

Strengthening the System: Foundations for a Disability Inclusive United Nations

BACKGROUND

This document presents the main findings and recommendations resulting from the institutional assessment undertaken as per decision 2018/20 of the Executive Committee of the Secretary-General on the inclusion of persons with disabilities¹. The decision stated that the findings of the review should inform the development of a system-wide policy, action plan and accountability framework addressing issues across various areas of the Organization's operations, including mandate, capacity, resources, systems, operational guidance and institutional-support structures.

The review was coordinated by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and conducted by the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with the support of the School for Global Inclusion and Social Development at the University of Massachusetts. A total of 40 UNSDG entities and a sample of 40 UNCTs were surveyed, and additional consultations were undertaken with HLCM, DM, DPKO, UN staff, including those with disabilities, and representative organizations of persons with disabilities.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Committee of the Secretary-General recognized the significant scope for further action by the UN on strengthening accessibility and mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities. The findings of the review support this, showing that despite important progress that has been made, clear gaps in accessibility and *disability inclusion*² remain across all pillars of the UN work at all levels³.

The recommendations emanating from the review seek to inform the content of the system-wide policy action plan and accountability framework particularly in the context of the UN reforms, and in support of the 2030 Agenda and its commitment to leave no one behind, with the aim to provide a foundation for lasting and transformative change on disability inclusion in the work of the UN.

¹ See Annex A on the Methodology of the Institutional Assessment

² **Disability inclusion** – This addresses the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities, the promotion of their rights, and the consideration of disability-related perspectives in compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

³ **Across all pillars of the UN work at all levels** – This includes programming and institutional areas, at country, regional and global levels.

MAIN FINDING

Consistent or systematic mainstreaming of accessibility and disability inclusion remains limited across all pillars of the UN work at all levels:

- Existing inclusive practices are inconsistent and episodic, showing a lack of coherent or comprehensive approaches.
- While multiple entities have relevant and specific responsibilities, no one entity has the dedicated capacity and explicit authority to actively facilitate, support and oversee progress made in the mainstreaming of accessibility and disability inclusion.
- Existing disability-specific inter-agency and interdepartmental networks and initiatives, such as the IASG-CRPD⁴, have not had the required impact on mainstreaming disability inclusion in the work of the UN.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Key challenges for system-wide mainstreaming of disability inclusion across all pillars of the UN work at all levels were identified in the following areas:

□ **Top- level Leadership**

- Top-level leadership to promote disability inclusion remains insufficient and inconsistent, despite having been identified as a key component to advance disability inclusion within the system.
- The lack of engagement and commitment by senior management results in and is reflected through the limited impact of existing efforts within entities and at inter-agency and interdepartmental networks, including the IASG-CRPD.

□ **Capacity**

- Among UN staff, there is a lack of understanding of how to mainstream disability. Similarly, there is a general lack of incentive to and knowledge on how to build capacity to include disability in their work.
- There is a lack of coherence among resources and tools to build capacity on disability inclusion, and no system for access to and dissemination of resources. Having dedicated training or staff with knowledge/expertise on disability rights were identified as important mechanisms to advance inclusion.

⁴ **The Inter-Agency Support Group for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (IASG-CRPD)** was established in 2006 by the United Nations Chief Executives Board (CEB), with the objective of promoting compliance with the Principles of the Convention and increasing the scale and effectiveness of the United Nations' involvement in disability issues. It comprises members from across the UN Secretariat, Funds and Programmes, Specialized Agencies, and other entities, and engages with representative organizations of persons with disabilities as observers. The Group is served by a co-secretariat (DESA-OHCHR) and rotating chair (currently UN Women).

□ **Inclusive programs and plans**

- With a few positive exceptions, UN entities minimally address persons with disabilities in their strategic planning and organizational policies. Persons with disabilities are often implicitly referred to under the category of marginalized or vulnerable groups or left out altogether.
- Few entities have disability-specific plans or policies to advance the rights of persons with disabilities in their work.
- Guidance for preparation of UNDAFs, Common Country Analyses and Joint Programmes do not identify disability inclusion as a strategic priority or measure progress made on disability inclusion. As a result, few UNDAFs substantially integrate disability issues, and few UNCTs work on disability inclusion.

□ **Accessibility**

- Efforts to make the UN accessible at all levels are insufficient and incomplete. Focused on physical accessibility of UN premises and disability-specific events, efforts do not consistently extend to facilities, services or operations outside of headquarters or to mainstream events or programming; nor do they recognize the diverse barriers faced by persons with disabilities, including barriers to information and communication.

□ **Human Resources**

- The majority of UN entities do not have formal policies or strategies to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities in recruitment, retention and career advancement. Measures that do exist, such as the SG Bulletin, are limited in scope and are not being effectively implemented or tracked.
- Few entities have allocated resources for reasonable accommodation⁵, and there is inconsistency in how employees with disabilities are provided with these.
- Existing employment benefits in the UN system do not cover disability-related additional costs for staff with disabilities.

□ **Funding & Procurement**

- There are insufficient resources dedicated to disability inclusion in both disability
- Specific and mainstream activities. With only two exceptions, UN entities do not track when and how resources are allocated to disability inclusion.
- Few entities utilize procurement processes that take into account accessibility or other disability related requirements.
- Existing funding initiatives like the UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), have limited resources, scope and capacity to support disability inclusion at country, regional and global levels.

⁵ **Reasonable accommodation** refers to the necessary and appropriate individual modifications or adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise their rights on an equal basis with others.

□ **Participation**

- Efforts to promote the participation of persons with disabilities at all UN levels, and in particular in the development and implementation of mainstream organizational policies and strategies, are limited and inconsistent.
- Intersectionality and the diversity of persons with disabilities are hardly taken into account within mainstream or disability-specific policies.

□ **Accountability**

- There are no mechanisms to ensure accountability for the full and effective mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities in efforts undertaken.
- There are no consistent or systematic tools to measure progress on disability inclusion, including data on the situation of persons with disabilities.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- To be successful in strengthening accessibility and mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities across the UN, the **policy, action plan and accountability framework** should:

- Cover and ensure active engagement of all levels of the UN, including across the three pillars, in institutional setup and programming, and at country, regional and global levels, in line with the enhanced structures and processes proposed in the UN reforms;
- Have endorsement and oversight from the highest levels of the UN, in particular sustained support, commitment and ownership from the Secretary-General; and
- Ensure the meaningful participation of representative organizations of persons with disabilities as a core criterion and benchmark for the design, implementation and monitoring of all UN work, including in its development and implementation.

- A new office should be established under the leadership of a dedicated Assistant Secretary-General with explicit authority, responsibility and expertise to actively facilitate, support and oversee the successful implementation of the system-wide policy, action plan and accountability framework.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- The **policy, action plan and accountability framework**, with recognition of their respective roles and functions, and in the context of the programmatic and operational areas outlined below, should:

Accountability

- Introduce common standards for disability-inclusive practices.
- Introduce mechanisms to enhance oversight of indicators for monitoring and evaluation with clear timelines and responsibilities for implementation.

Leadership

- Develop measures to ensure the strengthened and visible commitment of leadership to promote disability inclusion and enhance their ownership of increased efforts to promote disability inclusion. Commitment and ownership should originate at the highest levels and be reflected throughout the hierarchy of the UN.

Capacity

- Ensure that all UN staff have the capacity to promote disability inclusion in their work to achieve the 2030 agenda and its commitment to leave no one behind, and to foster compliance with the CRPD.
- Develop an approach to capacity building that ensures quality and consistency of tools and resources across the system.
- Ensure that all UN entities have a designated disability advisor and focal points.

Accessibility

- Develop a strategic approach to accessibility and universal design to ensure that all efforts of the UN are accessible to persons with disabilities, addressing barriers in the built environment, information, communications, technology, services, procurement, and conferences and meetings.

Human Resources

- Review current human resources policies and practices to eliminate discrimination and barriers at all stages of employment and ensure consistent provision of reasonable accommodation.
- Conduct proactive outreach to candidates with disabilities.

Funding, Budgeting and Procurement

- Commit sufficient resources to support disability inclusion in a meaningful manner, accompanied by disability markers to track when and how resources are allocated to disability inclusion.
- Call for the creation of reasonable accommodation reserves/funds across the UN system.
- Develop and implement common standards and procedures for disability-inclusive procurement.

Inclusive Programming and Planning

- Promote disability-inclusive Results-Based Management at all levels. Entities should commit to measurable outcomes with respect to the inclusion of persons with disabilities to be able to assess progress both in mainstream and disability-specific efforts.
- Recognize inclusion of persons with disabilities within UNDAFs and Common Country Analyses as a strategic priority.
- Designate a Disability Officer in DOCO to support the work of Resident Coordinators to mainstream disability inclusion.

Annex A: Methodology

Data was collected both at headquarters and country-level using a multi-method approach which included a preliminary desk review, written questionnaires or institutional assessments, key informant interviews, consultations with organizations representing persons with disabilities, and analysis of data gathered by reliable third party sources.

Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM), Department of Management (DM), Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), Inter-Agency Support Group on Disability (IASG), UN Staff Union, as well as UN DESA. In addition, written questionnaires were completed by the HLCM, the DM, and the DPKO. Additional written materials were provided by the UNPRPD and the UN Staff Union.

Institutional assessments were sent to the 40 members of the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) and a sample of 40 UN Country Teams (UNCTs). The assessments were completed and returned by twenty-nine members of the UNSDG and twenty-two UNCTs. It is important to note that the countries were not a random sampling, although efforts were made to ensure geographic and income representation, yet a sampling of countries who were known to have worked on disability issues in the field.

Exhibit 1. List of UNSDG Respondents

Respondents from Members of the UNSDG	
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
IFAD	International Fund for Agriculture Development
ILO	International Labor Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNAIDS	United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs



UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
UNESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHABITAT	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNOCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNPBSO	United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organisation
WMO	World Meteorological Organisation

Exhibit 2. Country Offices Surveyed and Responded

Country Offices Surveyed	
Afghanistan	Kazakhstan
Albania*	Kenya*
Algeria	Libya



Bangladesh	Madagascar*
Bolivia	Moldova
Bosnia	Nepal*
Botswana*	Nigeria
Brazil	Palestine
Cambodia*	Papua New Guinea*
China*	Paraguay*
Cote d'Ivoire*	Senegal*
Cuba*	Serbia*
Ecuador*	Somalia
Ethiopia	South Africa*
Fiji	Sri Lanka*
Guatemala	Sudan
Haiti	Thailand*
India*	UAE*
Jamaica	Ukraine*
Jordan*	Vietnam*

* country responded to assessment

Exhibit 3. Assessments Received by Region

Region	# of Countries	Representation in Sample
Latin America	3	14%
Africa	6	27%
Middle East and Northern Africa	2	9%
Eastern Europe	3	14%
Asia/Pacific	8	36%

Exhibit 4. Assessments Received by Income Level

Income Level	# of Countries	Representation in Sample
Low-Income Country (LIC)	3	14%
Low-and Middle-Income Country	10	45%
High- and Middle-Income Country	9	41%

The areas of study focused on leadership, policy and planning, programming, technical capacity, capacity building, data disaggregation, financial resource allocation, employment, accessibility, and institutional culture within the UN System. It is important to note that an examination of the role and efforts of Member States in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities was outside the scope of this study and should be included in future studies.

In addition, the data collected was of self-report. Future work should include triangulation of data points through community-based reporting and impact studies.