The Governments of Ecuador, Pakistan, Germany, Ireland, China, Republic of Korea, United States of America, and Zimbabwe hosted a side event, Assistive Technology for All, during the 69th World Health Assembly. The main purpose of the side event was to raise awareness about the need for and benefit of assistive technology and its relevance to the health sector prior to the WHO 139th Executive Board discussion on assistive technology. During the side event, along with other distinguished delegates, Dr Saira Afzal Tarar, Minister of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination of Pakistan and Dr Margarita Guevara, Minister of Public Health of Ecuador, launched the WHO Priority Assistive Products List, which is the first step of the WHO’s Global Cooperation on Assistive Technology (GATE) initiative towards improving global access to assistive products for everyone, everywhere.

The session was moderated by Dr Maria Fernanda Espinosa, the Permanent Representative of Ecuador to the United Nations Office at Geneva with seven panellists, four statements from representatives of professional organizations and two statements from Member States.

Learn more about GATE: http://www.who.int/disabilities/technology/gate/en/
Introduction to the emerging need for assistive technology, *Dr Suzanne Hill*, Director, Essential Medicines and Health Products, WHO

Dr Hill highlighted how access to assistive technology should be seen as a tool to curb the growing expenses relating to the urgent and emerging challenges of today’s world; enabling older people to remain autonomous and less dependent on health care services; and enabling people with disabilities to take an active role in society. She outlined the work of the Essential Medicines and Health Products Department, which is tasked with creating the mechanisms, policies and capacity to make essential and quality medical products affordable and available to health systems. She described how the work of the department has recently come to include assistive technology through the establishment of the GATE initiative, which has developed the Priority Assistive Products List (APL), based on the concept of the WHO Model List of Essential Medicines.

Improve access to assistive technology, *Mr Jia Yong*, Vice President of China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF)

Mr Yong described China’s recently implemented five-year development programme which has a component relating to people with disabilities, which aims to protect the equal rights and improve living standards for people with disabilities and includes provision of assistive products. Mr Yong outlined CDPF’s commitment to promote cooperation in the field of disability under the Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM) framework. In 2015, CDPF hosted the first ASEM conference, addressing three pillars: promoting social progress, protecting the rights and interests of people with disabilities, and promoting economic growth. The conference culminated in the Beijing Initiative which highlights assistive technology as a priority for industry, and the importance of access to assistive products for all, at an affordable price. It outlines suggestions for promoting affordable assistive technology for all at the global, regional and national levels.

Assistive technology in emergencies and humanitarian action, *Dr Margarita Guevara*, Minster of Public Health of Ecuador

Dr Guevara opened by explaining that Lenin Moreno, former Vice President of Ecuador and UN Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility, was not able to attend the side event as he was visiting areas hit by the recent earthquake in Ecuador. She described the recent earthquake in Ecuador which affected provinces along the coast, with 64,000 people in urban areas affected and 2128 people with disabilities pinpointed and provided with necessary assistance in terms of drugs and technical support. Three specialized workshops in Ecuador produce assistive products and will focus on producing products for people affected by the disaster. Dr Guevara outlined the development of the APL, including the global survey which was widely disseminated in Ecuador. She emphasized the need to now convince governments that the APL needs to be supported if it is to be as useful as the list of essential medicines.

Promoting access to assistive technology globally as an integral part of the development agenda, *Ms Irene Koek*, Deputy Assistant Administrator for Global Health, USAID, USA

Ms Koek outlined the work of USAID, the United States Government agency responsible for administering foreign assistance. She described how access to assistive technology is enshrined through the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Articles 4,
20, 26, specifically obligate Member States who have ratified the Convention to ensure that assistive technology is available and affordable. She also described how affordable assistive technology is intrinsic to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For example, we cannot end poverty, eradicate hunger, ensure inclusive and equitable education, achieve sustained economic growth and meaningful employment, reduce inequities between countries and make cities safe without the full participation of all members of society, including the 15% of the global population that face obstacles to full engagement without assistive technology.

Disability, ageing, rehabilitation and assistive technology, Dr Lee Sung-jae, President of National Rehabilitation Centre, Korea

Dr Sung-jae highlighted the importance of assistive technology, not only for persons with disabilities but for the whole ageing population. He said that Korea has made strenuous efforts to increase the availability of assistive technology; noting that older people will ultimately face health conditions that will lead to associated impairments and disability; and also that 43% of people with disabilities in Korea are 65 years and older. Dr Sung-jae emphasized that assistive technology is a key resource to increase social participation and that creating boundaries in who needs assistive products is no longer meaningful – assistive technology needs to be provided for all. Korea’s Article 65, enacted in 2015, emphasizes the importance of assistive technology and aims to increase availability and improve financing of assistive technology. Dr Sung-jae outlined how the APL will give Member States a starting point to improve the availability of assistive technology.

Dr Gerald Gwinji, Permanent Secretary for health and child, Zimbabwe

Dr Gwinji described the current scenario in Zimbabwe. 7% of the population, approximately a million individuals are living with disability, 78% of whom can be classified as having moderate or severe disability. Dr Gwinji described major issues with access, with limited and fragmented procurement and delivery of assistive technology. He described barriers including: lack of adequate and enforced legislation; lack of skilled human resources for service delivery, insufficient quantity and poor quality of products; and lack of awareness of the existence of assistive products that can assist the population. Dr Gwinji described a survey of a million people with disabilities which found that only a small number of people have access to assistive technology. He welcomed the launch of the APL, saying it will assist in directing policy and developing programmes towards making life better for people with disabilities.

Remarks and launching of Priority Assistive Products List (APL), Dr Saira Afzal Tarar, Minister of State for National Health Services Regulation and Coordination, Pakistan

Dr Tarar highlighted the need for the global community and states to act now to make the means available for persons with disabilities, older people and individuals with chronic health conditions/non-communicable diseases to lead a dignified life as a matter of right. It was with this vision that the Government of Pakistan took the issue to the WHO Executive Board, so that a roadmap of collective action could be developed. Dr Tarar outlined Pakistan’s newly launched National Health Scheme which includes assistive technology so that people in need of assistive products can have access to them without cost. The WHO Model Disability Survey was conducted last year in Pakistan’s biggest province, which identified the prevalence of disability at 15.5% of the population. Dr Tarar highlighted the need for international cooperation and joint commitment to improve access to assistive technology for everyone, everywhere; and she finished by unveiling the APL.

Learn more about GATE: http://www.who.int/disabilities/technology/gate/en/
Statements from civil society organizations

Rehabilitation International (RI): Jan Monsbakken

RI emphasized the need for all WHO partners, government and civil society to strive for implementation of the APL. RI highlighted the Norwegian assistive technology system as a model of good practice, with three pillars essential to successful country-level implementation: a rights approach, an excellent distribution system, and universal coverage.

International Society of Prosthetics and Orthotics (ISPO): Nils-Odd Tonnevold

ISPO recognised the GATE Initiative as a major step forward in promoting recognition of the importance of making assistive technology available more widely. ISPO also highlighted the need for Member States to support the APL in order for this to become a reality. Mr Tonnevold described his personal experience as a user of two artificial limbs to emphasize that assistive technology is not an expense, but an investment.

World Confederation of Physical Therapy (WCPT): Margot Skinner

WCPT highlighted physical therapists as one of the key rehabilitation professionals with skills for the service delivery of assistive products and called on Member States to involve rehabilitation professions in planning and delivering effective service delivery systems for assistive technology in the fulfilment of the obligations of the CRPD.

World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT): Samantha Shann

WFOT highlighted how assistive products can optimize human performance throughout the life course, in relation to life roles, better health and functioning, and for societal participation. WFOT described the APL as a powerful directive that will set the standard for essential assistive products which must be available in health systems at all times. WFOT is committed to working with all stakeholders towards operationalizing the APL.

Co-sponsoring Country Statements

Germany:

Germany expressed its support for the side event and its willingness to share its experiences in relation to assistive technology. Germany hopes that the list will encourage countries to adopt it in the national context.

Ireland:

Ireland underscored the importance of the APL for countries with ageing populations, as well as for people with disabilities. Ireland looked forward to continued discussions at the Executive Board meeting and future World Health Assembly.

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