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# Social Work and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities in Mexico: Hidden Barriers

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*This article proposes that a thorough understanding of the concept of diversity should facilitate the full inclusion of all people in society. Furthermore, it proposes that we should look at diversity and inclusion from a community perspective. Consistent with these premises, Mexico has recently taken a significant leap forward by developing programs to serve functionally diverse people. Most significantly, the federal government has created the National Program for the Wellbeing and Development of People with Disabilities that is sponsored by the executive branch of government. The creation of this program followed the dissemination by the National System for the Integral Development of Families, of the work conducted by the National Board for the Development and Inclusion of People with Disabilities (CONADIS, in Spanish), the Advisory Council for the People with Disabilities, other civic organizations, and people with disabilities and their families. The authors conclude that, in spite of the considerable progress observed, there are still invisible or hidden barriers to a full social integration of persons with disabilities.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Development, Inclusion, Social Work, Functional Disability, Accessibility*

## Introduction

From a social perspective, the goal of “diversity” entails the complete integration of citizens in all spheres of society. According to Coria (2010), the only thing differentiating each social group should be the way they manage their respective social limitations as they work to achieve their rights.

Given the special needs of persons with disabilities in advanced societies, responses to those needs must follow a community perspective, since these affect society as a whole and require collective action. Human service professionals, in particular, should engage in individual, family, organizational and community-level actions in an effort to overcome problems and promote social inclusion (Fernández & López-Peláez, 2008). Our social interventions should seek to increase social access for all citizens. Specific goals could include increasing social cohesion and equality, and improving geographic distribution and economic disparities. This would facilitate enhancing social service delivery and providing employment, economic, cultural and social activities (Cabrero, Trejo, & Fernández, 2011).

Human service professions in general, and social work in particular, confront unique challenges that must be addressed in professional degree programs as they prepare persons for the workforce. These challenges are associated with social, economic, technological and cultural changes, and respond to social problems created by economic globalization and new information and communication technologies (Hernández, De la Fuente, & Campo, 2014). Technological innovation results from continuous scientific discovery and invention. These, in turn, produce changes in the social structure and present new challenges to social intervention. This situation calls for a new set of professional skills and competencies (De la Fuente, 2009).

### *Conceptual framework*

The concept of accessibility is rather ambiguous, given that its definition is usually tied to the context in which it is used. Etymologically, the word is related to the adjective “accessible” and the suffix “-bility,” which denotes “quality of” or “pertaining to” (Real Academia Española [RAE], 2016). When talking about accessibility, we inevitably think about adaptive

materials and equipment such as ramps, supportive gear, and people with limited mobility, given their physical disabilities and the nature of their surroundings. Nonetheless, this term deserves a broader definition to fit its socio-cultural contexts.

Approaches to accessibility in Mexico have evolved through the last decade into new concepts and approaches such as “Design for Everyone,” “Universal Design” and “Universal Accessibility” (De la Fuente, Martín, & Hernández, 2016). Consistent with this, article 9 of the Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2006 asserted that the state must intervene to guarantee equal access to physical surroundings, transportation, information and communication technologies, and public facilities, spaces and services to enable people with disabilities to live independent full lives. Government actions seeking the identification and elimination of barriers, should apply to: (a) buildings, roads, transportation and navigation, lakes and outdoor facilities such as schools, homes, medical facilities and other workplaces; and (b) information, communication and other services, including electronic and emergency services (Hernández et al., 2014).

The legal profession has made significant contributions to advancing “Universal Access” and “Design for Everyone” through the creation of compensatory measures such as positive action, reverse discrimination and compulsory adjustments. It has also produced transcending principles such as non-discrimination, life independence, civil dialogue, and transversality of policies concerning human diversity. These concepts and related principles reinforce and broaden social rights, and should enable us to overcome invisible or hidden barriers as part of a new paradigm of social accessibility. As part of this new paradigm, we keep persons with disabilities in mind, but more importantly, we will keep in mind society and the relationship of every individual with their surroundings. This dynamic conception of diversity is expected to foster the creation of a fully inclusive society where diversity is viewed as an intrinsic aspect of democratic life (CRUE, 2014).

### *Accessibility Guidelines in Mexico*

According to the World Report on Disabilities, over a billion people, slightly over 15 percent of the world’s population,

suffers from some type of disability (PRONADDIS, 2009-2012). Furthermore, the World Health Survey (OMS, 2011) reports that almost 200 million people in the world endure serious difficulties in their daily lives. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, disabilities will become an even more serious issue in the near future. Reportedly, the prevalence of disabilities is increasing due to the aging of the world's population and related increases of chronic diseases such as mental illness, diabetes, heart conditions and cancer (OMS, 2011).

We do not have an accurate estimate of the extent of disabilities in Mexico. Nevertheless, according to the 12th General Population and Housing Census conducted in 2000 (National Institute for Statistics, Geography and Information Technologies, 2001) and the National Survey on Performance Evaluation conducted in 2003 by the Department of Health, about 9.7 million people suffer from some type of disability in the country (PRONADDIS, 2009-2012). Other sources report that a considerable percentage of the Mexican population with disabilities are also victims of discrimination and poverty. An estimated 60 percent of people with disabilities fall well below the national median for income. This demonstrates the vulnerability of this social group (PRONADDIS 2009-2012). At the same time, the Mexican population is aging at a fast rate. The projection is that the elderly in Mexico will represent 28 percent of the population by the year 2050 (Partida, 2006).

Mexico's rapidly aging population is expected to eventually overwhelm the country's healthcare and housing systems, given the associations between economic dependency, poor health and disabilities among the elderly. According to Hernández and De la Fuente (2016), in the year 2000, the National Population Board for the first time provided information about population subgroups suffering from any type of physical or mental limitation. The prevalence of these conditions increases the risk of developing disabilities, particularly for the elderly. For this reason, Mexican policy makers should thoroughly analyze this situation and try to respond to the needs of the increasing number of economically dependent and ill elderly persons in the country.

According to ENADIS (2010), Mexico's National Survey on Discrimination reported that more than 7 out of 10 Mexicans believe that the rights of people with disabilities are not being

fully protected. Furthermore, 19.1 percent of people with disabilities completing the survey reported not having enough income to meet their basic needs. Almost 39 percent of persons with disabilities receive income from employment, 78 percent of them have difficulties with access to government support, and only 33 percent report that they receive the healthcare they need. In summary, people with disabilities reported their greatest problems are unemployment, discrimination, problems with self-sufficiency and lack of access to government support (ENADIS, 2010).

### *Legal framework*

Mexico ratified and signed the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2006. Article 4 of this international treaty establishes the obligation to: undertake or foster research and development, and promote the availability and use of new technologies, including information and communication technologies, mobility assistance, technical devices and support technologies for people with disabilities, prioritizing those that are more affordable (UN, 2006). Likewise, article 9, concerning accessibility, states that:

[...] State parties shall undertake the appropriate measures to ensure access to people with disabilities, in equal conditions, to the physical environment, transport, information and communications and to other public services and facilities, both in urban and rural areas. These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers, will be applied—among other things—to [...] information, communication and services of other kinds, including electronic and emergency services (UN, 2006).

The National Program for the Development of People with Disabilities was created as part of the implementation of the General Law for People with Disabilities and in collaboration with the National Board for People with Disabilities. This program follows the guidelines provided by the United Nations and is part of the nation's commitment to fight for equality of rights and opportunities for people with disabilities (CONADIS,

in Spanish). The program aims at promoting the development and full inclusion of this population subgroup. It also seeks a cultural shift to fight discrimination and move from welfare assistance policies to policies that focus on human rights.

Subsequently, the 2014–2018 National Program for the Development and Inclusion of People with Disabilities was sanctioned, consistent with the guidelines of the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and the 2007–2012 National Plan for Development (Dirección General de Derechos Humanos y Democracia [General Directorate of Human Rights and Democracy], 2014). This program has six basic objectives that go beyond assessing the needs of people with disabilities in the country. These objectives are:

- Incorporate the rights of people with disabilities into government policies and programs.
- Increase access of people with disabilities to general and specialized health services.
- Design and develop programs to increase access to quality jobs for people with disabilities in coordination with the Department of Labor and Social Forecast.
- Promote inclusion of people with disabilities in special education, sports culture and tourism.
- Increase their accessibility to public and private spaces, transportation, and information technologies.
- Promote legislation aimed at providing people with disabilities with greater justice and political and public participation (Dirección General de Derechos Humanos y Democracia [General Directorate of Human Rights and Democracy], 2014).

*Current situation: progress and hidden barriers*

Significant progress has been made in Mexico in the creation of programs for people with disabilities. Particularly significant was the creation of the National Program for the Wellbeing and

the Incorporation to Development of People with Disabilities, implemented by the executive branch of the federal government. This program was the result of joint efforts by federal and state government agencies, organizations of people with disabilities, and academicians following reports published by the National System for the Integral Development of Families (DIF, in Spanish) (PRONADDIS 2009-2014). Consistent with the guidelines provided by the National Program for the Wellbeing and the Incorporation to Development of People with Disabilities, the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS, in Spanish) is promoting cultural dignity, tolerance for people with disabilities, and the principles of equality, equity and development (De la Fuente et al., 2016). Nevertheless, in spite of the progress made, we must continue to detect and identify hidden barriers to full social integration. To this end, we must guarantee physical and social accessibility to people with disabilities so they can enjoy a full social life. Mexican authorities should focus on the promotion of full social participation for functionally diverse people, consistent with the recommendations of the World Health Organization. The resulting new paradigm will no longer focus on individuals with health conditions or who are functionally diverse. Instead, it will focus on social contexts and disabling surroundings that generate and perpetuate exclusion (Diaz, 2010).

The existing urban-architectural spaces in the City of Mexico and its surrounding Metropolitan Area present physical barriers leading to the exclusion of persons with disabilities (De la Fuente et al., 2016). While many Mexican citizens are aware of barriers in each community and city of the City of Mexico Metropolitan Area, unfortunately this awareness has not led to plan for access in urban or suburban development projects. As a result, many Mexican suburban communities have emerged without properly addressing the issue of accessibility. The level of exclusion of people with disabilities in Mexico City is reportedly lower than in the suburbs, however there are still many neighborhoods where persons with disabilities are not able to exit their homes (Torres, 2014).

*Inclusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Social Work: A Challenge for Professional Education*

Access resulting from better-designed surroundings plays an essential role in the social participation of people with functional limitations. Furthermore, ICT's can provide increased access for persons with disabilities to all aspects of modern life (Discapnet, 2016). ICTs provide new ways to communicate, manage data and organize our lives. For this reason, Feria (2015, p. 3) proposes that "social work must not ignore this, since innovation in favor of its own management processes, teaching and research will result in better tools to face environmental challenges."

According to Feria (2015), in 2010 the Oxford University's Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, identified the following necessary social work knowledge and skills:

- E-awareness, related to reflective knowledge.
- Technological literacy, that is, the ability to use ICTs skillfully.
- Information and digital literacy. This is the capacity to understand, evaluate and interpret information gathered from different sources, and the ability to produce new knowledge with the support of ICTs.
- Digital literacy. This is the ability to gather relevant information and use ICTs to access, store, organize, integrate and share information and knowledge in a variety of formats.
- Media literacy. This includes awareness of traditional media transformation within the field of telematics (Feria, 2015).

The digital divide is the "line that separates people who already communicate and coordinate by means of digital networks from those who have not yet reached this advanced state of development" (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2003, p. 7). This should motivate policy-makers

to ponder about the social impact of access to ICTs, on the socio-economic development of functionally diverse persons and other marginalized populations (Tello, 2008, p. 2).

A wide digital gap currently affects the Mexican general population as well as specific age, geographic, income, and other subgroups (AMITI—Mexican Association of the Information Technology Industry, 2006). This is mainly the result of lack of incentives to use ICTs and lack of availability of ICTs in the workplace (Tello, 2008). This is particularly true within the profession of social work. The incorporation of ICTs into our profession in Mexico is very limited, perhaps due to lack of economic resources, technical support, and training, even though its use is very essential and innovative. This represents a challenge we must overcome to significantly improve capacity for action, efficiency, diffusion, impact, cost effective measures, participation, transparency and democracy. Because of this, it is necessary to incorporate the use of ICTs into social interventions at the individual, group, or community levels (Santás, 2015).

## Conclusion

“Equal Opportunity” and “Universal Design” represent a comprehensive approach to social accessibility. The key values of this paradigm seek to produce a new egalitarian culture of response to needs and reduced inequality, consistent with the Objectives for Sustainable Development and Human Rights promoted by the United Nations. At the same time, ICTs have revolutionized education, re-shaped cultures, and created new social structures, economic models, and job markets in virtually every country around the globe. Lack of adequate access to ICTs represents a hidden barrier to the empowerment and inclusion of persons with disabilities in Mexico. For this reason, Mexican officials must work to overcome this barrier. They should formulate new policies for professional social work education aimed at empowering social workers, the general population, and particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Rodríguez (2010) proposes that the role of professional social workers has been transformed as a result of drastic changes in their employing organizations, the now required education for effective practice, and the changing characteristics and social origins of their targeted populations. This new reality forces

social workers to overcome new challenges and meet new objectives. Consistent with these views, the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Superior Education in Mexico (ANUIES, in Spanish) declared that education in the 21st century must facilitate relevant organizational and operational transformations to respond to new challenges and requirements. New competencies and knowledge are needed to promote the full integration of marginalized groups. Twenty-first century universities and social work educational programs, in particular, should prepare students to effectively respond to emerging practice demands effectively and efficiently. They must identify new fields of action in an effort to improve citizens' living conditions. This has motivated social work faculty members to seek curricular innovations (Preciado, Covarrubias, Alcaraz, & Arias, 2004).

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