

United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy: A framework to accelerate transformative change for persons with disabilities in the peace and security pillar

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Abstract

The United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy establishes the first-ever framework for the United Nations system to advance disability inclusion across all pillars of the Organization's work, including the peace and security pillar, and to measure the progress made across the system. Evidence reported since the launch of the Strategy in 2019 demonstrates that the Strategy has provided a clear impetus among United Nations entities and peace operations working in the sector to address the rights of persons with disabilities, who are among the most marginalized in any crisis-affected community. However, the evidence also reveals that while humanitarian entities have made progress since the launch of the Strategy, disability inclusion remains an emerging area of work for peace operations in the field. The article argues that the Strategy's accountability framework has provided a much-needed blueprint and ability to monitor progress across the system, yet far more needs to be done to ensure that the United Nations system is equipped to respond to complex situations and reach the furthest behind first.

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Disability inclusion is essential to upholding human rights, sustainable development, and peace and security. However, persons with disabilities – who are among those most adversely affected in crises and conflict – continue to be one of the most excluded groups in society. The increasing number of conflicts and natural disasters, alongside the impact of climate change and the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises, stand to further exacerbate the situation of persons with disabilities.¹

In June 2019, the Secretary-General launched the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy to provide the Organization with a clear road map to accelerate progress on the inclusion of persons with disabilities across all United Nations pillars – human rights, development, and peace and security – and at all levels of the Organization.² While the United Nations has been working for many decades on the rights of persons with disabilities, the need for organizational change was clearly articulated in an institutional review, commissioned by the Secretary-General in 2018. The review recognized pockets of good practice, yet also identified clear gaps in mainstreaming disability inclusion across the United Nations system, in particular in the area of peace and security and at the field level. The progress made as a result of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD),³ and the explicit inclusion of persons with disabilities in the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals as well as other international commitments have made it even more vital for the United Nations to become fit for purpose on disability inclusion.

The Strategy has strengthened the United Nations’ internal and external accountability on disability inclusion. For the first time, the Organization has a comprehensive, system-wide framework to assess and advance disability inclusion across programmes and internal operations, from headquarters to country level. With concrete indicators and benchmarks to measure progress, the United Nations now has a clear picture of the extent to which disability inclusion is addressed across the work of the Organization. All parts of the United Nations report annually on their performance. In turn, the Secretary-General reports to the United Nations General Assembly on system-wide implementation of the Strategy – thereby ensuring accountability to its Member States.

All United Nations entities engaged in humanitarian action, peace and security, as well as the majority of peacekeeping and political missions and 130

- 1 United Nations, *Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19*, May 2020, available at: www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2020/05/sg_policy_brief_on_persons_with_disabilities_final.pdf (all internet references were accessed in November 2022).
- 2 United Nations, United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, June 2019, available at: www.un.org/en/content/disabilitystrategy/assets/documentation/UN_Disability_Inclusion_Strategy_english.pdf.
- 3 United Nations General Assembly, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General Assembly Resolution 61/106, UN Doc. A/RES/61/106, 24 January 2007.

country teams, are implementing the Strategy. Evidence from the first three years of reporting demonstrates that the Strategy has generated considerable momentum and triggered action in this sector. United Nations agencies, funds, programmes and Secretariat offices working on humanitarian action have demonstrated progress in performance, moving from meeting the Strategy's benchmarks in 15% of indicators in 2019 to 40% in 2021. In 2021, the Central Emergency Response Fund assisted an estimated three million persons with disabilities, of whom the majority, 1.6 million, were women and girls, and a further sum of USD 10 million was earmarked to target persons with disabilities. Reporting indicates that these entities are also promoting disability-inclusive humanitarian action by collecting disability-disaggregated data, documenting participation by organizations of persons with disabilities and developing related guidance.⁴

Yet while humanitarian agencies have stepped up their efforts considerably, disability inclusion remains an emerging area of work for peace operations in the field. Peacekeeping and political missions play a key role in the Organization's work to ensure disability inclusion in zones of crisis and conflict. The number of peace operations implementing and reporting on the Strategy has increased by 50% since 2019. However, peace operations are currently meeting only 17% of the benchmarks of the Strategy, which is lower than the overall system-wide performance.⁵

It is therefore encouraging that as part of the Strategy's implementation, peace operations as well as humanitarian entities are developing action plans that put forward foundational commitments for disability inclusion including: the development of disability-specific policy/strategies; conducting assessments on accessibility; integrating disability inclusion into strategic plans and evaluations; and better representing persons with disabilities in their communications. A range of training and capacity-building initiatives on disability inclusion for staff is also planned. Country teams and humanitarian country teams have expanded their focus on disability-inclusive humanitarian action through the development of resources, strengthening data collection to inform needs assessments, and delivery of capacity building and technical assistance to national authorities, humanitarian actors and organizations of persons with disabilities, among other initiatives.⁶

These actions demonstrate the importance of the Strategy's accountability framework in triggering change and maintaining the momentum for continued transition toward disability inclusion. For example, in Colombia the country team and humanitarian country team Humanitarian Needs Overview included an analysis of how persons with disabilities are affected by COVID-19, conflict, natural disasters and mixed migration. In Iraq, the field mission has worked closely with national organizations of persons with disabilities and the

4 United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General: Mainstreaming Disability Inclusion in the United Nations System*, forthcoming, 2022.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

government to take specific measures to ensure that national elections are accessible to persons with disabilities. In Somalia, the field mission is collaborating with organizations of persons with disabilities to build awareness and capacity of staff on disability-inclusive programming.⁷

The increasing number of conflicts and crises worldwide make disability-inclusive action in the areas of peace and security and humanitarian response imperative. Indeed, Security Council Resolution 2475,⁸ adopted just prior to the Strategy's launch, was a significant step in recognizing that more needs to be done by all stakeholders to ensure that persons with disabilities do not continue to be overlooked in conflict and crisis settings. While operating in difficult and high-risk situations poses unique implementation challenges, the potential positive impact for persons with disabilities, who are among those most in need of assistance and support in these contexts, is high.

Resolution 2475's call to action in a number of key areas is addressed by the Strategy. In line with Resolution 2475 and the CRPD, the Strategy recognizes that persons with disabilities are actors of change who possess unique knowledge and lived experience of disability, and consulting persons with disabilities is a foundational indicator of the Strategy's accountability framework.⁹ Close consultation and active involvement with persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities across all actions by peace operations and humanitarian agencies will be crucial to ensuring disability inclusion as well as improving effectiveness and accountability, and is an area that has seen considerable advances since 2019.

The Strategy urges all parts of the Organization to deepen their knowledge and collect data on the situation of persons with disabilities, taking into account the diversity of the population of persons with disabilities while doing so. As a system, we cannot structure our programmes and projects to reach those most likely to be left behind if we do not know the current situation of persons with disabilities in relation to our areas of work, and make plans to address it. Furthermore, deeper knowledge of the situation of persons with disabilities enhances the Organization's ability to make concrete recommendations to Member States on issues relevant to persons with disabilities. Developing and utilizing resources to build knowledge and capacity of staff on disability inclusion have been key in supporting all parts of the Organization to implement the Strategy.

Leadership commitment, particularly that of the Secretary-General, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations entity principals and country team leadership, has maintained the momentum of implementation. High-level leadership has spurred the engagement of staff on disability inclusion across programmes and operations and at all levels of the Organization, which has been fundamental to the progress achieved since 2019. The Strategy encourages shared ownership and

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2475 (2019), UN Doc. S/RES/2475 (2019), 20 June 2019.

⁹ United Nations, *Guidelines on Consulting Persons with Disabilities: Indicator 5*, May 2021, available at: www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_consultation_guidelines.pdf.

responsibility for disability inclusion by staff at all levels, across programmes and internal operations.

While progress has clearly been made by the United Nations system on disability inclusion in the peace and security pillar, much more needs to be done. The Strategy provides the Organization with a framework to come together and advance disability inclusion in a coordinated and comprehensive manner to achieve the Secretary-General's vision of leading by example on disability inclusion – a commitment we can and must all aspire to. A disability-inclusive United Nations will better serve everyone. It will provide for more inclusive, accessible and agile systems capable of responding to complex situations, reaching the furthest behind first, and ensuring a more just and peaceful world for all.