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**Matters related to the implementation of the Convention:
round-table discussions**

Digital accessibility for persons with disabilities

Note by the Secretariat

The present note was prepared by the Secretariat in consultation with United Nations entities, representatives of civil society and other relevant stakeholders to facilitate the round-table discussion on the theme "Digital accessibility for persons with disabilities". The Secretariat hereby transmits the note, as approved by the Bureau of the Conference, to the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at its sixteenth session.

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I. Introduction

1.   Digital technologies include electronic tools, systems, devices and resources that generate, store or process data. Well-known examples of digital technology include the Internet, social media, online games, computers, tablets, calculators, software and applications, mobile phones, video technologies for working from home, telehealth, GPS, automated teller machines, online banking, digital music, 5G, virtual reality, smart homes and artificial intelligence.

2.   In today's digital age, digital technologies play a central role in nearly all aspects of life. They affect how people work, learn, buy products and services, take advantage of entertainment opportunities, vote, search and receive information and interact with each other. Digital accessibility can offer persons with disabilities opportunities for education, work, leisure, social interaction and political participation and can provide access to public services and information.

3.   At the same time, a lack of digital accessibility presents a major risk of leaving persons with disabilities further behind in cases where digital technologies, products, content and services are not created with accessibility requirements, principles and standards in mind. Increasingly, digital accessibility, that is, the ability of all persons, including persons with disabilities, to access and use digital devices and services, must be seen as a critical element for ensuring inclusion and the realization of the rights of persons with disabilities.

4.   The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and resulting lockdowns led to a significant rise in the demand for digital services, as most people, including persons with disabilities, turned to the digital world to continue to work, network and shop, have access to education and health care and maintain family connections. The pandemic thus resulted in an increase in the demand for digital accessibility, while also bringing to light certain challenges.

5.   In the present note, key issues and challenges are identified regarding digital accessibility for persons with disabilities. The note also includes a review of promising opportunities to remove barriers to digital accessibility and to align national policies and strategies on digital accessibility with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

II. Relevant international normative frameworks and policy instruments

6.   The critical role of digital accessibility in empowering persons with disabilities and ensuring that they fully enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms is recognized in the Convention. The importance of accessibility of information and communication is highlighted in the preamble. Under article 4, States parties are obliged to undertake or promote the research and development of, and to promote the availability and use of, new technologies, including information and communications technology (ICT). Under article 9, States parties are obliged to take appropriate measures to ensure equitable access and remove barriers in access to ICTs. Under article 21, private and mass media entities that provide services and information to the general public, including through the Internet, are urged to make such information and services accessible to persons with disabilities.

7.   The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development contains a crucial target for digital inclusion. Target 9.c of Sustainable Development Goal 9 is to significantly increase access to ICT and strive to provide universal access to the Internet in least developed countries.

8.   To ensure that everyone can be included in the development and use of digital technologies, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies recommend that accessibility be fully implemented by mainstreaming ICT accessibility requirements, principles and standards through policies and regulatory measures.[1] In the ITU strategic plan for 2020–2023, adopted under resolution 71 (Rev. Dubai, 2018), emphasis is placed on the importance of inclusiveness through target 2.9, which is to establish enabling environments to ensure accessible telecommunications and ICTs for persons with disabilities in all countries by 2023. Moreover, in 2018, the Plenipotentiary Conference of ITU adopted three resolutions on ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities: resolution 175 (Rev. Dubai, 2018), on telecommunications and ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities; resolution 191 (Rev. Dubai, 2018), on a strategy for the coordination of efforts among the three sectors of ITU, including to bridge the digital divide and the standardization gap for persons with disabilities; and resolution 196 (Rev. Dubai, 2018), on protecting the users and consumers of telecommunication services, including by ensuring that access to telecommunications and ICTs is open, affordable and inclusive, paying special attention to persons with disabilities.

9.   Under the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, launched in June 2019, the Secretary-General committed to closely consulting and actively involving persons with disabilities and their representative organizations to ensure full accessibility for all, including to information and communications, through the use of specific measures, equipment and services.

10.   In 2022, the General Assembly adopted two resolutions further supporting digital accessibility and the need to make digital technologies safe for persons with disabilities. In resolution 77/240, on promoting and mainstreaming easy-to-understand communication for accessibility for persons with disabilities, the Assembly stressed the urgent need to close digital divides and urged Member States to redouble efforts to address obstacles and barriers to accessibility in information, communications and other services, including electronic services, emergency services and assistive technologies. In resolution 77/211, on the right to privacy in the digital age, the Assembly noted that violations and abuses of the right to privacy in the digital age could affect all individuals, in particular persons with disabilities, among others, and recognized that the promotion of and respect for the right to privacy were important to the prevention of violence, including gender-based violence, abuse and sexual harassment, in particular against women and children, as well as any form of discrimination, which could occur in digital and online spaces and included cyberbullying and cyberstalking.

III.   Regional and national normative frameworks and policy instruments

11.   An increasing number of laws, policies and programmes have been introduced to enhance digital accessibility for persons with disabilities. Most of these initiatives have been focused on providing access on an equal basis with others and improving ICT accessibility. As of 2020, 88 countries had adopted regulatory frameworks to ensure ICT accessibility for persons with disabilities, up from 48 countries in 2016.[2]

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[1] ITU and Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, *Model ICT Accessibility Policy Report*, November 2014.

[2] Information provided by ITU in January 2023.

12.   At the regional level, in January 2018, the African Union adopted a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Africa, in which the Heads of State and Government of the African Union recognized the rights of persons with disabilities to barrier-free access to information, including communications technologies and systems. As at February 2023, 13 countries had signed and 5 countries had ratified the Protocol. In April 2019, the European Accessibility Act came into effect in the European Union. The act is aimed at improving the functioning of the internal market for accessible products and services by harmonizing rules across member States.[3] Such harmonization is expected to increase the availability of accessible digital products and services for persons with disabilities. The European Union has also adopted a digital agenda for Europe, which includes actions to promote inclusive digital services and the systematic evaluation of accessibility, notably in the areas of e-commerce, e-identity and e-signature. The European Commission has developed the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030[4] to ensure their full participation in society, on an equal basis with others, in the European Union and beyond, in line with the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which establish equality and non-discrimination as cornerstones of European Union policies. In the Strategy, the Commission committed to: including, in 2021, accessibility and inclusiveness in the reinforced European Union digital government strategy; evaluating, in 2022, the application of the Web Accessibility Directive and assessing whether the Directive should be revised to address any gaps identified; and supporting Member States in providing an accessible digital learning environment and content.

13.   With regard to national legislation, in Latin America and the Caribbean, ICT and persons with disabilities are mentioned under the general disability law in 13 countries and territories and are a provision of the general telecommunication law in six countries.[5] Japan enacted legislation in June 2020 to provide telecommunication relay services to persons who are unable to use telephones, for example, persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. Since July 2021, video and text relay services have been provided by the designated relay service provider, and the cost has been shared by all telephone companies.[6] Several countries have implemented national measures to promote digital accessibility. In 2019, Haiti launched a national ICT initiative, including a strategy for development through the digital economy,[7] and the national regulatory body of Mexico, the Federal Telecommunications Institute, devised and implemented measures to promote appropriate access to telecommunication services and ICTs for persons with disabilities, including general guidelines that are aimed at establishing mechanisms to help to protect the rights of users with disabilities and setting out the obligations of licensed and authorized telecommunication service providers to allow users with disabilities to access such services on an equal footing with others.[8] In 2021, China issued a series of policies and regulations outlining the Government's responsibilities and providing guidelines for enterprises on ensuring ICT and telecommunication accessibility.

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[3] See https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1202#:~:text=The%20European%20accessibility%20act%20is,EU%20leading%20to%20costs%20reduction.

[4] See https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_810.

[5] Heidi Ullmann and others, *Information and Communications Technologies for the Inclusion and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018.

[6] ITU, *Access to Telecommunication/ICT Services by Persons with Disabilities and Other Persons with Specific Needs: Output Report on ITU-D Question 7/1 for the Study Period 2018–2021* (Geneva, 2021), p. 31.

[7] Ibid., p. 9.

[8] Ibid.

14. A number of countries have adopted accessibility requirements in public procurement, thereby influencing digital accessibility in government services and promoting overall digital accessibility through ripple effects in the broader consumer market.[9] Policies have also been established requiring telecommunication service providers, public sector organizations (including government-owned banks), providers of public accommodation, commercial facilities and producers and distributors of digital media to provide accessible digital services.[10]

15. The provision of accessible electronic equipment for persons with disabilities represents an important means to promote digital accessibility. In Guatemala and Lithuania, for example, public libraries have been equipped with computers that have screen reader programs (A/74/146, para. 33).

16. National and international funding mechanisms have significantly contributed to the promotion of digital accessibility for persons with disabilities. For example, funding has been provided through the Innovation Fund of the United Nations Children's Fund to develop open-source accessible digital e-readers (textbooks) for children of primary schools in Kenya and a mobile application to help children with speech impairments to communicate in India.[11] Funds have also been set up to disseminate examples of best practices for digital accessibility, to raise awareness through the mainstreaming of ICT accessibility standards and to support the distribution of specialized equipment to low-income persons with disabilities to give them access to ICTs.[12]

IV. Key issues and challenges in ensuring digital accessibility for persons with disabilities

17. Websites have been ranked as one of the most important ICTs for persons with disabilities in terms of access to health care, education, employment, government services and participation in political and public life.[13] However, persons with disabilities still face significant barriers to using the Internet. While international standards for web accessibility have been adopted and updated since the late 1990s,

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[9] United States of America, United States Access Board, "Information and communication technology: revised 508 standards and 255 guidelines" (available at https://www.access-board.gov/ict/); Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, "CRPD implementation: promoting global digital inclusion through ICT procurement policies and accessibility standards", October 2015; and European Commission Mandate M/376: standardisation mandate to the European Committee for Standardization, the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization and the European Telecommunications Standards Institute in support of European accessibility requirements for the public procurement of products and services in the ICT domain, December 2005 (available at https://www.anec.eu/images/attachments/M376.pdf).

[10] For example, Qatar, Supreme Council of Information and Communication Technology, "Qatar's e-accessibility policy", September 2011. Available at https://mot.gov.qa/sites/default/files/qatar_eaccessibility_policy_en_v4.pdf.

[11] See https://unicefinnovationfund.org/#/all_projects.

[12] For example, the ITU Accessibility Fund (www.itu.int/en/action/accessibility/Pages/accessibilityFund.aspx) and a funding mechanism to improve access to assistive technologies established under the Qatar e-accessibility policy (https://mot.gov.qa/sites/default/files/qatar_eaccessibility_policy_en_v4.pdf).

[13] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Broadband Commission for Digital Development, Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, International Disability Alliance, ITU, Microsoft, and Telecentre.org Foundation, *The ICT Opportunity for a Disability-Inclusive Development Framework: Synthesis Report of the ICT Consultation in Support of the High-Level Meeting on Disability and Development of the Sixty-Eighth Session of the United Nations General Assembly* (September 2013), pp. 6–9.

a 2022 study of the top 1 million websites revealed that 97 per cent of website home pages had detectable failures to comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines of the World Wide Web Consortium.[14] In 2020, 63 per cent of countries worldwide had national government portals that were not in compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, with Africa having the highest percentage of countries (87 per cent) with government websites that were not accessible for persons with disabilities, and Europe having the lowest percentage (30 per cent).[15] Similar barriers are found in social media sites. Following an investigation in 2019, a social media platform was found to be generally not accessible for blind users.[16] The accessibility of online portals that served as gateways to COVID-19 testing, vaccination appointments and other vital information was a critical necessity. A study on the accessibility of 21 government websites across Europe and Asia showed that a large number of the websites were not fully accessible for persons with disabilities.[17] Similar concerns and accessibility issues were raised in studies of COVID-19 websites in the United States of America.[18]

18.   As a result of this lack of accessibility and other barriers, significant gaps have been observed between persons with and persons without disabilities in the use of the Internet, with persons with disabilities reporting lower usage. In a study on 14 countries, it was found that, on average, 19 per cent of persons with disabilities use the Internet, compared with 36 per cent of persons without disabilities. The gap in the use of the Internet also varies with age. More persons with disabilities between the ages of 5 and 39 use the Internet (around 25 per cent) than persons with disabilities who are 40 years of age or older (below 15 per cent). Variations in Internet use between women and men depend on the country. In some countries, women with disabilities have the lowest rates of Internet use, lower than men with disabilities and women without disabilities; in other countries, women and men with disabilities report similar rates of using the Internet.[19]

19.   Education can have a strong impact on access to the digital world. Persons with disabilities with higher education levels are more likely to use the Internet: 62 per cent of persons with disabilities with tertiary education use the Internet, compared with 31 per cent of persons with disabilities with secondary education, 7 per cent of persons with disabilities with primary education and 3 per cent of persons with disabilities with no schooling.[20]

20.   In addition to ensuring education and connectivity, ensuring that persons with disabilities are productively engaged in and profiting from the digital economy requires investments in digital literacy and digital skills. Digital divides and fewer opportunities for accessible training can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities to learn and enhance digital skills. Recognizing this gap, some countries

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[14] WebAIM, "The WebAIM million: the 2022 report on the accessibility of the top 1 million home pages", updated in March 2022.

[15] *E-Government Survey 2020: Digital Government in the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development* (United Nations publication, 2020).

[16] April Glaser, "When things go wrong for blind users on Facebook, they go really wrong", *Slate*, 20 November 2019.

[17] Jinat Ara and Cecilia Sik-Lanyi, "Investigation of COVID-19 vaccine information websites across Europe and Asia using automated accessibility protocols", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, No. 5 (1 March 2022).

[18] Grace Jo and others, "COVID-19 vaccine website accessibility dashboard", *Disability and Health Journal*, vol. 15, No. 3 (July 2022).

[19] *Disability and Development Report 2018: Realizing the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations publication, 2018).

[20] Ibid.

have focused on improving digital skills through the training of persons with disabilities, in particular youth with disabilities.[21]

21. A digital world that is designed without the perspectives of persons with disabilities will lead to their exclusion. For example, developments in artificial intelligence are rarely designed to include the perspectives and presence of persons with disabilities. Datasets are being used to train artificial intelligence systems to determine the best candidate for a job based on a remote video interview. These systems examine speech patterns, tone of voice, facial movements and other indicators, and make recommendations about whom should be scheduled for a follow-up interview. As persons with disabilities are not sufficiently included in the datasets used to train these systems, the systems tend to discriminate against many persons with disabilities, whose impairments resulting from, for example, deafness, blindness, speech disorders or a stroke significantly affect facial expression and voice.[22] Recognizing this gap, in December 2022, under the framework of a joint project on the accessibility of online job application and recruitment systems and with the involvement of end users with different types of disabilities, ITU and the International Labour Organization launched a guidebook and an e-learning course on how to make e-recruitment platforms accessible to jobseekers with disabilities. In his 2021 report (A/HRC/49/52), the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities also issued practical recommendations on how to reap the benefits of artificial intelligence for persons with disabilities in such fields as employment, education and independent living, while avoiding the risks and challenges posed by these new technologies.

22. Persons with disabilities need to have access to e-commerce and digital finance products and services. According to crowdsourced data from 2017, collected primarily from developed countries, 12 per cent of automated teller machines were not accessible, while data from 5 developing countries in 2011 indicated that banking was not accessible for 37 per cent of persons with disabilities.[23]

23. The COVID-19 pandemic made the issue of digital accessibility more pressing, as many persons with disabilities faced digital barriers that had a negative impact on employment and education: in 2020, only 29 per cent of persons with disabilities who used digital platforms for work or education said that all online platforms were accessible to them.[24] As schools were closed around the world, in addition to facing connectivity challenges and inequitable access to digital devices, children with disabilities faced a lack of accessibility of digital devices, Internet platforms and digital learning materials.[25] Only 27 per cent of students with disabilities who had

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[21] World Bank, *Jamaica: Youth Employment in Digital and Animation Industries Project* (Washington, D.C., June 2014; available at http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/421641468043471522/Jamaica-Youth-Employment-in-Digital-and-Animation-Industries-Project); Vashkar Bhattacharjee, "Empowering youth with disabilities in Bangladesh: providing ICT skills", World Bank Blogs, 26 November 2013; Chile, national plan for the development of digital technology entitled "Digital agenda: imagine Chile 2013–2020"(available at www.agendadigital.gob.cl/files/otros/Agenda_Digital_Imagina_Chile_2013-2020.pdf); Peru, Supreme Decree No. 066-2011-PCM, on the "Information society development plan of Peru: the Peruvian digital agenda 2.0"; and Heidi Ullmann and others, *Information and Communications Technologies*.

[22] Meredith Whittaker and others, "Disability, bias, and AI", AI Now Institute at New York University, November 2019.

[23] *Disability and Development Report 2018*.

[24] International Disability Alliance, *Survey on the Experiences of Persons with Disabilities Adapting to the COVID-19 Global Pandemic*, September 2021.

[25] UNESCO, "Policy brief: understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the education of persons with disabilities – challenges and opportunities of distance education", 2021, p. 5; World Bank, *A Landscape Review of ICT for Disability-Inclusive Education* (Washington, D.C., January 2022).

access to a tablet found the tablet to be accessible and useful, and only 25 per cent of those who had access to the Internet found it to be accessible and useful. Moreover, 30 per cent of those who had access to smartphones found them to be accessible and useful, and 16 per cent of those who had access to cell phones found them to be accessible and useful.[26]

24.   Many businesses continue to struggle to ensure digital accessibility in the workplace. In an ILO survey conducted in May and June 2022 among businesses around the world that are committed to disability inclusion, 32 per cent reported a need to further build the capacity to provide workplace adjustments for inclusive remote work (A/77/166, para. 19).

25.   During the pandemic, the use of telehealth services increased substantially in many countries, and telehealth has now become a basic need for the general population. However, many persons with disabilities experience difficulties and challenges in accessing and using telehealth services and are often forgotten in the design of these digital services. There is increasing evidence that, in particular in low- and middle-income countries, persons with disabilities cannot benefit from telehealth services owing to highly inaccessible formats of delivery. Very often, telehealth platforms are not compatible with such devices as screen readers, which help persons with vision impairments to access information, or the lack of captioning or volume control in videoconferences impedes persons who are deaf or hard of hearing from interacting with health professionals virtually. It is, therefore, critical to scale up efforts to address digital accessibility for persons with disabilities in order to ensure equitable access to telehealth services.

V.   Responses to overcoming existing and emerging challenges

26.   In 2020, ITU issued guidelines on how to ensure that digital information, services and products are accessible to all people, including persons with disabilities, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines provide two key messages: (a) ensure that key digital information, services and requirements for reducing contamination of COVID-19 are provided in accessible formats to enable all people, including persons with disabilities, to have access to such vital information; and (b) ensure that all people, including persons with disabilities, can access, understand and use digital information and services provided through various means, including electronic display screens in public spaces and other methods of providing public information, radio, television, text messages, WhatsApp, email, social networks and websites.[27]

27.   Similarly, in 2021, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization issued guidelines on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in open and distance learning, which contain recommendations for key stakeholders to support opportunities for continued high-quality digital learning, including by harnessing open solutions.[28] In addition, the guidelines on emergency movement to online and distance learning, developed by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, include an emergency response actions checklist. The checklist contains emergency response actions to be taken by educators and developers during an emergency, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, that requires the use of accessible digital distance learning resources for persons with disabilities.

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[26] World Bank, *Learners with Disabilities and COVID-19 School Closures: Findings from a Global Survey Conducted by the World Bank's Inclusive Education Initiative* (Washington, D.C., 2021).

[27] See https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Digital-Inclusion/Persons-with-Disabilities/Pages/COVID-19-Guidelines.aspx.

[28] See https://www.unesco.org/en/communication-information/odl-guidelines/guidelines.

28.   In the report entitled *A Landscape Review of ICT for Disability-Inclusive Education*, the World Bank emphasizes the need to invest in the full system of educational technology to allow learners with disabilities to enjoy the benefits of digital technology, namely by investing in people, products, pedagogy, policies, accessible places and funding and support mechanisms.

29.   To support businesses struggling with digital accessibility, in 2021, the ILO Global Business and Disability Network published a technical guide entitled "Leave no one offline: a primer on engaging your company on digital accessibility", with a view to highlighting the business benefits of promoting digital accessibility. In February 2022, the Network organized a public webinar entitled "Reaping the business benefits of accessibility" to highlight the most recent accessibility policies and initiatives undertaken by multinational enterprises, with a focus on their efforts to design and implement internal and external infrastructure to ensure digital accessibility.

30.   To support efforts to address digital accessibility for persons with disabilities and ensure equitable access to telehealth services, in June 2022, ITU and the World Health Organization (WHO) launched a global standard on the accessibility of telehealth services, with the aim of defining the accessibility requirements for technical features to be implemented by Governments, health-care providers and manufacturers of telehealth platforms to facilitate the access to and use of telehealth services by persons with disabilities.[29] In line with an inclusive approach, all technical requirements included in the standard are based on inputs collected from stakeholders in civil society, including organizations of persons with disabilities, and in the industry, thereby ensuring their feasibility and relevance. Examples of such requirements include the presence of captioning during videoconferences for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, or compatibility of telehealth platforms with screen readers or such assistive products as Braille keyboards to remove barriers for people who are blind or visually impaired. Some countries are already adopting the WHO-ITU global standard in their national telehealth platforms.[30] Other countries have included disability considerations in their digital health strategies. For example, in the digital transformation strategies of Australia and Sweden, it is recommended that vulnerable groups be included and considered as integral to the design and drafting of policies. Likewise, in Canada, funding agencies require that persons with disabilities be included at every stage of development of digital health projects. Recently, the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, with the support of WHO, issued a report entitled "The future of virtual health and care: driving access and equity through inclusive policies". In the report, the Commission stresses that virtual health and care should be an integral component of health priorities and highlights the importance of integrating disability-inclusive features into these digital services.

VI.   Ways forward: policy recommendations

31.   Given the growing importance of the digital economy, investments in digital accessibility for persons with disabilities are critical. The digitalization of services and activities increased substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although countries are adopting a growing number of laws, policies, strategies and programmes with digital accessibility considerations, more efforts are needed to ensure that they are implemented.

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[29] Recommendation ITU-T F.780.2 (accessibility of telehealth services). Available at https://www.itu.int/rec/T-REC-F.780.2-202203-I.

[30] For example, the national telehealth platform of India (https://esanjeevani.in/).

32. Many websites, digital devices, social media platforms and artificial intelligence systems remain inaccessible for persons with disabilities. During the pandemic, gaps in digital accessibility were particularly visible in remote education, telehealth and remote work. Many online COVID-19 information portals were not fully accessible for persons with disabilities. Over the past two years, awareness of these gaps has led to the development of several international guidelines on accessibility of digital information, services and products for persons with disabilities.

33. Considering the vast potential of digital technology to improve the lives of persons with disabilities and to contribute to the implementation of the Convention, policymakers and decision makers are urged to continue to invest in digital accessibility to ensure that persons with disabilities have equitable opportunities for educational, economic, social and civic participation. In some countries, there is a persistent gender divide, with women with disabilities using digital technology at a lower rate than men with disabilities and women without disabilities. Efforts should also be made to ensure that women and girls with disabilities have access to accessible digital technology.

34. Digital accessibility can be promoted by focusing on the following priority areas:

(a) **Strengthening the implementation of digital accessibility policies and regulations**. As countries continue to develop better policy, legislative and regulatory frameworks, it is also important to strengthen collaboration among ministries, enhance the alignment of policies across sectors and strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms to ensure that policies are properly implemented. Internet accessibility can be improved by aligning national regulations with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines;

(b) **Adopting international standards on accessibility of digital health technologies and ensuring that digital health solutions, including telehealth, are disability inclusive and that accessibility of digital health technologies is a principle of national policies**. Countries need to amend or create national digital health strategies that are appropriate for the local context and that reflect the needs of persons with disabilities. Digital applications and software can be universally designed and accessible to everyone through the adoption of international standards, such as the WHO-ITU global standard on accessibility of telehealth services;

(c) **Making accessibility a core feature of digital development investments and programmes**. Planning and budgeting for accessibility in digital investments from the start will ensure comprehensive planning, the targeting of beneficiaries with disabilities and cost efficiencies and will reduce the need for expensive retrofitting;

(d) **Promoting the principles of universal design in the mainstream ICT industry and the public sector**. Implementing universal design principles is more inclusive, affordable and often simpler than developing specialized software or hardware for persons with disabilities;

(e) **Enhancing the knowledge of and building human capacity on digital accessibility**. Raising awareness of the barriers and solutions for persons with disabilities will be crucial to successfully increasing digital accessibility for persons with disabilities. In particular, key stakeholders, such as Governments and decision makers, educators, statisticians, non-governmental organizations, particularly organizations of persons with disabilities, and ICT industries in the public and private sectors, must be made aware of the vast potential of, and urgent need for, accessible ICTs to improve the quality of life and ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Methods to raise such awareness could include the development of

academic and training programmes highlighting digital accessibility and universal design;

(f)   **Involving persons with disabilities directly**. In order for stakeholders to properly understand the variety of accessibility requirements, persons with disabilities must be involved at every stage of ICT development. One of the most effective ways to do this is to work with organizations of persons with disabilities, in particular those that have expertise in the field of digital accessibility, and connect them with ICT businesses to enable them to provide their input and insights;

(g)   **Developing and publishing comparable data on digital accessibility**. Data on digital access, accessibility and usage by persons with disabilities should be routinely produced. A systematic collection of data, a clear methodology for comparison, regular data evaluation and a publicly available platform to showcase the data to interested parties are crucial for a successful analysis of the state of digital accessibility.

VII.   Guiding questions for discussion by the panel

35.   The following questions are presented for consideration by all round-table panellists and participants attending the discussion, taking into account the overarching theme of the sixteenth session of the Conference, "Harmonizing national policies and strategies with the Convention: achievements and challenges":

(a)   What are the major barriers to making progress towards full digital accessibility?

(b)   Based on your expertise or experiences, what governmental policies are required to promote digital accessibility?

(c)   Can you provide one or two examples of measures that have encouraged the producers of digital technology, in the public or private sectors, to create accessible products and services for persons with disabilities, including through the use of universal design?

(d)   Can you share one innovative good practice to raise awareness of the benefits of digital accessibility among Governments and decision makers, ICT industries, educators and employers?

(e)   In some countries, women and girls with disabilities have more limited access to digital technology. What can be done by Governments, the ICT sector and the disability community to address this gap?

(f)   What financing mechanisms and models are available to support the development and deployment of assistive technologies for persons with disabilities in developing countries? How can these mechanisms be made more effective and sustainable over the long term?

(g)   How can public-private partnerships be leveraged to ensure that assistive technologies are affordable and accessible to persons with disabilities in developing countries? What role can international development organizations play in supporting these partnerships?

(h)   What are the best practices for training and building the capacity of technology developers and designers on inclusive design and accessibility, in particular in developing countries? How can these practices be integrated into educational curricula and professional development programmes?

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