

In-house (dis)ability

Safak Pavey

In May 2007 UNHCR established an internal working group to look at developing in-house policies for people with disabilities both for the benefit of people of concern to us and for staff members.

Under the assumption that one cannot do anything for others unless applying the same rules at home, I am convinced that the UN system, including UNHCR, cannot provide effective services for displaced people with disabilities unless the principles are applied equally in-house to its staff and work environment. Simply put, it is a question of practising at home what you advocate abroad.

Our working group was multi-disciplinary in nature and included colleagues from many parts of the organisation. When it first started the process of developing a 'disability-confident' workplace and employment policy, three main themes emerged:

1. How does UNHCR address the needs of colleagues who become disabled in the course of their careers?
2. How disability 'welcoming' and 'confident' an employer is UNHCR in the recruitment and retention of staff members with disabilities?
3. How aware were UNHCR staff, particularly those at the decision-making levels, of the principles and rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights

of Persons with Disabilities? How prepared and willing was UNHCR for the "shift from the medical to the social and human rights model of disability"¹ as a principle embedded in the Convention?

These questions were difficult then and are no easier to answer three years further on. We rapidly realised that any policy initiative would need to address issues, some quite complex, existing across the UN system relating to infrastructure, the UN-wide insurance system and security restrictions, UNHCR's rotational work policy, access to medical facilities, workplace safety and budgets. We agreed, however, that measures could be taken immediately to protect the privacy and dignity of staff members with disabilities; interim solutions could be found to allow them to continue working effectively, perform their daily duties and have an opportunity to develop their careers. With this in mind we started working on some specific, individual cases which varied from a field office not allocating the small amount of funds necessary to make a basic technical adjustment to enable our colleague to perform one of their core duties, to having to fight against a manager's prejudice against appointing a fully-

competent and specialised colleague on the basis of their disability.

We had to challenge the UN-wide medical clearance system to recognise a colleague's functionality with a disability recently acquired in the line of duty to allow that person to return to work as they wished instead of being pensioned off. We also tried to reverse appointment decisions for colleagues who were assigned to positions that they could not perform with their particular disability. And we had to overcome our security restrictions to allow wheelchair-using staff or visitors to access UNHCR headquarters through an alternative entrance.

Parallel to this work, our team decided to establish an inventory of relevant policies that UNHCR had in place – the number of policies that could be used to the benefit of staff members with disabilities (for example, flexible working arrangements). We could then develop some standards and guidelines, in consultation internally and with counterparts in other UN agencies as well as with respective national specialist bodies and civil society entities.

Within the UN family, ILO turned out to be the most progressive and was then the only UN agency that had already introduced relevant employment policies and guidelines.



UNHCR/S Hopper

At the 4th meeting of the Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) for the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Onny Eikhaug, Programme Leader for 'Design for All' at the Norwegian Design Council joins Safak Pavey, UNHCR Public Relations Officer, and Rama Gheerawo, inclusive design research fellow from Royal College of Arts in the UK, in evaluating UNHCR's Emergency Kit according to disability accessibility design standards. November 2009.

They had a specific unit to work on disability-related issues with an expert team. In cooperation with them and using their policy as an example we started developing ours, with some adaptations to account for the peculiarities of UNHCR.

We agreed that policy development and implementation in this area would have to be progressive (although any new offices could be provided with sufficient information to establish appropriate standards from the outset). In this regard, in-house awareness raising and advocacy promoting good practices was highlighted as an opportunity, and it was suggested that appropriate inputs be made during the consultation process with external partners.

Moving forward

We organised some discussions and seminars with the invaluable support of some prominent external individuals and organisations. At a special event to mark the International Day for Persons with Disabilities in 2007, Gil Loescher shared a frank account of learning to live with his disability acquired in the suicide bombing of the UN building in Baghdad in 2003. He noted how his own harrowing experience had helped him to understand better what disabled refugees meant when

they said that they were 'invisible' in their communities during his visits to various refugee settlement areas and told us ironic anecdotes about the inaccessibility of the offices of specialist disability NGOs in the refugee camps.

After hard work and a lot of patience, by December 2008 we had both our operational and staffing policies approved and officially issued

in-house. It was also stressed that both managers and staff need to be more aware of disability issues and contribute to confidence building.

In response to the concerns that the policy would not be effective without resources, we had prepared a follow-up action plan, which included some pilot projects with experts such as: an Internship Scheme, a Disability Mentoring Scheme, a Disability-Friendly Workplace and Disability Standard Survey, and a Staff Training Module ('Championing Disability in the UN workplace'). Our working group also stressed that there are ways to implement the policy without a lot of resources. But a year and a half later, we have still not reached the point of implementing specific actions in accordance with the basic principles we had agreed – such as making the recruitment process more encouraging for qualified disabled applicants or carrying out pilot building modifications.

At a meeting of the Inter-Agency Support Group for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities hosted by UNHCR in 2009, we arranged for experts to give presentations to us about how in the real world the concepts of accessibility of the workplace, reasonable accommodation and

'universal design' principles were applied. Taking the UNHCR emergency kit that is deployed in every crisis where we intervene in the world, the design experts and I tried to open it and set up various items in the kit – but none of the items, from tent to emergency first-aid kit, could be opened or set up by a disabled or female person. Everything seemed to have been designed for a full-strength young male. How then are vulnerable, injured people or humanitarian workers with less strength supposed to access these products and services, especially in the midst of the confusion during an emergency? If these products and services were designed according to universal design principles and procured or purchased with the inclusion of disabled people then they would have been accessible for all at no extra cost.

However, we have come a long way over three years of trying to adapt our work space in UNHCR to the principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. UNHCR is actually now one of the few more progressive UN agencies in this area, perhaps because our staff are relatively familiar with real-life disability-related issues from field experiences and are flexible and practical as a result.

But there is still so much to do. While acknowledging the in-house goodwill and support, if we really want to achieve something concrete in this area then we need to allocate specialist attention, resources and staff to it. It is time that the UN family, from bottom to top, institutionalised this process. This would mean that disabled people would be represented proportionately and good practice can be created afresh for others to aspire to and follow.

Safak Pavey (pavey@unhcr.org) is Senior Regional Communications officer with UNHCR and a Worldwide Associate of Employers Forum on Disability (<http://www.efd.org.uk>).

1. Understanding disability as a result of the interaction between environmental factors and persons with impairment, rather than considering disability to reside in the person.

Resources on disability and displacement

See RSC's Forced Migration Online resource summary at <http://www.forcedmigration.org/browse/thematic/disability/>