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Bridging the Gap: European commitment for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the development agenda

Bridging the Gap's launch event

Brussels, December 5th, 2017





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Neven Mimica, European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development: **“Through Bridging the Gap, the European Union is not only promoting the rights and the potential of people with disabilities, but building a better world for all”**

In the context of the European Disability and Development Week (EDDW), the European project Bridging the Gap-Inclusive policies and services for equal rights of persons with disabilities, was launched on December 5th in Brussels in a high-level meeting introduced by the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, who presented Bridging the Gap as a "ground-breaking project" which will address the common challenges "in finding ways to improve our practices, shift our mind-sets and actions in order to ensure the full rights and participation of all women, men and children with disabilities, in all aspects of daily life". "A society which empowers, promotes and protects Human Rights and does not leave no one behind – Commissioner Mimica claimed – is a stronger, more stable, more successful society for all".

The Commissioner was accompanied during the opening remarks by Victoria Wulf Barreiro, Development Cooperation Counsellor of **Permanent Representation of Spain to the European Union**, Patrick Clarke, Vice-President of the **European Disability Forum**, Birgit Van Hout, **Regional Representative in Europe of the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights** and Sofie From-Emmesberger, Ambassador of Finland to the EU's Political and Security Committee.

All speakers highlighted Bridging the Gap's role for the promotion of the rights and of the effective inclusion of persons with disabilities, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals.



Birgit Van Hout: **“It is only by joining forces with a wide, diverse range of partners that true change can happen. We very much look forward to moving together to bridge the gaps for the creation of inclusive and sustainable communities.”**



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Bridging the Gap's main context of reference was then introduced by the lawyer and disability rights activist **Yetnebersh Nigussie**, who in September 2017 was awarded the prestigious Right Livelihood Award, widely referred to as the 'Alternative Nobel Prize'.

From a human rights perspective and bearing in mind the main challenges Bridging the Gap has to tackle, Ms. Nigussie introduced the main topics of discussion of the day: Inclusive education; Ensuring CRPD compliance in the SDGs through international cooperation; and Gender equality.

Yetnebersh Nigussie: "Bridging the Gap project provides countries with advice in disability budgeting and influence development partners to clearly allocate resources for disability inclusion."

((Click on the following link to listen to Yetnebersh Nigussie's video message: <https://youtu.be/JJ73wCP6RhE>))

Bridging the Gap, a twofold project

But what is Bridging the Gap about? What are its components, objectives, approaches and issues? The questions were answered in a dedicated event session lead by Victoria Lee and Federico Martire, Project Managers of respectively Bridging the Gap I and II.

The session guided the audience through the twofold approach of Bridging the Gap: a global component (Bridging the Gap I), led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and focusing on the development of human rights indicators for the CRPD and tools to facilitate the CRPD-compliant implementation of the SDGs, and a country-level component (Bridging the Gap II), coordinated by the International and Ibero-American Foundation for Administration and Public Policies (FIIAPP) in partnership with the Spanish Agency for Development Cooperation (AECID), the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (IADC), the European Disability Forum (EDF) and the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC), which aims at supporting the mainstreaming of disability in international cooperation and the efforts of five partner countries in planning and implementing inclusive public policies and services.

Bridging the Gap I:

- Develops tools to facilitate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs).
- Develops human rights indicators for the CRPD; SDGs guidelines for



policymakers; guidelines on data sources for populating indicators; training material.

- Involves five countries: Ethiopia, Jordan, Moldova, Nepal and Paraguay.

Bridging the Gap II

- Focuses on sector policies: Inclusive Education, Universal Access to Healthcare, Universal Access to Employment, Livelihoods and Social Protection, Data Generation and Use.
- Supports inclusive public policies in low-and-middle-income countries and disability mainstreaming in international cooperation.
- Empowers Organisations of persons with disabilities in advocating for CRPD compliance.
- Involves five countries: Burkina Faso, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Paraguay and Sudan.

Inclusive education

The event continued with the panel session, opened by a first roundtable on inclusive education moderated by **Marion Steff**, SDGs Coordinator at European Disability Forum. **Claude Cahn**, Human Rights Officer with the OHCHR Regional Office for Europe, **Franz-Joseph Huainigg**, Member of the Foreign Policy Committee and Committee on Human Rights of the Austrian Parliament, and **Donata Vivanti**, Vice-President of the Italian Forum on Disability discussed the topic, pointing out the value of inclusive education from their personal and professional perspective.



As Claude Cahn recalled, “**inclusive education is a fundamental right. It means that in order to do the work of CRPD one has to really look at the system as a whole and to think about education in its entirety, and to the way in which diversity of children engage with the education system**”.



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Franz-Joseph Huainigg, by taking inspiration from his personal story, and Donata Vivanti discussed the strengths and weaknesses of the school systems in their respective countries, Austria and Italy, highlighting the need to keep working to remove physical and cultural barriers and ensure the equal access of persons with disabilities to education.

Franz-Joseph Huainigg: **“Inclusive society, with equal possibilities for everyone and where no one is left behind, starts realizing inclusive education”**



Ensuring CRPD compliance in the SDGs through international cooperation



The panel session resumed in the afternoon with Jean-Louis Ville, Director of People and Peace at European Commission’s DG DEVCO, who introduced the discussion on CRPD-compliant SDGs by talking of the EU commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as reinforced by the European Consensus on Development.

Sabine Rehbichler, International Director Programmes, Advocacy and Strategic Partnerships at Light for the world, **cooked her recipe for to the actual participation of persons with disabilities in SDG implementation.**

Giampiero Griffo, President of the Italian Network for Disability and Development, and Thorkild Olesen, SDG Expert to Dansk Blindesamfund, added spices to the meal emphasizing the empowerment of people with disabilities and their organisations as a mandatory requirement to ensure the success of the SDGs.



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Giampiero Griffo: “Projects like Bridging the Gap should develop new perspectives where persons with disabilities are really protagonists”

Gender equality and human rights

The third and last panel discussed gender equality under the moderation of **Joanna Maycook**, Secretary General of the European Women Lobby. Three activists of gender equality and disability rights, **Ola Abu Alghaib**, Deputy Director of Global Leonard Cheshire Disability and IDDC Board Member, **Shitaye Astawes**, National Coordinator in Ethiopia from the Austrian Development Agency, and **Olga Montúfar**, President of the Indigenous Persons with Disabilities, inspired the audience with groundbreaking and innovative views to ensure that women’s voice is heard loud and clear in all development matters, stressing the importance of the inclusion of women with disabilities.



Shitaye Astawes, claimed that “women with disabilities are not addressed by the mainstream women's movement”, whilst Olga Montúfar talked about intersectionality and the challenges that indigenous women with disabilities have to face.



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Finally, Ola Abu Alghaib, raised the challenges related to the promotion of the rights of women and girls with disabilities at national level, “where governments are still struggling to understand how to put that into practice”.

Ola Abu Alghaib: “There is the necessity to have specific programmes like Bridging the Gap that make the balance between what is out there for disability and gender and how to ensure that women with disabilities’ issues and services are equally addressed”



Closing remarks

The Director of Social Affairs and Public Administration of FIIAPP, Germán García da Rosa, delivered the final speech.



Germán García Da Rosa: “We need to shorten the distances. On the one hand, we have the CRPD and the SDGs. On the other hand, we have the reality, the reality of persons with disabilities’ inclusion in low and medium income countries. Bridging the gap between these two sides is a difficult but fascinating challenge”.





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