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Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week (HNPW): Statement at Geneva Launch of the IASC Disability Guidelines

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As delivered

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here with you. This is an issue that is very close to my heart – the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of humanitarian response. We are here to discuss the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, which as you heard were launched in New York last year. These guidelines are a milestone in the humanitarian sector’s commitment to make inclusive humanitarian action a reality. And importantly, they represent the first guidelines adopted across the IASC that were developed with and by people with disabilities.

Today’s event is an opportunity to recognize this important achievement and to discuss the next steps we need to take to implement these guidelines on the ground.

All of us here today know why these guidelines are so important. They are important because humanitarian crises disproportionately affect people with disabilities, testing their resilience and threatening their safety and well-being. They are crucial because, as the number of people who need humanitarian assistance rises, so too does the number of people with disabilities in crisis situations. These guidelines are central because we must ensure that humanitarian action responds to all people in need – in all their diversity and with a thorough understanding of their specific needs, priorities and capacities.

In short, for humanitarian action to be effective, it needs to be inclusive.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Global humanitarian needs are on the rise. Protracted conflict, natural disasters and climate shocks mean that 168 million people on this globe need humanitarian assistance this year. This is the highest figure since OCHA started collecting this data. If current trends continue, and if governments do not better address climate change and the root
causes of conflict, more than 200 million people could require humanitarian assistance by the year 2022.

These crisis contexts not only make assistance complicated for people with disabilities, but they are also a leading cause of disability. Conflicts kill and injure tens of thousands each year – 2019 marked the highest number of children killed or maimed in conflict since record-keeping began.

Traumatic experiences can also have a serious impact on mental health and psychosocial well-being. The World Health Organization estimates that one in five people living in a conflict zone has some form of mental disorder. The Conference on Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support in Emergencies, organized by the Government of the Netherlands a few months ago, highlighted the need to take into account these issues in humanitarian action.

While a lot of discussions focus on the number and needs of people with disabilities, it is equally – if not more important – to ensure space and focus on the capacities and voices of persons with disabilities themselves.

Last year, I met 19-year-old Nujeen Mustafa, a Syrian refugee with a disability. She described her journey fleeing from Aleppo to Germany with her family, and she told me about the many challenges she faced. She had to argue to get her wheelchair onto a boat from Turkey to Greece. When she arrived, she had to cope with living in a refugee camp where she could not access the most basic services including clean water, showers, and schools.

Nujeen and I briefed the United Nations Security Council on the situation in Syria, and she was the first person with disability to address the Council in such a session.

It is critical that we create more opportunities like these for people with disabilities to drive and advocate for change.

In a hugely welcome step, this year for the first time, the Security Council adopted a resolution on the protection of people with disabilities in armed conflict.

Colleagues,

Looking ahead, there are a number of other things that need to happen to meet the needs and empower people with disabilities in complex crises, and I would like to highlight just a couple of them here today.

First, our responses will only be inclusive if we count in people with disabilities. We have begun to do this by adapting our needs assessment and planning tools, to include people
with disabilities in our data. This must become common practice across the humanitarian system.

Second, we need to act on these findings in our operations. We do this by ensuring that response planning is inclusive, that assistance is accessible and tailored to the needs of people with disabilities, and that we are accountable for delivering on these promises. All of this must be done with the strong participation of people with disabilities.

Third, we need to empower and invest in civil society efforts to support people with disabilities, especially by partnering with people with disabilities and their representative organizations.

The new IASC guidelines will help us make real progress on all of these fronts. They will help us to achieve more in our planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation efforts.

Let me express once more our sincere thanks to Humanity and Inclusion, to the International Disability Alliance, and to UNICEF. With support from OCHA and others, they spearheaded the work of the Task Team mandated by the IASC to draft the guidelines. I also want to commend the over 600 participants and their organizations that actively engaged in the regional and online consultations. And I thank colleagues from the IASC Secretariat and other IASC entities who cooperated in these efforts, including the Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support Reference Group and the Gender Reference Group, many of whom are here today.

The guidelines would not have come to life without the advocacy and essential financial support from Australia, Finland, Germany, Luxembourg and the European Union. Thank you very much for your current – and future – support, to make sure these guidelines are implemented. Today’s event is already a very good sign of this commitment.

The guidelines are the humanitarian sector’s contribution to the new UN Disability Inclusion Strategy, launched last summer by the UN Secretary-General. We will work closely with UN colleagues to make sure that both of these initiatives complement each other, and you will hear more about this in the course of this session.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Just as the development of these guidelines were a collaborative effort, so must be their implementation. Looking forward, the United Nations, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, NGOs, Governments, donors and others all have an important role to putting these guidelines into practice.

We also need to see progress outside of the humanitarian sector to complement these efforts. We need to ensure that development efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals are inclusive of persons with disabilities. And we rely on
Governments to address disability rights in their national policies, because people with disabilities are less likely to be left behind in humanitarian action if they are an integral part of society outside of emergencies.

In closing, I would like to once again offer my congratulations on this momentous achievement and for all the progress that is to come. Let’s keep it going!

Thank you.