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Novel Country Expertise in the Use of Assistive Technology to Support Persons with Autism Presented at the 12th Session of the United Nations Conference of the States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

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The State of Qatar's mission to the United Nations in New York organized a side event on the role of assistive technology in helping autistic people on the 12th Session of the Conference of the States Parties (COSP) in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Qatar believes in the importance of ICT investment in order to unlock the potential of people with disabilities and help them achieve independence and self-reliance. The State of Qatar is one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008. It has taken a number of measures in its continuous efforts to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities and their full integration into the society. In accordance with the directives of His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Amir of Qatar, and the embodiment of the Qatar National Vision 2030, which provides for equality and justice for all sectors and sectors of society.

In order to achieve the objectives and to highlight Qatar's outstanding efforts and achievements, Mada Assistive Technology Center participated with Qatar Social Work Foundation, Al Shafallah Center for Persons with Disability and Hamad Bin Khalifa University, represented by the College of Science and Engineering and Qatar Biomedical Research Institute. This international event was organized under the title of 'How Technology Can Help Support Autistic People' on the sidelines of the 12th Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the headquarters of the United Nations in New York.

Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al-Thani, Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations in New York, opened the session and welcomed the participants. She spoke about the importance of supporting autistic people through assistive technology and information and communication technologies to ensure that no one is left behind by 2030.

Ms. Amal A. Al-Mannai, CEO of Qatar Foundation for Social Work (QFSW), spoke about the importance of assistive technology in supporting people with disabilities and people with autism. Ms. Al Mannai highlighted the distinguished achievements and services of Qatar Foundation for Social Work in various fields to support people with autism at various levels.

The seminar included the presentation of a number of specialized working papers that reflected Qatar's role in supporting people with disabilities through ICT.

For her part, Maha Al Mansouri, CEO of Mada, presented the center's strategic objectives and diverse services that directly and effectively contribute to the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, with special emphasis on Article 9 on accessibility. Ms. Al Mansouri reviewed the Center's achievements in the field of ICT access, including the development of the first language based on Arabic symbols, according to local cultural standards. Ms. Maha Al Mansouri also spoke about Mada's activity as the leading innovation center in the region and the world in supporting the development of technology solutions in

Arabic such as the Arabic version of Clker 7, the leading teaching tool used by teachers with students with disabilities, including people with autism around the world. Al Mansouri also noted that Qatar achieved 94 percent access rate within government websites and that Qatar is ranked fifth in terms of rights of digital accessibility assessment.

"I would like to thank Ambassador Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al-Thani, the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to the United Nations in New York, for her efforts in organizing this important international event," said Maha Al Mansouri. "Over the years, we have embarked on a journey to enable digital access in the State of Qatar, and focused on building the capacity of specialists through training programs and facilitating the global accreditation of specialized tests in Arabic for graduates of Mada's program. This enables advanced users from different parties to adopt digital accessibility to sites and applications.

Dr. Dina Al-Thani, Assistant Professor at the College of Science and Engineering at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, reviewed the role of sensor and virtual reality techniques in supporting the education and learning of children with autism spectrum disorder. Dr. Dina introduced two different projects for the college: the Vocabulary Support Project for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) using MAR; and a project to detect and monitor attention in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder during learning.

Dr. Dena Al-Thani said: "The rapid advancement of technologies is going a long way to transform healthcare and the lives of those with disabilities. Through HBKU's multidisciplinary approach, we are driven to contribute to addressing challenges facing Qatar and the region, including the growing prevalence of autism. I had the pleasure to present our research findings on developing novel non-invasive methods to measure attention span of students with autism spectrum disorder in a panel discussion organized by the Qatar Permanent mission to the United Nations. The panel was on the sidelines of the 12th Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities."

Mrs. Nora Al-Sulaiti, from the Shafallah Center for People with Disabilities at the Qatar Social Work Foundation presented a presentation on the achievements of the autism department in the center in addition to the various services provided by the Center, including specialized technical assistance services. Ms. Nora Al-Sulaiti explained the stages of providing services to the target groups in the center, including positive intervention and follow-up. Mrs. Al-Sulaiti also praised the cooperation and coordination with Mada in various fields, including building the capacity of advanced users of assistive technology from the Shafallah Center, to conclude with various success stories from Shafallah Center using assistive technology.

Dr. Fouad Al-Shaban and Dr. Sara Abdulla from the Neurological Disorders Research Centre (NDRC) at Qatar Biomedical Research Institute (QBRI), part of Hamad Bin Khalifa University, participated in the event. Dr. Sara Abdulla presented an overview of the ongoing translational research projects on autism spectrum disorder (ASD) conducted at the NDRC. She introduced the use of eye tracking technology as a diagnostic tool for the early identification of ASD. Furthermore, she highlighted the NDRC's multidisciplinary approach towards understanding the underlying mechanisms behind ASD and their aim to identify blood biomarkers that may aid early diagnosis to support clinicians and families.

Dr. Al-Shaban highlighted QBRI's prevalence study, which identified an estimated number of individuals with ASD in Qatar. Furthermore, he presented his current research strategy of utilizing eye-tracking technology as a tool for the early screening and diagnosis of ASD. Dr. Al-Shaban has adapted this technology to cater to children in the Arab region, utilizing Arabic stimuli, and is in the process of validating its effectiveness.

Dr. Omar El-Agnaf, Executive Director of QBRI, also attended the event and participated in the round table discussion, he said: "QBRI is committed to conducting invaluable research that will contribute to the development of tailor-made assisted technologies to improve the lives of people with autism. We are honored to have been given the opportunity to participate in this significant session, which enabled us to showcase the pivotal work of Qatar and local entities to better understand and support children with autism. We are especially grateful to be able to benefit from the wealth of expertise around us, and present QBRI's significant and promising work in the field in an international domain."

The seminar, moderated by Dr. Andy Sheeh, Vice President for Inclusion and Public Health at Autism Speaks, included Ms. Daniela Bas, Director of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Inclusive Social

Development of the United Nations; and Mr. Takashi Tsutsu, Professor, College of Science at the University of Tokyo; Ms. Roxana Widmer, Senior Program Officer for Digital Inclusion-Development Bureau at the International Telecommunication Union; and Mr. Leo Janquera, Microsoft.

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