



RI Australia Network
ABN 60 149 775 100

REPORT

22nd RI World Congress, Songdo Convensia, October 29 to November 2, 2012 Incheon, Korea.

An RI World Congress is a phenomenon to be marveled at! Over two thousand people, representing 77 countries attended the 22nd RI Global World Congress^{1 2} in Incheon, Korea in October-November 2012. Celebrating the 90th anniversary of the organisation, the conference brought together people with disabilities and non-disabled advocates, as well as health and rehabilitation specialists and academics. Many delegates were wheelchair users, so that wheelchairs of every description and configuration made up the most noticeable part of a formidable contingent of people with disabilities.

The Conference slogan, *Changing the World through ICT Partnerships*, was apt. There was an emphasis on Information Technology (IT), and diverse formats were used to maximise accessibility for all at the conference. A Samsung 10.1 Tablet (plus a business-like briefcase-backpack) was a welcome gift for all registrants, especially those from the least developed countries. The conference program was provided in an Application for either android or Apple operating systems, so that provision of hardcopy material was minimised. [Korea



¹ A full report of the conference is available at www.global.org, accessed through entering email account and password used for your search engine.

² The conference was co-organised by the Korean Society of Rehabilitation for Persons with Disabilities and sponsored by Incheon and the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

is the land of the smart phone. There are few postcards anywhere. Presumably this is because everyone, from 4 year olds upwards, are tweeting their photos to friends and family.]

An electronic version of the official RI Global report is available online³.

In the plenary sessions, real time captioning (CART) was provided in both English and Korean. In addition sign language interpretation was provided by two interpreters who worked side by side, translating into signed American and signed Korean. This was projected on split-screens, positioned at either side of a central screen which carried the video image of the speaker or the PowerPoint being presented. Simultaneous oral translation was provided in English, Korean and Spanish through wireless headphones supplied to participants each time they entered the venue. There was a minimum of 4 streams of parallel sessions with 16 different parallel session time-slots over the 4 days of presentations. For the parallel sessions, sign interpretation and CART were provided in each venue, along with simultaneous translation to the wireless headsets. I couldn't help wondering how or where in Australia we could stage a conference of such magnitude or level of assistive technology.

An efficient shuttle bus service was provided for delegates, as some hotels were at considerable distance from the Convensia. Buses were accessible, with self-operated tie-downs superior to anything I have seen in the USA or Australia. Admittedly the tie-downs were only usable for manual chairs.



There was a poignant edge to the conference. On the night prior to its opening, a prominent Korean disability advocate died in an apartment fire in central Seoul. The tragedy could have been averted if the woman had been able to have the 24/7 personal assistance that she needed and for which she had been lobbying the Government. This sadly highlighted the lack of support services for people with disabilities across all nations.

³ The official RI Global report of the conference is at:
https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B6vcocjslHsAQmszUGFIQ0xJckk/edit?usp=drive_web.

Korean delegates decided that the death should not be in vain and that wider publicity of the inadequacy of care services had to be made. A high level meeting of UNESCAP (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), taking place in the Convensia at the same time, brought a number of Korean politicians and international dignitaries to the building. It was decided to capitalise on this situation and a military-precision demonstration was organised on Day 2.

Banners with explicit messages were printed and serried rows of wheelchairs assembled in the atrium. Facing a phalanx of security guards, the demonstrators advanced in unison to drumbeats and sharply shouted demands for better services. Thus they effectively confined the UNESCAP delegates to their meeting rooms for over 2 hours. It was an instructive exercise for those of us who have never been in militant disability rights movements.



Three rows of suit-clad security guards.

The conference commenced with RI Commission meetings. RI Global has 7 commissions⁴ ranging from Education to Employment. I attended the Work and Employment Commission⁵ meeting chaired by Dr. Madan M. Kundu, Professor in the Department of Rehabilitation at Michigan State University. Commission Vice-Chair, Dr. Friedrich Mehrhoff is an experienced rehabilitation specialist from the German Federation of Insurers for Work Accidents and Occupational Diseases.

The Commission's expertise in rehabilitation is such that its emphasis is on acquired disabilities and return-to-work (RTW) programs rather than general disability enterprises or disability employment services. It seems that in other countries, as in Australia, rehabilitative RTW programs, although ostensibly integrated, are still largely separate to disability employment services for people with intellectual or other congenital disabilities. Discussion focused on the effectiveness of current government policies for workplace

⁴ RI Global Commissions are: Education; Health & Function; International Commission on Technology & Accessibility (ICTA); Leisure, Recreation & Physical Activities; Policy & Service; Social; Work & Employment.

⁵ RI Global Work & Employment Commission Mission Statement is at: <http://www.riglobal.org/about/government-structure/commissions/work-and-employment/>

accessibility and reintegration of people with acquired disabilities into employment. Article 27 (Work and Employment) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is the focus, underpinned by the principles in Article 26 (Habilitation and Rehabilitation).

UN Secretary General, Ban-Ki Moon, was keynote speaker at the conference opening dinner. Notwithstanding the fact that he is a Korean citizen, it was a mark of the high standing of RI Global as an NGO contributor to UN policy, that he honoured the conference in this way.



UN Secretary-General, Ban-Ki Moon, opening address to Congress

On other days, conference catering was managed in an innovative way. A culinary festival had been organised to take place on the grounds adjacent to the Consvensia. By wandering next door, delegates could use vouchers supplied to sample a range of traditional foods, and enjoy demonstrations of dance, arts, games and crafts in a carnival atmosphere. In addition a side laneway was devoted to the sale of goods made by the Korean equivalent of Disability Enterprises. Having a central agency for marketing of these products is something that could be explored in Australia, perhaps through a Social Ventures Australia project.



Traditional costumes at the culinary festival.



Central agency for marketing products produced in disability enterprises countrywide.

Incheon itself is a new city about 50 kilometres from Seoul. Housing 4 million people, it is a forest of high-rise apartments. As the world's first ubiquitous technology city, Incheon demonstrates state-of-the-art sustainability principles. The city is digitally wired and controlled in terms of systems management, which includes everything from waste to energy use⁶. A touch of the traditional is added with community gardens dotted between the apartment blocks. It is not certain that modern Korean urbanites are committed to growing their own supplies. The gardens I saw were sadly neglected and overgrown! Incheon was set up as a Free Economic Zone, with low taxes providing an incentive for business and commercial enterprises to base themselves in the area.

For a wheelchair user Incheon is an easy environment to manage. As a reclaimed tidal swamp region, the new land is flat and all pathways have shallow cutaways. Sellers of Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSI) have made a fortune from the new city. Yellow TGSI cover more surfaces than one would think possible. A lake in Incheon's Central Park is a large pedestrian zone that caters for weekend picnics and boating. Glass skyscrapers seem to defy current sustainability considerations, but are apparently very energy efficient. The light poles along the highway connecting to the airport carry solar panels and are topped with wind turbines to generate their own electricity. Local buses are accessible, as is the rail connection to Seoul. I was too timid to try either on my own.



Representing RI Australia, I was a member of a panel in the first set of Parallel Sessions at the conference. Entitled "Women With Disabilities", the panel included presentations from five women – Subira Lendaiga (Supervisor, International Rescue Committee for refugees in Tanzania); Ndyde Yassin Sallah (Gambia Federation of the Disabled); Asha Hans (Executive Vice-President, Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre in India), and Asratun Nahar (Executive Director, the Women with Disabilities Foundation in

⁶ <http://www.commoncurrent.com/notes/2009/08/a-visit-to-incheon-south-korea.html>

Bangladesh). My paper looked at the Australian and international situation of high levels of violence against women with disabilities and initiatives to address this travesty of epidemic proportions⁷. Although presentations covered a wide geographical slice of the globe, there was an underlying theme. The negative impact of intersectionality, arising from gender and disability discrimination, effects women with disabilities in all economies and in all countries. In conflict zones and across least developed nations the situation is dire. Yet women leaders, many with disabilities themselves, are making incredible contributions with few resources to improve the lives of their peers. The presentations highlighted the need for RI Australia to honour its objective to assist people, and especially women, with disabilities in the Asia-Pacific nations to our north.

There were only a handful of Aussie speakers at the conference, so it was unfortunate that the presentation from ScopeVic in the *Accessibility and Assistive Technologies* panel was also during the first set of parallel sessions. Barbara Solarsh (Speech Pathologist, Communication Resource Centre, ScopeVic) and Hank Wyllie (Volunteer, Communication Resource Centre, ScopeVic) presented the findings of a longitudinal study on the working poor looking at *Communication Access Rights: form vision to Action*. Through this they also introduced a universal Communication Symbol which is already being promoted through ScopeVic. The RI Commission, Information and Communications Technology and Accessibility (ICTA), has expressed interest in looking at wider adoption of the symbol by RI Global.



Where the symbol is displayed, people with communication impairment can be confident that a wide range of conditions causing communication impairment is understood; that staff are familiar with various alternative and augmentative devices for communication including tablet applications, and that all forms of communication will be validated and respected.

The Songdo Convensia simultaneously co-hosted a number of disability conferences in late October-early November 2012: Asia-Pacific Disabled People's International (DPI) Assembly (24-26 October); Asia-Pacific Disabled People's Organisation's (DPO) Assembly (27 October); Asia-Pacific Disability Forum (APDF) Conference (26-31

⁷ Salthouse, S. 2012, *The Gender Trap, Gender, disability and domestic violence*, RI World Congress, Incheon, South Korea 2012 is available on the RI Australia website at: www.riaustralia.org.

October); UNESCAP High-level Intergovernmental Meeting on the Final Review of the Implementation of Asian & Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons 2003-2012 (29 October – 2 November). Thus, the combined meetings brought together many distinguished global disability activists and advocates; provided an opportunity to re-kindle friendships made at the 21st RI World Congress held in Quebec in 2008, and to re-ignite our dedication to improving the status of people with disabilities world-wide.

I would like to thank John Seo (Director of the Research Institute of the Differently Abled Persons Rights in Korea), and his family for their hospitality on the day following the conference. Without their assistance I would not have been able to visit the Chrysanthemum Festival at the Jogyesa Temple, or the famous Lotus Lantern Festival on the reclaimed Cheonggyecheon Stream or sample the joys of cooking a *gogigui bulgogi* on a gas barbecue in the middle of the restaurant table, finished with *bibimbap* – a meal to remember. John also arranged for an interpreter-helper to accompany me on 2 more days of sight-seeing in Seoul. We developed a tour itinerary by using a brochure of significant sites and travelling by taxi from one to the next.

Contrary to the situation in Australia, taxi drivers of the luxury leather-upholstered Korean-make sedans, were ever-helpful and never objected to dismantling the wheelchair to put it in the boot. A refreshing change! There is also a fleet of wheelchair accessible taxis. These cabs have a rail system to secure the chair. No belts are involved and the driver needs only 5 seconds to lock or unlock a chair. Bookings must be made two hours in advance, and a there is a flat rate for fares.



John Seo, Jogyesa Temple,
Chrysanthemum Festival



Gyeongbokgung Palace

The final declaration of the conference (Do Dream Incheon Declaration) was:

- 1. To urge all nations to completely ratify the UN convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol, ensure effective implementation and monitoring, and promote international cooperation to eradicate extreme poverty which impedes full realisation of rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.*
- 2. To urge the government and international organisations to promote pro-active habilitation and rehabilitation measures, and take a role for upholding rights and inclusion of people with disabilities.*
- 3. To take a lead to significantly reduce poverty as confronted by persons with disabilities in developing countries, and accordingly urge for active implementation of international development and cooperation by utilizing potentialities that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) offers to people with disabilities.*

My recommendations for RI Australia are:

- 1. Promote the formation of a central marketing body, coordinated by Social Ventures Australia, for articles made through social enterprises owned by and employing people with disabilities.*
- 2. Promote wider adoption of the Communication Symbol.*
- 3. Have regular input to the RI Global Work and Employment Commission.*
- 4. Explore ways to support people, and especially women, with disabilities in Asia-Pacific nations.*

Sue Salthouse

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