

## EMPOWERING AND PROTECTING PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### Opening remarks

- *Mr. Kaveh Zahedi, Deputy Executive Secretary, ESCAP*

Mr. Zahedi explained the aim of the webinar in bringing together experts, policymakers and changemakers that have been championing disability-inclusive development in Asia and the Pacific, i.e. to understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on persons with disabilities and to understand whether the needs of persons with disabilities are being met in the pandemic responses. Mr. Zahedi introduced the context of the current situation, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. He then underlined the significance in the Incheon Strategy to Make the Right Real for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific and The Beijing Declaration and Action Plan in safeguarding and strengthening disability rights and disability-inclusive development in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

### Keynote address

- *Ms. Maria Soledad Cisternas Reyes, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility*

Ms. Reyes gave insights into rights-based approaches of protecting and empowering persons with disabilities in the context of COVID-19. Acknowledging the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic including its impact on the future, Ms. Reyes reaffirmed the importance of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. She first emphasised the importance of disability-inclusive healthcare, rights and access to goods and services. She also underlined the policy brief by the United Nations Secretary-General, calling for an inclusive pandemic response based upon anti-discrimination, intersectionality, the participation of persons with disabilities and their organisations in pandemic response and disaggregated data collection. Finally, she called for accountability following the pandemic in respect of reporting to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. She reminded State Parties, their agencies, the private sector and other stakeholders of the importance of creating an inclusive, sustainable and accessible society when planning for the future.

### Video

- *“Leave Us Not Behind” [Video]*

The video showcases the concerns and difficulties that persons with disabilities are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic and looks to changes that can be made for a sustainable future. Through the experiences of persons with disabilities and representatives from organizations of persons with disabilities, the video highlights key messages concerning the higher risks for persons with disabilities, the total loss of livelihoods, impacts of lockdowns, the importance of information in saving lives, difficulties in social distancing, the impact on persons with disabilities in facilities and the need to adapt to thrive. The video also examines positive changes and emphasizes the importance of

partnering with government ministries to ensure that persons with disabilities are not forgotten in the pandemic response. The message of the video “Leave Us Not Behind” is that every life matters, and of the importance of disability-inclusive measures when adapting to the new normal.

#### Closing reflections

- *Mr. Monthian Buntan, Senator of the Parliament of Thailand and Member of United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and ESCAP Champion for the Asian and Pacific Decade of Persons with Disabilities, 2013-2022*

Mr. Buntan reflected on the messages brought forward by the panellists and discussants, as well as how all their insights pave the way forward. He noted that the medical advice which governments are following can exacerbate the exclusion of persons with disabilities. He also highlighted the noting of using the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to accelerate disability-inclusion at all levels – in policy, at the operational levels and in budget allocation. He underscored the importance of working across ministries and sectors to further the rights of persons with disabilities, such as through economic and social protection measures. He also praised the examples of partnerships raised by several speakers and expressed hope that the active involvement of persons with disabilities in implementing projects is finally being realised. He also praised the efforts of ICT initiatives in broadening accessibility and the help ICT could offer developing economies in taking good practices on board. Finally, Mr. Buntan reflected on the importance of conquering difficulties through human solidarity, urged participants to be creators and active participants in the new normal, and encouraged them to “think globally and act locally.”