



A section of the attendees

KSH joins hands with RI in organising workshop

Accessibility to disabled people in focus

By Joana Saba
Arab Times Staff

KUWAIT CITY, Feb 6: Rehabilitation International (RI), under request from the Kuwait Society for the Handicapped (KSH) held a workshop on Tuesday outlining the ongoing proposal for the Kuwait Access Strategy (KAS), dealing with the needs of disabled people.

The workshop comprised of several presentations by Michael Fox, Chair of the RI Foundation and the RI Working Group on Humanitarian Emergencies and former President of RI (2004-2008), and Joseph Kwan, Global Chair of RI International Commission on Technology and Accessibility (ICTA). Primarily, Fox and Kwan addressed the issue of developing the correct legislation and drafting the correct laws - most importantly focusing on Kuwait ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which would enable providing accessibility for disabled persons in Kuwait from an architectural standpoint.

From a human rights standpoint, the CRPD ensures that disabled people are treated equally and provided equal opportunity in all areas of life, and as such, part of this is ensuring that disabled people have access to the same facilities and services that others do. Currently, Kuwait has not ratified the CRPD and lacks the legislation to implement the kind of architectural planning that it would require to ensure this.

"What we're doing is traveling to different countries around the world to assist governments in ratifying the CRPD, [which would lead to] the government becoming liable for the requirements of that legislation," Michael Fox told the Arab Times.

"I think there's a lot of concern [with regards to accessibility in Kuwait]," he continued, "but unfortunately the government hasn't yet made the political decision to ratify this convention. I think the government thinks it's difficult, but it's not, and our job is to explain the process and benefits of ratification in Kuwait. Everybody will benefit if transport, the airport, hotels, schools, etc. are more accessible."

The KAS involves 4 stages; reviewing the existing legislation regarding access for disabled people in Kuwait, reviewing the different types of buildings in Kuwait

and the kinds of planning they would require, holding various different workshops and meetings in Kuwait (including ones with the government, students and architects) and finally the actual access strategy that includes recommendations to the government.

This is the fourth visit from RI to Kuwait, over the period of the past year, and this has involved capacity-building sessions, setting up meetings and seminars with officials from various ministries, including the Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Education, as well as various professionals.

"The strategy entails many things. From the top level, you need good legislation, and providing equality for people with disabilities," stated Joseph Kwan to the Arab Times. "You may need to set up committees or commissions to oversee projects, and at the building level, the department of building works needs a good set of codes and guidelines for what is good-practice design. The easiest way to get this is political will from the top; it's a must."

One main point of contest is accessibility for schools in Kuwait. The government is currently embarking on a project to build two specialized schools for disabled children that would segregate them from other children. However, this in itself can be seen as a denial of basic rights for disabled children.

"One of the main aspects of the UN convention is that kids should go through an education experience together, not segregated. We are very critical of the special schools program, we think schools should be designed to give every kid, with or without a disability, an opportunity to play and learn together," Fox continued.

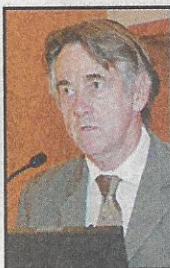
"Because in Kuwait the environment is not very accessible, a lot of parents would like their children to be in a closed environment, and therefore a special school is OK because their child is being looked after carefully. In a society like Kuwait, people with disabilities have been managed through a charity model," he added.

KAS provides recommendations for removing the barriers which prevent disabled people from becoming full, active and assimilated members of society, as well as reviews on the technical specifications currently being used, and what is required to implement them. The strategy, if adopted, will take approximately 2-3 years to implement, given that legislation can take 1-2 years to draft, and the process can be fast-tracked if Kuwait chooses to use a template from another country in terms of legislation.

The ICTA Kuwait Commission was formed in order to study the KAS proposal, give remarks and suggestions regarding it and participate in its realization. Based on ICTA Global, it is presided by Munira Al-Mutawa, Founder of KSH, and comprises of figures including Hashem Taqi, Director General of KSH and Chair of the RI Education Commission, Mona Bourusli, board member of the Kuwait Society for Engineering, Haifa Al-Jourawi from the Ministry of Public Works, Moujbel Al-Zafiri from the Ministry of Communications, Adel Al-Atram from the Municipality and Aiman Al-Araj from the Kuwait Engineer's Office.

Both Michael Fox and Joseph Kwan are architects specializing in specialized best-practice accessibility planning for buildings. Michael Fox is based in Sydney, Australia and was extensively involved in drafting the UN CRPD in 2006, which has since been ratified by 127 out of 200 countries globally. In addition, he is the Director of Access Australia and an accredited member of the Association of Consultants in Access Australia.

Joseph Kwan is based in Hong Kong, and is a resource person for the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), as well as a member of the International Union of Architects, the Hong Kong SAR Government's Rehabilitation Advisory Committee, and much more.



Fox



Taqi