



Huong Dao Thu serves as a national UN Volunteer Disability Rights Officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Viet Nam. Here, she takes the floor to contribute her perspective during a training on the Human Rights Based Approach to Programme.

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Calling the United Nations system to action on disability inclusion

In 2015, the United Nations made a promise—a transformative promise—to leave no one behind. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are at the very heart of that commitment to lift people up by championing inclusion and equality to improve lives.

Working with persons with disabilities is not new for the United Nations system. The [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) identifies and protects the rights of persons with disabilities. We must uphold these rights in our peace, development and humanitarian work.

When it comes to diversity and inclusion, we must challenge ourselves to push beyond our historical focus on gender and geography. We must address the inclusion of other underrepresented groups more intentionally in our workforce, including persons with disabilities.

Approximately 15 per cent of the world's population lives with some form of

disability.¹ This global estimate continues to rise in line with the increase in global population. We know that the United Nations workforce does not proportionally represent persons with disabilities and that it should reflect the diversity of our Member States and the world in which we operate.

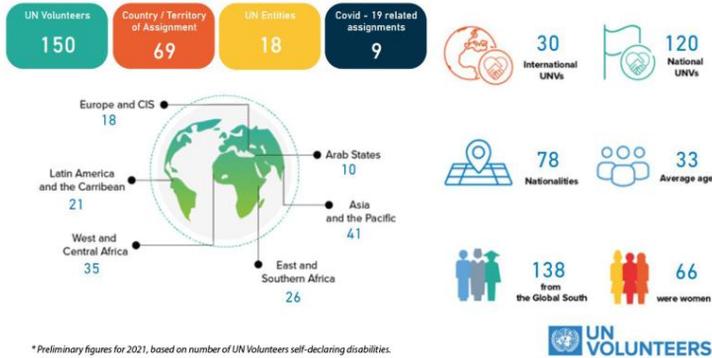
At the end of December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution [74/253](#) on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system ([JIU/REP/2018/6](#)).

Inspector Gopinathan Achamkulangare, in an [interview with the UN Chronicle](#), spoke of how “mainstreaming accessibility as a cross-cutting issue in the work of organizations has been limited”. The report also revealed that funding and costs often become excuses for inaction, but that the problem most often is lack of awareness.

We know that a diverse workforce delivers more effectively. We know that persons with disabilities bring unique inputs and perspectives. This makes us better as an organization and helps us become more effective partners to the countries and people we work with. Beyond this, we know the United Nations system has been missing out on the skillsets, talent and experience that persons with disabilities bring.

“ Persons with disabilities still face a plethora of barriers, stereotypes, stigma and discrimination in accessing services and securing effective participation in society. If I can be included and can contribute meaningfully, I can inspire other persons with disabilities. We can all play a critical role in ensuring an inclusive and accessible society for all. -- Gift Govere, United Nations Volunteer Project Officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Zimbabwe

UN VOLUNTEERS WITH DISABILITIES IN 2021*



The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme provides the United Nations system with a pool of talented and dedicated professionals from which to choose. Serving as United Nations Volunteers, these individuals bolster the delivery of United Nations funds, agencies and programmes on their mandates. This makes UNV an optimal partner for advancing the inclusion agenda.

For a few years now, UNV has turned its attention to increasing the integration of persons with disabilities into the development sector workforce through volunteerism. Step by step, it is building a talent pipeline of highly qualified professionals with disabilities who can contribute to the attainment of the SDGs at the national and global levels. For example, UNV and UNDP have partnered on a Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities.²

The intentionality of UNV in recruiting volunteers with disabilities and addressing reasonable accommodation needs sends an important signal to the wider United Nations system. It reinforces my view that building and sustaining a diverse and inclusive workforce requires a systematic approach on two fronts: to actively attract and recruit candidates from underrepresented groups, and to build an enabling and inclusive culture, where everyone has the opportunity to participate on an equal basis.

“ Inclusion in the UN system as a volunteer has meant

“ greater independence, self-improvement, personal growth, productivity, motivation, inspiration and capacity development, allowing me to be able to contribute to my family and society. It was a challenge, both for me and the organization; we had to adapt to each other. But with reasonable adjustments (an adaptation of the desk to the necessary height, placement of access ramps, transport management and assistance), I have been able to discharge my functions fully. --Olga Altman, United Nations Volunteer for Inclusion, Innovation and the 2030 Agenda, UNDP in the Dominican Republic

The CRPD recognizes that more must be done to enhance lives and opportunities for those with disabilities. The SDGs reference disability in seven targets across five goals, while another six goals have targets linked to disability-inclusive development.

The direction is clear. The United Nations system cannot falter in improving accessibility in our global work simply because it is hard. There are challenges, and we must rise to them. We have the Convention, the SDGs and the frameworks; now, we must do the work. This is even more urgent in the context of COVID-19.

We take diversity and the representation of marginalized groups seriously; it speaks to the trust we have in the United Nations and the perception of our legitimacy. To remain credible, the United Nations must ensure that we are walking our talk in our international civil service.

We owe that to “the peoples of the United Nations”.

Notes

¹ The World Health Organization and the World Bank, *World Report on Disability*, WHO/NMH/VIP/11.01. Available at <https://www.who.int/teams/noncommunicable-diseases/sensory-functions-disability-and-rehabilitation/world-report-on-disability>

² Germany and Sweden provided generous contributions to the UNDP/UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities.

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In celebration of the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021, the [UN Chronicle](#) was pleased to present two articles, one by Ms Martha Helena Lopez, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources in the United Nations Secretariat, and the other by Mr. Toily Kurbanov, Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Volunteers programme. Each author shares their perspective on disability inclusion in the United Nations system and the barriers that must be overcome to accelerate results. The second article can be found [here](#).



Global

• [International Day of Persons with Disabilities](#) • [Persons with disabilities](#) • [UNDP/UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities](#)

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 10: Reduced inequalities](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)