Accessibility in Global Governance: The (In)visibility of Persons with Disabilities

Preliminary report from Phase 2 of a Mixed Methods Analysis of the Participation of Persons with Disabilities in the United Nations System and Broader Global Governance Processes

Findings – Phase II (Survey)

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**Please note that this preliminary report is a working draft**

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About the Institute on Disability and Public Policy

The Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) based at American University (AU) in Washington, D.C. prepares transformative disability policy leaders and serves as a collaborative "think tank" on disability policy through an interdisciplinary American University community and an unparalleled network of universities and outreach partners, with founding support from The Nippon Foundation.

The Institute on Disability and Public Policy contributes to the vision of an inclusive, barrier-free and rights-based global society. In line with the AU 2030 initiative on Global Disability Policy, Technology and Education, the IDPP at American University helps to facilitate collaborative interdisciplinary research, teaching and outreach programs through cross-campus partnerships. IDPP prepares transformative disability policy leaders and serve as a collaborative “Think Tank” on disability policy.

The major project of IDPP has been the development of IDPP for the ASEAN Region, which has built a path-breaking network of 20 leading universities and 4 outreach partners since its establishment in April 2011 with the support of The Nippon Foundation. With a focus on the 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), IDPP for the ASEAN Region addresses a critical need to serve as a collaborative "think tank" on disability policy for the ASEAN region, and to develop a cadre of leaders who can impact disability policy toward an inclusive ASEAN community.
About American University

American University (AU) is a private doctoral research institution chartered by an Act of Congress in February 1893. The AU community is one of exceptional talent. American University’s full time faculty are experts in their fields and engaged in their professional disciplines. The university distinguishes itself through a broad array of undergraduate and graduate programs that stem from these primary commitments:

- interdisciplinary inquiry transcending traditional boundaries among academic disciplines and between administrative units
- international understanding reflected in curriculum offerings, faculty research, study abroad and internship programs, student and faculty representation, and the regular presence of world leaders on campus
- interactive teaching providing personalized educational experiences for students, in and out of the classroom
- research and creative endeavors consistent with its distinctive mission, generating new knowledge beneficial to society
- practical application of knowledge through experiential learning, taking full advantage of the resources of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area.

The central commitment of American University is to the development of thoughtful, responsible human beings in the context of a challenging yet supportive academic community. The total Fall 2014 student enrollment was 13,011, with 7,083 undergraduates, 3,447 graduate students, 1,585 law students, and 896 students in non-degree certificate programs.

American University is home to seven colleges and schools, with nationally recognized programs, centers, and institutes, a distinguished faculty, and a location that offers countless resources. Each college’s and school’s curriculum is rigorous and grounded in the arts and sciences and connected to professions addressing contemporary issues. Co-curricular activities based on primary commitments—such as study abroad programs in 41 countries, internships in our Washington Semester Program, and opportunities to conduct research with faculty—allow students to craft unique and personalized educational experiences. And, with Washington, D.C., as their classroom, they are able to take advantage of the vast opportunities offered by the federal government, embassies, theatres, research institutes, and other national and international organizations.
About The Nippon Foundation

The Nippon Foundation was established in 1962 as a non-profit philanthropic organization, active in Japan and around the world. Initially, the Foundation’s efforts focused largely on the maritime and shipping fields, but since then the range of activities has expanded to education, social welfare, public health, and other fields—carried out in more than 100 countries to date. Together with more than 20 partner organizations in Japan and worldwide, The Nippon Foundation is funding and assisting community-led efforts aimed at realizing a more peaceful and prosperous global society.

The Nippon Foundation tackles a broad range of issues facing humanity through its mission of social innovation. The Foundation aims to achieve a society where all people support one another, reducing the burdens and challenges they face together. The Foundation believes everyone has a role to play: citizens, corporations, nonprofit organizations, governments, and international bodies. By forging networks among these actors, The Nippon Foundation serves as a hub for the world’s wisdom, experience, and human resources, giving individuals the capacity to change society—the hope that they can make a difference. The Nippon Foundation’s goal is to give all of humanity the chance to participate in creating our future.

The Nippon Foundation defines Social Innovation as “Implementing ideas to create new frameworks and bring about change for a better society.” It believes that the widespread implementation of Social Innovation will achieve a truly sustainable society in which “all people support one another.”

The Nippon Foundation aims to achieve this society in which “all people support one another.” This requires new public-private sector and private-private sector frameworks that transcend the conventional perspectives of citizens, companies, NGOs, governments, and international organizations. It believes that implementing the concept of Social Innovation with the involvement of individual donors, corporate CSR activities, and national and local governments will lead to the realization of this society.

The Nippon Foundation acts as a Social Innovation hub, positioned at the center of new frameworks that link citizens, companies, NGOs, governments, and international organizations, to achieve a society in which “all people support one another.”
About The Authors

**Dr. Filippo Trevisan** is Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and Deputy Director of the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) at American University in Washington, DC. He is a political communication, public policy and disability scholar, and most of his work has focused on the impact of new media technologies on political participation among citizens with disabilities. He is the author of “Disability Rights Advocacy Online: Voice, Empowerment and Global Connectivity” (Routledge, 2017), which explores how a combination of social media activism and acute policy crises has revitalized and transformed disability rights advocacy in Britain and America in recent years. He also studies how persons with disabilities use the Internet to find information about and participate in elections, as well as how candidates are trying to reach this diverse constituency online. Among others, his work has been published in *Disability & Society, Disability Studies Quarterly, Information, Communication & Society, Public Relations Inquiry*, and *First Monday*.

**Dr. Derrick L. Cogburn** is Associate Professor at the School of International Service and the Kogod School of Business at American University, and Executive Director of the AU Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP). His research and teaching includes: global information and communication technology and socioeconomic development; multistakeholder institutional mechanisms for Internet governance; transnational policy networks and epistemic communities; and the socio-technical infrastructure for geographically distributed collaboration in knowledge work. Dr. Cogburn has published in major journals such as *Telecommunications Policy, International Studies Perspectives, Journal of International Affairs, Assistive Technology, and Information Technologies and International Development (ITID)*. He has published with and/or advised the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), United Nations World Institute for Development Economics Research, the World Bank, UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). He has served as PI or co-PI on grants from sources as diverse as the National Science Foundation, US Department of Education, JP Morgan Chase, Microsoft Research, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and The Nippon Foundation. Dr. Cogburn directs the Center for Research on Collaboratories and Technology Enhanced Learning Communities (COTELCO), an award winning social science research collaboratory investigating the social and technical factors that influence geographically distributed collaborative knowledge work, particularly between developed and developing countries. Dr. Cogburn is editor of the Palgrave Macmillan book series on Information Technology and Global Governance. He is past president of the Information Technology and Politics section of the American Political Science Association, and past president of the International Communication section of the International Studies Association. He is a founding member and past Vice Chair of the Global Internet Governance Academic Network (GigaNet).
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Executive Summary

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This report discusses the results of the first global survey of organizations involved in disability rights advocacy carried out by the Institute on Disability and Public Policy (IDPP) at American University with the support of The Nippon Foundation. This survey constitutes Phase II of IDPP’s “Accessibility in Global Governance” study and its development was informed by several subject matter expert interviews carried out in Phase I of this project. The survey questionnaire covered four key areas in global governance and was completed by 123 organizations from 51 different countries in all regions of the world between the months of September and October 2016.

This executive summary highlights the key findings from the survey and main recommendations for enhancing the effective participation of the disability community in global governance processes.

1 For the full report from Phase I of the AGG study, see: http://www.idppglobal.org/accessible-global-governance
Attitudes and experiences at international conferences:

- **Eagerness to participate:** Disability advocates around the world are looking to be more engaged and participate more effectively in global governance, with a large majority stating that U.N. (83.87%) and non-U.N. (77%) international conferences, meetings and events are highly relevant to their work.

- **Respondents were more likely to participate non-U.N. international conferences compared to U.N. events:** Overall, respondents were more likely to have participated in non-U.N. international conferences (78.38%) than U.N. international conferences, meetings, and events (46.15%).

- **Participation in U.N. conferences tends to be a ‘one off’:** the average number of U.N. conferences attended was relatively low (mean=5.8; median=2) and 32.3% of those who had ever attended a U.N. event had done so only once, suggesting that a large number of disability organizations lack regular and sustained opportunities for engaging with the U.N. system.

- **Nearly nine in ten respondents never participated in a PrepCom or similar participatory meeting:** Given the fundamental role that PrepComs and similar events play in negotiating key outcomes and final documents for important global conferences, this highlights the importance of training disability rights advocates on the importance of PrepCom meetings and conference diplomacy more generally.

- **Being invited as a speaker was a major incentive to attend international events:** In particular, it was interesting to note that respondents said they were considerably more likely to be invited as a speaker at non-U.N. international conferences (34%) compared to U.N. ones (25%).

Key barriers to effective participation:

- **Major barriers for persons with disabilities start well before their arrival at conference host cities and venues.** Interestingly, lack of conference accessibility was by far the least popular option among several reasons for not attending U.N. conferences, meetings and events. Instead, major obstacles identified by survey respondents included:
  
  **Cost and lack of funding:** nearly three quarters (73.41%) of respondents stated that lack of funding was a key problem for them when it came to U.N. events; financial constraints were at the top of the list of reasons for not attending U.N. events, followed a distant second by not knowing about the events (37.68%).

  **Inaccessible conference invitations:** over 40% of respondents indicated that conference invitations were not in an accessible format tailored to persons with
disabilities and many commented specifically on the challenges for persons with visual deficits.

- **Lack of knowledge about registration:** 21% stated they did not know how to register.

- **ECOSOC accreditation:** More than half of the respondents stated that a lack of ECOSOC accreditation was a significant barrier that limited participation by persons with disabilities in U.N. conferences. Lack of ECOSOC accreditation was explicitly cited by 29% of respondents as a major factor that prevented them from being able to attend U.N. conferences.

**Accessibility features at international conferences:**

- **Non-U.N. conferences were rated higher for overall accessibility:** Only 6% of respondents thought that U.N. conferences were fully accessible for persons with disabilities. Comparatively, nearly a quarter of survey respondents felt that non-U.N. conferences were fully accessible for persons with disabilities.

- **Venue accessibility goes beyond the provision of ramps and elevators:** U.N. conferences scored particularly low (36.67%) for venue accessibility. While ramps and elevators were the accessibility features that were provided most commonly at the U.N. conferences attended by survey respondents (72.41% and 62.07% respectively), these results suggested that there are other accessibility features on which it is important for conference organizers to focus in the future, for example braille signage and accessible toilets.

- **Accommodation for persons with visual impairments were particularly deficient:** According to survey respondents, screen reader accessible conference material was provided only in 37.98% of cases, braille material in just under a quarter of conferences (24.4%) and the vast majority of conference websites (79.31%) could not be easily accessed using a screen reader.

**Remote participation:**

- **Virtual participation was available at few international conferences:** only 15.63% of those who said they participated in U.N. events were able to do so virtually.

- **However, U.N. conferences tended to be slightly ahead of the game with regard to remote participation compared to other international forums:** Looking at non-U.N. conferences and events, the number of respondents who participated virtually via webconferencing tools was even smaller at only 3.77% compared to 96.23% who attended in person.
• When virtual participation was available, it showed great potential: At U.N. conferences for which virtual participation was offered, respondents engaged in a good range of activities. 40% of those who participated in U.N. events remotely via webconferencing software were able to give a presentation and 80% were able to ask a question in real-time, either via voice or using sign language into a camera (40%) or via text (40%).
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Background and rationale

United Nations Member States have recognized the benefits of civil society engagement in 
global governance processes and have taken measures to ensure means of participation from 
various stakeholder groups. The adoption of Agenda 21 by U.N. Member States established 
nine “Major Groups” aimed at increasing engagement and partnership with a broad range of 
stakeholders outside of the intergovernmental spheres, is indicative of these civil society 
engagement efforts.

The nine Major Groups include a range of actors, namely: 1) women; 2) children and youth; 3) 
indigenous people; 4) Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs); 5) local authorities; 6) workers 
and trade unions; 7) business and industry; 8) scientific and technological community; and 9) 
farmers. While this list includes many important marginalized communities, it leaves out many 
others, including persons with disabilities.

“The Future We Want” document published by the U.N. stated that, in addition to the Major 
Groups, “other stakeholders” should also be invited to participate in U.N. processes related to 
realizing sustainable development. Persons with disabilities are specifically included under 
“other stakeholders” in paragraph 43 of this resolution. While the “other stakeholders” are 
distinct from the nine Major Groups, they are involved with intergovernmental process. In this
process, persons with disabilities and their advocacy organizations have the opportunity to engage in U.N. processes by attending meetings, gain access to official information, and make recommendations. With more than a billion people in the world living with some form of disability (WHO, 2011), it is essential that persons with disabilities and Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) are able to engage fully in the U.N. system, as well as other global, regional, and local decision-making processes. In order for this to be possible, barriers to participation in the U.N. system and other international forums need to be addressed comprehensively.

International policy formulation processes are complex and the lack of formalized networks for persons with disabilities to organize their efforts, which in turn limits their influence in international global governance processes. Additionally, regional and global conferences and accompanying outcome documents require sustained activity and collaboration during pre-conference preparations and post-conference activities, which include implementation, monitoring and evaluation. For persons with disabilities, physical and electronic accessibility issues exacerbate this challenging climate, and exclude individuals from actively participating in global policy formulation.
Research Design and Sample

To explore the perspective of global disability rights advocates on these issues, a survey on the accessibility of global governance mechanisms was designed and distributed using the Qualtrics software. The development of the survey questionnaire was informed by the results of Phase I of the Accessible Global Governance (AGG) study, which included interviews with subject matter experts on disability and global governance. This generated 72 questions covering four main areas in addition to basic demographics such as location, age, gender, educational attainments, disability status, role within the organization, and level of involvement with the international disability community. The four key areas covered in the survey included:

1) Participation and accessibility in the U.N. System;
2) Participation and accessibility at non-U.N. international conferences;
3) Involvement in Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) and grassroots engagement; and
4) Inter-organizational collaboration and the U.N. Major Groups’ framework.

Each of these areas was explored using both closed and open, qualitative questions. To assess the disability status of survey respondents, the AGG survey incorporated the Washington Group on Disability Statistics Short Set Questions\(^2\). The Short Set was created in 2001 at the U.N. International Seminar on Measurement of Disability with the aim to measure six specific domains of functioning including (1) vision, (2) hearing, (3) mobility, (4) memory and concentration, (5) self-care, and (6) communication to better identify people at risk of participation restrictions. While we acknowledge the limitations that derive from the self-reporting nature of this way of measuring disability, the Short Set has gained widespread recognition in recent years, which enhances the comparability of our data with other international studies on disability.

A distribution list including 973 prominent organizations involved in disability rights advocacy work at the international level was drawn from relevant national and international directories\(^3\). Every country was represented in the distribution list, with the number of organizations included per country determined by the total size of its population. Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) focused on all or multiple disabilities were favored in the selection process. Whenever possible, the president or chief executive officers of each organization were emailed directly, while for a minority of organizations it was necessary to use a generic email address such as “info@organization.org.” The survey was distributed to the entire list in early September 2016 and two follow-up reminders sent out later that month and in October 2016.

123 organizations from 51 different countries completed the survey. As shown in Figure 1, all regions of the world were represented in the sample. Asia, the world’s most populous region

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2 [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/washington_group/wg_questions.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/washington_group/wg_questions.htm)
3 For example: [http://www.disability-europe.net](http://www.disability-europe.net); [http://www.gallaudet.edu/rsia/world-deaf-information-resource.html](http://www.gallaudet.edu/rsia/world-deaf-information-resource.html)
and home to the largest number of people with disabilities, counted for just over a third of the sample, with Africa second at nearly 20% of respondents.

![Image of world map with percentage distributions](image)

**Fig. 1** – AGG Survey respondents’ global distribution

The vast majority of the organizations that responded (83.75%) were non-governmental civil society organizations, with the rest of the sample including a small number of government agencies, foundations, private sector organizations, and academic institutions. Among non-governmental civil society organizations, just over 42% were described by respondents as “self-advocacy” organizations and 39% as “professional advocacy organizations.” Of these, more than half (55.74%) was involved in pan-disability work, just over a quarter (26.23%) advocated for multiple disabilities, and the remaining 18% focused on a specific disability.

While the roles of individual respondents within their respective organizations varied, 73.5% of them occupied an executive position such as executive director or other officer, board member, and program manager. There were more male respondents (57.32%) than females (42.68%). The median respondent age was 46 in a range comprised between 23 and 75 years old.

Most respondents were highly educated. Nearly half (44.58%) had a master’s degree, 19.28% held a bachelor’s degree, and just over 7% a doctorate or other terminal degree. The most common fields of training included public policy and governance, law, education, and business. These results corroborate findings from the interviews carried out with subject matter experts in Phase I of the AGG study, highlighting the role that education and training in these fields plays in boosting the engagement of the in global disability community in international governance. Survey respondents also stated that, on average, they spent about 21% of their time engaging with the international disability community.
More than two-thirds (70.73%) of all respondents said they identified as a person with disabilities (Figure 2).

In addition, 57.9% of respondents also responded positively to two or more of the Washington Group Short Set Questions, indicating that they had multiple disabilities. The most prevalent self-reported disability related to physical mobility impairments, including ambulation, as 52% of respondents reported some level of difficulty walking or climbing steps, with 23% of all respondents reporting they were unable to perform ambulation at all. Furthermore, just over a quarter of all participants (26.6%) had vision issues, 18.52% had problems with their hearing, 18.75% had issues remembering or concentrating, 33.5% found it difficult to self-care at some level, and 12.5% experienced communication problems.
Findings

1. Participation at U.N. Conferences, Meetings and Events

Overall, just under half of the respondents (46.5%) said they had ever attended one U.N. conference, meeting or event (in person or virtually via webconferencing tools – Figure 3). This was in contrast to over three quarters (78.38%) who said they had attended at least one non-U.N. international conference (Figure 4).

Attendance at U.N. conferences, meetings, and events, ranged from one to 35 events. However, the average number of conferences attended was relatively low (mean=5.8; median=2) and 32.3% of those who had ever attended a U.N. event had done so only once. This
suggested that even those survey respondents who had participated in U.N. events tended to do so rarely or as a ‘one off’ instead than on a regular basis.

While not entirely surprising, these results – particularly the disparity between attendance at U.N. and non-U.N. international conferences – invited a reflection on the mechanisms that alerted respondents about international conferences, accessibility at these events, and modalities of participation.

1.a Conference location

Although some of the U.N. conferences mentioned by respondents moved between cities in North America, Europe, South-East Asia, and Africa, the majority of these meetings was held at U.N. headquarters in either New York City (n=12) or Geneva (n=4). The centrality of New York and Geneva to U.N. processes requires participants to travel long distances in order to attend in person, particularly from Africa, South-East Asia, and Oceania, which made up a majority of survey respondents. Traveling internationally is particularly expensive and can be impractical or even impossible for people with disabilities who often require multiple accommodations due to inaccessible transport links. This helps explaining why over half of those who took part in the survey had been unable to attend a U.N. conference, meeting, or event.

1.b Cost and lack of funding as key barriers

These results were corroborated also by the fact that nearly three quarters (73.41%) of respondents stated that lack of funding was a key problem for them when it came to U.N. events (Figure 5).

This result was compounded by the fact that only 56.5% of those who had attended a U.N. conference said they had been able to secure external funding to support travel costs. Overall,
this put financial constraints at the top of the list of reasons for not attending U.N. events, followed a distant second by not knowing about the events (37.68%).

Interestingly, lack of conference accessibility was by far the least popular option among reasons for not attending U.N. conferences, meetings and events. It would be premature, however, to assume that this is because these events were considered to be fully accessible as respondents also identified serious accessibility deficits at U.N. conferences, as is discussed in detail in section 3. of this report. Instead, these results re-affirmed the point that, for many persons with disabilities and the organizations that represent them, barriers start well before they arrive at conference host cities and venues, and involve being able to find out about the event, register independently, and find the resources to travel to its location.

Given that funding was identified as a major barrier to the participation of disability organizations in U.N. events and both New York and Geneva are likely to continue to be central locations for much of this work, a low-cost solution to reduce barriers imposed by distance includes increasing the functionality and availability of remote participation, which allows people to take part in conferences through accessible cyber infrastructure. Allowing people to virtually attend meetings, present at working sessions, and communicate in real-time with other conference participants constitute cost effective solutions to ensure people with disabilities are able to engage in global governance processes more effectively.

Some events have started to offer these opportunities and some of the survey respondents stated that they had participated virtually in a variety of ways in recent years. Yet, as it is discussed in section 4. below, the number of those who took up webconferencing opportunities remained low and there is great scope for expansion in this area.

1.c Types of U.N. conferences

Those who had attended U.N. conferences were asked also to briefly describe the nature of these meetings, topics discussed, and list the name of the most recent U.N. event they attended in open questions. Among those who answered this last question (n=30), the event that was mentioned most frequently was the Conference of State Parties (COSP) to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was mentioned six times. Other popular responses included regional U.N. conferences on disability rights (n=4), CRPD Committee briefings and hearings (n=2), the High-Level Political Forum on sustainable development (n=2), Sendai conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (n=2), and the meetings of the Commission on the Status of Women (n=2). Other U.N. conferences mentioned by respondents included ITU conferences, UNESCO conferences, ILO workshops, and UNDESA expert meetings.

Although the prevalence of disability-specific events such as those on the CRPD is understandable, the fact that only a very small number of respondents had participated in conferences focused on other issues suggested that there is still a long way to go towards
ensuring that disability is mainstreamed in global governance processes and securing opportunities for the global disability community to be heard in these forums.

1.d U.N. conference registration

There were two main ways in which respondents said they had found out about U.N. conferences including through other organizations (50%) and electronic mailing lists (25%). While finding out through other organizations hinted at the importance of partnership and inter-organizational collaboration for the effective participation of the global disability community in global governance – as was revealed also in other survey questions – the relevance of email lists also highlighted the importance of electronic communication to raise awareness of these processes among disability advocates.

As is discussed in more detail further below in section 3., over 40% of respondents indicated that conference invitations were not in an accessible format tailored to persons with disabilities and 21% stated they did not know how to register. Many commented on the specific challenges for persons with visual deficits. Because many people with visual impairments use screen reader technology, ensuring that all features of electronic communication are fully accessible will likely help these individuals become more knowledgeable about UN conferences, and to more fully participate. Electronic communication, besides being compatible with assistive technology such as screen readers, must also be accessible to people with cognitive deficits, including language comprehension. Several respondents indicated that website text was not written in a clear manner, and others stated that the website lacked image descriptions.

1.e PrepCom participation

Another important result is that, among those who had attended a U.N. event, only just over a quarter (26.67%) – meaning 12% of the total survey sample – participated in a PrepCom or a similar preparatory meeting. Participation in these preparatory activities is imperative as they lead to recommendations for action and the contributions support international conference planning. Given the fundamental role that this type of events play in negotiating key outcomes and final documents for important global conferences such as the recent Habitat III conference, it is particularly concerning to see that the global disability community is not represented at them in the vast majority of cases. This highlights the importance of training disability rights advocates on the importance of PrepCom meetings and conference diplomacy more generally.

2. Participation at non-U.N. International Conferences, Meetings and Events

As was mentioned above, over three quarters of respondents (78.38%) said that they had attended at least one non-U.N. international conference, meeting, or event. This was considerably higher than the 46% who said they had attended a U.N. conference, meeting, or event. In addition, the average number of non-U.N. events attended was also substantially higher (mean=12.18; median=5, compared to 5.8 and 2 for U.N. conferences) in a range from one to 50.
2.a Types and location of non-U.N. conferences

Respondents described various non-UN international conferences they attended, which included meetings hosted by DPI and IDA. In addition, many respondents reported attending meetings for the ASEAN peoples’ forum, ISPO world congresses, and ILO strategies for skill acquisition and work for disabled people. While a majority of non-U.N. conferences attended by respondents also focused specifically on disability issues, these numbers suggested a broader and more regular level of engagement with international affairs outside the U.N. system for disability rights advocates.

In addition to higher attendance rates, the distribution of conference attendance was more dispersed. Notably, there was more representation from Oceanic and African countries. There was less virtual participation in non-U.N. international conferences compared to U.N. conferences. However, this could be because the conferences attended were more regionally focused and therefore geographically closer. This brings to light the effect of distance as a barrier for people with disabilities.

With regard to the type of activities that respondents were able to carry out during non-U.N. conferences, meetings and events, it was interesting to note that respondents said they were considerably more likely to be invited as a speaker (34%) compared to a U.N. conference (25%). It is reasonable to assume that this opportunity for enhanced and more meaningful participation acted as an additional incentive in promoting attendance at non-U.N. conferences, meetings and events.

In light of this, it was useful to explore in detail the perspective of survey respondents with regard to accessibility at these meetings. The following section includes results for accessibility-related questions at both U.N. and non-U.N. international conferences, meetings, and events with a view to better understand why disability rights advocates were less likely to be involved in the former and identify key barriers and priority areas for intervention at U.N. conferences, meetings, and events.

3. Accessibility of International Conferences, Meetings and Events

Survey respondents were asked to rate the most recent U.N. and non-U.N. international conferences they attended in terms of accessibility for persons with disabilities on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 stands for completely inaccessible and 10 for fully accessible. Only 6% of respondents thought that U.N. conferences were fully accessible for persons with disabilities, and just 43% rated U.N. conferences 8 or above (Figure 6). Comparatively, nearly a quarter of survey respondents felt that non-U.N. conferences were fully accessible for persons with disabilities and as much as 61% rated non-U.N. conferences at least 8 or above. On average, non-U.N. international conferences were also scored more highly (mean=7.79; median=8) than their U.N. counterparts (mean=6.38; median=7) for overall accessibility.
Although it would seem reasonable to assume that the number and severity of the disabilities affecting any one individual and their perspective on accessibility may be linked, correlation analysis between the aggregate measure of disability derived from the Washington Short Set and overall accessibility ratings did not show a noteworthy relationship. Having said that, carrying out the same type of analysis for each of the functional domains that pertain to the Washington Short Set showed that there was an important inverse relationship between visual impairments and perspectives on the overall accessibility of U.N. conferences (correlation coefficient .625* significant at the 0.01 level). This was an interesting result that is discussed in detail in the next section with regard to the accessibility of conference material for persons with visual impairments.

Overall, these results invited further reflection on what made U.N. conferences comparatively less accessible than non-U.N. events in the eyes of global disability rights advocates. The rest of this section discusses this issue in detail by focusing on specific accessibility components.

3. a Accessibility of U.N. conferences

In addition to providing an overall accessibility score, survey respondents were also asked to rate the accessibility of a number of specific components of the most recent U.N. conference they attended on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=fully inaccessible and 5=fully accessible. The percentage of respondents who indicated that each conference component was not fully accessible (i.e. scored it between 1-4) is show in Table 1 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conference component</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who considered it not fully accessible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conference invitation</td>
<td>43.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference documents (e.g. background material, program and agenda, etc.)</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venue physical accessibility</td>
<td>63.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference website</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Proportion of respondents who thought key conference components were not fully accessible for persons with disabilities

As these results clearly show, respondents perceived a large accessibility deficit in all these key U.N. conference components. Additional open questions about each of these conference components and related accommodations offered further information about accessibility to complement and help explain these numerical results.

3.b Conference venue accessibility

While ramps and elevators were the accessibility features that were provided most commonly at U.N. conferences attended by survey respondents (72.41% and 62.07% respectively), the very low score for overall venue physical accessibility suggested that there are other features such as braille signage and accessible toilets on which it is important for conference organizers to focus (Figure 7).
3.c Conference materials accessibility for visually impaired people

Adding to initial results discussed above for conference invitations and registration information (see section 1.d), one area in which U.N. conferences seemed to be particularly deficient is accessibility features for people with visual impairments. In particular, according to survey respondents screen reader accessible conference material was provided only in 37.98% of cases, braille material in just under a quarter of conferences (24.4%) and the vast majority of conference websites (79.31%) could not be easily accessed using a screen reader (Figure 7).

In open questions, respondents clarified that various foundations and other organizations, including The Nippon Foundation, provided accessible documents to participants in need. However, they also noted that the U.N. itself did not universally provide these services. For example, one respondent explained that conference material was projected onto a large screen, yet found it difficult to see unless seated directly in front of the screen. Some respondents acknowledged attempts made by the U.N. to provide accessible background information but pointed out also that these attempts did not address all types of disabilities equally. In addition, these services were not consistent at every conference or working session meeting. This inconsistency likely greatly affects the participation and engagement of persons with disabilities at U.N. conferences.

Comparatively, U.N. conferences scored better on accessibility features for deaf and hard of hearing people, although still far from ideal with sign language interpretation provided in 58.62% of cases and closed captioning in 41.38% of relevant events.

3.d ECOSOC accreditation as a barrier

One additional barrier that was pointed out with specific regard to U.N. conferences and meetings was ECOSOC accreditation. More than half of the respondents (57%) stated that a lack of ECOSOC accreditation (and other necessary accreditation) was a significant barrier that limited participation by persons with disabilities in U.N. conferences. In fact, 47% of respondents were unsure whether they had proper ECOSOC accreditation, while 34% indicated they did not have proper accreditation necessary to attend and contribute to U.N. conferences. Lack of ECOSOC accreditation was explicitly cited by 29% of respondents as a major factor that prevented them from being able to attend U.N. conferences.

These findings corroborate those from Phase I of the AGG study, in which subject matter experts also stated that ECOSOC accreditation represents a significant political barrier that keeps persons with disabilities and their organizations from participating in U.N. conferences, meetings and events. Although disability organizations may find that it is possible to collaborate with other ECOSOC-accredited organizations to overcome this obstacle to participation, this nevertheless restricts their ability to register for relevant U.N. events in their own right. Alternative options should be explored to remove this considerable obstacle and enable a better representation of the global disability community at U.N. conferences.
4. Virtual Participation

Despite accessibility barriers, respondents showed eagerness to be more engaged and participate more effectively in global governance, with a large majority stating that U.N. (83.87%) and non-U.N. (77%) international conferences, meetings and events were highly relevant to their work. As was briefly stated above, one way to enable more persons with disabilities and their organizations to become more involved in these processes is by boosting and expanding opportunities for remote participation.

4.a Virtual participation rates

Despite the benefits associated with remote participation – particularly its potential for offsetting significant financial and travel barriers for persons with disabilities – only 15.63% of those who said they participated in U.N. events were able to do so virtually compared to 84.38% who did it in person. Looking at non-U.N. conferences and events, the number of respondents who participated virtually via webconferencing tools was even smaller at only 3.77% compared to 96.23% who attended in person. These results indicate that there is great scope for expanding virtual participation efforts for persons with disabilities and their organizations in global governance events.

While the low levels of virtual participation could be ascribed to a variety of factors, including availability and affordability of technology, as well as cultural preferences when it comes to using technology to participate remotely, it is important to note that respondents stated that remote participation was available only at 6.9% of the U.N. conferences they had attended. This suggested that the provision of low cost opportunities for remote participation is far from routine at international conferences, stressing the need for international institutions such as the U.N. and other conference organizers to provide this type of facilities on a regular basis.

4.b Type of activities in virtual participation

At U.N. conferences for which virtual participation was offered, respondents engaged in a good range of activities. In particular, 40% of those who participated in U.N. events remotely via webconferencing software were able to give a presentation and 80% were able to ask a question in real-time, either via voice or using sign language into a camera (40%) or via text (40%). Being a presenter in particular seemed to be an important incentive to participating remotely as all of those who had attended a non-U.N. conference, meeting or event virtually stated that they were able to give a presentation. Comparatively, however, the range of virtual participation activities was much more restricted at non-U.N. events as no respondents said they had been able to ask a question in real time, watch a live stream, or catch up with the conference later through a recorded live stream.

These results suggest that, while there is great scope for expanding remote participation opportunities for persons with disabilities in global governance events, U.N. conferences tend
to be somewhat ahead of the game compared to other international forums. In particular, it is important to explore and potentially use as a model recent U.N. conferences that included substantial efforts to make remote participation available such as COSP, the Sendai DDR conference, Habitat III in Quito, Ecuador, and Global Platform in Cancun, Mexico.