Disability in Asia and the Pacific: THE FACTS

What is disability?
Disability results from the interaction of impairments and barriers:

**Persons with Impairments**
Individuals with limited functioning of the senses, mobility, cognition, or psychosocial difficulties.

**Barriers**
- Can be attitudinal — such as discrimination against a job applicant with an impairment; or
- Environmental — such as inaccessible building entrances.

**Persons with Disabilities**
The interaction of impairments and barriers to prevent the full participation of persons with disabilities in society.

Given that the nature of both impairments and barriers changes over time, disability is recognized by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as an ‘evolving concept’.
Fact 1: An estimated 690 million persons live with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific.

This represents one in every six persons. This number is likely to increase as a result of population ageing, climate-related disasters, chronic health conditions, road traffic injuries and poor working conditions, among other factors.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the fastest-approved UN human rights treaty in history, demonstrating the global commitment to empowering individuals with disabilities.

Fact 2: At the end of 2016, the Convention has been ratified by 43 ESCAP member States since its adoption.

The Convention legally protects the human rights of all persons with disabilities to participate in society on an equal basis with others.

43 of 50 Governments have ratified the CRPD.
Fact 3: In Asia and the Pacific, only 12 Governments have enacted anti-discrimination legislation.

Ratification is a major step towards the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities, however it is not an end in itself. Ratification must coincide with the harmonization of domestic legislation and policies in line with the Convention. This includes the establishment of enforceable anti-discrimination laws protecting persons with disabilities, as well as the removal or amendment of existing laws that are either directly or indirectly disability-discriminatory.

Fact 4: Available data shows that as few as 0.4 per cent parliamentarians in the region are persons with disabilities.

Out of a total of 4,960 national parliamentarians (or equivalent) in 17 reporting countries and areas, only 18 parliamentarians had some type of disability. Women with disabilities are particularly excluded from decision making bodies - accounting for 0.1 per cent of parliamentarians in the region, amounting to five parliamentarians who are women. Policy measures to increase the meaningful representation of persons with disabilities in parliaments, political parties, national gender equality mechanisms, decision-making processes and governance at all levels are needed.

Additionally, technological improvements should be harnessed to enable persons with disabilities to participate in public decision-making processes and to exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities as members of society. The improvements include the provision of an enabling environment for persons with disabilities to have equitable access to appointments in the judicial, executive and legislative branches of government, including those of the supreme court, ministries and the national legislative body. Disability inclusive development can be fully realized only when girls and women with disabilities are active participants in mainstream development.

Incheon Strategy strengthening the 2030 Agenda

In the ESCAP region, the Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific takes a holistic approach to disability-inclusive development. The Incheon Strategy provides the Asian and Pacific region, and the world, with the first set of 10 disability-specific development goals, supported by 27 targets and 62 indicators. Building on the CRPD, the Strategy will enable the Asian and Pacific region to track progress towards improving the quality of life, and fulfilment of the rights of persons with disabilities in the region. The Strategy is the collaborative product of more than two years of consultations between governments and Disabled People’s Organizations.
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the world with a universal, people-centered and inclusive approach to global development until 2030. The 2030 Agenda contains 5 explicit references to disability, with 6 additional Goals implicitly linked to persons with disabilities through its mandate to leave no one behind.

Both the Incheon Strategy and the 2030 Agenda are based on respect for human rights, and take a people-centered and gender-sensitive approach to development. In Asia and the Pacific, governments, civil society and self-advocates with disabilities can leverage the synergies between the CRPD, the Incheon Strategy and the SDGs to ensure that persons with disabilities are at the forefront of this historic movement to transform our world.
Fact 5: Disability prevalence is underestimated in Asia and the Pacific by 450 million persons

Whereas the World Health Organization and World Bank estimate a global disability prevalence of 15 per cent, all but two ESCAP member States report figures below this level. Indeed, the median disability prevalence in the region, as recorded by national governments, is 4.4 per cent — effectively meaning that only around 200 million out of 690 million persons with disabilities are actually counted. The vast range in official prevalence rates — from 1.1 per cent in Brunei Darussalam to 24.0 per cent in New Zealand — points to differing definitions and conceptual approaches to disability data collection. The poor standard of disability data hampers adequate assessments of the quality of life and socioeconomic participation of persons with disabilities, which are crucial to designing effective policies and programmes. Without accurate, disaggregated data, there can be no understanding of disability issues in Asian and Pacific countries; without understanding, there can be no meaningful policymaking, and without appropriate, targeted policies, there can be no effective action.

Further to its high prevalence, disability affects persons across all demographic lines, including but not limited to; age, gender, ethnicity, rural or urban, and global North or global South. But while disability exists indiscriminately across demographic groups, the discrimination against those with disabilities in the region is reflected through the numerous inequalities they face across various aspects of daily life.

Fact 6: Differences in poverty rates between persons with disabilities and the overall populations range from 3.9 to 20.6 per cent in the region

Poverty is inextricably linked with disability, as both a cause and effect of the inequality of opportunity faced by persons with disabilities. Impoverished groups often lack adequate access to basic support services, including healthcare, education and social protection. In the case of health, conditions that may otherwise be treatable could become chronic. Similarly, the marginalization of persons with disabilities caused by environmental, systemic and societal barriers inhibits their equal participation in society and perpetuates poverty.

In this connection, the right to work is a fundamental part of participating as a full and equal member of society, and it should be realized by all people, regardless of whether or not they live with a disability. Access to decent work is instrumental in escaping poverty and allows individuals to live autonomously and with dignity. Despite this, evidence shows that persons with disabilities are systematically excluded from equal access to work in Asia and the Pacific, as a result of both attitudinal and environmental barriers which severely reduce their chances of finding and keeping a job.
Fact 7: On average, persons with disabilities are 2 to 6 times less likely to be employed than persons without disabilities.

Persons with disabilities in the region are more likely than others to work in the informal sector, lacking the security offered by work contracts, salaries, pensions, health insurance and other benefits. When persons with disabilities work less or earn less because of the barriers they face, they accordingly contribute less to overall consumption and economic growth.

Meanwhile, studies show that if persons with disabilities were paid on an equal basis as their colleagues without disabilities, the GDP of many Asian and Pacific countries could increase by between 1 and 7 per cent. This range may still be an underestimate, because it doesn’t account for the lost economic productivity caused by caregivers of persons with disabilities also having reduced opportunities to work in the open labour market.

Fact 8: GDP could rise by 1-7% with disability-inclusive employment

In many parts of the region, barriers to the physical environment; public transport, and knowledge, information and communication services prevent persons with diverse disabilities from leading productive and meaningful lives. Accessibility is the practice of identifying and breaking down such barriers, and in the process, empowering persons with disabilities to live full and dignified lives. Currently however, inaccessible environments and services create difficulties for many persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, in terms of attending school, acquiring skills, and finding and keeping jobs — as well as engaging in diverse aspects of community and social life.

To offer one example of the kinds of barriers to accessibility faced by persons with disabilities: only around 5 per cent of electronic books published every year are made available in formats that are accessible to persons with print disabilities. Moreover, because the population of the Asia-Pacific region is ageing, it is expected that an increasing number of persons with disabilities will require more accessible environments and services to remain mobile and engaged in society. This ever-growing demand must be anticipated now.

Fact 9: Standards of accessibility vary across the region and are often not comprehensive in responding to the barriers to diverse disabilities

Although some countries and areas report high levels of accessibility of government buildings and international airports, in many cases the concept of accessibility is confined to issues faced by persons with mobility impairments, such as wheelchair users. These buildings remain largely difficult for persons with other disabilities to navigate. The transfer of knowledge and information is also limited by inaccessible technologies and means of communication.
Fact 10: Inaccessible environments & services prevent inclusion: only 5% of electronic books published annually are made accessible

Inaccessible environments and information can result in the exclusion of persons with disabilities from full and effective participation in various sectors of society. One example is education. With information and communications technologies (ICT) increasingly important in all aspects of life, ensuring accessibility of ICT products and services is essential to ensuring access to quality education for persons with disabilities. Computers, mobile devices, documents, websites and other media are all examples of ICT products and services for which accessibility is an important precursor to access for persons with disabilities. The digital divide continues to greatly impact persons with disabilities. Deficient access to written materials is one of the factors that excludes persons with disabilities from education and economic opportunities.

Fact 11: The numbers of children with disabilities attending secondary education drops by an average of 52.7 per cent across the region, compared with the number enrolled in primary education.

Greater efforts must be undertaken to provide persons with disabilities educational and economic opportunities across the life cycle. In the Asia-Pacific region, at least one third of children with disabilities are likely to be not receiving any early intervention services. Such early intervention responses cover, inter alia, stimulation, nurturing and care, and pre-school education. Investing in early childhood programmes yields higher returns than at subsequent levels of education and training. Government commitment to early childhood programmes would significantly improve their development outcomes. As persons with disabilities transition into the labour market, they encounter significant difficulties in securing employment, especially decent jobs. Barriers to full engagement are also experienced in the access to health care.

Fact 12: Information concerning health care, and related services is often unavailable to person with disabilities as it is seldom in formats and language that are accessible to them.

Despite comprising half of the region’s 690 million persons with disabilities, women and girls face double discrimination on the grounds of their gender and disabilities. Women with disabilities, in particular, are also at a relative disadvantage in accessing reproductive health services, compared with their peers without disabilities, due, in part, to the absence of accessible information concerning health care and related services. The barriers to accessible information impact access to reproductive health services for women with disabilities.
Fact 13: Access to reproductive health services for women with disabilities is two to three times lower than their counterparts without disabilities.

Available evidence from Indonesia and the Republic of Korea highlight that women and girls with disabilities are at a disadvantage in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. In Indonesia, a distinctly larger proportion of married women with disabilities have unmet needs for family planning, and their access to contraceptive methods is 12.6 per cent lower than for peers without disabilities. In the Republic of Korea, the access of women with disabilities to reproductive health services at pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium is two to three times lower than for women without disabilities.

In addition to barriers to access of health services, violence against women and girls with disabilities is highly prevalent in the Asia Pacific region.

Fact 14: There is a pandemic of violence against women and girls with disabilities

Some 350 million women and girls with disabilities live in Asia and the Pacific – more than a half of the region’s total population with disabilities. Available data suggests that adult women with disabilities are at least 1.5 times more likely to be physically and sexually abused than women without disabilities – though the actual figure may be up to ten times more likely. In Australia, for example, it has been estimated that 70 per cent of women with disabilities are survivors of violent sexual assaults. Amongst Australian women with learning disabilities, as many as 90 per cent have experienced sexual abuse – more than two thirds of whom were first abused as children. Meanwhile, one survey of 700 women with disabilities conducted in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, found that every single respondent had experienced domestic violence. The dearth of population data that is disaggregated by both sex and disability in Asia and the Pacific compounds the invisibility of women and girls with disabilities, and serves to perpetuate the pandemic of violence against them.

Though disaster is indiscriminate in who they affect, persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected in disasters situations compared to their counterparts without disabilities.

Fact 15: Persons with disabilities are 2-4 times more likely to be killed in disasters

Asia and the Pacific is the region most prone to both natural and man-made hazards, which combine with unsustainable human development processes to expose the region’s 4.4 billion people to frequent disasters. Populations at large are exposed to disaster risk, and persons with disabilities face disproportionately high levels of risk. Indeed, evidence shows that persons with disabilities are between two and four times more likely to be killed during disasters than others. As a result of insufficiently inclusive evacuation systems, support
services and preparedness measures, persons with disabilities are particularly exposed to disasters such as the 2011 Tohoku earthquake in Japan. In the town of Minamisanriku, Miyagi Prefecture, 12 per cent of the local population with disabilities was reported killed or missing, in comparison to 4 per cent of persons without disabilities. Disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) builds the preparedness and resilience of persons with disabilities in the face of disasters by ensuring that everyone in society is able to access and then act on information related to disaster risk reduction.

**ESCAP’s Work**

ESCAP is promoting the full realization of the rights of persons with disabilities in Asia and the Pacific through its efforts to implement the Incheon Strategy, during the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013–2022. As highlighted above, the Strategy focuses on evidence-based policies and programmes, and it is further strengthened in promoting disability-inclusive development by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

ESCAP builds member States’ technical knowledge and capacity to empower their citizens with disabilities, through the provision of analytical work, organizing technical consultations and meetings, and conducting advocacy campaigns.

Details of our work can be accessed at:
www.maketherightreal.net
www.unescap.org/our-work/social-development/disability