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Colleagues with disabilities make an inclusive UN

834 - NOV 2023

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**NOT AN OPTION**

Disability inclusion at the UN -P.8

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Chest hair and jeep smugglers -P.34

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## Colleagues with disabilities make an inclusive UN

Can I let you in on a little secret? The editorial committee and I plan our issues well in advance and discuss topics that we know would be of interest to you as our reader. I am grateful to all members of the committee who don't seem to run out of ideas of enthusiasm. This issue is no exception. Led by editorial committee member, it articles written by colleagues with disabilities across the UN system. Working on this article reiterated what I already knew – there are excellent professionals with disabilities and the UN should continue to ensure it hires and have next working with us.

Don't miss a mother-daughter duo article on copying with dyslexia, you may associate with some of the situation or related to a similar family matter.

Other notable articles in this issue are focused on art and travel in nearby regions of Geneva or Switzerland. If you missed the event or the season, plan ahead, you could explore these with the advice of our contributors next year.

We pride ourselves in being a magazine by staff for staff – this issue is one of those excellent examples.

I hope you enjoy this issue. ■

## Les collègues handicapés font une ONU inclusive

Puis-je vous confier un petit secret? Le comité de rédaction et moi-même planifions nos numéros bien à l'avance et discutons de sujets qui, nous le savons, pourraient vous intéresser en tant que lecteur. Je remercie tous les membres du comité qui ne semblent pas à court d'idées d'enthousiasme. Ce problème ne fait pas exception. Dirigé par un membre du comité de rédaction, il publie des articles rédigés par des collègues handicapés du système des Nations Unies. Travailler sur cet article a réitéré ce que je savais déjà: il existe d'excellents professionnels handicapés et l'ONU devrait continuer à veiller à embaucher et à travailler ensuite avec nous.

Ne manquez pas un article du duo mère-fille sur la copie avec la dyslexie, que vous pourriez associer à une certaine situation ou lié à une affaire familiale similaire. D'autres articles notables de ce numéro sont consacrés à l'art et aux voyages dans les régions proches de Genève ou de la Suisse. Si vous avez raté l'événement ou la saison, anticipez, vous pourrez les explorer avec les conseils de nos contributeurs l'année prochaine.

Nous sommes fiers d'être un magazine rédigé par le personnel et destiné au personnel – ce numéro en est un excellent exemple.

J'espère que vous apprécierez ce numéro. ■

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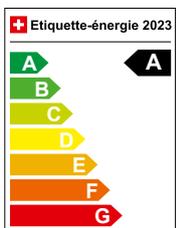
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# A call to inclusion

## Editors and allies

Many of the articles in this edition of *newSpecial* were written by UN colleagues with disabilities, and UN colleagues with dependents with disabilities.



**ERIC STENER CARLSON, UN SOCIETY OF WRITERS**

The idea for this edition came directly from the disability movement's slogan, "Nothing about us without us".

For far too many years, persons without disabilities have talked for – and talked over – persons with disabilities. Until recently, the same has happened in the UN system. And, for that reason, persons with disabilities have often been portrayed as either objects of *pity* who cannot do anything for themselves, or as objects of *inspiration*, superheroes who can do absolutely everything. Both stereotypes are damaging, because they don't view persons with disabilities as actual persons (with good days and bad days, with strengths and challenges).

The only way to smash these stereotypes is for persons with disabilities to write their own stories.

And, so, the idea for this edition of *newSpecial* was born. As part of the Editorial Board, I had the fortunate job of reaching out to UN colleagues with disabilities, colleagues with dependents with disabilities, and both. (I did this through networks – such as through the UN Employee Resource Groups and Affinity Groups – and by contacting individuals directly.) As you will read, we had an amazing response, with varied and interesting articles.

I then had the rather daunting job of editing these articles from colleagues from IOM, ILO, UNHCR, WFP and WHO – daunting because I was aware of the history of "speaking for", and of how easily we can slide into stereotypes. And, so, from the first drafts until publication,

I had a continual (and meaningful) dialogue with the authors, back and forth, to ensure that the final versions of their articles truly reflected what they wanted to say.

In that regard, I think the role of an editor is much like the role of an ally in disability inclusion. We can help the authors in getting their message out, in accompanying them, engaging in dialogue with them, perhaps also in helping readers understand the context of their narratives.

But the story is always theirs. The lived experience is always theirs. And they will forever be the protagonists of their own story.

I have learned that being an ally is sometimes about stepping up (making statements, taking positions), and sometimes it's about stepping back. So now it's time for me to step back – and, like a good editor, to fade into the background- and to let the stories speak for themselves.

However, before I do so, I will hasten to add that these authors are neither "special", nor "brave", nor "differently-abled", as the gamut of stereotypes goes. Or rather, they are *as special* as any of us are, with specialized skills, languages and experience. They are *as brave* as any of us are, promoting peace and justice in sometimes dangerous situations. And they bring to bear a range of abilities and strengths that distinguish them as the best representatives their countries have to offer.

In other words, they are UN officials – just like all of us. ■



Urooj during a WFP workshop on Disability Inclusion at Serena Hotel, Quetta, Balochistan.

## From struggles to strength

# Embracing thalassemia in an inclusive world

### UROOJ ALI & SARA YOUNAS\*, WFP

As I walk past the flag in my office displaying the United Nations' logo, I am wading through an endless stream of emotions. Stepping into the role of a Business Support Assistant at the World Food Programme (WFP) Pakistan in 2021, my journey was preceded by a transformative three-month stint in the Disability Inclusion Programme. Now is when I can be officially referred to as a UN employee, working for a noble cause recognized around the world. But, maybe, WFP's cause isn't my only cause. Maybe, for once, my cause is bigger and nobler in my eyes: being recognized as a person with an invisible disability.

Ever since my inception, I have been trying to strike a balance between the two lives that are intertwined in my daily routine: working 9 to 5 at my workplace

and being attached to an IV line for the rest of the little remaining day. I understand that I can do without the former; the lack of latter has the capacity to threaten my very existence. And what an existence it is.

Since I was a child, I would go three times every month for a blood transfusion at our local hospital in the small city of Quetta, inside the ward for Thalassemia patients. Ritual had me holding a stuffed teddy bear toy with my tiny left hand; while the other held onto the shoulder of the purchaser of the doll: my mother. Mother passed away shortly after; the stuffed teddy bear remains intact to this day.

The type of disease that I have - thalassemia major - is a type of disease that eats away at your life. This condition renders my body unable to produce red

blood cells, necessitating blood transfusions every ten days. The symptoms, though formidable, have not deterred my determination - from iron overload to bone deformities, from cardiac complications to delayed puberty, each hurdle has been met with resilience. The only cure is a 'Bone Marrow Transplant' which, because of my age, I am rendered ineligible for. In simple words, my own body has (almost) defeated me. *Life won at the cost of a battle lost*: an equation I did not truly sign up for.

I completed my education, an M.Phil in Commerce, amidst a hostile environment at home. However, I found solace in the company of my two sisters, until one of them, also suffering from Thalassemia Major lost her life to the disease. It was I and my sister, left alone, to wander through the darkest of times in our lives.



Urooj Ali, right, with her sister Sawera at a hospital in Quetta. Both are getting a blood transfusion. Sawera passed away at the age of 13. From right to left: Urooj Ali, aged: 11; Sawera, aged: 6



Urooj Ali, second from the right, interacting with beneficiaries in a community. Quetta, Balochistan. Photo credits: Balach Jamali

I eventually finished my M.Phil with an impressive GPA.

Setting out to work and landing odd jobs at different places, I slowly moved my way up to positions that offered substantial opportunities. Meanwhile, funds were always short, compelling me to manage my treatment and survive at the same time. I soon founded a start-up company for soft-skills training, finally materializing my lifelong love and passion for soft-skills trainings. I also auditioned – mindlessly – for a Radio Program which, much to my surprise, I was selected for. Thus, I served in the capacity of a radio presenter for our government-based *FM101 Radio Pakistan*. I bid my infant creation (the startup company) farewell when at last, I was called on to work for the World Food Programme. And that changed everything.

Working with WFP has been a life-changing event for me. I have

never felt as empowered, brave, and content as I do now. Not only do I grow professionally every day, but being a WFP employee adds to my personal growth as well. The safety that comes with knowing that you will be taken care of no matter what, is something that I have missed all my life.

Participating in numerous trainings on disability awareness and inclusion, as part of the bigger Disability Inclusion (DI) Pilot project, has helped me to finally use my voice through this glorified institution called United Nations. I no longer shy away from large crowds. A *'pale girl'* as I was first called at seven months of age, I have been told the tale of my mother rushing me to the hospital to run some tests. The diagnosis came, and my mother wept. 33 years on, I am paler still, but the colour from my life has not faded away. My workstation is filled with countless sticky-notes and

to-do-lists of yellow and blue; the ombre shade in my hair reflecting the rays of sun-light. Yes, I would like to paint the whole town red, as I simultaneously lose it from my face.

I am thriving, and I continue to succeed. From my current field of covering communications, creating content and stories, and interacting with diverse communities, I would like to take the journey forward and excel in this career that I have chosen for myself. I wish to take centre stage and be in the limelight for as long as it lasts. I must fight all battles – my body's and my own.

For, although the veins in my arms are scarred, narrating the story of the many battles I have fought for life, all is not lost: In the end, I have my stuffed teddy bear to cling to for support, warmth, and hope. Believing otherwise would be rendering injustice to the eight-year-old girl

in the Thalassemia Ward – one hand holding to life, the other to hope. ■

\* Urooj Ali and Sara Younas are Business Support Assistants at United Nations World Food Programme Pakistan (WFP)



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# Employee resource groups/ affinity groups foster disability inclusion in the UN

For UN colleagues with disabilities, ERGs provide a supportive community, and they play a pivotal role in shaping an inclusive culture.



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**XAVIER ORELLAN & ANA-MARIA SIMEREA, IOM;**  
**PRIYA DESAI, ILO; JULIANNE DI NENNA, UNHCR;**  
**ANGELA KOHAMA, WFP;**  
**KAREN REYES, WHO**

## What are ERGs?

Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), also known as Affinity Groups, are voluntary, topic-specific groups for staff. ERGs can be on any topic, for example, for staff who identify as being Latinx, who have Asian heritage, who are parents of neurodivergent children, who are women of color, who are part of the LGBTIQ+ community... etc.

We, the authors of this article, are members of various ERGs on Disability Inclusion throughout the UN system: IOM; ILO; UNHCR; WFP

and WHO. Our members are UN colleagues with disabilities, colleagues with dependents with disabilities, or both.

Our ERGs offer a unique space where UN staff can connect, share their journeys, and make our organizations more accessible. We foster dialogue, and we amplify the voices of our members. We also collaborate with staff unions, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Sections to enhance disability inclusion.

Each ERG provides an avenue to promote implementation of the *United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS)*. UNDIS provides a framework to guide UN entities in promoting and ensuring full and equal participation of persons with disabilities. This includes improving our organizations' hiring practices, better portraying persons with disabilities in our publications, and training staff on disability inclusion, along with many other things. When implementing UNDIS, it just makes sense to consult with ERGs.

But our ERGs aren't all alike. Each UN entity has its own unique journey and history and experience with disability inclusion, so our structures and memberships are diverse. Depending on the organization, ERG membership may just be for employees with disabilities, offering a private space for candid discussions and advocacy. Other organizations open their ERGs to allies and any individual passionate about promoting disability inclusion.

Below, each one of us describes a bit about what our ERGs are like.

## International Organization for Migration (IOM)

In the IOM, the **Employees with Disability and Allies Affinity Group** exists since the end of 2020 as an online group based on Yammer (an employee communication platform). We have 55 members. One of our members has the following to say:

*The group is a good start for the organization to engage with employees with disabilities. We have been consulted on several policies and organizational change processes, and have been able to shed light on issues that would have otherwise been ignored, as for example reasonable accommodations, special provisions for duty travel for persons with disabilities, and more.*

## International Labour Organization (ILO)

We established our **ILO Employee Resource Group on Disability Inclusion** in 2022, and it's been key to promoting the inclusion of persons with disabilities within our organization. Our ERG on Disability Inclusion is an independent, voluntary group of ILO colleagues at headquarters and in field offices who have disabilities or dependents with disabilities, or both, as well as allies of disability inclusion.

Through our knowledge, lived experiences with disabilities, and shared interests, we drive culture change in our organization. We help shape disability inclusion policies and practices, raise awareness and advocate for better workplace inclusion. We also provide a confidential space for colleagues with disabilities or with dependents with disabilities to share their concerns. We provide mutual support to one another, finding solutions to disability-related issues.

Our ERG on Disability Inclusion collaborates closely with many groups in the ILO, like the ILO UNDIS Indicator Custodians, the ILO's Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Branch, and the ILO's Disability Champions Network.

## United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

At UNHCR, the **Disability Inclusion Resource Group (DIS RG)** unites about 40 colleagues with disabilities and caregivers (colleagues with dependents with disabilities) who work world-wide. The group reviews draft policies that impact persons with disabilities and raises awareness within the organization. We also highlight where improvements

can be made for fostering more enabling, empowering, and disability-inclusive workplaces. Members come from all linguistic and regional backgrounds, ages, nationalities, genders, levels, and functions. We don't like to draw attention to our disabilities; we want, like everyone, to be recognized for the people we are.

The DIS RG has moved from anonymity to story-telling and sharing experiences. We aim to promote more understanding in the organization, not only for ourselves but also for everyone with disabilities and caregivers in the organization. We've created an internal webpage with eight key messages for the organization. We're the catalyst behind

disability-related celebrations and events, such as Global Accessibility Awareness Day.

Even if much remains to be done, much has progressed within the organization for persons with disabilities, thanks to our group raising its collective voice. The most important thing is how we support each other, so no one is left unheard or entirely on their own, so disabilities can be talked about and normalized.

## The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP)

Our **Disability Inclusion Network (DIN)** was launched on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities in 2021. As of October



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2023, we have 216 members working across WFP's global operations. The DIN is open to WFP employees with disabilities and those connected to disability, such as parents of children with disabilities, or colleagues who provide care to family members with disabilities.

According to the DIN's charter, its goal is to improve employee engagement and provide a sense of inclusion and belonging within WFP. Our members volunteer their time and resources and share their passion for success. We work towards enhancing the employee experience, fostering a work environment that brings the power of diversity and inclusion to life, and creating a community that empowers and connects everyone at WFP.

We advocate for more inclusive policies and practices for employees with disabilities, and we work together to raise awareness about disability inclusion at WFP. The governance team is consistently exploring creative ways to grab the attention of employees (as we all have many priorities)! For example, in 2023, the DIN invited "The Lost Voice Guy," a stand-up comedian who is famous for his sets on disability inclusion, to raise awareness of disability inclusion in the workplace.

WFP's dedication to cultivating a workplace that embraces diversity and inclusion shines through our management of Affinity Groups under the banner of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion). (At WFP, we proudly host three dynamic Affinity Groups: the Disability Inclusion Network, the LGBTIQ+, and the Women's Equality Network.) By offering support, resources, and guidance, the DEI division empowers our Affinity Groups, enabling them to flourish and steer transformative progress within our organization.

World Health Organization (WHO)  
At WHO, our **Embracing Disability Affinity-Resource Group** was established in 2020 and began with a handful of colleagues with visible disabilities. Today, it boasts a membership of over 100 from regions and country offices working together to cultivate a diverse and inclusive WHO environment. The group welcomes everyone. For example, our pioneering "Embracing Disability Benefits EVERYONE" campaign has shone a light on disability narratives; it uses the power of storytelling – creating a safe space to share experiences, dispelling myths and encouraging empathy.

The Embracing Disability Group meets once a month to plan activities, share experiences and concerns, and to advocate for UNDIS implementation. Biannual sessions with the senior sponsor (the Assistant Director-General, Business Operations) provide an avenue to report achievements and advocate for impactful changes. Additionally, the Embracing Disability Group actively collaborates with the WHO UNDIS Secretariat and its Working Groups and Human Resources. We've contributed to policies and strategies for disability inclusion, such as the WHO Policy on Disability, Employment of persons with disabilities, and Reasonable Accommodation.

In this way, we act as a "voice" for disability inclusion at WHO.

### How we work together

Over the past three years, the ERGs from IOM, ILO, UNHCR, WFP, and WHO, among others, have collaborated to improve disability inclusion. For example, we come together, to celebrate diversity during the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on 3 December, and to identify critical gaps in disability inclusion in the UN system.

We acknowledge that UNDIS has been a game-changer for disability inclusion. However, many colleagues with disabilities still face challenges that prevent them from fully participating in our organizations. Issues like a higher cost of living (because of higher costs of accessible housing, transportation, assistive devices... etc.), inaccessibility at certain offices, inequalities in career development, ableism, hardship duty station disadvantages, and other systemic disadvantages due to disability persist.

With the ongoing revision of the UN compensation package – including salaries, allowances, and benefits – there's an unprecedented opportunity to make changes. By taking disability into account, there's potential to ensure that the UN workforce with disabilities achieves full inclusion. This would further solidify the commitment to diversity and equal representation within the UN system.

Join an ERG/Affinity Group in your organization today  
Do you experience any form of disability? Do you have a child or other dependent with a disability? Do you want to be an ally for disability inclusion? Then join your Organization's ERG/Affinity Group!

If your Organization does not yet have an ERG, then we can help you start one! Dive in, engage, and become a beacon for disability inclusion.

As a member of an ERG/Affinity Group, you can share experiences, join forces to make proposals to management, and exchange knowledge and expertise about career moves, life in particular duty stations, and more.

Join us today for a more diverse, inclusive and accessible UN system! ■

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#### Important Contacts

ILO Staff interested in joining our ERG on Disability inclusion and in taking forward its important mission can contact the ERG at the following e-mail address: [DISABILITY-ERG@ilo.org](mailto:DISABILITY-ERG@ilo.org)

WHO colleagues interested in joining our Embracing Disability Affinity Resource Group can contact Karen Reyes: [reyesk@who.int](mailto:reyesk@who.int)

UNHCR colleagues can contact the DIS RG through Julianne Di Nenna: [dinenna@unhcr.org](mailto:dinenna@unhcr.org)

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# Daring to be different

I come from an international family, with family ties in Kenya and India. My father was a senior official with the United Nations, and I travelled with him to headquarters and field duty stations.

I grew up with no right arm due to a medically-required amputation at a very young age.



Nepal – Kala Patthar 5643 m (2018)

## PRIYA ANN DESAI, ILO

In my youth, I cannot remember seeing other people with a physical disability similar to mine. In fact, seeing other people with a disability was far less common in the 1970s and 80s than it is now, and attitudes were different – there was less understanding, and people were tremendously curious.

I knew higher education was going to be important for me and, fortunately, I was able to attend top universities and speak various languages, e.g. English, French and Spanish. Nevertheless, after graduating in the early 1990's, it was hugely challenging to find work. Employment agencies turned me away solely on the grounds of my disability. I was once told

by the recruiter in an international organization that I could not be considered because I needed to drive a 4x4 vehicle, and there were no automatic vehicles.

Also, there were questions on the UN Personal History Form (the famous UNP11) such as “How many words can you type per minute?” and “Do you have restrictions on travel?” These questions were disconcerting and made me realize that certain jobs would not be made easily accessible to me.

I recall being asked during an interview if I could do the job, since I typed with one hand. This was a position that entailed providing support to the Director's office. I was able to convince the person that it was not a problem (I typed very fast), and I got the job. This was a breakthrough and a great moment! But it needs to be said that it was me having to adapt to the workplace, not the other way around.

Some 30 years later, I would reply to the question slightly differently. I now need voice-to-text software. I dare to be open about my needs and my differences!

I would also like to share that I'm the mother of a twenty-year-old with an intellectual disability. He does not read, write or do basic arithmetic, but he has developed his own way of capturing information through photos and images; he sees details that I would never pick up, and I often try to see the world through my son's eyes.

My son's diagnosis at the age of one was not something I was prepared for, and I won't hide that it was heart-rending and entirely life-changing.

I was good at separating my personal circumstances from my professional life, to the extent that colleagues were not aware of the full implications of his disability. At first, I used to say that *he was slow*, but I later realized that colleagues didn't really comprehend, and it led to some misunderstandings. That's why, if you're in a similar situation, I would advise against being too indirect or vague, as work colleagues may not automatically be aware of the extent of the complexities, the adjustments that are required, as well as the life-long parental commitments and responsibilities. (Of course, how much you disclose is up to you; however, in practical terms, if you are going to request reasonable adjustments related to a dependent with disabilities (which is your right), you will need to inform a designated person at work – a supervisor, your HR partner... etc.) This affected my choices for geographical mobility, and I ended up staying in Geneva rather than returning to the field.

There were multiple medical appointments and therapies to put into place, and I arranged most of these during lunchtime or at the end of the day and hired external help to minimize time away from the office. It was never a straight line, and constant monitoring of progress and adjustments to therapies were required, even into my son's adulthood.

That being said, the UN Special Education Grant opened doors that would never have been possible; it enabled my son to benefit from excellent institutions offering specialized education and cognitive development.

Today, as a result of ongoing vocational training, my son works in a specialized, secure environment working with farm animals.

There are other vocational opportunities available at his workplace, such as gardening, woodwork, cooking and working with textiles or in a small shop. He's very responsible and dedicated to his work. He has a strong sense of belonging and values work relations and human contact.

I have had an exciting career, working for different UN agencies at headquarters and in the field. I realize how fortunate I am to have had an international career and to have worked in areas that I am passionate about. I've also met a lot of amazing colleagues. At the same time, I have had to overcome many hurdles to secure jobs and succeed as an international civil servant. I believe that other colleagues with disabilities seeking fixed-term positions and career advancement face similar barriers across the UN system. Over the years, I have come to realize that negative attitudes toward people with disabilities still exist and can be difficult to shift.

Yet, today we are more united, and we have a stronger voice through Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) on Disability Inclusion, which bring together staff with disabilities, staff with

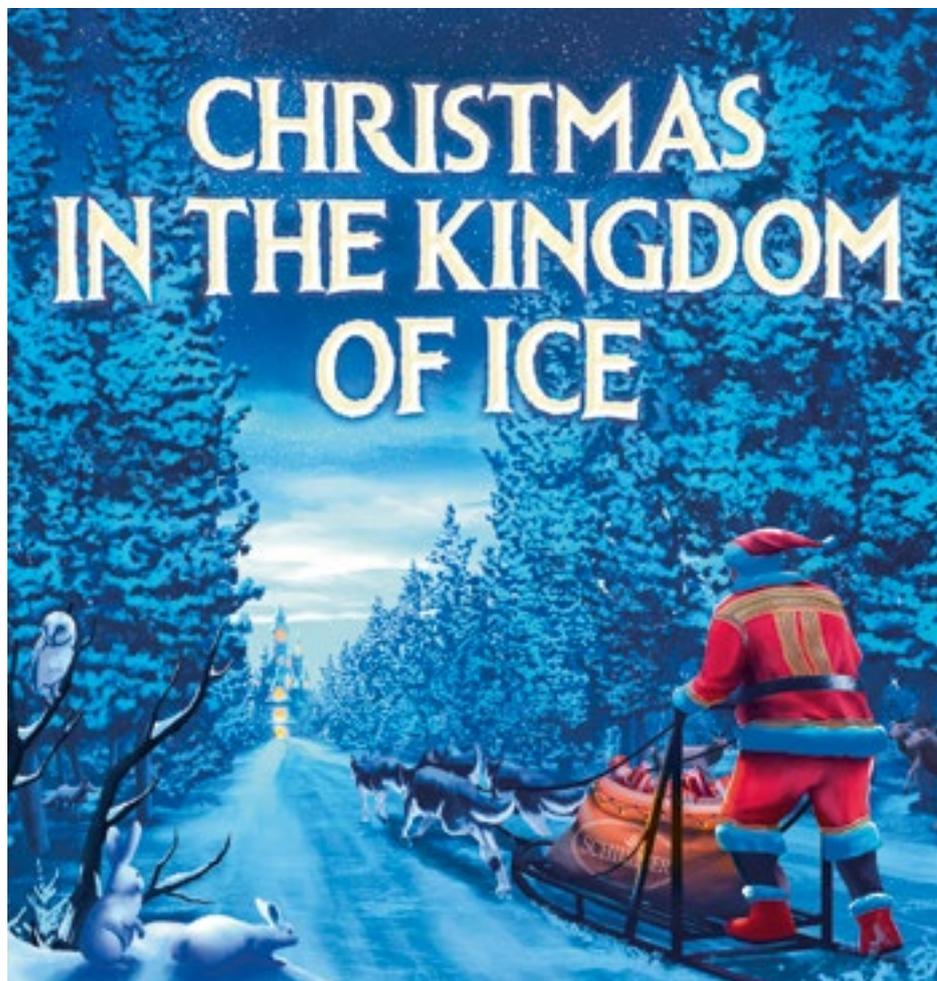
dependents with disabilities, or both. (I'm one of the founding members of the ILO ERG on Disability Inclusion.) This is key, because, while the support of allies throughout the UN system is essential, our lived experience with disability is really what it is all about. We are the driving force of the motto, "*Nothing about us without us*".

It is a critical time to address mindsets and limiting beliefs about the competencies and capabilities of persons with disabilities. We also need to tackle barriers that prevent UN agencies from truly becoming employers of choice for persons with disabilities. Currently, efforts are focusing on recruitment and increasing the number of employees with disabilities. Attention also needs to be given to the career development and advancement of employees with disabilities.

What cannot lag behind is work on intersectionality (where several identities come together, such as age, gender, race, ethnicity). For example, statistics reveal that persons with disabilities, and particularly women with disabilities, are less likely to be provided with equal opportunities for career advancement.

I have come to realize that people with disabilities are incredibly resilient, persistent and determined. We are natural problem-solvers. We bring important attributes and human qualities to the workplace, and I am often told by colleagues and clients that they find it easy to confide in and trust me. But, of course, my lived experience with disability is only one aspect of me, and I bring to my work an array of knowledge and competencies that have nothing to do with my disability.

Why not dare to be different? ■



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# Aysar's Journey overcoming obstacles in my work with the UN System

**AYSAR ALAIDI\*, IOM**

Hello. I'm Aysar Alaidi. I'm from Iraq, and I've been working with the United Nations' International Organization for Migration since 2017.

In 2014, Iraq was in a conflict which claimed many lives and left many individuals with physical impairments. During this tumultuous time, I resided in a neighborhood notorious for frequent violence. Little did I know that a seemingly routine bus ride on September 16th would forever change my life. As I gazed upon the bustling markets of Karada city, listening to music on my headphones, a sudden spark of light inside the bus disrupted my world. I didn't hear the explosion directly below my seat but realized something had happened when people scattered from the bus. That day, I lost my right leg, and thus began my transformative journey.

Despite the challenges that lay ahead, I refused to let adversity define me. I began my physical and emotional recovery. Step by step, I rebuilt my life and made a solemn promise to myself – nothing would impede my journey.

Over the years, I ventured into various roles, and in 2017 I seized the opportunity to work with IOM, supporting community policing projects in Iraq. The work was far from easy – it required standing for long hours, delivering demanding training sessions, organizing

meetings, and visiting remote communities, especially those recently liberated from ISIS.

Throughout my journey, I frequently encountered individuals who had lost limbs during the war, young people who believed they had forfeited their opportunities in life because of how people judged them based upon their disabilities. I made it my mission to use my own journey as an example, demonstrating that disability was not a barrier. I was the same person as before, and I had a wellspring of inner strength that fueled my determination to persevere.

My path led me from community policing to becoming the MENA region focal point for one of IOM's border management projects. I traveled to border regions, trained border guards and government officials, and supported other missions in Sudan and Jordan.

During my journey, I have had the privilege of meeting numerous beneficiaries who often express their surprise upon discovering my disability. Their surprise quickly turns into comfort as they realize that I walked the same path as them, faced the same challenges, and overcame them.

In Iraq, it's incredibly rare to see someone with a disability doing what I do. In fact, I'm one of the few UN employees with a disability working in Iraq.

Regrettably, in my culture, discrimination is an all-too-common occurrence, and so is pity. This is the reason I sometimes choose to conceal my prosthetic leg. Compounded by the ongoing security challenges in my country, my prosthetic leg has posed significant difficulties during security checks and at airports when I travel.

Some people want to "make sure" I have a disability. Others think I shouldn't be doing more than sitting in a chair doing nothing. These encounters consume valuable time and often leave me feeling quite uncomfortable.

But in my job, I'm treated like any other employee, and my disability is not considered as a barrier. Being part of the IOM, and the larger UN system, has not only opened doors but has also empowered me to give more.

My journey demonstrates that disability should never be viewed as an obstacle. My career within the UN, particularly with IOM, has opened doors and shattered stereotypes in my country, proving that physical impairments do not define a person's capabilities. My story is a reminder that there are UN colleagues all over the world with disabilities, upholding the values and commitment of fostering a more inclusive world for all. ■

\* Aysar Alaidi is Immigration and Border Governance Expert – International Organization for Migration (IOM)



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# Portraits of WFP People

The World Food Programme's (WFP) "Portraits of People" features the stories of employees that participate in WFP's Employee Resource Group, the Disability Inclusion Network.

ORIGINAL WORK BY CARA YAR KHAN, EDITED FOR NEWSPECIAL BY THE WFP DISABILITY INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION TEAMS.

Employees shared their stories and lived experience with disability to foster allyship, destigmatize and normalize disability and combat ableism in the workplace. The campaign contains photographs of WFP employees with disabilities "living their best life" and a short story about their life, experience working at WFP, challenges and hopes.

All stories shared with permission by the storytellers for newSpecial.

Storytellers include: Murali Padmanabhan, Manaleli Selemela, Zarghoona Wadood, Teshome Kinde, Alipayo "Selina" Ayangi and Mary Helen Brighton.

All photos are provided by the storytellers themselves.



Mary Helen sits in a café in Rome.

Mary Helen Brighton

**Location: Rome**

*To me, disability inclusion is transparent, inclusive and humanizing.*

I joined WFP as a Digital Communications Specialist two years ago, after completing my graduate degree in Peace Studies. I joined WFP because I believe in the value of all human beings, and I believe that basic needs such as nutritious, accessible food should be shared and ensured around the world. I identify as neurodivergent and was diagnosed with ADHD while attending university.

ADHD is more likely to go undiagnosed in women. There is the misinformed assumption that ADHD makes one hyper, unruly,

and unable to focus. My ADHD manifests in different ways. I am hyperaware, taking in everything around me all at once. I read emotions, reactions, and social complexities quite well, but this can feel overwhelming. To some, I seem like I am daydreaming, but I am really processing a mass amount of information all at once, feeling it in my mind and body.

I must use extra energy to mask the fact that my brain is moving at the speed of light 24 hours per day. I am also prone to overstimulation, which can manifest as light sensitivity, noise sensitivity, etc. I have learned to self-soothe and ground myself in the moment, but I would say that I am more prone to exhaustion than a neurotypical person. It is not rare for me to nap in a dark, quiet room for an entire weekend after a busy work week.

Having ADHD does not make me a victim, and I know that my perspective adds value to the world. My hyper-focused attention to detail and quick reflexes makes me a reliable person in emergency situations, and I prioritize kindness and open communication with colleagues.

As an adult woman, I feel confident, empowered, and self-aware.

As I learn more about my diagnosis and connect the dots, I feel like I am meeting myself in childhood. I would not say that my ADHD is a superpower, and it does make life a bit more exhausting, but it has fostered deep empathy and intuition in me.

I would just say that my life is a bit more complicated because existing systems and neurotypical expectations require me to push aside parts of myself and my health. Advocating for myself and establishing boundaries in my relationships is a constant learning process. I am also aware that ADHD continues to be largely misunderstood and stigmatized, especially in women.

**I am nothing but myself, and I want to make space for others to be themselves as well.** I am also aware of how other people feel, and I always try to anticipate workplace needs. I want to extend safety to everyone, because I know what it feels like to not always have acceptance and security extended to me. Overall, my hyperfocus comes in handy at WFP, as I love what I do and spend extensive amounts of time working towards goals I am passionate about. ■

Murali Padmanabhan

**Location: Bangkok**

*To me, disability inclusion means leadership, demystification, and transformative approaches to mainstreaming.*

I'm originally from India and of Tamil ethnicity. Working for WFP came from a desire to promote inclusion in the largest humanitarian agency.

That wish came true in 2021 when I joined the organization as the Disability Inclusion Regional Advisor for the Regional Bureau in Bangkok. My family and friends were thrilled for me. So far, my work experience at WFP has been a positive, rewarding and highly



Murali Padmanabhan stands on a balcony in Bangkok, where he works as WFP's Regional Disability Inclusion Advisor.

encouraging experience. I work with colleagues who do not treat me differently just because I am blind, and I have gained more confidence. Having said that, there are some barriers that I face in the workplace, particularly related to technology and inaccessible software.

While I am still fairly new to Bangkok, I have not experienced negative attitudes because of my disability. People are curious to understand me and sometimes they even admire the ordinary things that I do. While I know we should avoid this ableist admiration, I am happy to share more about my life with the community around me, in an effort to break down stereotypes. This is especially as it's not common in Asia for someone who is blind to hold such a senior position.

When we, as an organization, change the way we think, respond and act across the board, we have tremendous potential to be champions of inclusion! ■



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A photo of Manaleli dressed in a Basotho shawl.

## Manaleli Selemela

**Location: Lesotho**

*To me, disability inclusion means equality, diversity and protection!*

I joined the WFP Lesotho office in 2019 because I love that the organization empowers women. Driving is considered a man's job in Lesotho, but WFP has proven otherwise by promoting equal employment opportunities for all.

Being a caregiver of a child with autism and epilepsy means I have extra responsibilities and at times it's draining, physically, emotionally and psychologically. When my child is unwell, I am not able to perform my best at work. My work is all about traveling. At times, I worry that my daughter

might get sick while I am away and that I won't be there to support her when she needs me most.

I am a Mosotho, originally from Lesotho. People with disabilities in Lesotho are among the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the country and often considered useless and weak. However, the country is making progress towards disability inclusion. In March 2021, the government enacted The Persons with Disability Equity Act to provide for equal opportunities and recognition of rights of persons living with disabilities in Lesotho. Disability inclusion at work is about more than hiring people with disabilities, it's about understanding the family and community support and engagement. ■



Zarghoona attends an event with WFP in Pakistan.

## Zarghoona Wadood

**Location: Pakistan**

*To me, disability inclusion means diversity, equity and respect!*

I joined the World Food Programme after participating in a disability inclusion pilot project with WFP Pakistan. I joined WFP in mid-2022 as a Business Support Assistant and was happy to see WFP's investment in creating a diverse workforce for persons like me.

I am Pakistani, from Baluchistan. I had polio as a baby, and now use a wheelchair. Here, the perceptions around disability and specifically of women with disabilities, are quite poor. Stereotypes in Baluchistan paint women with disabilities as "good for nothing." People believe that we should not and cannot have a proper education and that we can't be independent.

When I joined WFP, my local office building needed accessibility updates – as well as the travel policy to ensure that work-related travel is disability inclusive. I take more time in performing my daily tasks, so I have been granted flexible hours which makes it easier for me. Since I joined, accessibility to the office building has improved, and the travel policy has been updated to become more inclusive. ■



Teshome stands in front of a lake, laughing.



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Selina Ayangi and her sister Namadi stand together in front of a family home in South Sudan.

**Alipayo “Selina” Ayangi**  
**Location: South Sudan**

*To me, disability inclusion means integrity, collaboration and impartiality.*

In my home country of South Sudan, I lend my experience to WFP’s mission of Saving and Changing Lives as a WFP Business Support Assistant in the Logistics Cluster. This is something that feels natural to me, as a caregiver to my 44-year-old sister, Namadi Cicilia Alipayo. She was born without a disability, but at

32 years old, she had an accident and sustained fracture of her spinal vertebrae leaving her paralyzed and using a wheelchair. Due to discrimination and stigma, she has been rejected by her husband, our parents, and other relatives, so I stepped in to provide support to her and her five children.

The work life balance at WFP, along with affording the additional expenses that come with having a family member with a disability who also has dependents, is not easy. Sometimes this responsibility affects my work

performance, because I am dually needed to focus on my sister’s health, security and feeding her children. Stigma exists throughout office systems and structures, which are not always set up to support caretakers.

Namadi credits my care with saving her life. But I must note that she is the head and joy of our family. We look to her as our advisor.

I believe people with disabilities are important and valuable members in society who deserve dignity, respect and equal treatment. ■

**Teshome Kinde**  
**Location: Ethiopia**

*To me, disability inclusion means equity, awareness and human rights.*

People ask me how I have accomplished everything I’ve done; despite the discrimination I have faced. I was born with a rare ichthyosis, a genetic skin disorder and joint problems. In elementary school, I was discriminated against by my teacher who forced

me to sit on the floor during class, falsely stating that my skin condition was contagious. Looking back, this experience shaped me – I sat on the floor for tomorrow’s changes.

Having a visible disability in a society that is not accepting forces you to protect yourself. I focused on my academics to make my voice heard and to correct the misconceptions about my skin condition. I went on to obtain my BA in Management and a Master’s

degree in Sociology. While studying at Addis Ababa University, I worked for an NGO that aimed to foster inclusive communities and conducted advocacy at a community level.

Today, I am a disability focal point in WFP Ethiopia. I consider myself an ambassador of disability inclusion and want to create a world which embraces everyone, on an equal basis. ■



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# Parents just like you – we want rights, not charity

Inclusion is not only a matter for colleagues with disabilities in the UN system but also for those of us with dependents with disabilities.



@wikipedia

“Broken Chair”

**CINTIA DE LIMA CARDOSO<sup>1</sup>, ITC & GUILLAUME DELAUTRE<sup>2</sup>, ILO**

We’re Guillaume Delautre and Cintia de Lima Cardoso, and we’re originally from France and Brazil. We work for the ILO and the ITC respectively, and we are the happy parents of two wonderful boys, Emmanuel and Gabriel. Almost three years ago, Gabriel was diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. This did not really come as a surprise; it was the final confirmation of a long process of consultations with many specialists over the years.

Gabriel must be accompanied most of the time in class by an adult. This person helps him to stay focused and makes sure that he can work just like his classmates. This professional also takes a little more time to explain certain things to him or sometimes has to help him manage his frustration. Supporting an autistic child requires a lot of patience and calm, but under these conditions, Gabriel can attend regular classes.

For five years, Gabriel attended the Collège Champittet in Nyon. The school provided a welcoming and safe environment for him. Unfortunately, we were obliged to look for a new school for him last Summer, and it has been quite a painful experience.

We received hurtful feedback from educational institutions that were supposed to be inclusive. Statements like: “The concessions we made for your son today will not be possible during the school year” or “The other students may be scared of your child’s unusual behaviour”. This left us disheartened.

After several unsuccessful attempts and refusals, which caused us a lot of stress, we finally learned two days before the start of the school year that a place was available at the International School of Geneva (Ecolint) for Gabriel. Very few schools accept children with specific needs, and few are ready to adapt how they work. At Ecolint, Gabriel benefits from a program for neurodivergent children, and he’s happy to go to school in the morning – which is an enormous relief.

This, however, has a very high financial cost, nearly double the regular school fee. The UN staff allowances mechanism poorly covers this additional cost due to a threshold for total expenses that we feel is set too low.

Another important element to consider in Gabriel’s case is the access to care services and the availability of care professionals. Since his diagnosis, Gabriel must visit several specialists regularly,

including a psychologist, a speech therapist and an occupational therapist. Unfortunately, even in the region of Geneva, finding available professionals is sometimes difficult, and appointment slots often coincide with our office hours. In these conditions, it is particularly difficult to maintain a good balance between our family and work obligations.

### The challenges of being a parent living abroad

Our family situation has become even more challenging since March this year when Guillaume joined the ILO office in Egypt as a Technical Specialist on wages and social dialogue. Finding suitable therapies for Gabriel in French or Portuguese (our family languages) would be impossible in Cairo. Moreover, autistic kids tend to prefer a stable and calm environment. For these reasons, and because Guillaume's position

implies many missions within Africa, we made the difficult decision to live separately.

Cintia, with the assistance of an au pair and a network of therapists, cares for our two children. She can also count on the support of her supervisors to allocate ad-hoc telecommuting days when needed and on her ITC colleagues who take disability inclusion matters seriously.

Thankfully, Guillaume's bosses and HRD understand the situation and have agreed to allocate him more days for teleworking out of his duty station. He attempts to return to Geneva approximately every four to five weeks. However, the situation remains a little complicated because, in addition to the obvious psychological difficulties linked to our separation, the post-adjustment in Cairo is not at all the same as in Geneva.

We sincerely hope that the UN system work-life balance policies begin to give more due consideration to staff with family members with disabilities. Achieving this will require a collective shift in our work culture. We must ensure that additional teleworking days, whether within or outside the duty station, and flexible working arrangements are not viewed as a mere "favour" but rather as a working right.

We also believe that better arrangements could be found to alleviate some of our stress in dealing with our family and work issues. We really enjoy our current jobs and the career advancement possibilities. We take pride in our work every day. Like many other colleagues in the same situation, we do not wish to be seen as charity cases or financial burdens to the organization. All we seek is the

acknowledgment and respect of our needs, as parents and officials in the UN system. ■

1 Cintia de Lima Cardoso is communication, data and information assistant and International Trade Centre focal point for disability and accessibility

2 Guillaume Delautre is technical specialist on wages and social Dialogue, ILO Cairo country office for Egypt & Eritrea

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# Schooling & dyslexia

Dyslexia has often been overlooked historically, but the difficulties of some children and adults in reading and expressing themselves are increasingly recognized. This article explores the experience of dyslexia and schooling, from the point of view of a student and her mother”.

## A mum's perspective

PHILLIPPA BIGGS, ITU

Our eldest daughter is severely dyslexic (in the first to tenth percentile of low achievement for a number of reading skills and competencies). ‘Dyslexia’ (Greek for dys- meaning difficult and lexia meaning words or language) results in a range of difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Improved awareness and better diagnosis of dyslexia are still growing, and the causes for it are fairly understood.

In broad terms, humans have existed for circa four million years, but reading and writing have only existed for around six thousand years. In brain scans monitoring the neural activity of literate and illiterate subjects while reading, there were differences in brain activity in the left temporal lobe and the junction of the left occipital and temporal lobes. But was this cause or effect? It has been claimed that learning to read effectively ‘rewires’ the human brain and likely ‘repurposes’ or uses parts of the brain that originally evolved to

handle spoken language or facial recognition.

Another possible explanation is based in differences in the retina in the eye. The French physicists Albert Le Floch and Guy Ropars were awarded a prize by the French Academy of Medicine in December 2020 for their discoveries on dyslexia. While studying the eye, these two researchers found a new possible cause of dyslexia in an excessive symmetry of Maxwell’s centroids in the fovea at the back of the retina, potentially contributing to difficulties in reading.

Bearing in mind the importance of reading in acquiring new knowledge, researching and taking tests, difficulties in reading clearly make education and traditional schooling more difficult. Even today, when many online applications can support learning (such as Reading Eggs, Maths seeds and Mathletics), reading still plays a vital role in accessing and transmitting knowledge.

The first indication of any problems in reading for our daughter came in the French preparatory

class (CP), when my daughter regularly took 30-45 minutes to read a short text in French. Her school reports regularly cited her “difficulties in sentence construction”. At the time, we attributed these problems to difficulties with being bilingual and learning two languages simultaneously and took her to the speech therapist to help her reading. Our family loves reading and our house is full of books, libraries, comics and magazines, so opportunities to read were not lacking!

However, by Year 3, although our daughter only read English slowly, paradoxically, I was struck by the fact that her English reading was still more fluent than her French reading, despite being in full-time school in France. She seemed about two years behind the rest of her class in reading, with all the difficulties that entailed. Her strong subjects were maths and art. Finally, following the advice of a teacher that English was her stronger language, we swapped her into schooling in English.

Fortunately, my daughter loves learning about the world. She has

a genuine interest and sense of humour about many subjects (scientific, historical and political), and she is always asking questions and wanting explanations (which is sometimes difficult for her parents and teachers alike!). She has a fantastic memory (no doubt honed as a coping strategy) and enjoys any sort of logic puzzle, from sudoku to chess. I believe her love of learning has overall compensated for her difficulties in reading.

Today, her love of learning is finally paying off, and she is going from strength to strength at school in a range of subjects. Formal education may always be a little harder for our daughter, but I do believe she has learned determination, perseverance and the value of a whole lot of effort along the way! As one dyslexic entrepreneurial millionaire said, learning to read was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life – after that, by comparison, starting up my own company was easy! ■

## A student's perspective

### AMELIA SIMMONS

As someone who is severely dyslexic, I have always struggled a lot with the traditional school system. It is easy to see it has not been designed or constructed with neuro-divergent people in mind. My first memory of reading was of bedtime reading with my mum, when I memorized the Peter and Jane books, which I found difficult, but learned by heart, which fooled my mother perfectly well.

When I read, sometimes the lines go wavy, and the letters look odd or move around sometimes. It is also quite difficult for me to find the next line on the page, I often jump lines or repeat lines and am not always sure where I am in a text.

Then there was school. The problem about school is it is not easy

to cheat – you get given new texts to read all the time, which you usually have to read out loud in front of the whole class. I struggled a lot, and it didn't get any better or easier as time went on. In French school, I was seen as dumb. It made me feel stupid and worthless. People were laughing at me and it made me feel as if I did not belong, I struggled to fit in. I used to dread French, and found it a waste of time.

However, since I moved to an English school, I had a diagnosis of dyslexia and helped me. This meant that I was understood as not being dumb. Most people have an idea or stereotype of a dyslexic as an idiot or a stupid person. When I do well in a test, my classmates are surprised. It's almost as if they think dyslexic people can't do well in tests. They've also started asking why I get extra time to do tests, but in reality, getting extra time in exams is to level

the playing-field, as I might take three times longer to read the questions than them.

I also think that there isn't enough awareness about neuro-diverse people, whether that is ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, autism or other conditions. I think we should make more effort to understand others. The world is made up of lots of different colours, and we need to be able to recognize different shades of colours, like all the different types of blues and pinks and purples. If we took away all the dyslexia and ADHD, we would be left with a very boring world with only a black and white picture left!

The disadvantage of dyslexia is in the traditional school system, so I have to make up for that with my memory and creativity and thinking outside of the box, and in a different way. I love problem-solving, as that is one way I can think outside of the box.

If there is anyone else out there who is dyslexic or has someone in the family who is dyslexic, I would like to tell them, you are NOT dumb, whatever anyone has said or made you believe. Dyslexia does not affect your intelligence at all. In many ways, dyslexic is your natural way to be, your natural way of seeing the world. I might not be able to read very well, but I can still think! And pass exams and plan for the future, like anyone else. You just need to think outside the box and be creative and let your imagination run loose. ■

## C.A.S.B.I.A

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Members of the ILO's Employee Resource Group on Disability Inclusion meet with the ILO's Director General, Gilbert F. Hougbo

# Making visible the invisible: creating a more inclusive world

The most challenging of disabilities are oftentimes not visible.



## PAMELA COKE-HAMILTON, ITC\*

Debilitating pain, neurodivergence and mental health disorders limit people's daily activities in a way that may not be obvious to others. While they influence every aspect of life, they can simultaneously stay hidden in the folds of shame.

The associated stigma exists in part because it is not easy to raise awareness – much less build understanding – of a condition that you cannot see or touch.

Many people suffer, oftentimes in silence. One billion people, to be specific, live with some sort of disability, whether physical or intellectual. Those at the bottom of the pyramid are overrepresented in that figure, with 80% of people with disabilities living in developing countries, according to the UN Development Programme.

This has to change. In the last few years, we've seen that those most vulnerable to crises – such as COVID-19, conflict, climate change and cost-of-living increases – live in developing countries, and within those countries, persons with disabilities face additional challenges in adapting to and navigating shocks, as they do not have access to the specific information, services or resources needed to address them. How can those reeling from one crisis after another get their footing?

Yet the obstacles that persons with disabilities face can be further compounded by discrimination related to other factors, such as age, gender or background.

## Making space for the marginalized

We all have a role to play in addressing these challenges, starting with raising visibility of the issue, then by working to make improvements. As the United Nations small business agency, we at the International Trade Centre (ITC) work to reshape the trade landscape from the ground up, to create a fairer world – by which we mean a more connected, sustainable and inclusive world – for all people, including small businesses, women, youth, indigenous peoples, members of vulnerable communities and persons with disabilities.

We work to make space at decision-making tables for those traditionally not invited to sit at them. Earlier this year, for example, we saw small businesses take the spotlight at the G20, when trade ministers formally tasked us with further investing in the accessibility of trade data for small firms of developing countries. Later this year, we will bring a delegation of small businesses with innovative green solutions to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP28), where trade will be officially on the agenda for the first time, so their ideas and concerns are heard by climate change negotiators.

Inclusion is about raising visibility of sidelined yet significant issues and of the people affected by them, and whenever possible, not speaking for them but providing the space for them to do it themselves.

## Creating change at home

We take the same approach – of prioritizing inclusivity – when it comes to our workplace environment because lasting change starts at home.

In 2017, two years before the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy was launched, we at ITC passed a policy on employment and accessibility for persons with disabilities. It laid the



foundation to ensure a non-discriminatory and inclusive working environment for persons with disabilities at ITC. That means equal access to employment, advancement and retention, recognizing that it is in our collective interest to have a “diverse and skilled workforce that is representative of the diverse nature of society, which includes persons with disabilities”.

As part of the policy, we have measures in place to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, eliminate discrimination based on disability in the workplace and promote a more inclusive workplace culture; identify and eliminate barriers to the employment and retention of persons with disabilities; and ensure that persons with disabilities have access to physical facilities, conferences and services, documentation and information, and professional development.

When we first assessed our work on disability inclusion in 2019, using the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy report indicators, we found we were “missing” 9 out of the 15 indicators. By 2022, just 2 out of 15 indicators were “missing”, and for the first time, “Programmes and Projects” was rated as “approaches requirements” after we added the mainstreaming of disability

inclusion into programme and project design guidelines. We are also working to add a disability inclusion marker to our projects to enable planning and reporting in this area.

Our Diversity and Inclusion Group, created in 2020, regularly advocates for an inclusive and enabling working environment at ITC, including through our disability focal point, internal events, a dedicated webpage and inclusion as a focus area of our 2022 mentoring programme for women.

We still have a lot of work to do, more progress we can make. That said, we are prioritizing this as an area for improvement, and we will continue to do so.

#### **Prioritizing all aspects of inclusivity**

As the Executive Director of the International Trade Centre, I can say that every project, programme and partnership we pursue is aimed at making the world of trade more connected, sustainable and inclusive, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

To accelerate progress, earlier this year, we launched our moonshots – our four high-ambition, strategic pushes in the priority areas of gender, youth, digital and green

– to support small businesses in the 134 countries we work in to fully participate in global trade. To give you an idea of the level of ambition, the green moonshot aims to catalyse 100,000 climate actions for small businesses, by small businesses, by 2025.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with just seven years left, we need to aim high.

As mentioned earlier, inclusive trade means the active participation of small businesses of developing countries – including small island developing states, which in a sense have disability of size – in global markets, especially small businesses led by women, youth, indigenous peoples and members of vulnerable communities.

Why focus on these groups? Members of these groups face additional obstacles to trade and would benefit most from targeted support, including access to market information, skills training, technology transfer and affordable financing.

For example, women face higher requirements for collateral; are more likely to shoulder unpaid domestic work; face particular barriers in accessing education, financial services and digital tools; and have smaller professional networks. Also note that

one in five women is likely to experience disability during her life, according to the World Health Organization and World Bank.

Providing tailored technical assistance to less visible, marginalized groups of people can help drive sustainable and inclusive development, in more ways than one.

At ITC, we have a flagship programme on women’s economic empowerment, called SheTrades, a youth programme expanding into new areas such as sports as an economic sector including in post-conflict countries, projects promoting digital connectivity and fast-tracking of technology in developing countries, and a green trade programme working to redefine socioeconomic development to equally prioritize people, planet and profit.

As we move forward, looking ahead to our 60th anniversary next year and beyond, we will continue to use trade as a vehicle to create concrete opportunities for growth and development for developing countries, and to build a more inclusive world for the people we serve. ■

\* Pamela Coke-Hamilton is Executive Director, International Trade Centre (ITC)

Ethiopia

# Transforming chronic disease care

**350** facilities providing noncommunicable disease care at primary health care level

**87** health facilities in eight regions supported by WHO, with funding from Norad

**2309** health professionals trained, including 180 pharmacists



## WHO REGIONAL OFFICE FOR AFRICA

**ADDIS ABABA** – Challenged by high cholesterol levels and hypertension, and later diabetes, 58-year-old Mola Admassie says his life has significantly changed thanks to the availability of noncommunicable disease services at the health centre 600 metres from his home.

Mola is frank that he is seldom in good health and recalls how arduous the lengthy commutes were when he had to visit Zewditu Memorial Hospital in the capital

Addis Ababa, to undergo cardiac examinations, or receive care for elevated blood pressure or sugar levels.

“I had to leave my home at the crack of dawn because I did not have money to take a taxi,” Mola recalls.

For the past few months, due to a collaboration between the government and World Health Organization (WHO) to address Ethiopia’s growing chronic disease burden, he has instead been

able to access the support he needs at the nearby Gerji Health Centre in Addis Ababa.

Chronic diseases, including mental health concerns and injuries, are becoming the leading cause of death and disability in Ethiopia due to lifestyle changes.

With support from WHO and other partners, the Government of Ethiopia is implementing a system of decentralizing non-communicable disease care from hospitals to local health centres,

“Whenever I feel that something may be wrong, it is so easy for me to go to the health centre and get the help I need.”

Mola Admassie



© WHO

called task-shifting. This eases the burden on busy hospitals and gives people more accessible and better-quality health care at local levels.

With support from WHO and other partners, the Government of Ethiopia has implemented task-shifting in 350 health facilities. With funding from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad), WHO has directly supported task-shifting in 87 of these health facilities in eight regions. WHO has also supported the training of 2309 health professionals, including 180 pharmacists.

Primary health care professionals, including pharmacists, are key players in the initiative, providing

“We believe that our patients are happy.”

Dr Timbilina Zewgemichael,  
Gerji Health Centre.

screening, care and treatment for noncommunicable diseases at clinics within walking distance of people’s homes. As per WHO recommended protocols of team-based care, pharmacy professionals are an integral member of the health workforce for key services such as counselling, monitoring people on treatment and ensuring that they stay the course.

The engagement of pharmacy professionals in chronic diseases

care is paramount, according to Dr. Asmamaw Bezabeh, WHO Ethiopia’s Noncommunicable Diseases Programme Coordinator. “Because health facility pharmacy professionals are responsible for the selection, quantification and procurement of medicines, the objective of the training they receive is to upskill them about protocol-recommended medicines to ensure sustainable access,” he explains. WHO protocols and guidelines, which are easy for health workers to use, ensure the provision of standardized services. For people accessing the services, they also know what to expect at every visit.

“Now, because we have received the guidance, we do proper examinations of everyone, and we try to conduct the appropriate follow-up so they can control their illness well. We believe that our patients are happy,” says Dr. Timbilina Zewgemichael, a general practitioner at Gerji Health Centre.

To help initiate services, WHO also provided equipment and supplies, including blood pressure measuring devices, glucometers with test strips and adult weighing machines, among other items. The Organization has also supplied acetic acid for visual inspection of the cervix, which is an effective and inexpensive

cervical cancer screening test that can be combined with simple treatment procedures for early cervical lesions.

“We have intervened by decentralizing services at hospital and health centre level, and have capacitated health care workers with different trainings, as well as equipped health facilities with drugs and diagnostic materials,” says Addisu Worku Tesema, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health Team Lead at Ethiopia’s Ministry of Health. “One of our priority areas is health promotion, especially on physical activity and other risk factors for noncommunicable diseases.”

Mola says his prayers have been answered. “Whenever I feel that something may be wrong, it is so easy for me to go to the nearby health centre and get the help I need. My life is much easier now.” ■

# Epigrams and quickies for daily consumption

third in a series

The *newSpecial* published a bouquet of aphorisms in its November 2022 edition, followed by a new collection in September 2023.

Here is a continuation of the series.



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ALFRED DE ZAYAS,  
UN SOCIETY OF WRITERS

**Keeping our eyes open and our feet on the ground.** Although we all live in the real world with all its beauty, complexity, nuances, physical laws and objective facts, we operate in artificially limited worlds, in contexts governed by teleological rules, red lines, stop signs, taboos – and enforced certainties. These separate epistemological systems are subject to man-made rules with their own internal logic and mathematics, where 2 plus 2 does not necessarily result in 4, because the building blocks are weighted according to extraneous factors of perceived political or social necessity, where essential elements and crucial

facts that do not fit the equation can be negated if their logical consequences and implications counter the socially imposed “truths” which determine not only the outcome but also the process of deliberation. There are many local, regional and larger contexts where the law is not applied uniformly, but *à la carte*, because what does not fit the paradigm must be ignored. What is politically undesirable loses its objective character, mutates into non-fact. Lapses in logic and obvious fallacies are tolerated in respectful silence.

For survival in our post-modern societies, we must demonstrate intellectual and emotional versatility, always bearing in mind

that besides a real world of universal logic and objectivity, there are other, restricted worlds of directed behaviour – and it is only in these truncated worlds that we are allowed to function, anxious about not behaving in the socially desired way, hesitating under an undefined threat of adverse consequences if we venture beyond, numbed by a vague apprehension that engenders both censorship and self-censorship. Wherefore – in this world of subtle and not so subtle intimidation, cognitive dissonance, capricious dialectics, false analogies, skewed empirical data, *doublethink*, double standards and selective indignation – we have to keep our eyes wide open and our moral compass operational so as to navigate

through the troubled waters. Overcoming these challenges is a full-time job, but worth it – if we want to keep our identity and our sanity.

Celebrating the myriad good things of life, dwelling on nature’s generous bounty, grasping those transcendental moments of genuine elation is decidedly more fun than keeping book on the faults and frailties of human beings, noticing the imperfections, counting the wrinkles or worrying about what might go wrong.

Blithe spirits bringing a myriad colours to our gardens, magic, ephemeral wings – butterflies – with short life-spans of a week to a few months. But why such an unpoetic name for a delicate daughter of nature? The Germans call them Schmetterlinge (even less onomatopoeic), the Russians call them бабочка (not to be confused with Бабушка, which means grandmother), the Greek πεταλούδα (which makes you think of petals), the French call them papillons (which is closer to the Latin papilio). Perhaps the more congenial, smoother descriptions are the Spanish mariposa and the delicate Dutch vlinder.

## Commonalities

Human beings of all cultures and colours share a common



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physiognomy, basic functions, needs and aspirations. Over thousands of years they have built diverse civilizations in which individual members have shown virtue and vice, generosity and greed, astounding creativity, musicality, gastronomy... Collectively, however, no civilization was ever all good or all bad, all constructive or all destructive, all innocent or all guilty – these are unhistorical categories. From the perspective of the 21st century, we can observe the progress and retrogression of peoples and detect a growing consciousness of the need for human solidarity and proactive bridge-building, in the name of the survival of the species. Global challenges demand global solutions – ensuring global participation in decision-making. Perhaps we will someday learn to build on our 99% commonalities, instead of fighting over the 1% that separates us.

History is full of paradoxes and contradictions. We have every reason to admire the great achievements of Chinese, Indian, Mesopotamian, Persian, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan and Roman cultures, not forgetting the indigenous civilizations of Africa, North and South America as well as the Pacific islands and the Aborigines of Australia. We have every reason to applaud UNESCO's vocation to preserve

the common heritage of mankind and declare thousands of sites as world heritage, hundreds of traditions as “intangible” world heritage, e.g. flamenco dancing. Indeed, all humans like to laugh, dance, eat well, raise families, engage in sports, create art and sculpture. While focusing on our commonalities, we must also celebrate the richness and diversity of our many civilizations. *Vive la difference!*

Among our commonalities is the desire of all peoples worldwide to live in peace. And yet we are constantly fighting wars that could be prevented by diplomacy and rationality. Every one knows the Latin maxim: *si vis pacem, para bellum* – if you want peace, prepare war (Livius VI, 18,7; Vegetius, ‘*Epitome rei militaris*’ 3, prologue). Surely it would be better to propose: *si vis pacem, cole justitiam*. If you want peace, cultivate justice! This enlightened maxim greets you at the Peace Palace in The Hague and at the ILO headquarters in Geneva (ILO was awarded the Nobel peace prize 1969). Policy-makers and civil society take note! More simply, I would say *si vis pacem, para pacem!* If you want peace, take the measures necessary to create the conditions for peace.

Civilization is the gradual transformation of the solipsist in us

into a social being endowed with a moral conscience and an awareness of both rights and duties. Alas, there are still too many antediluvian predators roaming Planet Earth. How can we teach ethics, peace and solidarity to these slow learners? We need a *Global Pact on Education* – education for peace and empathy.

#### Identity

We are who we are and ought to be comfortable with our identity, conscious of our heritage and serenely proud of the achievements of our ancestors. Just happy to exist *hic et nunc*. Each one of us has the faculty to extend our horizons, learn, build, evolve, modify our opinions as often as necessary – as we gain experience and perhaps perspective and a measure of wisdom. We should exercise the freedoms we have to ask questions, seek to understand our dynamic surroundings, continuously push the limits, but always in harmony with our roots and our identity. An Aborigine need not desire to be European. A Bolivian need not aspire to be Brazilian. A German need not wish to be American. Let the Aborigine be proud of being Aborigine, the African to be African, the American to be American – as long as such pride is tempered by self-criticism and respect for others. There is nothing wrong with

patriotism – only with egoism, exceptionalism, chauvinism. The key to personal happiness is a sense of belonging, of harmony and familiarity with one's environment, a combination of enthusiasm and melancholy, of love and equanimity, of being snug in one's skin. Love of oneself and respect for one's heritage must not be confused with narcissism or xenophobia. On the contrary: it is a prerequisite for creativity and a dependable foundation to love and inter-relate with others. We all have a pluralistic identity which is always in flux like a river (Heraclitus) and manifests not only a collective dimension in its dynamics of flow, in liturgies and rituals, but also an individualistic dimension defined by our personal choices.

Man is born into a culture and religion and has a limited number of roles to play. While perfectly coherent within a given epistemology, outside this specific cultural or religious context, man's actions may appear illogical or even irrational. Thus, while St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas were doubtless brilliant thinkers, their legacy is not accessible outside the Christian faith. For non-believers, much of Aquinas' reasoning may appear circular; to a traditional Christian, Muhammad remains inaccessible.

## Naming and Shaming

The practice of naming and shaming has relatively little effect because it rests on multiple fallacies: First, that the party doing the naming possesses moral or legal authority to shame the other; second, that the target of the naming acknowledges the legitimacy of the party pointing fingers; third, that the impugned party is generally open to criticism. Experience shows that the namer frequently has a closet full of skeletons and that therefore the target of the naming and shaming will not bow to the namer's pretense. Who is sufficiently objective and sedate to act as a judge? Who is justified to hurl the first stone at the adulteress? Instead of raising fingers and pointing at others, it would be better if those States and ngo's who claim moral superiority would instead consider offering advisory services and technical assistance so as to enable impugned States to improve their human rights practices and infrastructures. The charade of naming and shaming is an ineffective expression of arrogance and intransigence. Alas, it is daily fare at the UN Human Rights Council, where the name of the game is not building bridges of understanding, but engaging in confrontational politics. However, the bottom line is that invective has never born any positive fruit, and that in order to make any progress in human rights terms, it is necessary to prepare the ground through confidence-building measures. At present the world is very much divided. No State or group of states can claim moral superiority over the others.

What we urgently need is good faith, more mirrors of self-criticism, more focus on root causes and prevention, greater readiness to dialogue without preconditions. We must labour for peace with patience and perseverance. There is little sense in verbally condemning others or calling for their judicial prosecution, unless we are prepared to be tried and punished ourselves. Above all, we

need more compassion toward the victims of injustice, violence and discrimination. Our focus must be to redress the wrongs in international solidarity, not to engage in rhetorical exercises.

The all-too-frequent instrumentalization of human rights for political purposes and the abuse of the concept of human rights as a selective weapon against others demonstrates how little politicians and media care for the essence of human dignity – which entails respect for the other person's identity, diversity and his/her right to hold different opinions. We need neutral brokers, not polemics nor rhetoric with the pervasive geopolitical after-taste. We need intellectual honesty – not international law *à la carte*.

### Zeitgeist

To become an apostate from the *Zeitgeist*, from the “consensus”, from the bandwagon is an act of intellectual liberation – and proof of maturity. It presupposes the capacity to think inside and outside of the box, to escape indoctrination and relentless media brainwashing, arrive at new syntheses, remaining open to new inputs, patient with colleagues and friends who lag behind, never abandoning hope in the power of reason over force, of the λόγος over chaos and nihilism.

History writing and teaching have always been co-opted by the elites in order to legitimize and consolidate their continued exercise of power. Yet, whoever has the temerity to do independent research into the past, visits the archives, analyzes documents, compares primary and secondary sources, meets doers and diplomats, interviews witnesses who may still be alive – discovers crucial facts, deliberately omitted by the court historians, new perspectives, dimensions, nuances that fundamentally change our understanding of events and differ substantially from media



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caricatures, popular misconceptions and *Zeitgeist*, will have to bear the consequences. I do not pretend to think that we can arrive at the “truth” in all of its manifestations, but surely a better approximation is possible and necessary.

Rhetoric has little to do with truth or sincerity, for it is a form of seduction through eloquence. Indeed, impressive rhetoric all too often proves empty if not downright false, as we know from some virtuosi of political debate. Similarly, beauty is scarcely related to goodness or generosity, for it is essentially a manifestation of aesthetics. Alas, a handsome face does not always announce a merciful heart.

War crimes and crimes against humanity are perpetrated by ordinary people inspired by the philosophy “the end justifies the means”, and indoctrinated into believing that the envisaged end is noble, duty, divinely ordained, or inevitable. Deviation from this conviction is perceived by the powerful as “unpatriotic” or even “treasonous”.

### Quickies

Peace is not an eschatological phenomenon but continuous work-in-progress.

Living on the edge is a youthful ideal of glorified danger with attendant adrenaline rushes. Living more toward the centre is the preferred location for those who, like me, are no longer youngsters and embrace the philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, which entails being

satisfied to have just enough, not too much, and to practice the Delphian Γνώθι Σεαυτόν and Μηδὲν ἄγαν.

Fantasies are invigorating for the spirit, but their magic escapes if we try to concretize them. Living out our fantasies *hic et nunc* is dangerous business.

Poetry resides in us all, but only the passionate few can reveal the magic.

A shockingly new idea, a controversial new perspective, an uncomfortable new paradigm first meets with fierce opposition, then with marginalization and silence, finally it is accepted as self-evident.

The two-party system is, alas, only twice as democratic as the one-party system.

Democracy is not an end in itself, but a means to achieve the sacred promises of human dignity, justice and peace. Democracy is not just the ballot box, nor is it mere majority rule. It is a form of government based on respect and solidarity with other members of society. It is a Covenant to listen to all members of the demos.

The war on terror is a rhetorical war just like the war on poverty, and, unfortunately, thus far both terror and poverty are winning.

Civilization is the long journey from predator behaviour to interdependence, rule of law and *caritas*. ■



© Philippa Biggs

# Moni, our three-legged dog from Bosnia

PHILLIPPA BIGGS, ITU

My family are the proud owners of Moni (short for Monika), a three-legged stray dog adopted from a Bosnian rescue shelter. When Moni first erupted into our lives, she was only 3 months old, but had already been dragging around a broken leg for a whole two months already. This did not detract from her excitement and enthusiasm at finally having a home, she was delighted and full of energy, licking everyone and everything!

Sadly, the muscles had dystrophied, making the leg virtually useless, and it soon became obvious that amputation would be the kinder option. Two Mr. I scans and one expensive operation later, Moni left hospital, and has never looked back since!

Walking a visibly disabled dog has taught me a few things... Firstly, how unobservant most people might actually be. Only around half the people we pass

might actually notice Moni is missing a leg, and it comes as a big surprise to them in a society that increasingly strives for physical perfection in every way. Secondly, how people usually always look at what is missing and what is not there, rather than what actually is. I nearly hugged the lady who remarked that Moni looked like a very calm and gentle dog, because she had noticed the actual character of our dog, rather than commenting on something that was missing! (My daughter's early school reports focused rather more on what was missing, than what was present, now I come to think about it).

Moni may be missing a leg, but she is full of heart, I want to say. Actually, I am reasonably sure that Moni is aware of her drawback, but she does not let it hold her back. She does not go picking fights she is not sure she can win (some people would call this good sense). When she plays or flirts with other dogs, she has adopted

a strategy of lying down to protect her remaining back leg. Yet if she sees a handsome male dog, she is off like a shot, and has not given up chasing squirrels or cats yet, despite my best deterrents.

We have to be careful that she does not get overweight, as that may create additional stress for her legs. And arthritis and rheumatism are probably more likely for her – Moni sometimes has a limp that comes and goes in early morning, before she has warmed up.

But at the moment, it is clearly her joy in life and the quality of her life that matter to her. And for all the vital things dogs love to do – sniffing, running, playing, flirting, swimming, she is up there alongside the best of them! A day filled with good food, good walks, good friends (canine or human), and Moni is happy, exuding positive energy everywhere. Perhaps worryingly, she is perhaps the calmest, most affectionate,

most expressive member of our family. (She is certainly the most consistent).

Well cared-for dogs bring so many things to a family – affection, loyalty, love, devotion, hugs, the importance of forgiveness. We are not sure what the future holds for her, but Moni is focused on enjoying the present – Moni definitely doesn't need any courses in mindfulness to help her appreciate life, no matter how many legs she has... And that is a wonderful life philosophy to have. ■

# Chest hair pulled on the Trans-Siberian by the extraordinary kindness of throat-singing Mongolian jeep smugglers

The title of this piece was actually the notes I jotted down quickly to remember the key points about what I wanted to write and in a way you don't really need the story, the title has it all.



© Kevin Crampton



© Kevin Crampton

## KEVIN CRAMPTON, WHO

It was 2001 and Jim and I were travelling across Asia on the Trans-Siberian train from Beijing to Moscow and our time in Mongolia proved to be by far the most surreal. To begin with we had to deal with being minor celebrities as waves of passengers drifted into our compartment to stare at Jim's red hair and make earnest efforts to begin conversation with us. My Mongolian phrase book was of limited use but got passed around so that

people could point to relevant expressions ("Where is your home?", "Do you have a wife?" and strangely "How are your bowels?").

Vodka was also passed around, suspiciously small but deadly bottles which emerged from bags wrapped in newspaper. Communication improved dramatically as the bottle was drained and by the discovery of a young Mongolian lad with some rudimentary English and German.



© Kevin Crompton

Our main companions were a group of about twenty men who explained, via the reluctant interpreter that they were travelling to Russia to collect a consignment of jeeps which would then be driven back to Ulaan Baatar. To maximise the money they would make, each man would drive one jeep whilst towing another and we shared our four-berth compartment for three days with a large selection of oily tow bars also wrapped in newspaper. It transpired that the jeep importation was also illegal, and one man mimed shouldering a rifle and firing to indicate the dangers with a hearty laugh.

Our newfound friends were very keen to hear about life, clothes and music in England and asked us to sing some songs. The best I managed was a croaky version of a few Beatles numbers but in return we were treated to some incredible throat singing – a haunting sound of the steppes that sounded as if the performer had swallowed a throat-sized didgeridoo.

Each song that we heard had the same rhythm and a few weeks

later I met another traveller who explained to me that since Mongolia's history is so closely tied to the horse the rhythm of horse riding is fused throughout their music.

The Mongolian jeep smugglers dominated this section of our journey as they always wanted to talk or drink vodka. My most memorable moment was when they woke me one morning by tugging on my chest hairs; they were genuinely fascinated by my chest and opening a shirt showed me how they were bare.

On our final day with them our carriage was mysteriously detached from the train and left in a siding for about twelve hours. No one seemed unduly concerned but we hadn't been told how long we would be there and so Jim and I were afraid to leave the train in case it headed on without us. The problem was that we had run out of provisions and were low on absolutely everything, the heating in the train was turned up to the core temperature of a small star and I was getting concerned with our lack of water.

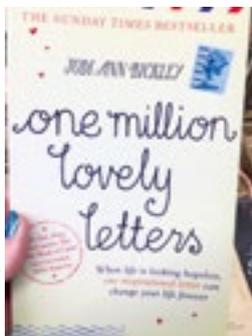
Mid-way through the afternoon, although we'd said nothing and had only discussed it quietly among ourselves, one of the Mongolians turned up with a large bag crammed with sausages, bottles of fizzy drink and even cheese. The bag was for us and he was adamant that he wouldn't accept any money in return,

It was one of the most unexpected and random acts of kindness that I've ever been lucky enough to receive. The Mongolians seemed to be this wonderful mixture to me – fairly rough, vodka-drinking, chest-hair-pulling jeep smugglers who could sing beautifully and respond so generously to someone in need.

Months after the holiday had ended is struck me just how generous that act really had been. When I reflected that these were men who were so poor that they would risk being shot at whilst smuggling vehicles across the border then the expense of finding us meat and cheese really was put into perspective. ■

# Lovely letters

I've been reading books ever since I was little. Mind you, when I was little, I pretended to read books. Somewhere, my mum has video footage of my sister reading a school book, and you can hear me in the background making up complete nonsense when reading a book. But now, I'm a reader.



© Lisanne Hopkin

Jodi's book always restores my faith in humanity.

## LISANNE HOPKIN

I don't ever try to read a specific amount of books in a year... Personally, what's the point in reading a book if you're not enjoying it and only reading it for the sake of having read a book? So, sometimes, like this year, I only read two books in a year. And that's fine. It all depends on the books themselves and whether I enjoy them or not.

However, my all-time favourite book that I can happily read again and again is the loveliest book you could ever imagine. And I say that because it's called 'One Million Lovely Letters'.

I'm not entirely sure how I came across this book, but this is what I think happened. I had been watching a YouTube video, posted by Carrie Hope Fletcher nonetheless, and it was a video solely dedicated to Jodi Ann Bickley's book, *One Million Lovely Letters*. For the purpose of this article, I hunted around for the video on Carrie's channel and found that it had been posted nine years ago, so Jodi's book has been in my life for about nine years now. Jodi created *One Million Lovely Letters* ten years ago, on February 3rd 2013, so all of Jodi's love and warmth has been available to the world for ten years.

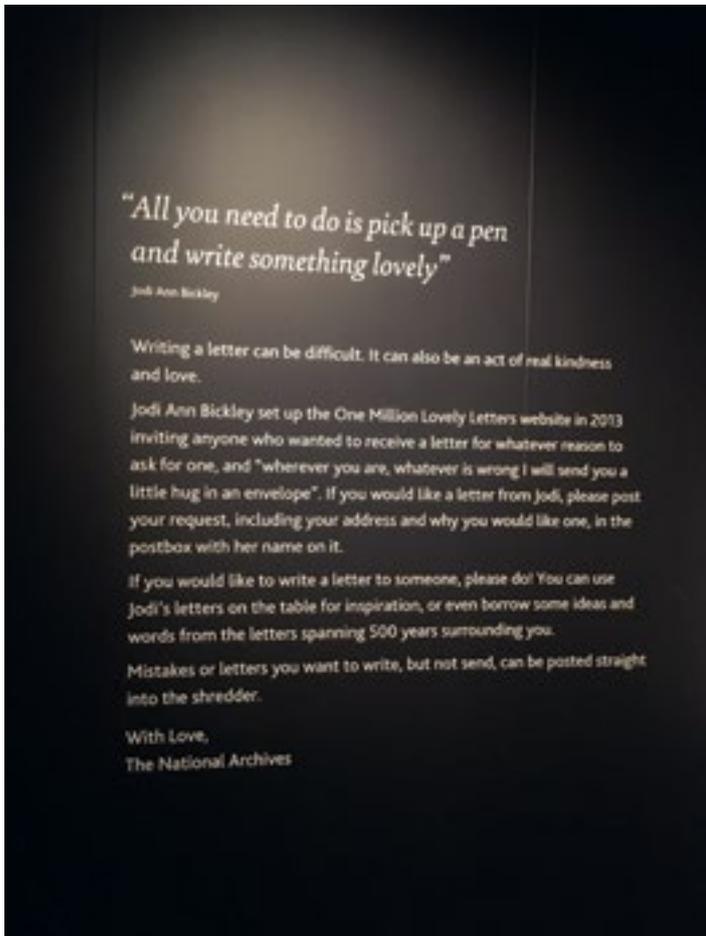
What's important to know is that in 2011, Jodi contracted meningoencephalitis, a brain disease, from a tick bite. She had been performing at a festival over the summer. (Side note: wear long trousers, put that insect repellent on!) You never think that suddenly, one day, your whole life will change. But Jodi's life did change. She went from being an independent 23-year-old, having just started performing her poetry at festivals, having created this life she was proud of, to moving back in with her mum, having to learn to walk and write all over again. At any age, it can be hard, but at 23, when your life is just beginning, and you're figuring out who you are, it can be heart-breaking. Jodi became so ill and depressed that she almost took her life. But, that ended up being the same evening that she created *One Million Lovely Letters*.

You see, *One Million Lovely Letters* is not just the title of Jodi Ann Bickley's book. It's also the name of the website Jodi set up ten years ago, when she decided that making use of the time that she had was better than giving up. In creating *One Million Lovely Letters*, Jodi decided that she would send 'a hug in an envelope' to everyone around the world who needed cheering up. Jodi

has always left little notes out for strangers to find, whether it was at school, on a bus, in the doctor's waiting room. But this was a whole new level. These letters would end up going to random strangers in 30 different countries. (I suspect her letters have been sent to more countries since her book was published ten years ago.) Jodi ended up making herself feel better by being able to make others feel better. And that is the most wonderful thing. Just making others feel better. Every year I think 'we need this book more and more', and every time I read it, it restores my faith in humanity. It makes me believe that maybe it could be possible to live in a world where people are kind to each other.

I know that since then, Charlie Mackesy wrote and created *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*, and that received a lot of attention for how lovely and kind it was. It even won an Oscar when it was turned into an animated short film!

You see, I think, and a lot of people will probably agree with me on this, that we all need kindness, that we all want kindness, but it is quite hard to come by in this world. We're so focused on our own lives, on what's happening



Jodi's corner at The National Archives.

around the world, on technology, on keeping up with trends, on work, school, there are so many things that we have running through our minds on a day-to-day basis. Maybe being kind is not always the most important thing in our list of many things that we need to achieve. Yes, I think a lot of us have basic human decency, which is already a good start, but when was the last time that you were actually kind to someone without having an ulterior motive? When you were kind just for the sake of being kind?

After having read One Million Lovely Letters, I slowly started to write my own letters to people. Family, friends, sometimes strangers. In uni, I would leave post-it notes on my flatmates' doors on a weekly basis. On Monday, it would be my flatmate in flat 3, on Tuesday, my flatmate in flat 7, and so on... Just so I could spread a little bit of happiness, and maybe so that they could

look forward to something. I don't know if all of my flatmates appreciated it, but when it was my birthday, I came back to my flat and found that they had stuck all the post-it notes I had written for them on the door to my flat, which I thought was lovely.

Kindness can be a thing that is taken for granted. We all need a bit of love, attention, affection in this world. It can be hard to remind ourselves that we need to look after ourselves, that we are important, that we do matter. And that despite whatever awful times we may go through, there are also some days when everything is less awful. Life doesn't always have to be sunshine, and rainbows, and happy endings. We're not guaranteed any of that in life. So, why would you not take the opportunity to provide someone's life with sunshine? We never know what people are really going through, and nowadays, we can feel even more

isolated or disconnected from people because of social media and technology. And letters can be kept for life!

For my 22nd birthday, a few friends and I went to The National Archives in Richmond, where they had an exhibition on love letters, and even a little area created by Jodi Ann Bickley where you could ask for a letter from her, write your own letter to someone, or even shred the letter you had written. (Sometimes writing a letter but never sending it can be helpful too!) The love letters in that exhibition were so beautiful and so personal, it made me wish that there could be something that would document my generation's love for each other. But we have nothing that's really tangible. Nothing that you can come back to and read over and over again. (Yes, you can re-read old messages, and yes, you can even 'save' messages, but you don't usually get a whole declaration of love via text message.)

You don't have to tell someone that you love them, but you can remind someone of their worth. You can remind them how incredible they are, perhaps how you admire them, or appreciate them. Go on, get a lovely pen out, some paper, and make someone's day. Be kind. ■



© Carli Edelembos

Cols routiers de Suisse (9)

# Le col du Julier

Deux colonnes antiques, seuls restes d'un sanctuaire romain, marquent le col du Julier qui relie Surses dans l'Oberalpstein à Silvaplana dans l'Engadine. Elles nous signalent que l'itinéraire passant par le col était utilisé depuis des milliers d'années. Des vestiges de mines de cuivre préromaines (jusqu'à environ 1000 av. J.-C.) ont été découverts en 2019 près du col, attestant le passage du col depuis l'âge du bronze, bien avant l'époque romaine.

**CARLA EDELENBOS,**  
UN SOCIETY OF WRITERS

Vu l'importance du col à l'ère romaine, on pourrait penser que le nom Julier (Güglia en romanche) est une référence à Julius Caesar, mais les experts sont d'opinion que le nom date d'avant l'époque romaine; il peut avoir son origine dans le mot celtique *jul* qui signifierait simplement col ou combe.

Le col du Julier se trouve à une altitude de 2284 mètres, à proximité du col du Septimer, qui offre

une liaison plus directe mais beaucoup plus raide vers le sud par le val Bregaglia. Il paraît que les Romains utilisaient le Julier pour des chars pleins et le Septimer quand les chars étaient vides. On ne sait pas exactement lequel de ces deux cols était le plus fréquenté au début du Moyen Âge, mais après l'aménagement d'une petite route carrossable au Septimer au 14<sup>e</sup> siècle, le Julier, qui continuait d'être un chemin muletier, perdit beaucoup de son importance. Il était surtout utilisé pour le trafic vers la Haute

Engadine. C'est seulement en 1820 que la décision fut prise d'élargir le Julier pour en faire une route pour des véhicules, ceci au détriment du Septimer, qui est de nos jours un chemin de randonnée pédestre populaire. La topographie plus favorable du Julier a joué un rôle dans cette décision, mais aussi la volonté politique d'éviter l'isolement de la Haute Engadine. C'est donc le Julier qui absorba l'augmentation du trafic pendant la deuxième partie du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle par des touristes désireux de se rendre aux stations

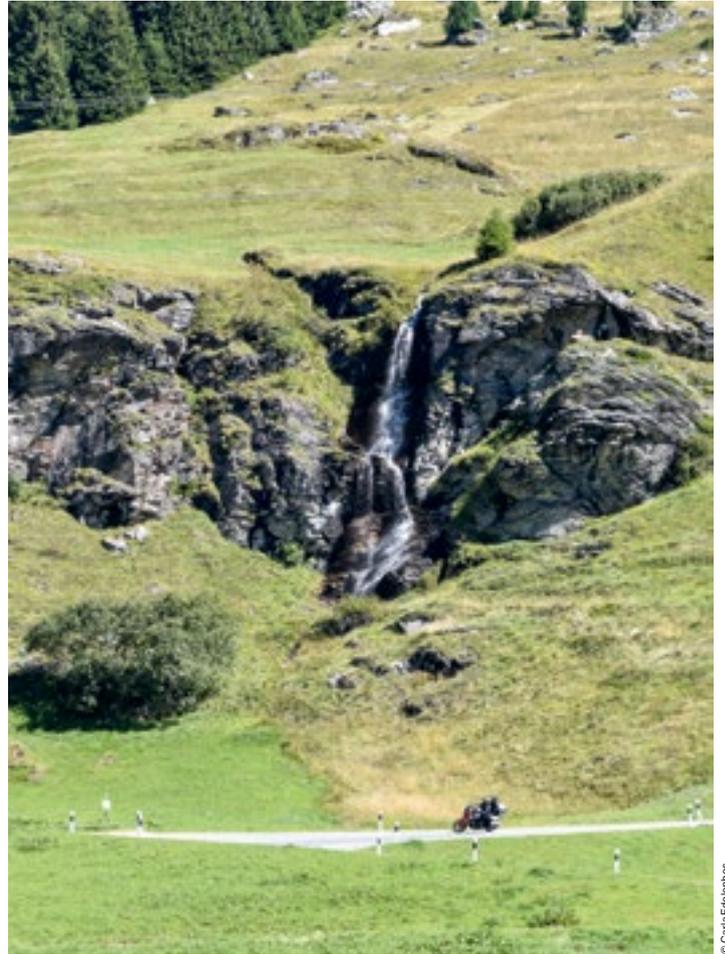
de cure en Engadine. Mais avec l'inauguration en 1903 du chemin de fer d'Albula, le Julier perdit de nouveau une partie de sa circulation. En 1923, un nouveau changement se produisit, quand le canton des Grisons décida de créer une route de transit pour les automobiles passant par le col du Julier. Entre 1935 et 1940 la route fut améliorée et ainsi le col devint le premier col asphalté de Suisse. Entre Surses et Silvaplana, elle couvre 34 kilomètres, avec une pente moyenne de 6% avec des maximas de 12%.



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La route du col est ouverte toute l'année, même en hiver. Comme elle constitue une liaison principale nord-sud, elle est large et bien entretenue. Le paysage qu'elle traverse est d'une beauté austère. Sur les alpages des vaches broutent tranquillement, et ne font aucune attention aux bruits des voitures et motards qui passent. Entre le col et Sur, le paysage fait partie du parc Ela, le plus grand parc naturel de Suisse. Côté nord du col, la rivière Julia traverse les alpages pour rejoindre l'Albula à Tiefencastel, dont les eaux se mêlent plus loin au Rhin postérieur. Côté sud, le petit lac, *lej da Güglia*, qui se trouve au col, est la source du ruisseau *Ova del Vallun*, qui longe la route vers le lac de Silvaplana, où il se jette dans la rivière Inn qui termine sa course 500 kilomètres plus loin dans la Danube: l'eau qui

coule depuis le col du Julier se

verse donc finalement dans la Mer Noire! Les deux rivières sont nourries par beaucoup d'autres torrents, et depuis la route on peut admirer des cascades et des rapides qui les nourrissent.

Nous commençons la montée à partir de Silvaplana en Engadine. Après le premier virage, un parking nous invite déjà à admirer la belle vue sur les lacs de Silvaplana et de Champfèr avec le Piz Corvatsch en arrière-plan. D'autres aires de stationnement nous encouragent à laisser la voiture et découvrir la région à pied. Si on veut, on peut même stationner son camping-car la nuit, moyennement une taxe. Les aires disposent des toilettes sèches, mais pas d'eau courante.

Quand nous arrivons au col, la première chose qui nous frappe est une tour en bois de 30 mètres

de haut, rouge et octogonale, symbole de l'unité de la nature et de la culture. C'est la salle de concerts éphémère du festival Origen, construite en 2017 pour accueillir des performances de danse, musique et théâtre. Malheureusement pour nous, le dernier concert a été donné le 31 août 2023, et à partir du fin septembre, le bâtiment sera démonté. Après avoir marqué le col pendant 6 ans remplis de musique, la vue des passants ne sera plus attirée par cette construction inédite, expression emblématique de l'esprit créatif du festival Origen, qui considère que l'art n'est pas limité à une salle de concert ou un théâtre, mais que le monde entier est sa scène. Le festival poursuivra ses performances dans d'autres lieux. En 2024, le village de Mulegns, au pied de la route du Julier, accueillera une

nouvelle tour, blanche celle-ci, pour des installations d'art et des spectacles.

Même s'il y a un kiosque au col pendant l'été, où on peut boire un café ou acheter des souvenirs, l'hospice du col se trouve un virage plus bas, à 2233 mètres d'altitude. L'hospice la Veduta, ouvert été comme hiver, offre des lits en chambre ou en dortoir. Le restaurant dispose d'une salle panoramique et, en été, il y a la sympathique terrasse avec vue sur les montagnes et les bolides qui passent à toute vitesse. N'oubliez pas de goûter la tarte aux noix, cette spécialité de la région est un régal! Depuis l'hospice, un sentier pédestre mène après quatre heures de marche à la cabane CAS Chamanna Jenatsch, qui se trouve à 2652 mètres d'altitude dans le Val Bever. Elle offre des places en



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dortoirs ou en chambres, pendant les mois d'été et en hiver.

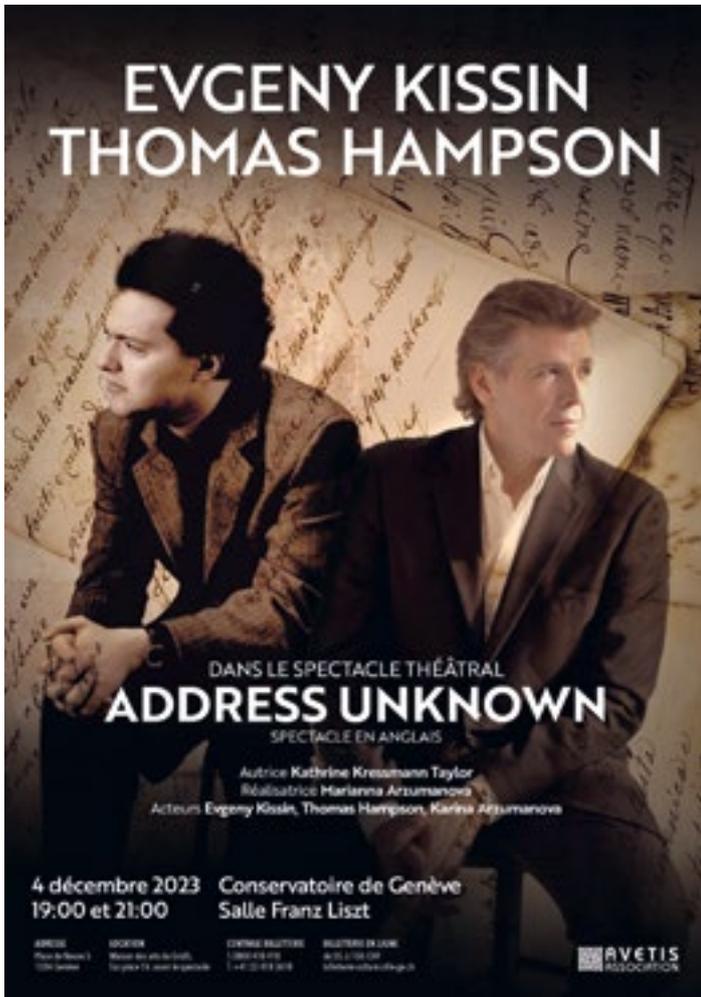
Après quelques grands virages, la route passe ensuite par Bivio, situé à 1769 mètres d'altitude, un joli village qui doit souffrir pas mal de toute cette circulation. C'est ici que jadis le trafic pouvait choisir entre le passage par le Julier ou le Septimer. Aujourd'hui, des randonneurs peuvent y prendre le chemin pédestre pour arriver au col du Septimer en deux heures et demie. À l'est du Septimer se trouve le col du Lunghin, situé à 2644 mètres d'altitude, qui forme le point de partage des eaux le plus important de l'Europe continentale en dehors de la Russie: à l'est, l'Inn prend sa source pour aboutir dans la Mer Noire, à l'ouest, le Mera se dirige vers le Pô pour rejoindre la Mer Adriatique, et au nord-ouest, les eaux d'un affluent du Julia finissent leur course dans la Mer du Nord.

Après avoir traversé Bivio, la route longe le lac de Marmorera, qui est niché comme un joyau entre les forêts et la route. Un parking offre une vue impressionnante, et comme tout le monde s'y arrête, ça donne aussi l'occasion d'admirer des voitures de sport, comme des Jaguar, Ferrari ou Lamborghini. Mais ce lac de barrage a une triste histoire: noyées dans ces eaux bleues se trouvent les ruines de l'ancien village de Marmorera. Dans les années 1940, la vie était dure pour les habitants qui vivaient surtout de l'agriculture et de l'alpage. Les investisseurs profitaient de la pauvreté des gens en promettant un gain financier s'ils acceptaient la construction du barrage et donc la perte de leur village et de leurs terres. En plus, les négociations se faisaient en allemand, langue que la plupart des villageois ne maîtrisaient pas, comme ils ne parlaient que le romanche ou l'italien. En

outre, sur les 94 habitants, seulement 26 avaient le droit de vote, parce que les femmes en étaient encore exclues. En octobre 1949, l'assemblée du village, avec 24 votes pour et 2 contre, accepta de concéder leurs terrains aux forces motrices de la ville de Zurich pour la construction du barrage. En 1954, le village fut mis sous eau. La majorité des familles durent déménager dans d'autres cantons. Pour les quelques familles qui refusaient de partir, un nouveau village fut construit au-dessus du lac. Les restes humains exhumés des habitants et habitantes du village furent transportés de l'ancien cimetière disparu pour être enterrés de nouveau dans le cimetière à côté de la nouvelle église. Plus aucun paysan n'habite le village maintenant, et la langue romanche, qui était autrefois parlée par la grande majorité de la population, risque de disparaître.

Un peu plus loin sur la route, à Sur, se trouve l'accès à Alp Flix, un trésor de la biodiversité. La petite route d'accès n'est pas accessible aux voitures, mais si vous ne voulez pas monter à pied pendant une heure, vous pouvez prendre le bus alpin. À Alp Flix se trouve l'hôtel et restaurant de montagne Piz Platta, dans un endroit idyllique, au milieu d'un site marécageux d'importance nationale. L'eau sautille de partout et la variété des fleurs de toutes les couleurs est époustouflante. Dans le lac d'alpage se reflètent les nuages, et l'ensemble forme un tableau harmonieux qui invite à rester longtemps. Croyez-moi, une fois arrivé vous aurez de la peine de repartir! ■

- [www.origen.ch](http://www.origen.ch)
- [www.laveduta.ch](http://www.laveduta.ch)
- <http://www.chamannajenatsch.ch>
- [www.parc-ela.ch](http://www.parc-ela.ch)
- [www.flix.ch](http://www.flix.ch)



## Association Avetis Prochain concert

Au mois de décembre l'association Avetis finira l'année avec deux événements uniques. Deux concerts à ne pas manquer pour les amateurs de jazz et de musique classique!

Le 4 décembre Avetis présentera au public genevois un spectacle théâtral *Address unknown* avec deux grands noms de la musique classique Evgeny Kissin et Thomas Hampson et le 15 décembre les amateurs de la musique de jazz assisteront à une soirée de Jazz avec les deux musiciens renommés - Tigran Hamasyan (piano) et Avishai Cohen (trompette). Toujours

un élément arménien apparaît dans les événements d'Avetis. Cette fois-ci, la réalisatrice de spectacle *Address unknown*, ainsi qu'une actrice de spectacle sont les arméniennes. Et évidemment la présence de Tigran Hamasyan dans la soirée de Jazz. ■

# Oily fish

Lake Baikal in Siberia contains one fifth of all the freshwater anywhere on planet earth, it is a huge inland sea and home to a bewildering array of specialised wildlife that exists nowhere else on the planet.



© Kevin Crampton

## KEVIN CRAMPTON, WHO

We were staying with a Russian grandmother in a traditional Siberian cabin built around a huge stove on the shores of the lake. It was February and everything was carpeted with a thick blanket of soft white snow that completely enveloped your feet as you walked along and robbed me of that satisfying crunch of the crispy snow back home. The lake had frozen over, several metres of transparent ice and it was quite eerie walking out onto this immense frozen plain. In places the top layer of snow had been cleared and you had the impression that you were walking on a huge sheet of thick black glass veined with strange crystalline shapes. Either that or talking a stroll across the top of one of those see-through boiled mint sweets. Either way it was a bit disconcerting.

One of my walks took me through a frozen harbour, I swung past the harbour wall and confidently marched past ice-bound fishing trawlers, slumbering in the icy clutches of fractured shards of dirty ice as tall as me.

The lake is frozen for several months each year and during this time the locals cut ice holes for their fishing. A fir tree was propped up beside each hole to warn anyone who wandered near it that a misplaced step could land them in ice cold water at the bottom of a five-metre-deep well of solid ice.

The guide took us to the local natural history museum, a one room affair with lots of stuffed animals and pictures of what the lake would have looked like if

we had been sensible tourists and come in the spring. There was all manner of strange stuffed sea creatures from the depths of this isolated ocean but by far the weirdest thing we saw was the oily fish.

The oily fish (whose name I had no hope of remembering even if I had been able to decipher the Russian museum tag) lives in the depths of the lake and relies on the pressure and extreme cold of the water to literally hold itself together. If accidentally fished and brought to the surface its body fat starts to melt away instantly so that all you end up holding in your sticky palms is a miniature fish skeleton, the specimen in the museum looked like it was grinning about something.

I struck out for a walk the next day and was soon frozen through and feeling a little bit nostalgic for the early spring that might be budding back in London. The lake was beautiful and in places, the ice sheet had ruptured and cracked in immense jagged ridges of fractured blues, like waves that had frozen instantly.

I was wearing a duffel coat that I had bought for five pounds in Camden market, on a limited budget and just hoping that it would hold up to the severity of the Siberian Winter. At one point the synthetic fur on the collar froze up and I believe I could've snapped it off if I'd wanted to.

My thoughts turned then, as they have often turned since, back to the oily fish of Lake Baikal. It was a bit ironic for the poor fish to melt in weather like this, and indeed my problem was quite the opposite. Either way I felt a special twinge of empathy with the little fish and reflected that he and I both were never really designed for life on the edge of this remarkable sea in the middle of the endless frigid Siberian forests. ■

ALFRED DE ZAYAS<sup>1</sup>

## *Imagine – inverso mundus*

*Close your eyes and see the universe within,  
explore in sleep the journey – end to origin.*

*Dream rhythms of the swaying trees,  
drink perfumes of the balmy breeze.*

*Now listen to the siren call of your own muse,  
sail safely through the songs that namelessly seduce.*

*Swim high in starry forth in blue celestial seas,  
fly past the blinking underwater galaxies.*

*Touch hushed arpeggios of the vesper prayer  
those velvet-flavored vestiges of incensed air.*

*Taste sweet nostalgia in your future memories,  
the melancholy of continuous metamorphosis.*

*Imagine and transcend all trifles, glitter, gold,  
embrace instead all generations, young and old.*

*Now, close your eyes – behold a deeper truth  
renewing universe that serenades of youth.*

<sup>1</sup> UNSociety of Writers



Long de 500 km, le lac Nasser qui marque la frontière entre l'Égypte et le Soudan est la plus grande retenue d'eau douce artificielle au monde.

© Claude Maillard

SOUDAN (1/4)

# Entre Nil et désert

Longtemps mystérieux, encore méconnu, le Soudan a révélé ses espaces et ses trésors lors de récentes recherches qui ont permis de reconstituer un passé multimillénaire et riche de diversité. Voyager au Soudan, c'est découvrir des sites antiques et des paysages fabuleux, vides de touristes.

**CLAUDE MAILLARD**

Comment le Soudan peut-il être aussi méconnu ? Pourtant, ses presque 1,9 million de km<sup>2</sup> lui permettent de se hisser à la troisième place des plus grands pays d'Afrique, derrière l'Algérie et la République démocratique du Congo. Il était même, jusqu'à sa partition en deux États indépendants le 9 juillet 2011, le plus vaste pays du continent africain. Trop rares sont les ouvrages sur cet immense pays traitant de son histoire millénaire, de sa richesse culturelle incomparable et de la gentillesse infinie de sa population. Les Soudanais sont très fiers de leur identité, mais savent faire preuve d'humilité. Traditionnellement très ouvert et accueillant, le

Soudan est malheureusement aujourd'hui dissimulé derrière la vitrine humanitaire du Darfour. Régulièrement secouée par des affrontements meurtriers, cette région du sud lui donne en effet une image profondément néfaste et limitée.

Pont culturel aux mille facettes, le Soudan est certainement le pays afro-arabe le plus passionnant et le plus varié. Avec 80 tribus majeures et près de 500 reconnues et autant de langues, il est l'un des pays de la région à la diversité la plus impressionnante. Après des décennies d'une terrible guerre civile, tous les Soudanais souhaitent se tourner résolument pour l'avenir vers la paix et le développement, choses

qu'ils méritent et que l'on ne peut que leur souhaiter.

Le Soudan a été habité par des populations nomades probablement depuis des dizaines de milliers d'années. Les premières traces d'habitations sédentaires dans le pays remontent à 10 000 ans, au Néolithique, à une époque où le climat était bien plus frais et humide qu'aujourd'hui. Les témoignages concrets de cette époque sont essentiellement les nécropoles, et c'est par leurs rites funéraires que les populations préhistoriques du Soudan nous sont d'abord connues. Leur présence est attestée sur les bords du Nil, dans le voisinage de l'Égypte pharaonique dont les premières civilisations vont s'épanouir au



© Claude Mallard

Rayonnante, charmante et sociable, Amira, notre petite princesse du désert.



© Claude Mallard

De toute beauté, le désert soudanais propose de nombreux lieux idylliques pour bivouaquer.



© Claude Mallard

Fin connaisseur du Soudan, guide talentueux, Moez Mahir aurait aimé voir son pays s'ouvrir plus facilement au tourisme.



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Premier contact chaleureux avec la population soudanaise à l'occasion du ravitaillement en vivres sur le marché de Wadi Halfa.

Soudan, faisant entrer la région dans le monde antique.

**Vers une quatrième guerre civile**  
Surnommé « guerre des généraux », un conflit armé a débuté au Soudan le 15 avril dernier entre l'armée à la tête du pays dirigée par Abdel Fattah al-Burhan et les forces paramilitaires commandées par Mohamed Hamdan Daglo qui tentent de prendre le pouvoir.

Des frappes aériennes, des tirs d'artillerie nourris sont signalés sur tout le territoire, y compris à Khartoum. Le conflit entre les deux généraux conduit le Soudan au bord d'une quatrième guerre civile après celles de 1955-1972, 1983-2005 et 2003-2020.

L'histoire du conflit au Soudan est longue et complexe: des facteurs tels que les tensions ethniques, les différends religieux et la concurrence pour les ressources alimentent la violence. Ce conflit remonte à la période de colonisation et d'islamisation de la région et s'est poursuivi sous les différents régimes qui ont suivi. Les affrontements auraient fait au moins 5000 morts parmi les civils et plus de 4,6 millions de déplacés dans les pays voisins. Par ailleurs, selon les Nations Unies, plus de la moitié des 45 millions de Soudanais ont besoin d'aide humanitaire pour survivre dans un contexte de pénurie chronique de nourriture, d'eau potable, de médicaments et de produits de base.

**Nubie, berceau d'une des premières civilisations d'Afrique**

La République du Soudan partage ses frontières avec le Soudan du Sud, la Centrafrique, le Tchad, la Libye, l'Égypte, l'Érythrée, l'Éthiopie et dispose d'une façade sur la mer Rouge. Trait d'union entre l'Égypte et l'Afrique noire, le Nil demeure pour le Soudan l'axe vital autour duquel se réunit la population et sur lequel elle se déplace depuis des millénaires. De Khartoum, là où les Nil Bleu et Nil Blanc se rejoignent pour ne former plus qu'un gigantesque fleuve, jusqu'à la frontière égyptienne, le Nil est l'ossature de cette région désertique. Ce vaste territoire recouvert de dunes de sable et de rocaille qui s'étend sur près de 1400 km entre la capitale

soudanaise et la ville sud-égyptienne d'Assouan, c'est la Nubie.

La Nubie rassemble un grand nombre de sites exceptionnels vivant injustement dans l'ombre de l'antiquité égyptienne. Les pyramides de Méroé, de Nuri, la deffufa de Kerma ou les temples de Soleb et du djebel Barkal... Tous ont peu à envier aux classiques touristiques de l'Égypte. Et même si les mille et une richesses ethniques et culturelles de la Nubie n'ont pas encore révélé tous leurs secrets au grand public, c'est bien entendu la destination phare au Soudan.

La Nubie a été le siège de l'une des premières civilisations de l'Afrique ancienne, jusqu'à sa



Vue dominante sur le Nil depuis Saï, une île au cœur de la Nubie, à la croisée des cultures anciennes du Soudan et de l'Égypte.



Vue dominante sur le Nil depuis Saï, une île au cœur de la Nubie, à la croisée des cultures anciennes du Soudan et de l'Égypte.

domination par l'Égypte sous le règne de Thoutmôsis I<sup>er</sup>, le troisième pharaon de la XVIII<sup>e</sup> dynastie. Puis, en 747 av. J.-C., elle a conquis à son tour l'Égypte et les pharaons noirs ont alors gouverné, constituant la XXV<sup>e</sup> dynastie égyptienne. Après presque un siècle de domination, le règne des pharaons noirs prendra fin et la Nubie sera de nouveau assujettie, avant de devenir plus tard grecque puis romaine. Elle est alors christianisée et assez forte pour résister à l'islamisation, au moins jusqu'au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle. La Nubie a vu s'épanouir de grands empires; pyramides et temples s'égrènent sur les rives du Nil, témoignant de la grandeur passée de ces royaumes antiques.

#### Lac Nasser, à la frontière de deux pays

Depuis Assouan, la ville la plus au sud d'Égypte (voir le *newSpecial* précédent), c'est toujours au fil du Nil que nous allons découvrir le Soudan. Chargé de volumineux camions, le ferry nous attend près d'Abou Simbel pour traverser le lac Nasser qui marque la frontière entre les deux pays. D'une largeur oscillant entre 5 et 50 km, cette gigantesque retenue d'eau douce artificielle s'étire sur 500 km dont le tiers, qui prend alors le nom de lac de Nubie, en territoire soudanais. Une heure de navigation parmi

des paysages fabuleux suffira pour toucher terre. L'attente au poste de douane sera par contre nettement plus longue! Trimbalés de bureau en bureau, après maints contrôles et formalités, nous aurons l'autorisation de franchir la frontière après avoir patienté quatre heures. Mais rien de comparable avec les chauffeurs routiers bloqués jusqu'à deux semaines. Leurs camions, stationnés sur le bord de la piste, forment des files qui s'étendent sur d'interminables kilomètres avant de pouvoir être fouillés de fond en comble.

L'aventure continue: c'est parti pour un périple de plus de 1300 km. Pour cela, Mohamed<sup>1</sup> a fait appel au guide soudanais Moez Mahir, fin connaisseur de son pays et qui sera également au volant de l'un de nos deux véhicules tout-terrain. Pour renforcer l'équipe, Walid, baroudeur et excellent cuisinier, officiera aussi comme chauffeur et saura nous régaler.

#### Saï, une île sur le Nil

Passage obligé lorsque l'on vient d'Égypte après avoir traversé le lac Nasser, Wadi Halfa est aujourd'hui une ville frontière et portuaire sans véritable charme, alors qu'autrefois elle était réputée pour ses palmeraies et son atmosphère. Pour nous ce sera l'occasion de nous procurer des

vivres avant d'affronter le désert où nous installerons notre bivouac au milieu des dunes de sable, loin de toute habitation. La nuit sera belle et sereine sous un magnifique ciel étoilé.

Abri, paisible bourgade construite sur la rive du Nil, est la porte d'entrée de l'île de Saï et du temple de Soleb. De part et d'autre du long ruban d'asphalte qui nous y conduit, le désert est creusé de toutes parts de vastes tranchées. Venus du Tchad voisin et du Niger, des chercheurs d'or se sont mêlés aux Soudanais afin de faire fortune. Ici, la chasse au trésor est libre et autorisée mais malheureusement ces fouilles ont des conséquences dramatiques sur le patrimoine, abîmé, détruit et pillé.

Saï que nous rejoignons par ferry est l'une des plus vastes îles du fleuve. Véritable perle archéologique habitée depuis le Paléolithique, elle offre une synthèse de la riche histoire de la Nubie, région au passé antique et médiéval extrêmement divers et passionnant, mais encore très mal connu. Le sol est jonché de poteries et il est facile d'imaginer toute la richesse archéologique qui est toujours enfouie sous le sable. Mais comme partout au Soudan, l'embargo empêche tout investissement étranger qui pourrait permettre d'entamer des recherches approfondies.

Sur la rive gauche du Nil, voué au culte d'Amon, le temple de Soleb a été mentionné pour la première fois par l'explorateur suisse Jean-Louis Burckhardt en 1813. Depuis Wawa, village situé de l'autre côté du fleuve large de 400 m, nous devons dénicher une embarcation pour pouvoir l'atteindre. Ce temple est l'œuvre d'Amenhotep III (1403 - 1352 av. J.-C.), neuvième pharaon de la XVIII<sup>e</sup> dynastie durant la période du Nouvel Empire. Il figure parmi les derniers témoignages de la domination égyptienne en Nubie. Aujourd'hui, seul le temple de Soleb rappelle encore concrètement la splendeur de cette période. Proche, le temple de Sedeinga dédié à Tiye, l'épouse d'Amenhotep III, n'a pas aussi bien résisté aux assauts du temps.

Retour à Wawa où nous passerons la nuit. L'entrée de notre guesthouse est ornée de têtes de crocodiles qui ont été capturés dans le Nil voisin. Frissons garantis après l'avoir traversé dans le seul et frêle canot disponible ce jour-là!

*Suite de l'aventure à vivre dans le prochain numéro du newSpecial. ■*

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