# Communique from the African Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities

On the occasion of the Sixth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD) 2020, being held under the overall theme “A Decade to Deliver a Transformed and Prosperous Africa through the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063”, February 24 to 27 2020 in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe

This year marks a special importance in the history of our movement as this is the first Forum happening after the UN Secretary-General launched the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy and the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the rights of persons with disabilities in Africa. These are bold measures taken by the UN and the African Union to leave no one behind and to live up to the expectation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We recognize the steps that UNECA has taken to ensure our participation in these forums including the one in Victoria Falls. In particular:

* We have realized the availability of International sign interpretation in the main session. Furthermore, we appreciate the volunteers being deployed to support persons with disabilities who traveled without assistants due to financial constraints.
* We also appreciate the bold search of the Deputy Secretary General for a young person with disability to speak at the youth event held on Monday 24 February 2020.
* It was also encouraging to see that the video produced by the stakeholder group of older persons with disabilities with the support of UNECA highlights the intersectionality between age and disability.
* Above all, we are grateful for the effort exerted to coordinate us by Ms. Laetitia Montero Catusse trying to learn more about our needs and closely working with us and coordinate efforts to make this meeting more accessible and inclusive.

Despite all the positive progresses outlined above, we have experienced some serious inequalities and barriers in our participation as persons with disabilities in the sixth ARFSD. These sources of discrimination should be tackled, if we want to dream of an inclusive and prosperous Africa.

Therefore, we would like to call upon the UNECA and the African Union to review the organizations of such meetings and come up with organized and structured mechanism to remove barriers and allow the full and effective participation of all delegates including those with disabilities. To do so, we recommend the following actions taken into consideration and seriously analyzed by the higher officials from both entities and the bureau organizing this annual forum.

1. Despite the availability of international sign, deaf persons were not able to sit on the first day in the front row where they could have a proper view of the interpretation. We are happy that UNECA immediately reacted on this and solved the problem from the second day onwards. Sitting arrangement for persons with disabilities is critical to facilitate their meaningful participation and will need to be worked in future and proper seats have to be always assigned at the front raw to allow deaf participants benefit from the reasonable accommodation provided.
2. We have witnessed there are no accessible toilets for such a busy and whole day meeting. Sanitation is a right to all and human demand that can’t be underestimated. Putting persons with disabilities in a place where they have no access to toilets for the whole day of a four-days meeting will definitely endanger their health and limit their participation in general. We therefore call upon UNECA and the African Union as well as the bureau of the SDG forum organization to undertake a proper physical accessibility audits of such premises beforehand and consult with organizations of persons with disabilities closely in need of expertise in this area.
3. Persons with disabilities were not given the chance to speak either in the opening or closing session. We highly appreciate the interventions of youth representatives on these occasions. However, we believe that those left furthest behind – persons with disabilities – need to be brought to the front as well. We therefore call upon the organizing bureau of the Forum to add a speaker with a disability either in the opening and in the closing panel, as is annually practiced at the UN in New York and at other regional forums in Asia and Latin America. This is a huge opportunity to increase the visibility of persons with disabilities for every attendee at the Forum.
4. The lack of full, up-to-date and accessible information on the website of the forum has made our participation difficult as it was not easy to tell what is happening where. Persons with disabilities are particularly affected due to this challenge as the venue is inaccessible and can’t be easily navigated. We call upon the UNECA to avail full and up-to-date information about the forum on the website including venues of side events to allow our full and effective participation.
5. The official video on the 17 SDGs represented by different members of the society, as shown at the opening session, is a strong communication tool. However, we are deeply concerned that there is no single character with a visible disability among them, which is unrepresentative and diminishes the overarching principle of “Leave No One behind”. The video also lacks captioning and international sign interpretation. We therefore urge for UNECA to rework on the video accordingly and as ensure accessibility.
6. Throughout the week in our interaction from registration to participation in meetings, we understand that this is an area where colleagues lack the capacity and competency to deal with. Despite the commitment for inclusion and leave no one behind, it is clear that there is a lot to learn from persons with disabilities. We therefore recommend for the AU and UNECA to avail their staff for various sessions and exchanges on disability. Organizations of Persons with disabilities like the African Disability Forum and its members in African countries will be more than ready to support in this journey by assigning experts to facilitate the learning.

Together let’s strive to build an inclusive and prosperous Africa we want.

African Stakeholders Group of Persons with Disabilities.

February 26, 2020.

Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe