

**Report on the Osaka Forum  
October 21 – 23, 2002  
by Godfrey Ooi for the MCR Committee**

The International Forum on Disabilities was held in Osaka, Japan October 21-23, 2002 and it served to mark the end-year of the Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons. In other words, this is the tenth and final year of the Asia-Pacific Decade organised by the *Regional Network of NGO(s)* or RNN aimed at promoting the needs and rights of the disabled and to recommend actions that would help them achieve full participation and equality in society.

The main theme of the forum was ‘Partnerships for Disability Rights’ and the major objective was to sum up the regional experiences accumulated during the decade and to share them with participants from Asian and Pacific countries/areas as well as from other regions of the world.

In view of the fact that the goal of full participation and equality had still not been achieved in many of the Asian and Pacific countries, the other objective of the forum was also to discuss whether or not to pursue the idea of the new Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons which had been adopted by ESCAP on May, 2002. The highlight of this next decade will be the realisation of a U.N Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities.

The main issues of the forum were as follows :

1. A Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities

Several plenary sessions were dedicated to the question of whether support should be given to the idea of getting the U.N to have a separate convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. The chief spokesman to explain the implications of such a convention was Bengt Lindqvist, Special Rapporteur on Disability of the United Nations Commission for Social Development (from Sweden)

Mr. Lindqvist drew attention to the following :

1.1 The U.N Standard Rules and Their Impact on the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities

- a. This convention should be based on human rights and values, i.e. “all human beings born free and equal”
- b. The attitude of treating the disabled as objects of care and medical responsibility must shift to that of regarding them as citizens who share equal rights. This means the disabled will need to be protected by rights-based legislation and policies.
- c. All the alliances (including the disability movement, professionals and political bodies) must unite in order to get a good process going which will lead to the convention.

- d. Lindqvist quotes : “only by closing our eyes can we believe that peace and freedom exist, but only by not closing our eyes can we ensure that it will happen”.

## 1.2 History of the Convention

Mexico took the initiative in 2001 to table the convention which caught the U.N and many governments by surprise. However, the convention was not adopted because it was deemed unnecessary by most governments. If history is not to repeat itself, more careful thought will be needed for drawing up a convention that is acceptable to the U.N and the same time will meet the needs of the disabled. This means that while it should be a human rights document, it should also be a flexible instrument that would allow for the channelling of resources to the needy and for the participation of the international non-governmental organisations.

## 1.3 Why a Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities is needed :

- a. Although the argument that human rights conventions of the U.N do not deliberately neglect disability issues, such matters are usually not included in government reports to the U.N
- b. Such a convention would provide a strong focus for the U.N and the governments to bring about the formulation of positive policies that would lead to addressing the needs and rights of the disabled for development.

## 1.4 What is the Human Rights Approach ?

- a. It raises questions as to why the disabled are neglected.
- b. The disabled are followed to exercise choice.
- c. Disability rights are enforceable by law. This means that discrimination can be challenged to obtain remedies through national and international channels.

## 1.5 Some Difficulties in Implementing Such a Convention :

- a. Consultation with the disabled may be considered as impractical by many governments.
- b. It may be rejected by governments because of the financial and resource implications that will become compulsory.
- c. To ensure success, it requires patience in working out the process towards the adoption of the convention. There must also be collaboration and solidarity among the NGO(s) and with the governments.

## 2. Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR) in Asia :

Some critical issues related to policy and planning of CBR in Asia were presented by Maya Thomas, Policy Advisor and Training Manager in Disability Rehabilitation, India. The points she raised were as follows :

- 2.1 CBR has evolved from the charity-based model to the social or rights-based model.
- 2.2 CBR is said to be cost effective but for whom – the consumers or the service providers ?
- 2.3 Although there is community participation, it ends to be selective and does not address the needs of all disabled persons such as those with multiple disabilities.
- 2.4 While volunteers are supposed to be the rock of CBR, it may not be realistic to rely on true voluntarism in developing countries.
- 2.5 On the whole, however, CBR has been effective in making a difference to the lives of the disabled and it has been successful as a sustainable programme.
- 2.6 Nevertheless, questions still remain concerning the long-term viability of CBR and there is the need for collaborative research, systematic planning and concrete evidence to show that CBR works.
- 2.7 CBR has reached a plateau stage and it will either develop further or it will decline.

## 3. The Second Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons :

At the final plenary session, it was agreed to adopt the following :

- 3.1 The Osaka Declaration on Partnership for Disability Rights
- 3.2 The proposed Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities
- 3.3 The proposed framework for a new regional NGO network on disability to promote the second Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons

A vote of thanks was recorded in appreciation of the work carried out by RNN for the Asia-Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons (1993-2002), recognising in particular the effort and invaluable contributions of Mr. Eita Yashiro as President and Mr. Maruyama as Secretary-General.

## 4. Observations :

- 4.1 It was very encouraging to note that for the first time seven major international organisations had come together under the umbrella body known as the

International Disability Alliance (IDA) which include Rehabilitation International, Inclusion International, Disabled Peoples International, World Blind Union, World Federation of the Deaf, and the World Federation for the Deaf-Blind.

- 4.2 Besides the plenary sessions, there were many concurrent workshops which deliberated on various interesting subjects. Unfortunately, many of these workshops were poorly attended, some having as few as seven participants only. It seems such a waste of resources if most of the participants cannot benefit from the concurrent workshops. At the very least, such workshops should not be held at the same time as the plenary sessions.
- 4.3 While I am very happy that new structure to be known as the Asia-Pacific Decade Forum (APDF) will enable the disabled to play a significant leadership role, I hope it will not exclude to able-bodied persons from the process of disabled people's empowerment. After all the theme of the Osaka Forum was "Partnerships for Disability Rights" which means the disabled and the able-bodied should be working together in fulfilling the goals of the decade.
- 4.4 Concerning the meeting venues, too many hotels had been designated for the purpose. Moreover, many of the hotels were isolated from in another by great distances. Consequently, this posed much difficulty with regards to coordination of participants and volunteers.