



# Rehabilitation International

News!

A GLOBAL ADVOCATE FOR REHABILITATION, INCLUSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS



## Editorial

Dear Members of Rehabilitation International, dear friends and partners of Rehabilitation International, and all interested readers,

This is the first Edition of the Rehabilitation International Newsletter during my term of office as president of RI global. Information and communication are key factors for good collaboration and collaborative work within an organization as well as successful policy development. This includes informing member organizations and individual members on the activities of RI a global level and – at the same time – give the member organizations a forum to inform and discuss about their work, projects an views. Last but opt least, informing the public as well as decision makers about RI's views and activities is a integral part of advocacy.

My thanks go to the new editor of the RI Newsletter and responsible person for RI's social media activities, Dr. B Nugraha, as well as all contributors to this first edition. I am also inviting all RI members to send in contributions to the upcoming editions. These can be reports from our Commissions, reports from RI regions and in particular from the activities of RI member organizations. Other interesting news as well as opinion articles are warmly welcomed too. Last but not least I would like to ask all RI Members to contribute to the event calendar.

Hannover, November 2024

Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEBPRM

President of Rehabilitation International

## In this RI News!

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## Event Calendar

**RI Executive Committee Meeting**  
(on invitation)  
31 March - 1 April 2025

**Global Disability Summit**  
Berlin, Germany  
2-3 April 2025

**COSP 18**  
10-12 June 2025



## RI's New President

In a significant development, Mme Haidi Zhang has officially stepped down from her role as President of the Rehabilitation International (RI) after 8 years of dedicated service. The mantle of leadership of RI has now been passed to Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEbPRM on 22 September 2024 in the General Assembly of RI in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

## RI gives several titles to Mme Haidi Zhang

During the inaugural speech, new RI President also stated 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 awards program and organized – together with her team – an amazing event in Beijing on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of our organization. And she also took a number of initiatives that will be of large importance for future work of RI.

Madame Haidi Zhang served as a visionary leader during their tenure, overseeing establishment of the Global Disability Development Fund (GDDF) that enabled RI to support most important projects.

Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEbPRM will bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the role, having previously served as leader in different organization in the field of disability and rehabilitation, including as the director of Rehabilitation Medicine at Hannover Medical School, Germany; the President of the Global Rehabilitation Alliance; and the President of German Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine among many others.

In his inaugural address, Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEbPRM stated that since the UN adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, significant progress has been made, with 191 countries ratifying it. However, challenges remain, such as gaps in education, employment, and access to healthcare for persons with disabilities, which exist in both high- and low-income countries. Full implementation requires addressing societal mindsets, enhancing rehabilitation and inclusion efforts, and working at the national and community levels to bring about real change.

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 the occasion of 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 promote of “equal participation and well-rounded development of persons with disabilities” that provides guidance for our future work.

In order 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 give her

### **Rehabilitation International Lifetime Membership**

as well as to appoint her as

### **Rehabilitation International Global Disability Rights Ambassador.**



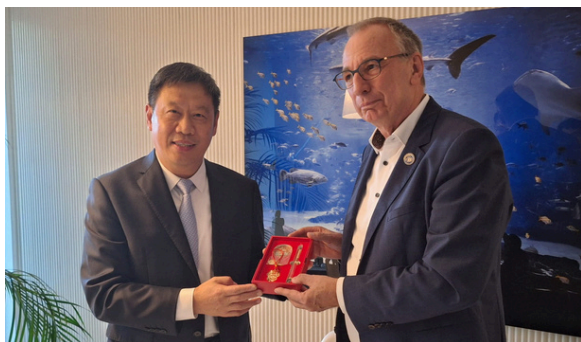
## Newly elected RI-Executive Committee

During the 2024 Membership Assembly in Abu Dhabi on September 24, 2024 the Treasurer, the Regional Vice Presidents and Deputy Vice Presidents as well as the Commission Chairs & Vice Chairs were newly elected. Furthermore the Presidency was handed over from Haidi Zhang to Christoph Gutenbrunner. The new Executive Board now has the following members:

- **President:** Christoph Gutenbrunner (Germany)
- **Immediate Past President:** Haidi Zhang (China)
- **Treasurer:** Susan Parker (USA)
- **Regional Vice Presidents & Deputy Vice Presidents:**
  - Africa Region Demelash Bekele (Ethiopia); Mark Webber (South Africa)
  - Middle East and North African Region: Abdulla Al Humaidan (UAE); Hashem Taqi (Qatar)
- Asia-Pacific Region: Joseph Kwan (Hong Kong SAR); Maria de Fátima Salvador dos Santos Ferreira (Macau SAR)
- Europe Region: Gregor Kemper (Germany); Mark Soubiran (France)
- North America Region: Mathieu Simard (Canada); Madan Kundu (USA)

### • Commission Chairs & Vice Chairs

- *Education Commission:* Pauliina Lampinen (Finland); Tone Mork (Norway)
- *Health & Functioning:* Liao Limin (China); Jan Monsbakken (Norway); Meera Al Shamsi (UAE)
- *Technology & Accessibility Commission:* Lei Shao (China); Hiroshi Kawamura (Japan)
- *Policy & Services Commission:* Yueqin Huang (China); Eman Al Tamimi (UAE)
- *Leisure, Recreation and Physical Activities Commission:* Zhanxin Tang (China); Jan Johansen (Denmark)
- *Social Commission:* Asha Hans (India); Dan Liu (China)
- *Work & Employment Commission:* Kimmo Kumlander (Finland); Khaled El-Mohtar (Lebanon)



## RI signed MoU with The University of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences, Qingdao, China

In October 2024, RI President, Prof. Dr. med. Christoph Gutenbrunner, FRCP, SFEPRM signed MoU with The University of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences, Qingdao, ROC. This document was signed in Hannover, Germany.

The signed MoU agree to collaborate in research and Education in the areas of disability & Rehabilitation at an academic level. This may include:

- the exchange of knowledge around the areas of collaboration;
- develop relevant scientific conceptualizations and science-informed policies relevant for the areas of collaboration;
- plan and perform joint research projects relevant for the implementation of the UN-Convention of Persons with Disabilities and the principles of rehabilitation service delivery as defined in the related resolutions of the World Health Assembly and the General Assembly of the United Nations;
- collaborate in academic teaching including curricula development, standards and quality management;
- organizing scientific events, like congresses, seminars, workshops and other formats.

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## Rehabilitation International on Social Media

We are thrilled to announce official social media of RI. Hopefully it will reach not only RI members, but also outside RI community.

These platforms will help us spread our message, celebrate successes, opinion, activities and work of RI and also others that could inspire broader community.

**So, visit, share, comment and follow/subscribe our RI Social Media and be part of it!**

 [Rehabilitation International](#)

 [RIglobal2024](#)

 [RIglobal.Official](#)

 [RIglobal.Official](#)

 [RIGlobal](#)

## RI AT UNESCAP 2024

BANGKOK, THAILAND, 8- 10 OCTOBER 2024



**PROF. ASHA HANS**  
CHAIRPERSON SOCIAL  
COMMISSION OF RI

At the Eighth Session of the Committee on Social Development held in Bangkok, Rehabilitation International (RI) presented a call to action for the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) to address critical challenges impacting persons with disabilities under the Jakarta Declaration and Decade of Persons with Disabilities (2023-2032). RI, represented by Prof. Asha Hans, underscored issues like poverty, accessibility, and gender disparities, citing that poverty for persons with disabilities is exacerbated by displacement from climate-related disasters and limited access to healthcare. RI further highlighted that accessibility issues persist in physical spaces and emerging technologies, while women with disabilities face distinct barriers, including exclusion from financial services and increased exposure to gender-based violence.

To address these pressing issues, RI recommended that UNESCAP member states prioritize inclusive economic measures, such as consulting persons with disabilities on employment inclusion and increasing funding for disability-focused organizations. The organization also urged countries to adopt universal design standards, improve education access for children with disabilities, and focus on Disability-Inclusive Climate Action (DiCA) and Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) strategies. RI further called for the establishment of a dedicated fund to alleviate poverty among women with disabilities, involving both public and private sectors to ensure sustainable support. This comprehensive approach aims to help realize the goals set forth in the Jakarta Declaration on the Decade of Persons with Disabilities, promoting a more inclusive and resilient future for all.

## RI AT UNESCO 2024 GLOBAL EDUCATION MEETING

FORTALEZA, BRAZIL, 31 OCTOBER 2024



**PROF. CHRISTOPH  
GUTENBRUNNER, MD,  
PHD, FRCP, SFEBPRM**  
RI PRESIDENT

At the UNESCO 2024 Global Education Meeting, Rehabilitation International (RI) underscored the transformative role of digital technology in enhancing educational access for students with disabilities. RI President Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEBPRM highlighted the organization's commitment to universal design and accessible learning environments, aligning with UNESCO's focus on inclusive education for all.

Prof. Gutenbrunner emphasized that digital technology can help dismantle barriers by providing accessible formats for students with hearing and visual impairments, enabling self-expression and access to information. Yet, he cautioned that digital learning must be balanced, noting potential risks such as reduced physical interaction and digital overload, particularly for students with "invisible impairments" like ADHD.

RI's recent guidelines on "Universal Design in Kindergarten and Schools" advocate for inclusive, equitable learning environments. These guidelines offer actionable insights, including checklists for accommodating diverse needs in educational settings, as well as a certification project to identify accessible schools and kindergartens globally.

In collaboration with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD), RI also introduced an online training tool that shares real-life experiences of students with disabilities and offers educators practical strategies to foster inclusive classrooms.

Prof. Gutenbrunner concluded by calling for broader implementation of universal design principles across all educational stages, from primary schools to lifelong learning programs, reinforcing that inclusive digital education is vital for equitable educational access worldwide.

## Message from RI President on Closing Ceremony WRC

25 September 2024, Abu Dhabi, UAE



**PROF. CHRISTOPH GUTENBRUNNER, MD, PHD, FRCP, SFEBPRM**  
RI PRESIDENT

At the closing of the World Congress on Rehabilitation in Abu Dhabi, Rehabilitation International (RI) President Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEBPRM announced a landmark commitment—the "Abu Dhabi Declaration on Work and Employment for Persons with Disabilities." This declaration, developed with support from global leaders, is set to drive inclusive employment opportunities for People of Determination (persons with disabilities) through a coordinated, rights-based approach.

Prof. Christoph Gutenbrunner, MD, PhD, FRCP, SFEBPRM outlined the declaration's objectives, emphasizing an inclusive labor market beyond protected employment. The initiative establishes goals for higher employment rates and robust collaboration mechanisms among governments, NGOs, and private sector entities, all united to promote workplace inclusion.

The declaration also integrates modern advancements, including artificial intelligence, to enhance employment opportunities for People of Determination. Prof. Gutenbrunner stressed that technology should be a catalyst for empowerment, not a barrier, and called for ongoing accountability through an annual review task force that will monitor progress.

Reflecting on Rehabilitation International's historic contributions, including the widely recognized wheelchair accessibility symbol and advocacy for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Prof. Gutenbrunner emphasized RI's commitment to rehabilitation, inclusion, and rights. He closed by expressing optimism that the 2025 World Congress will showcase measurable progress in inclusive employment.

This declaration symbolizes a unified global commitment to fostering opportunities and removing barriers for People of Determination worldwide.

## 2024 GLOBAL SMART EDUCATION CONFERENCE

18-20 Aug 2024, Beijing, china



**TONE MORK**  
VICE CHAIR RI  
EDUCATION  
COMMISSION

The 2024 Global Smart Education Conference convened in Beijing, organized by Beijing Normal University and partners like the UNESCO Institute for Information Technology in Education. Under the theme "Educational Transformation and International Understanding," the event drew around 1,000 participants to explore smart education's role in fostering equitable, inclusive, and high-quality learning.

A series of focused forums highlighted diverse aspects of digital education. These included discussions on digital infrastructure, mental and physical health for adolescent development, AI in assessment, digital tools for regional education, and the future of digital textbooks. Special emphasis was placed on digital transformation in K-12 education and innovations in early childhood learning environments.

Tone L. Mork, Vice Chair and former Chair of the Rehabilitation International (RI) Education Commission, delivered an address on "Inclusive Education – Inclusive Societies" at the Forum on Smart Learning in Early Childhood Care and Education. Mork presented RI's mission, emphasizing the link between inclusive educational practices and broader societal inclusion. Her presentation examined how a more inclusive approach in early education could positively impact societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, fostering greater acceptance and equality.

This year's conference underscored the transformative potential of digital education in creating more inclusive societies. Participants agreed that smart education technologies hold promise for addressing global educational disparities, marking a pivotal step in the journey toward universal, inclusive learning solutions.

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## News from RI Education Commission

Rehabilitation International (RI) is intensifying its efforts to make inclusive education a reality worldwide, addressing the gaps between policy intentions and practical implementation. With a focus on creating learning environments that support every child, RI is introducing a new global initiative aimed at promoting accessibility and inclusivity in schools. From early education to employment opportunities, RI emphasizes the transformative impact of inclusive education on both individuals and society.

### **RI Inclusive Education – Way Forward**

Rehabilitation International (RI) has highlighted the global need to transform inclusive education policies into actionable practices. Despite international conventions, significant gaps remain between policies and real-world classroom inclusivity, as seen in Norway. Research suggests that inclusive schools, where students learn in diverse settings rather than segregated programs, benefit all students. RI advocates beginning inclusion in early childhood, promoting attitudes of acceptance and understanding from a young age. The organization calls for continuous efforts to bridge policy-practice gaps, aiming for inclusive education as a foundation for a more inclusive society.

### **RI Inclusive Education – Employment**

RI emphasizes the role of education in improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Statistics from Norway and the EU reveal a stark employment gap: 74% of people without disabilities are employed, compared to only 44% with disabilities in Norway. RI argues that inclusive education is crucial for people with disabilities to enter the workforce, fostering independence and economic participation. By increasing access to education and skill-building, RI aims to ensure individuals with disabilities can transition into employment more successfully.

### **RI Inclusive Education – Global Symbol**

To further inclusive practices, RI is launching a project to create a universal symbol for inclusive education, modeled after the wheelchair accessibility icon. This global symbol will serve as a visible commitment to accessible learning in kindergartens and schools worldwide. Supported by RI's Education Commission and the International Commission on Technology and Accessibility, the symbol project will be unveiled at the 2026 World Congress, marking a milestone in standardized global efforts for inclusive education.

### **RI Inclusive Education – Implementation**

Effective implementation requires national support, school-level initiatives, and targeted teacher training. RI's guidelines stress universal design, digital accessibility, and collaborative school environments. The organization has developed tools to help schools implement inclusive practices, available for free on RI's website. RI calls on countries to adopt clear policies, develop action plans, and provide adequate funding to make inclusive education accessible to all children.

**Support  
the Project!**

### **Support the project!**

Education Commission invites those who have good ideas for the project.

As this is an international project, input from different part of the world are very welcome!

Please contact project manager: [tone.mork@outlook.com](mailto:tone.mork@outlook.com)



## RI News from World Congress on Rehabilitation - 1

(by Meera Al Shamsi)

The **World Congress on Rehabilitation 2024 (WCR 2024)** was held from **September 23 to 25, 2024**, at the **Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC)**. Organized under the esteemed patronage of **His Highness Sheikh Khalid bin Zayed Al Nahyan**, Chairman of the Zayed Higher Organization for Individual with disability (ZHO), the Congress operated under the theme of **“Work and Employment.”**

This three-day event, jointly organized by **Rehabilitation International (RI)** and the **International Social Security Association (ISSA)**, was hosted by the **Zayed Higher Organization for Individual with disability (ZHO)**. His Excellency **Abdullah Al-Humaidan**, Secretary General of ZHO and Deputy Vice-President of the MENA Region for Rehabilitation International (RI), chaired the Organizing Committee of WCR 2024, guiding the event's mission to empower and integrate Individual with disability into the workforce.

Over the three days, WCR 2024 welcomed **1,077 attendees from 81 countries** and hosted over **190 speakers**, including **30 experts from the UAE**. With the submission of **over 170 abstracts** covering critical topics related to the workforce inclusion and empowerment of person with disability.

Participants included leaders, government officials, healthcare experts, rehabilitation specialists, academics, researchers, and service providers dedicated to improving the lives of people with disability. The Congress also saw the active involvement of **20 local entities in Abu Dhabi**, underscoring the UAE's commitment to fostering inclusion and advancing support services for People of disability.

### **The Global and Local Importance of WCR 2024**

WCR2024 Congress addresses global challenges facing Individual with disability in the workforce, exacerbated by rapid technological advancements and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI). With estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO) showing that nearly 1 billion people (15% of the global population) live with disabilities worldwide, the need for inclusive employment strategies is urgent.

Locally, in the UAE, while significant strides have been made toward their empowerment, much more needs to be done to ensure their inclusion in the evolving workforce.

### **The Challenge of AI and Technological Advancement**

One of the most pressing issues to be addressed during the Congress is the rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and automation technologies. While AI holds the potential to revolutionize industries, it also poses a significant risk of eliminating jobs, particularly in sectors where Individual with disability might find employment opportunities. AI's Potential Impact on Employment: Studies from McKinsey Global Institute (2017) suggest that up to 800 million jobs globally could be displaced by automation and AI by 2030. For People of Determination, who already face barriers to employment, this challenge could exacerbate existing inequalities.



## RI News from World Congress on Rehabilitation - 2

(by Meera Al Shamsi)

### Vision and Objectives for WCR 2024

The Congress's overarching vision is to build an inclusive future where Individual with disability can fully participate in the labor market, contributing to their communities and economies. Key objectives of the Congress include promoting inclusive employment, addressing the impact of AI, and ensuring actionable post-Congress outcomes.

### Key Topics and Insights

Under the Congress's central theme, "Work and Employment," WCR 2024 featured a variety of insightful sessions and discussions. Key topics included:

- **Workforce Integration for People of Determination:** Sessions emphasized strategies to increase workforce participation, highlighting the unique challenges faced by Individual with disability and exploring effective solutions to overcome them.
- **AI and Technological Advancements:** Experts discussed the role of AI in both creating new opportunities and presenting challenges. While AI and automation hold transformative potential, they also pose risks for job displacement, making it critical to develop inclusive employment policies.
- **Policy Development and Global Frameworks:** Discussions focused on public policies that promote workforce inclusion, with insights from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO). These sessions highlighted the importance of cohesive, global strategies to support People of Determination.

WCR 2024 presents a critical opportunity for the global community to come together and address the challenges and opportunities presented by AI, automation, and the evolving labor market. Through a commitment to Embracing Inclusion, the Congress will ensure that Individual with disability have a meaningful place in the workforce of the future.

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### Post-Congress Action Plan

A key outcome of WCR 2024 will be the formulation of a global action plan designed to drive the ongoing empowerment of Individual with disability. The action plan will:

1. Define clear milestones for increasing employment rates.
2. Propose mechanisms for ongoing collaboration between governments, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders.
3. Recommend steps for integrating AI and new technologies in a way that enhances, rather than hinders, the employability of individual with disability.

### Looking Forward: Outcomes and Future Directions

A significant outcome of WCR 2024 was the formulation of a global action plan aimed at increasing employment opportunities for individual with disability.. This plan includes:

- Setting clear employment milestones
- Promoting collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and private sector stakeholders
- Integrating AI and emerging technologies to enhance job accessibility rather than create barriers

As the first World Congress on Rehabilitation to be held in the Middle East, WCR 2024 represents a landmark achievement and a commitment to embracing inclusivity. The Congress has laid the foundation for ongoing collaboration, continuous learning, and a dedicated focus on workforce empowerment for individual with disability



## Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities



### WHO Report Urges Global Health Systems to Prioritize Disability Equity

The World Health Organization (WHO) has released a report calling for urgent action to address health inequities experienced by people with disabilities worldwide. With approximately 1.3 billion people, or 16% of the global population, living with significant disabilities, the WHO's Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities highlights the disproportionate health challenges faced by this population. It also outlines a roadmap of 40 actionable recommendations aimed at making health systems more inclusive and equitable.

The report details the continued health inequities that people with disabilities face, including shorter life expectancy, poorer health, and limited access to healthcare services. These disparities often arise from inadequate healthcare policies, inaccessible facilities, and a lack of trained healthcare workers familiar with the specific needs of disabled individuals. These barriers have persisted even as countries are mandated, by both international and national laws, to uphold the health rights of all citizens.

WHO stresses that addressing these inequities benefits not only individuals with disabilities but also contributes to broader public health goals, including universal health coverage (UHC) and pandemic preparedness. For example, equitable health interventions—such as disability-inclusive vaccination programs or family planning—benefit entire communities while also upholding the rights of disabled individuals.

#### Key Principles for Inclusive Health Systems

The WHO report outlines three foundational principles for advancing health equity for people with disabilities:

**Centralizing Disability in Health Equity:** Ensuring that disability-inclusive health is a priority in all policies and initiatives is critical. This principle calls for a human rights-based approach, placing the needs of those most marginalized, including people with disabilities, at the center of health planning and services.

**Empowerment and Meaningful Participation:** Echoing the motto "nothing about us without us," WHO emphasizes the importance of including people with disabilities in health policy decisions and service design. Engaging their representative organizations in decision-making processes ensures that services are tailored to meet their specific needs, creating a more inclusive healthcare landscape.

**Monitoring and Evaluation:** WHO recommends robust tracking of health outcomes for people with disabilities to assess progress and make necessary adjustments. Monitoring enables health systems to evaluate the effectiveness of their policies, ensuring that resources are used effectively to reduce health disparities.

Read more: [Global Report on Health Equity for Persons with Disabilities](#)

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As we wrap up this first edition, we want to thank all of contributors for their support.

We would be happy to receive your contribution from all member of RI from all regions by sending it to:

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