



Advancing the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities worldwide

RI Governing Assembly 2024

Speech of incoming president of Rehabilitation International

Dear Mme. Zhang Haidi,

Dear RI Governing Assembly Members,

Dear RI Executive Committee Members,

Distinguish guests,

Ladies and Gentleman's,

Dear RI Global Family!

It is not only a great honor but also a pleasure to convey the deep gratitude from all the organization of Rehabilitation International to our honorable President, Mme. Zhang Haidi. She served in RI Executive Board for 10 years, 8 years of them as our president. Under her leadership, RI global reached a new level of activities and standing in the international community. I only can mention a few of them: Haidi Zhang established the Africa Fund that supported milestone projects in a region where people with disabilities still need much support. She also established the Global Disability Development Fund (*GDDF*) that enabled RI to support most important projects, mainly done by our Commissions. She introduced a fantastic **RI Award for Outstanding Achievements and** organized – together with her team – an amazing event in Beijing on the 100th anniversary of our organization. And she also took several initiatives that will be of large importance for future work of RI. Two of them are the initiative to establish a “World Organization on Disability” at UN level, and the foundation of the Health and Rehabilitation University in Qingdao, her hometown. Those of us who had the opportunity to visit and to work in this University on our last EC meeting were deeply impressed by this amazing project.

Last but not least, I would like to remind you on the Beijing Declaration on **the promotion of the “equal participation and well-rounded development of persons with disabilities”** that provides guidance for our future work.

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To express our gratitude and combined with the hope, that Mme. Haidi will remain active in RI also in the future, the Executive Board decided to convey Mme. Zhang Haidi the title of an

“Outstanding Contributor to the Global Disability Rights Movement”

and award her

“Rehabilitation International Lifetime Membership”

as well as to appoint her as

“Rehabilitation International Global Disability Rights Ambassador”

Before talking about the perspectives of my term as president, it is important for me to extend my gratitude **to** all that very actively organized the last four years of RI’s work, and – I must remind you on this – this includes the most difficult time with many restrictions and problems during the COVID Pandemic. My thanks include Susan Parker, our treasurer, Teuta Rexhepi, our Secretary General, the RI Presidents office team, namely Anna Guo and Dong Jing, as well as all Commission Chairs and Co-chairs and all regional Vice Presidents and Deputy Vice Presidents. Last but not least, I want to thank Zayed Higher Organization to organize this meeting and the upcoming World Rehabilitation Congress, represented by His Excellency Abdulla Abdulalee Abdulla Al- Humaidan and to Meera Mohammed Alshamsi who really did a great job!

On the opening the Paralympics 2024 in Paris, the President of the International Paralympic Committee, Mr. Andrew Parsons, claimed for a “Disability Revolution”, and he used the main goals in accordance with the spirit of the French Revolution in 1789: “Liberté”, “Egalité” and “Fraternité”. I will pick up this idea and say it in my own words:

- **“La liberté” in English “Freedom”**: That means that everybody can make his or her own choice regarding all life areas. This includes equal opportunities and unrestricted access all spaces and services including education, labor, health, leisure and sports, cultural and religious events and many others. Of course, this must also apply for information technology and artificial intelligence.



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- **“L’ égalité” in English “Equality”**: This means that every person gets equal opportunities such as going to university, choosing a job, participation in political decision making and many other areas of life.
- **“La fraternité”** which is difficult to translate into English as it is a little bit an old-fashioned word. However, the concept behind may be the most important in these days of huge societal conflicts in many countries. My interpretation is that this includes solidarity with other people irrespective if they are part of your family but with all other members of society and societal groups. It is to stand together, in challenging times. For me this term also includes a certain kind of love to people that are around you.

I remember that Mme. Haidi Zhang used this word in the context of disability inclusion and fundamental rights.

But what is the reality: Since the adoption of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disability by the UN General Assembly in 2006 **we can observe enormous progress** in implementing the rights of persons with disability. Until now, 191 countries have ratified the declaration and Convention and 104 the Optional Protocol. The UN-Commission on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) commission at UN is very active and a huge number of stakeholders are working in this field. I was very much impressed by the last COSP-17 meeting that was opened in the UN General Assembly Hall. Many important initiatives were presented but also the gaps in the implementation process were clearly addressed. It would take too much time to give a list on achievement, but they include many areas of life, education, labor, health and rehabilitation, leisure and sports, justice and other areas of social life and societal inclusion.

But – we must be very clear on this – ratification of the Convention alone does not necessarily change the real-life situation of persons with disabilities. And we must realize that there are still enormous gaps in the implementation in both – in the high income and low-income countries.

Just a few examples:

- access to education including all levels from Kindergarten to University is restricted for Persons with disabilities in many countries. We are far away from inclusive schools for all.



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- Many professions are closed for People with Disabilities even then if it would be easy to access to the job, may be with support of assistive technology or a few adaptations in the workplace.
- Access to health and rehabilitation services remains an issue. This is not only the case because of physical barriers but also because there is a lack of specific training of health professionals.
- The employment rates of persons with disabilities in most countries is significantly lower than in persons without disability.
- And may be the most important issue is the mind set of large population groups that still think persons with disabilities are less important members of the society or even a burden.
- And the last example: It was declared that the Paralympics should have the same relevance as the Olympic games. But we could observe that it was much less present in the media. Of course, this list could be continued almost endlessly.

This shows that even **18 years after the UNCRPD we must face many challenges** that are in direct relation to above mentioned areas. I cannot list them again. However, it shows that the implementation of the UNCRPD must be in the focus. For this, several activities must be done, e.g.

- to collect data on the real-life situation at global and national level,
- to develop, implement and evaluate best practice models, and
- to continue with well-designed public relations campaigns to change the mind set of decision makers and the overall society.

We also must reflect, if may be some more follow-up documents of the UNCRPD are needed and to ensure that at global level the rights of persons with disabilities are respected in all guiding documents (*which now still is not the case*).

RI must be a strong voice for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and a body that contributes with strong and smart positions as well as a convincing narrative. Also here, there are many more challenges as I could mention here.

Due to my observation another challenge is to overcome the discussion about the right way to reduce or even overcome disability by either applying the principles of rehabilitation or of inclusion (*sometimes also addressed as medical vs. social model*). Nowadays, we have good



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agreement that rehabilitation is a strategy to empower or enable people with disabilities or people experiencing disability to achieve optimal functioning in interaction with the environment. Inclusion means a societal approach to allow unrestricted access to and involvement in all areas of society. Considering the comprehensive model of functioning as an interaction of a person and the environment it becomes clear that both aspects are of great importance: to provide individuals with services helping them to use their full potential by empowerment strategy and to transform society to achieve full inclusiveness. I am convinced that a rights-based approach must include both, access to qualified and inclusive rehabilitation services as well as a disability-inclusive society including all areas of life as mentioned before!

But more concretely, how should we start in the upcoming working period 2024-2028?

1. We must develop a **new strategic plan and an action plan accordingly**. It must be based on the last plans for the period 2012 to 2021 and take into consideration the dramatic changes in many of our societies and in the global political landscape. RI Europe suggested to organize a meeting to update RI strategies in a meeting in early 2025. I am working on this.
2. Based on this strategy, we must **strengthen our advocacy**. This includes systematic analysis of priority events, developing clear and short messages and well-grounded and evidence-based position papers. We also need a **booster of our public relations strategy** to disseminate our messages and to share it with potential partners and the public. This must include updating our website and reactivating the RI newsletter.
3. **Effective advocacy must be based on evidence and a clear theoretical foundation**. For this reason, I intend to **strengthen science within RI**, mainly in establishing a network of academic institutions active in disability and rehabilitation and founding a RI science commission. I am very grateful to Mme. Haidi that she is linking the Qingdao Health and Rehabilitation University in Qingdao and to offer a grant called the Autism fund. I will intensively follow up with this initiative.
4. Another important aspect of international advocacy is **the collaboration with UN and its agencies**. As you all know RI is in consultative status with UN Economic and Social Council (*ECOSOC*) and involved in the UNCRPD commission. However, we also must establish or re-establish respectively official relations with UNESCO, WHO, ILO and other UN-Agencies. I am committed to work towards this goal.



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5. **Networking** is another aspect of successful policy making. Nowadays, the disability and rehabilitation movement are stronger than ever, and many good activities are done. My experience is that you can reach more if you collaborate with others. This does not mean – and this is important – to lose the autonomy of our organization. I am convinced that we have a **most important and unique role** which is to have all three aspects in our mind and bringing them together: **rehabilitation, inclusion and rights!**
6. Youth is our future! Being aware of this I intend to **establish a RI youth forum as soon as possible.**
7. Years ago, Rehabilitation International introduced and promoted **the concept of Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR)**. This is a comprehensive and successful strategy to improve quality of life and the societal position of persons with disabilities, not only for low-income settings. It could be observed that this concept has been degraded in the priority list and its importance sometimes being denied. We decided already in the last Executive Committee Meeting in Qingdao to put a focus on this strategy by rethinking, may be modernizing the concept and work on its implementation.
8. As **membership of RI decreased in the last years**, we need to **start a membership initiative**. This must include more communication with all member organizations and to include them more in all RI activities. Our advocacy goals must be informed by the needs of people living in the countries, represented by our member organizations. Furthermore, we must support National Member Organizations in their own advocacy and to implement the UNCRPD at country level. Finally, the **membership due structure** needs a review and most likely a reform.
9. The **financial situation** of RI global is fragile. This has impact on the intensity and quality of our work, e.g. because of low capacity of the Secretariat in NYC and only low support for the commission's work. Therefore, we must start a **fund-raising initiative**, and I hope that all members will use their contacts to make this a success. I will give you more details soon.
10. The above-mentioned **challenges require an effective governance structure**. As you may expect from a president of German origin, I will implement a few new tools like a **managing board** with at least monthly meetings to work on the running business, the development and implementation of bylaws supplementing our constitution and provide more transparency in working processes.



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Quality of work and success of activities does not or not only come from the president's activities. **It must come from collaborative and teamwork.** We have great commission chairs and Regional Vice Presidents. Additional to their commitment and contribution, it is crucial that every member Organization contributes to RI's work by making suggestions and giving contributions and – of course constructive criticism. Already today, I would like to ask you for two important contributions:

Please **identify and nominate candidates with the respective expertise and commitment to work in our commissions.** These are:

1. RI Education Commission
2. RI Health & Function Commission
3. RI Technology & Accessibility Commission
4. RI Policy & Services Commission
5. RI Leisure, Recreation and Physical Activities Commission
6. RI Social Commission
7. RI Work & Employment Commission

Please identify volunteers that are interested to work in the new RI Youth Forum (*in foundation*)

Implementation needs a lot of work in detail. This cannot be done at a global level alone; it must be done at country level including the community.

I count on you in many ways! On good cooperation! **Let's work together for unrestricted enjoyments of rights for people with disabilities and to achieve full participation in all areas of society!**

September 22, 2024

Prof Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD PhD, FRCP, SFEBPRM

RI President