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

The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED) was set up in September 2016 at the request of Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (ESCWA) Committee on Social Development to support the member States in the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level. The IGED meetings are informed by and build on the normative work of the subprogramme, which is closely coordinating with subprogramme 5 (Statistics) and subprogramme 6 (ESCWA Centre for Women) to harness the multi-disciplinary nature of ESCWA to address multisectoral complexities of disability policy.

The current document provides a review of the activities undertaken by the IGED during this reporting cycle. Members of the Committee are invited to take note of and comment on the progress achieved since the eleventh session of the Committee on Social Development.

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Introduction

*“The relevance of disability in the understanding of deprivation in the world is often underestimated, and this can be one of the most important arguments for paying attention to the capability perspective. People with physical or mental disability are not only among the most deprived human beings in the world, they are also, frequently enough, the most neglected.”**

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*

1. Persons with disabilities in the Arab region are one of the most marginalized and excluded population groups. They are often not visible in public life, as social and physical environments remain inaccessible to them, and their levels of educational attainment and employment are generally much lower than those of persons without disabilities. This situation is perpetuated and aggravated by environmental and social barriers, discriminatory attitudes and inaccessible facilities. Women and girls with disabilities, especially those in rural areas, are particularly vulnerable. In humanitarian crises and situations of armed conflict, the number of persons with disabilities increases while their access to assistance, services and livelihoods becomes more limited. They also often face heightened protection concerns due to the breakdown of community structures and social cohesion.

2. Although the situation of persons with disabilities in the region remains difficult, many ESCWA member States have made progressive steps towards greater inclusivity. All member countries have signed or ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), possess enabling legal and policy frameworks, best practices and success stories of empowering persons with disabilities or have examples of public-private cooperation in this sphere. Arab governments also endorsed the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), subscribing to the aspiration of leaving no one behind. SDG Goal 10.2 explicitly refers to “the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status”.

I. POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

3. Acknowledging the need for increased cooperation and exchange of experiences on disability issues in the Arab region, at its tenth session in 2015, the Committee on Social Development (CSD) recommended the formation of an “intersessional expert group under the Social Development Committee tasked with following up on issues pertinent to persons with disabilities in the period between Committee sessions”. As a result of this recommendation, ESCWA supported the establishment of an intergovernmental network of experts on disability policy from its member States, the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED). Seventeen out of 18 ESCWA member States have nominated focal points, primarily heads of offices or specialized bodies in charge of disability affairs for their governments.

4. Thus far, the group has met officially three times, in Beirut (September 2016), Amman (July 2017) and Riyadh (May 2018), in addition to a number of expert group meetings and trainings on specialized topics at least once or twice per year. The group has also been closely involved in SDD’s normative work, contributing to regional reports on social protection for persons with disabilities, in statistical analysis and in research on persons with disabilities living in institutions.

5. Acknowledging deficits in the United Nations approach to disability inclusion, the Secretary-General of the United Nations launched the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy in June 2019. This strategy and the related accountability framework obliges all United Nations entities and agencies to increase disability inclusion in their respective global, regional and country programmes.

* Amartya K. Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London, Allen Lane, 2009) p. 258.

II. ACTIVITIES OF THE IGED

6. In the reporting period 2017 to 2019, the IGED conducted two annual meetings. In addition, IGED members participated in six additional meetings on specialized topics. Each of these meetings facilitated the presentation of a specific country's progress as well as the exchange of experience across countries of the region, which are among the main priorities of the network.

7. The activities in the past two years include the following meetings:

1. *Expert group meeting on the ESCWA publication "Disability in the Arab Region 2017: Strengthening Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities"*
(Beirut, 11-12 April 2017)

8. The IGED met to discuss and review the information contained in the draft publication entitled "Disability in the Arab region 2017: Strengthening Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities", with a view to improving the coverage and the quality as well as seek participants' expertise on the accuracy of its content as well as its structure and purpose. ESCWA disability focal points from Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Qatar, the Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen attended the event. The meeting also included representatives from United Nations and international agencies, organizations for persons with disabilities and international and regional experts in disability.

9. The meeting focused on three subject areas covered in the report: (a) how the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development supports persons with disabilities and intersects with the CRPD; (b) the situation of persons with disabilities in the Arab region as it relates to data collection on disability; and (c) disability-inclusive social protection in the Arab region. Participants looked at different kinds of social protection schemes in the Arab region, legal and institutional frameworks, eligibility and targeting and key elements of disability-inclusive social protection. They also discussed some of the challenges related implementing social protection programmes for persons with disabilities in Arab countries. The feedback received during the EGM was incorporated into the final version of the publication.

2. *Second meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED), with a focus on the 2030 Agenda*
(Amman, 3-5 July 2017)

10. This second meeting of the IGED covered the following topics: (a) updates from member States regarding their national disability policies; (b) updates on the disability-related work and research of ESCWA; and (c) discussions on how to effectively translate disability laws into administrative practice, and what this means for government institutions and disability councils. Disability focal points from the following countries attended the meeting: Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen.

11. Special consideration was given to examples from Jordan, Malta and Belgium about how to fill the implementation gap. Jordan's new disability law was presented and discussed as an example of bridging the gap between legislation and implementation. Participants concluded that there is a need to educate judges on the rights of persons with disabilities when implementing disability laws. The need for high quality and comprehensive data about persons with disabilities was additionally emphasized.

3. *International Day of Persons with Disabilities*
(Beirut, 4 December 2017)

12. ESCWA hosted a roundtable event on the occasion of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, celebrated annually on 3 December. The aim of the roundtable was to engage policy makers and disability stakeholders in the region on the issue of labour market inclusion of persons with disabilities. The roundtable

gave participants the opportunity to share regional knowledge, identify policy gaps and find opportunities for advancement. During the event, a new social media campaign on disability in the Arab region was launched highlighting the necessity to move from charity to agency. Participants included government representatives responsible for labour and employment policies and IGED disability focal points from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. The meeting also included representatives from United Nations agencies, organizations for persons with disabilities and private sector companies.

13. The event contributed to the discussion on the overall objective of “leaving no one behind” and including all members of society into the development process under the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. Better inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market corresponds to Article 27 of the CRPD and Goal 8 of the SDGs.

4. *Workshop on the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in the Labour Market*
(Beirut, 5-6 December 2017)

14. ESCWA and the International Labour Organization (ILO) organized a training workshop for policymakers and disability stakeholders from Arab States on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the labour market. The workshop covered (a) how member States can develop an enabling environment, including laws and active labour market policies, and develop or activate quota policies; and (b) how public and private sector enterprises can provide reasonable accommodations which make it possible for people with disabilities to access decent work opportunities. Participants included government representatives responsible for labour and employment policies and IGED disability focal points from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. The meeting also included representatives from United Nations, organizations for persons with disabilities and private sector companies.

5. *Third meeting of the IGED*
(Riyadh, 2-3 May 2018)

15. The third meeting of the IGED covered the following topics: (a) updates from member States regarding their national disability policies; (b) updates on the disability-related work and research of ESCWA; (c) a presentation on Saudi Arabia’s experience with employment networks for persons with disabilities; and (d) shifting from the “medical model” to the “social model” in disability assessment using a rights-based approach, including the use of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF). The meeting included external experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank. Disability focal points from the following countries attended the meeting: Jordan, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

16. Participants reviewed examples from Brazil and Greece and gained an in-depth understanding of how the ICF can be a useful tool to standardize disability assessment processes based on individuals’ functioning and abilities, rather than only on their medical impairments. They also reconfirmed their wish that IGED meetings be held annually and expressed appreciation for the nature of IGED, which is to provide a safe space for countries to share good experiences as well as challenges among colleagues and experts.

6. *Expert group meeting on Persons with Disabilities Living in Institutions in Arab countries*
(Beirut, 28-29 August 2018)

17. The expert group meeting aimed to review the preliminary results of a study by ESCWA and the Centre for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University on persons with disabilities living in institutions in Arab countries. It discussed different aspects of institutionalization, including causes, services, government regulation and alternatives to institutions and identified challenges, opportunities and support needs towards implementing article 19 of the CRPD. Participants included members of the IGED and 12 representatives of national ministries and disability councils from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania,

Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen, together with international experts, organizations for persons with disabilities and members of civil society working on disability-related issues.

18. The main recommendations of the EGM were that countries should establish national databases of persons with disabilities in institutions; countries should consider holding national workshops to discuss issues related to institutions in more detail; countries should revisit national regulations of institutions, and to begin a process of closing institutions and transitioning to mobile and community-based services, in line with article 19; countries should expand alternative and community-based services for better inclusion of persons with disabilities in society to ensure that vulnerable people are not neglected; further discussion and learning are needed on the issue of mental health, psychosocial disabilities and intellectual disabilities, including health, education and social needs; and further research is required on issues related to psychosocial disabilities, discriminatory laws and the legal capacity of persons with disabilities.

19. The critical and constructive feedback provided in the EGM greatly supported improved quality of the final report, which will be published in 2019.

7. Workshop on establishing an Arab Disability Indicator Framework and improving data collection on persons with disabilities
(Cairo, 19-21 September 2018)

20. ESCWA Social Development and Statistics Divisions jointly held the first regional meeting bringing together statisticians and policymakers from Arab countries to discuss refining the collection of data on persons with disabilities. The aim was to start developing a Framework of Disability Indicators for the Arab region to be used for collecting and analyzing disability statistics. Participants also reviewed best practices for collecting data in accordance with methodologies developed by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics.

21. The meeting was attended by IGED members from thirteen countries in the Arab region (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, the State of Palestine, Qatar, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen) and by international experts and representatives of United Nations agencies, civil society and organizations for persons with disabilities.

22. The workshop helped achieve a common and improved understanding among the participants about the various technical issues and challenges of producing comparable and harmonized disability data. The workshop also benefitted from the user-producer dialogue to develop the Arab Disability Framework Indicator and related Metadata Handbook. It provided valuable inputs for the continued development of guidelines and training material addressing disability statistics for measuring and monitoring development indicators including the SDGs.

8. European Union-Arab High-level Meeting on Disability Rights
(24-25 April 2019, Valletta, Malta)

23. Malta hosted the first European Union-Arab High-level Meeting on Disability Rights on 24-25 April 2019 bringing together governments, civil society and experts on the rights of persons with disabilities from the European Union and the Arab region. The European Commission, ESCWA and League of Arab States were in attendance, as were the European Disability Forum and two leading civil society groups from the Arab region, the Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities and the Arab Forum for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

24. The initiative was an outcome of Malta's participation in both the European Commission's Disability High-level Group (DHLG) and the IGED. The meeting was organized to bridge the work of both entities, to enable further sharing of knowledge, and to build an enduring vehicle for future cooperation between the European Union and the Arab world in the disability rights field. The meeting included the creation of an

European Union-Arab Cooperation Forum on Disability Rights (the “Valletta Forum”) to be set up following the adoption of a Political Declaration (the “Valletta Declaration”) by representatives of signatory States and entities present, including the European Commission, ESCWA and the League of Arab States. The nine Arab countries that attended the meeting and adopted the Valletta Declaration were: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, the State of Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

25. The event marked the first occasion for an intensive interregional dialogue on challenges and opportunities in implementing the CRPD. All member States present signed the Valletta Declaration, showcasing the strong support and political will to increase cooperation on disability issues between the European and Arab regions.

III. SATISFACTION OF THE IGED

26. In May 2019, ESCWA conducted a satisfaction survey among members of the IGED. Sixteen countries responded to the survey, out of which five affirmed they were greatly satisfied, nine were satisfied, and two were somewhat satisfied. None of the countries stated that they were unsatisfied. ESCWA received a number of suggestions related to what topics of interest that the group would like to work on in the future, as well as suggestions for how the work of the group could be improved. ESCWA will take this feedback into consideration when organizing future meetings and workshops.

IV. FUTURE COOPERATION ENVISAGED

27. The next meeting of the IGED is scheduled to take place in the last quarter of 2019. The meeting theme and date have not yet been decided.

28. As outlined in the satisfaction survey, respondents to the satisfaction survey expressed the wish to continue with more in-depth discussion about (annex):

- Disability assessment procedures;
- Data and statistics;
- Social protection.

29. Furthermore, experts of the IGED expressed their interest to take the work of the group further towards achieving the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society by focusing on new thematic areas such as:

- Skill development, vocational training, and community-based rehabilitation (CBR);
- Integration and inclusiveness;
- Accessible ICTs;
- Political participation.

30. Experts concluded their responses by providing several suggestions for strengthening the communication and cooperation between individual members of the group, possibly through study visits and working groups.

31. These and other suggestions will be discussed in the upcoming IGED meeting.

32. In particular, the cooperation on statistical data will continue in close cooperation with ESCWA Statistics Division. The objectives are to (a) launch a proposed Arab Regional Disability Indicator Framework and develop an implementation plan, and (b) strengthen the users-producers dialogue, which was started in Cairo in September 2018.

Annex**RESPONSE MATRIX OF THE IGED SATISFACTION SURVEY****(a) Matrix of responses to the six main thematic areas of IGED**

	Bahrain	Egypt	Jordan	Kuwait	Iraq	Lebanon	Mauritania	Morocco	State of Palestine	Oman	Saudi Arabia	Sudan	Syrian Arab Republic	Tunisia	United Arab Emirates	Yemen	Total	Percentage
Disability assessment procedures	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	14	88
Social protection	X		X	X		X	X	X			X	X	X		X		10	63
Data and statistics		X	X		X		X			X		X	X	X			8	50
Employment			X			X	X	X			X		X				6	38
Government structures (Article 33 on National Implementation and Monitoring)			X			X	X		X			X			X		6	38
Institutionalization (Article 19 on Independent Living)			X			X				X					X		4	25

(b) Additional thematic areas


