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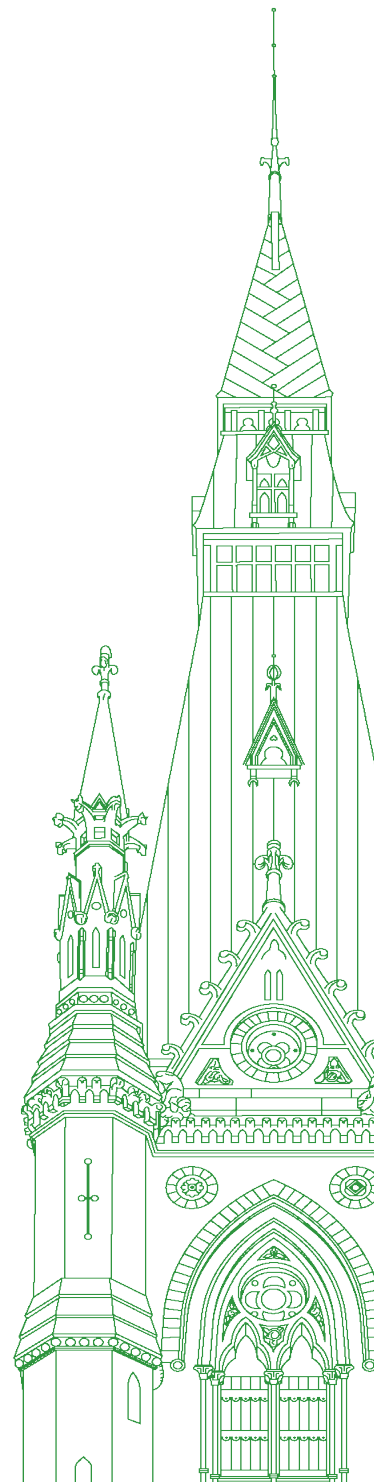
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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1140)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 42 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[*Translation*]

To ensure the meeting will go smoothly, I would like to outline a few rules to follow for witnesses and members.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by videoconference, click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

[*English*]

Regarding interpretation, those on Zoom have the choice at the bottom of the screen of the floor, English or French. Those in the room can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[*Translation*]

I wish to inform the subcommittee that, in accordance with our routine motion concerning connection tests, all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of the meeting.

[*English*]

Please join me in welcoming the witnesses who are appearing this morning as we continue our study of international disability-inclusive education.

From the Global Partnership for Education, we have Dr. Susan Liautaud, vice-chair. Here, I would like to mention to the committee that Dr. Liautaud must leave the meeting after her opening remarks. Members may submit written questions to the Global Partnership for Education via the clerk.

We have also Ms. Nujeen Mustafa, disability and refugee rights advocate.

From Harvard Medical School, we have Mr. Vikram Patel, Paul Farmer Professor and chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine. We have also Dr. Shawna Novak, fellow at the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine.

From Disability Rights International, we have Mr. Eric Rosenthal, executive director; from International Parliamentary Network

for Education, Mr. Joseph Nhan-O'Reilly, executive director; from the Washington Group on Disability Statistics, Ms. Julie Weeks, lead health statistician; and from Visibilia Foundation, Ms. Paola Jelonche, lawyer.

From World Bank Group, we have Ms. Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, global disability adviser, and Ms. Ruchi Kulbir Singh, disability inclusion specialist.

• (1145)

[*Translation*]

Thank you for being with us today.

You will have up to five minutes for your remarks, after which we will proceed to questions from the members of the subcommittee.

I will let you know when you have one minute left.

[*English*]

We will begin with Madam Susan Liautaud.

Madam Liautaud, thank you for agreeing to appear. The floor is yours for five minutes. You can begin, please.

Dr. Susan Liautaud (Vice-Chair, Board of Directors, Global Partnership for Education): Good morning.

Thank you to the chairman and members of the committee for inviting me today.

As noted, I'm Dr. Susan Liautaud, the vice-chair of the Global Partnership for Education board. It's a privilege to be with you on behalf of GPE to discuss this very important topic, and we're so grateful for Canada's leadership on global education.

Thank you to the committee and, in particular, to MP Mike Lake, for continuing to spotlight the urgency with which we need to address inclusive education, including education for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

GPE was born out of an unshakable belief that every single child deserves the hope, opportunity and agency that a quality education brings. Today, it is the largest global fund and partnership solely dedicated to transforming education in nearly 90 low- and lower-income countries.

Since 2002, we have raised more than \$11 billion for education, helped partner countries get 160 million more children in schools and doubled girls' enrolment. We've seen increases in school completion rates, enabling every girl and boy to unlock their potential.

These achievements are the result of GPE's unique multi-stakeholder partnership model, bringing together donors, multilateral institutions, civil society, teacher representatives and the private sector to support country governments drive lasting and systemic change. How our support unfolds differs in every country. I have a few examples.

In Vanuatu, where most children with disabilities miss out on schooling, the government has established a number of initiatives, including the first national inclusive education resource centre, trained preschool and primary school teachers in inclusive education and developed books to challenge disability stereotypes and beyond.

In Somalia, an emergency grant managed by Save the Children helped hearing impaired students receive assistive devices. The grant also ensured children with disabilities continued learning during the pandemic by supporting the production and distribution of over 8,600 copies of Braille textbooks, benefiting more than 650 visually impaired students.

What remains common across all countries is GPE's commitment to transform education systems and ensure that all children, including children with disabilities, can learn in a safe, healthy and inclusive environment, free of discrimination.

Inclusive education requires deeper systemic change, supporting education systems that adapt to and include all learners, regardless of physical or intellectual ability, gender, ethnicity, language, refugee status or any other factor. It requires social and cultural change, challenging the stigma and discrimination that hold some children back. Inclusive education is beneficial not only for the children with disabilities, who are all too often excluded, but for all children.

According to the World Bank, excluding people with disabilities from educational and other opportunities may lower a country's GDP by 3% to 7%. Making schools safe, healthy and inclusive is both a human right and an investment in human capital. To do this, GPE provides guidance and funding for interventions to include children with disabilities in countries' education systems. Partner countries use GPE grants to train teachers in inclusive education and provide access to equipment and learning materials for children such as Braille machines, eyeglasses and hearing aids.

In 2022, GPE had active grants allocating approximately \$50 million to support inclusion of children with disabilities in 50 partner countries. During COVID, more than 80% of GPE's accelerated grants for the COVID-19 response included initiatives that targeted children with disabilities to ensure learning continuity, yet I share deeply in the frustration that we are not moving fast enough and far enough. We welcome the work of this committee and the Honourable Mike Lake in highlighting this issue and stressing that only by reaching the most excluded can we truly unlock education's enormous potential to catalyze progress on the suite of the UN SDGs for families, communities and nations. Many countries are

beginning to do what is needed. Now is the time to step up the pace and make exponential progress.

Inclusivity is still a fight. It's a fight for each of us. Inclusion is available to all of us and is a responsibility for each of us.

● (1150)

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today on behalf of GPE. We look forward to continuing this important work together with you, and we will be very happy to take questions in writing and send our responses after the hearing. Again, many thanks for the privilege of being with you this morning.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Liautaud. It was nice to have you here and for you to give good remarks to the committee.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Nujeen Mustafa to take the floor for five minutes. The floor is yours.

Ms. Nujeen Mustafa (Disability and Refugee Rights Advocate, As an Individual): Thank you.

I'm Nujeen Mustafa, a Kurdish girl from Syria. I was born with cerebral palsy and I use a wheelchair.

Growing up, I lived in a fifth-floor apartment in a building with no lift. I did not attend school, because school, and education in general, was not accessible to people with disabilities.

Disability in general, and psychosocial disabilities especially, are surrounded by stigma. This was—and still sadly is—true for my country of Syria. People with disabilities were not seen as a group worth investing in, and this outlook resulted in their being excluded from education.

Luckily for me, my family did not share that opinion. With their help, books and TV, I was able to overcome most of the challenges that had put me in that situation. I learned how to read and write in Arabic and even a second language.

You see, my life was not perfect, but I loved it. However, the war changed everything.

When you are being bombed, you realize a few things. You cannot move and seek shelter as quickly as everyone else. That means your loved ones would have to stay with you and endanger their safety. The only option you have is staying, witnessing and enduring the horror that's happening around you. I was one of the lucky ones who had a strong brother who could carry me down five flights of stairs. This was not the case for everyone.

The fact of the matter is that if you are a person with a disability and you are in a conflict, your life is at a greater risk, regardless of what type of disability that might be.

The war finally forced us to flee Syria and go on a 3,500-mile journey from Syria to Germany, which included the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean on a dinghy boat. You might imagine that the situation would improve once you reached the other side, but this was sadly not the case. I came face to face with the fact that nobody had thought of people with disabilities when establishing and setting up humanitarian action on the ground, from the lack of accessibility to basic services, such as restrooms, to the lack of accessibility to education and rehabilitation services.

Now that we have highlighted the problem, I would like to suggest a few steps that could be taken to ensure that people who have disabilities are no longer overlooked.

Meaningful inclusion and integration of people with disabilities in the efforts targeted towards education should be a prerequisite for the funding of humanitarian actors in a crisis.

Stable and continuous communication with people with disabilities and their representative organizations is crucial to achieving real, true and meaningful inclusion and integration.

There is also a need for increased investment in raising awareness of disability-inclusive education among humanitarian staff. Therefore, it is necessary to provide them with the proper tools, knowledge and experience that would enable them to best integrate people with disabilities in initiatives related to education in areas of conflict and areas of humanitarian crises. This could be done through specific courses, for example.

• (1155)

A monitoring mechanism should be established with the purpose of achieving specific goals within a certain time frame, tracking progress and holding parties accountable for their commitments to disability inclusion in all facets of their work, including education. Failing to meet these goals should result in meaningful consequences, such as withdrawal of support.

I hope that Canada can play a leading role in the efforts to build a more disability-inclusive approach to education in a humanitarian-crisis situation and encourage its partners to follow suit because what's at stake here are people's lives and their futures.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mustafa. It was touching. Thank you for the good will, and congratulations. We would like and hope to see a lot of disabled people on this planet succeed the way that you have. Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Dr. Shawna Novak to take the floor for five minutes.

The floor is yours, Dr. Novak.

Dr. Shawna Novak (Fellow, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Bonjour and good day, honourable members of the House of Commons subcommittee on human rights. Thank you so much for inviting us to join you today.

Today's critical dialogue centres on fostering inclusivity within educational systems, ensuring that they cater to the entire disability spectrum, with particular attention to the often-neglected cognitive, communicative and behavioural disabilities. I'm here to highlight the importance of advancing this cause and to share several potential evidence-based approaches to support this committee's work.

The conversations today are in the spirit of the sustainable development goals to leave no one behind. Inclusion must be aligned with not only the SDGs but also the fundamental rights of persons with disabilities, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It means inclusion for persons with disability in all spaces, including education, health and employment, notwithstanding that within communities...

Despite this, it would be fair to say that in all contexts in societies, persons with disability are far from realizing these fundamental rights. Within this group of persons, those with cognitive, communication and behavioural disabilities are particularly disadvantaged. COVID-19 exacerbated this, particularly in LMICs, where children with disability were disproportionately affected.

In our global educational systems, the needs of differently abled individuals are frequently marginalized. These disabilities, encompassing a range, demand a nuanced and empathetic educational approach. In areas of limited resources, conflict settings and within displaced populations, these challenges are compounded.

It's within this context that we encounter a pivotal concern—namely, the intersection of limited literacy and disabilities. This intersection uncovers a profound gap in our current educational models. It necessitates an urgent need for a comprehensive approach that caters to individuals from early development through adulthood, embracing all learning styles and recognizing the distinct ways that people with disabilities process and engage with information.

I want to bring some of those points to life with a story of a community health worker I worked with, a community health worker from the West Bank with a cognitive disability. We ran a pilot project in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine and through my organization, CISEPO, to teach skills to improve women's health in a resource-limited and complex setting.

Amira grew up in a community with scant educational support. She faced daily struggles that left her feeling isolated. This program offered a lifeline with tailored cognitive training that tapped into her innate strengths, coupled with social skill-building sessions. The intervention included the use of adaptive learning technologies and personalized teaching methods.

Her progress was incredible. She evolved from a reticent individual into an empowered community health advocate. Her progress wasn't only cognitive; it was also social. She became an active member of the community health program, demonstrating incredible empathy and engagement with other local women seeking health education. She went from being a hesitant learner to a confident health advocate. That alone illustrates the potential of inclusive education when it's rooted in respect for individual rights and capabilities.

Building on practical experiences like this and best practices grounded in evidence, we would suggest several key recommendations. We feel that it is imperative to integrate life-cycle education into our strategies, acknowledging that disability is not unique to any one stage of life. From prenatal through adolescent health and elder care, there is room to design and implement programs that address the needs of those who are differently abled so that they may receive services and engage to provide services in the context of workforce capacity-building. We can and should adapt our methods to cater to the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities throughout their lives.

Second, the implementation of task-sharing models is crucial. This involves empowering not only educators but also community members, caregivers and peers in the educational process. Furthermore, technology must be levered judiciously to bridge the educational divide. We need to develop and implement digital solutions, including ICT, that are accessible to all, ensuring that technology serves as an enabler and not a barrier to learning.

Third, we need to look beyond the educational sector itself and foster interdisciplinary collaborations involving health care, social service and community organizations. These partnerships can offer holistic support to students with disabilities, addressing their educational, social and health needs.

• (1200)

We heavily suggest that a mandate be implemented for all funding decisions, one that requires a demonstration of a clear commitment with specific metrics towards the inclusion of children with disabilities. Measurement is critical to spur change, and doing it well necessitates co-operation and partnerships outside of silos. In our globalized world, we need to make a concerted effort to convene these types of partnerships outside of Canada, as well, and tap into international collaboration and co-operation.

Funding these partnerships on a participatory basis is also key. We need to look beyond our borders, learning from and supporting each other in our quest to provide inclusive education.

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? It's been almost one minute extra.

Dr. Shawna Novak: Yes.

This involves sharing best practices, engaging in research initiatives and informing international networks to advocate for policy changes. Working together—both within nations and across—we can create a world where each individual, irrespective of their abilities, has the opportunity to learn, grow and contribute to their community.

Thank you for all of your unwavering dedication to making a meaningful difference, and for the leadership you've shown in steering this committee. Your efforts are the cornerstone of progress in this endeavour.

Thank you.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Novak.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Eric Rosenthal to take the floor for five minutes.

Can you hear us, Mr. Rosenthal?

Mr. Eric Rosenthal (Executive Director, Disability Rights International): I lost the previous testimony, but I can hear you.

The Chair: Go ahead, please. You have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Eric Rosenthal: Thank you very much.

My name is Eric Rosenthal. I'm the founder and executive director of Disability Rights International.

I thank you very much for your interest in advancing the cause of inclusive education for people with disabilities. I appreciate this privilege and opportunity to speak about what we at DRI have observed in 30 years of work, documenting and investigating the human rights of children and adults with disabilities.

I would like to bring the attention of this committee to the important link between the issue of inclusive education and the segregation of children from society in orphanages, boarding schools, institutions, social care homes, adult psychiatric facilities and many places where they are swept away unseen, experience terrible human rights conditions and do not have the opportunity for any form of education, much less inclusive education.

I have visited institutions in more than three dozen countries, including Mexico and countries in Central America, South America, eastern Europe, the Middle East and Vietnam. What we found is universal. These facilities are dangerous, and within them, not only do children generally not go to school at all; they receive essentially no education. If there is one call, it is that global, inclusive education must address the needs of children who are placed in these institutions. Even if education were provided, the dangers, the human rights violations, the emotional impact, the cognitive neglect and the impairments caused by the disability undermine any future opportunity or current ability to receive an education.

What we have unfortunately found is that international aid has very often overlooked this population and, indeed, contributed to the problems by investing international resources...very often moving from big institutions into smaller institutions, such as group homes. The international community and the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have emphasized that inclusive education cannot happen in an institutional context, and that institutions both large and small, including what are called group homes, are essentially institutions. If we invest in those institutions, we are writing off the lives and the future potential of these children.

Our main recommendation is that institutionalization be placed on the agenda of the Global Education Program and that efforts be made to specifically target returning children to their families, which is the only place they will ever be able to be fully included in society and achieve an education.

The other important thing is, in breaking down the silos between the education community and, more broadly, between the children's community and the disability community, what we find is that reform is only possible when the constituents of those reforms—meaning children with disabilities, family members and organizations of people with disabilities—are engaged. In order to create an inclusive society in which education is a possibility, support for family organizations and disability-run organizations is essential. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that participation as a fundamental right.

We have seen time and time again policies made by major international donors that sound great on paper, but when you go to the field, the reality is far different from what you see. Grants must be broken down. Support must be provided. There will be no effective participation of people with disabilities unless funding is set aside to support the participation of people with disabilities. Funding, capacity-building, training, inclusion, full participation and partnership are essential.

- (1210)

Please, we encourage you to partner at the local level and the national level with disability organizations to address combined efforts for both inclusive education and ending the very dangerous segregation of children from society to save them from a lifetime of abuse.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Rosenthal, that's perfect timing. Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Joseph Nhan-O'Reilly to take the floor for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Joseph Nhan-O'Reilly (Executive Director, International Parliamentary Network for Education): Thank you, Mr. Chair. This is a terrific initiative, and it's a real pleasure and privilege to be here with so many esteemed witnesses with so much expertise.

I am the co-founder and executive director of the International Parliamentary Network for Education. The Network's purpose is to grow political leadership for education and the achievement of the sustainable development goal for education, goal 4, in particular.

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the active participation in the network—which is a network of members of parliament from all around the world—of a number of Canadian MPs and senators, including three members of this committee, members Lake, Vandenbeld and McPherson, who have all been founding members of IPNEd and very active in its work, particularly Mr. Lake, who is a member of our global executive, in which he represents North America.

As you all know, central to the promise of the sustainable development goals is the principle that we will leave no one behind and that, consequently, the goals will not be considered delivered unless everyone benefits. We are, of course, a long way from achieving that in respect of the education goal in general and, in particular, with respect to learners with disabilities. As I know we'll hear about later, data on disability in general and on disabled learners' access to and achievement in education is poor but the UNESCO global education monitoring report estimates that in low- and middle-income countries, up to half of all children with a disability are, in fact, out of school and the vast majority of those children have in fact never been to school. So action to support the inclusion of people with disabilities in education is absolutely crucial to the fulfillment of the SDGs and, of course, to the rights of those children.

I opened by explaining IPNEd's mission to grow political leadership for education. I want to return to that principle, affirm this committee's work, point to its wider potential and leave you with some suggestions.

We grow political leadership on education by supporting parliamentarians to understand the opportunities and the challenges associated with educational progress. We provide them with evidence and encouragement to take actionable steps as individuals and, even more importantly, with their parliamentary peers in their own parliament, regionally and globally.

As you all know, parliaments and their members have a number of core functions, including representation, legislation, budgeting and scrutiny, and we want to ensure that parliamentarians leverage those functions to the very best effect in growing access to and improving the quality of education around the world. I'm delighted to see the initiatives being taken by the Canadian Parliament in this regard, first in the form of the unanimous adoption of Mr Lake's motion on disability-inclusive education and now with this inquiry. You see, one of the challenges associated with disability is, as we know, invisibility. At its worst, this takes the form of the de facto incarceration of disabled people in institutions or even in their own homes. But it has many manifestations, which lead us to turn the other way and fail to acknowledge both the extent of disability in our communities and the exclusion of disabled people. So it's very powerful when parliaments use their powers to shine a light on disability and seek to address it.

With that in mind, along with the specific mandate of the International Parliamentary Network for Education, I want to draw the committee's attention to the central importance of parliamentary action to accelerate disability-inclusive education around the world. Obviously, we have a basis for that in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. There are 187 states parties to the convention. As you all know, an international convention such as this needs to be given effect through national legislation, which is the preserve of parliaments. At the heart of any legislative approach will, of course, be guaranteeing in law non-discrimination on the grounds of disability and then applying that via policy and legislation so that a clear framework exists that sets out the rights and entitlements of disabled people in respect of education and the responsibilities of duty bearers. We all understand that the best laws won't, on their own, alter a situation, but we see time and time again that the lack of laws impedes progress.

I want to close by sharing one example and a couple of quick suggestions. One of our aims at IPNEd is to amplify the work of parliaments when they take action in support of education. In appearing before you today, I want to take the opportunity to acknowledge the efforts of the Government of Sierra Leone, supported by its parliament, in developing the country's national policy on radical inclusion in schools.

• (1215)

It's a very ambitious policy in which the government committed to inclusive learning environments, targeted support for vulnerable learners, the engagement of families and communities, and the creation of an enabling policy environment.

In April this year, its Parliament passed the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act, which seeks to provide a legislative basis for this and other educational policies. It includes a wide range of regulations, such as ensuring the inclusion of children with physical or learning disabilities, banning discrimination, the creation of youth advisory groups, the prohibition of corporal punishment, and protection from violence and abuse. They're all part of making education more inclusive—radically inclusive, in fact—not just for the learners with disabilities but for other vulnerable children as well.

I hope now that, having passed the act, members of Parliament in Sierra Leone will closely monitor its implementation and hold the government to account for its delivery.

I hope that we can create opportunities for members of Parliament to learn about—

The Chair: Can you please wrap it up? You're at almost one minute extra time.

Thank you.

Mr. Joseph Nhan-O'Reilly: Oh, I'm sorry. I just want to say that I hope that we can learn about the strengths and weaknesses of legislation designed to deliver disability-inclusive education.

I would just also say this: Wouldn't it be amazing if other parliaments adopted similar commitments to the one contained in Mr. Lake's resolution, namely that, when governments spend money, they must commit to the maximum inclusion of people with disabilities, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities?

I apologize for running over.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nhan-O'Reilly.

Now I would like to invite Dr. Julie Weeks to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Dr. Julie Weeks (Lead Health Statistician, The Washington Group on Disability Statistics): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, subcommittee members. Thank you for inviting The Washington Group on Disability Statistics to today's meeting.

I'm going to provide some background information about the Washington Group and the tools that have been developed to collect the information on disability, particularly for children.

The Washington Group is a United Nations city group. City groups are formed by the UN Statistical Commission to address specific statistical or methodological issues of broad concern to countries.

The Washington Group was founded in 2001. Its membership currently stands at some 168 national statistical offices, including Statistics Canada.

We also collaborate with organizations for persons with disabilities, non-governmental organizations, development agencies and umbrella disability organizations, some of which you have heard from or are represented here today.

The primary goal of the Washington Group is to improve the state of disability statistics internationally and to develop question sets that produce high-quality, cross-culturally comparable data and statistics, which can then be used to monitor programs and the commitments that countries have made through their conventions and the 2030 SDGs.

In the last two decades, the Washington Group has developed a number of tools, which are all widely tested and translated, and are now included in data collections around the world.

Many of you are familiar with the short set on functioning, which was developed and formally adopted in 2006. It is a set of six questions to be included in censuses and provides internationally comparable disability data. Currently, some 130 countries report including the short set in at least one of its national data collections.

Following this, longer question sets have been developed and endorsed. These are typically included in national living standards and health surveys, including stand-alone disability surveys.

The case for collecting high-quality data on children is clear. Children are less visible in our data collection agendas. General household surveys and censuses often inadequately identify children with disabilities, especially those with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

For collecting data on children, the Washington Group and UNICEF have collaborated on the development of three question sets.

The first is the child functioning module, which was developed through vigorous international testing and evaluation and adopted in 2016. There are two modules. One is for children aged two to four and one is for school-aged children of five to 17 years. Both are meant for inclusion in surveys and the targeted respondent is the child's parent—most often the mother—or primary caregiver.

The child functioning module is included in some 70 multiple indicator cluster surveys and also country data collections.

There is a version of the child functioning module under development now for use in educational settings. This teacher version of the child functioning module is expected to be finalized by mid-2024. Unlike the other Washington Group tools, it is designed to be administered in school settings including EMIS.

Interest in the child functioning module-teacher version has been great. Participating in evaluations of the tool are USAID, Save the Children, Humanity & Inclusion, Sightsavers, Education Cannot Wait and others.

Finally, as the subcommittee knows, there is also great interest in not only collecting data on disability, but also identifying the barriers and the facilitators to inclusive education. The inclusive education module is an extended set of questions that has undergone both cognitive and field testing in multiple countries. It is also expected to be finalized in mid-2024.

The IEM focuses on formal education and is designed to be used in conjunction with the child functioning module. It aims to identify the barriers children with disabilities may experience in school

attendance. It includes an out-of-school component to ensure data are collected on this vulnerable subpopulation.

● (1220)

Thank you for letting me talk today about some of the Washington Group tools that can ensure we collect critical information on children with disabilities to improve attendance and participation in school.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Weeks. That was very good timing, also.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Jelonche to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Paola Jelonche (Lawyer, Visibilia Foundation): Good morning and thank you very much for allowing me to share my experiences and thoughts with all of you. It's my privilege.

I'm co-founder and president of Fundación Visibilia, a self-advocate organization with a consultative status with the UN and a member of Inclusion International.

We work for inclusion through reading and literacy. The barriers that children and adolescents with disabilities face when attending regular schools are many. In my country, Argentina, these barriers are significant and are mainly of an attitudinal nature.

There is still a misconception that children with intellectual or development disabilities hold back the progress of other children. This idea ignores the principles behind supports, reasonable adjustments and the work of support teachers. In addition, these teachers—who make inclusion real and effective—face many institutional barriers, for example, to understanding that inclusion is not limited to class time work.

Every learning process is based on three essential pillars: the student's interests, the relationship with the teacher and adequate materials. If we do not address and eliminate barriers in these three key aspects, inclusion will continue to be a significant challenge and mask serious contradictions.

I would like to focus on adequate learning materials, which has been neglected in inclusion in common schools. At Fundación Visibilia in Argentina, we have focused on the creation of easy-to-read materials and easy-to-understand communication materials. Initially we designed these resources for students with intellectual disabilities. However, we observed that these materials not only improved the educational performance of students with intellectual disabilities, but also of many others, for example, students with other learning difficulties or who had different linguistic levels due to other circumstances such as those who drop out of school to work or whose native language is not the official language.

However, the use of materials prepared with universal designs for learning faces many myths and purisms that only create more barriers to innovative solutions.

I witness today to highlight the importance of applying easy-to-read and easy-to-understand materials as a universal design for learning to promote inclusive education. This tool not only benefits students with disabilities, but also contributes to achieving real inclusion for all students, regardless of their condition. Inclusive education requires diversity in the classroom, and diversity benefits from universal design. Let's advocate for real inclusive education.

I strongly believe that is the shortcut to creating more respectful and peaceful societies and leaderships.

I am very brief. Thank you so much and thank you, Canada, for leading on.

• (1225)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jelonche.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Ruchi Kulbir Singh to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Ruchi Kulbir Singh (Disability Inclusion Specialist, World Bank Group): Mr. Chair, members of the committee, distinguished witnesses, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for undertaking a study in disability-inclusive education.

A special thank you to the Honourable Mike Lake for introducing this issue to the parliamentary agenda.

I am pleased to be here representing the World Bank, a multilateral institution that provides financing, policy advice and technical assistance to governments of developing countries.

My name is Ruchi Singh and I'm a disability inclusion specialist. I am joined here today by my colleague, Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, World Bank's global disability adviser, who joins us from a remote location in South Africa.

During my remarks, I will provide an overview of the World Bank's authorizing environment and then share three learnings from our experience in delivering inclusive education at scale through World Bank's assisted finance project along with some recommendations.

The World Bank has been making considerable progress in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities throughout its operations. The World Bank's authorizing—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. The interpretation is not working.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll suspend for a couple of seconds to try to deal with the technical difficulties, please.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: I would like to thank all of the witnesses for your remarks.

We will now move to questions and answers with members of the subcommittee.

Due to the fact that Madam Liataud had to leave, if you have any questions for her, you can send them in writing to Global Partnership for Education, through the clerk, please.

For the first round, I would like to invite Mr. Lake to take the floor for seven minutes.

Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I just want to get clarity. Because we started so late and we have a significant number of witnesses who set aside the time to appear, I think we have the opportunity to extend until 1:30 with reduced quorum. The rules allow for that if the committee decides to do that, right?

The Chair: I have no objection if most of the committee agrees.

Hon. Mike Lake: It's just for asking questions of witnesses.

The Chair: Excuse me. I need your attention, please.

Can you repeat that, please, Mr. Lake?

Hon. Mike Lake: I'm not actually calling for a vote on anything. I just want to clarify the rules.

If the committee decides to sit with reduced quorum for that extra half an hour, until 1:30, we don't have to have all members here just to ask questions of the witnesses. It will allow the witnesses to get more information on the record, given that we have some folks who have set aside a significant amount of time, and of course we were delayed by the vote today.

I'm just asking for clarity, which I think you've already given; if the committee decides to do that, we can. I don't need to waste more time on that now.

The Chair: There are two things.

I would like to have the opinion of the members and the clerk, please, in order to rule on it.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Unfortunately, as much as I would like to be able to stay and question the witnesses until 1:30, we are scheduled until 1:00, and I have other meetings. I have other things that I have contributed to that I've said I would be at. Not to diminish from the testimony that the witnesses have brought forward, but we were scheduled until 1:00.

As you know, Mr. Chair, members of Parliament have very busy schedules that are very tight, and as a member of one of the smaller parties, I have additional duties that I actually have made commitments to already.

The Chair: Thank you.

Yes, Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): I want to echo Ms. McPherson's comments.

The reality is that it's a very busy time and very unfortunate that we started late because of the vote, but this happens often at committees.

Unfortunately, when members are not available, I think it's only fair that the committee adjourn. I'm not available, and I know Ms. McPherson isn't. I already informed Mr. Lake of this, and I don't think it's fair to continue. We should do the same as every other committee does.

Thank you.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake: I'm not really moving a motion right now, just recognizing the fact that... Again, there's nothing contentious. There are no votes or anything that happened at this committee. It is simply an opportunity for those who can stay, and in respect of the witnesses, to continue to ask questions of them and have them give testimony that would help the committee if we were to continue.

There's no real motion to move right now, I don't think.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lake.

Who is going to stay, and who is going to leave?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Mr. El-Khoury, if I may, I think the golden rule of this committee has been that if there is anyone who is against that, then we cannot proceed with doing things in that particular manner.

In this particular case, I think several of us have indicated that we do have misgivings about it.

The Chair: Please, may I know who is going to stay and who is going to leave? Then I can get the opinion of the clerk.

Who is going to leave?

I count one, two, three, four....

Yes, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, someone is going to have to come and replace me. As my colleague Ms. McPherson said, members from smaller parties have a larger workload.

That said, I am not sure I fully understand what is being proposed. We are told that some members will leave, but that some will stay to continue asking questions. I don't think we would even have a quorum. I don't think that's valid.

Mr. Clerk, I don't think we can keep House resources when there isn't even a quorum. It doesn't make sense.

● (1235)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Yes, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Just very quickly, I want to point out that we will have a report from this, and so we will, as members, be feeding into that report. If we're not here to listen to the testimony, then that testimony can't be included in the report.

From my perspective, it would be very inappropriate for the committee to continue.

The Chair: May I know who is leaving and who is staying, please?

Mr. Zuberi, are you leaving or staying?

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Chair, I have other meetings after this.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, are you leaving or staying?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I will have a substitute.

But whether there is one or not—

[*English*]

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): I'm covering for Mr. Genuis, so yes, I'm staying.

The Chair: Ms. Sidhu, are you leaving or staying?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, but it doesn't change—

[*English*]

Ms. Sonia Sidhu (Brampton South, Lib.): I'm staying.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead, Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'm just saying that we have to demonstrate some consistency here. I don't think it's necessarily coming down to who can stay and who can't. The golden rule for this committee is that there has to be consensus. Obviously, there isn't consensus on this particular point. I think the meeting should be adjourned at one o'clock.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Excuse me just a moment, because Mr. Zuberi has—

Hon. Mike Lake: Given that there's no consensus, I didn't even really move a motion, but I think we need not waste any more time. It's clear that there are a couple of members who have to leave.

The Chair: We have to go for questions and answers.

We'll adjourn at one o'clock.

The floor is yours, Mr. Lake.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was just listening to a couple of different points that sort of jumped out at me. One was social progress. Dr. Novak was bringing up social progress in addition to cognitive progress from inclusion.

Paola was saying that there is a misconception out there sometimes that kids with disabilities hold back other kids.

Dr. Novak, in the research, you brought up the idea that there's social progress in addition to cognitive progress when you have meaningful inclusion. There's this idea of helping peers to be a part of the solution in a sense.

Can you speak to that a little bit?

Dr. Shawna Novak: Absolutely, thank you very much.

I'm happy to answer that. I think that's a really important point to raise. Inclusion does not exist within a silo nor does engagement in any sense.

You have to have a fulsome response to the social factors. It has to be fully participatory in order to get movement along the continuum to meaningful change and improvement of the particulars to have better quality of life for those with disabilities, to engage them on a social basis, an economic basis and an educational basis. There's engagement at the preliminary level from the point of the childhood education level all the way up to end of life cycle so you're looking at it from a holistic point of view.

In terms of kids with disabilities participating in their own education, that's something that's been addressed as well. It's part of the radical education movement embracing the idea of participatory measures. There's a type of research that heavily involves methodology around participatory methodology. At the same time, you can take that and transition it into interventionalist approaches. That means embedding these different elements plus lived experiences of not only those who have disabilities or are affected by disabilities but also their families, their communities and other stakeholders. I would encourage the incorporation of all those different elements rather than seeing it through a singular lens. This is really about intersectional lenses.

Hon. Mike Lake: I would love to dig into that further, but I have a very limited time for questions.

To Ms. Weeks, the Washington Group child functioning model was mentioned in the call to action. You gave a little bit of background to it. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about how that functioning model is used in practice on the ground.

• (1240)

Dr. Julie Weeks: The data collected with the child functioning model provides two things.

One is information on difficulties that children are experiencing in certain domains of functioning, whether that's seeing, hearing, mobility, fine motor skills, learning, playing, controlling emotions, anxiety or depression. Overall, many data users tend to use that to dichotomize children with disability versus children without; however, the other use of the data, of course, is to kind of drill down into those specific areas of functional difficulty so that any programs or efforts can be targeted to the particular type of difficulty.

Can you elaborate a little bit further if I haven't specifically answered your question?

Hon. Mike Lake: I'm trying to figure this out. For an individual child, in a specific location somewhere in the world, you said that you have a model that's used for two- to four-year-olds and a model that's used for five- to 17-year-olds. A big part of the challenge we have is that we don't know who those kids are. In many parts of the world, those kids are hidden. They're "invisible", to use a word that some would use.

The question I have is around maybe a community health worker who is working for an organization, or something like that. If they're given access to this model, they might have an opportunity to meet one of these kids as they're visiting the families from home to home, and they might be able to, I imagine, use the model to give some form of a broad assessment of a child's situation or disability. Is that how it would work?

In other words, if we scaled that up to more and more organizations on the ground that are meeting families everywhere in the world, might we identify more kids with disabilities who are currently invisible to the system, and might we have that opportunity to get those kids included in school systems?

Dr. Julie Weeks: Yes. The more we harmonize the use of the same kinds of modules to identify children with disabilities, not only in our censuses, not only in our nationally representative surveys, but also in our programming.... When dollars are spent through programs, you have to attach the requirement that information collected during those programs will be collected in the same way. This harmonization is absolutely critical, whether it's administrative data sources, programs or our usual national data collections.

Hon. Mike Lake: Thank you.

I have one minute left. I'm going to Eric, if I could.

You were talking about institutionalization. I guess this is further to the question I asked Dr. Novak a few minutes ago. I would ask for a comment on inclusion and individuals who don't have disabilities. What is the impact on those individuals when we get inclusion right?

Mr. Eric Rosenthal: Thank you very much.

Yes, once we address the issue of inclusion, it has a much broader impact on children who are not labelled with a disability. What we know is that institutional segregation creates impairment and leads to disability of all children, essentially. We are generating more and more impairment by placing children in institutions. By creating inclusive societies for children with disabilities and by allowing that form of segregation to be avoided, we are protecting all children from the dangers of psychiatric, psychological and cognitive impairments as well as protecting them from human rights violations, exploitation of labour and trafficking and other forms of abuse we see in institutions—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Rosenthal. You have exceeded the time by almost half a minute.

We have to do a sound test because Ms. Kulbir Singh was not able to give her remarks earlier. We will suspend for a moment.

Yes, it is working now.

Ms. Kulbir Singh, you have the floor.

• (1245)

Ms. Ruchi Kulbir Singh: That's wonderful. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Members of the committee, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for undertaking this study in disability-inclusive education. A special thank you goes to the Honourable Mike Lake for introducing this issue to the parliamentary agenda.

I am pleased to be here representing the World Bank, a multilateral institution that provides financing, policy advice and technical assistance to governments of developing countries.

My name is Ruchi Kulbir Singh, and I'm a disability inclusion specialist. I'm joined here today by my colleague, Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, World Bank's global disability adviser, who joins us from a remote location in South Africa.

During my remarks, I will provide an overview of the World Bank's authorizing environment, and then share three key learnings from our experience in developing inclusive education and delivering it at scale through the World Bank's assisted-financing projects, along with recommendations.

The World Bank has been making considerable progress in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities throughout its operations. The World Bank's authorizing environment includes a commitment to ensure that all World Bank-financed education projects and programs are disability-inclusive by 2025. In addition, we have the IDA19 and IDA20 policy commitments, which make special reference to disability inclusion—and, in IDA20, to education more particularly.

The World Bank's authorizing framework is the social framework that presents entry points for inclusion. What that means is that every project, education, and otherwise must identify differentiated risks and impacts on persons with disabilities and design programs that prevent and mitigate such risks to ensure equal access and participation.

I am now going to share with you some distilled lessons from our work on improving and promoting disability-inclusive education.

First, there is a strong commitment among government partners to promote disability inclusion in education; however, the catalyst necessary to promote inclusion in education, which is strategic financing and budgetary support, often remains elusive. Regular financing is essential to operationalize a twin-track approach to ensure that a systems-level strengthening for inclusive education is possible. At the World Bank, we have implemented this approach of providing strategic catalytic grants through our two trust funds on disability-inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, and we have seen big gains in countries such as Rwanda, Ethiopia and Nepal.

This operational playbook of investing in catalytic grants has also supported us to deliver at scale. For example, in Rwanda, an investment of \$2 million U.S. by the World Bank's inclusive education initiative has successfully influenced several aspects of a \$150-million investment project in areas such as teacher training, learning materials and infrastructural components, by applying the lens of disability inclusion. Hence, it is our recommendation that continuous financial resources must be available to provide just-in-time support to countries as they take small but critical steps towards ensuring inclusive education.

Secondly, children with intellectual disabilities are the most marginalized, overlooked and stigmatized amongst the disability groups. Moreover, within the disability groups, research indicates that issues concerning intellectual disabilities often receive little to no policy support or financial investment as compared to other disability groups. Resources in the form of financial and assistive technology are often channelled to organizations that may have the strongest lobby or advocacy on the ground.

• (1250)

Third, the commitment toward disability-inclusive education cannot afford to be political. Countries must support this agenda because the right to education is a human right and because article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities prohibits discrimination on grounds of disability and promotes access—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? The time is up.

Ms. Ruchi Kulbir Singh: Support towards disability-inclusive education should not be an occasional policy agenda, and we must move beyond thinking just in terms of access to education for children with disabilities and move toward quality learning.

Mr. Chair, one last point I would like to make before I close is that disability is an experience that intersects with other aspects of human experience and identity. In development circles, disability is often viewed as a separate agenda, and it need not be so.

The Government of Canada has championed the promotion of rights of girls, women and LGBTQI groups. However, the intersecting lens of disability and gender has often been overlooked within those investments. We recommend taking advantage of the momentum around the gender discourse.

Thank you once again.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here and for your testimony and Mr. Lake and the committee for making this study possible.

Disability is an extremely important subject, as is education, and ensuring that all people who have a disability can receive a dignified education and be full participants in society is critical.

While we were in committee, I saw the news, although I won't talk about it in this moment, but it brought to mind what's happening within a conflict right now in the Middle East.

Ms. Mustafa, I thank you for your testimony and your story as a young person who lived in a conflict zone in Syria and later on got the tools to really develop to your fullest capacity. I'd like to hear what your ordeal was like while living in conflict within Syria and what that experience meant for you as somebody who was living with violence and war. Can you talk a bit more about that, please?

Ms. Nujeen Mustafa: Sure. I would love to address that.

Living with a disability, especially when it was physical, made me feel like I was the obstacle between my family and reaching safety. There was always the anxiety of what to do if we had to evacuate at a moment's notice, which might not always have been possible.

I think this is even more visible for people with other types of disabilities. If you're hard of hearing, you would not be warned of bombs coming or an impending bombing. If you had a visual impairment, you would have to navigate an environment full of debris and rubble to reach safety or to access any form of security.

It took a toll on my emotional and mental health to be in that situation as a person with a disability, just in feeling like I was a burden on everyone else, that they could escape easier if I wasn't there, and—

• (1255)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Can I ask you this? I just want to get a bit of precision regarding some answers for the testimony. The breaking news is that the prime ministers of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, all three prime ministers, called for urgent international efforts toward a sustainable ceasefire in Israel and Gaza in the Israel-Gaza conflict. You were a young person and conflict was happening around you. If you could put yourself in the shoes of the young people within Gaza today, what do you think they're going through right now?

Ms. Nujeen Mustafa: I think they're in what I call “survival mode”. They're experiencing feelings of helplessness and despair in that situation. They're hoping for the best outcome, but not expect-

ing it. They are praying the situation will not become worse, or that they will not end up losing their lives or someone they care about.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: I've been told that U.N. agencies were quite robust, assisting and very much present on the ground, in particular for persons with disabilities in education.

Was that your experience? Did you find there was a stronger presence within Syria as compared with other conflicts?

Ms. Nujeen Mustafa: I was personally not approached to participate in any initiatives related to education. I did not receive a proper education until I was in Germany, which was at the age of 17.

I always say that people with disabilities are forgotten in times of peace, let alone in times of war, in terms of access to education. Also, I would not have had any access to information related to initiatives made by U.N. agencies. There were other humanitarian actors in regard to the topic of education within conflict. That's one of the barriers that also presents: the lack of access and exposure to education when it comes to conflict.

Oftentimes, education is not prioritized when you're just trying to survive. In that context, I believe a very minuscule portion of families or people who have disabilities would have access to services, when it comes to education during a conflict.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: You, personally, are a very high performer—

The Chair: You only have 30 seconds.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thirty seconds....

Do you have any closing thoughts?

Ms. Nujeen Mustafa: My closing thought is this: I would encourage proper data collection and proper training for humanitarian staff so they can be more inclusive in their initiatives in regard to education—to know how to integrate people with disabilities and factor them into the building blocks, not leave them as an afterthought.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mustafa.

Yes, go ahead, please.

Hon. Mike Lake: By way of compromise, given the conversation we had before, I have this suggestion. At this point, neither the Bloc nor the NDP have had questioning rounds, whereas we got seven minutes each. I'd suggest that the Bloc and the NDP each get their seven-minute questioning rounds. Then, I'm fine if we end.

The Chair: I would like to ask whether you want to give up some of your time, taking two and a half minutes each. How about that?

Ms. Heather McPherson: I honestly cannot stay past 1:00. This is unfortunately where we're at.

The Chair: Okay.

Please, go ahead.

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola (Beauport—Limoilou, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Nhan-O'Reilly.

Mr. Nhan-O'Reilly, you gave the example of Sierra Leone in terms of changing laws and regulations for the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Can you give us any examples other than Sierra Leone of legal frameworks that have been effective in implementing obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

[*English*]

The Chair: Yes, please.

Mr. Joseph Nhan-O'Reilly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

It's a great question.

In the short time that's available, rather than call out particular examples, I think, really, that this is work for us all. This is something we should focus very much on.

I was doing some research in advance of this session on good practice, good examples and tool kits for disability-inclusive education, legislation, policy and practice, and it wasn't readily available. That was one of the recommendations I made in my testimony: In trying to implement Mr. Lake's resolution and encouraging the Government of Canada to think about what more it could do on this, supporting parliaments and parliamentarians around the world to share good practice and identify what good looks like is really essential.

We have a fantastic enabling instrument in the form of the declaration on the rights of persons with disabilities, but enacting that into legislation can take many forms. I think a community of practice of parliamentarians focusing on that would be very powerful.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Julie Vignola: Thank you, Mr. Nhan-O'Reilly—

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to ask if it is the will of the committee to adjourn now.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Mr. Chair, several people have spoken. It is not the will of the committee members to continue.

We want to adjourn.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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