

Accessible Tourism

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**Alba, Italy
11-12 June 2010**

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I wanted at first to thank you for the invitation to come and speak at this session on “Accessible Tourism and to express my genuine gratitude for the recognition this opportunity represents to highlight what the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is all about and the work of the Committee. I must say that the progress so far achieved in the work for equality of treatment for persons with disabilities has been the result of much collaborative effort, and the valuable input of many involved parties who have taken up the cause of equality and justice for all including persons with disabilities.

As most of you know, the CRPD is the latest in a collection of human rights treaties which aim to establish, strengthen and support the rights of people everywhere. Since its entry into force in May of 2008, the CRPD has seen 144 countries become signatories, signaling their intent to ratify, and 87 become full parties to the Convention. The fast way in which the ratification of the Convention happens is evidence of the full support states give to the convention aims and their desire to implement its provisions.

The CRPD treaty document represents a significant shift in the approach to disabilities, both philosophically, and practically. In the past, disability was often viewed as a deficiency or condition which requires treating, and which may prevent the individual from interacting fully with society. The CRPD turns this outdated view on its head, and recognizes disability as *resulting from* environmental or attitudinal barriers in society, which prevents a facilitating climate. Disability is not a deficiency to be cured, but rather results from a discrepancy between the level of accessibility in society, and the needs of all of its inhabitants.

Tourism is recognized in the CRPD as being part of this important aspect of accessibility. In the text of the convention, article 30 addresses the rights of all people to participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport, and to paraphrase, makes specific mention that states parties shall take appropriate measures ensuring that persons with disabilities have access to recreational and tourism venues, including

access to services from those involved in tourism organizations, and that, as far as possible, all persons are able to enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

This means that in many cases, much work will be needed to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities. In the process of ratification to meet these goals, States will need to work closely with private entities to assure that the design and development of access to national sites of tourism are met, access to leisure places is granted to persons with disabilities. This also means that a huge market potential is there, since persons with disabilities, although having the means and the need for leisure have been limited by the limitations imposed by a tourism industry oriented only in most cases to non disabled people. Therefore, the need for improvement to allow persons with disabilities the same level of enjoyment of leisure and tourism as everyone else has the potential to benefit not only such persons but also the tourism industry.

The Committee believes that the impact of the CRPD to the tourism sector will be a positive one. It has been recognized that the Convention is able to act as a development tool. It will help shape future policies and programs towards the full inclusion of society. One particular area in which I can see huge market potential is the development of hotel infrastructure that meets the needs of persons with disabilities. Being myself a person with disabilities, I must say still a lot needs to be done in this area, but it is clear that removing barriers in the way of persons with disabilities would benefit both the tourism industry and persons with disabilities. Also we need to note that while we work so hard on promoting accessible tourism and making our surrounding accessible for all; I noticed lately that so much work needs to be done with the airlines industry in particular. They are increasingly making it hard for PWD's to travel by asking for medical certificate saying that you are fit to travel or a need for an accompanying assistant to be with you and as we all know, this is purely against the CRPD in its entirety and further , it's a pure violation of human rights as will.

I therefore can see the need for improvement in transportation policies. I must say I have myself experienced acts of discrimination by some airlines that required from me a medical certificate that I was fit to travel by air. Since then I decided to

travel not with a medical certificate, but with my pilot certificate, as I cannot only travel by air, I was actually considered fit to drive a plane and I took flying lessons already when I was disabled. This example only shows how in the minds of many people the medical approach is still preferred approach, when it comes to dealing with persons with disabilities. The Convention however recognizes that persons with disabilities are not so much disabled by the physical impairments they have, as are because the society has not created equally accessible infrastructure for them and the negative attitudes that follow.

Therefore, the need for tourism development that is fully accessible from the start will require the recognition and inclusion of these values both in the form of government regulation, but mostly the active involvement of investors interested in investing in this much promising and dynamic new market area, a tourism market that takes full account of the needs of persons with disabilities. Full conformity with the Convention in this area too will help in the development of a fully inclusive society.

We know that progress in this area despite the recognized market potential will not come quick everywhere. Already now we have been getting complaints from individuals that feel discriminated in their right to use leisure sights, since accessibility to such places is not granted. The Committee has a mandate under the Optional Protocol to the Convention to review such petitions and work together with states to progressively remove such barriers. The Committee is confident that with the cooperation of all stakeholders including those in the tourism industry, we have good prospects to create better and inclusive societies for all in the near future.

I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you, and I am happy to respond to any possible questions.

Thank you again,

