



Building Back Better: Reflections on the United Nations Conference of States Parties on the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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People with intellectual and developmental disabilities were marginalized long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, the events of the last year and a half have highlighted the realities and consequences of systems that exclude people by design. As we build back, people with disabilities must be at the center of any plans, discussions, and initiatives that impact their lives. That's the only way to build back better.

Keystone Human Services was proud to participate in the most recent United Nations Conference of States Parties (COSP) on the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as countries worldwide gathered virtually to take on this very challenge. The conference theme of "Building back better: COVID-19 response and recovery; Meeting the needs, Realizing the rights, and Addressing the socio-economic impacts on persons with disabilities" produced discussions and presentations largely focused on inclusive recovery from the pandemic, inclusive education, and independent living in the community.

Ms. Pirkko Mahlamäki, Secretary-General of Finnish Disability Forum, framed the challenge with her statement to the General Assembly: **'Independent living and full participation in the community are inextricably linked. This is the core of the CRPD.'** In short, to create a more inclusive world, we must look at society as a whole. We must strive to change legislation, regulations, and attitudes. We must continue to work to end institutionalization of people with disabilities while simultaneously ensuring that their rights are fully protected in inclusive communities.

We were gratified to see the presentation of the final report from the Bridging the Gap project, which Keystone Moldova supported to develop human rights indicators for the CRPD. Recent CRPD Committee consultations on deinstitutionalization, which Keystone participated in from both the US and Moldova, also show much promise. Participating in these collaborative efforts gives us a voice in global policy debates and informs our practices as we support thousands of people with disabilities in the US, India, and Moldova.

As Gerard Quinn, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, stated, “Not one dime should go towards institutions.” The burgeoning recovery gives us an opportunity to ensure that building back better means social inclusion for all.
