

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
Day of General Discussion on “The Right to Accessibility”

7 October 2010

Mr. Chair,

UNICEF is pleased to address the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and all our partners gathered here today.

UNICEF’s mission statement is grounded in human rights and commits the organisation to ensuring special protection for the most disadvantaged children in the world, including children with disabilities. A human rights-based approach underlies all UNICEF programmes, and guides our work on disability. In 2007, Programme Guidance on Children with Disabilities was developed in order to support UNICEF country offices in mainstreaming the rights of children with disabilities in programming and advocacy. We are happy to report that in recent years the number of UNICEF country offices programming in the area of disability has increased, and that these programmes are shifting from project-based to a more systematic approach, including policy advocacy and legislative reform.

Mr Chair,

It is indefensible that, due to barriers to educational access, globally fewer than five percent of children with disabilities attend school and that in some cases the figure is less than one percent. This is particularly alarming if we consider the central role that education plays in ensuring rights and promoting development – of children, communities and nations. Without educational opportunities, children with disabilities will not have the chance to develop to their full potential and will face tremendous barriers to full social and economic participation in society.

Barriers to educational access vary depending upon the type of disability a child may have, and efforts must therefore be focused both on physical barriers as well as barriers created by the way in which education is delivered. Through the Child Friendly Schools approach UNICEF supports the development of national frameworks for inclusive education (starting with inclusive pedagogic approaches), and advocates and provides technical resources for improved infrastructure making classrooms, latrines, school canteens, and doorways accessible to children with disabilities.

The Child Friendly Schools approach, which is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on the principles of inclusiveness, democratic participation and child-centredness, requires that schools be open and welcoming to all children without exception. Through this holistic approach, strategies and measures are put in place to tackle barriers to education, in relation to a school's physical design, the relevance of curricula, teacher training, pedagogy,

health services, sanitation, attractiveness of classrooms - everything that enables each child to learn best - with special emphasis on reaching all children.

Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Children with disabilities, like all other children, have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, but are often left out because of factors such as discrimination and inaccessibility due to lack of information, financial resources, transportation, and physical access to health care facilities.

UNICEF's support to health systems strengthening, in the context of both national strategic planning as well as community level initiatives, provides great opportunities for working towards equal access to health services. We strive to use these opportunities to promote changes in service delivery so that children with disabilities and their families are assured equal access to services and provided additional services in response to their special needs. This requires, among other things, awareness and commitment to understanding cultural beliefs about disability. For example, children with disabilities may not be brought to immunization or birth registration campaigns if they are seen as a source of shame, or in the mistaken belief that disability is a contraindication to immunization.

Finally, the right to accessibility must be integrated into planning and monitoring emergency responses, and activities should be designed which promote accessibility and mobility of children with disability. In particular, in refugee camps, children with disabilities may have great difficulty in moving about and accessing relief services, social and cultural activities. Furthermore, as sport and play are an important aspect of the healing and rehabilitation process for all children affected by crisis, 'child friendly spaces' should be constructed to ensure equal access and utility for all children.

Mr. Chair,

UNICEF is currently developing draft guiding principles for its work as it relates to and with persons with disabilities. We also anticipate the appointment of a Senior Adviser on Children with Disabilities within the coming months.

UNICEF looks forward to supporting the work of this Committee. Based on our 20 years of experience in supporting reporting to the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, we foresee that we will support States Parties in their reporting to the Committee, support NGOs in preparing alternative reports, provide the Committee with country level information as relevant, and furnish any additional assistance which the Committee might find useful.

Thank you.