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Agenda item 138: Pattern of conferences

Statement to the Fifth Committee on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled
**"Enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences
and meetings of the United Nations system"** (JIU/REP/2018/6)

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

I have the honour to introduce the JIU report entitled "Enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the United Nations system" contained in document A/74/217 of 23 July 2019.

The review was undertaken as part of the JIU's Programme of Work for 2018, in response to a proposal from the United Nations Secretariat. Its relevance derives from the recognition that about 15 per cent of the global population is estimated to live with some form of disability, and face more barriers than those without, with regard to participation in, and access to, deliberative processes. Making conferences and meetings fully accessible, therefore, becomes a critical indicator of the willingness of our organizations to "walk the talk" when it comes to non-discrimination and inclusion.

The review focussed on assessing the current status of accessibility for persons with disabilities to large-scale, small-scale and offsite conferences and meetings organized by United Nations system organizations. The objective was to identify obstacles, impediments and good practices to enhance accessibility for persons with disabilities so that they can participate effectively in conferences and meetings, and to this end, the report makes actionable recommendations to improve the current situation.

The approach goes beyond physical meeting rooms to assess all relevant aspects that affect accessibility and incorporates the essential human rights perspective while dealing with this topic. We analysed mandates, policies, guidelines and standards as well as questionnaire responses and documentation from 23 JIU participating organizations, interviewed over 250 stakeholders from them as well as organizations of persons with disabilities and Permanent Missions, and conducted an individual perceptions survey of persons with disabilities. The final report contains 10 formal recommendations, one addressed to the legislative organs and nine to the Executive Heads.

Mr. Chairman, allow me to briefly highlight six key findings of the report.

1. Formal policies on accessibility are lacking
Only three entities have a dedicated policy on accessibility or reasonable accommodation, while seven have policies on the employment of persons with disabilities that incorporate accessibility elements. Our review concludes that good practice elements in existing policies and highly instructive guidance documents can assist in policy formulation, while identified international standards can be considered for the development of aspirational benchmarks.

2. Limited provision of accessible facilities and services

In headquarters locations, most organizations are not providing many of the essential Information and Communications Technology and other services that would make meetings and conferences more accessible. Field office accessibility lags considerably behind that of headquarters owing to multiple factors, ranging from restrictions on physical modifications due to rented or heritage status premises, to resource limitations and remote locations. For meetings at off-site locations, most organizations neither adequately monitor accessibility provisions, nor set minimum accessibility requirements.

3. Low levels of stakeholder satisfaction with existing accessibility provisions

Through surveys and interviews, persons with disabilities and their representative organizations have highlighted the need to address the lack of communication on accessibility before, during and after conferences and meetings. They have also called for incorporating accessibility into all stages of event design and planning, to address invisible disabilities, to replicate all good practices found in entities on a system-wide basis, to establish a focal point for disabilities, to defray the participation costs for persons with disabilities and to make greater use of assistive technological tools.

4. Deficits in accessibility-related internal capacity and coordination negatively impact upon the participation of persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings

Many organizations do not have a disability and accessibility focal point and where they do exist, they do not have clearly-defined terms of reference; standard operating procedures for accessibility-related activities are non-existent; there is very limited and inconsistent consideration of accessibility-related costs in conference and meeting planning processes; most organizations neither proactively request information on participants' accessibility needs, nor disseminate information on available accessible facilities and services prior to conferences and meetings; registration processes for meetings are inaccessible for individuals with certain disabilities; accessibility centers are non-existent in all major conference venues, except for the ones in New York and Bangkok; and the uptake and utilization of assistive ICT tools has been very limited, given what is available in the market.

5. Deficits in the proactive incorporation of accessibility considerations in organizational work as well as in knowledge-sharing and accountability on the subject matter

The conduct of accessibility assessments of organizational facilities and services is not a standard practice in organizations. Additionally, accessibility considerations are rarely proactively incorporated into procurement processes to ensure that new acquisitions do not create more barriers. Most organizations do not systematically collect data on accessibility, monitor it or have performance indicators to measure it, and consequently they do not report periodically on the state of accessibility to their legislative bodies. While several inter- and intra-agency coordination mechanisms on disabilities and accessibility exist, they can do much more to share good practices. While raising staff awareness could be greatly assisted by incorporating accessibility-related questions into staff surveys and ensuring staff training on disability inclusion and accessibility, such provisions are lacking in most organizations.

6. Limited progress towards mainstreaming accessibility

The limited and uneven pace of progress in furthering accessibility, lack of dynamism in adapting and utilizing advances in technology, and the lack of systematic focus on the topic in legislative bodies has led stakeholders to perceive disability inclusion and accessibility as an "institutional orphan". Consequently, persons with disabilities, their representative organizations and United Nations system professionals on the subject matter, have underscored the imperative of "mainstreaming" the topic in the work of all organizations as a cross-cutting issue to secure a higher degree of institutional support and scale-up awareness-raising.

In this context, I am pleased to inform the General Assembly that the executive summary of the review is being prepared in an 'Easy Read' format and will be available on the JIU website in the early part of next year.

Recommendations

Distinguished delegates, to address the afore-mentioned challenges, the report outlines a series of concrete measures to enhance accessibility-related internal capacity and coordination, encourage the participation of persons with disabilities in conferences and meetings, proactively incorporate accessibility considerations into organizational work, share good practices and knowledge, further accountability and mainstream the disability inclusion agenda across the United Nations system.

Specifically, the report recommends that you, the legislative bodies, should include in your respective agendas the review of periodic reports on the state of accessibility for persons with disabilities to conferences and meetings of the organizations of the United Nations system.

Furthermore, nine recommendations are addressed to the executive heads of organizations that include:

- One - developing a comprehensive policy and guidelines on accessibility;
- Two - ensuring that accessibility requirements are clearly stipulated in individual agreements concluded with the hosting entity for specific conferences and meetings;
- Three - appointing a focal point on accessibility under terms of reference that clearly define the focal point's role and responsibilities;
- Four - developing standard operating procedures on operational responsibilities of relevant actors engaged, directly or indirectly, in servicing conferences and meetings;
- Five - ensuring that meeting and conference registration processes are fully accessible, that registration forms include clauses to specifically query on accessibility requirements, that information on accessible facilities and services is disseminated to all potential participants, and that post-conference satisfaction surveys consistently include accessibility-related questions;
- Six - providing the option for remote participation in all meetings and conferences organized;
- Seven - undertaking periodic accessibility assessments of organizational facilities and services for conferences and meetings, and ensuring that organizations of persons with disabilities are adequately consulted at all stages of the process;
- Eight - incorporating accessibility checks and/or requirements into procurement policies and guidelines for consideration and adoption by the relevant decision-making authority; and
- Nine - developing and implementing, through relevant inter-agency mechanisms, a common system-wide mandatory specialized training module on disability inclusion and accessibility for personnel involved directly or indirectly in the servicing of conferences and meetings.

The timely consideration of these recommendations can be greatly facilitated if, you, the legislative bodies, impress upon the executive heads to take prompt and effective action.

I should like to underscore the genuine enthusiasm towards the topic that some organizations demonstrated during the review. For example, as already noted in the review, inspired by the JIU questionnaire, one of the entities drew up an action plan within three months for enhancing accessibility in three phases: short-term, to be accomplished within three months and within existing resources; medium-term, where resources had to be identified for measures that could be undertaken; and long-term, which would involve significant financial outlays and discussions with the host government that owned the building complex, in order to undertake structural improvements that would take two to three years to accomplish.

Likewise, following discussions with the JIU project team on existing processes and procedures, several organizations voluntarily agreed to introduce changes in their conference and meeting registration and accreditation procedures to proactively seek information from potential participants about their specific requirements relating to accessibility. Several entities agreed to include information about the availability of facilities and services in the conference and meeting information note for participants,

while some agreed to include questions on accessibility in their global staff surveys, without waiting for the formal publication of the JIU review. This proactivity indicates that the primary challenge in addressing accessibility is one of information deficits rather than an unwillingness to act.

Furthermore, the then Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Global Communications had thanked the Joint Inspection Unit for this review in his statement to the Committee on Information, as it had guided the Department Of Global Communications and the Department of Safety and Security in their joint work to ensure seamless accreditation and access to the United Nations Headquarters event for the observance of the World Autism Awareness Day on 2nd April 2019; the collaborative efforts of the two Departments earned heartfelt appreciation from the speakers, participants and attendees for the smooth process of registration.

Management response / CEB comments

Mr. Chairman,

We have taken note of the comments of the CEB on the review, contained in document A/74/217/Add.1 of 23 July 2019, and appreciate that organizations welcome the findings of the report in general, and mostly support the provisions of the proposed recommendations.

However, the CEB appears to link many of its comments to the implementation of United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy, which the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) adopted in May 2019.

The JIU welcomes the Disability Inclusion Strategy as an important tool to monitor and measure progress on inclusion. However, it should be noted that the present JIU review contains very specific and time-bound recommendations for system-wide action by the executive heads and the legislative organs and governing bodies by the end of 2020 or 2021, while the strategy has a longer-time frame for monitoring and reporting. Consequently, we are of the view that the implementation of the JIU's recommendations by the organizations of the United Nations system should not be tied down to the implementation of the strategy.

Member States in the legislative organs and governing bodies of the organizations of the United Nations system may wish to give further careful consideration to this matter.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates, thank you very much for your kind attention, and I would welcome any comments or questions you may have.

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