

## UN's Advocacy for Accessibility and China's Contributions

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Over the 80 years since the United Nations was founded, international human rights law has undergone a dynamic and increasingly enriched process of evolution from universal declarations to formal treaties, and from proclamations of rights to institutionalized safeguards. As an integral part of the human rights system, the affirmation of the rights of persons with disabilities and the promotion of accessibility mark new breakthroughs and developments in international human rights law since the advent of the new century. In the context of contemporary international law, the concept of “accessibility” has transcended its traditional interpretation and evolved into one of the core elements for building an inclusive society and advancing sustainable development. It covers a wide array of aspects, including physical environments, information dissemination, legal systems, and social attitudes etc.

As a sponsoring state and active promoter of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) (hereinafter referred to as *Convention*) adopted in 2006, China has not only played a significant role in the drafting and negotiation stages of the *Convention* but has also made constructive contributions to its implementation and the advancement of the international accessibility agenda. Recognizing “accessibility” as a vital aspect of human rights protection, social equity, and modern governance, China has repeatedly put forward relevant initiatives within the frameworks, including the UN Human Rights Council, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering a more inclusive global governance model in the international community.

At the milestone moment of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations, a review of China's efforts to promote accessibility and contributions made in this regard not only helps understand the progressive development and key achievements of international human rights law but also enhances the recognition of China's proactive role and leadership in international human rights governance.

### **I. Advocacy for and Promotion of Accessibility within the UN**

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## Framework

In 1975, the *Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons* was adopted at the United Nations General Assembly, which articulated the rights of persons with disabilities to equal opportunities and full participation in social life. The following year, the United Nations proclaimed 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons, with “Full Participation and Equality” as its theme. Through this global political declaration, the United Nations emphasized the importance of equality and social participation for persons with disabilities. In 1982, the United Nations General Assembly further adopted the *World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons*, marking a conceptual shift that moved beyond the traditional view of persons with disabilities as “care recipients.” This document called on governments to take proactive measures to eliminate structural barriers hindering their social participation, which further established promoting accessibility as a key direction for both national policies and international cooperation. The United Nations urged member states to remove barriers to participation and build an inclusive society by taking comprehensive measures, including legislation, planning, building standards, and educational policies. In 1993, the *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, providing clear guidance for the international community on establishing policy directions for the equal rights of persons with disabilities. These soft law instruments, while not legally binding, laid the normative foundation for the subsequent development of legally binding treaties.

The CRPD, adopted by the United Nations in 2006, fundamentally transformed the international community’s understanding of disability: it is no longer regarded as an individual impairment or a medical issue, but rather a consequence of barriers in the social environment and systems. Within this framework, equal participation is no longer merely a value proposition, but an international legal obligation that State Parties shall fulfill through legislation and policies.

It is under the guidance of this concept that the principle of accessibility was explicitly set forth in the CRPD at the treaty level for the first time, establishing it as a prerequisite for persons with disabilities to achieve equal participation in social life. As required by the Article 9 of the *Convention*, the States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure persons with disabilities have equal access to physical environments, transportation, information and communication systems, and other public facilities and services on an equal basis with others. This provision not only promoted the institutionalization of accessibility within the international human rights law system but also provided a key legal basis for subsequent UN development

agendas.

The concept of accessibility has been extensively embedded in the UN's social development frameworks. Paragraph 2 of the Preamble to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, sets forth the commitment that “no one will be left behind”. Its Goal 11 calls for “making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”, and explicitly mandates to “provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transportation, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.” These statements demonstrate that accessibility is no longer an issue solely for persons with disabilities or specific groups, but an integral part of the underlying logic of the global governance framework for inclusive development.

Entering the 2020s, the concept of accessibility has further evolved from a discourse on rights into a governance principle. A multi-tiered accessibility agenda has taken shape within the UN system as its subordinate bodies have incorporated “accessibility” into their work plans. These bodies include the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the Human Rights Council, the Commission for Social Development, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Take ESCAP as an example. The Incheon Strategy to “Make the Right Real” for Persons with Disabilities in Asia and the Pacific, formulated by ESCAP since 2012, states in its Goal 3 — “Enhance access to the physical environment, public transportation, knowledge, information and communication” — that access to the physical environment, public transportation, knowledge, information, and communication is a prerequisite for persons with disabilities to enjoy their rights in an accessible society. The United Nations Secretary-General's Office, in its United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy published in 2019, required the UN system to achieve accessibility and disability inclusion in policies, programs, facilities, and information dissemination.<sup>1</sup>

In this process, China has not only actively engaged in the formulation of international rules for the accessibility agenda but has also institutionalized and systematized its domestic policy-making, thereby transforming accessibility from an issue concerning persons with disabilities into a matter of public social concern.

## **II. China's Efforts to Advocate and Contributions to UN Accessibility Agenda**

Human rights are a hallmark of human civilization's progress. Historically

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy*, New York, 2019.

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speaking, the international community's awareness of protecting the rights of persons with disabilities has undergone a gradual evolution. Among the related developments, profound recognition and vigorous advocacy for these rights, particularly the establishment and refinement of the international legal framework for their protection, emerged relatively late. A notable example is the *Millennium Development Goals*, adopted by the United Nations at the Millennium Summit in September 2000, which closely linked development with human rights and constituted the most significant UN-driven social development agenda for the international community. Yet, these goals lacked development indicators specifically addressing the rights of persons with disabilities. It was not until December 2006, sixty years after the founding of the United Nations, that the UN General Assembly formulated and adopted the CRPD, which ranks among the latest-drafted and developed core UN human rights conventions.

As one of the sponsoring states of the CRPD, the Chinese government attached great importance to the protection and full realization of the rights of persons with disabilities during the *Convention's* drafting process, and maintained a proactive stance toward its formulation and adoption. At the end of 2003, the Chinese government submitted its draft of the *Convention* to the United Nations, asserting that the *Convention* should emphasize the parallel advancement of human rights and social development, as well as the integration of rights and measures. The Chinese government also sent a delegation to the said meeting, maintaining that a comprehensive convention for the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities should be drafted by giving full consideration to various dimensions, including social development, human rights, and anti-discrimination, in accordance with the spirit of the relevant United Nations General Assembly resolutions establishing the Ad Hoc Committee.<sup>2</sup> For specific provisions, however, it reiterated that due consideration should be given to the diverse circumstances of states and the progressive nature of obligations. For instance, China proposed adding the term "appropriate measures" to Article 19(1)<sup>3</sup> to ensure the *Convention* could be widely accepted and effectively implemented by all states, thereby genuinely advancing and safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities. This demonstrates that from the very outset of formulating this international convention, China has closely integrated development with

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "China Engages in Negotiations on Drafting International Human Rights Instruments," accessed October 14, 2025, [http://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wj\\_b\\_673085/zzjg\\_673183/tyfls\\_674667/xwlb\\_674669/200406/t20040611\\_7669237.shtml](http://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wj_b_673085/zzjg_673183/tyfls_674667/xwlb_674669/200406/t20040611_7669237.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, "Summary of the Third Meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities," accessed October 14, 2025, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/rights/ahc3sum19.htm>.

human rights.

The Chinese government ratified the CRPD on June 26, 2008, becoming the 33<sup>rd</sup> State Party to the *Convention*. On August 31<sup>st</sup> of that year, the *Convention* officially entered into force for China.

In the formation and development of the United Nations system for the rights of persons with disabilities, China has both been an active advocate and a state that actively fulfills its obligations and vigorously promotes the protection of the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as accessibility domestically following its early ratification of the *Convention*. Given its relatively late entry into the international spotlight, China still has a long way to go in advocating for the protection of persons with disabilities' rights. A key and actionable component of this drive is promoting accessibility, which is a crucial reason why China has been an active champion of accessibility in the international community.

China has consistently advanced the international cause of accessibility at the United Nations. At the UN Human Rights Council alone, China has undertaken persistent work through various initiatives. At its regular sessions, the Chinese delegation has emphasized in its statements under various agenda items that groups such as persons with disabilities, older persons, women, and children should be guaranteed equal opportunities for participation in social development. On March 12, 2024, an event commemorating the tenth anniversary of the establishment of the special procedures on the rights of persons with disabilities was co-organized by the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland, jointly with Switzerland and the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities. In his address, Ambassador Chen Xu, head of the delegation, stressed China's readiness to work with all parties in advancing the cause of the rights of persons with disabilities. He put forward three proposals: fostering inclusion and eliminating prejudice and discrimination against persons with disabilities; accelerating the development of accessible and age-friendly facilities and establishing a sound support system; and enhancing participation by promoting employment, entrepreneurship, and equal engagement of persons with disabilities in economic, social, and cultural affairs.<sup>4</sup> These proposals reflect China's proactive approach to highlighting the synergy between development and human rights and shaping the global governance agenda on the rights of persons with disabilities through the vision of inclusive growth.

On October 10, 2024, the resolution titled "Promoting accessibility for the full enjoyment of all human rights by all," which was submitted by China on

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<sup>4</sup> Liu Zhonghua, "China and UN Agencies Co-organize Thematic Event on Rights of Persons with Disabilities," *People's Daily*, March 14, 2024.

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behalf of 30 countries, including Cameroon, Honduras, Pakistan, and Turkey, was adopted by consensus at the 57<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council.<sup>5</sup> This is the first UN resolution adopted on this specific topic and represents a landmark international human rights document. Not only does it reaffirm the significance of promoting accessibility as stipulated in Article 9 of the CRPD for safeguarding the rights of persons with disabilities, but the resolution also further highlights the value of the accessibility cause for the enjoyment of human rights by all, especially vulnerable groups such as older persons. By conveying a renewed human rights perspective on strengthening accessibility promotion to the world, the resolution has expanded and deepened the international consensus on this issue. It stands as an important contribution by China to international human rights governance.

On June 16, 2025, an event themed “Accessibility for All Exhibition: Building an Inclusive Future” opened at the Palace of Nations on the same day as the 59<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The exhibition was hosted by the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva, sharing with the international community China’s approach to the construction of barrier-free environments. In his remarks, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk stated that the exhibition demonstrated how remarkable achievements in promoting accessibility could be made through the joint efforts of governments, society — particularly organizations of persons with disabilities and older persons — the private sector, and individuals.<sup>6</sup>

New developments in science and technology bring about numerous possibilities. It is critically important to ensure that science and technology are developed for good purposes and that their advances benefit everyone, especially vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, in a timely manner. In December 2024, a regional seminar on information accessibility and assistive technology was held in Beijing. The seminar was co-organized by the China Association of Persons with Visual Disabilities and the World Blind Union Asia-Pacific, with active support from UNESCO. During the seminar, the participants discussed topics including the role of technology and artificial intelligence in the Asia-Pacific region, global efforts to enhance information access for persons with disabilities, and China’s progress in building information accessibility infrastructure.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Shi Song, “From Instant Chinese Translation to Eye Controlled Communication — China’s Accessibility Solutions Impress at Palais des Nations,” Xinhua News Agency, accessed October 14, 2025, <https://www.news.cn/20250619/1f58285eb901473da627230c612d9770/c.html>.

<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, “UNESCO Supports Regional Seminar to Promote Information Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities,” accessed October 14, 2025, [https://www.unesco.org/zh/articles/lianheguojiaokewenzuzhizhichiquyuyantaohuizhulicanzhangrenshixinxiwuzhangai?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.unesco.org/zh/articles/lianheguojiaokewenzuzhizhichiquyuyantaohuizhulicanzhangrenshixinxiwuzhangai?utm_source=chatgpt.com).

On July 4, 2025, Ambassador Chen Xu, head of the Chinese Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office at Geneva, delivered a joint statement titled “Artificial Intelligence (AI) for Promoting Accessibility” on behalf of over 70 countries at the 59<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The statement called for strengthened technical assistance and capacity building in the field of AI enabled accessibility and urged all states to share the benefits of artificial intelligence development. The joint statement highlighted the enormous potential of artificial intelligence technology to eliminate physical, informational, and cultural barriers through innovative solutions, thereby fostering inclusive social development. Three key propositions were set forth in the joint statement: first, adhering to a people-centered approach to ensure that the development of artificial intelligence technology fully respects, promotes, and protects human rights; second, upholding inclusiveness and shared benefits so that the fruits of AI development reach all groups, thereby advancing equal opportunities and inclusive, equitable development; third, pursuing win-win cooperation by increasing financial and technical support for developing countries and jointly improving global AI governance through international collaboration.

These propositions serve as key measures to implement the resolution on accessibility for all spearheaded by China at the Human Rights Council, and also constitute one of the statements on AI for human rights delivered by China at the Council. Previously, China initiated joint statements on “AI for the rights of persons with disabilities” at the 53<sup>rd</sup> session, on “AI for children’s rights” at the 55<sup>th</sup> session, and on “AI for women’s rights” at the 56<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, demonstrating its consistent commitment to the rights of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups.

In September 2020, during an inspection tour in Hunan province and while presiding over a symposium with grassroots representatives, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that “building accessible facilities is a hallmark of a country and society’s civilization, to which we must attach great importance.”<sup>8</sup> On September 18, 2025, a side event themed “The Advancement of Accessibility” was hosted by the Permanent Mission of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva at the Palais des Nations, marking the fifth anniversary of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s remarks on accessibility. Representatives from states including China, Malaysia, Mexico, Slovenia, and Pakistan, as well as from international organizations including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), and the European Union, engaged

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<sup>8</sup> Zhang Xiaodong et al., “Staying True to the People: Continuing the New Era’s Long March — An Account of Xi Jinping’s Inspection Tour in Hunan and Symposium with Grassroots Representatives,” *People’s Daily*, September 21, 2021, page 1.

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in extensive discussions on the vital importance of accessibility for the full enjoyment of human rights by all. Held during the 60<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council, the event garnered widespread attention and positive responses.

China's engagement in the UN accessibility agenda aligns with its overarching philosophy in human rights diplomacy. General Secretary Xi Jinping has articulated the "people-centered development philosophy" on multiple international occasions. This philosophy translates into a policy framework of "people-centered global governance" and "inclusive development" within the UN context. Promoting accessibility is a concrete embodiment of this philosophy: through institutionalized means, it removes barriers to social participation and ensures that the fruits of development reach a broader population.

### **III. Institutional Innovation in China's Domestic Promotion of Accessibility and its Alignment with International Norms**

In recent years, the Chinese government has continued to champion and promote the cause of accessibility. In June 2023, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Construction of Barrier-free Environments* was deliberated and adopted at the Third Session of the Standing Committee of the 14<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress. The law designates "persons with disabilities and older persons" as protected groups and establishes legal safeguards for the development of barrier-free environments. Adopted at the Third Plenary Session of the 20<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2024, the *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization* emphasizes the need that, "In line with the principle of doing everything within our means, we will refine the systems of basic public services, with the focus on providing inclusive services, meeting essential needs, and providing a cushion for those most in need. We will strive to resolve the most practical problems that are of the greatest and most direct concern to the people so as to meet people's aspirations for a better life." It also calls for "improving .....the social security and service systems for people with disabilities."

The implementation of the *Law on the Construction of Barrier-free Environments* marks a new stage in which China's accessibility system has been placed on a legal footing and applied comprehensively. This is a specialized law enacted in China for the construction of barrier-free environments. The enforcement of this law aims to ensure that persons with disabilities participate equally, fully, and conveniently in social life and are a part of it, while also promoting the sharing of the achievements of socioeconomic development by all members of society.

The law not only focuses on persons with disabilities but explicitly states

that the construction of barrier-free environments applies to all citizens in need of convenient conditions. It establishes, for the first time at the national legislative level, the principle of “universal design,” requiring universal accessibility in areas including public facilities, information dissemination, digital services, transportation, education, and culture. This legislative approach is aligned with Article 9 of the CRPD on accessibility and Goal 11 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, demonstrating China’s conscious commitment to aligning with international norms.

In September 2025, six typical cases of procuratorial public interest litigation focusing on accessibility and age-appropriate adaptation were jointly released by the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the China Disabled Persons’ Federation. The cases cover three key areas: the construction of an accessible environment, accessible information exchange, and accessible social services. The legal principles were illustrated by specific cases, which, in turn, serve to advance the implementation of the law.

At the policy level, the State Council and relevant ministries and agencies (such as the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology) have progressively introduced multiple supporting documents. Let’s take some examples. In 2021, the 14<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for the Protection and Development of Persons with Disabilities was issued by the State Council. In February 2025, the *Notice on Further Strengthening the Construction of Urban Accessibility Facilities* issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development focused on the need to enhance the quality of accessibility facilities in engineering projects, strictly implement construction standards, ensure that accessibility facilities be planned, designed, constructed, inspected, and delivered simultaneously with the main project, and be effectively connected with existing accessibility facilities to form a continuous and accessible network. A comprehensive institutional framework, extending from the central to the local level and spanning standards to implementation, has been established through the rollout of special action plans for the construction of barrier-free environments across all regions. These policies not only aim to improve the lives of persons with disabilities but also to build a universally accessible and inclusively shared social environment, which marks promoting accessibility as a key indicator of social progress and civilization.

In January 2025, the proposal to enhance engagement with accessibility issues on international platforms, submitted by Ambassador Chen Xu in his capacity as a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), was recognized as one of the

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Excellent Proposals of the CPPCC for 2024.<sup>9</sup> Over the years, Ambassador Chen Xu has been consistently advocating for accessibility on the UN stage, earning appreciation for amplifying China’s voice in promoting and advancing human rights.

In summary, at this historic milestone marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations, a review of China’s practices and advocacy in promoting accessibility clearly demonstrates its proactive role in advancing the international human rights and sustainable development agendas. China has not only established an institutionalized and inclusive barrier-free environment domestically but has also actively participated in UN rule-making, agenda promotion, and the sharing of international experience. Through initiatives including sponsoring resolutions, co-organizing side meetings and exhibitions, and promoting technical cooperation and capacity-building, China has contributed to the sustained improvement of the global accessibility governance system. Within the framework of the UN, China is playing an increasingly active role as both a contributor and a leader in the progressive and dynamic development of international human rights law.

( Translated by *QI Wenhua* )

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<sup>9</sup> “List of Excellent Proposals of the CPPCC for 2024,” *People’s Political Consultative Conference Daily*, January 3, 2025, page 2.