

# Hear Us: Young Voices

BRINGING THE UN CONVENTION TO LIFE



**Leonard  
Cheshire  
Disability**

Leonard Cheshire Disability works with project partners in over 50 countries to support people with disabilities in their efforts to secure education, livelihoods, health care and a voice in their society. We also campaign to change attitudes and improve services.

Our 60 years of experience in international disability and development work is backed up by our research team at University College London. This, combined with the expertise and reach of our offices in five continents, puts us in a prime position to share good practice and campaign for the human rights of people with disabilities. We promote inclusive development in which people with disabilities are central to every stage of our projects.

Our programme areas include:

- Education
- Livelihoods
- Health and rehabilitation
- Support for everyday living
- Research
- Campaigning

Working with over 50 national disability organisations, we are active participants in the new Cheshire Global Alliance, a network to share innovation in campaigning and service provision.

We have regional offices in Asia, Africa and The Americas. For further details please see the inside back cover.

The Young Voices project would not exist without the generous support of:

- The United Nations  
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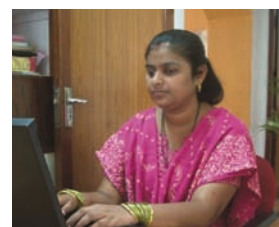
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**communicate**



**inspire**

## **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was a landmark event in the history of human rights for disabled people.**

The final text is the result of many years of hard work and campaigning by people with disabilities, their organisations, their allies in civil society and governments.

The Convention has the legal force to call on governments to reach out to the disabled members of their populations. None can now ignore people with disabilities. All need to pursue a human rights agenda for people with disabilities, fund it, support it, embrace it.

Countries have taken up the Convention in growing numbers. An initial 82 signed it at its launch on 30 March 2007. But by 4 April 2008, no less than 126 had signed up to it. By mid-2008 over twenty countries had ratified it. This means that those countries must implement the Convention.

The Convention reaffirms that all people with disabilities have fundamental rights and these need to be realised. Its opening claim is to “promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity”.

The Convention provides an extraordinary opportunity for people with disabilities to build awareness of their rights in the wider community and to prompt and encourage governments to act on their good intentions. However, experience has shown from earlier Conventions that the ratification of human rights treaties does not, in itself, guarantee that governments will implement or resource their commitments. Implemented properly, the Convention can bring about a real change for the better in the daily experiences of the millions of people with disabilities around the globe. Now that the Convention is ‘alive’ we must be vigilant. All of us must monitor governments’ progress in meeting their promises.

### **Read on!**

This report gives an update on Leonard Cheshire Disability’s Young Voices project and the UN Convention that inspired it. It focuses on activities during 2007–8, looks forward to its future and, finally, hears from some former Young Voices who are on their way to becoming inspirational leaders of the future.

### **Young Voices: a call to action**

People with disabilities will secure their rights by publicly and loudly reminding politicians of their duties and promises. Young Voices, a project of Leonard Cheshire Disability, provides this opportunity. Young people with disabilities have the chance to share their experiences, to speak

out against discrimination and, most importantly, to influence important government decisions that impact on their lives. It is a unique opportunity for people who often find themselves ignored and the object of discrimination to shout out and make their voices heard.

People with disabilities, through Young Voices, are forming a global network and learning how to organise themselves. In so doing, this project shapes future leaders both for the disability movement and for wider society.

Young people with disabilities have joined the Young Voices groups in growing numbers and from an increasing number of countries. They have taken the Young Voices message of advocacy and lobbying to their politicians and their media. Their efforts help to inform people who may be unfamiliar with the human rights of people with disabilities, particularly by drawing their attention to the UN Convention that has the potential to change people's lives and status.

The Young Voices project has increased the capacity for active citizenship by working with disabled young people to develop their understanding of human rights and advocacy. It will also help ensure that potential leaders in the disability field are equipped with useful campaigning, advocacy and media skills. With the knowledge and experience they have gained, they will be able to hold their

governments to account for the implementation of this new human rights instrument.

The challenge now is to support the groups to become capable of taking on an advocacy and campaigning role that sees the Convention ratified, implemented and monitored in each of their countries.



**Meeting the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka**

## 6 Young Voices: the story so far

**Starting with a pilot project in 2005, Leonard Cheshire Disability worked through local partners to support groups of young people with disabilities in twelve countries. This covered the last two years of the development of the Convention. As these young people became knowledgeable about the Convention, they began to understand how to use their voices to influence policy.**

A highlight for participants in the early years of the project was the opportunity to attend the ad-hoc committee of the UN in New York, where they organised a side event. Their passion and enthusiasm reminded everybody deep in negotiations that the rights of millions of people around the world were at stake. Three years on, groups of young people with disabilities have been formed or are being developed in the following 18 countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana, Kenya, Uganda, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, China, Guyana, South Africa, Brazil, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and the Philippines. A network of effective advocates working closely with disabled people's organisations and others in civil society has come to life.

### **Young Voices: in action all around the world**

The Young Voices project is a place for action. Young people with disabilities have met to share their experiences, planned and executed

campaigns, pushed for ratification of the Convention with senior politicians and organised street demonstrations. They have used radio, TV, theatre and music to get their message out to the general public and share their experiences of discrimination, barriers to access and negative attitudes. Developing their leadership, campaigning and advocacy skills has been the groups' focus.

Here's a snapshot of some of the exciting activities that have taken place during 2007 and 2008. Young Voices has given a forum for young people with disabilities to shout louder and promote harder their own needs and rights.

### **Swaziland: a theatrical hit**

The Young Voices group in Swaziland approached the Ministry of Youth and Regional Development Affairs, and used media, poems and drama to promote the Convention and facilitate training workshops for people with disabilities.

In July 2007 the group in Swaziland introduced many people with disabilities to the use of theatre as a forum for advocacy. It was a great hit. The theatre for development training workshop for people with disabilities was held with the support of the Swaziland Theatre for Children and Young people and the Leonard Cheshire Disability Southern Africa Office.

Nine young men and women with different disabilities came to learn more about telling their stories of discrimination through the medium of drama. Regarding the theatre as a place where they could educate people, they wanted to deliver powerful messages to the government in a more entertaining way. They addressed some complex and important topics, including public health issues that affect people with HIV and AIDS, the rights of women and children with disabilities and the abilities of people with disabilities. Also enjoyable was surprising the audience with their talent and having fun together.

The storyline concerned a deaf woman in southern Africa who struggled to gain an education and work, facing abuse and discrimination along the way. It was an accurate and difficult account of the life of a disabled person in a poor country where disability is so little understood.

Developing the play prompted discussion and original thought. The participants used it to discover talents and abilities that they may not have known they had for developing ideas, writing and performing.

### **The Philippines: an award winner**

The Young Voices project has been very active in the Philippines as part of a wider campaign to develop advocacy skills around the UN Convention.

**Article 30** of the UN Convention on disability requires countries to recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats, enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats, enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services.



LEONARD CHESHIRE DISABILITY

**Young Voices campaign for access, Sierra Leone**

Through a partnership with the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, the Young Voices project trained 34 dynamic young people with disabilities in human rights. They will go on to train other young people and will together become future leaders of the disability movement and advocates on human rights around the UN Convention.

In October 2007, the Inclusive Youth Centre in Quezon, Philippines, of which Young Voices is part, won a 'Smart TAYO Innovation Award'. This annual award for the ten accomplished youth organisations (TAYO) is given by the Philippine government's National Youth Commission.

### **Sri Lanka: taking to the streets**

Hundreds of people, many from the Young Voices project, marched through the streets of Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, on 7 December 2007. This 'walk to freedom' culminated with them meeting the Prime Minister, Mr Rathnasiri Wickremanayake, and presenting him with a memorandum calling on Sri Lanka to ratify the Convention as soon as possible. The Young Voices project in Sri Lanka organised this major event through the Leonard Cheshire Disability Resource centre in Colombo.

### **Namibia: a word from the PM**

An inspiring speech by the Prime Minister of Namibia was the high point of a workshop attended by fifteen Young Voices participants

from four regions of the country. The speech was the centre piece of a parliamentary debate on the ratification of the UN Convention.

The Speaker of the parliament also paid tribute to the advocacy of the Leonard Cheshire Disability Southern Africa Office. He thanked staff for assisting with the empowering of young people with disabilities in Namibia and said that the government will benefit from their skills in the future as Namibia ratifies and implements the Convention.

### **Young Voices in conflict zones: Sudan, Sierra Leone and Liberia**

Conflict both impacts on and causes disability and undermines society's ability to respond to disabled people's needs. In the three post-conflict countries selected to be part of the Young Voices project, civil war made these problems even more acute. This led to young people with disabilities who already took part in Leonard Cheshire Disability projects there to call for help to combat these problems. Activities in the countries were supported by a grant from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

### **Sudan**

People with disabilities, other disability organisations, government representatives and members of the media came together at a successful stakeholders' workshop in Juba,



Southern Sudan. The aim was to understand and explore the new Convention and its implications. The group also discussed monitoring and delivery of the Convention.

The workshop notched up some important successes. Disability was the subject of a series of programmes on UN radio in Sudan, putting the topic in front of local policy makers and members of the government. This was followed up with a national workshop in Khartoum in the north of Sudan in November 2007

Lack of understanding of the UN Convention among the members of Sudan's National Assembly and the South Sudan Legislative Assembly concerned the participants. Because of this, the disabled people's organisations that attended the Khartoum workshop called on the president to do all he can to ratify the Convention and develop a national action plan. Achieving this depends heavily on the continuation of the fragile peace between North and South.

### **Sierra Leone**

25 young disabled people called on the government of Sierra Leone to ratify the Convention at a Young Voices workshop. Held in the capital, Freetown, in November 2007, the workshop was covered in the local media, and challenged the government to change the laws in Sierra Leone as soon as possible.

**Article 29 – Participation in political and public life.** The UN Convention requires countries to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice.

The UN Convention guarantees to persons with disabilities political rights and the opportunity to enjoy them on an equal basis with others.

The countries also need to ensure that persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others, directly or through freely chosen representatives, including the right and opportunity for persons with disabilities to vote and be elected.

**Article 11 – Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies.** The UN Convention requires countries to take all necessary measures to ensure the protection and safety of persons with disabilities in situations of risk, including situations of armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and the occurrence of natural disasters.

## Sharing news in Sierra Leone

JENNY MATTHEWS/LEONARD CHESHIRE DISABILITY



At the meeting, the NGOs, school heads and other leaders joined the young people in calling for allocating resources for people with disabilities in the annual budget. They also affirmed the need for the UN to set up an organisation to deal with disability issues. Access to facilities for people with disabilities in Sierra Leone was a particularly pressing topic demanding action, they said.

### Liberia

War has left particularly painful wounds in Liberia. The number of people with disabilities in the country is also unusually high; according to the Centre For The Rehabilitation of the Injured and the Disabled, it amounts to no less than 16% of the entire population.

This brought the ratification of the UN convention to the top of the agenda for 21 people with

disabilities who attended a workshop in Monrovia, Liberia's capital, in January 2008. Participants demanded that the National Legislature ratify the People with Disabilities Act pending before the House. They also appealed to the Liberian Government to conduct a nationwide census of the country's disabled population.

## Young Voices: the story continues!

Advocacy groups such as Young Voices have a great opportunity to mobilise themselves and their campaigns for meaningful implementation of this Convention.

As the confidence of the young people with disabilities grows through their campaigning work, the campaigns themselves will become more effective. Increasing use of media and new technology will also create more opportunities for the Young Voices groups to come together and make their voices heard.

### Objectives and outcomes of the next phase

- National campaigning and advocacy groups of young people with disabilities in all the participating countries, with a positive understanding of human rights and active citizenship

- Visible engagement of young people with disabilities with their governments to press for the ratification and implementation of the Convention in each country
- Practical experience of producing media materials and engagement with the media within each of the national groups
- Establishment of a network among the groups nationally, regionally and globally
- A medium-term action plan for an advocacy campaign that will achieve national compliance with the UN Convention according to priorities identified by young people's groups

### **Lights, cameras, action: Young Voices telling their stories through film**

A two-day workshop of young people with disabilities from around the world took place on the eve of the bi-annual Leonard Cheshire Disability / UN Economic Commission for Africa Global Conference on 18–19 May 2008 in Addis Ababa. 18 participants – one from each of the countries where the Leonard Cheshire Disability Young Voices project operates or is starting this year – discussed advocacy and campaigning and received training in film making. They also attended the conference which took place from 20–22 May.

The training was conducted by award-winning filmmakers Ron McCullagh and Sorious Samura of Storyhouse Films. They dealt with media awareness in advocacy, practicalities of filmmaking and specific tips on making video diaries. Each participant received one-to-one training and advice.

Back at home, the participants will film their daily experiences and the work of their Young Voices group. The material will be edited into professionally produced three-minute films to be shown on the Young Voices microsite and in other settings. A total of 26 short films will be produced during the course of the year, with each Young Voices country contributing at least one.

The films will be in video diary style with individual commentary from the young voices participants themselves. There will be commentary and input from other group members as well as footage of young voices groups meeting, debating and taking action.

“They will be their films, their style, their voices.”

## Ten point programme – what you can do

There is no time for delay. The time to act on the Convention is now!

- 1 Study and discuss the Convention.
- 2 Campaign for implementation of the Convention.
- 3 Lobby Governments and officials.
- 4 Push disability issues in the media and write articles and blogs.
- 5 Support each other against discrimination.
- 6 Protest when people with disabilities are abused.
- 7 Link with Disabled People's Organisations.
- 8 Celebrate when barriers are lifted and discrimination is overcome.
- 9 Think of new ways to tell your stories.
- 10 Demand the right to be heard.

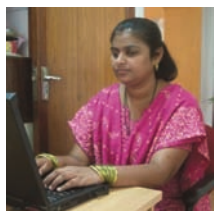
**The UN Convention opens the way for young people with disabilities to press their case in the corridors of power and important institutions.**

Young Voices helps young people take the first steps towards bringing the UN Convention to life. The project has the potential to introduce people with disabilities both to the arguments that will help bring about implementation of the provisions of the UN Convention and to new advocacy tools. The use of filming, theatre, new media and technology offer opportunities for breakthroughs in advocacy. The end result is an unparalleled opportunity for young people with disabilities to make their voices heard and shape their own future.

Over the coming years, Young Voices projects will continue bringing the UN Convention to life. If Young Voices has inspired you, please join us by taking the following actions.

### **After Young Voices: Young Voices alumni look back on their experience**

Youth with disabilities have learned the art of advocacy and taken the opportunity to express their beliefs and arguments in many different and important forums. They have been key influences on decision processes and taken forward the cause for people with disabilities around the world. Here we meet three such people, Anjum from India, Mwaura from Kenya and Grace from the Philippines.



### **Anjum Taj – an inspiration for people with disabilities**

Anjum, from India, was one of the most active participants in the pilot Young Voices initiative.

This has given her the experience and the confidence to take forward the message of disability, to motivate and inspire people with disabilities and to inform the world about experiences of people with disabilities. Today, she is a disability rights activist and a role model for people with disabilities.

Anjum, who is 30, discusses what Young Voices has meant to her, and how it was an inspiration. “It was one of the most enriching experiences of my life... it gave me an opportunity to understand and highlight issues of people with disabilities, across cultures, with different types and degrees of disability.”

In spite of her commitments as a new mother, Anjum took at the opportunity to address an international audience at the United Nations in New York on the subject of discrimination against and concerns of young people with disabilities.

In addition to enriching her knowledge and skills, active participation in the Young Voices process has also given her considerable visibility. She says, “People now consider me an activist. I use every opportunity to increase awareness among people about the potential and capacities of

people with disabilities and their inherent right to participate and excel in every aspect of daily life.”

Anjum has proved this in her personal life too. She is a human resources executive at Satyam (one of the largest IT companies in India). After just five months in the company, she received an award for the best ‘Contributor of Initiatives in the HR Department’.

She regularly interacts with the Diversity Department at Satyam to ensure that disability issues are given due importance and suitable actions are taken. She has been involved in campaigning inside the company to ensure that Braille indicators are correctly marked in the elevators of her office. Never missing an opportunity to try to change attitudes, she likes to discuss the rights and potential of people with disability with fellow bus passengers.

Anjum has emerged as a disability activist and is regularly invited to speak by radio and television channels. Anjum’s appearances on these programmes motivate people, raise awareness and promote the rights of people with disabilities.



**Isaac Mwaura – Kenya’s tireless campaigner**

Isaac has become Kenya’s leading youth activist for people with disabilities, speaking in many global forums with great

eloquence and passion.

He gained early experience as the youth representative for Africa’s eastern and northern regions at the negotiations during the eighth ad-hoc meeting at the United Nations in New York in August 2006. He says the sessions were “captivating and empowering” – a formative experience for a young man.

Isaac, who is now 26 years old, was interviewed for UN Radio and TV and says he came out of the experience, “very energised and determined to make a difference since the UN Convention, when ratified, would have greater impact on us as young persons with disabilities.”

He later attended the global youth employment summit held in Kenya and did all he could to ensure maximum attendance by young people with disabilities. Holding a press conference, he called on his government to implement the Persons with Disabilities Act and then set about forming a network for young people with disabilities.

This became The Kenya Youth with Disabilities Rehabilitation Network, which has collaborated

with the government in formulating an African Youth Charter. It also pushed for the establishment of a Special Needs Unit, championed Millennium Development Goals and represented youth on national agencies.

Isaac has been a tireless campaigner at the highest political level to improve conditions for people with disabilities in Kenya. He is a model advocate for young disabled people, and Young Voices served as his inspiration and training ground.



**Mary Grace C. Cabrera – committed youth campaigner**

“I realised that other people with disabilities had similar stories to tell” says Grace after meeting the young voices participants in the Philippines.

Grace was the Young Voices participant from the Philippines at the UN in August 2006. Her experience at the UN inspired her to help set up the Inclusive Youth Centre, which won a government award. Encouraging young people from throughout the country to support the advocacy campaigns on the UN Convention is Grace’s priority. At the moment, she works with the Philippine Council of Cheshire Homes as a technical staff member based at the Inclusive Youth Centre. She also contributes to the council’s resource mobilisation programme.

“The Convention, together with its  
Optional Protocol... is a historic  
moment of our quest for  
realisation of the universal  
human rights for all persons.”

Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General

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