

Thank You

HE President Banda, HE President Mugabe, Honorable Ministers, Dignitaries, Athletes of Special Olympics, and all protocol observed.

President Banda. All of us in the world of Special Olympics are honored and humbled by your leadership here today. When we asked all the Presidents of the world to come to our World Winter Games in Korea, you came. When we asked for a leader to amplify the voice of disability at the Clinton Global Initiative, you spoke. When we asked for action in Africa to attack the scourge of discrimination, you said, “Come to Lilongwe! Action will start here!”

In our time, no value has more powerfully captured the hopes and dreams of the human family than the value of equality. The United Nations at its birth claimed the mantle of human rights for all people. We have heard it repeated the world over: we are all created equal, entitled to equal protection and opportunity. Our great hero of reconciliation and unity, Nelson Mandela, made this his call: “Amandla! A way too”. Power, he insisted, was with the people—all the people.

Today, we must admit that despite campaigns and conventions and proclamations, we are here with many whose claim to equality has gone mostly unheard or worse, rejected. We gather with a question lurking in our hearts: do we really

believe in the dignity and beauty and sacred equality of all human beings? Are we prepared to change our laws, our cultures, and ourselves to recognize the dignity of people with intellectual disabilities? Are people with intellectual and other disabilities sacred?

If we want to answer yes, we must remember that as Mother Theresa said, Love is Action—and I add—love is not a report! And action in pursuit of equality for people with intellectual disabilities will not be easy. Discrimination is rampant. Exclusion is too often the norm among the rich and the poor, in the north and the south; in Africa and on every other continent on the planet. We will need action guided by conviction, steeled with grit, determined to persevere in the face of indifference and scoffing. This work is not for the faint of heart.

[Last year, this came home to many of us when we saw the picture of a 9 year old boy living in a village not far from here where one of our Special Olympics volunteers found him, tied to a hut like an animal, held because there was nowhere for him to go and no one to support his impoverished mother. “Tied.” The word is enough to break my heart. “Tied.” Through no fault of his or his mother’s, he was hidden like thousands of others, never to hear the words of United Nations Declarations on human rights, on the rights of people with disabilities, never to take a pencil and go to school, never to

play a game of football with his friends, never to stand before his community as a winner so his mother could be proud.

Like millions of mothers before her, she probably heard the words that are almost too painful to speak: “your son is a cabbage, a curse, a defect, a possessed, a retard, an invalid, hopeless.”

Our challenge today is not to recount the mistakes of history but to correct them. Our commitment is not just to proclaim the rights of people with ID but to secure them. Our goal is not to profess our belief in the sacredness of the human spirit but to live it. We are here to act.

To do so, we need a plan of action. I hope that today, we will use our time together to take the first steps necessary to agree on such a plan and launch action in pursuit of its goals. To that end, [i/we] suggest that we focus our attention in 4 areas:

First, we ask that all the leaders of African nations begin to collect, organize, and monitor the data on people with intellectual disabilities--their numbers, their health status, their access to education, their needs. We cannot act if we don't know and we cannot improve if we don't measure.

Second, we ask that all the leaders of Africa send the message by work and action and law that no child is “wrong” or “cursed” or “hopeless.” We ask that cultural, religious, and social

leaders speak with one voice to end labelling and stigma and replace them with medical care from birth equal to any other child. We cannot end preventable disease or preventable death if we prevent some children from getting care. All children. No exceptions.

Third, we ask that all the leaders of Africa and their development partners crack open the meaning of education and work so that every child goes to school. No exceptions. To educate is to draw a child into the world, to help a child discover an inner compass, and to help that child point that compass toward the work and mission and life purpose that is his or hers to seek. But we cannot teach purpose and value only to some and not others or we will in effect be teaching exclusion and selfishness.

Finally, we challenge the funders—private and public—to dedicate specific funding to the needs of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. If they are roughly 3% of the population, then they deserve a minimum of 3% of the funding.

I hope we can discuss and debate these ideas and your own today and push ourselves toward a plan. We need new Millennium Development Goals that offer promise to the most forgotten. Let's create them here in Lilongwe. We need to turn the promise of the UN Convention on the Rights to People with

Disabilities into laws and services. Let's do that in here in Lilongwe. We need a coalition of NGOs and governments and private funders to work together and fund change. Let's get commitments right here in Lilongwe.

Is any of this easy? No. In fact, it will be among the most difficult development work ever undertaken. But we didn't come to Lilongwe to do easy work. We came here because we've seen the leash and we must end its use. We came here because we've met the mothers and seen their tears and we must end their shame. We came here because we've played games, run races, cheered goals, and seen the smiles of the athletes of Special Olympics and we cannot rest as long as one of them—even one—is crushed and forgotten. Not one.

In Special Olympics, we challenge each person to unleash the goodness of your spirit. We call on everyone to play unified and to live to learn unified too. We are revolutionaries of hearts and minds, restlessly un-satisfied with the status quo and endlessly moved by joy and bravery of the most vulnerable people on earth who embody the rare strength that can heal divisions and bring peace.

Today is the first day of the Lilongwe era of action. Let us make sure that it doesn't end until that strength is welcomed and celebrated the world over.