**Youth with Disabilities and Sustainable Development**

This article provides key messages from youth with disabilities in light of [the Decade of Action](https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/decade-of-action/) to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Decade of Action calls for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world’s biggest challenges, ranging from poverty and gender to climate change, inequality and closing the finance gap.

The [Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups/personswithdisabilities) carried out a survey asking youth with disabilities about societal barriers and inclusion in the SDGs for two weeks in February and March of 2020 in English, French, International Sign, and Spanish. The survey was shared via Twitter, the International Disability Alliance listserv, the International Disability and Development Consortium listserv, and via other networks. We received 133 responses from individuals with a variety of disabilities with an age range from 9 to 63.

The responses were regionally balanced with the following countries represented:

* Latin America and the Caribbean: Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Haiti, Mexico, and Peru;
* Africa: Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe;
* Asia-Pacific: Bangladesh, China (Hong Kong), India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pacific Islands, Pakistan, Philippines, and Sri Lanka;
* Middle East and North Africa: Egypt and Morocco; and
* Europe and other groups: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and USA.

**Sustainable Development Goals**

The majority of respondents in the aforementioned survey had never heard of the SDGs, a few respondents had learned about the SDGs via the radio in their country. If respondents were aware of the SDGs, they considered the Goals ideal with one person stating that if the SDGs were achieved “the world would look and feel like a home.” Despite this, many indicated that it is unrealistic to achieve the SDGs, or only possible if governments become directly involved in implementation efforts.

**Main challenges**

Many recurrent themes emerged as main challenges and barriers in the lives of the youth with disabilities. The responses are clustered below. Pervasive discrimination, inequality, indifference, marginalization, and stigma was the most common answer indicating that youth with disabilities overwhelmingly face attitudinal barriers throughout the world. Connected to this, many respondents indicated that they felt loneliness, isolation, had low self-esteem, and were not believed. One respondent captures this sentiment well of a main challenge of “being second-guessed by many people including my own parents as a self-willed individual capable of being independent in life.”

Barriers to accessing decent work, healthcare services, and education were very common responses, and are key areas in which to focus policies and programs. In addition, the lack of accessible built environment, transportation, communication, and information are also ubiquitous barriers. Additional challenges included lack of access to sign language interpreters, no recognition of national sign language, and the lack of independent living.

Intersecting factors also impact youth with disabilities, such as gender inequality, racism, and poverty, and environmental factors including lack of access to clean water and unsafe environments, and from this sexual and emotional abuse was indicated by some respondents. A respondent reflects this by responding that “I worry every day, including when I’m in school, that it should be a “safe place” but it isn’t.”

**Main asks to government**

Many respondents indicated that their governments neither listen, respond, or assist youth with disabilities, nor realize youth and/or disability rights. Additionally, a large number of respondents called for increased youth opportunities and empowerment. Creating an inclusive and accessible society was another top ask, including access to school and healthcare services, provision of sign language interpreters in public services, accessible housing, and increased budget allocation for persons with disabilities.

There was also a strong call for political participation, leadership positions for persons with disabilities and a stronger commitment to fully implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In line with this, one respondent called for governments to “consult persons with disabilities in all stages and to stop adopting the one-size-fits-all approach by tokenisticallyrelegating the involvement of persons with disabilities in those consultations while at the same time trivializing their role.”

**Inclusion and equal opportunities in society**

Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that they were not equally included in society and also not provided the same opportunities as youth without disabilities. Some answers were heartbreaking such as one young person saying “I’m not included at all, that’s why am begging to sustain my living as my parents are poor.” There was indication of lack of information and connection to youth with disabilities, such as “I don't even know what opportunities exist, let alone have the opportunity to access them.” Youth with disabilities are not always treated equally with youth without disabilities as one respondent explained, “because societies have a tendency to look at youth with disabilities from the disability perceptive, not from their ability to deliver on an equal basis with others.”

Additionally, there was a need to focus on youth with disabilities (and others) in rural populations who are greatly neglected. Also, there was a push to increase participation of youth with disabilities at global forums rather than the adults who continue to represent them.

**Conclusion**

The Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities is ready to actively contribute to the Decade of Action to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with Member States and the UN system. We must work together to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for persons with disabilities around the world.This is even more paramount withthe COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on persons with disabilities.A young person with a disability captures this sentiment well by stating that “we all can make the world a better place,” and indeed this is how we will leave no one behind.