

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COUNCIL**

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/5
14 June 2021
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Committee on Social Development
Thirteenth session
Online, 22-23 September 2021

Item 6 of the provisional agenda

Activities of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability**Summary**

The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED) of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) comprises representatives of government institutions involved in disability and social development issues. IGED was established in September 2016 at the request of the Committee on Social Development to support member States in implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level. IGED provides a platform for the exchange of experiences, knowledge and good practices between member States.

The current document provides a review of the activities undertaken by IGED since the twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development, held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019. The Committee is invited to take note of implemented activities and make comments to guide the work of the ESCWA secretariat in this field.

Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	5-1	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
I. IGED ACTIVITIES	6-17	3
A. Fourth meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability to discuss disability assessment and identification for the better inclusion of persons with disabilities in Arab countries	9-10	4
B. High-level meeting to support persons with disabilities during COVID-19 in the Arab region	11-13	4
C. Arab Platform for Digital Inclusion: consultative meeting on national technical guidelines on e-accessibility for the Arab region	14-15	5
D. Fifth meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability on disability assessment and identification systems in the Arab region	16-17	5
II. FUTURE COOPERATION	18-19	5

Annexes

Annex I. IGED responsibilities		6
Annex II. Members of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability		7

Introduction

1. Persons with disabilities in the Arab region are one of the most marginalized and excluded population groups, especially given the absence of laws to protect their rights. Persons with disabilities face a number of challenges that prevent their full social and economic participation, including an inaccessible physical environment, a lack of assistive devices and technologies, inappropriate means of transport, gaps in services, discrimination and stigma. Persons with disabilities suffer from the absence of a coherent and systematic approach to ensure universal inclusion in areas, such as education, health and employment, and from high poverty rates. They are among the most vulnerable groups during armed conflicts and crises, which further limit their access to necessary aid, services and livelihoods.
2. Some Arab countries have recently adopted various initiatives and measures to integrate disability issues into development processes, but shortcomings and gaps between policy and practice remain significant. It is therefore imperative for all stakeholders to intensify efforts to fulfil international obligations, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Implementing policies, strengthening collaboration and coordinating activities to collect data on disability is necessary to make greater progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the benefit of persons with disabilities and society as a whole.
3. To provide a regional platform aimed at strengthening collaboration, coordination and the exchange of experiences in the field of disability issues, ESCWA and Arab countries established the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED) in September 2016. Eighteen countries have appointed IGED focal points, who are heads of government offices or specialized bodies responsible for disability issues (annex II).
4. Since 2016, IGED has contributed to improving the implementation and monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the related SDGs, and to assisting in assessing and identifying disability at the national level in line with the Convention and international classification standards. Over the past years, under the auspices of ESCWA, the exchange of knowledge and experiences between Arab countries within IGED has led to a tangible change in policies and South-South cooperation. For example, the Iraq Disability Committee asked ESCWA to assist in the process of updating its legislation, reformulating the Disability Committee's role in line with international standards set out in disability law, and developing a national disability policy. To meet that request, ESCWA worked through IGED to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and expertise of the Jordanian Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the Iraqi Disability Committee.
5. Since its establishment, IGED has held five formal meetings (Beirut, September 2016; Amman, July 2017; Riyadh, May 2018; Cairo, December 2019; online, December 2020). IGED members also participated in a number of specialized training courses, and contributed to regional reports on social protection for persons with disabilities, a report on persons with disabilities living in institutions, and statistical analysis related to persons with disabilities, in coordination and collaboration with the ESCWA Statistics Team.

I. IGED activities

6. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, ESCWA has played an active role in exchanging information and lessons learned between IGED members on disability-inclusive responses in Arab countries. ESCWA communicated, collaborated and coordinated with IGED members to prepare a “Survey of government actions taken to prevent persons with disabilities from covid-19 and efforts to provide them with accessible information and awareness-raising materials” (E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/INF.5 in Arabic only). IGED members were contacted to provide ESCWA with information on their national context and measures taken by their Government to ensure a response that was inclusive of persons with disabilities. The report was then shared with all IGED members and published on the ESCWA website to enhance knowledge and learning.
7. Since the twelfth session of the Committee on Social Development, held in Beirut on 8 and 9 October 2019, IGED has organized two meetings for its members. IGED members also participated in regional meetings held by ESCWA on specialized topics, including a high-level meeting to support persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Arab region, and a consultative meeting on the project

“*Arab Digital Inclusion Platform*”, which focuses on electronic accessibility. The following sections provide information on these meetings.

8. To exchange knowledge on technical issues related to persons with disabilities, IGED members were given the opportunity to review several technical papers and other specialized publications to express their views, including a technical paper on disability assessment and identification, which was discussed at the fifth IGED meeting (paragraphs 16 and 17 of the present document).

A. Fourth meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability to discuss disability assessment and identification for the better inclusion of persons with disabilities in Arab countries
(Cairo, 15-16 December 2019)

9. At its fourth meeting, IGED discussed issues related to disability assessment and the challenges associated with it. The meeting programme focused on the following topics: an overview of international approaches to and tools for disability assessment and identification procedures; existing assessment and identification procedures currently in place in member States and ongoing change processes; and the overall objectives of disability assessment, specific purposes such as work ability, disability pension, disability cards, learning support needs for children and long-term care needs. The meeting was attended by several IGED members, in addition to a representative from Malta and representatives from three organizations for persons with disabilities.

10. In the discussions, IGED members presented national initiatives and procedures to improve policies related to disability issues, and amend institutional frameworks to comply with the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, so as to provide an inclusive environment for persons with disabilities to be able to enjoy their rights, including their right to education and employment. The meeting also discussed the issue of social protection frameworks, and reviews of disability assessment and identification procedures away from independent from medical models and towards multidimensional assessments.

B. High-level meeting to support persons with disabilities during COVID-19 in the Arab region
(Online, 24 June 2020)

11. ESCWA and the League of Arab States (Social Affairs Sector - Department of Development and Social Policies), in coordination with Ms. María Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on Disability and Accessibility, organized a meeting of senior officials in Arab countries concerned with addressing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on persons with disabilities in Arab countries. The meeting was held in collaboration with the Arab Organization of Persons with Disabilities, and was attended by IGED members.

12. The meeting aimed to ensure coordination between partners and Governments on measures to address the repercussions of the pandemic and its impact on persons with disabilities, identify national initiatives, and provide a platform to review the various experiences and mechanisms developed by countries to protect societies from the pandemic and its health, social and economic effects on persons with disabilities. This would lead to the development of a road map for the benefit of persons with disabilities to ensure that they are not isolated from society. At the meeting, the results of the survey prepared by ESCWA on government measures to protect persons with disabilities from the pandemic were presented, to provide IGED members with the necessary information and awareness-raising materials in an accessible format.

13. The meeting adopted a set of recommendations on preparing a draft Arab strategic framework for the rights of persons with disabilities under the umbrella of relevant Arab and international charters and treaties. ESCWA is currently working with the League of Arab States to develop the first draft. The meeting also resulted in other recommendations on the need to include persons with disabilities in urgent policies and strategies to tackle the pandemic, and to ensure that they are taken into account in general restrictions measures

on an equal basis with others, while emphasizing that all preparedness and response plans and awareness-raising methods are available and inclusive of all persons with disabilities. ESCWA is supporting member States in implementing these recommendations by providing technical support (for details of the technical support provided by ESCWA to member states in disability issues, see document E/ESCWA/C.2/2021/4).

C. Arab Digital Inclusion Platform: consultative meeting on national technical guidelines on e-accessibility for the Arab region
(Online, 10-11 November 2020)

14. Under the project “*Arab Digital Inclusion Platform*” aimed at supporting policymakers in developing and improving their policies and national guidelines for enhancing e-accessibility, which was launched by ESCWA in 2020 to bridge the digital divide and enable inclusive ICT access and use, ESCWA organized an online consultative meeting to discuss two models: a model for national policies on e-accessibility in the Arab region; and a template for technical guidelines on e-accessibility in the Arab region.

15. Several IGED members participated in the meeting, at which they were presented with the two models and provided comments for their improvement. In the discussions, participants shared their feedback on the models and their national experiences in achieving e-accessibility. The project supports the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been signed by all ESCWA member States, and contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy to enhance system-wide accessibility and mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities. The project is also closely linked to the Beirut Consensus on Technology for Sustainable Development in the Arab Region and the 2030 Agenda, by providing member States with high-quality guidance and specific support on technology and innovation for sustainable development, with a focus on the inclusion of persons with disabilities, thus promoting social welfare for all. A prototype of the platform is expected to be ready in 2022. The platform will also contain a dedicated forum for IGED, which will allow members to share information, updates and events in a specific password-protected online space.

D. Fifth meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability on disability assessment and identification systems in the Arab region
(Online, 17 December 2020)

16. The fifth IGED meeting discussed a draft technical paper prepared by ESCWA entitled “Disability assessment and identification systems in the Arab region: an overview”, to broaden the study’s scope and to benefit from the experience and comments of IGED members that were taken into account when preparing the final version of the paper, which will be published on the ESCWA website at the end of 2021. The meeting was also an opportunity to share knowledge and experiences among countries on the transition to a disability assessment and identification system, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

17. The meeting was attended by several IGED members, a representative of the League of Arab States and another of Malta.

II. Future cooperation

18. The agenda of the next IGED meeting will include one of the following areas:

(a) Digitalaccessibililty;

(b) Accessibility in the urban environment;

(c) Establishing an Arab academic network on disability, through possible collaboration with the Valletta Forum in Malta.

19. The Committee on Social Development is invited to take note of IGED activities, and to comment on work priorities in disability areas for the coming period.

Annex I

IGED responsibilities

1. The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED) was established at the request of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development of ESCWA at its tenth session (Rabat, 8-9 September 2015) to support member States in implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level.
2. IGED members' responsibilities cover the following issues:
 - (a) Act as the main interlocutor for receiving and responding to communications from ESCWA on disability issues, including through coordination with ministries and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate;
 - (b) Advise ESCWA on national developments in the inclusion of persons with disabilities, including institutional, legal and policy processes, and in the field of data and statistics on disability;
 - (c) Participate in in-person and online IGED meetings, and participate (or nominate other representatives to participate) in other meetings related to disability and social development;
 - (d) Exchange information with other members on experiences, good practices and lessons learned, the inclusion of persons with disabilities, and improving their participation in social development;
 - (e) Develop and implement biennial work plans and review performance based on desired outcomes at each formal meeting;
 - (f) Review the financial needs of IGED and propose funding sources;
 - (g) Submit a biennial report on IGED achievements to the ESCWA Committee on Social Development.

Annex II

Members of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability

Country	Name	Professional titles	Ministry/organization
Bahrain	Aisha bint Ali al-Khalifa	Assistant Undersecretary for Social Welfare and Rehabilitation	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
	Fatima al-Ali	-	
Egypt	Ashraf Merhi	Secretary-General	National Council for Disability Affairs, Cairo
Iraq	Abir al-Jalabi	Undersecretary of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs	Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs
	Suda al-Khafaji	Assistant to the Director-General	Office of People with Special Needs at the Disability and Special Needs Authority, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
Jordan	Muhannad Alazzeah	Secretary-General	Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
	Razan al-Kurdi	Director	
Kuwait	Alkhansaa al-Husseini	Director of the Planning and Research Department	Public Authority of the Disabled
Lebanon	Abdallah Ahmad	Director-General	Ministry of Social Affairs
	Marie Al-Hajj	Director of the Disabled Affairs Department	
	Najwa Shari	Chief of the Centers Unit, Disabled Rights Project	
Libya	Bashir al-Fitouri	Disability adviser at the Ministry of Social Affairs	Ministry of Social Affairs
Mauritania	Abdullah Adiakiti	Legal Adviser	Ministry of Social Affairs, Childhood and Family
	Alioun Haidara Muhammed Lahbib	Director of Persons with Disabilities	
Morocco	Ahmed Sheikhi	Director of Prevention, Accessibility and Assistance Division	Ministry of Solidarity, Social Development, Equality and Family
	Aziz Azerbi	Director of the Prevention and Awareness Department	
Oman	Hammoud bin Mirdad bin Hammoud al-Shabibi	Assistant to the Director-General; Directorate General for Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Social Development
	Mohammed Hamad Mubarak al-Habsi	Head of the Employment Follow-up Department	
State of Palestine	Jamal Omar	Director of the Department of Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Social Development

Country	Name	Professional titles	Ministry/organization
Qatar	Laalei Abu Alfain	Executive Director of Shafallah Center	Qatar Social Work
Saudi Arabia	Abdullah al-Otaibi	Director of the General Directorate for International Cooperation	Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development
	Hisham al-Haidari	Executive Director	Authority for the Care of Persons with Disabilities
Sudan	Rehab Mustafa	Secretary-General	National Council for Persons with Disabilities
	Amal Ali	Deputy Secretary-General	
Syrian Arab Republic	Khadija Arsan	Directorate of Planning and International Cooperation	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
Tunisia	Raja bin Brahim	Director of Solidarity and Social Development	Ministry of Social Affairs
	Walid bin Belqasim Al Qasimi	Assistant Director of the Directorate Administration for Social Advancement	Directorate General of Social Advancement, Ministry of Social Affairs
United Arab Emirates	Wafaa Hamad bin Suleiman	Director of the Department for the Care and Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities	Ministry of Community Development
Yemen	Faisal al-Maqtari	Adviser	Disability Welfare and Rehabilitation Fund. Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
	Aziza Naaman	Director of the Department for the Care and Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities	National Fund for Persons with Disabilities
