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**Progress in social development since the tenth session of the  
Committee on Social Development****Report of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability  
on its first meeting****Summary**

The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability was formed following a call by the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in order to tackle the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the national level. Its first meeting was held on 20 and 21 September 2016 at the United Nations House in Beirut. It brought together officials from Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, who were nominated by their Governments as disability experts.

Participants discussed certain aspects of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly article 33 that deals with institutional set-ups for implementation. They also reviewed the disability-related Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda, and highlighted the challenges of collection and disaggregation of data on disability. The meeting finally examined the Group's terms of reference, work modalities, possible funding arrangements and expected outcomes.

Participants in the eleventh session of the Committee on Social Development are invited to discuss the recommendations of the Group, its proposed work modalities and terms of reference, and to advise on the way forward in that regard.

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## **Introduction**

1. At the tenth session of the Committee on Social Development of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), held in Rabat on 8 and 9 September 2015, participants recommended that an intersessional expert group be formed to follow up “on issues pertinent to persons with disabilities in the period between Committee sessions” and that this Group “present a report on its achievements at the following Committee sessions”.
2. The Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability was thus formed and held its first meeting at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 20 and 21 September 2016. It gathered officials from Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, who were nominated by their Governments as disability experts. The meeting was divided into a substantial and a procedural part. Participants discussed certain aspects of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly article 33 that deals with institutional set-ups for implementation. They also reviewed the disability-related Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and highlighted the challenges of collection and disaggregation of data on disability. They finally discussed the terms of reference of the Group, its work modalities, possible funding arrangements and expected outcomes.
3. This report is a summary of the meeting discussions and recommendations. It is presented to the Committee on Social Development in implementation of the recommendation it made at its tenth session. Participants are invited to discuss the recommendations of the Group, and its proposed work modalities and terms of reference, and to advise on the way forward in that regard.

### **I. RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. At its final session, the first meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability adopted the following recommendations, addressed to the ESCWA secretariat and ESCWA focal points:
  - (a) The ESCWA secretariat should continue to support member States in better understanding and implementing article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
  - (b) The ESCWA secretariat should circulate the draft terms of reference and workplan of the Group to all ESCWA focal points;
  - (c) ESCWA focal points should review the draft terms of reference and workplan, and address any comments to the ESCWA secretariat at their earliest convenience, so that these documents can be finalized and submitted to the Committee on Social Development;
  - (d) ESCWA focal points should reflect on when, where and how often the Group should meet;
  - (e) ESCWA focal points should advise on whether they can provide funding to organize, attend and/or host future meetings of the Group;
  - (f) ESCWA focal points should encourage their national statistical offices to further cooperate with the ESCWA Statistics Division in order to complete the exercise on disability statistics.

### **II. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION**

#### **A. SESSION 1: THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND THE ARAB REGION**

5. The first session was moderated by Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division at ESCWA. Mr. Gerard Quinn, from the National University of Ireland, made the first presentation, recounting the history of the disability movement and events that led to the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December 2006. Following the two world wars, countries began focusing on improving options for rehabilitation of, and support to, persons with disabilities. During the first United

Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992), a committee was set up to look at how to push the disability agenda forward, but at that time there was little interest in drafting an international treaty on the issue. On 20 December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 48/96 on Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which put forward the 'equal opportunity' model. It also called for the appointment of a special rapporteur on disability to monitor the implementation of the Standard Rules and report thereon to the Commission for Social Development.

6. Some States, such as Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, moved forward, passing legislation. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was considered a landmark, model legislation. Under the leadership of Mexico, the General Assembly established an ad hoc committee in 2001 to consider proposals for a comprehensive convention on persons with disabilities. Civil society was very active throughout the treaty negotiations. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was finally adopted by the General Assembly on 13 December 2006 and came into force on 3 May 2008.

7. The speaker added that article 1 of the Convention adopted a broad, socially sensitive definition of disability. It considered persons with disabilities as subjects, not objects, with economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. It sought to prevent discrimination on the basis of disability and recognized the multidimensional challenges faced by persons with disabilities, focusing more on women and children than the elderly. Article 3 provided the general principles on which the Convention was based. Article 33 was the bridge between the text and domestic policymaking processes as it underlined the main orientations that should guide the elaboration of national implementation frameworks.

8. In the ensuing discussion, some participants considered the definition of disability to be important, as it directly affected targets of government support, while others considered it more important to focus on the concept of disability rather than to have an exact definition. They underlined that the Convention's definition of disability was open, and that each society had to consider how it viewed disability. It was important that definitions frame persons with disabilities as assets rather than problems, so it was key to identify and address the barriers that persons with disabilities faced. Participants also stressed that the Arabic version of the Convention used outdated and discriminatory language.

9. Other issues raised included how persons with disabilities could play a more active role in making decisions for themselves; how best to support employment as part of the social model, particularly in an environment of high unemployment and other difficulties witnessed by many Arab countries; the funding challenges of mainstreaming disability in policymaking; the usefulness of adopting national plans, which the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities encourages; timescales for legislation and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities; the impact of positive versus negative discrimination; the critical role played by the families of persons with disabilities in changing social and cultural attitudes to facilitate their inclusion; regional ratification of the Convention; and the importance of involvement and independence of civil society in monitoring processes.

10. In reference to article 44, a question was raised as to whether an Arab regional organization could ratify the Convention, but legally speaking this would require transferring sovereignty to the regional body, which could be difficult. Participants highlighted that the institutional architecture under article 33 of the Convention varied from country to country. In Iraq, the work of the Independent Commission for Persons with Disabilities and Special Needs was closely overseen by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, but the sustainability of funding was a challenge. Lebanon had created a national institution with authority on all matters pertaining to disability and adopted a strong disability law (No. 220/2000); the problem was however the lack of coordination between ministries in addressing disability issues.

11. Mr. Jorge Araya, from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), added that the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was responsible for supporting and monitoring implementation of the Convention, and reviewing reports submitted by States parties. The States parties appointed the members of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which had already

reviewed the disability-related legislation of some 50 States. There had been considerable progress in understanding the human rights-based approach, but entrenched stereotypes remained across cultures. Changing society's mindsets required additional sustained efforts.

12. Ms. Angela Zettler, Associate Social Affairs Officer in the Social Development Division at ESCWA, presented an overview of the situation of persons with disabilities in the Arab region, based on a 2014 report by ESCWA and the League of Arab States entitled "Disability in the Arab region: an overview", which was the first regional baseline study on the situation of persons with disabilities. Since the adoption of the Arab Decade of Disabled Persons 2003-2012 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there had been progress in the development of institutional, legal and policy frameworks on disability, including the establishment of many national coordination mechanisms. However, due to differences in definition and data collection, there were significant variations in the reported prevalence of disability across countries, and the Arab region reported lower prevalence than other regions. Persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, were more likely to experience problems in accessing education and employment than the general population.

13. In the discussion that followed, participants pointed out the need to improve comparability of disability data. Due to cultural sensitivities, some families sought to conceal disability, which made data accuracy even more challenging. Some countries adopted very restrictive definitions of disability to reduce the number of persons classified as disabled and thus reduce support costs. Participants also discussed employment quotas, which a number of Arab countries had adopted, highlighting difficulties in enforcing them. Moreover, such quotas sometimes increased access to low-status, low-paid jobs only. Quota systems should thus be combined with strong anti-discrimination laws.

#### B. SESSION 2: ARTICLE 33 OF THE CONVENTION: FOCAL POINTS, COORDINATION MECHANISMS AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS

14. The session was moderated by Ms. Gisela Nauk, Chief of the Inclusive Social Development Section at ESCWA. Mr. Quinn presented article 33 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which provides for domestic bodies to drive the implementation process and guides governments in making the necessary architectural changes. He underlined that governments could take into consideration their local contexts and priorities and decide how best to implement the article. The most important obligation, under article 33.1, was the designation of focal points for matters relating to implementation. While it was important for the focal points to actively consult civil society, the latter should maintain a degree of critical detachment to ensure critical independence. A consultative body made up of civil society members could help to guide and inform the work of focal points. It was important that focal points have a clear legal mandate. Establishing a coordination mechanism was optional, but it would be prudent to have one that would coordinate actions among the different ministries and on the ground. Some countries, such as Slovenia, had decided not to have a coordination mechanism at all.

15. The speaker highlighted that article 33.2 called for a monitoring framework to ensure that governments act in accordance with the Convention and provide guidance on how they could improve their policy choices or re-engineer their systems. It should ideally be independent, in line with the Paris Principles relating to the status and functioning of national institutions, and there should be a clear division between the executive branch of the government and the monitoring framework. National human rights institutions could act as monitoring frameworks. The framework's functions should include promotion of the Convention through education, awareness-raising and research; protecting persons with disabilities by handling complaints and assisting in court cases; and monitoring the implementation of the Convention through data collection and evaluation. Civil society should be involved in the monitoring process, as per article 33.3. It was also important that the monitoring framework have sufficient human and financial resources to perform its tasks. Monitoring mechanisms without a defined structure or budget could be hindered in carrying out their duties.

16. The first discussant, Mr. Araya, noted that reporting to an international body, as was required in the Convention, was becoming regular practice in international agreements. For example, there was an oversight function for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities met twice a year in Geneva. The main focal point in most countries was usually the Ministry for Social Affairs. This trend was important because it reflected that countries were moving away from the medical approach to disability towards a more social or human rights-based one. However, the appointment of only one ministry as focal point meant that others were often not interested or involved in the focal point's work. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities encouraged States to have more than one focal point so that disability could be mainstreamed across ministries, and recommended that the level of the focal point be high enough within the government structure to have sufficient political leverage. On the issue of monitoring frameworks, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities had recently finalized guidelines on how they should be set up, function and involve persons with disabilities. Some of the concerns previously raised about those frameworks included that they were not sufficiently resourced; implementing bodies did not properly address their recommendations; and there was no formal agreement on how the frameworks could influence implementation of the Convention. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recommended that there be closer interaction between the national monitoring frameworks and the Committee.

17. The second discussant, Mr. Muhannad Alazzeah, Senator and expert from Jordan, commented on the importance of article 33 and the positive indications of political will to conform to the Convention, even in those States that have not yet ratified it. Disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) and civil society entities were adopting a human rights-based approach, including through the promotion of the participation of persons with disabilities in monitoring mechanisms, which was still low in many countries. The Convention did not call for a standardized or unified coordination mechanism or monitoring framework; the structure of the mechanism should correspond with the system established in the country. Existing structures could be improved or serve as a foundation for a new architecture. Careful translation of texts from English to Arabic was required: for example, the Arabic version of the Convention used a word equivalent to "involvement" instead of "participation", as well as derogatory words for disability.

18. In the ensuing discussion, the representative of Iraq considered that the language of article 33 was not strong or clear enough, particularly regarding at what level of government the focal point, coordination mechanism or monitoring framework should be. More emphasis should be placed on the fact that persons with disabilities should chair these various set-ups. The representative of Tunisia informed participants that his country had an independent human rights monitoring mechanism, but that since it covered all human rights issues, only a small portion of its work was dedicated to monitoring implementation of the Convention. The new Tunisian Constitution included a section on the rights of persons with disabilities, which led to the establishment of a new commission on disability issues. The representative of Yemen noted that his country had established a fund to support persons with disabilities, which was also entrusted with monitoring implementation of the Convention. Finally, the representative of the Sudan said that her country had established the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, which was an independent government body, and had appointed state-level focal points coordinated at the federal level. It was planned that the Council would be chaired by the President and composed of ministers, DPOs and persons with disabilities.

### C. SESSION 3: ARTICLE 33 OF THE CONVENTION: PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

19. The session was moderated by Mr. Oussama Safa, Chief of the Social Justice Section at ESCWA. In the first presentation, Mr. Alazzeah stated that many governments were uncomfortable with the word "monitoring". However, it was important to understand that monitoring was only meant to ensure better implementation of the Convention. Some government entities were acting as focal points, coordinating mechanisms and monitoring frameworks at the same time, which was not acceptable. Ministries should not be responsible for self-monitoring, civil society organizations (CSOs) or DPOs could be in charge of that part of the process. Different factors affected the level of monitoring, such as the political context, legislative issues or a State's reservations to the Convention. Civil society had different mechanisms for monitoring, including submitting

shadow reports to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, States should also consult with persons with disabilities and involve civil society in monitoring and preparing reports presented to the Committee.

20. Ms. Orsolya Bartha, from the International Disability Alliance, made a presentation on the importance of participation of persons with disabilities in the implementation and monitoring processes, as they could make concrete recommendations. She stressed that DPOs needed time to prepare meaningful contributions, because they had their own consultative processes to follow. She recalled that in General Assembly resolution [67/290](#) of 9 July 2013 on Format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, Member States granted persons with disabilities a role in the forum. In 2016, they participated in all its official meetings, made interventions and recommendations, organized side events and round tables, and were invited to be panelists. Also at the 2016 forum, 8 out of 22 States spoke about persons with disabilities and 17 wrote about them in their voluntary national reviews. The inclusion of persons with disabilities in global processes would maintain international attention on their rights and ensure that they are not left behind at the national level.

21. Participants commented on the importance of being mindful of the balance between involving civil society in government processes and maintaining the independence of both parties. The difficulty for DPOs was also to maintain their independence when they were funded by the government. There was unhealthy competition between CSOs sometimes, which undermined their cause, and they often did not have a common council to represent them. It was necessary to build the capacity of CSOs and to include parliaments, as representatives of the people, in implementation and monitoring processes.

22. The representative of Morocco said that a national dialogue was launched in the country prior to the adoption of the 2012 Constitution to increase the participation of civil society. However, the mechanism for participation was not clear and the process did not lead to tangible outcomes. The National Disability Strategy was overseen by the Council of Ministers. A framework law was enacted in January 2015; it imposed responsibilities on all government institutions to adjust their regulations to the needs of persons with disabilities. Funding for schools and vocational training for persons with disabilities was provided. The representative of Lebanon said that political difficulties had prevented the State from ratifying the Convention, but that a national council was established under Law 220 to act as a guiding body, comprising DPOs, relevant institutions and 12 elected members. Persons with disabilities in Lebanon were issued a special identification card, which granted them particular rights and services, though for various reasons not all came forward to request one. Finally, the representative of Mauritania underlined that an interministerial council including DPOs followed up on all issues related to disability. An independent commission was dedicated to human rights.

#### D. SESSION 4: THE SDGs/2030 AGENDA AND DISABILITY

23. The session was moderated by Mr. Juraj Riecan, Director of the Statistics Division at ESCWA. Ms. Bartha made a presentation on bringing disability into the development agenda. She underlined that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not specifically mention disability and there were no related programmes targeting people with disabilities. The SDGs, on the other hand, contained seven targets that specifically referenced persons with disabilities, and 18 references to “vulnerable” populations, in which they were encompassed as well. She stressed that the 2030 Agenda was an aspirational agreement that intended to ensure that no one was left behind. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, by contrast, was one of the binding international human rights conventions, and was thus binding under international law. However, the SDGs did not detract from the primacy of the legal obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in any way. The speaker then highlighted the similarities between the SDGs and the Convention, which both underlined the importance of statistics and data collection in tracking progress. In March 2016, the United Nations Statistical Commission agreed to 231 global indicators covering all targets of the SDGs as a framework to follow up and review progress in implementation at the global level. Once agreed by the General Assembly, these indicators would have to be adopted at the national level and integrated into national statistical systems.

24. Ms. Karima El Korri, Chief of the Population and Social Development Section and in charge of the Unit on Agenda 2030 at ESCWA, made a presentation on the processes of implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda in the Arab region. She noted that there were three implementation levels: national, regional and global, and that the responsibility of implementation at the national level rested with governments. National ownership and participation of civil society and the private sector were thus key aspects of implementation. States were encouraged to submit two voluntary national reports on their implementation of the 2030 Agenda between 2015 and 2030. Morocco and Egypt had submitted their first reports in 2016. The 2016 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, organized by ESCWA in May, had addressed regional challenges and issues of common interest related to the 2030 Agenda.

25. Ms. Neda Jafar, Head of the Statistical Policies and Coordination Unit at ESCWA, presented issues related to disability statistics in the Arab region. She underlined that many countries suffered from a lack of reliable data and harmonized concepts, definitions and methodologies, and from weak dissemination of information to policymakers. The lack of comparable data was also an obstacle to mainstreaming disability issues in development planning. The speaker provided information on the Washington Group on Disability Statistics, whose main objective was to produce comparable data on disability. It developed, tested and adopted a short set of disability measures suitable for use in censuses, sample-based national surveys, or other statistical formats. The Washington Group defined persons with disabilities as those experiencing restrictions in performing specific tasks or participating in activities, due to limitations in basic functioning. Survey questions developed by the Group related to seeing, hearing, walking, remembering, self-care and communicating. Responses could range from “no difficulty” to “inability” to carry out each activity. Cut-off levels were defined in order to disaggregate other information, such as access to education and employment, by disability status. Those identified as having a disability were those who experienced difficulties in performing the activity, or who were unable to perform it.

26. The speaker informed participants that ESCWA was working on a capacity-building project aimed at assisting member States in developing reliable and comparable data on disability. The exercise included collection and assessment of the quality of countries’ data sets, and recommendations on ways forward. ESCWA had developed a questionnaire in line with the Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses (Revision 3), the SDGs and the Washington Group short set of questions on disability. It included 22 tables covering the areas of demography, education, employment, poverty, violence, access and benefits. The project included three phases: (a) validation of national data sets (revision of calculations, harmonization of totals and cross-checking (September to November 2016)); (b) calculation of indicators (November to December 2016); and (c) dissemination of harmonized comparable data sets (January to March 2017). ESCWA had sent the questionnaire to all Arab countries, and nine had responded. Additional responses were expected from Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Arab Emirates. ESCWA was planning a training workshop in early 2017 for the countries that had responded, with a view to improving the production of accurate, comparable and relevant national and regional data sets, and providing recommendations and guidelines for the 2020 population and housing census round and SDG monitoring.

27. Mr. Ahmed Cheikhi, Director of the Division for Prevention, Accessibility and Assistance at the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development of Morocco, briefed participants on the process that his country had carried out before submitting its voluntary report to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. A national debate was first launched in 2013 to contribute to the global discussion on the SDGs; in March 2016, a national consultation was also carried out to identify the national priorities for implementation of the 2030 Agenda; and in July 2016, Morocco shared the results of this consultation at the Forum. The country’s vision for the SDGs included reinforcing national ownership; harmonizing the SDGs with national priorities; coordinating public policy and aligning existing structures and frameworks with the SDGs; developing the statistical system; securing funding; and following up and monitoring with all stakeholders.

28. In the area of disability, the Government of Morocco had worked on harmonizing national legislation with international obligations and raising the needed financial resources. In the health sector, early detection mechanisms had been adopted and special education needs had been mainstreamed in national planning. Morocco had also enacted a law that set the general principles and guidelines for the public and private sectors in the area of disability. It had also set aside a special fund for the social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, and established a national strategy that included practical measures coupled with indicators to measure progress. The country had made progress in implementing Goals 3 (health), 4 (education), 8 (employment), 11 (inclusive cities) and 17 (means of implementation related to statistics), in relation to persons with disabilities. It had finally established the National Human Rights Council, an independent entity responsible for monitoring implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

29. The subsequent discussion among participants highlighted the lack of consideration of mental, psychosocial and intellectual disabilities in the Washington Group questions, and the importance of harmonizing reporting obligations under different treaties, which would otherwise become too cumbersome. Ms. Nauk stressed that ESCWA could help member States to harmonize reporting statistics, as it already did for Morocco.

#### E. SESSIONS 5 AND 6: FORMATION OF THE INTERSESSIONAL GROUP OF EXPERTS ON DISABILITY – DRAFTING AND DISCUSSING THE WORKPLAN

30. Ms. Nauk moderated the session. Mr. Quinn presented the High-Level Group on Disability (HLGD), a platform supported by the European Commission where senior policymakers address common challenges in implementing the Convention. He said that the Group issued useful thematic reports on developments in member States in terms of policy and legislation changes. They met twice a year in Brussels and had an annual work forum, which brought together Group members, civil society representatives, experts and others. The European Commission funded a network of European universities with programmes of disability studies to contribute research to the HLGD. The network wrote reports, tracked legislation changes and produced an annual yearbook on disability law and policy.

31. Mr. Neto reminded participants that the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability had been formed following a request by the ESCWA Committee on Social Development, and that the report on the Group's first meeting and recommendations would be presented to the Committee at its 2017 meeting. He identified four main areas for discussion: (a) whether the Group should be formal or informal—if the Group remained informal, it would facilitate the organization of face-to-face meetings; (b) participation in the Group meetings, possibly by representatives of all ESCWA member States, as well as experts and non-governmental organizations (NGOs); (c) meeting dates and agendas; and (d) sustainable funding options for the Group.

32. Ms. Zettler read the draft terms of reference for the Group so that participants could review and discuss them (annex I).

33. In the ensuing discussion, participants made the following points:

- (a) An objective should be added on capacity-building for the expert group;
- (b) Regarding the participation of experts or NGOs in the Group meetings, a sentence should be added on selection criteria;
- (c) An objective on sharing reports, a newsletter or good practices should be added;
- (d) Member States could contribute to the cost of Group meetings, or at least share costs by hosting meetings;
- (e) Face-to-face Group meetings should be held more than every other year and ways to carry out work between meetings should be provided;

- (f) The Group should adopt a common reference or common principles on disability (particularly in terms of medical versus social perspective);
- (g) A needs assessment should be carried out in order to determine the kind of funding required by the Group;
- (h) It is important that all Arab countries participate in the Group;
- (i) Observer status and/or membership should be opened up to civil society representatives, persons with disabilities and academics;
- (j) A workplan and road map should be set;
- (k) The level of experts (e.g. head of department, vice-minister, minister, etc.) should be agreed upon;
- (l) Member States should be encouraged to nominate persons with disabilities as their focal points.

34. Ms. Nauk noted that the Group would not have voting or decision-making responsibilities, as it was meant to be a platform for experts to exchange ideas and experiences. She underlined that the size of the Group should be discussed, as well as how often it could meet, considering that the budget for each meeting could amount to \$25,000. She specified that if host countries decided to cover meeting costs, they would be required to pay for the travel of participants from least developed countries (Mauritania, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Yemen) and of ESCWA staff (if the meetings were held outside Beirut). An academic network could be established to support the Group. DPOs could nominate representatives to attend Group meetings. A revised version of the terms of reference incorporating the aforementioned suggestions would be circulated for comments and would be submitted to the Committee on Social Development when finalized. Regarding a draft workplan, she underlined that it was difficult for ESCWA to create a proposal before the frequency of meetings was decided upon. Focus areas could be suggested, such as follow up on discussions about article 33 of the Convention and on statistical issues. An alternative to developing a short-term workplan could be setting meeting agendas on an ad-hoc basis prior to each meeting. However, a long-term workplan could be helpful if the Group decided not to meet frequently. Finally, she noted that ESCWA was preparing a baseline study on article 33 and the institutional frameworks established in the Arab region for implementing and monitoring the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, for which it had requested information from member States. She hoped that member States would respond to that request so that the secretariat could finalize the study.

### **III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK**

#### **A. DATE AND VENUE**

35. The first meeting of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability was held on 20 and 21 September 2016 at the United Nations House in Beirut.

#### **B. ATTENDANCE**

36. The meeting brought together officials from Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen, who were nominated by their Governments as disability experts. The list of participants is set out in annex II of this report.

#### **C. OPENING**

37. Mr. Frederico Neto, Director of the Social Development Division at ESCWA, opened the meeting by explaining the context of the formation of the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability. He underlined the responsibilities of the Group, which were to follow up on issues of relevance to persons with disabilities between sessions of the ESCWA Committee on Social Development. This Group would also provide opportunities for further cooperation between member States on disability issues, which were accorded priority

in the region. He finally highlighted the long-standing engagement of ESCWA on the issue and its support to member States on disability-related matters.

38. Mr. Nadher Al-Shammary, from the Independent Commission for Persons with Disabilities and Special Needs at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of Iraq also delivered an opening statement, in his capacity as Chair of the tenth session of the Committee on Social Development. He stressed the importance of supporting persons with disabilities who constituted one of the most marginalized social groups, especially in situations of armed conflict and natural disasters. He expressed confidence that the Group would be the first step towards strengthening the ties between disability focal points in Arab Governments and thus achieving progress in the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Annex I

**TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE INTERSESSIONAL GROUP  
OF EXPERTS ON DISABILITY**

**Background**

The rights of persons with disabilities represent a core pillar of the social development agenda in the Arab region. To date, 16 out of 18 member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has led to legal, institutional and policy changes throughout the region. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents a new milestone, as Governments were called upon to further their efforts in promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of development.

During the tenth session of the Committee on Social Development, ESCWA member States agreed “to form an intersessional expert group under the Committee on Social Development tasked with following up on issues pertinent to persons with disabilities in the period between Committee sessions, and to present a report on its achievements at the following Committee session”. The below terms of reference outline the proposed framework for the Intersessional Group of Experts on Disability (IGED).

**Objectives**

The IGED will act as the main framework for cooperation on disability-related issues between participating Governments and with ESCWA in between sessions of the Committee on Social Development. In doing so, it will serve to:

1. Strengthen ties and opportunities for cooperation on disability policy between ESCWA and its member States, as well as among member States themselves.
2. Promote regional and subregional cooperation to advance the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including through the sharing of information among member States.
3. Ensure that member States are well informed of the ongoing and planned activities of ESCWA on disability, and vice versa.
4. Carry out capacity-building activities, meetings and workshops for members of the IGED.
5. Follow up on issues pertinent to persons with disabilities in the period between Committee sessions.

**Membership**

The IGED will be formed of one or more representatives from each of the 18 ESCWA member States. Members will be nominated by the official ESCWA focal points, and may be the same as, replace or complement those representatives already serving in the existing network of government focal points on disability. Given their responsibilities, IGED members should have substantive knowledge and experience on disability and social development issues. Other experts may be added as per decision of the Group.

**Responsibilities**

The responsibilities of the IGED members will be as follows:

1. To act as the main interlocutors for receiving and responding to communication from ESCWA on disability issues, including through liaison with relevant ministries and stakeholders where applicable.

2. To advise ESCWA on national developments in the field of disability inclusion, including with regard to institutional, legal and policy processes, as well as disability data and statistics.
3. To participate in face-to-face and virtual meetings of the IGED, and to participate in (or nominate other representatives for) other meetings related to disability and social development.
4. To exchange information with other members on experiences, good practices and lessons learned in promoting the participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in social development.
5. To develop and implement biennial workplans and review performance against intended results at each formal meeting.
6. To review the Group's financial requirements and advise on sources of funding.
7. To present a biennial report on the achievements of IGED at each subsequent Committee session.

### **Work modalities**

The work modalities of the IGED will be as follows:

1. The IGED will meet once a year.
2. Face-to-face meetings will be complemented by shorter, virtual meetings (video/teleconference) as needed.
3. The ESCWA Social Development Division will act as the secretariat of the IGED. Within existing resources, the secretariat shall be responsible for maintaining communication among members, convening face-to-face and virtual meetings, disseminating documentation to focal points, and supporting the planning and implementation of joint activities.
4. ESCWA focal points will nominate representatives for the IGED. If there is a change in representation, it is the responsibility of the ESCWA focal point to notify the IGED secretariat.
5. Documentation produced in relation to the IGED will be made available in English and prepared in accessible formats where possible.
6. The IGED may invite non-members (e.g. representatives of non-ESCWA member States in the Arab region, United Nations organizations, research institutions and disabled persons' organizations (DPOs) to participate in meetings as observers or experts. Invitations to these non-members shall be extended by the secretariat in consultation with members. Non-member invitees should be recognized disability experts or established representatives of the disability community.
7. The Committee on Social Development, at its successive sessions, will review the workplan and terms of reference of the IGED and make any necessary adjustments to its working methods or responsibilities.

Annex II\*

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

A. FOCAL POINTS

Iraq

Nadher Al-Shammary  
Head of the Independent Commission for Persons  
with Disabilities and Special Needs  
Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs

Lebanon

Mary El-Haj  
Head of Disability Department  
Ministry of Social Affairs

Mauritania

Abdellahi Diakite  
Legal Advisor to the Minister  
Ministry of Social Affairs,  
Childhood and Family

Morocco

Ahmed Cheikhi  
Director  
Division for Prevention, Accessibility and  
Assistance  
Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social  
Development

Sudan

Manal Mohamed Osman Ahmed  
Executive Manager  
National Council for People with Disabilities

Tunisia

Ahmad Bala'azi  
Director of Solidarity and Social Development  
General Directorate for Social Advancement

Yemen

Mohammed Al-Hawri  
Deputy Minister of Planning  
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation

B. EXTERNAL EXPERTS

Abeer Al-Khraisha  
Human Rights Officer  
Regional Office for the Middle East – Beirut  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human  
Rights (OHCHR)

Gerard Quinn  
Professor of Law  
Director of the Centre for Disability Law  
and Policy  
National University of Ireland

Harumi Fuentes  
Human Rights Officer  
Treaties Division  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human  
Rights (OHCHR)

Jorge Araya  
Secretary of the Committee on the Rights of  
Persons with Disabilities  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human  
Rights (OHCHR)

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\* Issued as submitted.

Lyn Eid  
Programme Coordinator  
Regional Office for the Middle East – Beirut  
Office of the High Commissioner for Human  
Rights (OHCHR)

Orsolya Bartha  
Senior Advisor  
International Disability Alliance

Muhannad Alazzeq  
Senator and international legal and human rights  
commissioned expert  
Jordan

C. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

Angela Zettler  
Associate Social Affairs Officer  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Magalie El Hajj  
Intern  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Anton Bjork  
Consultant, Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Malak Elmousallamy  
Intern  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Frederico Neto  
Director  
Social Development Division

Neda Jafar  
Head  
Statistical Policies and Coordination Unit  
Statistics Division

Gisela Nauk  
Chief  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Oussama Safa  
Chief  
Social Justice Section  
Social Development Division

Juraj Riecan  
Director  
Statistics Division

Patrick Ray  
Consultant  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

Karima El Korri  
Chief of the Population and Social Development  
Section and in charge of the ESCWA Unit on  
Agenda 2030  
Social Development Division

Thomas Hegarty  
Associate Social Affairs Officer  
Inclusive Social Development Section  
Social Development Division

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