

International Day of Persons with Disabilities 3 December 2002

Independent Living and Sustainable Livelihoods.

On the International Day of Disabled Persons 2002, the International Labour Organization welcomes the themes of this year's celebration - Independent Living and Sustainable Livelihoods – which are of central importance to achieving the goals of full participation with equality for people with disabilities throughout the world.

The economic empowerment of people with disabilities is a key to independent living and sustainable livelihoods. Throughout the world, people with disabilities are participating and contributing in the world of work. Both women and men with disabilities are working: in low-skill as well as technical jobs, in management and in decision-making positions. Many are working in informal sector jobs. Work enables a person to earn a living, support a family, develop social networks, gain in self esteem, make a contribution to his or her community and society.

Yet many persons with disabilities do not have the opportunity to work. In the field of employment, the available statistics indicate that the unemployment rate among the world's 386 million disabled people of working age¹ tends to be twice or three times that of the workforce as a whole. As a result, many disabled people live in poverty, their potential contribution is lost – to their families, to employers and to society as a whole, and the goals of independent living and sustainable livelihood remain elusive.

What prevents individuals with disabilities, who can and want to work, from taking part in the active workforce? Many of the obstacles which they face in their search for jobs and at work arise as much, if not more, from social barriers, than from the disability itself. Examples include barriers arising from:

- the attitudes and assumptions of non-disabled people, including employers, co-workers and the general public
- the way in which employment and work is structured and organized
- the physical environment, including transportation, housing and workplaces

¹ Based on the World Health Organization's estimate that 10 per cent of the world's population has a disability, or 610 million people, of whom 386 million are between the ages of 15-64 years (UN World Population Statistics, 1998).

- laws, policies and regulations relating to employment.
- the lack of education and skills training opportunities.

For many years, the ILO has worked to promote the economic empowerment of disabled persons, through its international labour standards, through its policy advisory work, through its research and publications, and through technical cooperation projects. The right to work and the importance of economic empowerment is recognised in the ILO Convention concerning the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment of Disabled Persons, adopted in 1983, and now ratified by 73 ILO Member States. Convention 159, as it is widely known, requires ratifying states to adopt a national policy concerning the vocational rehabilitation, training and employment of persons with disabilities, based on the principles of equal opportunity and equal treatment, with an emphasis on mainstreaming where appropriate, and on community involvement. Countries are required to tackle the obstacles which disabled persons face in seeking to develop a sustainable livelihood through a national policy which includes affirmative action measures to overcome these barriers.

The ILO Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace, adopted in 2001, reiterates the importance of removing barriers to recruitment, promotion, job retention and return to work which disabled job-seekers face, and highlights the business case for employing people with disabilities, which has grown stronger as more and more women and men with disabilities have entered the active labour market and demonstrated their work capacity.

Underlying the ILO international labour standards relating to disability, is the conviction that issues facing disabled persons are issues of human rights, and that issues to do with economic empowerment, of central importance to independent living and sustainable livelihoods, need to be dealt with in the framework of labour market policy rather than under the umbrellas of social protection. Once this is recognized and acted upon – by governments, employer organizations and trade unions alike – a major step will be taken towards the goals of independent living and sustainable livelihood for people with disabilities .