# Statement by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in the implementation of the convention

# **Promoting inclusive urban development**

# Adopted during the Committee’s 19th session, held, from 14 February to 9 March 2018 in Geneva

Over the last twenty years there have been large scale population movements that include persons with disabilities from remote areas to urban centres. As a consequence, by 2050, the world urban population is expected to nearly double. Of the approximately 6.25 billion people predicted to inhabit urban centres by 2050, 15 percent are expected to be persons with disabilities. There is serious concern in that cities appear overburdened. The large influx in population and growth in economic activities, as well as environmental and humanitarian factors, pose huge sustainability challenges in terms of infrastructure, employment, education, and support services, among others, thus calling for a new urban development agenda. In this regard, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities welcomed the outcome document, developed by the High Level Forum on Disability Inclusion and Accessible Urban Development (Habitat III) held in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016, which resolves to include persons with disabilities in the New Urban Agenda.

Urban development is of utmost importance to all persons, especially persons with disabilities. However, current urban settlements are strewn with obstacles that do not enable persons with disabilities to function effectively in them. Public and private buildings, including housing, are constructed in a way that excludes persons with disabilities. There are high rise buildings without elevators and shopping centres without automated doors for wheelchair users or parents with young infants. Roads are constructed with open sewage and without sidewalks, thus impeding the independent mobility of persons with disabilities. Similarly, transport systems do not take into account the accessibility requirements of persons with disabilities. Public and private facilities including education, health care services, banking facilities, and others, including public parks, are not constructed taking into account the access requirements of many persons with disabilities. Not only is the physical environment inaccessible, but also information, communications, electronic and emergency services are not designed to be accessible for persons with disabilities, including web-accessibility. Studies reveal a gross lack of accessibility by persons with disabilities to the built environment. The World Report on Disability (2011), recognizes “that the built environment, transport systems and information and communication are often inaccessible to persons with disabilities.” Inaccessibility, in all its aspects, is a form of disability discrimination that denies persons with disabilities the ability to fully and effectively participate in and be fully included in society.

Accessibility and disability inclusion are the key ingredients for the effective involvement of persons with disabilities in the new urban development agenda. Accessibility is, in fact, a fundamental principle of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities contained in article 3 (f). As provided for in article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its general comment No. 2 (2014) on accessibility, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities reaffirms that “[a]ccessibility is a precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully and equally in society. Without access to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communication, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, persons with disabilities would not have equal opportunities for participation in their respective societies.”

The new international framework for development, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (September 2015) clearly recognized the importance of sustainable and inclusive cities. Disability is specifically mentioned 11 times in target areas in the Agenda, including Goal 11 on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, emphasizing, among other issues, the importance of accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities in urban development contexts. In 2013, the United Nations High-level Meeting on Disability and Development stressed the importance of ensuring accessibility for and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of development and giving due consideration to all persons with disabilities in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Outcome Document of the 2013 High Level Forum called for action to ensure accessibility by removing barriers to the physical environment, transportation, employment, education, health, services, information and assistive devices, such as ICTs. The Committee on the Rights of persons with disabilities considers accessibility to be one of the key issues in virtually all constructive dialogues it conducts with States parties in their reports and the subsequent concluding observations all contain recommendations concerning accessibility. The Committee notes with concern that persons with disabilities “are most often denied the opportunity to be active citizens in urban areas because of social barriers such as low-level of accessibility, unemployment and low or no income and lack of awareness on the part of society and policy makers.” The Committee further considers that when designing and deciding upon the future planning of urban environments certain important aspects must be taken into consideration, in accordance with Committee’s jurisprudence, to ensure the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities. These include, but are not limited to, accessibility (art. 9); living independently and being included in the community (art. 19); work and employment (art. 27); adequate standard of living and social protection (art. 28); and participation in political and public life and in cultural life, recreation and sport (arts. 29 and 30).

If persons with disabilities are to be included in the sustainable urban development agenda, then there must be some serious restructuring of society and its infrastructure. Legislation and, more importantly, strong commitments in concrete terms on the part of States parties and stakeholders, will be required in order to ensure that infrastructure required for the use of the public is adapted and universally designed to meet the requirements of persons with disabilities. Thus, all goods and services opened to the public, including apartments, schools, shops, banking facilities, sports and recreational grounds, transport systems, information and communication technologies and all support services must be made accessible and suitable for the use of persons with disabilities.

Finally, in order to secure an inclusive and sustainable urban development, there must be active, meaningful and effective participation of persons with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the planning, implementation and monitoring of urban development throughout all stages, in line with article 4 (3) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. While we disseminate to the world important policy decisions taken to reshape the world system, it is important that we practice what we preach. Urban development, which must be inclusive of persons with disabilities, can only be realized if it begins from the world body deciding to reorganize its infrastructural facilities, its information and communication technologies, and ensuring that accessibility is a guiding principle in its planning. Thus, right from the United Nations Headquarters, down to its agencies and further down to all towns and cities worldwide, the concerns of persons with disabilities must be taken fully into account in implementing the New Urban Agenda, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the outcome document of the 2013 High-level Forum on Disability and Development as acknowledged in May 2017 in London by the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, when he said in answer to a question on disability issues “It is very clear that this must be an enhanced priority. It is also clear that we have not done enough, in the United Nations we have not done enough, and this is one of the areas we have selected in order to correct what has been a lack of sufficient commitment in the past.” If such commitment can be obtained from and acted upon by all world leaders, we will ensure that the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda message to “leave no one behind”, including persons with disabilities in urban centres is strictly operationalised.