

**United Nations Development Programme**



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**National Conference on  
“Accessibility and Universal Design: Implications for Public  
Transport and the Built Environment”**

Introductory Remarks by

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- Yang Berhormat Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development
- Cik Norani Hj Mohd Hashim, Director, Department for the Development of Persons with Disabilities, Social Welfare Department
- Honourable guests, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you today to the *National Conference on Accessibility and Universal Design: Implications for Public Transport and the Built Environment*, on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme in Malaysia. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules to join us for this important Conference, which is a joint effort between UNDP and the Department for the Development of Persons with Disabilities, Social Welfare Department, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

I would especially like to thank Yang Berhormat Senator Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun, Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, for her presence today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

People with disability continue to be one of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in all societies. While international human rights frameworks have changed many lives, people with disability have not necessarily or significantly benefited from such frameworks yet.

Over the last three decades, there has been an increasing realization throughout the world that continuing to deny people with disability their rights is no longer acceptable. The international community finally responded with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006. The Convention, which Malaysia has signed but is yet to ratify, elaborates in detail on the rights of persons with disability and sets out a code for implementation.

One of the Articles of the Convention, which I believe will also be the focus of extensive discussion during this Conference, concerns the key issue of accessibility. Article 9 of the Convention requires countries to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility and to ensure that people with disability can regularly and conveniently access transportation, public facilities and services, and information and communications technologies.

More importantly, the Convention approaches issues of persons with disabilities from a rights-based approach. Hence, Article 9 also speaks of the importance of enabling people with disability to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, which would not be possible, if issues to do with accessibility are not fully addressed.

In this context, UNDP is pleased to note that access is a right which Malaysia has included under Section 26 and 27 of its Persons with Disabilities Act 2008, as well as its other policies and guidelines. Furthermore, Malaysia also embarked on a study which focused on the rights of persons with disabilities to public transportation in the State of Penang.

This was a collaborative effort between UNDP, the Social Welfare Department and the State Economic Planning Unit. The study, which commenced in January 2008, focused on different aspects of developing a comprehensive and fully accessible public transportation system at the State level. Under the study, access audits of public transport facilities and infrastructure were conducted, a State Public Transport Improvement Strategy Master Plan developed, and a national disability awareness campaign launched in 2009. In addition, several training programmes on accessibility and public transportation were developed so as to build the capacity of NGOs, front line operators and persons with disabilities.

Ladies and Gentleman,

Many important lessons were derived from this joint study. *Firstly*, an accessible public transport system does not only benefit persons with disabilities but also the elderly, pregnant women, parents with young children in prams and medical or health tourists all of whom bring economic benefits to a state. This realization has resulted in the Conference focus on the concept of universal design because such a design ensures that products and environments are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.

*Secondly*, while it is relatively easy to build accessible infrastructure and introduce accessible vehicles, the real challenge lies in ensuring that their design and construction follows set guidelines; that they are integrated and streamlined; and that they are well maintained. *Thirdly*, the lack of specialists in the field of accessibility or universal design pose a serious challenge to ensuring that accessible infrastructure and other facilities are designed in accordance with the practical needs of persons with disabilities.

*Fourthly*, while the design of infrastructure and facilities can create accessibility, the social and cultural aspects of their use are equally important. The study has therefore recommended, amongst others, that there is a need for the existing guidelines and standards on accessibility to be reviewed and streamlined. This should include a review of relevant policies so as to clarify and strengthen the responsibilities of agencies that are mandated to enforce these guidelines. Such a review should also contribute to the responsible use of public amenities, especially those used by people with disability. There is also a need to ensure continuing professional education on accessibility and universal design for construction industry professionals.

And *lastly*, awareness programmes which address the abuses of amenities meant for people with disability such as ramps, pedestrian walkways, washrooms and parking lots, need to be conducted, both regularly and over a sustained period of time.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I hope that this Conference will create a platform to discuss and share critical experiences on some of the issues I have raised in these introductory remarks. More importantly, it is hoped that this Conference will create an in-depth understanding of the importance of accessibility and Universal Design and the need for a much greater mainstreaming of these principles into development plans. I would like to conclude by thanking the organizing committee, which comprises staff from the Department for the Development of Persons with Disabilities and UNDP project staff for their tireless effort in putting this event together. I wish you all a very successful and productive Conference. Thank you.