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## *Dialogue and Mutual Understanding*

### **Fact sheet: Youth with Disabilities**

- Youth with disabilities are amongst the most marginalized and poorest of all the world's youth.
- UNESCO estimates that 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school and 99% of girls with disabilities are illiterate.
- Youth with disabilities face dual disadvantages as individuals with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty even in developed countries

#### **Introduction**

Throughout the world, youth are dropping out of school and being excluded from the economy. However, young women and men with disabilities commonly face more discrimination and severe social, economic, and civic disparities as compared with those without disabilities, even in developed countries. For many young people with disabilities, exclusion, isolation, and abuse, as well as lack of educational and economic opportunities are daily experiences. Youth with disabilities are amongst the most marginalized and poorest of all the world's youth, whose basic rights are not well met and for whom full societal acceptance is often out of reach.

Disparities in education, employment, and relationships are more pronounced in youth with disabilities. Like adults with disabilities, youth with disabilities do not enjoy the same human rights or equal access to goods and services as peers without disabilities. The international community recognized this and after three years of negotiation, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December 2006 to ensure that persons with disabilities, including the youngest ones, enjoy the same human rights as everyone else. Effective implementation of the Convention requires a focused effort by all sectors to guarantee that young people with disabilities participate in mainstreamed as well as in disability specific programs on an equal basis with others.

#### **Youth and disabilities: Prevalence**

There is a significant dearth of empirical research on prevalence of disabilities among youth (between ages 15-24 as per the United Nations) and on their living conditions. Estimates suggest that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide and nearly 80% of them live in developing





countries (Groce, 2003; Roggero, Tarricone, Nicoli & Mangiaterra, 2005; United Nations 1990). Variations in definitions of disability, data collection methods, and sophistication of statistical analysis make international comparisons difficult. Additionally, questions on disability are often excluded from national surveys such as the census or when included may be too narrow to gather holistic information about the economic and social living conditions of people with disabilities (Eide & Loeb, 2005). Although the actual figures are uncertain, it is clear that individuals with disabilities form a significant proportion of the youth population in every society.

The number of youth with disabilities is likely to increase due to youthful age-structures in most developing countries and medical advancements which promote higher survival rates and life expectancy after impairment-causing diseases, health conditions, and injuries. Youth itself can be a contributing factor, as young people are at an increased risk of acquiring a disability through such incidents as road traffic accidents, injuries from diving and other sport activities, violence and warfare (Aito et al. 2005, Cripps 2003, Karacan et al. 2000). Statistics from several countries show that the incidence of spinal cord injury is highest among youth. In Canada, for example, over half of those with spinal cord injury were aged between 15 and 24 at the time of their accident (Canadian Paraplegic Association, 2003). In Australia, the incidence rates of spinal cord injury are also highest for those aged between 15 and 24 (Cripps 2006). Youth are also increasingly involved in war and conflict – approximately 250,000 individuals under 18 years of age are participating in armed conflicts (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF], 2006), over 300 million youth live in countries affected by armed conflict and warfare (Integrated Regional Information Networks, 2007) - and are at severe risk of violence, abuse, and injury (United Nations, 2008).

## Poverty

Young people constitute a major proportion of those living in poverty across the world – almost 209 million live on less than US\$ 1 a day, 515 million live on less than US\$ 2 a day (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN-DESA], 2005). Youth with disabilities face dual disadvantages as individuals with disabilities are more likely to live in poverty, including in developed countries such as the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Additionally, households with members with disabilities generally have lower incomes than other households and are at a significantly higher risk of living below the poverty line (Loeb & Eide, 2004; Hoogevan, 2005). As parents and family members take on care-giving roles, at least one parent or family member (mostly women) in many households may have to give up employment or sustainable livelihood activities due to limited government supports, inaccessible community infrastructure, and financial limitations to pay for personal assistants.





## Family situation

The family is the central unit in the lives of most youth. For some families, having a child with a disability may bring them closer together, but for others it can pose significant challenges. In many places, there is considerable societal stigma imposed on families with young members with disabilities. Societal discrimination and negative attitudes arising from misconceptions, stereotypes, and myths, such as disability being a punishment for past sins or signs of a curse, are still predominant in many countries. Members of the community holding such negative attitudes may disassociate themselves from individuals of that family and greatly diminish the young individuals' chances for community participation and social inclusion. Feeling embarrassed and ashamed, families in these societies often do not acknowledge having a youth with a disability, keep them hidden and at home, and limit their interaction with the rest of society (Inclusion International, 2006).

Many families believe that their children need protection, thereby stifling their independence that can lead to lower self-esteem and a weaker sense of identity. This attitude prevents youth with disabilities from reaching their full potential. The proportion of youth with disabilities living independently is considerably less than for the general population (United States Department of Education, 1993). Youth with disabilities are frequently in a vulnerable position within their family, as people with disabilities are more likely to be subjected to physical or sexual abuse than the rest of society (Groce, 2003). Many may be institutionalized during their adolescence as their families find it too difficult to manage with limited resources or are too old to care for a grown individual (Groce, 2004). A number of youth with disabilities will find themselves on the street, with one estimate suggesting that 30% of street youth have a disability (UNICEF, 1999).

## Education

Education for all youth is critical for realizing their full potential. Yet, UNESCO estimates that 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school and 99% of girls with disabilities are illiterate. By the time they enter adolescence, many youth with disabilities run a high risk of being illiterate, leading to restricted opportunities for further education, employment, and income generation. Some families do not feel that youth with disabilities should receive an education, often believing that young people with disabilities are incapable of learning (Groce, 2004). In societies that favour males, young women with disabilities are at a particular disadvantage as families may be reluctant to allocate resources to them.

However even with supportive and encouraging families, many youth with disabilities face severe challenges in obtaining an education. Educational establishments are often inaccessible, lack appropriate facilities, and do not provide students with disabilities with necessary accommodations or assistive





devices. Teachers frequently have preconceived ideas about what is appropriate for their students with disabilities, often resulting in the exclusion of youth with disabilities from certain activities. Sensitization, awareness-raising, and capacity building programmes to prepare teachers adequately are sorely lacking. Appropriate programmes targeted at students with disabilities are mostly considered only outside of mainstream educational services i.e. special education which is often below par with mainstream education, isolates these students, and may not lead to holistic learning and skill development (UNESCO, 2003). These barriers cause many youth with disabilities to drop out of school before their peers (Levin et al. 1986, Hollar 2005), thereby limiting their opportunities in the future. Studies in the United States show that youth with disabilities have higher rates of alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse than their peers (Hollar & Morgan 2004; Hollar 2005; Kessler and Klein 1995). Youth with disabilities remain under-represented in higher education institutions, although numbers are increasing in several countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2003). Limited school education and continuing inaccessibility of higher education institutions curtails their ability to participate in vocational training courses.

The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) adopted by the United Nations, in 1995, calls upon states to pay particular attention to the education of youth with disabilities. Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has provisions to ensure that persons with disabilities receive an education within the general education system that provides them with the necessary supports to facilitate educational activities as well as life and social development skills, and allows them to develop their full potential.

### **Transition into working life and financial independence**

Many young individuals with disabilities face a difficult period of upheaval and uncertainty as they transition from childhood into adulthood, primarily in the area of achieving successful employment and independent living. For youth with disabilities excluded from community participation and interaction in their formal years, transition into adult independence in the real world can be particularly challenging as they face discrimination and attitudinal barriers. In developed countries with established services to support youth under the age of 18 through school, the sudden lack of individualized supports and services and the need to fight for appropriate accommodations can become a daunting barrier (National Council on Disability, 2000). The World Youth Report 2007, focusing on transition into adulthood, states that the lack of an enabling environment that supports youth development in all aspects including education and health care, is a critical constraint to successful transition into adulthood (UN-DESA, 2007). Inequities in, and inaccessibility of these systems for youth with disabilities makes their transition even more difficult and barrier-prone than their peers without disabilities. Youth generally face greater employment uncertainties and hiring disparities during economic downturns and shrinking labour





markets (UN-DESA). In such scenarios, youth with disabilities face even greater discrimination in hiring practices.

## Employment

Not receiving the skills and qualifications to function in the wider society limits the employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities are higher than for people without disabilities in every society. For example, in some countries of the Asia-Pacific region the unemployment rate of people with disabilities is over 80% (ILO, 2002). While inequities in educational and skill development resources can impact their competitiveness in the labour market, negative attitudes about disability and discrimination on the basis of disability are the most prevalent and primary obstacles to the successful employment of people with disabilities. Negative perceptions of youth with disabilities and misconceptions held by employers, for example, that they are less productive than their peers, require too much assistance, affect the employer's image, and/or concerns over initial hiring costs (e.g. building ramps, accessible IT), pose a formidable barrier to youth with disabilities looking for employment. In fact, studies have shown that most accommodations do not impose significant financial costs to the employer and even people without disabilities use and benefit from the use of supportive workplace policies and practices (Schartz, Hendricks & Blanck, 2006; Schartz, Schartz, Hendricks & Blanck, 2006). Youth with disabilities are given little room for error, and are quickly labeled unemployable if they are unsuccessful at their first job. For young women with disabilities, the situation is even worse as they have to counter disability and gender based societal prejudices. Even with a good education, young women with disabilities take a longer time to find a job (Roggero et al. 2005). These negative perceptions do not correspond with studies that show that people with disabilities are just as productive, dependable, and less absent from work than workers without disabilities (Du Pont 1993; Zadeck & Scott-Parker 2003).

The World Programme of Action for Youth urges countries to take measures to develop the possibilities for youth with disabilities. Article 27 of the Convention addresses employment concerns by stipulating that people with disabilities have the right to work as everyone else in an open, inclusive, and accessible labour market, without discrimination, and with access to reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

## Sex and relationship

Sexual relationships are difficult to manage and having a disability adds further dimensions to them. In most places, society incorrectly believes that youth with disabilities are asexual and/or cannot be abused (Milligan & Neufeldt 2001; Groce, 2003, 2004). Access to reproductive health information is often not available to youth with disabilities, or disseminated through such inappropriate means as inaccessible clinics, inaccessible print or electronic media, or by providers who cannot communicate with youth with





disabilities. Few education programmes cater to the reproductive needs of youth with disabilities. For example, in several countries youth with disabilities often do not receive advice on HIV/AIDS, as the clinics are physically inaccessible, material is not available for those with visual impairments, and providers are unable to communicate in sign language. Moreover, most health care professionals have no disability awareness and consequently feel unwilling or unable to address their issues (Yousafzai, et al., 2005).

The lack of social acknowledgment of their sexuality has several negative consequences for youth with disabilities. Many youth with disabilities will absorb and accept these negative beliefs as facts and refrain from sexuality and intimacy altogether (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001). Well-meaning parents may not acknowledge their children as sexual beings and discourage them from expressing any form of sexuality (Di Giulio, 2003). Other youth with disabilities will have relationships, but without receiving appropriate education may undertake high risk activities. Some might go through several uncertain relationships, as the marriage of people with disabilities is frowned upon in a number of places and in some cases even legally prohibited (Groce 2003; United Nations 1995). In polygamous societies, young women with disabilities are unlikely to become the primary wife (Groce 2004). The right of people with disabilities to have children is also curtailed and denied by many societies, sometimes by law. Article 23 of the Convention recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to form relationships, marry, and start a family and adopt children. It also states that countries should provide persons with disabilities access to the same sexual and reproductive health care and family planning education available to individuals without disabilities.

## Acceptance

Young people with disabilities often experience rejection and isolation due to peers' misconceptions. Feelings of loneliness and isolation are reinforced by an environment inaccessible to individuals with different disabilities (e.g. movies at cinema halls without closed captioning).

As social creatures, humans desire a sense of identity and belonging - a desire to be part of a community that respects and appreciates every individual, regardless of their differences. Yet for youth with disabilities, societal prejudice, other youths' awkwardness and discomfort in their presence, and environmental barriers largely prevent them from being accepted. The greatest impediments continue to be discrimination, prejudice, and social isolation (Despouy, 1991). Inaccurate or negative portrayals of people with disabilities in the media also impact the conceptualization of disability in the minds of individuals with and without disabilities.

Ignorance of disability results in the needs of youth with disabilities being unrealized, leading to a loss of self-esteem, self-worth, and the creation of social isolation. Youth programmes seldom address issues of youth with disabilities; much less include them into activities. Other initiatives directed at youth often





overlook those with disabilities. However, these societal misapprehensions need not be the case. When youth with disabilities interact with their peers, and there is a sense of belonging, these barriers collapse (Green, 2003).

Increasingly, youth are engaging in virtual social networking using various multi-media tools online. However if these interactive platforms are designed without comprehension of the need for accessible features in information and communication technologies (ICT) that facilitate the use of assistive technology (AT), youth with disabilities who use AT to access ICT will again be left out of opportunities for social participation.

Greater awareness and understanding of disabilities is fundamental to improving this situation. Concerted efforts to raise awareness and disseminate accurate information about people with disabilities that challenge misconceptions and stereotypes, design public use infrastructure (physical or virtual) to be accessible, and provide equal opportunities for youth with disabilities to participate in all aspects of youth development are important and necessary to promote the full participation and inclusion of youth with disabilities.

## **The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD)**

The CRPD entered into force in 2008. At its core, the Convention ensures that persons with disabilities enjoy the same human rights as everyone else, and are able to lead their lives as citizens who are given the same opportunities to grow and contribute to society as those without disabilities. It marks a paradigm shift from seeing persons with disabilities as objects of charity and pity to holders of rights.

The Convention notes that "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments." The extent to which these impairments disable someone is dependent upon the level of attitudinal and environmental barriers encountered in society. Examples of these can be seen everywhere from stairs into buildings, reading materials in inaccessible formats, and prevailing negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. The more barriers, the less likely persons with disabilities are able to participate in society.

## **Concluding remarks**

The experiences that people face in their youth shape the rest of their lives. Youth with disabilities face the same issues and concerns as their peers without disabilities, but societal prejudices, barriers, and ignorance exacerbate their concerns. To date, most societies have not fully integrated youth with disabilities, leading to segregation and the condemnation of a whole segment of the population. Clearly,





more work is required. Providing opportunities for full and equal social, civic, and economic participation is beneficial not only to youth with disabilities, but also their societies and countries as the youth can contribute fully to the country's development and economic growth. The Convention offers hope for improving the current situation. In many places it is facilitating the process that empowers youth with disabilities to address the multiple societal challenges they face. However, its implementation and realization requires a focused effort by all stakeholders, and especially Governments and policy makers, to ensure that a significant proportion of their population does not remain an isolated and invisible segment but one that can realize its full potential, have equal access to all opportunities, and exercise the same rights as the rest of the citizens.

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