Expert Meeting on Creating Universal Design-based Accessible Societies in Asia and the Pacific

13-14 December 2018
Meeting Room A, level 6
Secretariat Building
UNESCAP
Bangkok, Thailand

CONCEPT NOTE

I. Background

Ensuring universal design-based accessibility of the physical environment, public transport, knowledge, information and communication is a precondition to enhance the political, social and economic participation of an estimated 690 million persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific. Accessibility supports the increased participation of all persons, with or without disabilities. For example, universally designed accessible buildings assist persons moving heavy luggage or those travelling with infants while also enhancing the usability for persons with physical disabilities. Furthermore, as the region is experiencing unprecedented population aging, universal design-based accessibility increases the usability of the physical and information environment for older persons. Increasing accessibility through universally designed buildings, products and services effectively support the full participation of all persons providing both social and economic benefits to society.¹

To support accessibility across Asia and the Pacific, governments in the region are guided by international and regional disability-inclusive mandates. Globally, the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes universal design and accessibility as a cross-cutting issue. Article 9 requires States Parties to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities, in both rural and urban areas, by developing and implementing accessibility standards, and incorporating accessibility from the early stages of procurement. Furthermore, the adoption of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (2030 Agenda) has strengthened support for accessibility for persons with disabilities. Goal 11, and associated targets, obliges member States to include accessibility as a core component to realizing inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements by 2030.

¹ Return on Disability, 2016
Regionally, governments in Asia and the Pacific committed to promoting universal design-based accessibility through the Incheon Strategy, supported by the Beijing Declaration and Action plan to accelerate the implementation of the Incheon Strategy. The Incheon Strategy leverages from the CRPD and the 2030 Agenda to provide the world’s first set of regionally agreed, time-bound, disability-specific development goals. Goal 3 of the Incheon Strategy requires member States to mainstream accessibility using universal design principles to enhance access to the physical environment, public transport, information and communication and services.

However, the implementation of accessibility across all development sectors lags far behind the commitment. The midpoint review of the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, conducted in 2017, revealed that many governments’ limited understanding of the scope of accessibility resulted in implementing limited accessibility to public infrastructure. For example, considering well-known accessibility concerns, such as those faced by wheelchair users, while not considering accessibility for persons with other diverse types of disabilities. Furthermore, governments in the region often failed to include the concept of universal design within relevant policies and standards. As for accessibility of information, only 41 per cent of TV news programmes in Asia and the Pacific were equipped with captioning to enable persons with hearing impairment to understand its content. While the Internet is becoming a major source of information in everyday life, only 40 percent of public websites were reported as accessible, and merely 5 per cent of electronic books produced annually were accessible for persons with print disabilities.\(^2\)

Furthermore, while good practices of accessibility and technical standards are readily available, many countries do not implement accessibility for several reasons. Promoting accessibility in its full scope is not a priority in some countries, due to the lack of political will, commitment, knowledge and understanding. In others, there is no plan for systematically investing in improving accessibility, nor coordination across ministries and different levels of government to harmonize domestic policy and standards with international standards. Discussing strategies to promote accessibility at the national level tends to focus on social welfare measures, therefore often missing the opportunity to link accessibility to other areas such as ICT and economic development. The lack of meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in the planning, implementation and evaluation process of accessibility promotion presents a fundamental challenge as many governments fail to conduct on-going consultations with diverse members of the disability community.

Barriers to the physical and information environment hamper full and equal economic and social participation, particularly in the areas of education, employment, social protection and participation in political processes and decision-making. Approximately 50 per cent of children with disabilities will not transition from primary education to secondary education. Lack of equal opportunities to education significantly impact employment opportunities for persons with

disabilities. On average, persons with disabilities are two to six times less likely to be employed than those without disabilities. Barriers to education and employment exacerbate the likelihood of persons with falling into poverty, with persons with disabilities between 4 to 21 per cent more likely to experience poverty compared to the overall population. Furthermore, persons with disabilities are underrepresented in the political process making up only 0.4 per cent of parliamentarians. Women parliamentarian with disabilities make up only 0.1 per cent of all parliamentarians.

Against this background, ESCAP is producing a guidebook in 2019 with the aim to motivate member States and other relevant stakeholders in Asia and the Pacific to take coordinated action to achieve comprehensive accessibility.

II. Objectives of the Expert Meeting

The Expert Meeting is intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To convene technical and policy experts to discuss successes, challenges and gaps in realizing universal design-based accessibility for persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific;
2. To review and discuss ways to advance universal design-based accessibility from policy compliance and business perspectives;
3. To make suggestions for the draft outline of the upcoming 2019 ESCAP publication on accessibility which will motivate Governments and other stakeholders to take concrete steps to advance universal design-based accessibility in Asia and the Pacific.

III. Expected outcomes of the Expert Meeting

1. List of challenges faced by the region in realizing universal design based accessibility.
2. List of good practices on realizing universal design-based accessibility.
3. List of suggestions for the upcoming ESCAP book on accessibility.

IV. Organizational arrangements

The Expert Meeting will be held from 13 to 14 December 2018 by the Social Development Division of ESCAP. The venue of the Expert Meeting will be at the United Nations Conference Centre (UNCC), located in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Expert Meeting will be conducted in English only.
V. Provisional agenda for the Workshop

The provisional agenda consists of the following agenda items:

1. Opening and introduction
2. Identification of achievements, challenges and opportunities in creating universal design-based accessibility societies.
3. Presentation of the annotated outline of the 2019 ESCAP guidebook and discussion
4. Closing

VI. Participation

The Expert Meeting will be attended by international and regional accessibility experts with technical and/or substantive policy expertise covering the areas of the built environment, transportation, ICT and services.

VII. Contacts at ESCAP secretariat

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3 The provisional agenda is subject to changes without further notice.