and international events. In particular, for those who find communication difficult, it is opening up new channels for connecting with peers and wider society.

I learned computer in school and I can surf the internet and read online newspapers. As for mobile phone, I can call my family and friends keep in touch with them and call my boss to discuss my work schedule.

Abdullah, Malaysia

ICT is also a medium through which young people with disabilities connect with each other and learn about their rights. It is much easier for them to come together and campaign without the barriers that make communication or physical access difficult. It often helps increase the profile of persons with disabilities, and allows them to participate actively.

How a lack of accessible ICT can hinder development

ICT, however, has its limits. There are young people with disabilities who feel they are missing out because they cannot access new technology. Many live in rural areas where this kind of technology is simply not available to anyone, or if it is, then it is too expensive for most people to obtain. For young people with disabilities, there is also the added challenge of whether the technology available is adapted to fit their needs. Very often, the adaptations are not widely known about or are prohibitively expensive. While young people in the cities might go to internet cafes to check email or use *Facebook* with relative ease, those with visual impairments struggle to find one that had screen-reader software installed. Thus, their options are often limited.

Another limitation is linked to education and familiarity with the technology. Young people with disabilities who have not attended school, may also not have learned to use computers or mobile phones. Often, illiteracy, a result of exclusion in education, does not enable the use of available ICT.

I find it difficult to use a computer because I am illiterate.

Nhlanhla, Swaziland

Even those who are familiar with technology called for more training to be provided. Technology has the potential to make a dramatic difference in the lives of young people with disabilities, and every effort should be made to ensure they have access.

Offering basic knowledge at schools on how to use technology will improve the lives of disabled people.

Nondumiso, Swaziland

The importance of accessible technology

The CRPD highlights the role accessible technology can play in helping people with disabilities to live full and independent lives. It emphasises that appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that people with disabilities can have:

“...access, on an equal basis with others to... information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems...”

Article 9 – Accessibility

There is an urgent and critical need to help young people with disabilities learn more about new technology, so they can take advantage of opportunities that are now being created. In addition to training in new technology, more people need to be taught how to use adapted computer programmes and devices. Furthermore, this is generally difficult because even those who are familiar with the technology itself may not be familiar with adapted versions.

HOW CAN SOCIETIES BECOME MORE INCLUSIVE?

SOME VIEWS ON WHAT HELPS TO CREATE MORE EQUAL COMMUNITIES

How the CRPD is helping to increase the visibility of young people with disabilities

Young people with disabilities around the world have welcomed the CRPD and are using it as a platform to campaign and raise awareness.

My friends in Young Voices and I have strong determination and courage of conviction to move the State for the ratification and implementation of CRPD in order to enable persons with disabilities to enjoy their human rights on an equal basis with others.

Ishan, Sri Lanka

For example, youth with disabilities in Uganda have been using the CRPD as a way to draw attention to their needs. They have used it to raise awareness about issues such as their rights to education and employment, and also to sensitise their communities about the need to include persons with disabilities in their activities.

We have organised meetings and discussed many issues linked to disabled people. I have been part of a team made up of lots of representatives from different disability associations which has led advocacy and networking meetings with community leaders.

Francis, Uganda

When I got involved in a District level campaign with the (Young Voices) group, it made me feel proud. I think if it was not for this group I would not have done this on my own.

This has enabled us to create awareness of disability among local authorities.

Maria, Uganda

In Kenya, where the CRPD was ratified in 2008, young people are gaining the confidence to speak out on issues that affect them.

We visited the Nairobi City Council and we spoke to the officials there. We voiced a few issues on accessibility. They included: access to buildings within the city that is through the building of lifts and also ramps. They started by building ramps in their own offices where they have made it accessible to all members of the public including physically disabled people.

Richard, Kenya

Despite having been rejected from school on the grounds of disability, one young woman from Uganda has gone on to achieve her goal of becoming a nurse. The discrimination she faced encouraged her to join a local disability rights group and to campaign for better rights, as enumerated in the CRPD. As part of a recent sensitisation campaign, she wrote and performed a poem that expresses the ideas and beliefs of many youth with disabilities:

Blessed are you, who take the time to listen to my difficult speech, for you help me to know that if I persevere I can be understood

Blessed are you, who never bid me to hurry or take a task away from me and do for me, for I always need time

Blessed are you, who understand that it is difficult for me to put my thoughts into words

Blessed are you with a smile, so please encourage me to try once more

Blessed are you who ask for my help, for the greatest need is to be needed

Blessed are you who never remind me that today I have asked the same question twice

Blessed are you who respect my rights, love me as I am and not as you wish I were.

Sofia, Uganda

In Sierra Leone, young people with disabilities have been coming together to raise awareness over the CRPD, which was ratified there in 2010:

(We have carried out) campaigns and awareness-raising activities which have brought the Convention to life. They have motivated colleagues and built their confidence. Our activities were successful because the public are aware about the rights of persons with disabilities. We lobbied the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs and the First Lady for a successful implementation of the Act.

Young Voices group, Sierra Leone

In the Philippines, where the CRPD was ratified in 2008, groups of young people with disabilities are working collaboratively to partner with the Government to implement it. This is an important initiative, as Governments around the world have been slow to implement the CRPD. In the Philippines, youth with disabilities have participated in disability access audits, where they visit local service providers to see how easy it is for people with various impairments to get the assistance and information they need. Others have been doing community outreach work, as well as using drama and song to raise awareness on this topic.

These efforts have not only helped the community gain a greater understanding of the challenges facing young people with disabilities, but also given young people the chance to feel they have contributed something valuable to their local communities.

In Sri Lanka, where the Government has signed (2007) but not yet ratified the CRPD, young people with disabilities met in March 2011 to carry out a "Disability Rights Convention" at the University of Colombo. Their aim was to sensitise the university community about the CRPD and how important it was for the country ratify it.

In Liberia, young, deaf and disabled women are standing up and talking about their rights for the very first time. Liberia signed the CRPD back in 2007, but much work remains to be done in persuading the Government to fulfil its obligations. With this goal in mind, young people with disabilities are now appearing on radio and on television, expressing what needs to be done in order to help them succeed and reach their full potential. They are also reaching out to persons with disabilities in communities where knowledge of the CRPD is still weak, so as to generate broader support for its ratification.

Being gender sensitive is important in promoting the inclusion of women

The CRPD recognises that women with disabilities often face multiple forms of discrimination and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Governments and communities are encouraged to make special efforts to empower women to articulate their needs. In fact, young people feel that there needs to be a major reform in attitude towards girls and young women with disabilities along with an effort to sensitise everyone – from families to law enforcement agencies and courts – on the vulnerability of girls. Many believe that programmes focusing on girls and women need to champion this issue and include women with disabilities within their ambit.

I have decided to fight gender-based discrimination since women with disabilities face multiple factors of marginalisation among disabled people.

Tharanga, Sri Lanka

Young people feel that laws should be implemented to protect women with disabilities, and that the legal system should be made more easily and readily accessible to them. Governments should ensure that there are sound facilities in place to look after those who have been abused (for

example, by providing accessible safe houses, counselling, and health services), so that they are able to recover.

Additional efforts should concentrate on empowering young women with disabilities to find their voice so that they can express their challenges. Women and girls with disabilities need to be educated and informed about their rights and what they can do to protect themselves. More young role models are needed to encourage women's aspirations and more leadership training should be offered to create a positive image of women with disabilities.

Calls for action from youth with disabilities

Give us opportunities: we will prove our talents.

Young Voices group, Sri Lanka

Young people with disabilities have found that awareness-raising has had the greatest effect on fostering opportunities for inclusion. Their opportunities increase significantly when teachers, parents, health professionals and communities value them and treat them with respect. The young people who took part in this consultation process raised many issues and concerns, but their call for action focused on a few, key requests:

1. Treat young people with disabilities with respect: **Disability is not inability**
2. Support young people's efforts to raise awareness on the rights of people with disabilities and open up opportunities for them to join in all activities. Help them to lobby and advocate for the implementation of the CRPD and to challenge the negative attitudes which are perpetuating their exclusion.

3. Pay attention to the environmental barriers that stop young people with disabilities from participating. Find out what the barriers are and try to remove them. A lack of participation by young people with disabilities does not mean they don't want to take part – it means they can't because something is stopping them.
4. Acknowledge that girls and young women with disabilities can be at very high risk of abuse and exploitation. Raise awareness around their vulnerability, reinforce laws to protect them, and support efforts to empower them so that they can speak out for themselves.
5. **Education for all** means just that – give young people with disabilities a chance to reach their potential by supporting schools and families to accept the value of education for children and young people with disabilities.
6. Make sure young people with disabilities are brought into decision-making forums and that their ideas and suggestions are given equal consideration to those of their non-disabled peers. Don't assume they are only interested in disability issues – make sure they are able to contribute their ideas and views in all areas of debate.
7. Create inclusive opportunities for young disabled people to take part in sports and other recreational activities. Sport in particular can be a powerful mechanism to challenge negative stereotypes and promote the integration of young people with disabilities into their communities. It's also fun and helps build friendships and peer groups.
8. Support the development and promotion of accessible technology because it's clear that it is already having an impact on the ability of young people with disabilities to participate.
9. International Development is important. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are unlikely to be achieved if the needs and capabilities of people with disabilities remain on the fringes of development policy and practice. Make sure all development programmes take proactive measures to include people with disabilities.
10. Celebrate diversity. Recognise the important role young people with disabilities play in creating richer, more dynamic, resourceful and respectful communities.

Although this publication has captured just a few of the voices of young people with disabilities around the world, it represents the many issues and experiences shared by millions of young people. Young people with disabilities are highly motivated by recent progress around the CRPD, and are coming together to promote its ideals and calls for action. However, they need the support of non-disabled people to take up their responsibilities, and to join them in promoting inclusive development, so that together they can create an equal global community for all.

Life is too short to wake up with regrets; rise and shine, do what you can do and show the world that we are able. If they give us a chance, the sky is our limit.

Mafuta, Zimbabwe

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED? SOME RESOURCES THAT ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP YOU LEARN MORE

Websites

United Nations ENABLE

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/>

UN Programme on Youth

www.un.org/youth

Leonard Cheshire Disability Young Voices

www.lcdisability.org/youngvoices

Disabled Peoples' International (DPI)

www.dpi.org

SOURCE

www.asksource.info

Global Partnership for Disability and Development (GPDD)

www.gpdd-online.org

International Disability Alliance (IDA)

www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org

International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC)

www.iddcconsortium.net

Publications

Youth and the UN (Publications)

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/library.htm>

UN Youth and Disabilities factsheet

<http://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/Fact%20sheet%20youth%20with%20disabilities.pdf>

It's about ability

http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_43893.html

It's about ability learning guide

http://www.unicef.org/publications/index_50687.html

WHO/World Bank World report on disability

http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/index.html

APPENDIX QUESTIONNAIRE

PART 1

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: (Optional)

Contact Details (email/telephone) please note all contact information will be kept confidential
.....

Please tell us:

Are you male or female?

How old are you?

What country do you come from and what town do you live in?

Do you have a disability? If so, would you like to tell us what disability you have?

Do you belong to a youth group? If so, can you tell us the name of the group you belong to?

PART 2

WHERE ARE THE CHALLENGES?

THEME 1 YOUTH IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

1.1 If having a disability affects your opportunities for education can you describe what problems you have experienced? What changes would make it easier for you to join your peers?

1.2 If having a disability affects your opportunities for work can you describe what kinds of problems you have experienced? What changes would make it easier for you to work?

1.3 Poverty is often seen to link with disability. If you have seen or experienced poverty because of disability can you briefly describe what it was like? What do you see as the main reason for why disability and poverty are often found together? What changes can be made to address this situation?

1.4 If having a disability has affected your chances of taking advantage of global opportunities can you describe what you believe you have missed out on? How do you think your future opportunities might be limited by not being involved in global opportunities? What changes can be made to address this situation?

THEME 2 YOUTH AND THEIR WELL-BEING

2.1 If having a disability affects your access to health care or information about issues like drug abuse and HIV/AIDS can you describe what the main problems have been for you? What changes would make it easier for you to access these services?

2.2 In what ways do you think girls and young women with disabilities face more challenges than their male peers? If you have personal experience of the challenges faced by girls and young women with disabilities, can you describe what they are? What changes can be made to address this situation?

2.3 In what ways do you think young people with disabilities have been affected by wars? Do you have any firsthand experience of this you can share? What changes can be made to address this situation?

THEME 3 YOUTH IN CIVIL SOCIETY

3.1 What do you find difficult, or easy about using computers, mobile/cell phones and other technologies? Are they easy for you to access? What do use them for? What changes can be made to address this situation?

3.2 If you have experiences of trying to take part in outdoor or other leisure activities but have been excluded because of your disability, can you describe how being disabled has made it difficult for you to join in activities like these? What changes can be made to address this situation?

3.3 If you have tried to join groups with non-disabled young people, can you describe what your experiences were like? Were you able to take part in all activities or were there times when you couldn't take part? What activities were difficult for you? Did the group try to find ways to include you or did they decide to do a different activity which was easier for you to join in? Did you feel you were fully accepted or did you feel more left out? What changes can be made to address this situation?

3.4 Do you feel that your ideas and opinions are listened to when adults, or others, are making decisions about what to do? If not, can you tell us about a recent example of how your ideas were not taken into consideration? What did that make you feel? What might have been done differently to allow your ideas to be listened to?

3.5 If you have heard about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, can you tell us how you think it will change the situation for young people with disabilities in the future in your country?

PART 3

CHANGING THINGS FOR THE BETTER

BRINGING ABOUT POSITIVE CHANGE

4.1 If you have recently taken part in and enjoyed a group activity which has helped young disabled people to feel more part of their community then can you tell us about it?

4.2 We would like you to describe any activities you have taken part in or led which have brought about positive changes for young disabled people. You are free to tell us in your own words what you have done or taken part in which has made a difference to you and others. If you have any photographs or pictures we would love you to share them with us.

4.3 As a young person with a disability, what is your personal message to the world?