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**Human Rights Council 25nd Session**

**Annual Discussion on Human Rights and Persons with Disabilities**



**Opening Statement by**

**Ms. Flavia Pansieri**

**United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

 **19 March 2014**

**12:00-15:00, Room XX, Palais des Nations**

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to open this sixth interactive discussion on the rights of persons with disabilities at the Human Rights Council.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities represents an important shift in the approach to the rights of this group. It establishes that persons with disabilities are holders of human rights on an equal basis with others. They can no longer be perceived as merely recipients of charity, goodwill or medical care.

By now 140 states and one regional integration organization have become parties to the Convention, and its Optional Protocol has been ratified by 79 States. This rapid rise in ratifications reflects growing international awareness of and commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities. States that have not yet ratified the two instruments should make this a priority. Those that have entered reservations should re-evaluate whether they can be withdrawn.

I also urge States that are parties to the Convention to take action to fully implement its provisions. This should be done with keen awareness of the linkages and overlaps between disability and other grounds for discrimination — including gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnic or religious origin, caste or socioeconomic status.

 The establishment of the mandate of the Secretary General’s Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility gives us an opportunity to move forward in effectively implementing the Convention. OHCHR looks forward to working closely with Mr Lenín Voltaire Moreno Garcés, a renowned advocate for persons with disabilities and inclusive society who was named Special Envoy last December.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today’s debate focuses on the right to education of persons with disabilities. To guide the discussion, my Office has prepared a thematic study on this topic, and its importance to realising the universal right to education. The study analyses the relevant provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; highlights good practices; and discusses challenges and strategies for the establishment of inclusive education systems.

Following the practice of the Human Rights Council, this study is available in an easy-to-read format, and is therefore accessible to persons with intellectual impairments. I encourage the Human Rights Council to ensure this type of accessibility for more panels, not just those related to disability. The Council could increase its efforts to making human rights mechanisms accessible to persons with disabilities by including related references in future resolutions.

Education is a fundamental human right. It contributes to freedom of choice and to productive and prosperous lives, as well as facilitating inclusion into society in general. Inclusive education also promotes respect for diversity.

Throughout history, persons with disabilities have faced discrimination. It has often been considered impossible to educate them in mainstream schools — if at all. The Convention advocates an end to this approach. It establishes that no person can be excluded from mainstream schools on the basis of disability, and states that reasonable accommodation cannot be denied.

Inclusive, quality education systems provide a powerful context to enable development of the capacities of every learner. They focus on enhancing participation of learners through diverse strategies that enrich the teaching-learning process. Under Article 24, the Convention recognizes that inclusive education systems, and lifelong learning, are the only means that can enable the right to education for persons with disabilities.

This contribution of the Convention to the international human rights framework elevates the right to education to a new level. It implies a progressive but systemic transformation of educational frameworks so that they can contribute to the enjoyment of this right — not only for persons with disabilities, but for all other excluded groups. I encourage States to engage in this systemic transformation, which promises to change the lives of so many excluded children and adults.

Currently, even when they are permitted to enter mainstream educational facilities, persons with disabilities face a number of barriers.

First, accessibility is a key challenge. Measures like Braille, sign language interpretation, augmentative communication systems and physical accessibility are a precondition for inclusive education.

Second, current educational practice often fails to consider the diverse ways in which people learn. Often, it promotes division among students, whether on the basis of cognitive functions, behaviour, cultural background, or other standardised categorizations. This creates segregation and exclusion. We need new designs for learning, with creative solutions that place value on diversity while guaranteeing education of high quality. Good practices from around the world can assist in building better systems that accommodate all learners, including those with disabilities.

Third, social attitudes may pose a very significant obstacle. Resistance to inclusion may come from teachers, school and other education-system administrators, municipal or government officials or the broader civil society. Efforts are needed to raise awareness in these communities of the enriching properties of diversity.

Finally, States may need to revise laws and policies to achieve inclusive education systems. Involvement of persons with disabilities in designing policy and building capacity will be an essential pillar of this transformation.

Distinguished panellists,

I am confident that your discussions will be able to identify practical steps that can be taken by all actors — including States, the private sector, civil society, UN entities, and others. As we build a global development agenda beyond 2015 that is firmly anchored in human rights, we should send a clear message to the international community. Inclusive, quality education is our goal. OHCHR stands ready to work with you to achieve it.

Thank you.