



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

Conference on Transition towards Independent Living Within the Community for Persons with Disabilities 14-15 February 2023

Summary

ESCWA, in cooperation with Government of Malta and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities organized a regional conference on “Transition towards Independent Living within the Community for Persons with Disabilities” to explore policies and programmes that support countries in ensuring the right of independent living for persons with disabilities.

The conference featured discussions on overcoming challenges and opportunities to ensure this right along with presentations on national experiences and good practices from European and Arab countries. It also featured research papers from European and Arab countries that were selected following a call for papers on achieving independent living and inclusion within the community for persons with disabilities.

This conference is the first event under the “Arab-EU Research Network on Disability”. The Network brings together policymakers, academics, researchers and institutions and acts as an interregional platform for knowledge exchange and capacity-building that promotes academic and policy research to achieve greater social inclusion for persons with disabilities.

Over 100 people participated in the event, including stakeholders from both regions, such as policy makers, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), universities, researchers, and representatives from the public and private sector.

The presentations, speeches, and discussions all focused on the right of persons with disabilities to live independently and on the different ways the attainment of that right can be facilitated. Moreover, several successful experiences and practices from both the private and public sector in the region were shared, proving both the possibility and benefits of securing this right and affirming the centrality of securing the right to independent living to building societies that are inclusive of persons with disabilities.

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Introduction

The Arab-EU Research Network on Disability was founded in 2022 by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Government of Malta and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It acts as an inter-regional platform for knowledge exchange and capacity building. It aims to bring together academics, researchers and institutions from both Europe and the Arab region for the shared objective of pursuing research as a driver for change to ensure greater social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

This academic conference, the first one under this network, focused on the theme of independent living and being included in the community, a right confirmed in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which states that “States Parties to the present Convention recognize the equal right of all persons with disabilities to live in the community, with choices equal to others, and shall take effective and appropriate measures to facilitate full enjoyment by persons with disabilities of this right and their full inclusion and participation in the community”¹. This topic was chosen given the fact that the right to independent living for persons with disabilities is far from realized. A study by ESCWA on “Barriers to implementing Article 19: A study on the institutionalization of persons with disabilities in select Arab countries”² found that there is large knowledge gap on the status of residential institutions currently set up in the region. The study also found that “few of the institutions studied are providing the kind of care and services required to facilitate the integration and independent living of persons with disabilities in their communities. It also found that in many Arab states, families often turn to institutionalization due to a lack of alternative care options and the inaccessibility of many public spaces, services and facilities.”³

The conference was held in-person at the UN-House in Beirut, Lebanon on Tuesday and Wednesday 14-15 February 2023. Arabic, English, and Arabic sign language interpretation were available during the sessions. The conference was also available to attendees through Zoom and was live-streamed on YouTube.

The participants for this conference comprised of relevant stakeholders from both Europe and the Arab region, including policy makers, Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), universities, researchers, and representatives from the public and private sector. The conference provided key stakeholders with the opportunity to conduct several bilateral meetings on topics related to policy regarding persons with disabilities in their country. It is worth noting that several speakers in the conference discussed the recent earthquake that took place in Turkey and Syria and the concerns on the well-being of persons with disabilities that stem from it.

Opening

Dr. Rola Dashti, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), commenced the conference with a statement that highlighted the opportunities and benefits that societies in the Arab region miss out on by not being inclusive of persons with disabilities. She gave examples from the fields of employment and education citing some very concerning numbers that portray the low level of inclusion of persons with disabilities in the region. Dr. Dashti went on to stress the importance of fostering North-South cooperation, promoting the coordination of responses, and enhancing inter-regional knowledge exchange in the aims of improving the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Dr. Dashti ended

¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-19-living-independently-and-being-included-in-the-community.html>

² https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/page_attachments/barriers-implementing-article19-institutionalization-persons-disabilities-en_0.pdf

³ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-19-living-independently-and-being-included-in-the-community.html>

with assuring the commitment of ESCWA, along with its partners from Malta and the UN Special Rapporteur on disability to including people with disabilities in all development efforts as equal partners.

The Minister for Inclusion, Voluntary Organisations and Consumer Rights in Malta Hon. Julia Farrugia Portelli made her opening statement via video. The minister started off by expressing her disappointment that she could not attend in person. Minister Portelli went on to stress how the conference substantiates Malta's position as an enabler for the existence of synergies between Europe and the Arab region citing examples from the neutral country's long history of cooperation with countries in both Europe and the Arab region. Minister Portelli went on to discuss Malta's engagement in 2018-2019 with ESCWA, the EU commission, and countries from both regions which culminated in the EU-Arab High-Level Meeting on Disability Rights in April 2019. Minister Portelli expressed that this conference was "the first tangible expression" to the Valletta declaration on the UNCRPD. The minister ended her speech by stressing Malta's commitment to the declaration both on the domestic and inter-regional level.

For his statement, Dr. Gerard Quinn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, started off with a brief introduction of himself stressing his involvement with several organizations in the region as part of his work on disability issues. Dr. Quinn went on to stress the importance of regional action and inter-regional exchanges when it comes to tackling such issues. Dr. Quinn voiced the importance of the focus on young researchers, calling them "the policy entrepreneurs of the future". Dr. Quinn ended his speech by emphasizing the significance of the topic of the conference to the UNCRPD and thanked both ESCWA, Maltese Government, and the Ford Foundation for what he deemed a model for inter-regional efforts around the world.

The last opening statement was given by Ms. Saba Almubaslat, the Director of the Middle East and North Africa Office at Ford Foundation. Ms. Almubaslat started off by thanking Dr. Dashti for stressing that this was the time for action. Ms. Almubaslat affirmed the centrality of disability inclusion to Ford Foundation's principles and work. She touched on problems such as discrimination, stigma, and exclusion and observed them as barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities in the cultural, economic and political aspects of their societies. Ms. Almubaslat then explained that financing is required to bring about change, and that Ford Foundation has set funds aside to address the structural barriers and inequalities that people with disabilities face, thanking ESCWA for bringing about the suitable collaborators. Ms. Almubaslat ended by mentioning the earthquake the recently took place in Turkey and Syria, and stressed that inclusion efforts should include people who acquired disabilities in light of the earthquake.

The opening remarks were succeeded by a keynote speech given by Ms. Nadia Haddad, Disability Advocate and Expert, Co-Chair of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), and a member of the Executive Committee of the European Disability Forum (EDF) through Zoom. Ms. Haddad started her speech with a discussion on terminology, explaining that the correct definition of independent living coincides with the basic right to self-determination. Ms. Haddad stressed that independent living principles should be streamlined into all proposals and should be embedded as a legal right. Ms. Haddad then described the current situation with regards to independent living, following that up with considerations that decision-makers need to take into consideration citing 12 pillars that should be considered in any de-institutionalization plan.

First – Recommendations

- National, regional and international responders to the earthquake in Syria and Turkey need to take into account the needs of persons with disabilities in their emergency responses and humanitarian aid.
- Decision makers in both Arab and European countries should ensure the active involvement and participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes.

- Decision makers in both Arab and European countries need to develop clear plans for de-institutionalization.
- Deinstitutionalization should be led by persons with disabilities.
- Investments in new residential institutions should be seized, and plans should be set to transition from existing residential institutions to community-living solutions.
- Due attention must be paid to women, children and old persons with disabilities since they are more prone to facing discrimination, violence, and abuse in residential institutions.
- Representatives of national disability councils and OPDs in the Arab region recommend the revision of the official Arabic translation of the CRPD as inaccurate translation could result in misinterpretation and would ultimately hinder the move towards independent living.
- Morocco recommends further collaboration between ESCWA member states to strengthen regional work on Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) and expressed its willingness to host a regional conference on this in the coming year.
- The Arab-EU Network on Disability Research to continue to support disability research and host a second edition of the conference.

Second – Conference Sessions and Discussions

Session 1: Independent Living under the CRPD: challenges and opportunities in Europe and Arab region.

Dr. Nawaf Kabbara, President of the Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities, started the session by describing the severity of the disaster that persons with disabilities in the earthquake affected areas in Turkey and Syria are faced with. He stressed that humanitarian assistance to the affected areas did not take into account the needs of persons with disabilities and called upon donors to take those needs into account. Dr. Kabbara then expressed his delight over the fact that this conference was a serious step towards acquiring high quality research on disability in the region. He mentioned that his organization was collaborating with several universities to publish a disability journal. Dr. Kabbara then introduced the first speaker Dr. Tarek Nabulsi, Minister Plenipotentiary, Director of Development and Social Policies Department, League of Arab States.

On his part Dr. Nabulsi, started off by sharing his concern with Dr. Kabbara on the situation of persons with disabilities in the earthquake affected areas in Turkey and Syria. Dr. Nabulsi mentioned that the league of Arab States, in partnership with ESCWA, has been working on rolling out an Arab regional framework for disability inclusive responses in emergency, disaster and conflict settings. He then greeted the other panel members and thanked ESCWA for the conference. He also touched on a point made by Dr. Dashti on the high unemployment rates for persons with disabilities especially women with disabilities before explaining the “independent living initiative” under the second Arab decade for persons with disabilities and how it aims to help persons with disabilities in the field of employment. Dr. Nabulsi then spoke of expanding these efforts through harnessing the momentum resulting from the Valetta declaration in 2019 amongst other ways. Lastly, Dr. Nabulsi discussed the topic of disability assessment and classification thanking the team at ESCWA for their efforts and mentioning that the Arab decade for persons with disabilities is a topic that will be discussed in the next Arab summit.

Before welcoming Dr. Muhannad Al Azza, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Secretary General of the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Jordan, Dr. Kabbara mentioned that Jordan had requested that the UN should revise the translation of the CRPD to Arabic as it could be improved.

Dr. Al Azza started off by thanking the participants and ESCWA. Dr. Al Azza then moved on to explain the reasoning behind the call for de-institutionalization and how residential institutes contradict the spirit of the CRPD amongst other human rights treaties. Dr. Al Azza stressed the right of persons with disabilities to enjoy all the legal rights of any citizen. Dr. Al Azza also cited the UN committee on the CRPD's stance on institutionalization explaining that they clearly oppose it in a document outlining their guiding principles. He shed light on the importance of looking at all forms of institutionalization and not just a very specific form of institutes. Dr. Al Azza also recommended that persons with disabilities are involved in the decision making process for issues concerning them. He also highlighted the compounded level of discrimination that persons with disabilities that belong to other vulnerable groups such as children. Dr. Al Azza ended by recommending that disability and independent living in particular are mainstreamed in all forms of planning.

Following Dr. Al Azza's presentation, Ms. Sumaya Almajthoob , Associate Social Affairs Officer at ESCWA explained that ESCWA conducted a series of four sub-regional consultations with OPDs in the Arab region in preparation for the conference. The consultations included about 80 participants and resulted in a series of inputs and recommendations from OPDs to decision-makers and various stakeholders.

The session was followed by 10 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 2: Technology and inclusion

The moderator Ms. Samantha Pace Gasan, Commissioner for the Rights of Persons with Disability in Malta introduced the session, highlighting the importance of technology as a catalyst for the process of transitioning to independent living for persons with disabilities.

Ms. Laura Alčiauskaitė, researcher at the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), began her presentation with a quick overview of assistive technologies. She then went on to describe the characteristics of the respondents to the survey that she conducted for her study. Ms. Alčiauskaitė then proceeded to list the types of technologies that her respondents were invited to rate. She then explained the categories of assistive technologies that persons with disabilities were keenest on using citing wearables as the category that scored the highest "use intention" amongst her respondents. Ms. Alčiauskaitė ended her presentation by clarifying some disability type specific preferences and giving a few recommendations.

For her presentation, Ms. Hanan Zaafarani, PhD researcher at Cadi Ayyad University in Morocco, started off with an overview of the situation for her study's group of interest, students with visual impairments in Cadi Ayyad University in Morocco. Ms. Zaafarani explained that her study aimed to explore the extent to which students with visual impairments in the university have access to education through various technological solutions. She found that the university's transition to more online and electronic tools and modes of learning post-COVID19 was helpful, but more measures can still be adopted. This includes the provision of accessible assistive technology and improving digital accessibility of the university's environment and curriculum.

The session was followed by 10 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 3: Country case studies and good practices

The moderator of the session, Dr. Alaa Sebeh, Regional Advisor on Disability at ESCWA commenced the session by emphasizing the importance of conferences such as this one to exchange experiences and collaboration mechanisms. Dr. Sebeh proceeded to shed the light on what is happening in Syria and Turkey after the earthquake, focusing on the situation faced by persons with disabilities in light of the disaster.

Dr. Al Azza began presenting Jordan's case study highlighting the national strategic plan for residential institutions, the role of residential institutions, and the plan to close them. He emphasized that a strategic decision was taken in 2019 to seize the practice of institutionalization and to transform existing residential institutions into inclusive ones within 10 years. Dr. Al Azza noted that one of the most important steps taken was the inclusion of a provision in the law that prohibits the establishment of any new residential institutions for persons with disabilities, despite the general opposition to that article. Another step that Dr. Al Azza stressed was the exchange of experiences with other countries and the partnership of several organizations that worked to transition away residential institutions to community-based solutions, an example of which is the Lumos Organization. He mentioned that two of the most important elements of the success of this experiment were that it was applied first to the government sector to promote the government's dedication to it. Secondly, the fact that there has been training of staff and personnel, preparation of transitional plans and existing alternatives are effective citing the experience of alternative or foster families as an example.

H.E Ms. Awatif Hayar, Minister of Solidarity, Social Integration and Family in Morocco made a statement through Zoom. Minister Hayar affirmed that Morocco is committed to promoting the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities. The minister cited the initiative in to ratify the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in April 2009, and that Morocco's constitution stipulates combating all forms of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of disability. She added that the Morocco's constitution affirms in Chapter 34 the obligation of the authorities to activate special programs for persons with disabilities so that they can enjoy the rights and freedoms recognized for all. She clarified that a national mechanism for the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities affiliated with the Supreme Council for Human Rights was also set up, and was considered an independent mechanism. The Minister concluded by stating that Morocco has also adopted a new development program to achieve inclusive and sustainable development by building an inclusive Morocco that provides opportunities and protection for all.

For his presentation on Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) in Morocco and in the Arab Region, Mr. Ahmed Haoute, Coordinator of Morocco's CBR/CBID Network, began presenting the experience of Morocco, starting from the establishment of the National Network for Community Rehabilitation. Mr. Haoute touched on the establishment of local associations to work on plans for integration mechanisms, to ensure continuity of management, and to search for local financial resources to provide services and rehabilitation, and to open inclusive education departments. Mr. Haoute added that there are national and international references that gave the national network a strong presence. Mr. Haoute explained that it is not possible to work on plans to integrate people with disabilities into society without achieving the goals of sustainable development. He stressed on the importance of a strategic partnership with the public sector. Finally, he emphasized that the community rehabilitation program is a program that guarantees the implementation of the CRPD, and that it is a program that contributes to community development and equal opportunities. Mr. Haoute encouraged all Arab countries to embrace this program to enhance the status of persons with disabilities in society and stated that Morocco will hold the first regional Arab conference of the Arab Network on CBID.

The last presentation in this session was given by Dr. Alistair De Gaetano, Administrator at the Directorate for Disability Issues in the Ministry of Inclusion, Voluntary Organizations and Consumer Rights of Malta. Dr. Alistair began by defining the concept of independent living for persons with disabilities and raising the importance of what is stipulated in Article 19 of the CRPD. He discussed how the effort made by countries on adopting laws and the implementation of those laws is important to build a foundation to work on, but it is not sufficient without ensuring the right for self-determination and choice. Dr. Alistair highlighted the importance of involving persons with disabilities in decision-making. He then explained the national strategy for people with disabilities in Malta and its most significant goals, starting with de-institutionalization efforts. He concluded his speech by emphasizing the importance of inclusion, freedom, and self-determination for persons with disabilities.

The session was followed by 20 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 4: Approaches to independent living in Europe

The moderator Ms. Sylvana Lakkis, President of the Arab Forum for Persons with Disabilities, Introduced the session and the research authors Mr. Lazar Stefanović and Mr. Meelis Joost.

Mr. Stefanović began his presentation by recalling that the European Union is the only regional organization that has acceded to a UN human rights treaty. Mr. Stefanović asked a question, which was also the research question of his paper, "How does the CRPD impact EU legislations and how do EU institutions interpret and apply the CRPD in light of the right to live independently and being included in the community?" He talked about the tension between the international conventions and the laws and actions of the European Union, which include the existence of a large number of shelter institutions and significant funds being spent on them due to dubious interpretations of the CRPD. Mr. Stefanović explained that in his analytical research he relied on the articles of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Articles 5, 19 and 23. He recalled that the convention committee stipulated that all concerned parties must guarantee the right to choose, guarantee family care for children with disabilities, and not admit them to residential institutions for long period of time.

For his presentation titled "A public-private partnership approach for accessible and affordable independent living in Estonia", Mr. Meelis Joost started by talking about Estonia's current situation in the context of working on independent living in the community. He explained how the situation could be improved through setting child support policies as a priority and after that comes the services for adults. Mr. Joost presented pictures and plans for some of the support centers that were rehabilitated in Estonia and how they are accessible to help people with disabilities live independently. He concluded by stressing that Estonia is preparing an assessment of the financial impact of making services accessible and how savings can be used to support other persons with disabilities.

The session was followed by 20 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 5: Independent living for children and students

The moderator Dr. Heba Kotb, Associate Professor of Practice Psychology at American University of Cairo the session and the research authors Mr. Rados Keravica and Ms. Ikhlas Al Sawaf.

Titled the "Pathologisation" of disabled childhood as an impediment to independent living," Mr. Keravica began his presentation by giving a social-relational definition of disability, describing it as the "product of the social relationships between those with and those without impairments in society". He stressed the point that if persons with disabilities are able to experience independent living from a young age then they are afforded similar opportunities to develop their own life course and personal networks like everyone else. Mr. Keravica went on to highlight the prevalence of the right of children, including children with disabilities, to express their views in both the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the CRPD stressing that the capacity to express views was not stated as a qualifier in the CRPD. He then explained his research methodology after which he shared insights that he had gathered from the interviews he conducted as part of his research. Mr. Keravica shed the light on medical intervention and repetitive surgeries that are sometimes not beneficial to persons with disabilities highlighting that they are sometimes done without taking their opinions into consideration.

In her presentation titled "A pilot study: The effectiveness of a proposed functional curriculum in giving female students with moderate intellectual disabilities functional and life skills in Saudi Arabia," Ms. Ikhlas Al Sawaf talked about the research on the effectiveness of functional curriculums in training students with

intellectual disabilities as a means to achieve independent living. Ms. Al Sawaf explained that the aim of this curriculum is to aid students with intellectual disabilities on their journey to be self-reliant thereby increasing their participation in society and ensure their right to self-determination. Ms. Al Sawaf defined the concept of the functional curriculum as an appropriate curriculum for students' actual and functional ages and useful for their daily lives, and that this curriculum ranges from easy to difficult according to different ages. Ms. Al Sawaf concluded by presenting experiences of students with disabilities as they are being trained on skills for independent living.

The session was followed by 20 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 6: Transition after university and finding work.

The moderator Mr. Ajaj Ajaj, General Director of Persons with Disabilities Directorate at the Ministry of Social Development in Palestine introduced the session, and the research authors Ms. Aida Ramadan and Ms. Rahma Al Kalbani.

For her Presentation titled “Does Disability Affect Labor Market Outcomes? Application of the case of Egypt”, Ms. Ramadan tackled a detailed profile of people with disability in Egypt according to levels of severity, the most prevalent types, and patterns of disability by socio-economic factors. Moreover, she explained how her study assesses the extent to which disability is associated with a lower probability of labor force participation and employment in Egypt. She found that having a disability decreases the odds of participating in the labor force by 13%, and that women with disabilities face a double barrier. Ms. Ramadan noted that a sizable part of the Egyptian labor force is under-utilized, and there is a disability-based inequality in work opportunities. She recommended a series of measures to mitigate this such as better enforcement of laws and programs, greater accessibility, inclusive education and raising awareness, among others.

In her presentation titled “Post-University Life and Independent Living: A case study of Persons with Disabilities in the Sultanate of Oman.” Ms. Rahma al Kalbani started off with a historical overview of the Sultanate of Oman in terms of the country’s approach towards the rights of persons with disabilities. Following that Ms. Kalbani clarified the methodology for her study aims to measure the extent to which the concept of independent living has been realized by persons with disabilities living in Omani society. She recommended the inclusion of persons with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities in decision-making processes. She also recommended increasing investments to fill gaps in data and research on persons with disabilities in Oman.

Mr. Ajaj then introduced the speakers from Qatar Foundation Ms. Hanieh Khataee, Director of Strategy and Impact and Ms. Shaikha Al Wadaani, Impact Analyst. Ms. Khataee started off with an overview of the work of Qatar Foundation followed by a description of the work of “Education City”, A multi-faceted education hub centered on enriching learning. It also works on adapting community offerings to ensure inclusion of people with disabilities. She then described what Qatar Foundation did to make the FIFA world cup in Qatar the most accessible world cup to date. Following that Ms. Al Wadaani shared the key findings of an impact analysis that she conducted on “Education City Stadium’s Sensory Room” an accessible room dedicated to persons with certain types of disabilities. The analysis found great satisfaction levels by attendees of the World Cup. The lessons learned from this experience are being mainstreamed within Qatar Foundation within its various programs and facilities. These lessons can also be applied worldwide in future World Cups and sports tournaments.

The session was followed by 20 minutes of discussion with the participants.

Session 7: Workshop on Future Prospects of Young Researchers, and Bridging Research and Policymaking for Disability Inclusion

Ms. Fathia AbdelFadil, Social Affairs Officer at ESCWA, introduced the main speaker of the session; Dr. Anne-Marie Callus, Associate Professor at the University of Malta. Her presentation was titled “Disability Research for Early Career Researcher”. The workshop started off with tips on how to apply the social model of disability to research. The workshop then touched on concepts such as the social-relational perspective on research and discussed whose perspectives count the most in disability research. Dr. Callus then discussed the role of persons with disabilities in research, and gave tips on writing and disseminating disability research. The workshop was followed by a discussion with the participants on possible topics of interest for disability research.

Third – Concluding remarks

Dr. Alaa Sebeh, Regional Advisor on disability at ESCWA started his remarks by highlighting that this was the first regional conference that brought together Arab and European countries to present research and policies to ensure the right to independent living for persons with disabilities. Dr. Sebeh went on to explain that despite the fact that all countries in the region have either signed or ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, it is still not translated into enforceable policies and laws. Dr. Sebeh reminded the participants of how the discussions that were held showed how independent living is not only a right of persons with disabilities, but also necessary to prevent the marginalization in education, employment, political and social life. He mentioned the examples of promising experiments to achieve independent living and de-institutionalization in Jordan, Malta and Morocco. He concluded by affirming that ESCWA looks forward to building on the momentum generated by the conference and continuing the work to ensure inclusive societies for all.

Dr. Gerard Quinn started off his closing statement by reminding the audience that the Valetta Declaration and process focused on research and knowledge to aid the process of changing, informing, and influencing policy. He stressed the important link between independent living and economic empowerment, the role of family, technology making change possible, and the need for immediate and effective humanitarian relief. Dr. Quinn then mentioned that the UNCRPD has a specific article on disasters and emergencies. He concluded his statement by thanking ESCWA, the Government of Malta, and the Ford Foundation for believing in the mission of the Network, and for providing platforms to support researchers. .

For his closing statement, Dr. Alistair De Gaetano discussed the importance of having more people with disabilities involved in conferences and how research is important. Dr. De Gaetano also highlighted the need for persons with disabilities to be included in decision making. He stressed the importance of working with persons with disabilities as opposed to working for them. Dr. De Gaetano explained the importance of a paradigm shift in order to fulfill the obligation under Article 19 of the CRPD. He concluded by discussing the importance of following up research with tangible initiatives in order to bring about change.

Fourth – Agenda

Day (1)	
9:00- 9:30	<i>Registration</i>
Conference on “Transition towards Independent Living within the Community”	
9:30 – 10:20	<p>Opening remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dr. Rola Dashti, Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of UN-ESCWA - Hon. Julia Farrugia Portelli, Minister for Inclusion, Voluntary Organisations and Consumer Rights, Malta - Dr. Gerard Quinn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - Ms. Saba Almubaslat, Director, Middle East and North Africa Office, Ford Foundation
10:20 – 10:30	<p>Keynote speech “Independent Living "IS" Living in the Community”, Ms. Nadia Haddad, Disability Advocate and Expert, Co-Chair of the European Network on Independent Living (ENIL), and a member of the Executive Committee of the European Disability Forum (EDF).</p>
10:30 – 11:10	<p>Session 1: Independent Living under the CRPD: challenges and opportunities in Europe and Arab region</p> <p>Moderator: Dr. Nawaf Kabbara, President of the Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mr. Eamon Gilmore, EU Special Representative for Human Rights (video message) - Dr. Tarek El Nabulsi, Minister Plenipotentiary, Director of Development and Social Policies Department, League of Arab States - “UN Committee on Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ Perspective on Independent Living,” Dr. Muhannad Al Azzeh, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Secretary General of the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Jordan - “Outcomes of ESCWA’s Sub-Regional Consultations with OPDs on Independent Living,” Sumaya Almajthoob, Associate Social Affairs Officer, ESCWA <p><i>Discussion Q&A</i></p>
11:10 – 11:20	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:20 – 12:20	<p>Session 2: Technology and inclusion</p> <p>Moderator and Discussant: Ms. Samantha Pace Gasan, Commissioner for the Rights of Persons with Disability, Malta</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Views of persons with disabilities on the future of assistive technologies: would they help them to become more independent?” Ms. Laura Alčiauskaitė (10 min) - Discussant (5 min)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Access to knowledge through digital inclusion; the case of students with visual disabilities in Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco” Ms. Hanan Zaafrani (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) <p><i>Discussion Q&A (30 min)</i></p>
12:20 – 13:40	<p>Session 3: Country case studies and good practices</p> <p>Moderator: Dr. Alaa Sebeh, Regional Adviser on Disability, ESCWA</p> <p><i>Ministerial statements:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Excellency Ms. Awatif Hayar, Minister of Solidarity, Social Integration and Family of Morocco <p><i>Country presentations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “The Experience of Jordan in Independent Living,” Dr. Muhannad Al Azzeh, Secretary General of the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Jordan - “Community Based Inclusive Development (CBID) in Morocco and in the Arab Region,” Mr. Ahmed Haoute, Coordinator of Morocco’s CBR/CBID Network - “Opportunities and challenges of independent living in Europe: Case study of Malta,” Dr. Alistair De Gaetano, Administrator at the Directorate for Disability Issues in the Ministry of Inclusion, Voluntary Organizations and Consumer Rights of the Republic of Malta <p><i>Discussion Q&A</i></p>
13:40 – 14:30	<i>Lunch</i>
14:30 – 15:30	<p>Session 4: Approaches to independent living in Europe</p> <p>Moderator and Discussant: Ms. Sylvana Lakkis, President of the Arab Forum for Persons with Disabilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “The commitment of the European Union to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the right to independent living within the community”, Mr. Lazar Stefanović (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) - “A public-private partnership approach for accessible and affordable independent living in Estonia”, Mr. Meelis Joost (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) <p><i>Discussion Q&A (30 min)</i></p>
Day (2)	
9:30 – 9:40	<i>Recap of main outcomes of day 1</i>
9:40 – 10:40	<p>Session 5: Independent living for children and students</p> <p>Moderator and Discussant: Dr. Heba Kotb, Associate Professor of Practice Psychology, American University of Cairo</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Pathologisation of disabled childhood as an impediment to independent living” Mr. Radoš Keravica (10 min) - Discussant (5 min)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “A pilot study: The effectiveness of a proposed functional curriculum in giving female students with moderate intellectual disabilities functional/life skills in Saudi Arabia” Ms. Ikhlas Sawaf (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) <p><i>Discussion Q&A (30 min)</i></p>
10:40 – 11:00	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:00 – 12:00	<p>Session 6: Transition after university and finding work</p> <p>Moderator: Mr. Ajaj Ajaj General Director of Persons with Disabilities Directorate at the Ministry of Social Development in Palestine</p> <p>Discussant: Ms. Busaina Al Atari, National consultant on disability inclusion at the Ministry of Social Development in State of Palestine</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Does disability affect labour market outcomes? Application of the case of Egypt” Aida Ramadan, Racha Ramadan (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) - “Life after university and independent living: Case study of persons with disabilities in Oman” Rahma Kalbaniah (10 min) - Discussant (5 min) <p><i>Discussion Q&A (30 min)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intervention by Qatar Foundation: “Making Education City inclusive of persons with disabilities using the lessons learned from hosting the World Cup” (5-7 min)
12:00 – 13:00	<p>Session 7: Workshop on Future Prospects of Young Researchers, and Bridging Research and Policymaking for Disability Inclusion</p> <p>Moderator: Dr. Anne-Marie Callus, Associate Professor, University of Malta</p>
13:00 – 13:15	<p>Concluding remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dr. Alaa Sebeh, Regional Adviser on Disability, ESCWA (5 minutes) - Dr. Gerard Quinn, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (5 minutes) - Dr. Alistair De Gaetano, Administrator at the Directorate for Disability Issues in the Ministry of Inclusion, Voluntary Organizations and Consumer Rights of the Republic of Malta (5 minutes)
13:15 – 14:15	<i>Lunch</i>

Fifth – List of Participants

The conference was attended in-person by 90 people in addition to approximately 119 attendees through Zoom. Below is the list of people who attended in-person:

#	Name	Position	Institution
1	Mariella Aguis	Executive Secretary	National Alliance for Rare Diseases Support - Malta
2	Khaled Mohamad Al Raqibi	President	Libyan Paralympic Committee
3	Fadel Al Hamidi	Focal point	Fund for the Care and Rehabilitation of the Disabled - Yemen
4	Hanane Zaafarani	PhD researcher majoring in Sociology	Cadi Ayyad University, Morocco
5	Rihab Mustafa KhalafAllah Abdul Qader	Secretary General	National Council for Persons with Disabilities - Sudan
6	Ahmed Haoute	Coordinator	Moroccan Network of CBR/CBID
7	Busaina Atari	National Consultant	Ministry of Social Development - Palestine
8	Michelle Muscat	Founder and President	National Alliance for Rare Diseases Support - Malta
9	Yasmine Saad Matar	Faculty of Education, Special Education Department. Lecturer in Mental Health	6th of October University
10	Jamal Mansour	Undersecretary	Ministry of Social Development - Sudan
11	Layla Al Faitouri Badda	Member of Libyan Paralympic Committee	Libyan Paralympic Committee
12	Rados Keravica	Board Member / Teaching Fellow	ENIL / University of leeds
13	Miroslava Zarkov	Personal Assistant	University of Leeds
14	Gerard Quinn	UN-Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	United Nations
15	Lina Karout	Editor-in-Chief of linanews.org	Linanews.org
16	Alioune Haidara Mohamad Lhibib	Head of Disability Department	Ministry of Social Work, Childhood and Family - Mauritania
17	Gamarelanbia Amara	Psychiarist, Researcher	Embassy of Sudan in Beirut
18	Raluca Raduta	Programme Coordinator	EU Delegation to Lebanon
19	Khaled Hanafi Jomaa	Director of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities	National Council for Persons with Disabilities
20	Walid Shawqi Abdul Raof Al Tawani	Public Relations Officer	National Council for Persons with Disabilities
21	Heba Kotb	Associate Professor of Practice (Psychology)	The American University in Cairo
22	Abdelmalek Ouramadane	Chargé d'Affaires a.i. of the Embassy of Algeria	Embassy of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria in Beirut
23	Mourad Benamzal	Director General	Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security - Algeria
24	Shirine Al Shahawi	Advisor	Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt in Beirut

25	M'hamed Grine	Ambassador of the Kingdom of Morocco in Lebanon	Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco in Lebanon
26	Laura Alčiauskaitė	Project Coordinator/ Researcher	ENIL (European Network on Independent Living)
27	Paola Candita	Personal Assistant	ENIL (European Network on Independent Living)
28	Ghadeer AlHaris	Assistant to the Secretary General	Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
29	Mohannad Alazza	Secretary General	Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
30	Fatima Yousef AlKawari	Section Head of Assistive Technology	Qatar University
31	Haya Ahmad AlKawari	Section Head for Accomodaion and Community Outreach	Qatar University
32	Grace Khawam	Lecturer	American University of Beirut
33	Hanna Khoury	Doctor	Plurimedec Pharmacy
34	Nada Assouad	Director - Business Development	KAYSAS S TRANSAS S.A.L
35	Alena Morávková	Deputy Head of Mission & Consul	Embassy of Slovak Republic
36	Bashir ElFaitouri	Consultant for Disability Affairs at the Ministry of Social Affairs, Libya	Ministry of Social Affairs, Libya
37	Mohammed Bashir Alfituri	Personal Assistant	Ministry of Social Affairs, Libya
38	Carlos Gitto	Ambassador of Uruguay	Embassy of Uruguay in Beirut
39	Ahmad Malas	Humanity and management crisis unit	Soboul Al Salam Relief Team
40	Moussa Charafeddine	President	Friends of the Disabled Association
41	Jahda Abu Khalil	Director General of the Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities	Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities
42	Hanieh Khataee	Director, Strategy and Impact	Qatar Foundation
43	Shaikha Marzouq Al-Wadaani	Impact Analyst	Qatar Foundation
44	Lazar Stefanovic	Researcher	University of Vienna
45	Ayman Tantawi	Executive Director	Kayan Association for Persons with Disabilities
46	Lea Francis	Humanitarian Program Officer	Australian Embassy in Beirut
47	Mohamad Rashid Al Miari	President of the Palestinian Federation for Persons with Disabilities	Palestinian Federation for Persons with Disabilities
48	Ibrahim Abdulla	Seniors and Disability Adviser at the International Rescue Committee (IRC).	Inernational Rescue Committee (IRC)
49	Zakariyaa Fasaal	Counselor of multilateral relations at the Embassy of the Kngdom of Morocco	Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco in Lebanon
50	Salem Jomaa Abdul Saheb	Director General of the Administrative, Financial and Legal Department	Authority for the Care of People with Disabilities and Special Needs

51	Fadia Farah	President	Lebanese Association for Self Advocacy-LASA
52	Ali Maatouk	Research Assistant	American University of Beirut
53	Waheb Al Saadi	Senior Political Officer	British Embassy- Muscat
54	Rahma Said Al Kalbani	Head of Students with Disabilities	Sultan Qaboos University
55	Raymond Bechara	Honorary Consul General for Malta in Lebanon	Honorary Consulate of Malta
56	Aida Husseiny	Reporter	Ray Al Kass Magazine
57	Mohamad Abdul Rahman Nadif	Member of Parliament	Ministry of Social Affairs in Somalia
58	Basma Antar		Embassy of Palestine in Lebanon
59	Mohamed Ali Darwish	Personal Assistant	
60	Hissa Siwan Al Shamri	Head of the Technical Guidance Department at the Persons with Disability Care Centers Department	Public Authority for People with Disabilities
61	Khalifa Al-Shurayda	Director of the Directorate of Shelter Alternatives and Affairs of Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Social Development - Jordan
62	Fadi El Halabi	Executive Director	Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN)
63	Yaser Al Ahmad	Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Labor	The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor in Syria
64	Maher Al Ahmad	Deputy Director of Information Systems	Ministry of Communications and Information Technology
65	Al Bashir Mostafa KhalafAllah Abdel Qader	Personal Assistant	National Council for Persons with Disabilities - Sudan
66	Ajaj Ajaj	Director of the Persons with Disabilities Directorate	Ministry of Social Development - Palestine
67	Abir Mahmoud Ajaj	Personal assistant	Ministry of Social Development - Palestine
68	Murad Bin Amzal	Director General for the Protection and Promotion of Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Labor, Employment and Social Security - Algeria
69	Christine Sant	Senior Executive	Aġenzija Sapport, Malta
70	Alistair Saviour De Gaetano	Administrator – Directorate for Disability Issues (DDI)	MINISTRY FOR INCLUSION, VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS AND CONSUMER RIGHTS - Malta
71	Anne-Marie Callus	Associate Professor	University of Malta
72	Tarek Nabulsi	Director of Development and Social Policies Department	League of Arab States
73	Nawaf Kabbara	President	Arab Organization for Persons with Disabilities

74	Sylvana Lakkis	President	Arab Forum for Persons with Disabilities
75	Samantha Pace Gasan	Commissioner for the Rights of Persons with Disability	Malta's Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD)
76	Rhoda Garland	Executive Director at the Commission	Malta's Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD)
77	Saba Almubaslat	Director, Middle East and North Africa Office	Ford Foundation
78	Meelis joost	President	Estonian Chamber of People with Disabilities
79	Ikhlas Sawaf	Director of the Special Education Department	Education Department of Jeddah Governorate, Saudi Arabia
80	Aida Ramadan	Teaching Assistant- Faculty of Economics and Political Science	University of Cairo
81	Mehrinaz El Awady	Leader of the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster	ESCWA
82	Lana El Skafi	Research Assistant	ESCWA
83	Cristina Al Armani	Intern	ESCWA
84	Karen Sweid	Research Assistant	ESCWA
85	Nadine Chalak	Research Assistant	ESCWA
86	Sumaya Almajthoob	Associate Social Affairs Officer	ESCWA
87	Alaa Sebeh	Regional Adviser on Disability	ESCWA
88	Fathia Abdelfadil	Social Affairs Officer	ESCWA
89	Sara Kaikati	Team Assistant	ESCWA
90	Nizar El Kotob	Research Assistant	ESCWA

Sixth – Feedback Analysis

ESCWA conducted an evaluation following the conference. The following section summarizes the responses of the 84 respondents that filled out the evaluation form.

When asked if they thought that the topic of the conference was important and relevant all respondent agreed, with 72.6% strongly agreeing and 27.4% selecting agree (Figure 1). Moreover, 60.7% of respondents agreed that the conference helped them better understand challenges and proposed solutions for Arab and European countries to ensure the right to independent living within the community with the remaining 39.3% of respondents selecting strongly agree (Figure 2).

I think that the conference's topic is important and relevant
أعتقد بأن موضوع المؤتمر مهم وذو صلة بعملتي

84 responses

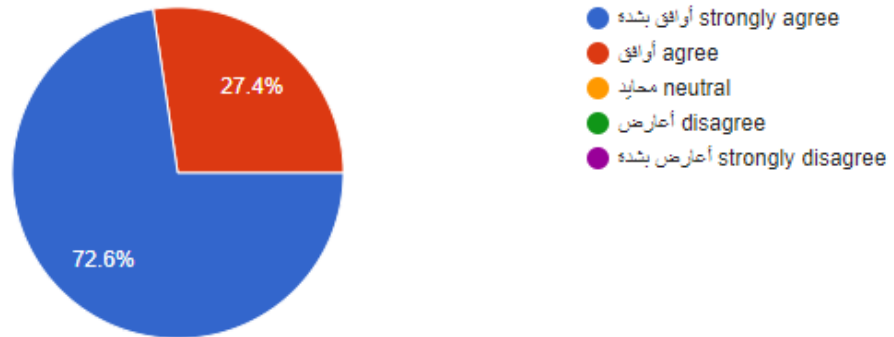


Figure 1

The conference helped me better understand challenges and proposed solutions for Arab and European countries to ensure the right to independent living within the community
ساهم المؤتمر في تعزيز فهمي للتحديات والتحديات، وأيضاً الحلول المقترحة، للدول العربية والأوروبية لضمان حق العيش المستقل في المجتمع

84 responses

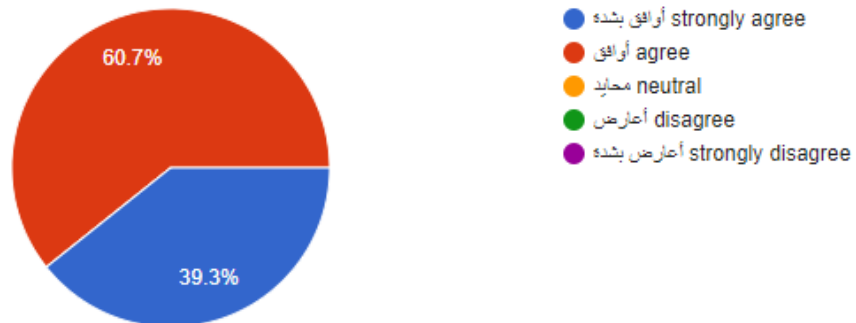
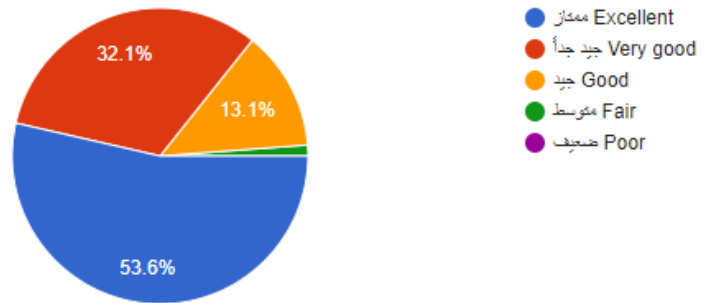


Figure 2

In terms of logistical arrangements, including those related to ensuring accessibility for persons with disability the feedback was also positive with 98.8% of respondents rating the quality of logistical arrangements between good and excellent (Figure 3).

The logistical arrangements of the conference الترتيبات اللوجستية للمؤتمر

84 responses



The feedback on the availability of reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities and the accessibility of the conference’s facilities and services was also similar, with all respondents selecting either good, very good, or excellent when asked (Figure 4 and 5). In response to an open ended question on the accessibility and reasonable accommodation of the conference, one respondent stated “All of my accessibility needs were met, including having an accessible hotel room.”

Reasonable accommodation الترتيبات التيسيرية

84 responses

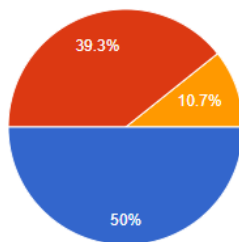


Figure 4

The accessibility of the conference facilities and services إمكانية الوصول بالنسبة لمرافق

وخدمات مقر المؤتمر

84 responses

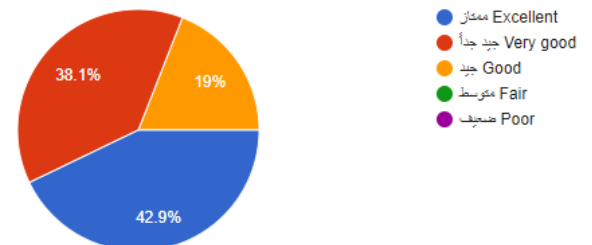


Figure 5

In terms of content, although the majority of responses were positive the aggregate was not as homogenous with a small percentage, 1.2% and 3.6%, of responses citing the quality of presentations and interventions were either “Fair” or “Poor” respectively (Figure 6 and 7). It is worthy of mention that several respondents requested that more time be allocated for questions, answers, and discussions.

The quality of presentations جودة العروض المقدمة

84 responses

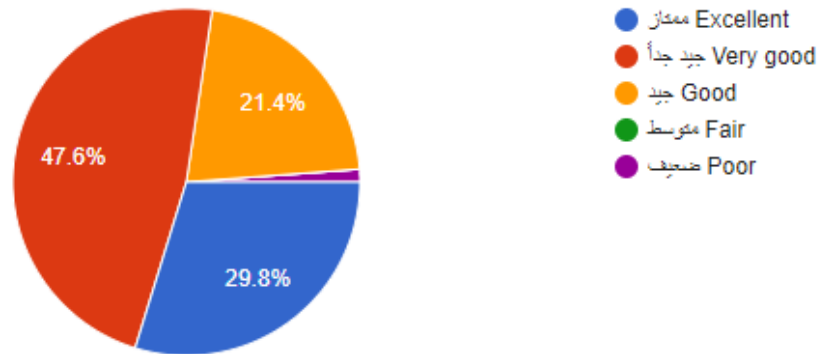


Figure 6

Quality of interventions/questions by participants مستوى مداخلات المتحدثين

84 responses

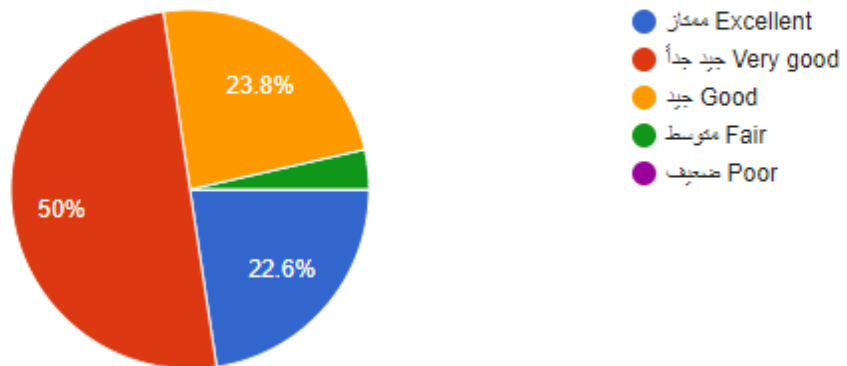


Figure 7