Rehabilitation International (supported by International Commission on Technology and Accessibility)

Persons with Disabilities in the Information Society

Comments on the draft declaration of principles and plan of action of the World Summit on the Information Society

Submitted by the
International Commission on Technology and Accessibility

May 2003

The International Commission on Technology and Accessibility
is a permanent commission of Rehabilitation International
www.rehab-international.org/

Table of Contents

Foreword

A few words about ICTA

The *International Commission on Technology and Accessibility* (ICTA)[1] is a permanent commission of *Rehabilitation International*, an international organisation with status at the United Nations.

ICTA's mission is to promote the creation of accessible environments in the areas of technology and information, as well as to offer a forum that facilitates the exchange of ideas and good practices, notably in the areas of housing, public transportation, communications, technical aids, as well as Web accessibility and universal design.

ICTA also works to sensitise decision makers in the public and private sectors, as well as community leaders with reference to the obstacles persons with disabilities face, and possible solutions concerning accessibility and technologies.

ICTA is organised in six regional sub-commissions; Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and North America. The North American chapter[2] has been mandated to co-ordinate the participation of ICTA at the *World Summit on the Information Society*.

The members of the various ICTA sub-commissions constitute a voluntary network of experts in the area of technology and accessibility, notably specialists in the integration and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities, researchers, and developers of technological aides, human resources specialists, experts in the design of accessible environments, representatives of civil society, as well as experts from government and the academe.

---

[1] [http://www.ictaglobal.org]
[2] [http://www.ictaglobal.org/na/index.html]

Introduction

Context of the initiative

In all countries of the world, governments, Civil Society and the private sector are increasingly concerned with issues surrounding the advent of the information society, and especially the rapid development over the last 10 years of issues relating to information and communication technologies.

The United Nations, recognising the importance of creating a common vision of how society is being transformed by the information revolution, while at the same time seeking to reduce what has come to be known as the "digital divide", adopted resolution A/RES/56/183[3] in December 2001. With this gesture, the General Assembly sanctioned the organisation of the *World Summit on the Information Society* (WSIS)[4] under the auspices of the Secretary General, Kofi Annan, with the International Telecommunications Union charged with the responsibility of organising the conference.

The *International Commission on Technology and Accessibility* (ICTA), a permanent commission of *Rehabilitation International*, is greatly concerned with the issues raised by WSIS and recognises the importance of ensuring that the disability community is given high visibility at the conference. We deem it essential that present and emerging barriers become known and recognised, that WSIS propose concrete means to eradicate these obstacles, and that the Summit ensure that persons with disabilities assume their rightful place in the new information society.

ICTA believes that to date, the documents flowing from the preparatory work of the Summit have not adequately addressed the situation faced by persons with disabilities, have not considered the totality of their needs, and have not taken into account the particular circumstances of their generalised exclusion, particularly in developing countries and in countries in transition to a market economy. Moreover, we are of the view that the benefits of the information society in terms of inclusion, autonomy and empowerment of persons with disabilities have not been well thought out in the pre-conference deliberations that have taken place to date.

We present this paper in the hopes that it will clarify for Summit partners the efforts that must be made in order to ensure the development of an information society that is truly inclusive and diversified, one that recognises and favours the participation of persons with disabilities. This document does not claim to provide an exhaustive look at the question, but rather attempts to highlight certain basic fundamental conditions necessary to permit persons with disabilities to fully participate in this new community.

---

[3] [http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/background/resolutions/56_183_unga_2002.pdf]
[4] [http://www.itu.int/wsis/]

Information concerning our contribution

The principle goal of this document is to comment on the draft declaration and plan of action proposed[5] in the context of the *World Summit on the Information Society*. It consists of six sections :

- A foreword that introduces the *International Commission on Technology and Accessibility*;
- An introduction that explains the context of our initiative;
- A section that provides a brief profile of persons with disabilities;
- Another section which proposes the necessary conditions that will ensure that the information society is truly inclusive;
- A conclusion;
- References.

The distribution and reproduction of this document is both permitted and encouraged as long as the source is mentioned. For additional information, please write to [bdion@magma.ca].

---

[5] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E) ; *Draft action plan* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/2-E), 21 March 2003 versions [http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/listing.asp?lang=en&c_event=pci|1&c_type=td|]

I – Persons with Disabilities

Technical considerations

The expression "persons with disabilities" used in this document is drawn from the definition set out in the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*[6], adopted by the *World Health Organisation*[7] in 1980.

Also, we subscribe to the idea that a "handicap" is the product of the interaction between the disability or functional limitations of the person and the ambient social and physical environment(s) the person finds him or herself in. This concept, which has been largely recognised around the world by different organisations concerned with the integration and socio-economic participation of people with disabilities, informs our vision and guides our actions.

Current situation

While there are more than half a billion people with disabilities in the world[8], their living conditions remain largely unknown to the general population. In spite of concentrated efforts in the course of the last 50 years, people with disabilities today remain one of the most invisible of minorities, particularly in developing countries, or in countries in transition to a market economy, where more than 80% of the world-wide disabled population resides.

The United Nations estimates that in the majority of countries of the globe, approximately one person in ten lives with a disability of one kind or another, be it vision, hearing, motor, intellectual impairment, or related to mental health. As a consequence, at least 25% of the population of the planet is affected by issues related to disability[9].

According to the UN, several factors are responsible for the ever increasing number of people with disabilities in the world and the marginalisation of this population. Amongst the many factors, we cite:

- War and other forms of violence and destruction;
- Poverty, famine and epidemics;
- The lack of affordable and decent housing, as well as unsanitary living conditions;
- The high level of illiteracy and the lack of awareness concerning basic social services, health and education;
- The absence of knowledge concerning the causes of disability and impairment, their prevention and treatment;
- The failure to address the prejudice and discrimination experienced by people with disabilities;

---

[6] [http://www3.who.int/icf/icftemplate.cfm]
[7] [http://www.who.int/en/]
[8] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *United Nations Commitment to Advancement of the Status of Persons with Disabilities* [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disun.htm]
[9] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *World Programme of Action Concerning Persons with Disabilities* [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/diswpa00.htm]

- Inadequate health and social programmes;
- The lack of prioritising socio-economic development activities that are linked to the prevention of disability and rehabilitation.[10]

Our intention is not to provide a complete overview of the situation faced by persons with disabilities. It would be impossible in just a few pages to present the richness and complexity of these fellow citizens living for the most part at society's edges. Rather, we propose to highlight certain fundamental basic aspects that generally characterise the lives of people with disabilities.

Poverty

Amongst marginalized populations, people with disabilities are the poorest of the poor, often living in abhorrent conditions. This is explained in part by the fact that more than ¾ of this population lives in developing countries. They generally live in regions where the services they require to cope with their limitations are non-existent, where there are few health services and where services that could prevent disability in the first place are cruelly absent.

The situation is only slightly better in industrialised countries. While a large number of these states have put in place social programmes as well as measures that promote the integration of persons of disabilities, numerous studies have demonstrated that most of these individuals exhibit, despite these efforts, an economic situation that is largely inferior to the general population.

The United Nations has stated that the relationship between disability and poverty has been clearly established; this relationship has also been noted by other organisations[11]. And, while the risk of disability is greater in poor populations, the presence of a disability often results in a heavy strain on the limited resources available to the person concerned or his or her family, thus further aggravating the poverty[12].

The lack of access to education and employment

The sociological situation of persons with disabilities across the globe is characterised by a lack of education and participation in the labour market, especially in developing and transition countries. Acquiring an education and the possibility to contribute economically to the community obviously have a considerable impact on quality of life at several levels, such as acquiring knowledge and skills, socialisation, participation in the democratic life of the nation, attaining personal goals and objectives, as well as becoming an active member of society.

With reference to education, persons with disabilities generally exhibit the highest levels of illiteracy and dropout rates, as well as failure to graduate when compared with persons who are not disabled. The UN estimates that at least one child in ten is disabled and notes that in developing countries, these children generally do not have access to specialised educational services, and for many, the school door does not even open[13].

---

[10] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *World Programme of Action Concerning Persons with Disabilities*

[11] Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, *Baseline Assessment, Inclusion and Disability in World Bank Activities*, 2002

[12] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *World Programme of Action Concerning Persons with Disabilities*

[13] Ibid.

In countries where these services exist, the rate of success of people with disabilities is certainly better. However, they still demonstrate an inferior level of educational attainment when compared to persons without disabilities, because the school environments often lack needed specialised resources, lack financing or the specialised services that do exist are over-extended.

It is largely recognised that the level of education of people with disabilities is strongly linked to their professional status; their precarious employment situation is therefore not surprising. In addition, many face discrimination in the labour market, be it the loss of a job at the first appearance of an impairment, the refusal to hire, inferior working conditions, the absence of job mobility, etc. In difficult economic times, people with disabilities are usually the first to be laid off and the last to be hired[14].

The situation is particularly difficult in developing countries. The rural migration to the cities poses additional challenges, with people with disabilities more often than not found in urban slums, living in conditions of misery. For some, this results in a forced dependence, while others must turn to begging in order to try and meet their needs.

Inaccessible venues and equipment

People with disabilities meet numerous daily obstacles because, traditionally, the ambient physical environment has not been conceived to respond to the needs of individuals who do not fall within the requirements of the general population. The lack of environmental accessibility has important impacts on the autonomy of people with disabilities, on their ability to attend school, to hold a job, to participate as full members of their community.

The lack of access to buildings, to public transportation, as well as lack of accessible street furniture, and accessible public infrastructure including telecommunications systems and information technologies means that people with disabilities must constantly face numerous physical and technological barriers. In the last few decades, several countries have adopted standards in order to take the needs of persons with disabilities into consideration, be they accessible building codes, accessible urban environments, and standards of accessible electronic technology, notably concerning web sites. It goes without saying that the establishment of these accessible standards has gone a long way to improve matters.

That said, many locations remain inaccessible, if not maladapted to people with disabilities, particularly in developing countries, in rural areas, or in areas of decay. Concerning the Internet, people with disabilities, like everyone else, face financial obstacles as well as the lack of adequate infrastructures.

Moreover, people with disabilities meet numerous technological barriers that remain largely unknown, despite the many resources that exist to enable them to take full advantage of these technological tools with regard to their integration and social participation. This is particularly disquieting when one considers the speed at which these new technologies develop, and leads to the conclusion that it is urgent to intervene in order to prevent new situations that further handicap persons with disabilities. Indeed, it is important to avoid making the same mistakes.

---

[14] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *World Programme of Action Concerning Persons with Disabilities*

Prejudice and discrimination

Prejudice remains an important obstacle to the social integration of persons with disabilities. Equality of opportunity is dependent on the recognition of the right to diversity, the "right to be different", a right that still remains elusive for many, but is the basis of a real change in society. Attitudes which take the form of indifference, of ignorance, of fear or hostility can have a very negative impact on quality of life and represent one of the largest obstacles to the recognition and the respect of rights of people with disabilities. Moreover, those who are members of ethnic or visible minorities, or women with disabilities, often find themselves in situations of double or triple disadvantage.

The emergence of a movement to promote the human rights of persons with disabilities is about fifty years old. It stems from consumer organisations or advocacy groups who understood that true change required a change of model, from that of providing charity to providing self-help.

The 1970s brought important developments in the area of human rights, notably the adoption in 1975 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons*[15]. This Declaration, as well as other UN initiatives, and the tireless work of organisations working on behalf of the promotion of the rights of people with disabilities acted as a catalyst. In the last 30 years, several countries have adopted legislation that outlaws discrimination on the grounds of handicap or disability. In addition, in 1993, the UN General Assembly adopted the "*Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*"[16]. These Rules do not have the force of law, but they were adopted in the spirit that they could represent a moral and political suasion for governments to apply them, in order to respect an international standard[17].

Today, in spite of these developments, people with disabilities remain largely marginalized. For many, their fundamental rights are still fragile, and access to true personal self-actualisation remains beyond their means. In recognition of the need to go further to safeguard the rights of people with disabilities, as well as the need to adopt a more systemic approach, in December 2001, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/56/168[18] which put in place an ad hoc committee. This ad hoc committee has the mandate to examine proposals for the eventual adoption of a global international convention on the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Work is now underway, and expectations are high amongst the international community active in the field of disability[19].

As has been noted, persons with disabilities occupy a very precarious position in society. Given this, one can only question the place that they will occupy in the new society, the information society. The next section proposes certain necessary conditions in order to ensure the establishment of an information society that is both inclusive and equitable for people with disabilities.

---

[15] United Nations, *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons*, (A/RES/3447 XXX) [http://193.194.138.190/html/menu3/b/72.htm]

[16] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, (A/RES/48/96) [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm]

[17] Ibid.

[18] [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disA56168e1.htm]

[19] [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/adhoccom.htm]

II - Persons with Disabilities in the Information Society

Humankind once again finds itself facing a profound transformation of society. The recent technological revolution, as the industrial revolution that came before it, has had a major impact on the family of nations, redefining the relationships between people, giving birth to new issues, pushing back the frontiers of both time and space. This revolution has indeed provided new opportunities, but it has also created new forms of exclusion.

The issue of the digital divide has been largely debated in recent years, with the recognition that there are inequalities of access between countries as well as between individuals. Poverty, the lack or absence of adequate infrastructure and the lack of access to education are key factors that contribute in an important way to defining this problem. And, as we have seen in the preceding section, people with disabilities are confronted with profound difficulties with regard to these issues. Moreover, they must deal with physical and/or technical barriers linked to information and communication technologies, technologies that play a determinant role in the development of the information society.

Taking this role into account, it is important at this stage to recognise the large potential that these technologies represent for people with disabilities when taking into account their needs. Whether in the medical field, of rehabilitation or of communications, technology has always played an important role concerning treatment, prevention, accommodation and socio-professional integration. Technologies have literally opened new worlds to numerous people with disabilities, permitting them to achieve a large sense of personal autonomy, and have allowed them to further access their potential.

Unfortunately, numerous technologies remain inaccessible to persons with disabilities. As well, their needs are not sufficiently taken into account during the developmental phase. And yet, several simple and inexpensive solutions exist. Moreover, there is considerable technical expertise to be found within the disability community itself. However, we must unfortunately note that these solutions and these resources are not called upon enough. And, whatever attempts are made are usually done at a late development stage, when the adaptation costs and efforts are more substantial. Relying upon this time honoured approach (retrofitting) has shown its limits and illustrates the need for a more systematic approach.

Given the above, we feel it essential to set out certain fundamental principles and conditions in order to ensure that persons with disabilities can gain equitable access to the information society, as well as fully grow and participate in its development.

Recommendations

Inclusion

Inclusion concerns to what extent persons with disabilities are taken into account in the conception, the implementation and the evaluation of strategies, policies, programmes and projects[20]. Women and ethnic and visible minorities have been the first groups to benefit from this model, that banks on a systemic approach to inclusion. Recognising the value of such an approach, and the limits of traditional courses of action, organisations representing persons with disabilities have taken this "systemic" model as their own with reference to integration and social participation.

The WSIS draft declaration of principles makes specific reference to persons with disabilities at two locations: article 14 which identifies certain vulnerable populations and article 31 which concerns the use of technologies in education[21]. Specifically, article 14 states that:

> "*Empowerment and inclusion are fundamental characteristics and objectives of the Information Society. Accordingly, special attention must be paid to:*
> *- The marginalized, including migrants and refugees, unemployed, underprivileged and disenfranchised peoples.*
> *- The vulnerable, including children and the elderly, the disabled, and those with special needs.*
> *- Indigenous peoples and communities.*"[22]

In addition, certain articles may be interpreted as having taken persons with disabilities into account. For example, when one notes in article 7 that the "*Information Society (…) is inclusive, where all persons, without distinction of any kind, are empowered freely to create, receive, share and utilise information and knowledge, in any media and regardless of frontiers*"[23], it can be assumed that reference is also made to the distinction relating to disability.

Article 13 states that the "*Information Society must be oriented towards eliminating existing socio-economic differences in our societies, averting the emergence of new forms of exclusion and becoming a positive force for all of the world's people by helping reduce the disparities between and within countries.*"[24] Again, it is reasonable to conclude that persons with disabilities are included in this article.

Nevertheless, while we recognise that conscious efforts were made not to exclude any particular group, we believe that the specific and particular problems faced by persons with disabilities, problems which remain largely unknown and not well understood outside of specialised circles, have not been given sufficient focus in the declaration and plan of action. As it often the case, persons with disabilities are mentioned in passing, along with a long list of groups having special and distinct needs, and whose political and economic concerns habitually have more clout.

---

[20] Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, *Baseline Assessment, Inclusion and Disability in World Bank Activities*, 2002
[21] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

The systematic inclusion of the concerns of people with disabilities as a part of larger projects has never taken place naturally, and their needs, when considered at all, are generally the last to be addressed. We can make a parallel with the women's movement, which met resistance regarding specific analysis and strategies for the inclusion of women in development issues. However, when they were systematically included, women made important gains, and have benefited from structural measures[25].

Also, given the absence of goals and concrete strategies concerning persons with disabilities in the proposed plan of action, we believe that it is essential that a specific article be added to the declaration concerning this population, as it is the case for women[26] and youth[27]. For us, this declaration will not have any true meaning, will not have any true value for persons with disabilities, unless the specificity of their problems are recognised.

Recommendation: The declaration and the plan of action must clearly identify in a distinct article persons with disabilities as a priority target group and propose goals and strategies in order to eliminate factors that contribute to the digital divide associated with disability.

Accessibility

As we have seen in the previous section, persons with disabilities must deal daily with obstacles relating to inaccessible environment and equipment. We believe it useful to state that the meaning we attribute to the term "accessibility" refers to the degree of usability of an environment or equipment for a person that does not correspond to norms of general usage.

For a person with a disability, accessibility means that a physical area is designed so that he or she may enter and move about without obstacles, that the facilities, equipment and communications tools have been conceived to permit their use with or without adaptation, by a person having motor, sensory or cognitive limitations.

As to information and communication technologies, this means that these technologies (web sites, software, computer hardware, telephony, information kiosks and automated service machines, etc.) are usable by persons with disabilities, regardless of their impairment or the means of adaptation used. In the case of web sites, for example, the issue of concern is having access to content, whatever the interface or means of connection used, essentially designing web pages that people can access and interact with according to their needs and preferences. [28]

We feel it is important to bring these concerns to the forefront, as the general usage of the term "accessibility" often has other meanings, such as proximity, availability, costs, etc. Certainly, these issues are also important for people with disabilities, but for many, if the aspect of usability is not included in the definition that one gives to the general concept of accessibility, the risk of exclusion remains enormous.

[25] Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, *Baseline Assessment, Inclusion and Disability in World Bank Activities*, 2002
[26] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1, article 15
[27] Ibid., article 16
[28] *Constructing Accessible Web Sites*, Glasshaus; Jim Thatcher et al., 2002

The texts of the declaration and the plan of action make no specific reference to accessibility for persons with disabilities, as we have defined it. The notion of accessibility is referred to at several places in the two texts, but the meaning refers to proximity, to connectivity, etc. [29] In addition, article 25 of the declaration[30], which enumerates the diverse barriers to access to information and knowledge, makes no mention of inaccessibility as a factor of exclusion. Moreover, in the list of questions in the plan of action, certain conditions for universal access are set out, but accessibility, as being an essential condition, is absent. [31]

Article 13 of the project plan of action stipulates that "(…) *information in the public domain should be of high quality, easily accessible, including the disabled*." [32] This objective is interesting, but has several shortcomings. In one sense, as we have already seen, the term "accessible" needs to be clarified. In addition, it requires that the means of access to the information must also be accessible. Finally, it is important to recall that persons with disabilities must have access to all information deemed to be public in the same manner as any other citizen, and that is not to be limited to information in the public domain.

Finally, we note that many people with disabilities must use assistive technologies in order to have access to information technologies, such as screen readers, Braille readers, voice recognition software, adapted keyboards and mice, etc. Without these adaptations, many people will encounter significant obstacles.

Many of these technological adaptations are quite expensive, some representing expenses of hundreds or thousands of dollars. Persons with disabilities, who form part of the most economically disadvantaged elements of society, must have access to subsidies or technical aid programmes when these exist. In developing countries, many disabled persons simply do not have access to these adaptations. Elsewhere, they must often deal with long waiting lists, or programmes without resources.

Recommendation: Clarifications must be made concerning the concept of accessibility in order to specifically include the notion of accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Recommendation: The declaration and plan of action must set out a clear commitment and concrete strategies in order to ensure accessibility to technologies and their contents to persons with disabilities, as well as to assistive technologies.

While the accessibility of technologies is essential to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the information society, the accessibility of environments and equipment is equally essential. This condition is necessary, for example, to ensure access to schools and other public places. Also, when it is an issue, such as in article 19[33] of the declaration, of favouring the creation of points of access from community centres (for example from post offices, libraries or schools) in order to promote universal access, in particular in rural and isolated areas and in poor urban areas, we have cause for concern.

---

[29] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1, articles 1, 9, 18, 23, 39
[30] Ibid.
[31] *Draft action plan* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/2-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1, article 3
[32] Ibid.
[33] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1

Certainly, the idea of such universal access is excellent and persons with disabilities constitute, without question, a group that could greatly benefit from such measures. However, we must again remember that inaccessibility of such venues remains an important problem. If specific and clear commitments are not formulated, numerous persons with disabilities will not have access to these resources.

Recommendation: The declaration and plan of action must set out a clear commitment and concrete strategies in order to insure the accessibility of environments and equipment to persons with disabilities.

In addition, we want to briefly deal with the question of procurement of accessible goods and services. We believe that this type of measure, linked to other policies and programmes, represents an excellent means by which accessibility may be achieved. Several governments and institutions have adopted policies that require that accessibility criteria be taken into account when purchasing equipment and technologies.

In the case of the United States, for example, the American government adopted in 2001 amendments to Section 508 of the *Rehabilitation Act*[34] which requires that all federal government agencies acquire accessible technologies, computers, software, telephones, communications equipment, videos, multimedia products and web sites.

The government of Canada, for its part, adopted standards that take into account accessibility for persons with disabilities for Internet sites of the federal government[35], and developed a procurement tool (The Accessible Procurement Toolkit[36]) which includes considerations for accessibility.

These kinds of actions may have a considerable impact on the markets concerned, and often have a training effect on other sectors of the economy. A commitment of government partners on the question of accessible procurement will contribute to ensuring that initiatives in "cybergovernment" are truly accessible for all. In addition, it will permit governments to act as agents of change.

Recommendation: The declaration and plan of action must contain concrete goals and strategies with reference to government procurement of accessible goods and services.

The final issue we want to address concerns standardisation. This is referred to several times in the draft declaration and the plan of action. Standards are important for persons with disabilities. Indeed, several advances concerning accessibility have taken place thanks to the development of standards that have considered the needs of persons with disabilities, be they with reference to architecture, urban planning, technologies, etc.

---

[34] [http://section508.gov]
[35] *Common Look and Feel for the Internet,* 2000 [http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upe/index_e.asp]
[36] [http://apt.gc.ca]

For example, the *Web Accessibility Initiative*[37], an international programme of the *World Wide Web Consortium* (W3C), has developed guidelines concerning the accessibility of web sites[38]. Certain governments have integrated these guidelines or have been inspired by them to develop standards that take into account the needs of persons with disabilities.

ICTA has also recognised the importance of standards. We have participated in the development of ISO Guides 50, 51 and 71 which concern the inclusion of persons with disabilities and the elderly in the development of all standards.

We are therefore satisfied to note that standardisation is identified "(…) *as one of the essential building blocks of the Information Society*"[39], that we wish to encourage "*the promotion of open and flexible international and interoperable standards* (…) *to ensure that all can utilise the technology and associated content and services to their maximum potential*"[40], that finally, "*the development of the Information Society must be based on platforms of internationally interoperable technical standards, accessible for all* (…)"[41]

However, a warning is in order. The reference to standards does not ensure automatic accessibility for persons with disabilities. Several countries use standards concerning web technology, for example, that do not take into account accessibility for persons with disabilities. Certainly, one can refer to the aspect of interoperability and this contributes in an important way to accessibility, but one does not necessarily equal the other.

As we noted previously, it is important to clarify the concept of accessibility in order to clearly take into account the needs of people with disabilities. In addition, we are of the opinion that all the articles concerning standardisation must include the notion of standards that are accessible for persons with disabilities.

Finally, we believe that governments may play an important role in the development and generalised acceptance of standards of accessibility. In one sense, they can lead by example through commitments concerning the adoption of standards that take accessibility for persons with disabilities into account. From another perspective, their role is important in supporting the work of organisations such as the *Web Accessibility Initiative* in the development of standards of accessibility.

Several years can elapse between the appearance of a new technology and the adoption of comprehensive, consensus-based standards, and standardisation organisations must have the necessary means to stay at the forefront of development. This is particularly important in the area of accessibility for persons with disabilities, because the developments in the new technologies sector take place at a rapid pace, and it is important to intervene rapidly to avoid new disabling situations.

Recommendation: The declaration and plan of action must promote the development of open, interoperable and **accessible** standards.

---

[37] [www.w3c.org/wai/]
[38] *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0* [http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/]
[39] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1, article 42
[40] *Draft action plan* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/2-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1, article 14
[41] Ibid., article 30

Recommendation: The declaration and the plan of action must call on governments to adopt and promote accessible standards for persons with disabilities.

Recommendation: The declaration and plan of action must propose concrete strategies in order to support the work of development of accessible standards.

Education

Education is without doubt a condition sine qua non to full and equitable participation in the information society. A society based on the exchange of information and of knowledge demands access to a quality education. However, as we have seen in the preceding section, persons with disabilities experience important delays in educational attainment, especially in developing countries.

The question of education is referenced in several articles of the draft declaration and plan of action, principally concerning capacity-building and the strengthening of information and communication technologies literacy, with an emphasis on e-learning.

Specifically, article 31[42] of the declaration stipulates that "*the use of ICT's for education and human resource development, including ICT literacy, should be promoted, with special reference to the requirements of people with disabilities*."

This element is positive because persons with disabilities may benefit greatly from the use of technologies in education. Certain novel projects embarked upon in recent years in this area have produced remarkable results. However, the plan of action is silent concerning how to bring about this goal. Indeed, articles 20 to 23, as well as article 38 of the plan of action do not identify persons with disabilities amongst the target groups and do not propose any concrete strategy to ensure that they will effectively have access to such strategies.

It should be recalled that problems of accessibility of technologies and environments represent major obstacles concerning access to education and many people with disabilities do not even have access to adaptations and to specialised educational services. If commitments are not made in this regard, this article will, essentially, amount to wishful thinking. Access to education (be it virtual apprenticeship or general studies, professional, high level or continuing education) will remain out of reach of numerous persons with disabilities.

Recommendation: The declaration must recognise the right to an education for all as a fundamental condition of the development of the information society.

Recommendation: The declaration and the plan of action must propose goals and objectives concerning persons with disabilities in order to raise their educational profile and to permit them to take full advantage of proposed developments.

---

[42] *Draft declaration of principles* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1

Participation

Participation concerns the extent to which persons with disabilities and the organisations that represent them may participate in the decision-making that has an impact on their life and on the life of their communities[43]. Traditionally, persons with disabilities have had very few opportunities to take a leadership role in the development of policy measures or programmes that concern them, be it at the local, national or international level.

And yet, people with disabilities have a considerable expertise concerning their needs and how to achieve them. They have proved, over the past 50 years, that they have the desire and the capacity to contribute to the development of these policies and programmes. A popular motto in the disability community, "Nothing about us without us", clearly indicates the level of commitment and determination in this regard.

Unfortunately, people with disabilities remain generally outside the mainstream of the decision-making process. Several factors contribute to this exclusion, be it the lack of access to education and information, the diverse obstacles linked to accessibility, poverty, the impossibility to exercise their roles as citizens, etc. In addition, the recognition of persons with disabilities as full partners in society and not just as beneficiaries of services must be an essential condition.

The UN has recognised the value of the participation of people with disabilities as a strong indicator of the level of social development of any society[44]. Rule 18 of the Standard Rules specifies that "*states should recognize the right of the organizations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognize the advisory role of organizations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters.*"[45]

Considering the socio-economic issues regarding the information society, it will be important that all partners in Civil Society may actively participate in its development, at the stage of conception, as well as at the stage of implementation and evaluation. A particular attention must be given to the participation of persons with disabilities, considering the numerous barriers that they must face.

Recommendation: The declaration and the plan of action must recognise the right of Civil Society partners to participate in the decision-making process and propose concrete means to promote this participation, with special attention to the needs of marginalized groups, notably persons with disabilities.

---

[43] Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, *Baseline Assessment, Inclusion and Disability in World Bank Activities*, 2002
[44] Social Development Division, *Asia and the Pacific into the Twenty-first Century : Prospects for persons with disabilities* [http://www.unescap.org/decade/prospects-a.htm]
[45] United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA), *Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*, (A/RES/48/96) [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm]

Other proposals

Article 45[46] of the draft plan of action proposes benchmarks for certain goals. We propose the inclusion of the following considerations:

- A goal concerning accessible procurement;
- A goal concerning the accessibility of information technologies, notably web sites;
- A goal concerning the promotion and adoption of accessibility standards.

Deadlines should be set out in consultation with organisations of persons with disabilities.

---

[46] *Draft action plan* (WSIS/PCIP/DT/2-E), 21 March 2003 version, Section 1

Conclusion

We have the unique opportunity to intervene in the first stages of development of a new society.

We have the possibility to define a common vision, that will bring together all countries, peoples and stakeholders. We have at this moment an opportunity to begin a process that is truly inclusive right from the start, to chose a model that will permit all individuals to participate in the development of society.

People with disabilities also want to be a part of the information society. They will contribute to its development, bringing into play their knowledge and expertise. However, to do this, concrete measures must be put in place to resolve current difficulties and intervene with reference to emerging obstacles. Because, if this is not done, persons with disabilities will have little opportunity to participate in the information society.

Persons with disabilities represent more than 600 million men and women in the world. They are young, and not so young; they live in large cities and in the far countryside; they go to school or hope one day to do so; they work or hope to be provided a chance to demonstrate their capacities; they are part of large families, or they are without resources.

A common goal drives them - to take their place in society, today's society and tomorrow's.

We hope that our paper will contribute to the debate and will encourage all WSIS partners to take the necessary steps to create a genuine equalisation of opportunities of persons with disabilities in the information society.

References

Asia and the Pacific into the Twenty-first Century : Prospects for persons with disabilities, Social Development Division [http://www.unescap.org/decade/prospects-a.htm]

Baseline Assessment, Inclusion and Disability in World Bank Activities, Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, 2002

Common Look and Feel for the Internet, 2000, Government of Canada [http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upe/index_e.asp]

Constructing Accessible Web Sites, Glasshaus; Jim Thatcher et al., 2002

Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, (A/RES/3447 XXX), United Nations [http://193.194.138.190/html/menu3/b/72.htm]

Draft action plan, (WSIS/PCIP/DT/2-E), 21 March 2003 version [http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/listing.asp?lang=en&c_event=pci|1&c_type=td|]

Draft declaration of principles (WSIS/PCIP/DT/1-E), 21 March 2003 version [http://www.itu.int/wsis/documents/listing.asp?lang=en&c_event=pci|1&c_type=td|]

Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, (A/RES/48/96), United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA) [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dissre00.htm]

United Nations Commitment to Advancement of the Status of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA) [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disun.htm]

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 [http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/]

World Programme of Action Concerning Persons with Disabilities, United Nations, Economic and Social Development (ESA) [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/diswpa00.htm]