

WHO POLICY ON DISABILITY

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Preamble

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) commits, through this policy, to making WHO an organization which is inclusive of people with disability in all their diversity and systematically integrates disability in all programme areas, contributing to the practical implementation of the globally agreed commitments contained in the United Nations (UN) treaties, conferences and summits and their follow-up, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;¹ the Sendai Framework;² the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development;³ the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III);⁴ the multiple resolutions adopted by the General Assembly,⁵ the World Health Assembly (WHA)⁶ and the Human Rights Council;⁷ and the World Humanitarian Summit.⁸

¹ UN General Assembly, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1.

² UN General Assembly, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, 23 June 2015, A/RES/69/283.

³ UN General Assembly, Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa Action Agenda), 17 August 2015, A/RES/69/313.

⁴ UN General Assembly, New Urban Agenda, 25 January 2017, A/RES/71/256.

⁵ Recent UN General Assembly resolutions include: Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto: accessibility, 20 January 2020, A/RES/74/144; Enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations, 30 July 2019, A/RES/74/253; Persons with Albinism, 25 June 2019, A/RES/74/123; Inclusive development for persons with disabilities, 8 January 2019, A/RES/71/165; Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto: situation of women and girls with disabilities, 25 January 2018, A/RES/72/162; and Toward the full realization of the an inclusive and accessible United Nations for persons with disabilities, 10 February 2016, A/RES/70/170.

⁶ Comprehensive and coordinated efforts for the management of autism spectrum disorders, 19–24 May 2014, WHA67.8; Comprehensive mental health action plan 2013–2020, 27 May 2013, WHA66.8; Disability, 27 May 2013, WHA66.9 and Disability, including prevention, management and rehabilitation, 25 May 2005, WHA58.23; International classification of functioning, disability and health, 22 May 2001, WHA54.21; Prevention of hearing impairment, 12 May 1995, WHA48.9; Disability prevention and rehabilitation, 11 May 1992, WHA45.10; Disability prevention and rehabilitation, 19 May 1989, WHA42.28; Prevention of hearing impairment and deafness, 16 May 1985, WHA38.19; Disability prevention and rehabilitation, 30 May 1976, WHA29.68; and Prevention of blindness, 28 May 1975, WHA28.54.

⁷ Mental health and human rights, 9 October 2017, A/HRC/RES/36/13; Mental health and human rights, 18 July 2016, A/HRC/RES/32/18; A Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 14 July 2014, A/HRC/RES/26/20; The right of persons with disabilities to education, 14 April 2014, A/HRC/RES/25/20; The work and employment of persons with disabilities, 14 March 2013, A/HRC/22/L.4; The rights of persons with disabilities: participation in political and public life, 22 March 2012, A/HRC/19/L.9; and Human rights of persons with disabilities, 25 March 2008, A/HRC/7/L.25.

⁸ UN General Assembly, Outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit: report of the Secretary-General, 23 August 2016, A/71/353.

2. WHO reaffirms that the full and complete realization of the human rights of people with disability is an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This is consistent with the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments, in particular the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD);⁹ the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;¹⁰ the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;¹¹ the Convention on the Rights of the Child;¹² the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;¹³ and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,¹⁴ as well as applicable International Labour Organization conventions, and is essential for the advancement of development, human rights and peace and security.
3. WHO recognizes that a world in which all people attain the highest possible standard of health and well-being can only be built if health systems are accessible to and inclusive of people with disability on an equal basis with others, and people with disability are considered among agents of change in the work of the Organization. It is therefore imperative that WHO is an inclusive organization, providing an enabling environment in which people with disability fully and effectively participate on an equal basis with others, and that disability is systematically integrated in all work of the Organization, as it advances its mission to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the most vulnerable.
4. This Policy on Disability is grounded in the principles set out in WHO's Constitution, most notably that 'the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition'. It is also aligned with the Organization's values which include commitments to human rights, universality, and equity, as well as to the UN values of integrity, professionalism, and respect for diversity.
5. WHO's powerful voice for health and human rights is indispensable to ensure that no-one is left behind. In line with the 13th General Programme of Work (GPW13), this policy will leverage the Organization's global leadership on health equity within the transformative agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), by supporting countries to ensure that people with disability are fully and meaningfully included in all efforts to achieve Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.¹⁵

⁹ UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 993, p. 3.

¹¹ UN General Assembly, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 16 December 1966, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171.

¹² UN General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1577, p. 3.

¹³ UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13.

¹⁴ UN General Assembly, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 21 December 1965, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 660, p. 195.

¹⁵ UN General Assembly, Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1.

Background

6. Disability is part of being human. Everybody is likely to experience difficulties in functioning at some point in their lives, particularly when growing older. How much disability a person experiences daily life varies greatly and is dependent upon how their impairment or health condition interacts with barriers in society. Disability is a global public health issue because it affects an estimated fifteen percent of the world's population,¹⁶ with increasing prevalence due to a rise in chronic health conditions and with populations' aging. Disability is a human rights issue with people with disability being subject to multiple violations of their rights, including acts of violence, abuse, prejudice and disrespect because of their disability, which intersects with other forms of discrimination based on age and gender, among other factors. People with disability also face barriers, stigmatization, and discrimination when accessing health and health-related services and strategies. Disability is a development priority because of its higher prevalence in lower-income countries and because disability and poverty reinforce and perpetuate one another.
7. In line with commitments to systematically integrate disability in all programme areas, this Policy on Disability leverages WHO's contributions to the field of disability globally. Some examples are: the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health,¹⁷ endorsed in 2001, which provides an international standard for describing and measuring health and disability; the Organization's Global Disability Action Plan 2014–2021,¹⁸ endorsed by Member States in 2014, which calls for improvements in access to health services and programmes, extension of rehabilitation, assistive devices and support services, and enhanced collection of relevant and internationally comparable data on disability; the Model Disability Survey,¹⁹ which provides comprehensive information about disability for the strengthening of policies and services, and for monitoring progress towards obligations under the SDGs and the CRPD; the WHO QualityRights initiative²⁰ which seeks to improve access to quality mental health and social services and promote the rights of people with psychosocial, intellectual and cognitive disability around the world; the Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology (GATE) initiative which supports countries to address challenges and improve access to assistive products within their context, implementing the World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution on assistive technology adopted in 2018;²¹ and the World Report on Disability,²² launched in 2011, which expanded information, statistics and analysis of the situation of people with disability, established disability as a critical developmental issue, and was a catalyst to ensuring the inclusion of people with disability in the global development agenda.

¹⁶ World Health Organization & The World Bank, World Report on Disability, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2011, available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-disability>

¹⁷ World Health Organization, International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health: ICF, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001, available at: <https://www.who.int/classifications/icf/en/>

¹⁸ World Health Organization, WHO Global Disability Action Plan 2014-2021, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2015, available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/who-global-disability-action-plan-2014-2021>

¹⁹ World Health Organization & The World Bank, Model Disability Survey, Geneva: World Health Organization, available at: <https://www.who.int/disabilities/data/mds/en/>

²⁰ World Health Organization, WHO QualityRights Initiative, Geneva: World Health Organization, available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/quality_rights/en/

²¹ Improving access to assistive technology, 26 May 2018, WHA71.8.

²² World Health Organization & The World Bank, World Report on Disability, Geneva: World Health Organization, 2011, available at: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-disability>

8. This Policy on Disability also expands other organizational policies that seek to make WHO's workforce inclusive of people with disability, such as the Policy on Employment of People with Disabilities (2010), through which WHO commits to providing equality of access to employment, advancement and retention in the Organization, recognizing that it is in the Organization's interest to recruit and maintain a diverse and skilled workforce that is representative of the diverse nature of society, which includes people with disability.²³
9. On 11 June 2019, the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS) was launched by the UN Secretary-General to promote 'sustainable and transformative progress on disability inclusion through all pillars of the work of the United Nations'.²⁴ This strategy requires all UN entities to ensure disability inclusion is consistently and systematically mainstreamed into all aspects of their operational and programmatic work and requires UN entities to report on this progress annually.
10. WHO welcomes the launch of the UNDIS by the UN Secretary General. Securing the rights of people with disability is of fundamental importance to the Organization. Building on the previous work outlined above, this comprehensive and wide-ranging WHO Policy on Disability will serve as the primary framework for implementation of the UNDIS across the Organization, formalizing commitments and driving institutional change to make disability inclusion central to WHO's core functions.

Process of the development of the policy

11. The WHO Policy on Disability was developed at the request of the Director-General, in consultation with the programmatic and operational departments of the Organization, staff with disability and Regional Disability Leads.

Purpose of the policy

12. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that people with disability in all their diversity are included meaningfully in WHO as an organization and that disability is ingrained across all programmatic areas of work.

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