

INTERNATIONAL YEAR FOR DISABLED PERSONS

1981

RESOLUTION 31/123 of the United Nations General Assembly of 16 December 1976, proclaiming 1981 the International Year for Disabled Persons aims at the following objectives:

- Helping disabled persons with their physical and psychological adjustment to society
- Promoting effective measures for the prevention of disability and for the rehabilitation of disabled persons
- Abolishing the social barriers—superstition, false ideas, outdated standards and legal regulations barring the disabled from leading an active life
- Providing the necessary information and advice to governments and organisations responsible for providing the needed services
- Improving the patient's and his family's knowledge and understanding of the effects of disability upon physical, social, vocational and psychological activities
- Directing the handicapped and his family towards realistic planning for the future
- Encouraging more active participation of disabled people in the rehabilitation process, thereby decreasing feelings of isolation, helplessness and anxiety.

During 1977 the United Nations Secretariat requested and received proposals regarding the organisation of the International Year from most of the UN delegates and from many non-governmental international and national organisations. These proposals were summarised and analysed in the Secretary General's report on the International Year for Disabled Persons (IYDP) (document A/32/288) and led to a draft programme which was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1977. Under the chairmanship of Mr Esko Kosunen, an advisory committee of 15 governmental representatives was subsequently established at the WHO headquarters in Geneva.

The proposals emphasise the promotion of preventive measures, in particular preventing disabilities of prenatal origin or those occurring in early childhood. The need for greater recognition of occupational hazards and enforcement of safety rules and regulations has also been stressed.

Under the auspices of the Council of World Organisations interested in the Handicapped (CWOIH), a draft programme of action for the promotion of rehabilitation services, particularly in developing countries, has been prepared. This aims at the implementation of the many objectives of the International Year for the Disabled Persons, and of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons.

Each country is expected to participate actively in the observance of IYDP. This will be done in numerous ways such as publicity campaigns, exhibitions, conferences, demonstrations of rehabilitation projects, inauguration of new services, and adoption of new legislative measures. It is emphasised that the activities in each country should be well co-ordinated.

As the theme of the International Year is '*Full Participation and Equality*', disabled persons themselves should have the opportunity to organise their own campaigns. Through such activities the general public should become aware that the degree of any handicap depends to a large extent on the knowledge and understanding of the able-bodied of what it means to be paraplegic, hemiplegic, blind or deaf. Better understanding of various types of disability will prevent delay in providing assistance for the disabled.

The projected image of the disabled, which is often demonstrated by the mass media, tends to exaggerate functional loss, thus creating a barrier between the disabled and those without physical impairment; between those who enjoy the full use of their physical, intellectual and moral capacities and those who have only partial use of these faculties. Such information directed at the general public should be professional and unsentimental, thus giving better insight in the problems and difficulties encountered by the disabled. It must be made clear to everyone that disabled people are *more like than unlike* the rest of society, that they have the same rights and privileges as any one else with regard to education, housing, jobs, recreation, etc., and equally important, that they also have the *same obligations* to contribute their talents and energies for the benefit of their fellow men. 'See the ability, not the disability' should be the motto for 1981.

As the general public becomes increasingly aware of the true potential of the handicapped members of our society, and of their significant contributions, the negative stereotype of the static, totally dependent invalid gradually assumes more positive, dynamic characteristics.

The medical, educational and vocational measures of readaptation cannot lead to success by themselves. Maximum independence of the disabled and full participation are possible only if we succeed in breaking down the many prejudices that still prevail among the general public, and which prevent the disabled from being members of the community on equal terms.

Prejudices frequently arise from ignorance and stereotyped ideas, and to remove these negative attitudes, opportunities should be provided for more direct communication between the disabled and the able-bodied. To achieve true partnership it is necessary to change the attitude not only of the welfare institutions and the general public, but also of the disabled persons themselves. They must be ready to give up their passive role within a given welfare system and assume more personal responsibility in building a future.

In 1981 we must promote closer participation of the disabled in community life. The possibility of any handicapped individual leading a normal life depends on integration in the community, that is on the availability of good housing, and provisions for education, work, and suitable transport.

Declarations of principles and solemn resolutions are sometimes far removed from everyday realities, and we all appreciate that it takes considerable time to increase public consciousness of the manifold problems of the handicapped. Just how strong an impact Resolution 31/123 will achieve is difficult to predict. The International Year for Disabled Persons 1981 must be the starting point for the more vigorous activities essential for the improvement of the welfare of the disabled as set out in the objectives of the UN Resolution.

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