

**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Social Development
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Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability**Summary**

The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED), established at the request of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in September 2015, brings together representatives from government institutions to address disability and social development issues. The goal of the IGED is to assist member States in effectively implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level. Through the IGED, member States can also share experiences, knowledge, and best practices to increase their efforts in this area of work in the Arab region.

The present document provides a summary of the activities carried out by the IGED since the fourteenth session of the Committee on Social Development, held in Beirut on 8 June 2023. The Committee is invited to review the contents of the document and provide feedback to help guide the work of the IGED in the coming period.

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Introduction

1. The annual meetings of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED), which was established at the request of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in 2015, provide a constructive platform for national disability experts to collaborate and exchange insights on disability inclusion issues, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Members share their experiences on national disability policies and the hurdles faced in coordination across different ministries and national institutions to ensure comprehensive integration and effective mainstreaming. The ESCWA secretariat also provides valuable updates on disability-related research and initiatives, fostering a constructive environment for knowledge sharing and collaboration. These meetings are vital in advancing disability rights and promoting inclusive policies on a regional scale, to contribute to the overall goal of creating a more inclusive and accessible society for persons with disabilities.

2. Since its establishment in 2016, the IGED has held eight formal meetings. Its members have also participated in several specialized training seminars and regional meetings or workshops, and provided input to national and regional reports. These include research on disability assessment and determination, accessibility, independent living, work and employment, adequate standard of living and social protection, and other aspects of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including national implementation challenges. These activities aim to foster constructive dialogue and generate actionable insights for improving the lives of persons with disabilities in Arab countries.

I. IGED activities

A. Eighth IGED meeting (Virtual, 15 November 2023)

3. The IGED held its eighth annual meeting virtually on 15 November 2023 to discuss several important disability-related issues. One of the primary topics of discussion was the protection of persons with disabilities during times of war and crises, with a focus on the challenges faced by this group of people in Gaza and the Sudan. Participants shared their experiences in that regard and explored various strategies and interventions that could be implemented to address the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in such situations.

4. Participants also discussed the interlinkages between disability and multidimensional poverty, namely how poverty exacerbates the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, and the importance of addressing these issues through targeted policy interventions.

5. The meeting also reviewed progress in achieving digital accessibility for persons with disabilities, including rolling out the Arab Digital Inclusion Platform developed by ESCWA in Arab countries. Participants shared examples of successful initiatives and partnerships that have helped improve digital accessibility for persons with disabilities in various contexts. The importance of ensuring that digital technologies are designed and developed with accessibility in mind was also emphasized.

B. Participation in ESCWA meetings **Closing meeting of the project on “Including persons with disabilities in the Arab labour market”** (Virtual, 16 November 2023)

6. IGED members participated in the closing meeting of the ESCWA regional project on “Including persons with disabilities in the Arab labour market,” aimed at promoting collaboration and inclusivity between the public and private sectors and organizations of persons with disabilities that are advocating for their rights. The meeting discussed successful actions adopted by Arab countries to reduce legislative gaps and operational challenges that hinder the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market.

7. The meeting covered various topics, including discussing inclusive employment policy in the Arab region, in line with article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It also reviewed the outcomes of the analysis of modules created to measure the obstacles that prevent persons with disabilities from entering the labour market. These modules were included in the labour force surveys in selected Arab countries.

8. The participation of IGED members in the meeting presented a valuable opportunity to discuss inclusive employment policies and means to translate article 27 of the Convention into national employment policies to achieve the right to work for persons with disabilities and create a more inclusive and equitable society.

II. Future areas of work

9. Over the years, and through peer learning, exchange programmes, and South-South cooperation, the IGED has facilitated the sharing of ideas, knowledge and best practices for addressing the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities. To further advance that work, the upcoming IGED meeting will focus on one of the suggested areas put forward by its members:

(a) Strengthening the role of national councils for persons with disabilities in implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and in monitoring the situation of persons with disabilities;

(b) Enhancing awareness among employers, policymakers and society in general on the importance of integrating persons with disabilities into the labour market, by holding meetings with several chambers of commerce in the Arab region, for example. This would respond to the interest of organizations of persons with disabilities in developing the skills of this group of people to integrate them into the labour market instead of simply providing them with services.

10. The Committee on Social Development is invited to take note of the IGED activities and to comment on work priorities in this area for the coming period.

Annex I

IGED responsibilities

1. The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED) was established at the request of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) at its tenth session (Rabat, 8–9 September 2015) to support member States in implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level.
2. Responsibilities of IGED members include:
 - (a) Acting as the main interlocutor for receiving and responding to communications from ESCWA on disability issues, including through coordination with ministries and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate;
 - (b) Advising ESCWA on national developments in the inclusion of persons with disabilities, including institutional, legal and policy processes, and in the field of data and statistics on disability;
 - (c) Participating in online and in-person IGED meetings, as well as participating or nominating other representatives to participate in other meetings related to disability and social development;
 - (d) Exchanging information with other members on experiences, good practices and lessons learned, and the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and improving their participation in social development;
 - (e) Developing and implementing biennial work plans and reviewing performance based on desired outcomes at each formal meeting;
 - (f) Reviewing the financial needs of the IGED and proposing funding sources;
 - (g) Submitting a biennial report on IGED achievements to the ESCWA Committee on Social Development.

Annex II

Members of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability

Country	Name	Professional titles	Ministry/organization
Bahrain	Zainab Salman Alawainati	Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Social Welfare and Rehabilitation	Ministry of Social Development
Egypt	Iman Karim	Secretary-General	National Council for Disability Affairs
Iraq	Abir al-Jalabi	Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
	Ali Alhillo	Assistant Deputy Head of Commission	Commission for the Care of Persons with Disabilities and Special Needs, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Jordan	Muhannad Alazzeah	Secretary-General	Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
	Razan al-Kurdi	Director of Independent Living	
Kuwait	Zainab Alenezi	Career Services Supervisor - Career Follow-up	Public Authority for Disability Affairs
Lebanon	Hiyam Saqr	Acting Head of the Department of Disabled Affairs	Ministry of Social Affairs
Libya	Bashir al-Fitouri	Disability Adviser	Ministry of Social Affairs
Mauritania	Abdullah Adiakiti	Legal Adviser	Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family
	Alioun Haidara Muhammed Lahbib	Director of Persons with Disabilities	
Morocco	Ahmed Sheikhi	Director of Prevention, Accessibility and Assistance Division	Ministry of Solidarity, Social Inclusion and Family
	Aziz Azerbi	Director of the Prevention and Awareness Department	
Oman	Hammoud bin Mirdad bin Hammoud al-Shabibi	Director-General; Directorate General for Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Social Development
	Mohammed Hamad Mubarak al-Habsi	Head of the Employment Follow-up Department	
State of Palestine	Ajaj Ajaj	Director of the Department of Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Social Development
Qatar	Laalei Abu Alfain	Executive Director of Shafallah Center	Qatar Social Work
Saudi Arabia	Hisham al-Haidari	Executive Director	Authority for the Care of Persons with Disabilities
Somalia	Mohammed Nadif	Disability Focal Point and Advisor to the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
Sudan	Rehab Mustafa	Secretary-General	National Council for Persons with Disabilities

Country	Name	Professional titles	Ministry/organization
Syrian Arab Republic	Roula Alaghbar	Directorate of Planning and International Cooperation	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
Tunisia	Raja bin Brahim	Director of Solidarity and Social Development	Ministry of Social Affairs
	Walid bin Belqasim Al Qasimi	Assistant Director of the General Directorate for Social Advancement	
United Arab Emirates	Mariam Alblooshi	Psychologist - People of Determination Care and Rehabilitation Department	Ministry of Community Development
Yemen	Aziza Noman	Public Relations Director	National Fund for Persons with Disabilities
