

ELLA CONGRESS 2015 IN VIENNA – "UNITED FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: MOVING BEYOND TRADITIONAL LEARNING"

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Title

Enabling the Disabled: Current situation and what the UN is doing for disabled youth

Good morning.

The scheduling of this congress is timely and its title “United for Inclusive education: moving beyond traditional learning” is indeed fitting.

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities¹

It is timely because on December 3rd this year, we will observe the 23rd International Day of Persons with Disability which was proclaimed by the United Nations back in 1992. The theme for this year will be “**Inclusion matters: access and empowerment of people of all disabilities**”.

The observance of the Day aims to promote an understanding of disability issues and mobilize support for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities.

It also seeks to increase awareness of gains to be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life.

MDGs and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The congress is also fitting because the end of 2015 marks a development journey away from Millennium Development Goals to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (also referred to as Sustainable Development Goals – SGS – or post-2015 Development Goals), which is a United Nations universal development agenda adopted by the General Assembly on September 25th this year. The agenda’s unique approach is its aspiration **to leave NO ONE behind and to have a human rights based approach.**

In this respect, addressing the rights of young people, especially young people with disabilities will be crucial in ensuring the success of the new development agenda. Inclusive and quality education for them is prerequisite for our efforts to empower them so that they can empower themselves.

¹ Int’l day of persons with disabilities: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp/default.asp?id=111>

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the organizers, ELLA, LLP, IB and ÖJAB, for inviting me to this very important congress.

I am particularly pleased to see many young people in attendance today. And I intentionally single them out because they, being part of the 2 billion young people around the world, will play a crucial role in our effort to issues of inequalities and the achievement of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Therefore thank you for being here.

Let us remind ourselves why we are here, at this congress

Some facts

According to a report² by the UN World Health Organization and the World Bank, more than one billion people in the world experience disability today.

That is just shy of the entire population of the European continent and the United States combined.

Nearly 220 million youth with disabilities around the world (that is about the size of the population of France, Germany and United Kingdom combined or 2/3 of the population of USA), nearly 80 percent of them live in developing countries, are either marginalized or discriminated against. In some cases they face both.

Disability disproportionately affects vulnerable population – it is more common among women, older people, and households that are poor.

Disability is very diverse – although the stereotypical views of disability focus more on the most affected such as wheelchair users, blind and deaf people, disability experience varies greatly.

People with disabilities face widespread barriers in accessing services (health, education, employment, transport as well as information).

People with disabilities have worse health and socioeconomic outcomes.

² World report on disability: http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/factsheet.pdf?ua=1
http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/en/

Young people with disabilities remain among the poorest and most marginalized of the world's youth. They face discrimination in schools, work places, and even in their own families.

Attitudes and discrimination linked to disability make it much more difficult for them to go to school, to find work or to participate in local activities.

We are here today because we share the same view that the above factual realities are not acceptable in a 21st Century world where there are more than enough knowledge and resources to provide everyone with equal opportunities to flourish. We are here because we believe that these realities **MUST** change.

What is the UN doing for disabled youth?

The UN has established a variety of instruments and programs through which it is addressing the issue of disability. In my following remarks, I will only touch on a few of those.

The UN continues to press for actions to increase opportunities for young people with disabilities.

Through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (SCRPD)³, the UN works to advance the rights of persons with disabilities in society and development, through key global instruments such as the **World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons**, the **Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities** and other relevant human rights and development instruments. For example:

United Nations Enable⁴

- United Nations Enable film festival was established in 2009 by UN DESA to show short films on the commemoration of the international day of persons with disability. The aim of the Enable film festival is **to raise awareness of disability issues and further promote the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities in society.**
- United Nations Enable photo exhibition was also initiated by UN DESA in 2015 with aim to **help change misperceptions and to counter stigma and stereotyping about persons with disabilities**

³ SCRPD: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>

⁴ Un Enable: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=17>

- UN forum on youth – example UNESCO youth forum (created in 1999 to **provide young people with the opportunity to present their concerns and ideas to Member States**) – the 9th UNESCO youth forum is took place in Paris on 26-28 October.
- The adoption of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities by the UN General Assembly in 1993 was one of the major outcomes of the decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). **It provides for the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to monitor the implementation of the Rules in Member States.**
- World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1982. **It is a global strategy to enhance disability prevention, rehabilitation and equalization of opportunities, which pertains to full participation of persons with disabilities in social life and national development. The WPA also emphasizes the need to approach disability from a human rights perspective.**
- The appointment of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility is another action taken by the UN in December 2014 following the Human Rights Council Resolution 26/20.

The office of the Special Envoy on Disability and Accessibility **is mandated to make sure that persons with disabilities are guaranteed the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination.**

It calls for further attention to address the barriers that persons with disabilities continue to face in all parts of the world in their participation as equal members of society.

- United Nations voluntary Fund on Disability **supports the implementation of the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons and the work of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility**

20130 Agenda for Sustainable Development and disability⁵

The other crucial instrument the UN has at its disposal to address inequalities for disabled people is through the 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

The participation and the engagement of youth in the new agenda will be crucial to ensure its success.

Stressing the importance of youth involvement at a meeting in NY, one youth representative Lucia Gareton from France said of the agenda **“It is extremely important to engage youth, because we are not only the leaders of tomorrow, but the leaders of today,” on the importance of youth involvement. ”These are our goals, and the time to get them done is now.”**

I could not agree more with Lucia.

The new development agenda’s goals 4, 8, 11 and 17 are designed to address the issue of disability.

If you allow me, I would like to go a little into details to explain how these goals aim to address the disability matter.

Goal 4 – Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all – specifically addresses, in its target 4.5 that by 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

Target 4.a addresses the need to build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

Goal 8 – Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work.

⁵ SDGs and disability: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=1618>

Target 8.5 of this goal sets forth that by 2030, full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value should be achieved.

Target 8.6 aims to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2020.

Targets 8.7 and 8.b address the need to eliminate child labor and the operationalization of the global strategy for youth employment.

Goal 11 – Make city and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

Target 11.2 sets forth that by 2030, we should provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.

Target 11.7 aims to provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities by 2030.

Goal 17 – Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

Target 17.18 aims to enhance capacity-building support to developing countries, including for least developed countries and small island developing States, to increase significantly the availability of high-quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts by 2030.

The above mentioned efforts by the United Nations are to be commended. But they are only instruments that only states must implement on the ground.

The Challenge in front of us

Marginalization and discrimination of youth with special needs are not only structural issues. They are social and cultural problems that require a holistic change of attitude and behavior on institutional and societal levels.

A special attention should be paid to young female with disability who face a “double discrimination” first due to their special needs and second due to their gender. Therefore by addressing this problem, we need an inclusive approach that bridges the gap between male and female youth with disability.

It is possible to change course

It has been proved and as we see here in the room, people are making the change. Let me share what I found out when I was doing my research for this conference:

First - Empowerment through new technologies

According to a study⁶ conducted by the social policy and development division of the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs (UN DESA), young people with disability have expressed how important new technologies have been changing their lives for the better.

But new technologies are not available to most of the almost 220 million youth with special needs who live in poor countries in Africa, Asia and others. In this regard, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will play a crucial role in creating an environment, in those countries, that will advance opportunities to make sure that no child is left behind.

Second - Knowledge exchange

Exchanging best practice experience and knowledge on how to address this problem should be done at all levels. International and regional cooperation is needed to increase capacity and ensure long term impact. This includes training and educating the society, employees, educators and policy makers on how to establish actions and approaches that are friendly to youth with disability.

⁶ Youth with disability: <http://undesadspd.org/youth/resourcesandpublications/youthwithdisabilities.aspx>

Third - Implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

Countries that have not yet signed the CRPD must do so without delay and ratify it at the earliest possible. Those who have ratified must ensure that the convention is being implemented accordingly and a rigorous monitoring and evaluation (SDGs include a monitoring and evaluation mechanism of disability-inclusive development) must continue to hold countries accountable when they are not living up to their responsibilities. In this regard, countries must cooperate fully with the office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General on Disability and Accessibility, the Special Rapporteur and continue to support the United Nations voluntary Fund on Disability.

Fourth - Unified action

The UN Secretary General, H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-moon has called on the UN to unite and deliver as one. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is giving youth with disability a platform to raise their voices and make their demands. But we need to do more. As individual, activist groups, civil society organizations, the private sector and other relevant institutions must unite as one to challenge norms and behavior that discriminate against children.

We must continue to raise awareness and campaigning for change. Because after all, just as much there should be no discrimination against gender, race, or any type of orientation, there should be no distinction between whether a child is born abled or disabled.

Fifth - Speak up and speak out

Finally, young people with disabilities must speak up whenever they can to make their voices heard and demand their rights from their societies and governments.

We must also speak out against all forms of discrimination against them and be their voices when they fall short.

What ordinary people can do

At the end of the day though, actions speak louder than words.

So let me ask us this, as JFK (the former USA President) once said “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”

So I am asking us, me and you, what are we doing for our society and our young people with special needs?

This is not a job interview so don't be compelled to answer but **think about it if you are not doing anything.**

I am very pleased to see and have read names of many people in this room today who are doing practical work to empower our young people. You will hear from some of them who will speak after me.

I believe that educating abled people is key to improving the situation of the disabled ones.

Because when we talk about discrimination, lack of opportunities, we are actually talking about both groups.

When we speak about these terms; discrimination, marginalization, and so forth, we are implying that one groups is being discriminated against and marginalized by the other.

My engagement experience

Allow me to share with you what I am doing, what my team and are doing in this regard. You will realize that it is not at all difficult and you can do something too.

In my spare time, I work to support my NGO, United for Education and Sustainable Futures, to educate young people about some of the most pressing issues we face, including human rights.

We believe that if we are to make long term progress we need a well-educated and more engaged generation of young people. Through our Youth Education Ambassadors program which we launched in January 2014, pupils between the ages of 15-18 are trained **to become critical thinkers and global citizens.**

Once they have completed workshops provided by our partners in which we train them to understand the main principles of human rights, we send them to various

NGOs in Austria and overseas to do practical work such teach other young people, help local NGOs, and so forth.

In doing so, we are not only empowering these young people, but we are educating them to educate others. We want to create a society in which young people are active agents of change, not subjects of problems. We continue to sick to broaden our partnership and hope that some of you will express interest to work with us.

At the Regional Academy on the United Nations which I have the honor to lead, we train young academics, Masters and PhD students in all issues related to the United Nations. Since its creation in 2012, we have trained over 120 students from over 15 countries.

I am pleased that the United Nations is making progress in recognizing the importance of youth and young people.

In his last five year plan, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon has made ‘working with and for young people’ one of his priority agenda.

In this regard, he appointed the first ever special envoy on youth in 2013, then 27 years old, Ahmad Alhendawi, whose task is to advocate for young people’s voice in the UN system.

Mr. Alhendawi likes to remind us that ‘young people are driving the change but they are not in the driving seat’.

This is true and we need to change this. The education programs I am part of - Youth Education Ambassadors program and the RAUN - can be seen an attempt to reverse this trend and allow young people to not only drive the change but do so from the driving seats.

Close

Let me close with a quote from, probably the strongest human rights instrument we have, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, our moral instrument, which, in its very first article states: “**All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.**”

It is important that the sentence mentions ‘dignity’ before ‘rights’ because dignity is about the ‘person’, it’s about ‘self’, it’s we are as people regardless of our natural or unnatural abilities.

It is about a person lying on the streets, homeless who becomes invisible because he or she does not have a home to live. It is about a woman whose rights are limited because they are women.

And in our context today, it’s about a child with special needs who is discriminated against by the society and the system because of their disability. They become hopeless, they lose their dignity in their invisibility.

So everyone should be afforded their dignity as well as their rights.

Finally, the Universal Declaration for Human Rights also calls for all human beings to “**act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.**” This is a call for us to act to ensure that other people’s dignity is preserved and their rights are respected.

Thank you!

Thank you very much!