



► **Statement by Cynthia Samuel-Olanjuwon, Director of the ILO
New York office, at COSP17 Roundtable 3: “Promoting the
rights of persons with disabilities to decent work and
sustainable livelihood”**

Thank you, Ambassador Sekeris, and Mr. Kumwenda, our esteemed co-Chairs for this important discussion.

At the outset, I wish to note that ILO data continues to show that much more needs to be done to improve the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities. In fact, seven in ten persons with disabilities are outside of the labour force, compared to four in ten persons without disabilities. The labour market participation rate of persons with disabilities is generally 30-40 percentage points below that of persons without disabilities. The employment gap for women with disabilities is similar but as the general labour market participation rate of women is lower than that of men, the labour market participation rate of women with disabilities is particularly low.

Worldwide, persons with disabilities are over-represented among those who try to make a living being self-employed. In developing countries where the informal economy tends to be the biggest part of a national economy, people with disabilities are also over-represented among workers in the informal economy, leading also to a lack of social protection, for example in the case of sickness.

Where relevant wage data are available, they show that there is a disability wage gap, most of which is not actually explained by differences in educational achievements or age but indeed by unequitable treatment of workers with disabilities.

A particularly concerning statistic which applies to all regions is that youth with disabilities are twice as likely to be neither in employment, education or training – compared to youth without disabilities. In some regions, this means that up to one in two youth with disabilities is neither in employment, education or training.



Article 27 on “work and employment” of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities remains far from being a reality for many persons with disabilities worldwide. More needs to be done to improve the labour market situation of persons with disabilities. Such improvements require both disability-targeted actions but, and this is even more important, also comprehensive and effective mainstreaming of the rights of persons with disabilities in general initiatives like youth employment promotion, vocational training, making use of the job opportunities in the digital and green economies – to name just a few.

On a more positive note, our collaboration with private sector employers, spearheaded by the ILO Global Business and Disability Network, has significantly boosted the employment of persons with disabilities within business communities worldwide. This Global Network has been instrumental for over a decade in developing, identifying, and disseminating exemplary corporate practices in disability inclusion, fostering a more inclusive and diverse workforce globally.

At global level, the Network currently comprises 40 leading Multinational Enterprises from diverse industry sectors, six international non-business entities with disability expertise as well as the International Disability Alliance. At the level of individual countries, 40 National Business and Disability Networks on all continents pertain to the Global Network, especially in the Global South. These national networks provide employers-led country-level platforms for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, nationally or regionally operating companies as well as local branches of Multinational Enterprises for peer-to-peer exchange and support on disability inclusion issues.

Furthermore, the ILO Global Business and Disability Network offers a free, web-based self-assessment tool that helps companies to identify gaps, prioritise corrective action and seek out human rights-based technical guidance and support on the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Some of the latest topics and practices that have been addressed in the Global Network include the risks and opportunities of Artificial Intelligence in recruitment, self-identification



of employees with disabilities as well as accommodations for neurodivergent workers. At its 11th global annual conference in November this year, the Global Network will launch two knowledge products: one on the importance of including disability issues in companies' Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) efforts and recommendations on disability-related Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) in this area; the other one on disability inclusion in supply chains and their opportunities to contribute to decent work for people with disabilities.

For a few years now, disability-inclusive climate action has received much more attention. The ILO has been contributing to this important development, in collaboration with other UN entities and the International Disability Alliance. While much of the attention in this area is devoted to the negative impact that climate change has on persons with disabilities, the focus of the ILO is to ensure that persons with disabilities can play an active role in the just transition to a low-carbon economy and that people with disabilities get access to the green jobs that this transition is already creating.

Another area of relevance for the ILO's work on the inclusion of persons with disabilities is the care and support economy. For persons with disabilities in working age who require personal support, having this support and having it provided in the way in which persons with disabilities require, will make the difference between being able to work or not. Coinciding with this Conference of States Parties, the International Labour Conference in Geneva is holding a general debate on the care economy, and we look forward to the outcome document which will define the work of the ILO in this area for the coming years.

Through the work with businesses I mentioned before, the ILO contributes to fighting the widely held misconception that the only option for persons with disabilities in developing countries is to be working in the informal economy. At the same time, it is a fact that in countries where most of the population works in the informal economy, this will also be the reality for the majority of persons with disabilities - especially those in rural and remote areas. The ILO has therefore started work to determine what measures can be taken to improve the working conditions of persons with disabilities in the informal economy.



The ILO has recently started a collaboration with the World Trade Organization (WTO), the UN conference on trade and development (UNCTAD) and the International Trade Center to promote more attention to disability inclusion in the context of trade. A first event on this will happen at the Aid for Trade conference also this month in Geneva and a second event is planned for the WTO public forum in September.

Much progress has been made over the last years on disability-inclusive social protection schemes. The ILO, together with UNICEF, has been at the forefront of this important work to ensure people with disabilities are not left behind in social protection policies. Much of this work has indeed been funded by the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In many countries, non-contributory disability benefits are incompatible with work. This means people with disabilities then lose disability-related social benefits when they earn an income. Faced with this dilemma due to poor policy design, persons with disabilities end up either not working or working in the informal economy. We insist that disability benefits need to be compatible with waged employment, as these social benefits will cover the extra costs of living with a disability in typically inaccessible and exclusionary environments - not only work environments.

While much progress has been made to mainstream the rights of persons with disabilities in the work of the UN, I think it is fair to say that still more is needed to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully included in the most relevant global initiatives. The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, as well as the Global Coalition for Social Justice are examples of global initiatives that need to lead by example when it comes to the inclusion of persons with disabilities.