With the support of Johanniter and in cooperation with YMCA and the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce and Industry, BASR organized a workshop at Grand Park Hotel in Bethlehem for promoting the full participation of people with disabilities in the local labor market in compliance with national laws and international conventions, in which more than 30 representatives of private companies, civil society institutions and decision makers at several governmental institutions have participated and discussed the concepts of inclusive employment, diversity and accommodation in accessible work environments.

The workshop is a first step of an intensive advocacy and lobbying plan set by BASR’s Economic Empowerment Program to fight against isolating and discriminating against people with disabilities, improve their quality of life, and encourage them to be fully integrated in the labor market on equal basis with other citizens, paving the way for people with disabilities to become active members of society, contributing to social and economic development in Palestine.

The workshop was inaugurated by Dr. Sameer Hazboun, Chair of Bethlehem Chamber of
Commerce and Industry, Mr. Musa Darwish, BASR’s Chairman of the Board and BASR’s General Director Mr. Edmund Shehadeh, and Mr. Nader Abu Amsha, Director of the East Jerusalem YMCA Rehabilitation Program.

At the opening session Dr. Sameer Hazboun addressed the private sector employers from the perspective of their corporate social responsibility to prevent the exclusion of people with disabilities and offer them equal access to compete for job opportunities at the proportion of at least 5% of the total number of their employees according to the 1999 law of the rights of Palestinian people with disability, declaring that the unemployment rate among people with disabilities in Palestine reached up to 87% according to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, which is not caused by the inability of people with disabilities to perform different tasks at work, but rather by the negative attitudes of employers and their fear of the inefficiency and lack of productivity of people with disabilities.

Adding to that, Dr. Hazboun introduced several initiatives that may contribute to elaborating strategic policies and mechanisms for steering the employment policies of people with disabilities by forming a coordination council of active members of the private and public sectors, proclaiming the willingness of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry to include people with disabilities in the upcoming project of 2015 that encompasses opening 6 new factories in the industrial suburb of Bethlehem district, highlighting its intention to allocate certain areas for marketing all goods produced by people with disabilities without any financial charges, and also to focus in its online promotional activities on the economic rights of people with disabilities. On the other hand, he asserted that micro-financing companies and banks need to soften their policies for supporting and micro-financing micro-enterprises for people with disabilities.

Mr. Nader Abu Amsha, Director of the East Jerusalem YMCA Rehabilitation Program, stressed the necessity to change societal attitudes towards people with disabilities from the charity to the social and rights based approach, as people with disabilities can equally compete in the labour market and can contribute to economic development.

Mr. Edmund Shehadeh, BASR’s General Director, urged the participants to invest in people with disabilities on the basis of their educational and professional experiences and competencies, confirming that many of them can be creative and efficient in different types of jobs, pointing out BASR’s positive experience with employing qualified persons with different types of disabilities in different administrative and professional positions including leading management positions, as a contribution towards promoting an inclusive society.
Following the opening session, several presentations were delivered on such topics as the components of inclusive employment policies accessible and inclusive work environment, reasonable accommodation to facilitate the participation of people with disabilities in the workplace, the real meaning of diversity, and the practical ways of engaging people with disabilities in the development process and the benefits to be gained thereafter. The workshop also dealt with topics as the three paradigms of disability the charitable, medical and human rights paradigms, emphasizing the necessity to reject the negative stereotypes of persons with disabilities and embrace the human rights approach that promotes the inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities in the labour market. Some good models of international private companies that considered persons with disabilities as users when designing and producing modern technologies that made life easier for all were also presented.

Later on, several video spots and reportages were shown to the audience for raising their awareness on societal attitudes and on positive models of self-employment, inclusive employment policies and practices as well as reasonable accommodation in the work environment for different types of disabilities.

At the end, there was an open discussion where the participants expressed their concerns and asked questions that were answered by the facilitators. All participants agreed on elaborating strategic inclusive policies for the right of people with disabilities to employment on equal footing with other citizens.

“Such workshops are essential to build partnerships and cooperation among the private, public and civil society sectors. They help raise the awareness of decision makers and remove employers’ fears and concerns regarding the employment of people with disability”, said the General Director of Nestle Company in Palestine, Mr. Anton Hazbun one of the participants at the workshop.
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