

Project Documents Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities

This article describes the beginning of the International Disability Rights Monitor and its advocacy for persons with disabilities. The author pays special attention to the passing of human rights laws for the disabled and future monitoring efforts to ensure that parties adhere to those laws.

by Julie Miller [The Center for International Rehabilitation]

In Serbia, only 13 percent of people with disabilities are employed; in Spain, sterilization and clinical experiments on people with disabilities are permissible in certain cases; and in Bangkok, people visiting the main post office cannot do so via wheelchair, nor can they easily enter most of the nation's public buildings since less than 1 percent are reportedly wheelchair-accessible.

This information is just a sliver of the data collected during the ongoing work of the International Disability Rights Monitor, which has conducted research in three regions of the world to date. The project has been in existence since 2004 and aims to promote the human rights of persons with disabilities around the globe by documenting the discrimination, abuse and inequity they experience. The *International Disability Rights Monitor* uses observations gathered by shadowing individuals and is the world's only systematic, international report focusing on disability rights.

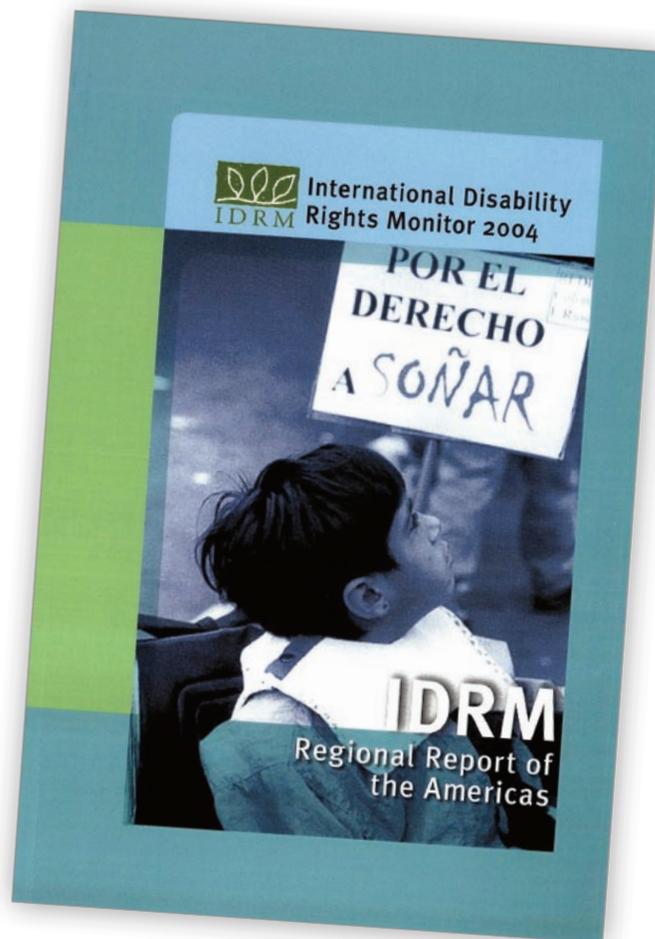
"The impetus for the project grew from the reality that policymakers, the human-rights community, treaty-monitoring bodies and global leaders have access to very little information about the extent or nature of the challenges faced by people with disabilities," says Dr. William Kennedy Smith, founder of the IDRM project and president of the Center for International Rehabilitation, a nonprofit organization based in Chicago that develops research, education and advocacy programs to improve the lives of people with disabilities.¹ "The IDRM project addresses this gap by documenting the problems, progress and barriers experienced by people with disabilities in a coordinated, systematic and sustained way."

The Beginning of the IDRM

Created in 2004 by the Center for International Rehabilitation, the IDRM relies on a grassroots network of researchers in more than 45 countries to document and assess the conditions of persons with disabilities and the ongoing human-rights violations that are a part of their daily lives. So far, the IDRM has produced four reports: *Regional Report of the Americas* (2004); *Regional Report of Asia* (2005); *Disability and Early Tsunami Relief Efforts in India, Indonesia and Thailand* (2005); and, most recently, *Regional Report of Europe* (December 2007).

The IDRM Mission

The IDRM country reports focus on several key areas such as legal protections, education, employment, accessibility, and health and housing services for persons with disabilities. IDRM regional reports include country reports and a report card to compare progress made by countries across each region. In addition to the amount of useful data they generate, the actual data-collection process is a major component in the awareness-building process.



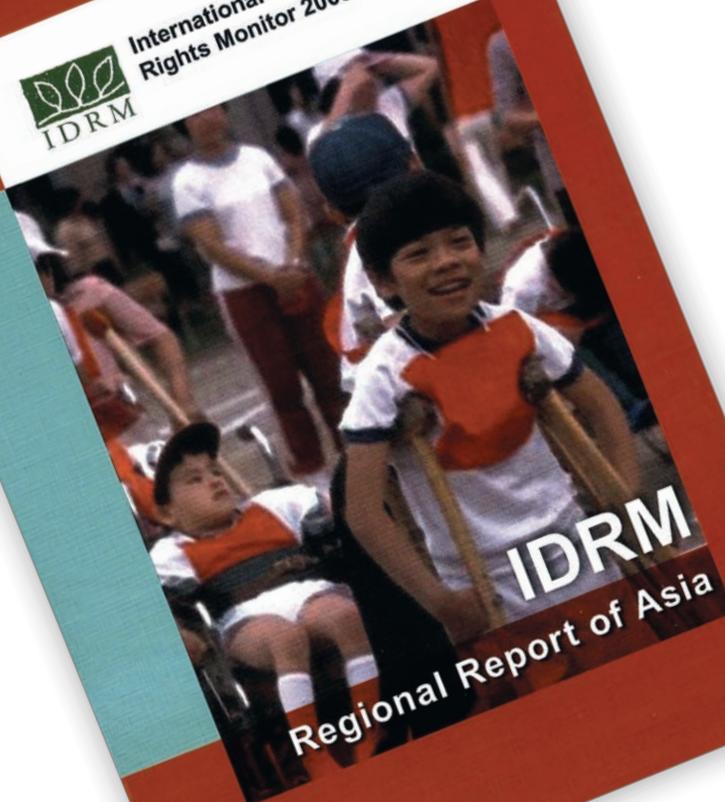
Cover image from an IDRM report.
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The researchers use both a quantitative and qualitative approach, and follow an IDRM research guide that includes 107 questions, all of which are based on the U.N. Standard Rules.² The researchers also conduct panel discussions through their local disability communities and interview key stakeholders. The reports are due to the contribution of hundreds of individuals, many of whom have disabilities.

"The IDRM reports are important because they achieve awareness-raising through the research ... and they support disability advocates in their work by improving the quality of available information," says Eirini-Maria Gounari, human-rights attorney and lead researcher for the Greece chapter of the IDRM: *Regional Report of Europe*.³ "The disability advocates can use the report as a very effective tool of advocacy in order to demonstrate whether the state is complying with international human rights law and what kind of policies and practices related to people with disabilities



International Disability
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IDRM
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have been adopted and then lobby for changes in laws and policies.”

Most researchers are connected to disability organizations at the national level, and receive training and grant support to compile country reports.

This connectivity ensures that the findings of the research can be widely distributed among the indigenous disability community. The years of collaboration and reporting have paid off significantly, and the documents have served as invaluable resources for, among others, the World Bank, UNESCO and the governments of Colombia and the United States. The IDRM project’s most significant achievement, however, was its use as a critical document for the passage of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.⁴

On 13 December 2006, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The Convention formally establishes the rights of persons with disabilities as human rights. Its intent is to end the discrimination that the estimated 650 million people with disabilities worldwide experience daily and to ensure that people with disabilities are full, contributing members of society. Not only was the Convention the first U.N. human-rights convention adopted in the 21st century, but it was also remarkable because nongovernmental organizations sat at the table with States Parties during negotiations.

Cover image from an IDRM report.

“The tremendous disparity in disability law from one country to the next is astounding,” Dr. Smith says. “The only way to ensure that every government in the world provides equal treatment and respect to its citizens with disabilities is to hold them accountable to a set of standards established through a Convention.”

The IDRM reports expose this disparity in fine detail. Other findings from the reports include:

- Approximately 70 percent of people with disabilities in Latin America are either unemployed or economically inactive.
- Several countries in Asia report school enrollment rates of more than 50 percent for children with disabilities; yet basic literacy and enrollment beyond elementary school are uncommon for disabled children.
- Even in the most inclusive nations, progress in protecting the rights of persons with disabilities is concentrated in major cities, and people in rural areas typically experience much worse conditions.

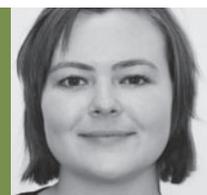
The Disability Convention entered into force on 3 May 2008, having been ratified by 20 countries. Although there are presently 129 signatories to the Convention and 26 ratifications, more are needed.

Furthermore, there will need to be a checking system in place to make sure the rights that are promised in the Convention are implemented. “Effective monitoring of disability rights is going to be one of the most important factors in ensuring the *Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities* is implemented in each country,” says Mary Keogh, IDRM International Coordinator.³

“The challenge to the disability community over the coming years will be to develop effective shadow reports that document the situation of people with disabilities and also states’ compliance to the Convention. The IDRM, in its work to date, has provided invaluable information on the realities faced by people with disabilities as they strive to be treated as equal citizens.” ♣

See Endnotes, page 111

To view or order copies of the report, please visit www.IDRMnet.org.



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