1st round:
Please explain what “universal design” means and how universal design enhances accessibility for persons with disabilities and older persons?

Universal Design accords with now internationally accepted standards, following human rights conventions on non-discriminatory environments, to be enjoyed by the most diverse range of user abilities. The advantage of Universal design of the built environment is that it is inclusive and not limited to providing access only for persons with disabilities. When the needs of the ever-increasing ageing population are included in the picture, it is really no longer necessary to justify the provision of ‘accessible’ elements through statistics on how many disabled users would feel the benefit: now everyone can enjoy these, often at less cost.

ILLUSTRATION 01. Exclusion

Where an environment is designed to include the widest range of abilities it also removes the discrimination and stigma that is often attached to ‘the disabled’ and allows the individual the independence to continue to participate in their community for as long as they wish, alongside their family and neighbours rather than having to take a separate route.

The Seven Principles of Universal Design were defined by the access advocate Ron Mace in 1985, requiring that “products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design”. The 7 Principles start with the more general requirements of ‘Equitable Use, Flexibility in Use, Simple and Intuitive Use, Perceptible Information and Tolerance for Error’. In the design of the built environment the final two principles – ‘Low Physical Effort’ and ‘Size and Space for Approach’ are particularly applicable, not just for wheelchair users but for older people too.
An eighth additional goal is also implied – that of **Safety** – which should be a priority in any design, not just around accessibility. Where once designers focused on simply complying with local codes on barrier-free accessibility for people with disabilities, now we understand that it is really not difficult to make environments even more enabling for a far wider range of users, to ensure safety, accessibility and convenience. This is especially true for diverse ageing populations, many of whom defy the statistical data on disability since they may not be medically definable as ‘disabled’; but even ‘fit’ individuals in any elderly population will be more vulnerable to injuries such as falls, more susceptible to fatigue or pain and whose quality of life is likely to be adversely affected by an aggregate of small factors that will inhibit their daily lives, even to the extent of withdrawing from society.

**ILLUSTRATION 02.ud.diagram**

These physical and psychological barriers can be reduced in a well-designed environment, not only to the advantage of the ageing individual, but also for their families, their caregivers and society at large. A daughter will be less anxious about her frail elderly mother tripping on badly-designed stairs; a social worker can feel reassured that a patient will be able return safely to an accessible home after a hip operation, releasing a much-needed hospital bed-space for the next person.

Inclusive design is, of course, much easier to apply in a new design; but most of our built environments are already in place, with their steps and narrow spaces, barriers and hazards which may be difficult or costly to remedy. Our living spaces include both the private (home) and public social spaces. Both should be equally accessible, but legislation to enforce this is
difficult unless retrofitting takes place. Taking a more strategic approach to connecting access features, rather than doing piecemeal ‘fixes’, will require more expertise and the demonstration of good examples. Whilst this may not be technically difficult, there is a real need to educate more professionals in this area.

(For those of you in the UN ESCAP Conference Centre; take a look at the connecting path between the ground floor café terrace and the Secretariat Building. What is now a level path was once a series of steep and slippery ramps – up and then down. Rather than upgrade the ramps it proved possible to remove them entirely, at far less cost.)

ILLUSTRATION 03.ESCAPpath

2nd round:
Please recommend any “quick fixes” in both rural and urban areas to increase accessibility in developing countries of Asia and the Pacific?

Obviously the idea of ‘quick fix’ is very optimistic. If such a thing existed, we would have seen it in action before now. There is also the very real danger that a ‘band-aid’ solution is unlikely to be sustainable and may lead to ‘done-that’ complacency, without further longer-term holistic action being considered.

There is also the factor that, in assessing any built environment, the context and topicality will vary greatly, from rural to urban, from culture to culture, with diverse economic situations. ‘One-size-fits-all’ solutions could prove to be costly mistakes. Assessment of local needs and possibilities would have to be undertaken and potential strategic solutions proposed. Some of these could be relatively short-term, while others could have a more sustainable future.

Who then would be able to find the time and the application to undertake such work?

My own experience tells me that professional design courses are often receptive to such opportunities. Architecture and planning, certain branches of engineering, as well as occupational therapists and sociologists, all rely on providing practical project work for their
students to develop their skills. This can range from Year One basic anthropometric and ergonomic studies, right up to PhD thesis topics.

Working from this idea, the proposal would be to create a package, with templates written to accommodate a range of applications and locations, to present as a challenge or opportunity to an educational establishment (or several in partnership). Some kudos or prestige would be attached if such a challenge came from a UN source, particularly if there was some suggestion of competition between schools or professions.

Known contacts in educational and professional circles could be canvassed in advance to identify individual ‘champions’ with research interests in this field, who might then recommend others who might be interested elsewhere.

As an alternative, active players in disability or other civil society organisations could be primed on the best way to approach their local design institutions to request active participation in this scheme.

The vehicle for such a project obviously requires fuller consideration, as well as the formation of a centre to facilitate this move and act as a clearing-house for developments, creating partnerships and so on. This, in turn, might grow out of the involvement of existing institutions, with some assistance from UN ESCAP. Teaching faculty of design schools might well undertake such work voluntarily as part of their research commitment, this reducing financial outlay.

Education should be seen as a fundamental catalyst to achieving inclusive environments (see Incheon Strategy). However, not all educators are supportive or well informed on this topic, sometime misjudging it as inhibiting aesthetic design or only appropriate for a minority. As well as the ‘quick-fix’ of identifying priority moves to enhance accessibility in designated areas, the proposal would have a more long-term benefit of encouraging teaching staff to increase their knowledge on universal design and to further promote initiatives such as continuing professional development courses for local designers.

**As a very rough idea of what the proposed package might look like:**

Explanatory information / instructions for participating tutors and students
Alternative strategic plan templates to assist in selecting suitable target areas or users.
Advice on how to identify partners in active user-groups, personalities / champions, locations.

Pictorial information for participants to show to residents of selected pilot places (urban & rural) could help to identify barriers, hazards as well as positive elements in daily living spaces (private and public). This might have (say) 8 points (illustrated) to identify positive and negative elements to independent living (barriers, hazards etc.) in their local life:

**Snapshot assessment - 8 points:** (ambulant, wheelchair, sensory - visual, aural) - responses by representative local residents / user groups – others - including students on:

1. Accessibility (+ safety) within the home
2. Accessibility into community (catalysts to socialize) + or -
3. Pathways (kerbs, steps, gradients, crossings etc.)
4. Public transport (‘travel-chain’ analysis)
5. Accessibility to shops and offices (thresholds)
6. Amenities – seats, accessible toilets, information, etc.
7. Mobility – connectedness - routes to daily destinations: shopping, clinic/pharmacy, post office, social venues/activities (crafts, allotments, child-minding)
8. ‘No-go’ areas (e.g. underpasses, unlit streets, anti-social activity – threats real or imagined)

Simple analysis of each item – why is it so (+ or -)? What to do?
- Who is responsible? (government agency, etc.) How to energise these?
- Working together – forming partnerships
- What legislation/responsibilities already in place? What could be improved for longer term?
- How could these be improved – design proposals - individually or strategically?
- How could suggestions be implemented (voluntary, professional consultation)?
- Cost implications – (e.g. could it be done within maintenance cycles?)
- Voluntary work. Incentives? Sponsors

Could cost-benefit analysis encourage owners to improve access? (e.g. Shopmobility UK. Chamber of trade, local authority, charity / NGO)

HOW TO GET IT DONE?
(more thought on this is needed, once the idea is seen as viable)

ONCE DONE
Sharing of information / Promotion event (Awards?)
- Pairing – friendly competition
- Local advocacy – local media (radio/tv/press), personalities to lend support
- Local professionals (govt/private)
- Organisations?
- Feedback to ‘clearing house’ and publication

SETTING AN EXAMPLE
“how we did it” publicity after the event

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