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UN conference to focus on ways of improving lives of people with disabilities



Disabled workers at a chalk factory in Ghana's capital, Accra

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Hundreds of delegates from governments and civil society will gather at United Nations in New York tomorrow to discuss ways to improve the lives and well-being of people with disabilities by addressing some of the challenges they face, including unemployment.

The three-day Fourth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities will bring together up to 500 delegates, including 78 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with more than 300 representatives, under the theme “Enabling Development, Realizing the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.”

Ronald Clive McCallum, the chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stressed, at a news conference at UN Headquarters, the need to provide employment opportunities for people with disabilities to help them support themselves and give them the opportunity to use their talents for the larger good of society.

“It is only through employment that we can play full roles as citizens in our countries. It is only through employment that we can use our talents to contribute to the better of society. It is only through employment that we can support ourselves and our families,” said Mr. McCallum, who has a visual disability himself.

He pointed out that too much money was being spent on disability pensions and social welfare benefits in some countries.

“What we want is money to be spent to get us into employment so that less of us need be on social security benefits. And in these economic times of downturn when some countries are cutting society security, it is even more imperative to have more programmes to get us out of sheltered workshops, to get us out of our homes, and to get us in full-time employment.”

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been ratified by 103 States and signed by 149 countries. Ratification makes it legally binding on States to comply with its contents.

There are also 62 States that have ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention that allows for individuals and organizations of persons with disabilities to complain to the UN committee about non-compliance with the Convention by governments.

Daniela Bas, the Director of the Division for Social Policy and Development at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which houses the Secretariat of the Convention, stressed that persons with disabilities must enjoy equal opportunities.

“It can take decades to change attitudes and behaviours deeply ingrained in cultures,” she said in a press release. “The UN has been focusing on a people-centred, developmental approach to disability.”

Round-table discussions during the Conference will focus on issues related to international cooperation, participation in political and public life, and the right to work and employment for persons with disabilities.

An interactive dialogue will be held to discuss the implementation of the Convention by UN agencies and other stakeholders.

The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly in December 2006 and came into force in May 2008. According to the Convention, State Parties meet regularly to review and discuss its implementation. Since 2008, three sessions of the Conference of States Parties have been held at UN Headquarters.

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