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**Matters related to the implementation of the Convention:
round-table discussions**

Right to education: challenges with inclusive education and accessibility during the coronavirus disease pandemic

Note by the Secretariat

The present note was prepared by the Secretariat in consultation with United Nations entities, representatives of civil society and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate the round-table discussion on the theme “Right to education: challenges with inclusive education and accessibility during the coronavirus disease pandemic”. The Secretariat hereby transmits the note, as approved by the Bureau of the Conference, to the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at its fourteenth session.

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Round table 3: Right to education: challenges with inclusive education and accessibility during the coronavirus disease pandemic

I. Introduction

1. Education is a fundamental human right¹ and an essential condition for individual development, as well as for full and effective inclusion in society. Education plays a critical role in enabling participation in the labour market and in the acquisition of skills and knowledge that are central to building peaceful, democratic, inclusive and environmentally and economically sustainable societies.

2. Inclusive education is commonly understood as the presence, participation and achievement of all learners. It allows students with and without disabilities to learn alongside one another, in the same classroom setting, through lessons that are accessible to all.

II. Relevant international normative frameworks

3. A call for inclusive education was first laid out in 1994 in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. A key principle laid out in the Framework is that of the inclusive school, where all children should learn together. Under the Framework, it is further recognized that inclusive schools should respond to the diverse needs of students, accommodate different styles and rates of learning and ensure quality education for all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities.

4. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates that States parties should ensure access for persons with disabilities to inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others (art. 24). In order to realize that right, the Convention includes a provision on the employment of teachers qualified in sign language and/or Braille and on disability awareness training for professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Under article 24, reasonable accommodation is called for and learning environments must be made accessible, including through accessible educational materials.

5. Under article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, States parties recognize the right of the child to education on the basis of equal opportunity; under article 23, they recognize the specific needs of a disabled child and the need to ensure that a disabled child has effective access to and receives education in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development.

6. Under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is recognized that persons with disabilities should have access to lifelong learning opportunities that help them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to exploit opportunities and to participate fully in society. The inclusive approach to education is included in Sustainable Development Goal 4, "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Under Goal 4, two targets are focused on the inclusion of persons with disabilities: target 4.5, "ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities"; and target 4.a, "build and upgrade education facilities that are

¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all”.

7. In addition, in the Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (2014), the Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives of small island developing States addressed the importance of providing high-quality education and training and called for enhancing international cooperation and investment in education, including support for transitions from basic to secondary education and from school to work for persons with disabilities.

8. In 2016, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities adopted general comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education under article 24 of the Convention. The general comment provides Governments with further guidance on the scope of their obligation to provide quality inclusive education for persons with disabilities. In particular, it contains an explanation of the meaning of inclusive education. Placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies does not constitute inclusion (para. 11). The general comment contains a description of system-level changes to whole educational environments that begin before admission and of learning-friendly environments for all. The Committee draws on general comment No. 13 (1999) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which establishes that, to fulfil the right to education, the education system should have four interrelated features: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability, including universal design for learning. It recognizes the differences between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion. Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and acceptability. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that special and segregated settings are not compliant with the Convention.

9. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century in which the accessibility of information and communications technologies (ICTs) is addressed, but it does not establish new rights in that regard for persons with disabilities. In its general comment No. 2 (2014), the Committee states that the importance of ICT lies in its ability to open up a wide range of services, transform existing services and create greater demand for access to information so as to promote social inclusion, in particular for persons with disabilities. In the general comment, the Committee stresses the importance of designing ICTs in an accessible way from the outset to achieve lower costs and make ICTs more affordable for persons with disabilities.

10. For article 24 (2) (e) to be implemented, the Committee underscores the need for individualized education plans under which all students with disabilities are provided with an equitable and participatory learning experience and the environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences.

11. Another major policy objective in international normative frameworks concerning the advancement of persons with disabilities has been to make ICTs accessible for the education of persons with disabilities. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic caused many educational programmes to move to online, radio-based or television-based learning, making the achievement of the objective even more urgent. The Declaration of Principles adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 contains a recommendation that the use of ICTs in all stages of education, training and human resource development should be promoted, while taking into account the specific needs of persons with disabilities. In the New Delhi Declaration on Inclusive ICTs for Persons with Disabilities: Making Empowerment a Reality, adopted in 2014, the importance of open and distance

learning for persons with disabilities is recognized. Both the 2030 Agenda and the Convention contain calls for accessible ICTs. The 2030 Agenda contains a call to significantly increase access to ICT and to strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020. In the Convention, the need to make virtual environments accessible is emphasized. Under article 9 (Accessibility), States parties are called upon to take measures to promote the design and production of accessible ICTs. In the outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on disability and development, held in 2013, the Assembly highlighted the need for ICTs to be accessible, following the universal design approach, in order to allow persons with disabilities to achieve their fullest potential. About 40 per cent of low- and lower-middle-income countries were not capable, including in their distance-learning policies, of supporting learners at risk of exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as learners who were poor, those belonging to linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities.²

12. In 2020, the General Assembly adopted resolution [75/154](#) on inclusive development for and with persons with disabilities, in which it provides guidance on ensuring inclusive education in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

13. The present note contains a discussion of key issues and challenges in achieving inclusive and accessible education for all, as well as the way forward to promote inclusive education, and considers the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the progress or lack of progress made since the topic was last discussed by the Conference.

III. Key issues and challenges

14. Too many persons with disabilities continue to be denied the right to education, owing to numerous barriers and obstacles to accessible education. These include prejudice, stigma and discrimination against those with disabilities, the lack of qualified teachers to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities, as well as inaccessible schools and educational materials. Despite the progress made, persons with disabilities face particular challenges in accessing quality education in line with the frameworks listed above, because the lack of understanding of inclusive education often leads to either the perpetuation of special or segregated settings, or efforts that go no further than “zero rejection” policies.

15. With regard to measures related to the COVID-19 response, the Secretary-General notes, in his policy brief on a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19, that lack of support, access to the Internet, accessible software and learning materials is likely to deepen the gap for students with disabilities.³

16. The data available reveal that, on average, one in three children with disabilities of primary school age is out of school, compared with one in seven children without disabilities.⁴ In addition, many children with disabilities are not registered at birth, which obscures the true proportion of children with disabilities in and out of school. Girls with disabilities are subject to multiple and aggravated forms of discrimination in accessing their right to education. Some of these children with disabilities may have attended school in the past and dropped out; some may enter school in the future; and some may never have been or will never go to school. School attendance tends to

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education – All Means All* (Paris, 2020).

³ United Nations, “Policy brief: a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19”, May 2020.

⁴ *Disability and Development Report: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities – 2018* (United Nations publication, Sales No. 19.IV.4).

depend on the type of marginalization and the unique exclusionary factors faced by different disability groups. For instance, children with physical disabilities have a better chance of being in school than children with intellectual or sensory impairments.⁵ Children with more complex needs and multiple disabilities face high risks to their right to education.

17. In some countries, more than 10 per cent of persons with disabilities have been refused entry into school because of their disability, and more than a quarter of persons with disabilities report that schools are not accessible or are hindering to them.⁶ Crowdsourced data, mostly from high-income countries, indicate that only 47 per cent of more than 30,000 education facilities surveyed are accessible for students using wheelchairs.⁷

18. Students with disabilities are sometimes obliged to stop attending school because of financial or environmental barriers. Education may be too expensive for them, the school may be too far away or transport to take them there may be unavailable, or communication and language barriers may exist.

19. Unavailability and unaffordability of adequate assistive technologies are also common barriers to the participation in education of persons with disabilities. Lack of electricity in many schools worldwide compromises the use of assistive technology for education. Only 66 per cent of primary schools in low- and middle-income countries have electricity. Primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa have the lowest level of access to electricity, at 32 per cent.⁸

20. Those who enter school still face challenges to accessing quality inclusive education. In many countries, at least 1 in 10 students with disabilities attends a school in which education is not inclusive.⁹ Even students with disabilities who are in school together with students without disabilities may face exclusion because they are unable to participate in the same way as their classmates, owing to factors such as lack of accessibility, lack of reasonable accommodation, lack of trained teachers and the absence of an adapted curriculum. Barriers in communication with classmates also lead to isolation and may create an environment that is not inviting for students with disabilities.

21. As a result, persons with disabilities remain less likely to be literate than persons without disabilities: 54 per cent of persons with disabilities are literate, compared with 77 per cent of persons without disabilities.¹⁰ Among persons with disabilities, persons with intellectual, communication and psychosocial disabilities are even more disadvantaged: they are less likely to be literate than other persons with disabilities.

22. The primary school completion rate is also lower for children with disabilities than for children without disabilities. As a direct consequence of that lower rate, children with disabilities are less likely to pursue and complete higher levels of education. In a review of 41 countries worldwide, the percentage of persons with disabilities who completed tertiary education (12 per cent) was half that of persons without disabilities (24 per cent).¹¹ Moreover, persons with disabilities spend fewer years – two fewer on average – in school than their counterparts without disabilities. Children with disabilities are not benefiting from global progress on education. There

⁵ UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the Marginalized* (Paris, 2010).

⁶ *Disability and Development Report*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics database (2016).

⁹ *Disability and Development Report*.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

is an increasing gap between children with disabilities and children without disabilities in terms of enrolment, attrition and attainment.¹²

23. Many countries continue to strengthen national policies and legal frameworks to improve access to education for persons with disabilities: 34 out of 193 United Nations Member States guarantee in their constitutions the right to education for persons with disabilities or provide protection against discrimination based on disability in education. In 2017, 88 per cent of 102 countries surveyed had a law or policy providing for the right of children with disabilities to receive education, up from 62 per cent in 2013. However, only 68 per cent of countries have a definition of inclusive education and only 57 per cent of those definitions include multiple marginalized groups.¹³

24. In only 44 per cent of Member States can students with disabilities be taught in the same classroom as other students. Even fewer countries, 33 per cent, provide adequate human resources for students with disabilities, up from 18 per cent in 2013. Nonetheless, progress has been made in recent years: in 2017, 41 per cent of countries provided appropriate materials and communication to support the inclusion of students with disabilities in their schools, compared with 17 per cent in 2013. Furthermore, 65 per cent of 88 countries provided curricula inclusive of children with disabilities in 2017, compared with only 42 per cent in 2013. Globally, laws in a quarter of countries provide that children with disabilities should be educated in separate settings.¹⁴

25. Many Governments have also made progress in collecting disability data through the education management information system: in 2017, 53 per cent of 101 countries had such a data collection system, up from 31 per cent in 2013. The collection of data is key to allowing Governments to make evidence-based plans for their education systems and to improve attitudes towards students with disabilities.¹⁵

26. Nonetheless, 2020 saw a regression in inclusive education. Some countries that had previously integrated students with and without disabilities reverted to sending students with disabilities to specialized institutions. Segregation based on disability goes against the fundamental principles of the Convention and has adverse effects on the social and educational development of children with disabilities, as well as on efforts to combat stigma and discrimination.

27. ICTs can be of value in removing barriers faced by persons with disabilities in education when accommodations are provided, allowing them to participate on an equal basis with others and to benefit from increased ICT use in the education field.

28. ICTs can be helpful in enhancing access by persons with disabilities to educational tools, in improving their communication with teachers and schoolmates and in providing teachers with knowledge and tools to teach students with disabilities. Owing to their versatility and the fact that they can be tailored to user needs, ICTs play a vital role in enhancing inclusive education and in enabling differentiated instruction and personalized learning, giving students with disabilities the capacity to construct their own learning experiences. ICT tools and applications that achieve this aim include Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) books; dyslexia fonts and large print in digital materials; and audio format on websites and in screen readers and captioned videos. Studies suggest that, given the right environment and freedom

¹² Ibid.

¹³ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Disability and Development Report*.

to use ICTs, students with disabilities tend to use them more than students without disabilities.¹⁶

29. In particular, computers in the classroom can bring many benefits for persons with disabilities. Data available for 54 developing countries indicate that 67 per cent of schools have computer-assisted education and 22 countries have universal or almost universal use of computer-assisted learning in primary schools. However, in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa, there are countries with very few or no schools with computer-assisted instruction. Thus, students with disabilities cannot benefit from the advantages of such instruction. The learner-to-computer ratio also varies widely across countries: some developing countries have a very low ratio of 1 to 1, while others have very high ratios, with more than 500 students per computer. Given such ratios, scaling up the use of computers in education for disability inclusion will be challenging. In countries with a 1 to 1 ratio, computers can be used to provide personalized learning, which can be extremely beneficial for the performance and participation of persons with disabilities in education. They can also be used as assistive devices for some students, such as those who are non-verbal and who can benefit from voice output communication aids, which can be built into tablets that support, for example, alternative and augmentative communication.

30. Although positive initiatives are starting to be implemented in low- and middle-income countries, most of the ICT initiatives in education come from high-income countries. There remain several barriers to scaling up the use of ICTs in education for persons with disabilities in developing countries, including gaps in awareness, access, affordability, infrastructure coherence and coordinated policy.¹⁷ These barriers affect ICT use for educational purposes at both the individual and the household levels, as well as at the school level.

31. Several measures could be taken to overcome these barriers. One of the major barriers is that ICT penetration in developing countries is still low. In 2016, only 35 per cent of households in developing countries had a computer and only 41 per cent had Internet access at home.¹⁸ Although 84 per cent of the world population lives in an area covered by a mobile broadband network, there are only 41 mobile broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in developing countries.¹⁹ ICT access in households of persons with disabilities tends to be even lower. To give vulnerable populations, such as persons with disabilities, the possibility of using ICT tools in education, ICTs should be made more widely available at the household and individual levels, and training sessions on their use should be made available and accessible. Moreover, in some developing countries, the proportion of classrooms with Internet access remains close to 0 per cent.²⁰ Furthermore, Internet speed in many developing countries remains low.²¹

32. Despite their benefits, ICTs in schools may create a new digital divide between students with and without disabilities if accommodations are not made to ensure that all ICTs used are accessible for persons with disabilities. In such cases, the potential

¹⁶ H. Hemmingsson, V. Bolic-Baric and H. Lidström, “E-inclusion: Digital equality – young people with disabilities”, *Studies in Health Technologies and Informatics*, vol. 217 (September 2015), pp. 685–688.

¹⁷ Telecentre, “ICTs and assistive technology in education: paving the way for the integration and inclusion of people with disabilities” (2019).

¹⁸ International Telecommunication Union (ITU), “ICT facts and figures 2016”, June 2016.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ UNESCO, *Accessible ICTs and Personalized Learning for Students with Disabilities: A Dialogue among Educators, Industry, Government and Civil Society – Consultative Expert Meeting Report*, 17–18 November 2011, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris (Paris, 2011).

²¹ ITU, “ICT facts and figures 2016”.

of ICTs for enhancing the inclusion and participation in education of students with disabilities is lost.

33. The COVID-19 crisis exposed the aforementioned digital divide and exacerbated the exclusion of persons with disabilities from education. As schools closed to slow the spread of the virus, classes in some countries shifted abruptly to digital modes reliant on computers, tablets and online learning portals, virtual lessons and radio- or television-based lessons. While these solutions might be workable options in some developed countries, they are not always accessible to all learners, including those with disabilities, especially those in poorer households and those in remote areas.

34. Availability and accessibility of quality ICTs is only one of the barriers that were amplified during the pandemic. Learners with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the disruption. About 40 per cent of the poorest countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during the crisis, including learners with disabilities, owing to limited access to learning materials and support, with parents and caregivers less likely to expect their return to school.²² Online school is feasible only in households with electricity, Internet access and the proper technology. However, households that include persons with disabilities are less likely than others to have those resources available to them. Even when the necessary tools are in place, distance-learning programmes are often not accessible and leave behind many persons with disabilities.²³ Even low-technology approaches have little chance of ensuring learning continuity. Among the poorest 20 per cent of households, only 7 per cent in Ethiopia own a radio, 8 per cent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 14 per cent in Madagascar and 30 per cent in Kenya. None own a television.²⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, in some countries, students with hearing impairments have reported that online education is not accessible to them because it is carried out through spoken language with no provision of sign-language interpreters; children with visual impairments have indicated difficulties with participating in online educational opportunities; and students with intellectual disabilities have reported losing the personalized support that they need for learning, partly owing to the inadequacy of social protection provided for education workers, especially those qualified in inclusive education (see [A/HRC/44/39](#)). The content and pedagogy used for the distance-learning curriculum also need to be suitable for learners with intellectual disabilities; this has rarely been the case during the pandemic,²⁵ and comes in addition to the inaccessibility of materials.

35. Furthermore, in many countries, there is no policy that addresses how digital education, including online classroom teaching, will generally be made accessible for persons with disabilities. Even in countries that quickly developed disability-inclusive guidelines for protecting persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, these guidelines often did not take into account the educational needs of students with disabilities or include provisions to ensure online, distance or home-based education for learners with disabilities.

36. The available data, which are disparate across countries and regions, show that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, around 570 million children lacked access to basic

²² M. Orsander, P. Mendoza, M. Burgess and S.M. Arlini, *The Hidden Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Families with Disabilities: A Global Research Series* (London, Save the Children International, 2020).

²³ Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development, “The experience of persons with disabilities with COVID-19: a short qualitative research study carried out between 1 May to 5 June 2020”.

²⁴ UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020*.

²⁵ World Bank, *Pivoting to Inclusion: Leveraging Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities (Inclusive Education Initiative)* (Washington, D.C., 2020).

drinking water services in school, nearly 620 million lacked access to basic sanitation and 900 million lacked access to hand-washing services.²⁶ The rights to water and sanitation are interrelated with the right to education because, especially in the context of a health crisis, access to water, sanitation and hygiene affect the health of school-age children and their ability to continue schooling. In countries where in-person schooling has continued owing to barriers to remote education, students with disabilities have confronted a lack of accessibility of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.²⁷ These barriers are exacerbated for those living in informal settlements and those affected by humanitarian emergencies.

37. In addition to causing learning loss, school closures and disruptions to skills and training programmes may increase school dropout rates among students with disabilities. If measures are not taken to address these gaps quickly, the effects are likely to be more than temporary shocks and may not easily be erased in the next academic year. They may have long-term negative impacts for individuals with disabilities and for society in general, such as lower lifetime earnings and impact on gross domestic product (GDP) growth. Studies have suggested that the loss of about one year of in-class learning could lead to a financial loss equivalent to a full year of earnings.²⁸

38. There are also impacts for learners with disabilities that go beyond learning loss and dropout rates. For many children with disabilities, peer relations, social perception and social competence are significant aspects of their individual education plans. In addition, school closures can also mean that many children with disabilities cannot access complementary services, such as food provision and medical check-ups or referral mechanisms for abuse and neglect.²⁹ Students living in institutions have faced additional challenges owing to restrictions on leaving the premises and on receiving visits because of higher rates of COVID-19 infection in such institutions. In some countries, residents were locked down in their rooms without access to the Internet, compounding the loss of support and of access to education.³⁰ These negative impacts on learning, quality of life and social and economic opportunity are compounded for women and girls with disabilities, who already experience greater rates of early dropout, social and economic exclusion and abuse and neglect than their male counterparts.

39. Persons with disabilities are also at risk of being left out of plans to reopen schools. Safely getting back to in-person learning during the COVID-19 crisis requires access to regular COVID-19 testing for students. Yet many COVID-19 testing sites are inaccessible for persons with disabilities. In various countries, tests are conducted in existing health facilities. In developed countries, crowdsourced reviews have shown that 20 per cent of hospitals, 32 per cent of pharmacies and 45 per cent of doctors' offices are not wheelchair-accessible.³¹ With regard to developing countries, data collected in selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia show that 30 per cent of persons with disabilities indicate that primary

²⁶ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO), *Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Global Baseline Report 2018* (New York, 2018).

²⁷ WHO, "Disability considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak" (2020); H. Kuper and P. Heydt, "The missing billion: access to health services for 1 billion people with disabilities" (2019); I. Mactaggart et al., "Access to water and sanitation among people with disabilities: results from cross-sectional surveys in Bangladesh, Cameroon, India and Malawi", *BMJ Open*, vol. 8, No. 6 (June 2018).

²⁸ Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: the hurt could last a lifetime", McKinsey & Company, 2020.

²⁹ United Nations, "Policy brief: the impact of COVID-19 on children", 15 April 2020.

³⁰ Inclusion Europe, *Neglect and Discrimination. Multiplied: How COVID-19 Affected the Rights of People with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Families* (Brussels, October 2020).

³¹ *Disability and Development Report*.

health-care clinics are not accessible and that 24 per cent of hospitals are not accessible.³² Furthermore, newly created facilities for COVID-19 testing rarely incorporate accessibility features for persons with disabilities, and information, especially accessible information, on the accessibility of sites is rarely available. Initiatives to address these issues have been put in place in a few countries, including offering COVID-19 testing at home for persons with disabilities and listing online the locations of testing sites accessible for persons with disabilities. In addition, persons with disabilities are at risk of being excluded from post-COVID-19 accelerated education, remedial and catch-up programmes if these programmes are not designed to be inclusive. Families and administrations have also, in several instances, postponed the return to school for children with disabilities owing to the perception that they are more vulnerable to COVID-19.³³

40. For many families of students with disabilities, the shift to remote learning has created additional financial pressures. These students require varied educational and support services. Many families are facing tough decisions because responsibility for therapies and education is falling on their shoulders and, in some instances, children living in institutions have returned to their family homes owing to restrictions on visits. Meanwhile, many households are also facing financial challenges because of job losses. Some countries have put in place financial support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic for families under economic pressure.

IV. Ways forward: promoting inclusive education

41. In an inclusive education system, all learners with and without disabilities learn together in classes in their local community schools. All learners are provided with the support they need from primary to tertiary and vocational education, in inclusive, accessible schools, including bilingual sign-language schools. Some learners with and without disabilities may choose to attend an inclusive school away from their community to benefit from bilingual sign-language education, to acquire skills and knowledge or to receive specific support not yet available in their community.³⁴

42. However, education for persons with disabilities is still seen in many countries as just giving access instead of focusing on meaningful inclusion. There remain considerable gaps at the school level: in materials and communication (including assistive products for learning), human resources (including teachers), in-service training for staff, and the physical environment (including adaption and construction of accessible school buildings). The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted gaps in virtual environments (including accessible and inclusive remote learning). Without these vital front-line resources in place, it is practically impossible to enable children with disabilities to go to school.

43. There is an urgent need to improve access to quality, equitable, inclusive education for persons with disabilities. Educational disadvantage could lead to higher rates of social exclusion and poverty and could have long-term implications for the capacity of persons with disabilities to participate in the labour force.

44. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased complexities for the education of children with disabilities. However, the pandemic can be used as an opportunity to rethink how education planning can be inclusive of, and increase access for, persons with disabilities. Below are some specific measures and policies, as well as good

³² Ibid.

³³ Inclusion Europe, *Neglect and Discrimination. Multiplied*.

³⁴ International Disability Alliance, "What an inclusive, equitable, quality education means to us: report of the International Disability Alliance, March 2020".

practices, to address the current challenges and to find entry points to achieve accessible and inclusive education.

A. Ensuring that efforts to put children back in school are more inclusive of learners with disabilities

45. Building a truly inclusive education system is the only way to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all children and learners, including learners with disabilities.³⁵ Many countries achieve higher completion rates of primary education for children without disabilities than for their peers with disabilities. This suggests that efforts to improve completion rates are biased towards children without disabilities and need to be more inclusive. Both general and targeted initiatives to keep children and youth with disabilities in school are needed, with a focus on those with the highest risk of exclusion, such as learners with psychosocial disabilities and learners with intellectual disabilities, who are most often left behind by education systems.

46. Post-pandemic inclusive education strategies must also include younger children, at the pre-primary level. However, national and regional education policies fail to take intersectional discrimination into account.

47. Although the participation of women and girls with disabilities in education has improved considerably and, in many countries, equals that of men and boys with disabilities, there are still countries where double discrimination is keeping girls and women with disabilities out of school at much higher rates than their male counterparts. Initiatives that are focused on gender and disability and partnerships between organizations working in the gender and disability fields have shown positive outcomes in countering this type of discrimination in education.

48. Several countries have adopted legislation, policies and guidelines to promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in education, but more countries need to follow these practices. There are also various initiatives to encourage the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education system, such as promoting the enrolment of students with disabilities through direct admission to universities, providing accessible accommodation in student dormitories and awarding scholarships. It should be noted that, when countries enact legislation aimed at integrating children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms without adequate support, this could be counterproductive, because such children may be further excluded if education resource allocation is aimed at moving towards a single education system. Building truly inclusive schools requires the transformation of existing education systems. Inclusive education requires cross-sectoral and interministerial collaboration.

49. Universal design for learning must be considered in order to increase learner diversity. Many countries offer education plans that are inclusive of students with disabilities through the use of tailored curricula or programmes and through provision for alternative arrangements for exams and assessments, allowing for exemptions, adaptation of exam conditions or format, and revalidation activities.

50. Some countries conduct awareness campaigns aimed at improving the understanding of disability among teachers, students and communities as a way to promote inclusive education, in line with articles 8 and 24 (4) of the Convention. Literature reviews have shown what works best to enable teachers to understand persons with disabilities and the barriers they face. This understanding can be

³⁵ Ibid.

translated into their teaching through theatre, role plays, games and songs.³⁶ Consistent and prolonged contact with disability advocates can also improve teachers' understanding of the barriers faced by persons with disabilities. In addition, there is considerable evidence that schools can become real champions of inclusion, with all children supporting their peers with disabilities from an empathetic and aware position that is positive, once they have gained an understanding of the oppression that results from "disabilism" or "ableism" within their curriculum. This approach also considerably reduces othering, name-calling and bullying and makes inclusive education much more feasible for children with disabilities.

B. Involving persons with disabilities in the design of education policies

51. To realize the rights of persons with disabilities in education, commitment and concerted effort from all relevant stakeholders, including organizations of persons with disabilities, their families and organizations representing their families, are pivotal. Many organizations are already working towards empowering persons with disabilities, including persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as those with hearing or vision loss or other disabilities, to participate in the design and implementation of the education policies of their countries. As a result of their advocacy, persons with disabilities have become active participants in the development of an inclusive education policy in some countries. Other countries should also engage persons with disabilities in policymaking related to education.

C. Investing in universal design of information and communications technologies for education and making them accessible to all

52. Although some countries have policies for the implementation or delivery of ICTs for education, national initiatives to increase the availability of ICTs in education for persons with disabilities are lacking. ICT and disability actors should stop working in isolation; coordinated mechanisms to increase ICT use for persons with disabilities in educational settings are needed, as well as multi-stakeholder partnerships for effective policy implementation and monitoring. The establishment of national procurement systems could lead to bulk buying and reduction of prices.

53. ICTs can be cost-effective options in making education accessible to all because, once the learning content is produced, the additional cost of sharing it with as many students as needed tends to be minimal or none. For example, teachers of deaf learners can record with their mobile devices a story read in the classroom, using sign language, and any deaf student can then have access to that video at any time at no cost. The initial investment in the production of accessible textbooks and other learning materials in digital format will vary from country to country but, once produced, they are accessible to anyone and will be ready for distribution at scale. This represents a very small investment compared to the cost of producing regular printed textbooks. The trend of decreasing costs of ICT is expected to lead to a further reduction in the cost of teaching materials in the future. Now that ICT tools are less expensive and more widely available, there is a critical opportunity to use them to provide access to education for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

54. A more coordinated approach to inclusive education that makes universal accessibility norms an integral part of the content creation process, rather than a

³⁶ R. Rieser, *Teacher Education for Children with Disabilities: Literature Review For UNICEF REAP Project* (UNICEF, 2013).

supplementary exercise, will be key in responding to COVID-19 and future pandemics. Standardized guidelines for digital education infrastructure for learners with disabilities should be devised in accordance with the Convention. In the design, development and production of ICTs, accessibility and usability, as well as affordability for all persons, including persons with disabilities, need to be considered at the outset. More research and development are needed to create new ICT-enabled solutions for education that can be used by everyone.

55. The most excluded and poorest households should be targeted with free or affordable Internet access, and learners with disabilities should have adequate access to equipment to enable them to benefit from remote learning.

56. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted shortcomings in the accessibility of online education and distance learning. The lack of accessibility extends to all types of ICT platforms used in remote learning, including radio and television, which still often lack accessibility features.

D. Providing low-tech and no-tech options for education during crises

57. Many learners with disabilities do not have household Internet access, and many countries have low Internet and broadband penetration or unaffordable mobile data plans. This is further compounded by the fact that households with persons with disabilities also consistently have lower rates of media access. Energy poverty also disproportionately affects people with disabilities, owing to higher housing costs and the use of assistive devices with high energy consumption. The importance of providing quality, effective, low-cost low-tech and no-tech solutions, such as delivery of paper documents that takes into consideration safe handling and distribution, should not be underestimated. Alternatives to remote learning during pandemic crises should be supported by adequate health-care systems and services, including accessible and affordable COVID-19 testing for persons with disabilities.

E. Making schools fully accessible

58. Many countries have taken action to enhance accessibility in schools, but these efforts are not yet universal. Some of the efforts were focused on revising construction standards and reviewing school buildings and facilities. They have led to the identification of physical obstacles that prevent persons with disabilities from enjoying their right to education, and the installation or modification of ramps, lifts and other accessible facilities. Measures have also been put in place to equip schools with specialized ICT solutions for persons with disabilities, such as large screens, Braille printers, assistive audio software and acoustic floors that vibrate with music for dance classes. It is important to make sure that children with communication disabilities are included, with ICT options for children who use alternative and augmentative communication, including voice output communication aids, which are included in the priority assistive products list issued by WHO in 2016.

59. Efforts have also been made to adapt teaching and learning environments to the diverse needs of students. Some schools are equipped with assistive technology and devices in support of learners, including ICT tools such as speech synthesizers, spelling tools, digital books and computer technology and software. Some schools provide education in sign language for deaf children or in Braille; use audiovisual materials, games and activities or e-books for children who have loss of hearing; and create an accessible online library with audio books. In some countries, educational materials in sign languages are made available in libraries. In many countries, the

arts, such as drama, music and drawing, have been incorporated into pedagogical methods for inclusive education for children with disabilities.

F. Supporting and building the capacity of teachers

60. Building the capacity of teachers – both pre- and in-service – in inclusive education is essential to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Significant investments are needed to recruit an adequate number of teachers, including teachers with disabilities. Teacher training classes and training manuals for teachers have been offered online – for example, through massive open online courses – and offline in some countries. Initiatives in other countries include the use of software to create educational materials in sign language to assist teachers, and university courses aimed at training teachers to teach in sign language. Such training should take a twin-track approach focused both on the general equity of inclusion and on the support that students with disabilities require depending on their type of impairment.³⁷

61. As schools transition to online learning during the COVID-19 crisis, it is important to provide teachers with guidance and relevant, evidence-based resources on how to deliver lessons that are inclusive of persons with disabilities in remote and online settings.

62. Another barrier is the fact that many teachers lack ICT skills and knowledge. On average, 40 per cent of teachers in countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development lack professional ICT skills. They are unprepared to teach online and cannot ensure student engagement, specifically for students with disabilities. Back-to-school responses to COVID-19 must anticipate the significant psychological and socioemotional impact of the pandemic on learners with disabilities, their teachers and education support staff. Appropriate resources and support services should be accessible and available to all members of school communities.

63. Furthermore, given that greater social protection measures are needed to provide economic support to all during the COVID-19 pandemic, a concerted effort must be made to extend these measures to education professionals, especially teachers qualified in inclusive education.

G. Ensuring that persons with disabilities have the financial means to participate in education

64. Persons with disabilities are at a higher risk of poverty than others and often face extra costs – estimated at a third of average income – as a result of living with disabilities.³⁸ Financial support is vital for students who cannot meet these extra costs. Such financial aid can be provided in the form of student grants, loans and coverage of the cost of transport to school. For instance, some countries allow reimbursement of taxi fares for students with disabilities who face barriers in taking public transport.

65. Online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic increased Internet expenditures in households. Although the cost of mobile broadband has been decreasing considerably in low- and middle-income countries, households with one

³⁷ UNICEF, *Educating Teachers for Children with Disabilities: Mapping, Scoping and Best Practices Exercise in the Context of Developing Inclusive Education – Rights, Education and Protection (REAP) Project* (2013).

³⁸ *Disability and Development Report*.

or more persons with disabilities would benefit from programmes to provide affordable Internet access.

66. Governments should remove school fees and direct and indirect costs for accessing education and guarantee that children with disabilities can benefit from free and compulsory education.

H. Addressing disruptions in support and care

67. Children with disabilities may require rehabilitation services, namely, physical and occupational therapies, speech and language therapy and related services, basic education support and assistive technology, which are often available only at school. Similarly, access to school nutrition programmes may be interrupted by school closures. Inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene facilities may not be available at home or in the community. In locked-down jurisdictions, many personal assistants and necessary support workers are not deemed essential workers, which results in disrupted services or no services at all. In addition, many health-care and social services for children with disabilities are made available through school. Like many children, children with learning disabilities are sensitive to changes in routine and need teacher support and continuous care to work independently. Mitigative COVID-19 response policies must ensure continued access to the necessary networks and services that often accompany schooling.

I. Assessing implementation through adequate monitoring

68. A lack of disaggregated data and research on disability and education impedes the development of effective policies and programmes to promote inclusive education. More data on disability are needed to guide future efforts. For example, there are currently no data available on the digital skills of specialist teachers who are teaching learners with disabilities in developing or least-developed countries. Often, data concerning discrete categories of disabilities are missing; for example, statistics relating to the deaf and hard of hearing are collected together, even though the needs of the two groups are quite different, which makes the data less useful for policy and programme development.

69. An increasing number of countries have been investing in monitoring. Many countries have been collecting, recording and analysing data on disability in the context of education, either by creating information systems with data on pupils with disabilities in schools or by developing indicators that track educational performance to accurately measure the progress of students with disabilities. The use of standardized methodologies and tools such as the Washington Group short set of questions on disability and the module on child functioning, as well as contextually appropriate diagnostic tools, should be integrated into efforts to collect disability-disaggregated data.

70. Communities have also been successfully engaged in monitoring educational outcomes for learners with disabilities. To assess the implementation of inclusive education, various countries have established monitoring mechanisms at the local, national or regional levels, such as commissions, task force teams or groups that provide guidance on education to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met and to monitor progress. Some countries have established follow-up services or mechanisms that rely on monitoring by communities, such as disability helplines through which families of students with disabilities can report concerns and solutions can be offered in cooperation with local education authorities and school inspectorates, as well as the involvement of parents in monitoring the effectiveness

of measures taken for inclusive education. The involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities in monitoring and data collection is also key to reaching out to persons with disabilities, particularly those who are often excluded from data collection, such as persons with intellectual disabilities or those with complex support needs.

V. Guiding questions for discussion by the panel

71. The following questions are presented for consideration at the round-table discussion:

(a) What are the existing good examples of initiatives to remove barriers and make quality education inclusive, available and accessible to persons with disabilities, in particular to students with high support needs? How can these good practices be scaled up or adapted to meet the needs associated with the COVID-19 crisis?

(b) What can be done by Governments, United Nations agencies, donors, civil society, including organizations of persons with disabilities, and private actors to improve the accessibility of both in-person and remote education, and how can they work together to that end, especially to ensure that the gains made so far with regard to inclusive and accessible education for learners with disabilities are not lost?

(c) What measures do States parties need to take to increase the availability and use of ICTs and assistive technology in education for those who need them? What initiatives have been taken to address the unmet need for ICTs and assistive technology in education?

(d) Are there specific measures, in both the public and the private sectors, that have encouraged the creation of accessible educational products and services that are inclusive of the needs of persons with disabilities, including through the use of universal design?

(e) How can Governments and other stakeholders address the socioeconomic impact on persons with disabilities of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic?
