



SPEECH BY

**HER EXCELLENCY DR. JOYCE BANDA
STATE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALAWI**

DURING

**THE AFRICAN LEADERS FORUM
ON INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY**

AT

**BINGU INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE
LILONGWE**

MONDAY, 10TH FEBRUARY, 2014

- **Your Excellency Robert Mugabe, President of the Republic of Zimbabwe;**
- **Your Excellency, Chief Justice Richard Banda, SC, (Retired);**
- **The Rt Honourable Khumbo Hastings Kachali, Vice President of the Republic of Malawi;**
- **Dr. Timothy Shriver, Chairman of the Board, Special Olympics International;**

- **Distinguished guests,
dignitaries, leaders, friends,
and the athletes of Special
Olympics:**

I wish to welcome you all to Lilongwe, Malawi where we celebrate the first-ever African Leaders Forum on Disability.

On behalf of the people of Malawi and indeed on my own behalf, in a special way, I wish to welcome Your Excellency and Dear Brother President Robert Mugabe, President of the Republic of Zimbabwe and

all foreign delegates to Malawi, the Warm Heart of Africa.

Your Excellency's presence at this very important gathering vividly testifies Your Excellency's commitment to the cause and plight of people with disabilities.

This forum has is very important as it will input into the post 2015 framework.

As a country, we are pleased to be accorded this honour to host such an important event. It is our hope that this high profile gathering will herald a new chapter as the global community seeks to address the problems of exclusion, stigmatization and marginalization that people with intellectual and other forms of disabilities are subjected to.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Our gathering and presence here in the city of Lilongwe is meant to galvanise and consolidate our commitments and drive against numerous challenges and problems that people with various forms of disabilities are confronted with.

My bible tells me that God created you and I, regardless of any factor of distinction or difference, in his own image.

As people who believe in divine creation, this religious belief provides us with a strong basis to believe in the philosophy of equality and equity among all. We all know and acknowledge that every person is unique regardless of one's IQ score. We all know that every person has areas of difficulty in one way or the other.

However, much as you and I know that everyone has difficulties in one way or the

other, we also know that everyone has areas of abilities in one way or the other.

Drawing from the above factual narration therefore it is vividly clear to all of us that disability is not inability and conversely inability is not disability.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

To address the disability-inability misperception we must first have a clear, realistic understanding of people with intellectual disability which rejects stereotypes. Sadly, it is the community's perception that complicates life not only for people with disabilities, but also their families.

It is common knowledge that disability is a reduction, restriction or disadvantage that comes as a result of impairment. This is compounded by societies' perceptions as to whether a person is fit or not. This shows how disability is a result of the gap between a person's capabilities and societal demands. It is indeed therefore societal perceptions and not physical condition that disables an individual. In other words, the need for society to adjust to suit the individual, rather than the individual

adjusting to society demands. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that disability is not inability.

To make matters worse, society treats them as objects of pity. This not only undermines their potential, but also demeans them and batters their self-esteem. It is, therefore, our role to help people with disabilities to change this negative attitude by involving them in development programmes.

It is only through encouraging them to actively participate in income-generating projects and decision-making agendas, access to education and employment opportunities that we can help them live a better life. It is through engagement and goodwill, and not only charity, that we can uplift people with disabilities.

There is need to educate the public and ourselves first, as to how intellectual disability differs from mental illness and

other disabilities. We must allow people with intellectual disabilities to express themselves and show their true potential. As I have pointed out earlier on we must realize that every person is not only unique but also and more importantly has abilities in one way or the other. Therefore it is incumbent upon us all to help in creating a conducive environment that will enable people with disabilities exercise their abilities to exploit their full potential.

We must allow for the greater community to witness and celebrate these achievements and to understand that these achievements are a glorious expression, of any nation's people.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

As the global community seeks to address the many problems and challenges that people with intellectual disability and other forms of disabilities face in various spheres

of our life and economy, our gathering here seeks to stimulate increased and urgent action in support of a population long underserved. Our presence here is a response to human call to help in building or creating a fair and just society.

We need to build a society that provides space for all its citizens to live in harmony, dignity, love and peace. A society that rewards its citizens not only on the basis of physical or mental condition but also on the

basis of the content of their ability and citizenry. A society that accords its entire citizenry undiscriminated access to all that is supposed to benefit all. A society that creates space for all its citizens regardless of physical and mental conditions to realize their full potential and capabilities. Of course a society that is sensitive and responsive to its citizens that require special needs. This is a critical, moral, and practical challenge that our respective societies are faced with.

Unfortunately, the majority of them are far away from realising these basic realities.

As we gather here therefore these are the very realities and tenets that need to take centre stage in our drive and commitment to the creation a just and fair community.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

In January 2013, I had the privilege of attending the 2013 Special Olympics World

Winter Games in South Korea. It was with a great sense of national pride that I delivered the keynote address at the first Global Development Summit on Intellectual Disability. But it was with even greater sense of amazement when I witnessed firsthand the incredible valor, courage, and sportsmanship that 2,000 athletes from some 100 countries displayed. What I learned in South Korea, was a deeper understanding of talents and abilities the people with disabilities possess.

And what I subsequently brought home to my country was a determination to address the entrenched stigma and isolation that the people with disabilities face in communities throughout Malawi. I knew then as I know now: I must do something to change this course if we will realize our full potential.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

This Forum is not a standard convening. This issue is not our standard development challenge. Like so many development challenges that we have willingly tackled before, the plight facing those with disabilities is one that interconnects with every facet of our lives. But allow me to be clear: our goal is not to highlight the problem, but to put into motion real solutions- together.

As Dr. Woo from Catholic Relief Services has underscored: disability is everyone's work. There is not an agency, an organization, a bank, a company, or a national government- that does not have a vested stake in righting this wrong. There is not a citizen of this country, of this continent, that would not benefit from the inclusion of individuals with disabilities as part of the larger platform for nation-building.

It is against this background therefore that before we can tackle the environmental barriers that block our children from school, before we can address the lack of training of doctors that block our children from the hospital, before we can strengthen the social policies that can help streamline family services- this stigma must become yesterday's news.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

We will be pouring valuable water into a bottomless bucket if we fail to address stigma in an aggressive, yet compassionate, way. As leaders in various positions, elimination of stigma and creation of a new national understanding begins with us. Political will is a critical element, and it is one that must have a sustained commitment.

There can be no distraction- in case we lose the very momentum needed to make this new day a reality. This is not to say that other issues cannot be advanced simultaneously. But it is to say that the elimination of this stigma must be part of the larger development programme necessary for a post Millennium Development Goals framework.

Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

In closing, I would like to thank Lions Clubs International, for taking up the issue of intellectual disability specifically through their global partnership with Special Olympics. As the world's largest service club organization, I am honored to have your executive leadership here, and I ask Lions Clubs to continue to build your service platform that has benefitted, and will continue to benefit, so many.

I should also add- I and my husband are proud to be members of the local Lions Club!

I would like to thank the Golisano Foundation from New York. Your leadership in this area is exactly the example that is needed to bring about sustained change for those with intellectual disabilities.

We are proud to be working together with you.

A heartfelt thanks to the Forum supporters: the Catholic Relief Services, the Malawian Red Cross National Society, Airtel, Coca Cola Malawi, and the host: Government of Malawi.

You have made our country proud, and you have awakened in us a new understanding of what is possible in Africa, by Africa, for Africa.

Lastly, I thank the athletes of Special Olympics. You are an inspiration to this

nation. You are the example to be emulated. You are the common denominator through which we understand the depth of the human condition, and the human spirit. You are the love we strive for, and the courage we need. Continue on your journey of determination and strength, and know that this President, and through this Forum, you have the support.

May God Bless Us All. I thank you.