Disability as a human rights issue

While human rights apply equally to all human beings, it is recognised that not all people may be able to enjoy them equally unless specific measures are taken to that effect. People must be enabled to claim these rights and to live their lives in dignity and autonomy as active members of society.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) aims to make this happen. It is the response of the international community to a long regrettable history of discrimination, exclusion and dehumanisation of persons with disabilities.

A human rights perspective means viewing people with disabilities as individuals who have certain rights, rather than people as problems because of their impairment or as the beneficiaries of charity. In 1993, the United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities laid the foundation for a shift from the welfare approach to the inclusive approach based on rights, and respect for the privacy and independence of persons with disabilities.

The UN CRPD is the main international human rights instrument addressing the rights of persons with disabilities. It sets out principles to guide policy development and action on disability matters. It raises awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities, as it sees disability as a human rights issue, rather than a welfare or medical issue. UNRWA’s Disability Policy embodies the main principles, concepts and language of the UN CRPD.

Disability in UNRWA’s Protection function

As a United Nations agency, UNRWA is committed to observing human rights and associated international standards and good practice in its programmes. UNRWA’s work is guided by relevant UN instruments, and principles of non-discrimination and protection of the integrity and dignity of people. By UN General Assembly Resolution 66/74 (January 2012), the Agency was explicitly mandated to address the needs and rights of persons with disabilities in accordance with the UN CRPD. UNRWA’s overarching Protection Policy strongly reinforces this commitment. Protection is what UNRWA does to safeguard and advance the rights of Palestine refugees (UNRWA Medium Term Strategy 2010-2015, para. 49, p. 18). Work towards securing the rights of persons with disabilities links closely with the Agency’s overall protection efforts. The Agency’s protection framework encompasses social and economic rights on one hand, and civil and political rights on the other.
ensuring access to core services, combined with targeted assistance and interventions, including to the relevant authorities, UNRWA endeavours to safeguard and advance the rights of Palestine refugees, including those with disabilities.

National policies
Within the region of UNRWA’s operations, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon have signed the Convention, although Lebanon has not yet ratified it. National disability strategies or plans are either completed (Jordan, Lebanon and Syria) or in development (Palestinian Authority), and in all fields of operation there are anti-discrimination laws.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Host</th>
<th>UN CRPD status as at January 2013</th>
<th>Policy frameworks</th>
<th>National disability body</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>National Plan for the Care and Habilitation of People with Disabilities 2008</td>
<td>National Council for Disability Affairs - established 2004 (High Council for Disability)</td>
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However, major gaps remain worldwide between the standards set by the UN CRPD and what happens in reality for people with disabilities. Unless new legislation is supported by strong administrative measures, active enforcement, and attitude change, those with disability will continue to be discriminated against and marginalised. Additionally, in view of UNRWA’s regional context, it is important to consider the rights of persons with disabilities in human rights monitoring related to conflict, emergency and post-conflict situations. (OHCHR, 2010)

More information

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 4,797,723 registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA’s services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.