

Purpose and content of the Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

13. The Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities have been developed on the basis of the experience gained during the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992)². The International Bill of Human Rights, comprising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights⁴, the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁵ and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women⁶, as well as the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, constitute the political and moral foundation for the Rules.

14. Although the Rules are not compulsory, they can become international customary rules when they are applied by a great number of States with the intention of respecting a rule in international law. They imply a strong moral and political commitment on behalf of States to take action for the Equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities. Important principles for responsibility, action and cooperation are indicated. Areas of decisive importance for the quality of life and for the achievement of full participation and equality are pointed out. The Rules offer an instrument for policy-making and action to persons with disabilities and their Organisations. They provide a basis for technical and economic cooperation among States, the United Nations and other international Organisations.

15. The purpose of the Rules is to ensure that girls, boys, women and men with disabilities, as members of their societies, may exercise the same rights and obligations as others. In all societies of the world there are still obstacles preventing persons with disabilities from exercising their rights and freedoms and making it difficult for them to participate fully in the activities of their societies. It is the

responsibility of States to take appropriate action to remove such obstacles. Persons with disabilities and their Organisations should play an active role as partners in this process. The Equalisation of opportunities for persons with disabilities is an essential contribution in the general and worldwide effort to mobilise human resources. Special attention may need to be directed towards groups such as women, children, the elderly, the poor, migrant workers, persons with dual or multiple disabilities, indigenous people and ethnic minorities. In addition, there are a large number of refugees with disabilities who have special needs requiring attention.

Fundamental concepts in disability policy

16. The concepts set out below appear throughout the Rules. They are essentially built on the concepts in the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons. In some cases they reflect the development that has taken place during the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons.

Disability and handicap

17. The term "disability" summarises a great number of different functional limitations occurring in any population in any country of the world. People may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness. Such impairments, conditions or illnesses may be permanent or transitory in nature.

18. The term "handicap" means the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on an equal level with others. It describes the encounter between the person with a disability and the environment. The purpose of this term is to emphasise the focus on the shortcomings in the environment and in many organised activities in society, for example, information, communication and education, which prevent persons with disabilities from participating on equal terms.

19. The use of the two terms "disability" and "handicap", as defined in paragraphs 17 and 18 above, should be seen in the light of modern disability history. During the 1970s there was a strong reaction among representatives of Organisations of persons with disabilities and professionals in the field of disability against the terminology of the time. The terms "disability" and "handicap" were often used in an unclear and confusing way, which gave poor guidance

² Proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 37/53.

³ Resolution 217 A (III).

⁴ See resolution 2200 A (XXI), annex.

⁵ Resolution 44/25, annex.

⁶ Resolution 34/180, annex.