



Yetnebersh Nigussie (Ethiopia)

“for her inspiring work promoting the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities, allowing them to realise their full potential and changing mindsets in our societies.”

Yetnebersh Nigussie is an Ethiopian lawyer working for human rights based on her own experience of being discriminated against coming from a “developing country”, being young, a woman – and blind. She is fearlessly pushing for women’s and girls’ rights, inclusive education and a vibrant civil society. Nigussie is an outstanding advocate for the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Through her tireless efforts, she has changed perceptions on disability in her own society and internationally with the compelling message: “Focus on the person, not the disability. We have one disability, but 99 abilities to build on!” Currently a Senior Inclusion Advisor with the international disability and development NGO, Light for the World, Nigussie fights for the inclusion of the 15% - about 1 billion - of the world’s population who have some kind of disability. She strives to create inclusive conditions for future generations by connecting national realities with international frameworks.

Active leader at an early age

Yetnebersh Nigussie was born 24 January 1982 in the Amhara region of Northern Ethiopia. Becoming blind at the age of five after a meningitis infection, she escaped an early marriage and was sent to the Shashemane Catholic School for the blind. The nuns running the school helped her to focus on her capabilities. “I did not understand until much later that women were considered to be of lower rank in society”, she says.

During her time at the Menelik II senior secondary school, she became the leader of the student council. As a student at Addis Ababa University, she co-founded the university Anti-AIDS movement. She also founded the Addis Ababa University Female Students’ Association (2006) and became its first president. In addition to her Law degree and Master’s degree in social work, she will soon complete a second Master’s degree in Peace and Security Studies at Addis Ababa University.

She has been an active volunteer with more than 20 Ethiopian organisations, including the Ethiopian National Disability Action Network. She served as Chair of the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind Women’s Wing for four years.



Founding and developing a national disability and development organisation

In 2005, Nigussie co-founded the Ethiopian Centre for Disability and Development (ECDD) in order to address the weak cooperation between disability organisations, specialised service providers and mainstream development programmes. Instead of only providing services to individuals, ECDD promotes and facilitates disability inclusion in the Ethiopian society, as well as in the legal and policy spheres. Nigussie and the other founding members of ECDD decided to design the organisation in a way which would reflect, both in structure and programmes, the following values: majority governance by persons with disabilities, gender equality, and positive bias (affirmative action) in staff employment. Thus, Nigussie and the ECDD team made sure that prominent individuals and professionals – both with and without disabilities – were represented in the organisation, and reflecting 152 different aspects of society. ECDD offers expertise to the government, civil society organisations and companies alike to help them make their services and workplaces inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

From 2011–2015, Nigussie was the Executive Director of ECDD. Under her leadership, ECDD became one of the main driving forces for inclusion and for implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in Ethiopia, and the organisation expanded its programmes from Addis Ababa to four other regions in the country. Furthermore, ECDD started publishing the 'Guide to Accessible Ethiopia' – listing how accessible official buildings, hotels and restaurants are to people with disabilities. During her time as Director, Nigussie played an instrumental role in securing a base for the African Disability Forum (the first umbrella grouping of African Disabled People's organisations) in Addis Ababa. In 2013, she was central in setting up the Ethiopian Charities & Societies Forum, ECSF, an umbrella organisation aimed to take on Ethiopian civil society's concerns and challenges, and served as its first chair. From 2013–2014, she was Goodwill Ambassador for the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management organising committee. She was also heavily involved in establishing the new accessibility directives for Ethiopia's building code, which require all new buildings to be accessible to persons with disabilities.

Regional and international advocacy work

After having represented the international and disability organisation, Light for the World, as a member of their International Board of Ambassadors, Nigussie joined their team as Senior Inclusion Advisor in 2016. In this role, she is expanding her advocacy work to regional and international arenas by connecting local and international development issues. Nigussie is currently serving as an alternate representative to the Stakeholder Group of Persons with



Disabilities – the focal point for UNDESA, ECOSOC and the General Assembly for all UN Sustainable Development policies (2016-2017).

Despite her strong focus on regional and international policy making, Nigussie's geographical base is still within Ethiopia.

Changing attitudes

Nigussie says that she wants to encourage young people to get involved in the development of their community and their country, so that they will stay and continue the development. Almost 10 years ago, she opened an inclusive school for underprivileged children in Addis Ababa. "Schools are the right place to promote inclusion of persons with disabilities", she says. "Children who are playing and learning together wouldn't have any problem to work together, to marry each other or to help each other."

Trust building is at the core of everything Nigussie does. She conveys the message that trust is needed in order to try to change people's minds when it comes to the abilities of people with disabilities, the potential of girls and women to become great pioneers, and the capacity of young people to take responsibility for their home environment and lives.

She is a skilled negotiator and eloquent speaker, and has received a number of awards for her work, including the 2015 African Most Influential Women in Business and Politics Award (category of welfare and civil society organisations) in South Africa; the 2011 World of Difference Life Time Achievement Award (category education) from the International Alliance for Women in the USA; the Individual Award for Excellent HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Activities Coordination, from the Addis Ababa City Administration; and, in 2003, the Amanitare Award for sexual and reproductive health advocates in South Africa. She is married and has two daughters, Ahati and Zema.