

March 24, 2011

DPI/NGO Briefing
"Reframing Disability Towards Eliminating Ableism in
Education and Employment Across the Globe"

Thursday, March 17, 2011, 10:15 a.m. - 12:15 p.m.

1. Background Information:

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 10% of the world's population - or 650 million people - live with a disability. Almost 80% of them live in isolated rural areas in developing countries. Persons with disabilities constitute the world's largest minority group.

Faced with economic, social, physical and barriers which hamper their full participation in society, people with disabilities often lead isolated lives disconnected from their own communities. They face particular challenges in education and training with many being denied access to basic literacy and numerical skills. As noted in the most recent Millennium Development Report (2010), "the link between disability and marginalization in education is evident in countries at all levels of development". It is estimated that over 90% of children with physical and mental impairments in developing countries do not attend school.

Data regarding the employment situation of persons with disabilities indicated that they encounter serious hurdles in job markets throughout the world. They are frequently denied employment or given only menial or poorly remunerated jobs. Furthermore, myths abound that persons with disabilities are unable to work and that accommodating them in the workplace is expensive.

Current statistics indicate that in developing countries, 80% to 90% of persons with disabilities of working age are unemployed. In industrialized countries the figure is between 50% and 70%. United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called on governments to do more to support people with disabilities and to implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which entered into force in 2008.

2. Moderator:

Ms. Gail Bindley-Taylor; Public Information Officer, NGO Relations Department of Public Information (DPI)

3. Speakers;

Ms. Akiko Ito; Chief of the Secretariat for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and United Nations Focal Point on Disability.

Mr. John Hockenberry; American Journalist and author.

Ms. Judith Heumann; Internationally recognized leader in the disability community and a lifelong civil rights advocate for disadvantaged people.

Dr. Thomas Hehir; Professor of Practice at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University.

4. The moderator, Ms. Gail Bindley-Taylor, welcomed everyone and introduced each of the speakers with their backgrounds. She indicated that this briefing will examine current efforts to eliminate gaps in economic and social development that marginalize persons with disabilities in the areas of education and employment.

5. The first speaker, Ms. Akiko Ito, is the Department Focal Point for Women in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations. Ms. Ito has lectured and published extensively on issues concerning disability and human rights at the United Nations.

Prior to her current post, she worked in the Legal Affairs Section at the United Nations Drug Control Program in Vienna, Austria. Ms. Ito's academic background is in international law. Her main area of interest is domestic application of international law with a focus on the rights of minorities and other disadvantaged groups.

Ms. Ito holds an LL.B. in International Legal Studies from Sophia University in Tokyo, Japan an M.A. degree in International Relations from the University of Chicago and an LL.M. from the Boalt Hall School of Law, University of California at Berkeley.

6. The second speaker, Mr. John Hockenberry, is a four-time Emmy Award winner and three-time Peabody Award winner. Mr. Hockenberry has worked in the media since 1980. Mr. Hockenberry has reported from all over the world. He has anchored programs for network TV, cable and radio. He has been a contributing reporter for magazines, newspapers, and online media.

He is a prominent figure in the disability rights movement. Mr. Hockenberry sustained a spinal cord injury in a car crash at the age of 19 which left him with paraplegia from the chest down. In 2007 he was named a Distinguished Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab.

Since April 2008, Mr. Hockenberry has been host at "The Takeaway", a live national morning news program created by Public Radio International and WNYC New York. He is the author of the nonfiction book "Moving Violations: War Zones, Wheelchairs and Declarations of Independence" and the novel "A River Out Of Eden".

7. The third speaker, Ms. Judith Heumann, is currently the Special Advisor for International Disability Rights at the United States Department of State. She previously served as the Director for the Department on Disability Rights at the United States Department of State. She previously served as the Director for the Department on Disability Services for the District of Columbia.

From June 2002 to 2006, Ms Heumann served as the World Bank's first Advisor on Disability and Development. She also served as the Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services in the Department of Education from 1993 to 2001 in the Clinton Administration.

For more than 30 years Ms. Heumann has worked with disabled people's organizations and governments around the world to advance the human rights of persons with disabilities. Ms. Heumann graduated from Long Island University in 1969 and received her masters degree in Public Health from the University of California at Berkeley in 1975. She has received numerous awards including being the first recipient of the Henry B. Betts Award in recognition of her efforts to significantly improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

8. The fourth speaker, Dr. Thomas Hehir, served as Director of the United States Department of Education's office of Special Education Programs from 1993 to 1999. As Director he was responsible for federal leadership in implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Dr. Hehir played a leading role in developing the Clinton Administration's proposal for the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA, 90 percent of which was adopted by Congress.

In 1990 he was the associate superintendent for the Chicago Public Schools, where he was responsible for special education services and student support services. In this role he implemented major changes in the special education service delivery system. This enabled Chicago to reach significantly higher levels of compliance with IDEA and resulted in the eventual removal of the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights as overseer.

Dr. Hehir served in a variety of positions in the Boston Public Schools from 1978 to 1987 including that of Director of Special Education from 1983 to 1987. An advocate for children with disabilities in the education system, he has written articles on special education, special education in the reform movement, due process, and least restrictive environment issues.

9. Summary;

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 10% of the world's population or 650 million people of which 200 million are children live with a disability. They constitute the world's largest minority group. Persons with disabilities are among the world's poorest and most excluded individuals. They often lead isolated lives disconnected from their own communities. They frequently also experience discrimination and face obstacles to their full participation in society.

Key points raised by the panel on this issue include;

- Students that have overcome great adversity and made to the college level often have strong parents that have played a key role in confronting those in the school system and elsewhere that hold onto the idea of ableism.
- Children need to learn in many ways that are most effective for them.
- It is important to confront the status quo rather than be satisfied with the existing agenda.
- There is a need to examine how social media can be used to change attitudes and break down barriers.
- What is good for persons with disabilities is good for everyone.
- While stigma is still strong, progress is being made towards the abandonment of the belief that persons with disabilities can only play a narrow role in society.
- The movement of persons with disabilities is growing and becoming more empowered. Ninety-nine countries have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- The MDGS can not be achieved without persons with disabilities.

10. Questions/Answers:

10.1 Ms. Judith Heumann; We need a program to teach disabled persons to be leaders. We need to educate people how movements begin and the role of the media.

10.2 Mr. John Hockenberry; Two issues are important for the disabled;

- There must be participation by the disabled.
- We must find out how the disabled can be useful in the system.

10.3 Ms. Judith Heumann; She explained how ladies rooms in different restaurants were not disabled accessible (i.e. Starbucks, etc). These issues are now being more recognized. All countries must use design technology that provide more accessibility. Disabled persons have that right.

10.4 Ms. Akiko Ito; What is good for the disabled is good for everyone. The media is important to creating a global network on this important issue.

Questions/Answers (Cont'd)

10.5 Dr. Thomas Hehir; We unfortunately created a sub-system for persons with disabilities. One of the schools in Boston, Massachusetts is one of the highest performers of schools for the disabled. The convergence of this issue is very important.

10.6 Dr. Thomas Hehir; The social media is a way to change the attitudes of people towards disabled children.

10.7 Ms. Akiko Ito; We must sit down with the media to discuss and explain this important issue.

10.8 Dr. Thomas Hehir; Parents are important to succeeding in helping the disabled.

10.9 Mr. John Hockenberry; We found out that in Iraq and Afghanistan how you can address disabilities. Nations in the Middle East must address modernism.

10.10; Ms. Judith Heumann; Work is now going on in the Middle East to helping their disabled.

PDC George Weinstein
National UN Chairman