Empowering Persons with Disabilities through ICTs

UNESCO's Pavilion at ITU Telecom World 2009
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Table of content

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ICTs improve the quality of life
of persons with disabilities by
providing access
to information and knowledge,
new employment
and socialization opportunities

In the last decades, the world has witnessed radical changes, in no small part because of the rapid advancement in information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have opened new avenues for development around the world. ICTs have great potential to improve the quality of life, for example in accessing education and healthcare, and provide new employment opportunities. For persons with disabilities, they hold many additional promises.

About 10 per cent of the world's population has a disability of one or the other form [1]. While their living conditions vary, persons with disabilities show the experience of being exposed to discrimination, social exclusion and poverty, as the following data demonstrate:

➜ Over 80 per cent of persons with disabilities live in isolated rural areas in developing countries[2];

➜ 62 million children of primary school age cope with disability[3];

➜ 186 million children with disabilities have not completed their primary school education[4];

➜ Unemployed rate amount in developing countries to 90 per cent of persons with disabilities of working age and in developed countries to 70 per cent.

At the same time, the rights of persons with disabilities are increasingly recognized. This shift to the human rights perspective, which is taking place in all economic and social systems, has been endorsed by the United Nations.

Indeed, the empowerment of persons with disabilities, particularly through effective use of ICTs, is not a charity, but the fulfillment of fundamental human rights as stated in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[5], highlithing that "all human beings are born free and equal in rights and dignity".

International legal instruments[6] recognized the need to promote, protect and ensure that people with disabilities would enjoy the full and equal recognition of their rights.

UNESCO is committed to the implementation of the Plan of Action[7] adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 that includes two important areas for persons with disabilities, namely access to information and knowledge and capacity building.

[1] http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/unsystem.shtml
[2] http://www.fao.org/newsroom/EN/news/2006/1000453/index.html
[3] http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=38522&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
[4] http://www.opcr.org/english/stats_world.htm
[5] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, United Nations
[6] United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; treaties such as the International Covenants on Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights; The United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities; The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol.

[7] Specifically: C2 Infrastructure: "Encourage the design and production of ICT equipment and services so that everyone, has easy and affordable access to them including older people, persons with disabilities, children, especially marginalized children, and other disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and promote the development of technologies, applications, and content suited to their needs, guided by the Universal Design Principle and further enhanced by the use of assistive technologies."C3 Access to Information and Knowledge: "Adaptation of ICT infrastructure, tools and applications that facilitate accessibility of ICTs for all, and disadvantaged groups in particular." C4 Capacity Building: "Address the need to ensure the benefits offered by ICTs for all, including disadvantaged, marginalised and vulnerable groups."

UNESCO's role

Establishing ICT policies and tools
for persons with disabilities
based on human rights, not charity

UNESCO promotes the concept of knowledge societies that are inclusive, pluralistic, equitable, open and participatory.

UNESCO also promotes better understanding of issues related to disability and mobilizes support for the recognition of the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities, and of the benefits of their integration in society.

In this context, UNESCO fosters effective utilisation of ICTs which are accessible, adaptive and affordable. UNESCO fosters international commitment to supporting measures that facilitate the lives of persons with disabilities and ensure their inclusion in society.

Together with its partners, such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), DAISY Consortium, China Foundation for Disabled Persons, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Everyone Counts, Inc., Nuance Communications, Freedom Scientific and Ability, supported by Willager, UNESCO advocates for the rights and needs of persons with disabilities as well as promotes best practices. The extent to which persons with disabilities can have access to and benefit from ICTs also depends on the overall political and economic environment.

UNESCO recognizes the need to:
➔ prepare national policies and strongly encourages local governments to introduce specific legislation to safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities,
➔ define government's aspirations as to services for persons with disabilities, including equal access to the Internet and educational opportunities,
➔ develop national standards for services, such as ICT accessibility guidelines and evolving mechanisms to ensure that these standards are maintained,
➔ train key professionals (hard, software developers, social workers, teachers, interpreters, etc.),
➔ adapt digital media to the nature of disabilities,
➔ enhance social and economic integration,
➔ collect statistical data,
➔ carry out research, and
➔ assign ministerial responsibility for disability issues.

Particular attention is given to issues related to universal design for all, which aims to ensure access for persons with disabilities to the Internet. The presentation of content on the Internet and the design of web pages should accommodate the needs and demands of those with disabilities, based on standards for accessible design, which benefit all at the same time.

Why should persons with disabilities be empowered through ICTs?

It increases the independence
of persons with disabilities

The rapid development and application of ICTs in various areas have shown the tremendous potential to improve access to information and knowledge and to open new learning opportunities.

ICTs provide opportunities for flexible learning, for sharing information and for networking with disability advocates in other countries, for facilitating employment and self-sufficiency and, most importantly, for increasing independence.

ICTs are particularly effective tools in the outreach to marginalized communities both in terms of accessing information and knowledge and encouraging the participation in the development of ICT content and applications of people with disabilities.

Even in the absence of a well-coordinated and well-planned infrastructure, ICTs can offer to people with disabilities new opportunities to compensate for physical and functional limitations, access knowledge by adapting media to their impairment, and enhance social and economic integration.

➔ By supporting UNESCO's efforts in empowering persons with disabilities through ICTs, the partners will not only enhance existing partnerships with UNESCO, but also strengthen their international recognition and reputation in helping people with disabilities effectively use ICTs.

Inclusive
Education

Utilization

Culture

Creation

Empowering
Persons
with Disabilities
through
ICTs

Preservation

Science

Social
and Human
Sciences

Dissemination

Communication
and
Information

UNESCO at
ITU Telecom World 2009

ICT applications and services
in education, science, culture and
communication and information

ITU Telecom World 2009 is a major event for the global telecom and ICT sector bringing together the key players from industry from around the world. The event provides a great opportunity to promote the notion of knowledge societies where everybody can create, access, use and share information and knowledge as well as equally benefit and contribute to the societal development.

Empowering persons with disabilities through ICTs is the primary thematic focus of the UNESCO Pavilion at ITU Telecom World 2009.

The UNESCO Pavilion is organized in the following thematic areas illustrating ICT applications and services for persons with disabilities:

● **Education** (inclusive education);

● **Culture** (access to world heritage, museums, cultural industries);

● **Science** (scientific networking);

● Social and Human Sciences (social inclusion, human rights);

● **Communication and Information** (access to information and knowledge, ICT applications, including libraries, archives, web-based educational solutions and public media).

The Pavilion is a showcase for UNESCO's and its partners' action to empower persons with disabilities through effective utilization of ICTs.

It provides space for displaying hardware, software and successful applications mobilizing new, action-oriented partnerships and furthering cooperation among stakeholders.

A number of special events organized are taking place, such as:

➔ Presentation related to special themes
➔ Demonstration of various ICT devices and applications, particularly for educational, scientific, cultural, and communication and information purposes,
➔ Private meetings,
➔ Workshops/Roundtables,
➔ Case and websites presentations.

11

UNESCO
Communication and Information Sector

1, rue Miollis
75732 Paris Cedex 15,
France

http://www.unesco.org/webworld