Change-makers: Cultivating social inclusion and disability awareness in childhood education in Ukraine

I was motivated to apply for the Talent Programme primarily because I was fascinated by the fact the UN is involving people with disabilities as volunteers to contribute to their country and community. The programme helps the inclusion of young people with disabilities in the workplace and offers valuable opportunities for professional development.

“...My experience through this assignment has been lifechanging. I have helped to advance conversations around inclusivity and accessibility for people with disabilities in my country. -- Marta Nykolayeva, UN Volunteer Media and Outreach Assistant with UNDP, Ukraine
People with disabilities often experience discrimination in Ukraine and find it hard to secure employment. Inclusion as a topic of conversation is on the rise, driven by more and more children with disabilities seeking access to kindergartens and schools.

Teachers need to know how to work with children who have different needs and so a key part of my assignment with UNDP has been to conduct training with teachers and education support providers on the principles of Universal Design as they relate to childhood education.

According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, **Universal Design** means "ensuring that the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be useable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design".

Universal Design is fundamental to the UNDP/UNICEF Joint Programme *Promoting Mainstream Policies and Services for People with Disabilities in Ukraine*. Training sessions have given teachers an understanding of social inclusion and inclusive programme design. By cultivating inclusive environments within schools and kindergartens, my hope is that we can drive positive change around the inclusion of people with disabilities in Ukrainian society more broadly.

My experience with UNDP has been wonderful for my personal and professional development. In order to undertake the assignment, I moved to the capital, where I didn’t know a lot of people. My UNDP colleagues were friendly and helped me settle into my new life quickly. Not only that, but I found the level of disability awareness within the organization to be very high which made me feel supported, especially when the team moved floors to accommodate my mobility. As result, I don’t feel I have had too many challenges in this regard.

Professionally, I have also learned and developed a great deal. My responsibilities now include managing social media and websites and I also translate material from Ukrainian to English and vice versa.

"For me, inclusiveness means that everyone can be accepted, and everyone has their own opportunity to become a change maker and have a real impact. I
encourage anyone to apply and become a change-maker too! --Marta Nykolayeva

This article was prepared with the kind assistance of Online Volunteer Helen Maccan.


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