

Disability and Old Age

Discussion Highlights

March 29, 2007

The German Federal Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs asked Global Action on Aging (GAA) to convene a group of experts from the aging and disability community who could address the overlapping concerns of older persons and those who have lived with lifelong disabilities. In particular, they wanted to know how older persons could use the Convention on Disability to advance and strengthen aging concerns.

Held in the Church Center for the UN, more than 32 persons attended (see list below) on March 29, 2007, from 10-12 noon. GAA's President, Susanne Paul moderated the discussion.

Mr. Thönnies, German Parliamentary Secretary of State and head of the German delegation, and Ms. Evers-Meyer, German Federal Government Commissioner for the Interests of the Disabled, addressed the audience with opening statements.

As the current President of the European Union, the German Government took pride in its achievement to secure the approval of all 27 EU Member States for the Convention on Disability, marking the first time that the EU acted as a single body on a UN convention.

Participants discussed the following specific themes:

Article 28 – Adequate standard of living and social protection

This article specifically notes that “older persons with disabilities” must have access to social protection and poverty reduction programs. Governments and NGO's alike noted that social protection is a right for everyone. Persons with disabilities, particularly older persons who acquire a disability as well as those with lifelong disability have the right to adequate clothing, food, housing, clean water and affordable professional services as well as a pension. Both groups need devices and other assistive aids to help them have active lives. Governments said that social protection forms the firm basis for assuring that both, persons with a lifelong handicap and the newly disabled in old age, can engage in society.

Common Issues

Disabled persons and older persons share a great number of common challenges. Even in a rich country such as the US, 42% of persons over 65 years have some form of disability. The groups agreed that older persons had a stake in lobbying and campaigning for adoption of the Convention on Disability since it would affect them positively as well.

Alexandre Sidorenko, MD, and Focal Point for the Ageing Programme at the UN, summarized the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing, particularly its sections related to disability. He noted the tension between the newly disabled elderly and those

who have grown old with a lifelong disability. He spoke about the eventual need for a Convention on Aging that would build on the UN Principles for Older Persons adopted in 1991.

The discussion moved to an analysis of the relative political strength of aging and disability constituencies and their organizations. Mary Mayer, International Federation on Ageing, pointed out that US funding usually goes in two streams, one to disability and another to aging organizations. This formula has contributed to tensions as the two groups competed for limited state funding. In addition, prejudice between both groups persists and distorts relationships between the elderly and persons with disabilities.

Cross-cutting

The Convention contains a number of cross-cutting items that will benefit both disabled and older persons, such as public transportation, the training of professionals to better provide the assistance and services, raising awareness throughout society, fostering respect for rights and dignity, combating stereotyping and prejudices to prevent all forms of exploitation, violence and abuse.

Speakers attested to the political power for both groups to insist on cross-cutting items that would support both populations.

Mr. Lagerwall, Secretary General of Rehabilitation International, pointed to the need for universal design and accessible public transportation. He specifically critiqued “special access buses” that clogged New York traffic when the public buses should be fully accessible.

The group gave extended discussion to the Convention’s requirement for human rights, informed consent, and the right to choose appropriate housing. The Czech Republic noted that while older people and the disabled compete for resources in their country, both are institutionalized at present. The Czech representatives recognized people’s preference of community-based housing that would be integrated into communities. However, the country could not yet afford switching away from institutionalization to in-home care.

In Germany, Mr. Thönnies pointed out that the government was reducing “elderly homes” and trying to get more assistance to care for people in their homes, offering more independence to the disabled and older persons. Ms. Maria Veronica Reina, Director of International Programs, Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University added that the disabled wanted to become self-sufficient—having the chance to request the service that they needed. Mr. Thönnies pointed out that the German government is moving toward a policy of “choice” so that persons with disabilities can choose the services that they need and want.

Emergencies and Development Aid

In the US, Ms. Anne Hayes, USAID’s International Coordinator, pointed out that an estimated 80% of the Louisiana Hurricane Katrina casualties were either elderly,

disabled, or both, who could not escape the disaster due to poor emergency preparedness, lack of accessibility, etc.

Ms. Reina, one of the principal organizers of the International Disability Caucus, discussed international development policies of institutions, such as the World Bank. She raised the example of how the World Bank funds projects, particularly in former Soviet Union countries, encouraging the building of accessible institutions, such as psychiatric wards for disabled persons. She criticized the Bank for funding these projects rather than those that would support in-home care for persons with disabilities.

Ms. Reina also brought up the human rights issues around coercive institutionalization without informed consent. The Convention would prohibit such loss of human rights.

Responding to the question on how much governments spend on disability related development aid, Mr. Ursic, Director General of the Directorate for the Disabled in the Slovenian Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Affairs, stated that although he didn't know the amount, he knew that most of Slovenia's aid goes toward projects working with people that acquired disabilities in conflicts, such as in land mine explosions, particularly those in east European countries.

Closing

At the close of the meeting, discussion returned to the relative strengths of the disability community and aging organizations. Some had the impression that the disabled community was more organized in Slovenia and other industrialized countries in general than were the elderly. For developing countries, however, some elderly had pensions or other support whereas those with lifelong disability who had managed to survive counted among the poorest of the poor with no support, no jobs.

Mr. Thönnnes and Mrs. Evers-Meyer concluded the meeting with their thanks to the participants, both governments and NGO's, and to Global Action on Aging. They felt that the session had explored seriously how older persons have a stake in the widespread adoption of the Disability Convention.

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Participants List

1	Andersen, Ms. Perrine Program Consultant UN NGLS	15	Kusar, Mr. Stefan Secretary General, National Council of Disabled People's Organizations of Slovenia
2	Berlanga, Ms. Ingrid Diplomatic Attaché Permanent Mission of Mexico to the UN	16	Lagerwall, Mr. Thomas Secretary General Rehabilitation International
3	Brownell, Ms. Patricia International Network on Prevention of Elder Abuse	17	Magyar, Ms. Patricia UMC GBGM Health and Relief
4	Collins, Mr. Jim International Federation of Gerontologists	18	Makovcova, Ms. Stanislava Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs Czech Republic
5	Dolakova, Ms. Petra Ali Permanent Mission of the Czech Republic to the UN	19	Marbán, Ms. Ana Mission of Spain to the UN
6	Einstmann, Mr. Torsten Head of Division, German Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	20	Mayer, Ms. Mary International Federation on Ageing
7	El Kholly, Mr. Farid Advisor, German Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	21	Moll, Ms. Tina Attaché Permanent Mission of Germany to the UN
8	Evers-Meyer, Ms. Karin German Federal Government Commissioner for the Interests of the Disabled	22	Pagel, Ms. Stefanie Advisor German Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
9	Hamlin, Ms. Helen International Federation on Ageing	23	Parkinson, Ms. Charlotte Global Action on Aging
10	Hayes, Ms. Anne International Coordinator USAID	24	Paul, Ms. Susanne President Global Action on Aging
11	Hazzard, Ms. Virginia UN Representative AARP	25	Peters, Ms. Elisa Deputy Coordinator UN NGLS
12	Hosek, Mr. Marian Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Czech Republic	26	Quegwer, Mr. Alexander Personal Advisor German Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs
13	Kaufman, Mr. Jonathan J. President Disabilityworks, Inc.	27	Reina, Ms. Maria V. Director, International Programs Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University

14	Kreibich, Dr. Sonja First Secretary Permanent Mission of Germany to the UN	28	Ryan, Mr. Ed UN Representative AARP
29	Thönnnes, Mr. Franz German Parliamentary Secretary of State in the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs	30	Ursic, Mr. Cveto Director General of the Directorate for the Disabled, Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Affairs
31	Toman, Ms. Mateja Board of Slovenian Disablitiy Organisation		