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**Promotion and protection of human rights:
implementation of human rights instruments**

Status of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto: participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in decision-making processes

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/144](#), provides an overview of the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making processes. It presents ongoing efforts and progress made by Governments, the entities of the United Nations system and civil society organizations to increase meaningful participation, in particular in the context of the unprecedented coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, which has exacerbated inequalities and heightened barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities. The report also provides an update on the status of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto. It concludes with recommendations to enhance the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in decision-making processes in the implementation of the Convention, as well as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

* [A/76/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. In article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,¹ States parties are called upon to “ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others” and “promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs”. Guided by the Convention, as well as other human rights and development instruments that focus on the participation of persons with disabilities, the United Nations works to both increase the agency of persons with disabilities and remove barriers to their inclusion in the physical and social environment.

2. The unprecedented coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis has, in many ways, hindered or blocked the participation and agency of persons with disabilities in many aspects of society and development. The crisis has exposed the extent of the marginalization and inequalities faced by persons with disabilities. It has heightened existing barriers to gaining access to basic necessities and has raised new ones. Nevertheless, the current recovery process presents opportunities to set new standards and norms, forge partnerships and strengthen institutions in order to build safeguards against the devastating impact of this and future crisis situations.

3. There are many inspiring examples of COVID-19-related response and recovery measures and processes from members of the international community, including Member States, entities of the United Nations system, private sector institutions and civil society, created in partnership with persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities. However, there is still much progress to be made in mainstreaming the rights, perspectives and well-being of persons with disabilities into the recovery process, enabling their participation and leadership as agents of change and taking into account their lived experiences. This next phase of the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity by which the international community can build back better towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the full and effective implementation of the Convention – for and with persons with disabilities.

4. As requested by the General Assembly in its resolution 74/144, the present report addresses the status of the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in decision-making processes. The report provides insight into relevant efforts and includes information contained in the reports submitted by States parties under article 35 of the Convention, as well as additional input from Member States, United Nations entities and civil society organizations. It concludes with recommendations for action to further promote the participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in decision-making processes in line with the Convention and for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

¹ As at 15 July 2021, there were 182 States parties and 164 signatories to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities since its opening for signature on 30 March 2007. The European Union, as a regional organization, has also ratified the Convention. In addition, there were 99 States parties and 94 signatories to the Optional Protocol to the Convention. The list of all signatories, ratifications and accessions to the Convention is available at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15&chapter=4&clang=_en. The list of all signatories, ratifications and accessions to the Optional Protocol is available at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-15-a&chapter=4&clang=_en.

International normative framework on the participation of persons with disabilities

5. Participation in decision-making in the present report refers to those participating, as individuals or as part of a larger organization, in decisions that affect their own lives and communities. It includes the right to vote, to be elected, to have access to public service positions and to participate in public affairs. Being part of public affairs includes all aspects of public administration and policymaking (see [A/HRC/31/62](#)).

6. The participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in decision-making processes ensures that the processes are more responsive to the needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities. It can generate efficiency and innovation and lead to improved policies and services. Such participation also leads to transformative social change, in that persons with disabilities have more agency and their voices are amplified.

7. To achieve the full, effective, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes, such processes need to be inclusive of and accessible for persons with disabilities, across all population groups, including women and girls with disabilities. Persons with disabilities must have access to the skills, funds and resources necessary to participate, free from interference from other actors.

8. The effective and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations as agents of change is at the heart of the Convention. In addition, the process to produce the Convention was a paramount example of such participation in decision-making, given that persons with disabilities were actively engaged and acted as leaders in drafting the Convention itself.

9. As recognized in the preamble to the Convention, persons with disabilities should be actively involved in decision-making processes regarding policies and programmes, especially those concerning them directly. In addition, it is required under article 4 (3) of the Convention (general obligations) that States parties consult closely with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations in the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the Convention and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities. Under article 29 of the Convention, it is stipulated that persons with disabilities have the right to actively participate in political and public life.

10. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its general comment No. 7 (2018), listed a number of points necessary to implement article 4 (3) of the Convention (see [CRPD/C/GC/7](#)). States parties “should closely consult and actively involve persons with disabilities, through their own organizations, in legal and regulatory frameworks and procedures across all levels and branches of Government. States parties should also consider consultations with and the involvement of persons with disabilities as a mandatory step prior to the approval of laws, regulations and policies, whether mainstream or disability specific”. These consultations “should begin in the early stages and provide an input to the final product in all decision-making processes”. Moreover, the consultations “should include organizations representing the wide diversity of persons with disabilities, at the local, national, regional, and international levels”. In addition, for meaningful participation, States parties should ensure that public decision-making spaces are accessible for persons with disabilities.

11. The provisions of the Convention draw on previous international agreements. The principle of participation in public life is well established in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reaffirmed in article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Participation, as a principle and a human right, is also recognized in other human rights instruments, such as under article 5 (c) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and articles 12 and 23 (1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

12. The 2030 Agenda, in recognizing the importance of inclusive decision-making for all, including persons with disabilities, contains calls for responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels in target 16.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. Overview of the status of participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes

A. Participation in national decision-making²

13. The participation of persons with disabilities in the monitoring of the implementation of the Convention is required pursuant to article 33 (3) of the Convention. However, the active involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in policymaking for national implementation has fallen short. Progress made by States parties in the past decade includes the granting of financial or other assistance to organizations of persons with disabilities, as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities in independent monitoring frameworks and in national monitoring processes. Moreover, some States have consulted with organizations of persons with disabilities in the preparation of their initial and periodic reports to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, this progress in participation in monitoring has often rarely been followed by meaningful participation in policymaking and decision-making at the national or local levels, including in the development and implementation of policies and programmes.

14. Data on the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making processes exist only in a handful of countries and for limited processes. The participation of persons with disabilities in elected bodies, such as national and local governments, in primarily appointed bodies, such as at the executive/ministerial level or in the judiciary and public administration and in leadership positions in the public and private sectors, as well as in civil society, is not regularly collated globally. In addition, most States also do not collect nor report disability-disaggregated data on voter registration and turnout rates during elections. The limited data available have not been systematized or aggregated over time and across regions. Although target 16.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals, on

² The data presented in this section are drawn primarily from the following sources: *Building Disability-inclusive Societies in Asia and the Pacific: Assessing Progress of the Incheon Strategy* (United Nations publication, 2018) (data on Asia and the Pacific); “Uganda’s reserved elected seats for persons with disabilities”, Zero Project, available at <https://zeroproject.org/policy/uganda-2> (data on Uganda); Department of Economic and Social Affairs analysis based on the information on the Election Access website, managed by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, available at www.electionaccess.org/en/resources/countries, and United States of America, Government Accountability Office, “Voters with disabilities: observations on polling place accessibility and related federal guidance” (October 2017), p. 15, available at www.gao.gov/assets/gao-18-4.pdf (data on disabilities).

responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, includes two indicators to be disaggregated by disability, no data are available to track progress towards achieving this target.

15. More efforts to collect disability-disaggregated data on participation in decision-making are needed. Further collaboration across the regional commissions and with other relevant institutions could facilitate the availability of regional and global data on the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making processes. Regular systematic reporting and collection of such data nationally, regionally and globally would be a welcome advancement in establishing a global baseline from which to measure progress and to strengthen the knowledge base to design appropriate policy or programme responses.

16. Where data are available, the representation level of persons with disabilities in decision-making bodies, such as national legislative bodies, remains low. In national parliaments, of 21 countries evaluated in the Asia and the Pacific region in 2016 and 2017, more than 50 per cent had no parliamentarians with disabilities and, for the rest, parliamentarians with disabilities comprised, on average, only 2 per cent of all parliamentarians. Uganda provides a positive example of the political inclusion of persons with disabilities, where there are some 47,000 representatives with disabilities sitting on directly elected bodies. The political participation of persons with disabilities has been facilitated by the adoption and implementation of accessibility requirements in public sector buildings, as well as by federal, district-level and local quotas, many of which are also gender-balanced, to ensure that a minimum number or percentage of seats on elected political bodies at all levels are reserved for representatives with disabilities.

17. Wide participation in politics, including voting and being elected for office, is also key for inclusive decision-making. However, even when political rights are legally guaranteed for persons with disabilities, States often limit or impede the participation of individuals in these processes on the basis of disability, directly or indirectly. Restrictive electoral or voting laws are a concern for persons with disabilities around the world, in particular in terms of their frequent application to persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, who are often deprived of the right to vote and to be elected for office. In addition, institutional environments often exclude persons with disabilities owing to a lack of accessibility, to institutional prejudice or to discrimination.

18. Of 190 countries for which information on the subject has been made available online, 128 have exceptions in their constitutions, legislation or laws that could restrict the right to vote of persons with disabilities, of which 94 countries have exclusions targeting persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. Available data indicate that only 62 countries give all citizens, including persons with disabilities, the right to vote without exception. With regard to the right of persons with disabilities to be elected for office, 161 of 176 countries assessed have exceptions. Of these 161 countries, 104 of them include exclusions targeting persons with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities. Only 15 of the 176 countries give all citizens, including persons with disabilities, the right to be elected for office without exception.

19. Persons with disabilities have a lower participation rate in voting even in countries with a comprehensive disability act. Existing data from developing countries indicate that persons with disabilities are almost twice as likely to not have voted in the most recent election and are more than four times as likely to have found voting in the that election to be problematic. The inaccessibility of polling stations has been an obstacle for persons with disabilities to exercise their right to vote. In 7 of 13 capital cities in the Asia and the Pacific region, less than 50 per cent of polling

stations were accessible. In 2016, in the United States of America, only 17 per cent of polling stations were completely accessible. Typical obstacles reported by persons with disabilities in casting their ballots include difficulties in reading the ballot, waiting in line, finding and entering the polling place, writing on the ballot and communicating with election officials.

20. Many persons with disabilities face numerous obstacles in gaining access to high-level decision-making roles, owing in particular to negative attitudes. In 16 of 19 countries with data available most recently for 2010, persons with disabilities were less likely than persons without disabilities to hold a position as a legislator, a senior official or a manager. In some countries, the percentage of employed persons with disabilities aged 15 and over who work as legislators, senior officials and managers was half that of their peers without disabilities.

21. The barriers are even steeper for women with disabilities. Evidence from those 19 countries showed that, on average, women with disabilities were less likely to assume a position as a legislator, senior official or manager than men with disabilities: women with disabilities were less likely to hold those positions in 9 of the 16 countries. The gender gap tends to be wider in developed countries, where the percentage of employed women with disabilities aged 15 and over who work as legislators, senior officials and managers can be as low as half that of their male peers.

22. While there are limited data available on women with disabilities in political leadership roles, available data suggest that representation remains extremely low. According to data collected in 2017, in 14 of 18 countries in the Asia and Pacific region, there were no women parliamentarians with disabilities in the national legislative body. In the other four countries, the percentage of women parliamentarians with disabilities ranged from 0.3 to 6.3 per cent. The representation of persons with disabilities in national machinery for gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as mechanisms designed to enhance the political participation of women, is comparably low, with a regional average of 2.7 per cent.

23. The representation of organizations of persons with disabilities tends also to be low in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters. For example, among 17 countries or areas in the Asia and the Pacific region surveyed with data available most recently for 2017, the percentage of members from organizations of persons with disabilities in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters was, on average, only 33 per cent. In two of those countries, there were no members from organizations of persons with disabilities in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters, and only four countries had 50 per cent or more of members from organizations of persons with disabilities in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters. The representation of women from organizations of persons with disabilities in these mechanisms tended to be even lower. The percentage of female members from organizations of persons with disabilities was on average, 12 per cent, compared with 21 per cent for men from those organizations. In three of those countries, there were no women from organizations of persons with disabilities represented. Among representatives from organizations of persons with disabilities, the number of women was equal to or higher than men in only five countries or areas.

24. The representation of women with disabilities in national mechanisms for gender equality has also been low in several instances. For example, in 7 of 12 countries in the Asia and Pacific region with data available most recently for 2017, none of the members were women with disabilities. In the remaining five countries, on average 9 per cent of the representatives were women with disabilities.

25. Women with disabilities also face barriers that prevent them from being promoted to the leadership of organizations of persons with disabilities. An analysis of social media data, in 2017, indicated that 42 per cent of women versus 58 per cent

of men held leadership positions in Spanish-speaking organizations working on disability issues or with persons with disabilities.

26. With regard to participation in decision-making processes relevant to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in the voluntary national reviews of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda has, to date, presented a mixed picture.³ In some countries, persons with disabilities and their organizations are invited to the consultative meetings and to submit a position paper, while in others they are left out from consultative meetings. On the basis of information collected from organizations of persons with disabilities from 13 countries, in 2017, the formal engagement, with clearly established mechanisms, of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in national consultations to produce the voluntary national review was rare. Informal consultations were more common.

B. Participation in global decision-making processes

27. The level of participation of persons with disabilities varies across international processes. The highest level of participation in a global process was perhaps seen in the drafting of the Convention. Representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities constituted 30 per cent of the working group tasked with preparing the draft text of the Convention. This enabled persons with disabilities to be meaningfully involved and play a key role in the development and drafting of the Convention. Such close consultation and active involvement of persons with disabilities, through organizations of persons with disabilities and their partners, had a positive impact on the process and outcome of the Convention drafting and its relevance for persons with disabilities.

28. Another good example is the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development, which is a part in the coordination mechanism with the major groups and other stakeholders in the context of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, created after the global commitment to meaningfully involve persons with disabilities in global processes related to sustainable development. The representatives of the Stakeholder Group have been invited, among others, as an observer to the forum meetings and to the consultations on the forum's ministerial declaration and other related intergovernmental processes, in order to reflect the needs and perspectives of persons with disabilities. This has allowed persons with disabilities to participate in the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and, recently, in the COVID-19 response and recovery.

29. As with all major groups and other stakeholders, the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities has the right, pursuant to General Assembly resolution [67/290](#), to attend all official meetings of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, to have access to all official information and documents, to intervene in official meetings, to submit documents and present written and oral contributions, to make recommendations and to organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat. However, as with all major groups, Member States ultimately decide on the modalities of the group's

³ See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "2020 synthesis report of the voluntary national reviews"; Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities and International Disability Alliance, "Case study on the engagement of organizations of persons with disabilities (DPO) in voluntary national reviews" (2017).

participation. Broadly speaking, the Stakeholder Group continues to demonstrate a high level of engagement with intergovernmental processes at the United Nations.

30. Organizations of persons with disabilities have also had a substantial impact on the annual Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Organizations of persons with disabilities participate in the interactive discussion at the general debate and the round table and they host or co-host many of the Conference's side events. In addition, each round table is co-chaired by a civil society leader and every official programme event includes at least one member of civil society on the expert panels. Furthermore, the Conference's civil society forum provides a dedicated platform for civil society perspectives and knowledge-sharing.

31. As a sign of increased political commitment at the highest level to make global processes accessible to persons with disabilities, in 2020, the General Assembly adopted resolution [74/253](#), in which it called for enhancing accessibility of conferences and meetings. The lack of funding support to accessibility remains an obstacle for many United Nations conferences and meetings. While closed captioning is, in general, available in United Nations meetings at Headquarters, the availability of sign language, for example, is sometimes dependent on the availability of funds to cover the cost.

32. Apart from the positive examples of the drafting of the Convention, the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a number of other global processes, such as the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III) and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, have also actively involved and meaningfully engaged persons with disabilities.

33. A major global survey, conducted by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction in 2013, found that persons with disabilities were often excluded and not consulted on planning responses for disaster threats. Consequently, the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction actively engaged with and provided a wide range of accessibility features for persons with disabilities. The outcome document of the Conference was the landmark Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, by which persons with disabilities are required to be consulted on plans and strategies for managing disaster risks.

34. There are other examples of meaningful participation in global decision-making processes on which to build. The Disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Network that emerged during the Third United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction is one model, and there are other examples, such as on Internet governance, where there is the Dynamic Coalition on Accessibility and Disability. Some of the most active participants in the disability advocacy community were first exposed to international negotiations and global governance issues at the World Summit on the Information Society.

35. Overall, the active involvement of persons with disabilities and their organizations in global processes has been made possible not only by the creation of formal mechanisms for participation, such as the ad hoc mechanisms for the Convention and the major groups of stakeholders for the high-level political forum on sustainable development, but also owing to the commitment of funding support for the participation of persons with disabilities. For example, in its resolution [67/290](#), the General Assembly requested the establishment of a trust fund that could cover expenses of participation of persons with disabilities in the high-level political forum on sustainable development. In other international decision-making processes, a lack of funding support and formal structures of engagement continues to limit the participation of persons with disabilities.

36. In addition, the lack of access to accessible documentation is a major barrier to the full participation of persons with disabilities in national and global decision-making processes. Website accessibility is equally important, as is accessibility of virtual processes and conferences, in particular because many national and global processes have moved online in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

III. Efforts and progress in advancing the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes⁴

A. Member States

1. Partnerships for policy development and consultative stakeholder networks

37. The full and effective implementation of the Convention requires that measures be informed by the diverse lived experiences of persons with disabilities. Many countries have formed partnerships between Governments and organizations of persons with disabilities. These have been shown to be effective as both short-term and specific and long-term and iterative engagements. For example, in 2016, the Ministry of Health in Colombia united 70 leaders from organizations of persons with disabilities from its seven disability categories to jointly develop strategies to encourage the hiring of persons with disabilities.⁵ Since 2016, Mongolia has taken action informed through continuous consultation with civil society. These include a national disability inclusion programme (2017–2021) and a project to improve inclusiveness and quality of life for persons with disabilities (2018–2022). These were coupled with the establishment of a national council on disability rights and ministerial sub-committees on disability rights (2016–2017), as well as a general department for disability-inclusive development (2018). Furthermore, Mongolia has actively involved organizations of persons with disabilities in its voluntary national review formulation.⁶ Other countries that have undertaken similar processes include Kiribati, New Zealand and Singapore.

38. To mainstream the disability perspective into national and local institutions, many Governments have integrated forums and networks of organizations of persons with disabilities into policy development mechanisms. For example, in 2018, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland formed a regional stakeholder network, consisting of organizations of persons with disabilities forums in nine regions, to engage stakeholders and solicit their feedback and to include persons with disabilities in local and national institutions. Network meetings continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, making use of information and communications technology (ICT) for accessible virtual cooperation. The federally funded National Association for Disabled Persons in Kiribati developed its strategic plan for the period 2016–2020 to inform social, economic and financial legislation. It has also been consulting on

⁴ The data presented in the following section are drawn primarily from national Government websites, State party reports to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016–2020), State party contributions to the general debate of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2019–2021) and voluntary national reviews to the high-level political forum on sustainable development (2018–2020).

⁵ Information received by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from Colombia on follow-up to the Committee's concluding observations on the country's initial report. Act No. 1145 (2007) and decision No. C-935 (2013) established seven categories of disability to ensure that stakeholder diversity is taken into account in disability inclusion activities: physical impairment, visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental impairment, intellectual impairment, deaf-blindness and multiple disabilities.

⁶ See Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific, "A national SDGs process and the involvement of the disabled community in Mongolia" (2019).

the development of legislation to protect and promote the engagement of persons with disabilities in political and public life, to be finalized in 2021. Several other countries have created dedicated mechanisms for consultation with organizations of persons with disabilities, including Egypt and Namibia.

39. However, the absence of consultation with persons with disabilities in the implementation of the Convention remains prevalent. This is due in large part to a lack of integration of consultation as a built-in mechanism in the development and implementation of policies and programmes that affect persons with disabilities.

2. Independent mechanisms to monitor progress

40. Pursuant to article 33 of the Convention, the establishment of an independent mechanism that includes persons with disabilities to monitor progress by Governments in implementing the Convention is required. Some States have designated their national human rights institution as the independent mechanism, such as the Australian Human Rights Commission. Others have established a mechanism that includes their national human rights institution, along with other organizations. For example, the New Zealand Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Convention Coalition Monitoring Group form a joint mechanism. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission cooperates with the National Disability Authority and includes a disability advisory committee composed of a diverse group of persons with lived experience of disability. Other States have created new institutions to serve as this independent mechanism. Examples include the national monitoring body in Germany and the establishment by Egypt in 2019 of its independent National Council for Persons with Disabilities. A 2011 study by the Canadian Human Rights Commission found that, of 27 States that submitted reports to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 44 per cent had designated their national human rights institution as their independent mechanism, 12 per cent had designated another body and 44 per cent had not yet designated their mechanism.⁷

3. Reducing barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes

41. Engagement is necessary for policy evaluation, data collection and ensuring that services reach those for whom they are intended. However, ensuring the engagement of persons with disabilities is often difficult owing to social, economic and technological barriers. Numerous barriers prevent the political participation of persons with disabilities. These include poverty, unemployment and underemployment, education disparity, the persistent digital divide and voting restrictions. These are amplified for persons with psychosocial disabilities and those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as women, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous persons. Persons with disabilities represent a high proportion of low-income households and face greater unemployment globally, compared with persons without disabilities.

42. Many countries are making progress in elevating the socioeconomic status of persons with disabilities, expanding access to education and ICT and enabling voting for all. While 80 per cent of Member States are taking steps to expand education, learners with disabilities continue to lack access to education owing to a multitude of factors, including discrimination and inaccessibility of facilities and programmes. Furthermore, 80 per cent of Member States still have legal, policy or other restrictions preventing persons with disabilities from voting.

⁷ See Canadian Human Rights Commission, "Survey of national human rights institutions on article 33.2 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (2011).

43. Many persons with disabilities do not have access to ICT, which further impedes their education and participation in other spheres of life. As of 2016, only 35 per cent of households in developing countries had a computer and only 41 per cent had Internet access at home.⁸ A total of 80 per cent of persons with disabilities lived in developing countries, 20 per cent of the world's poorest people had a disability and, within poor communities, persons with disabilities were at a greater disadvantage than persons without disabilities.⁹ Although there are clear correlations between disability, poverty and a lack of access to ICT, the International Telecommunication Union reports that “there are no sources of consistent data available worldwide on digital accessibility”.¹⁰

44. To overcome challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Peru created “I Learn at Home”, a distance education service offered in formats accessible to learners with varied disabilities. It accounts for disparities in ICT access by making use of radio and television, in addition to the Internet, as well as through distributing tablets. Austria, Chile, Croatia, Ghana, India, Lebanon, New Zealand, Qatar, Singapore, South Africa and Trinidad and Tobago also provide good examples of accessible education expansion. The accessible technology programme (2017–2022) in Canada is increasing the variety and affordability of ICT available to persons with disabilities through co-funded projects with private sector firms, non-profits and research institutes. Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, New Zealand and Qatar have also made strides in accounting for or closing the digital divide.

45. In 2018, France extended the right to vote to all persons with disabilities and Singapore has rendered voting more accessible through numerous measures, including by providing stencils to persons with visual disabilities, so that they can mark ballot papers without assistance, and providing lower polling booths to voters using wheelchairs. In addition, Argentina, Costa Rica, Jamaica and Peru have also recently supported the political participation of persons with disabilities by expanding voting rights or improving the accessibility of voting.

46. Singapore offers multiple accessible channels for citizen engagement with local and federal officials, including an e-engagement platform that makes use of SMS, telephone, email and social media, a mobile app for feedback on municipal issues, a public forum section in a major newspaper and online feedback mechanisms on every government ministry website. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sierra Leone organized a group of community-based “social mobilizers” representing “all categories of disabilities” to reach out to and support persons with disabilities.

47. To decrease unemployment, Croatia provides vocational rehabilitation to persons with disabilities, as well as incentives for businesses, including its “aid for employment” measure, which grants employers up to 75 per cent of the salary for workers with disabilities. Afghanistan, Austria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte

⁸ See International Telecommunication Union, “ICT facts and figures” (2016).

⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Factsheet on persons with disabilities”, available at www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html.

¹⁰ See International Telecommunication Union, *Output Report on ITU-D Question 7/1: Access to Telecommunication/ICT Services by Persons with Disabilities and Other Persons with Specific Needs – Study Period 2018–2021* (2021). The digital accessibility rights evaluation index of the Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies is working to address this, in collaboration with organizations of persons with disabilities. The index is collecting data from accessibility advocates on digital accessibility from 121 countries, representing 89 per cent of the world's population, in collaboration with Disabled People's International, and according to International Telecommunication Union indicators, as well as indicators established pursuant to the “decennial call for action on digital inclusion”, a collaboration between the Global Initiative, Disabled People's International and the International Disability Alliance.

d'Ivoire, France, Ghana, Guyana, Honduras, Iraq, Kiribati, Lebanon, New Zealand, Qatar, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom, among others, have recently instituted or expanded similar programmes.

B. United Nations system

48. The United Nations system has made strides in ensuring the leadership and participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making processes. This includes involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Convention by the United Nations Secretariat, as well as in the policy and programme development and operations of the United Nations Development Programme and other independent, specialized agencies. This progress is best exemplified by the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, launched by the Secretary-General in 2019. The Strategy consists of a policy and an accountability framework with two aligned components: an entity accountability framework and a United Nations country team scorecard on disability inclusion. Both the entity accountability framework and the scorecard emphasize in their indicator 5 the importance and the cross-cutting nature of systematically consulting and actively involving persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. The first report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the Strategy clearly demonstrates that entities across the United Nations system need to take significant steps to ensure systematic consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations.

49. The system-wide action plan is working to mainstream disability inclusion into all United Nations activities, externally and internally, which includes the review of current activities and the development of new ones. The former involves including disability as a cross-cutting principle in United Nations security, human rights and development work with Member States and other stakeholders, as well as introducing targeted measures to ensure that the rights of persons with disabilities are upheld in all areas. The latter involves the development of mechanisms to ensure that consultation with persons with disabilities and organizations of persons with disabilities are built into the development and implementation of policies and programmes, as well as initiatives to hire more persons with disabilities and create more inclusive and accessible working environments. Furthermore, to ensure meaningful and systematic consultation with organizations of persons with disabilities, system-wide guidelines on consulting persons with disabilities have been developed and disseminated in 2021 to support the implementation of indicator 5.

50. In May 2020, the Secretary-General issued a policy brief on a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19, in which he outlined the impact of the pandemic on persons with disabilities and called for disability-inclusive response and recovery measures designed and implemented in consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. The policy brief presented eight recommendations to Member States, the first of which explicitly contained calls for the meaningful engagement of persons with disabilities at all stages of the response.

51. The Inter-Agency Support Group on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as a United Nations system-wide platform to address the mainstreaming of disability into the global agenda through its collaborative mechanisms for action, responded to the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis on persons with disabilities through a series of collective efforts. These included joint and individual activities to support the participation of persons with disabilities in intergovernmental platforms, including through inter-agency support and collaborations to advance disability-inclusive response and recovery and building back better, as well as enhancing civil society participation at the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the

Rights of Persons with Disabilities, held in November and December 2020 and June 2021, respectively, the 2020 and 2021 sessions of the high-level political forum on sustainable development and the seventy-fifth session of the General Assembly. Members of the Inter-Agency Support Group further collaborated on an extensive series of policy briefs for disability-inclusive response and recovery with an emphasis on the participation and the agency of persons with disabilities in their relevant mandate areas. These focused on key issues, such as disability-inclusive humanitarian emergency response and social protection and were aimed at building back better towards a more disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable world.

52. Under a joint programme of the United Nations Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to address disability-inclusive responses to COVID-19, members of the Inter-Agency Support Group on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities collaborate to collect and analyse relevant data and statistics, develop policy recommendations, and compile good practices and other relevant information to co-create a common platform, namely, a system-wide knowledge hub on disability-inclusive responses to COVID-19. In addition, the Inter-Agency Support Group facilitated knowledge-sharing and system-wide collaboration through programmes to raise awareness, build capacity and forge partnerships among the United Nations, Member States, organizations of persons with disabilities, academic institutions and other stakeholders. These included the 2020 International Day of Persons with Disabilities and a variety of other activities facilitated through the Partnership's joint programme.¹¹

53. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights created a Sustainable Development Goal-Convention resource package to provide support for action undertaken towards achieving the Goals to enable it to be inclusive of persons with disabilities. Similarly, the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, along with the support of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, developed the International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities.

54. Efforts to make societies more inclusive and accessible are expanded and adapted for different country and sectoral contexts by United Nations offices and their operations worldwide. For example, the United Nations Development Programme in Japan supported access to justice and public service through the establishment of travelling sign language services to remote rural regions. The International Labour Organization works towards reducing the barriers to equal opportunities in the world of work. In today's increasingly digital world, this also requires making ICT more accessible, as reflected in ITU engagements, especially strategic goal 2, on inclusiveness, contained in its strategic framework for the period 2020–2023.

55. Through the guidelines on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in open and distance learning, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization provides guidance for open and distance learning in line with the Convention. Initiatives such as this one are expected, in time, to increase the agency of persons with disabilities and enable them to participate on a more equal basis in any and all decision-making processes.

¹¹ Participating entities in the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the International Labour Organization, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), the United Nations Population Fund and the World Health Organization.

56. Furthermore, United Nations conferences and meetings are becoming more accessible. As the secretariat to the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs supported a higher level of accessibility in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Office of Legal Affairs, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and other United Nations offices during the thirteenth and fourteenth sessions of the Conference, including the adoption of a hybrid meeting model, combining in-person and virtual sessions, using virtual platforms with new accessibility features. However, while digital technology can help to expand participation opportunities for those with access to connectivity, it does not facilitate the inclusion of those on the other side of the digital divide.

57. Documentation was also shared in accessible formats, and all meetings included captions and international sign language interpretation. In addition, key accessibility services are now guaranteed for all official Department of Economic and Social Affairs-supported meetings, including the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

58. The United Nations system is also continuing to improve physical accessibility and working environments. For example, the Economic Commission for Africa has increased accessibility through the creation of an accessibility centre. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF ensured specific provisions for flexible work arrangements for employees with disabilities, who may be at a heightened risk of complications, to minimize their exposure.

C. Civil society organizations

59. Civil society organizations, in particular organizations of persons with disabilities, are a major enabler for the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities in national and international decision-making processes. As previously noted, the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities facilitates the inclusion of persons with disabilities in major United Nations intergovernmental processes. Organizations of persons with disabilities, as well as other stakeholders, are key partners to ensure the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

60. Civil society organizations, in particular organizations of persons with disabilities, have emphasized the importance of including persons with disabilities in the design of all activities and products. In addition to the design of policies and development programmes, this also includes the design of commercial products and the design of statistical censuses.

61. For example, the International Disability Alliance programme on making disabled people's organizations equal partners in inclusive development in Africa has provided a critical mass of national activists with disabilities across African countries with capacity-building to organize and coordinate political advocacy work and develop technical skills to effectively engage in evidence-based rights advocacy with Governments and development partners with regard to policy and programme development and reform, as well as progress monitoring.¹²

¹² See International Disability Alliance, "Making DPOs equal partners of inclusive development in Africa," available at www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/norad.

IV. Conclusions and recommendations

A. Conclusions

62. There is limited availability of globally comparable data and statistics on the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations across all areas of decision-making, including representation at the local and national levels and in the appointed bodies of relevant Governments.

63. Nevertheless, available data show that important strides have been made by the international community in enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in national, regional and global processes. Various national and regional data illustrate progress, and laws and other measures have been adopted and implemented, including amendments to electoral laws. These include the integration of the networks of organizations of persons with disabilities into national policymaking mechanisms and processes, as well as the inclusion of persons with disabilities in independent monitoring mechanisms. Global evidence from across the international community follows similar trends, given that United Nations consultative processes, for example, are more open than ever to the participation of persons with disabilities.

64. However, many obstacles remain. Disability-based discrimination, stereotypes and stigma, unfavourable legal frameworks, and the lack of financial resources, of support or engagement by public institutions and private entities and of role models remain persistent challenges.

65. Participation in decision-making and the realization of all human rights are interrelated. The lack of access to education and training, ICT and basic services, as well as disproportionate levels of poverty, are obstacles for persons with disabilities to fully and meaningfully participating and engaging in decision-making processes and mechanisms. It is therefore essential to take a twin-track approach: address disability-specific issues, on the one hand, and mainstream disability into all initiatives, programmes, projects and policies, on the other.

66. In addition, persons with disabilities should be included in all aspects of consultative and decision-making processes and mechanisms pertaining to the promotion of inclusive and accessible society and development. Education and awareness regarding the imperative of the participation and agency of persons with disabilities need to be promoted. Furthermore, the full representation of the disability community in its diversity should be enhanced, in particular for those with psychosocial disabilities and those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including women with disabilities, older persons, ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous persons.

67. Many decision-making processes continue to lack procedures to enable the participation of persons with disabilities and to draw from the perspectives and experiences of persons with disabilities. The participation of persons with disabilities should be a built-in mechanism for developing policies, programmes and measures for Convention implementation, as well as for their monitoring and evaluation. In addition, while progress has been made by the United Nations system in becoming more accessible, virtual platforms and physical access for global meetings are not always accessible to all, and procedures and funding need to be secured for the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities.

68. A greater level of concerted action is needed to overcome these challenges and to ensure the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in decision-making vis-à-vis their peers without disabilities. This is especially relevant in the

light of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals.

69. Ensuring the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations will improve the design, implementation and inclusivity of international and national policies and projects, and ultimately benefit society. Indeed, most advances for greater disability inclusion have also had benefits for those without disabilities.

B. Recommendations

70. **Member States are encouraged to further demonstrate their political commitment by adopting comprehensive strategies that address the context-specific barriers to the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations at all levels of decision-making, including:**

(a) **Changing laws and regulations that prevent persons with disabilities from serving in public office, and adopting a comprehensive framework for equality, non-discrimination and equal participation of persons with disabilities, including through the adoption of temporary special measures, where relevant, to secure the participation of persons with disabilities. This may include reviewing electoral laws and quotas to ensure the placement of persons with disabilities and/or representatives of their organizations on political lists and decision-making mechanisms at the local and national levels, and adopting laws to make political processes, public institutions and private entities accessible for persons with disabilities, both in physical and virtual settings;**

(b) **Making polling stations, information on how to run for office and public buildings accessible for persons with disabilities and ensuring that alternative methods of voting are available to accommodate the various needs of voters with disabilities, as well as ensuring that election officials are trained on accessible elections and that polling station officials are trained on accessibility;**

(c) **Ensuring that public information on elections and public services is accessible to persons with disabilities and reaches households with persons with disabilities. All public information should be provided in accessible formats, for example, Braille, easy-to-read formats and sign languages;**

(d) **Introducing a quota system for securing the representation of persons with disabilities in legislatures and government organs and increasing the proportion of persons with disabilities or representatives of their organizations in appointed positions, including at the executive and ministerial levels across all sectors, and creating incentives to political parties and public and private institutions to increase the number of candidates and leaders with disabilities;**

(e) **Ensuring meaningful participation of and consultation with persons with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the development and implementation of policies and programmes for the implementation of the Convention, as well as in other relevant issues at the national and local levels, including through integrating consultative processes as a mandatory step in such policies and programmes;**

(f) **Ensuring that data on the participation of persons with disabilities and representatives of their organizations in decision-making at all levels, in public and private entities, is systematically collected, including for appointed and elected positions, and that disability-disaggregated data are reported on candidates, voter registration and voter turnout, and strengthening data collection, disaggregated by disability, on leadership in the judiciary, law**

enforcement, political parties, trade unions, professional or industry associations, national mechanisms on disability, community-based organizations and the private sector;

(g) Expanding the availability and improving affordability of ICT, including to learners with disabilities;

(h) Allocating the funding necessary to support organizations of persons with disabilities, including through national programmes, international partnerships and encouraging good practices among private donors, private foundations and funding agencies;

(i) Facilitating an enabling environment for persons with disabilities in political and other processes, including through targeted awareness and outreach campaigns, partnerships with media institutions, accessible information and voting stations, accessible public offices and public recognition of the value of and the need for the participation and contributions of persons with disabilities to society;

(j) Supporting young people with disabilities, in particular young women with disabilities, in considering political careers and leadership positions at the local, national, regional and global levels, including through access to and the visibility of role models, supportive mentoring programmes and initiatives for persons with disabilities promoting participation and leadership;

(k) Investing in educational tools and programmes to support aspiring leaders, in particular women with disabilities, such as strengthening the capacities of persons with disabilities to apply for public office, including through training on legal rights and national constitutions;

(l) Formalizing specific consultative mechanisms for ensuring the participation of persons with disabilities in key global processes across the pillars of the United Nations (development, human rights, and peace and security), and identifying funding to support persons with disabilities and their organizations in participating in relevant United Nations conferences, meetings and events;

(m) Investing in and developing policies and programmes to ensure that the prerequisites to political participation are addressed, namely, poverty reduction, employment, education and ICT, and health care.

71. The United Nations system, international financial and development institutions, and other international and regional organizations are encouraged to:

(a) Support and complement the efforts by Member States to improve data on the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making by establishing a mechanism to develop standards for data collection and to track the data worldwide on a regular basis;

(b) Increase assistance to support Member States in their national efforts by implementing training to support persons with disabilities in participating in electoral processes, political activities and other leadership activities;

(c) Increase assistance to support Member States in substantially enhancing the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in decision-making, including through building capacity and the sharing of experiences and best practices;

(d) Establish regular platforms for the sharing of knowledge, expertise and experiences in promoting the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society and development;

(e) **Include persons with disabilities in the design of development strategies, plans and programmes to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals at all levels;**

(f) **Provide sustained, long-term support to national partners, including civil society organizations, in their efforts to become more disability-sensitive and promote the participation of persons with disabilities and their organizations in their decision-making processes;**

(g) **Accelerate efforts to make all United Nations conferences and meetings and their processes accessible for persons with disabilities by identifying and eliminating barriers, both physical and virtual, and investing in accessibility features, and provide training for persons with disabilities and their organizations to engage in the processes for United Nations and other international conferences, meetings and events;**

(h) **Continue to implement the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy and to report on progress made in its implementation, including with regard to consultations with persons with disabilities.**
