The journey so far: Where to next for disability inclusion at UNV?

The journey is the destination – a saying never more important than when it comes to disability inclusion. On the journey to a more inclusive UNV programme, my observation as a Disability Inclusion Focal point is that it is a process – of small and large wins. Drawing conclusions from valuable lessons learnt, I can say that it has been both enriching and challenging at the same time,
and in many ways. Importantly though, lots of new opportunities for persons with disabilities to volunteer and participate in peace and sustainable development have been created.

The path to a more inclusive UN system has been paved by the engagement of UN volunteers with disabilities in UN entities around the world. Yet, barriers still exist – both within and outside of the UN system. Social stigma via institutional and economic constraints on physical participation and communication, persist. Barriers have hampered efforts and limited successes yet are also motivation to work tirelessly towards inclusive change.

To ensure no one is left behind, the UNV pilot Talent and Capacity Building Programme for an Inclusive UN System for Persons with Disabilities was launched in 2017. It later contributed to the joint UNDP-UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities, which arrived in 2018.

Both the UNV pilot project and UNDP-UNV programme were evaluated in April/May 2020 by an independent, external evaluator. The purpose of the evaluation, now published at UNDP’s Evaluation Resource Centre, was to assess project performance and to generate relevant findings, conclusions, lessons learned and recommendations for the future. Based on the results of the evaluation, UNV and operational UN partners have undergone an intensive process to establish plans for follow-up initiatives.

The importance of this work is clear. For one UN volunteer with disabilities - “As for me, the current process is wonderful as it ensures that all potential candidates are considered and are given a chance to prove their ability.”

Of course, there are challenges. On the way to sustainable inclusion of persons with disabilities within the UN system, many barriers still need to be removed.
Not only has the evaluation provided invaluable insight into lessons learned, it has set out recommendations for future disability inclusion endeavors of UNV. They range from implementing a Theory of Change for new approaches, to awareness raising efforts among UN Entities and the community of persons with disabilities, to supporting capacity development and readiness of host entities. The importance of policies and a budget for reasonable accommodation adjustments was also stressed – as one supervisor of a volunteer with disability put it, "We understand that the key to inclusive employment is reasonable accommodation".

The recommendations, if wholeheartedly implemented, will change the way UNV and the entire UN ecosystem, facilitates employment and engagement of persons with disabilities. It will lead to more inclusive cultures, structures and practices. Yet until realised, there are many more small and big steps to take.

In the words of one UN volunteer with disability, "Persons with disabilities are yet to be brought up into the mainstream. Hiring agencies have to understand that we need more support and time to overcome marginalization."

And what next?

As per the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, a twin-track approach with targeted and mainstream interventions, is vital.

Targeted interventions aim at providing benefits for persons with disabilities directly, such as reasonable accommodations, while mainstream interventions, such as awareness raising, aim to benefit persons with disabilities indirectly, by creating a more inclusive system for all, in line with the UN Strategic and Operational Framework. My wish is that a twin-track approach at UNV, will continue to contribute to inclusive change within the organisation, UN system and sustainable development in general.

The UN Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), launched by the UN Secretary-General in June 2019, will also help UNV to work in an inclusive manner and
apply a twin-track approach to disability inclusion. UNDIS provides clear
guidance for all UN Entities on how to develop and implement "a consistent
and systematic approach to disability inclusion in all areas of operations and
programming, internally and externally" (ref. UNDIS Technical Notes: Entity
Accountability Framework). In early 2020, UNV reported on UNDIS for the
first time and has now a clearer vision of relevant, targeted and mainstream
inclusion tasks, for the years to come.

I would like to close with the words of yet another
UN Volunteer with disability, who said of their
experience, "My first days and introduction to my
new colleagues set the pace for me. I knew right
from the beginning that it was going to be a
wonderful experience working for the UN."

May the journey so far and the recommendations made, mean every UN
volunteer with a disability can say the same.

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• International Day of Persons with Disabilities • UNDP/UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities • Germany

Sustainable Development Goal: **SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals**