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**Promoting rights of Persons with Disabilities;  
An insight to UN Convention on State parties**

## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to share an insight to UN Convention on State Parties (COSP) on rights of persons with disabilities. It is an annual event, taking place at the UN Headquarters in New York, that brings all member states together to discuss their reports and up to date activities in relation to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), a treaty that was established in 2006 and ratified by Finland in 2016.*

*The COSP also brings together a number of other stakeholders like representatives of civil society, academics and activists. It is a mixture of official and unofficial meetings, workshops and other side events, where persons with disabilities are both the experts and the focus of discussions. As Laurea University of Applied sciences became a member of Rehabilitation Finland, or RIFI ry., in 2023, it had an opportunity also to participate in this event at the UN.*

*This paper shares some experiences of the COSP 17 that took place in June 2024. It also provides an overall view to the current topics of the meeting; How to promote inclusion through technology innovations, how to protect persons with disabilities in humanitarian crises and how to provide equal opportunities in the labour market for persons with disabilities.*

*In connection to the latter topic, RIFI ry. organized a side event called My Inclusion. My Inclusion is a website that provides training and awareness raising materials on inclusion in education. Inclusion in education is a gateway to more inclusive working life and indeed an important theme to higher education institutions like Laurea*

Keywords: disability, human rights, inclusion, education, humanitarian crises

# Promoting rights of Persons with Disabilities; An insight to UN Convention on State parties

## UN CRPD AND COSP — WHAT DOES LAUREA HAVE TO DO WITH THIS?

United Nations negotiated Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. This convention — or CRPD as it is often shortened in English — was ratified by Finland in 2016. It was a major event all around the world as this convention for the first time recognized the need to promote and protect the human rights of persons with disabilities. It contributed to other former declarations and conventions, such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 and Beijing Declaration on the rights of women 1995, and highlighted the importance of including persons with disabilities in societies as full citizens. The CRPD urges the member states to take action in implementing policies and practices to promote rights of persons with disabilities in all areas of the society.

It can be argued that the convention was a consequence of the so-called social model of disability in contrast to former medical model. The social model of disability emphasizes the environment and society as something that needs to change so all members of the society have equal opportunity for participation. The former medical model focused more on the individual's impairments and rehabilitation as a process that helps a person to cope and adjust with the environment. (mm. Katsui 2005; Shakespeare 2006). Today, it is still not clear, if the social model is dominating, but the disability movement together with the obligations of the UN Convention, is clearly putting more pressure on UN member states to act and change societies to become more inclusive.

Every year UN member state representatives gather to the annual Conference of State Parties (COSP) in UN Headquarters in New York City. The COSP is for all nation states to share their reports and up to date activities in relation to the Convention. In addition, COSP gathers a large number of civil society representatives together to discuss the main topics of the conference.

As Laurea University of Applied sciences became a member of Rehabilitation Finland, or RIFI ry., in 2023, it had an opportunity also to participate in this event at the UN. RIFI ry. is a small NGO promoting international cooperation in rehabilitation, but it is also a member of a global organization called Rehabilitation International (RI). RI has an official partnership with United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), which is in charge of the COSP. With this mandate as Laurea's and RIFI's representative I had the privilege to participate this event last June.

## OFFICIAL MEETINGS, ROUND TABLE DISCUSSIONS AND SIDE EVENTS ON GLOBAL DISABILITY POLICIES

COSP is about meetings and discussions. Every year UN diplomats, special rapporteurs, national delegates and experts gather together to discuss global disability policies and activities. During the usually four-day event

delegates participate in official meetings for member state representatives, round table discussions and public debates which are open for all participants. An important part of the event are also several side events and unofficial gatherings organized by member states or NGOs.

The COSP is all about convention on rights of persons with disabilities. Each year UN carefully picks up the main topics for the event. The convention covers all areas of life and obligates UN member states to implement legislation and activities that promote aims of the convention.

Rights of persons with disabilities is related in many ways to other societal aspects such as mental health, poverty and access to education, employment and services. Therefore, the discussions during the COSP provide a wide overall picture of current global challenges.

Each year certain themes are picked as the focus point. In 2024 COSP17 focused on the following main topics:

**a) International cooperation to promote technology innovations and transfer for an inclusive future;**

This topic looks at the challenges and gaps in promoting technology innovations that include people with disabilities. One challenge is that those individuals and communities that have limited access to technological and digital resources tend to further marginalize and aggravate inequalities. Many research and surveys show that not all young people have an opportunity to learn comprehensive digital literacy through their education system (UN Note by the Secretariat 2024b). Furthermore, there are differences in opportunities according to socioeconomic background and between rural and urban environments. The gap has also an impact on young people with disabilities and affects their contribution to technology development and their opportunities to benefit from digitalization. (UN Report, 2024; Nuorten digitaidot 2021; Moxon & al. 2021).

Another viewpoint to technology is access to assistive technologies, which are crucial for everyday functioning and participation for all people that require special assistance. According to WHO, more than 2.5 billion people globally need one or more assistive technologies, yet most are denied access, in particular in low- and middle-income countries.

**b) Persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies;**

The world's crisis has kept this topic a priority for many years. It points out the importance of including persons with disabilities at all stages of implementation of preparedness, response and recovery systems in disaster risk reduction, climate action and public health efforts. According to the UN note by the secretariat (2024a), persons with disabilities are largely excluded from these processes.

The Secretariat stresses the importance of paying special attention to persons with disabilities during and after situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, because persons with disabilities are most vulnerable to the effects of conflict, climate change and health emergencies. Also, poverty, stigma and discrimination increase the vulnerability of persons with disabilities' to the effects of climate change and other crises. (UN Note by the Secretariat 2024c).

**c) Promoting the rights of persons with disabilities to decent work and sustainable livelihoods**

Decent income and access to work has been a major topic in relation to persons with disabilities worldwide. According to ILO persons with disabilities make up an estimated one billion, or 15 per cent, of the world's

population. Of those about 80 per cent are of working age. It is very difficult to find reliable data on employment rates because disability or working capacity is not easy to define. Even in Finland we have to rely on data collected from various different sources (retirement and rehabilitation statistics by Kela and ETK and employment statistics) to form some idea of the current employment rate of persons with disabilities.

Since the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities there has been some progress in UN member states. In 2016, among the 193 States Members of the United Nations, over 60 per cent had included in their laws disability-specific provisions prohibiting discrimination and guaranteeing equal pay for work of equal value. Also, in various countries worldwide, initiatives such as specific training programs, awareness raising campaigns and support systems have been taken to promote inclusive working life. (UN Note by the Secretariat 2024d).

In Finland this topic has been targeted in many policies since the early 2000. Act on Social Firms from 2002 paid attention to promoting employment of persons with partial working capacity. Afterwards many governmental initiatives and policies have been implemented to promote employment of persons with partial working capacity and with disabilities. The results of these activities have improved the employment of persons with disability to some extent, but there are still significant obstacles both in support systems and workplaces that make employment for persons with disabilities difficult.

## EXPERIENCES DURING THE EVENT — ARMED CONFLICTS AND AUTISM STRATEGY

During the COSP 17 I was able to attend two side events: One on armed conflicts and humanitarian crises organized by Finland and one on Australia's Autism Strategy. Both discussions were high level events, and it was interesting to learn how much networking, negotiating and volunteer work it takes to make a change.

Finland's event: '**Persons with Disabilities in armed conflicts and humanitarian crises: How to improve the implementation of the UNSC Resolution 2475?**' was organized by Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN together with Abilis Foundation<sup>1</sup>. The discussion was focusing on a UN resolution 2475 (2019) on the protection of persons with disabilities in situations of armed conflict.

The discussion was a mixture of official delegates<sup>2</sup> statements and comments and civil society's questions and experiences. The civil society was represented<sup>3</sup> by different NGOs working in crises areas. The discussion was chaired by Ms. Amu Urhonen from Abilis Foundation.

One of the main points of the side event was to convince UN to reserve funding for operations that take place in grass root level during armed conflicts. Ms. Mariia Kurinna shared a powerful insight to helping persons with disabilities in the war zone in occupied Ukraina. She pointed out how important it is to let humanitarian aid organisations to help people in their own environment and how even the smallest help can be crucial for survival.

<sup>1</sup> Abilis Foundation is a Finnish non-governmental organisation founded by persons with disabilities that works in fragile contexts of developing countries. Abilis is also a partner in Laurea's Erasmus project Crising (2024-2027).

<sup>2</sup> H.E Pekka Puustinen Under-Secretary of State Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, H.E. Archie Young UK Ambassador to the General Assembly, Ms. Mina Mojtahedi Team Lead, UN Disability Inclusion Team and H.E. Łukasz Krasoń Secretary of State at the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy of the Republic of Poland

<sup>3</sup> Ms. Sara Minkara United States Special Advisor on International Disability Rights, Ms. Mariia Kurinna Human Rights Researcher and Defender, International Advocacy Manager, Fight For Right, Mr. Nawaf Kabbara President, International Disability Alliance and Ms. Amu Urhonen representing Abilis Foundation.

It became clear that more funding is needed to help people who live in the crisis areas, help them get food, water and medical aid, but also keep people informed and help them should they want to leave and move on to a safer environment. Mr. Nawaf Kabbara pointed out the same need as he referred to the war in Gaza.

In total it seemed that there is indeed a will to help and bring in more money for helping people during armed crises, but getting the money into the right place and helping organisations that coordinate volunteer work in crisis areas still seems to be very complicated. However, like the presenters pointed out in many ways, even the smallest aid is important and can save lives.

Another side event was less heartbreaking, but yet very interesting: '**Australia's National Autism Strategy**'. Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-31 ensures persons with disabilities to fulfil their potential as equal members of the community.

With Australia's disability strategy one aim is to focus also on people with autism. As a result, Australia is developing a National Autism Strategy which is led by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. The Strategy and first year action plan are expected to be finalized and launched by the end of 2024. As in most other side events, speakers represented both governments and civil society<sup>4</sup>.

It was most interesting to hear the outline of the Australian Disability Strategy and learn how the Autism Strategy contributes to it. The practice of forming the strategy had paid a lot of attention to including people with Autism in the development and implementation of the strategy. This, according to all speakers, was very important and required a lot of negotiating and co-operation. But without the participation of people with Autism themselves, the strategy would not have been successful. This is the case in many disability strategies; if persons with disabilities are not included and heard during the strategy process, many measures and activities go in vain.

In comparison to Finland, it was interesting to hear how both the Australian Disability Strategy and the Autism Strategy covered all areas of policies. In Finland the disability policies have been based on two recent documents: The National Action Plan on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that determines the measures that will be taken to promote the implementation of the Convention in different administrative branches during the second action plan period 2020-2023 and the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030 (Union of Equality 2021). Both these documents give an outline to policy implementation, but no major changes have taken place.

In Finland the main form of disability policy is the Disability Services Act that has been in development for decades. The most recent version of the Act is still waiting to be agreed on in the Parliament. The concept of an overarching disability strategy is however much broader than a mere services act. Though it should be recognized that many other pieces of legislation such as labour laws and educational laws cover some disability policy areas.

## MY INCLUSION SIDE EVENT: SHOWCASING A TOOL TO PROMOTE INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

My personal contribution to the COSP<sup>17</sup> was My Inclusion -side event, which I organized together with Siltavalmennus executive director Kimmo Kumlander. My Inclusion was a project run by RIFI ry. and funded by Rehabilitation International. Like I explained in the beginning, Laurea became a member of RIFI ry. and this was the main reason for my participation in the COSP event.

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<sup>4</sup> The Hon Bill Shorten MP, Australian Government Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Minister for Government Services, Robyn Shannon, Deputy Secretary, Australian Government Department of Social Services, Amber Shulyta, Branch Manager, Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, Edwina Dohle, Branch Manager, Australian Government Department of Social Services, Clare Gibellini, Autistic Co-Chair, Australia's National Autism Strategy Oversight Council. Clare is also the Deputy Chair for the Western Australia Ministerial Advisory Council on Disability, and a Policy Officer at Women with Disabilities Australia.

As a starting point for this project and the side event was the need to raise awareness on inclusion, especially inclusion in education and its importance in relation to employment opportunities. The UNESCO report on inclusion and education (2020) states that there are still significant obstacles in the way of inclusion. According to UNESCO 68 percent of countries have a definition of inclusive education but only 57 percent of those definitions cover multiple marginalized groups. Recent data from 14 countries using the Child Functioning Module suggest that children with disabilities constitute 15 percent of the out-of-school population. They face complex barriers and even in developed countries they face a greater risk of poverty. An EU statistical study from 2011 found out that rate of early leavers from school and education was much higher for disabled people: 31.5 percent compared with 12.3 percent of persons without disability. Also, twice as many young people with disabilities are neither in employment nor in education and training.

In comparison to Finland it is, again, difficult to find reliable data on education of persons with disability. The legislation on education uses the term special needs and this covers a much wider group of people than those with a disability. And vice versa; not all students with disabilities require special care, if they are provided with adequate assistive devices supported by accessible environment.

The side event My Inclusion – Training materials to raise awareness on inclusion in education was to showcase [an on-line site developed in the project](#). The on-line site is targeted to young people with disabilities themselves, their teachers and counsellors and their close networks. The site consists of facts and figures about inclusion, education and participation.

The core of the site are videos, where young people with disabilities (Finland, Thailand and Vietnam) themselves share their own experiences on inclusion. What it has meant for them as they have gone to school and built their careers. It also shares experiences of counsellors who work with young people.

The side event was a hybrid event; 10 participants in the site in RI's office in NYC and 30 participants on-line. The experience was very good; there were representatives from Germany, USA, Japan, Hungary, Norway, Denmark, Canada, just to mention a few. Feedback was very positive, especially because many participants believed that the site would be a very good tool to promote inclusion in education.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Inclusion in education and in working life is still a very big issue in a global context. As education is the gateway to employment it is important that people with disabilities have the right to education on equal basis with non-disabled people.

There are lots of good practices and policies that are in place and should be disseminated throughout the world. It also seems like many nations have a national disability strategy to guide their policy making and practices. Finland seems to lack such an umbrella strategy, and this is why disability issues are often seen merely as services for people with disabilities rather than something that should be noted in all policy making.

The ongoing wars in the world are a huge risk for people with disabilities. Also, wars cause disabilities especially for children and youth. In fact, according to some UN statistics disabilities grow especially fast among young people. It is a great loss for the labour market in many countries, if those people that became disabled at a young age, cannot be supported back to education and employment.

Finland has many policies in a right place, but there is still work to be done. Accessibility is a real problem especially in education as is access to right kind of support. Getting support is often difficult partly because our fragmented system takes a long time deciding which department is in charge of the costs of the support.

Educational institutes, such like Laurea, could do a lot more to support equal opportunities of people with disabilities. We could, for example, promote enrollment of people with disabilities and post-graduation employment. Also, it should be noted that there are examples of universities that have a reputation of being fully accessible and they attract people with disabilities from around the world.

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