Summary report on the

First stakeholders' meeting for developing an Arab report on disability

WHO-EM/HLP/077/E

Cairo, Egypt
26 December 2012

World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean hosted the first stakeholders' meeting for developing an Arab report on disability on 26 December 2012. The meeting was a preliminary step building on the initiative of the Arab Organization of Persons with Disabilities to develop such a report in collaboration with WHO and key partners at the regional and global levels. In attendance were representatives of the League of Arab States (LAS), Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), Arab Organization of Persons with Disabilities (AOPD), Arab Union for the Blind and Inclusion International, Middle East and North Africa region, in addition to WHO staff.

The main objectives of the meeting were to:

- Involve stakeholders, including United Nations agencies, LAS, ISESCO and disabled persons organizations in the initiative to develop an Arab report on disability, from its inception;
- Share with partners all aspects of the initiative and discuss the different aspects of the process of developing the report and the proposed joint action plan.

The meeting was inaugurated by Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, who stressed the importance of building a strong database of information that would lay the scientific foundation for designing and implementing systematic and sustainable interventions around disability. Without such information, there would always be a shortfall in developing a clear vision on how to fully realize the rights of persons with disabilities. This issue had become even more urgent in view of the fact that most Arab countries were now state parties in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). He emphasized the importance of establishing constructive partnerships with key actors in this area; namely governments, nongovernmental organizations, United Nations and other agencies as

well as the persons with disability themselves so as to draw a clearer picture of disability in the Arab world. This would also aid in developing more specific messages that catered to the needs of the Region.

Mr Tarek Nabulsi, LAS Representative, Officer in charge of Social policies department, technical secretariat of Arab Social Ministerial Council, stressed the importance of harmonizing the efforts of WHO, LAS and all regional partners as well as civil society organizations to develop the Arab Report on Disability, in coordination with the concerned sectors in the Arab States. It is hoped that the Report would provide a clear picture of disability in the Arab World based on scientific evidence and accurate data to enable a thorough analysis of the current situation, especially in view of the recent developments and conflicts in some Arab countries, which had led to an increased number of persons with disability. He suggested that the Arab report should take into account regional efforts for implementing the Arab Decade of Persons with Disability, which would end in 2013.

In his speech during the inaugural session, Dr Nawaf Kabbara, President of AOPD, stressed the importance of keeping up with the transformations occurring in the Arab world using a scientific approach to address the issue of disability, as a human rights issue. Accordingly, the importance of the proposed Arab report lay in securing a database that would inform policies and programmes aimed at shifting the way governments dealt this issue.

Following the inaugural session, the meeting reviewed the developments in the field of disability in recent years. The shift in understanding disability, from a medicalized model to a human rights-based and a social model, has contributed to accelerating the relevant global developments. These developments culminated in the endorsement of UNCRPD, which came into force in May 2008 and resulted in many changes across the world. Out of 21 Arab countries, 19 have become state parties to this

convention. In 2009, international commitment to inclusion of the persons with disability into international development goals was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution no. 64/131 on "Realizing the Millennium Development Goals for Persons with Disabilities". Two years later, the UN General Assembly Resolution no. 66/124 on "The Way Forward: a disability-inclusive development agenda towards 2015 and beyond" called for convening a high-level meeting of the General Assembly at the level of heads of states and governments, on 23 September 2013. It is hoped that this meeting will result in an action document supporting objectives of the UNCRPD and those of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other internationally agreed development goals, for persons with disability.

According to the WHO/World Bank's *World Report on Disability* 2011, 15% of the world population, over one billion persons, lives with some form of disability. The report also showed that most persons with disability live in low-income countries and encounter lower health, educational and economic conditions than persons without disabilities.

The *World Report on disability* provided the best available data on disability, which demonstrated a growing global trend. However data collected by the Arab countries on disability prevalence was insufficient. Based upon international calculations, the Arab World is home to over 53 million persons with disabilities (15% of total population in Arab countries extracted from the United Nations Population Division database). According to the World Bank's *Note on Disability the in Middle East and North Africa*, the epidemiological and demographic transitions occurring in Arab countries, are causing a transformation in the patterns of mortality, morbidity and causes of disability. Ageing populations, non-communicable and chronic diseases and injuries, including those relating to road crashes, stand behind the increasing trend of disability in the Arab region. Add to this the ongoing wars, conflicts and land mines. Despite the fact that most Arab States have become state

parties to the UNCRPD, there is still a wide gap in understanding how this is translateed into action. Hence, the lack of sufficient data and evidence on the different aspects of disability is a major problem.

The Arab region faces several challenges around disability, such as the variation in the definition of disability from one country to another; the lack of data and information on the different aspects of disability; domination of the concept of 'care' in addressing the issue over the philosophy of inclusion; the discrepancy between the current level of political commitment with the magnitude of disability and the declared commitments; the gap in understanding how commitments are translated into action; the fragmentation of existing efforts and insufficient or ineffective coordination mechanisms within and between the concerned sectors. Add to this the weakness of primary and secondary mechanisms for prevention of disabilities as well as for reduction of their longer-term impact by early detection of related risk factors and initiation of prevention measures.

There are also gaps in the essential care and service provision, including rehabilitation services, together with the limited human resources in different aspects and the variation in the level of development in the Arab region.

Nevertheless, the existing opportunities remain a motivating factor for Arab countries to scale up their efforts to address disability. Among the most important of these opportunities are the current and forthcoming relevant regional and global commitments; the release of the *World report on disability* and the *Community-based rehabilitation guidelines*; the increased number of disabled persons organizations in the Region, in terms of strength and extent; the increased social awareness around the issue; growth of the rights-based approach to disability; the comprehensive community development initiatives, already existing in many countries and the various efforts exerted at the global, regional and

national levels. All of this represents a solid foundation for further action and efforts. It is noteworthy that the recent turmoil, unrest and conflicts in some countries of the Region have drawn attention to the need to upgrade the level of related response.

The participants also discussed the rationale for developing the first Arab Report on disability and expected outcomes of producing this report. They put forward suggestions about contents of the report, its development methodology and the next steps to be followed.

2. Summary of discussions

- The Arab report comes up at a good time with the active ongoing debate about disability and the development agenda beyond 2015. Therefore, it would appropriate to publish it before the relevant meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. This could be an opportunity to issue an Arab declaration on disability for the following years. Hence, the timeframe to develop the Arab report on disability is preferably two years.
- It is important of taking advantage of the lessons learned from the development of the *World report on disability*, so that the Arab report would be a more sophisticated document that allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the status of disability in the Arab states, and not a mere report on disability in the general sense. In this regard, the *Global status report on road safety* and the *World status report on noncommunicable diseases* (published by WHO), as well as the *Regional status report on disability in the Asian and West Pacific Region* (published by ESCAP) have been reviewed as successful examples of assessing the situation in different countries using a standard methodology and a uniform set of indicators, and applied in clear partnership with governments who endorse and clear the final country data for publication.

- There is a need to make use of the data available in the *World report on disability* on the Arab region as a basis to assess the situation, or as a supplementary source to validate the data to be collected from different countries.
- Financing should not constitute an obstacle for the implementation of this project. The initiative in itself should help raise awareness and political commitment. As well, the amount of funds available is not necessarily an indicator of success.
- Implementation of this project represents an important step on a longer journey. Developing the report is a first step, while using it to prompt and bring about the aspired change is a separate task. Therefore, future plans on how to make use of the report on the ground should be laid down in parallel to its preparation.
- It is important to seek the assistance of the Washington Group for technical support and to form technical and advisory committees to develop the report, in consultation with the relevant stakeholders. It is also important to make use of the pioneer experiences and successful models in the area of disability at all levels, whether in the Arab states or in other countries.
- During the development of the Arab report, discussions should be undertaken on whether this would be a one-time exercise, or would the report be repeated at preset intervals. In such a case, planning should be made for continuing technical support in terms of the standard tools used. For example, there would be a specific website for the data, with all the implications around regular support.
- Participants highlighted the need to make use of efforts of the Arab States in implementing the Arab Decade of Persons with Disability 2004–2013, as well as the need to streamline relevant joint work and avoid duplication within the UN system and with LAS and ESCWA.

3. Proposed framework for the report

Proposed content

- Preamble
- Introduction (why the report?; purpose of the report; methodology; expected outcomes; broader scope/the bigger picture)
- Comprehensive review of the disability scene in Arab states
  - Philosophy and concepts
  - Cultural and social context
  - About disability data (statistics)
  - International and regional commitments
  - Legislation on disability
  - Policies and institutional frameworks
- Recommendations
- Brief profile on the status of disability in each country
- Pioneer experiences from Arab countries.

Participants also suggested agreeing on a specific set of indicators for different domains such as health, education, employment and livelihood; accessibility and enabling environments, etc, and developing an executive summary (maximum 5 pages) enclosing the findings of the Report, its recommendations and a proposed framework for action.

Suggested responsibilities

- Advisory committee (possibly composed of) WHO, LAS, World Bank, ILO, ESCWA, UNICEF, UNDP, UNESCO, OHCHR, UNDESA, ISESCO, Arab Labour Organization, Executive Office of the Council of Social Affairs Ministers for GCC, AOPD, International Disability and Development Consortium, Arab Union for the Blind and Inclusion International, MENA Region.
- Technical committee (drafting committee):

- 5–7 persons
- Academic expert + PhD +previous experience in developing similar reports + relevant experience + English and Arabic
- Statistician (to work with the website expert)
- Legal expert in this field
- Accessibility expert
- Experts in health, education and employment
- General disability expert

Potential financial supporters

- AGFUND
- Al-Waleed BinTalal Foundation
- International Development Research Center
- Scientific Research Support Fund, Qatar
- Royal Charity Organization, Bahrain
- Zayed Charitable and Humanitarian Foundation
- Mohamed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Humanitarian Foundation
- Islamic Relief Worldwide, United Kingdom

4. Next steps

1. Share the report of the first stakeholders' meeting with participants and other stakeholders that could not attend.
2. Develop a conceptual framework and proposal to be submitted to potential financial supporters.
3. Share the report of the first stakeholders' meeting with concerned management at WHO and LAS to obtain their support.
4. Develop the terms of reference for the advisory committee and drafting committee (technical committee) including experts.
5. Organize a meeting with the concerned United Nations agencies to streamline efforts and consolidate participation in reporting.

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