



**From the Shadows to Significance:
Achieving Human Rights for People with Intellectual Disabilities**

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It gives me great pleasure to join you today at this unprecedented Global Development Summit, which brings together leaders from various sectors to examine the needs of people with intellectual disabilities throughout the developing world. Before I start, I must thank Chairwoman Na Kyung-Won, President of the Organizing Committee of the Special Olympics World Winter Games and Dr Timothy Shriver, Chairman and CEO of the Special Olympics, for inviting me to give this address. I thank all of you for being here and for giving me such a warm welcome.

The stated mission of the Special Olympics is as follows:

“to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community”.

For the past 45 years you have carried out this mission with vision and success – you have used sport as a medium to bring together people with intellectual disabilities from all corners of the globe. Around 4 million athletes from more than 170 countries have joined a community where they find can joy, confidence, success and fulfilment.

I am very happy that the Special Olympics has a presence in Burma with over 2,300 registered athletes. I thank you for the commitment you have shown to our country. We have lived through decades of isolation but you did not forget us.



In recent years we have lived through globalization, the rapid development of technology and the growth of the world economy. Despite these significant changes, people with intellectual disabilities remain too often marginalized, isolated and neglected.

This Global Development Summit brings together more than 300 of the world's leaders from various different sectors to pursue the following goals:

1. to strengthen inclusive development strategies that will bring increased support and advocacy to those most in need;
2. to promote human rights; and
3. to establish a renewed global commitment to people with intellectual disabilities.

These goals are truly commendable. A new global effort is certainly required and collaboration between supporters of the Summit and *partners such as UNICEF, the Peace Corps, Lions Club International, FIFA and* others would help us to address this urgent need.

I understand that in the past decade the Special Olympics movement has undergone a significant demographic shift, with around 80 percent of athletes now coming from the developing world. It is important that the Summit develops a plan of action for people everywhere.

This leads me to the subject matter of my address to you, "*From Shadows to Significance: Achieving Human Rights for People with Intellectual Disabilities*".

It is estimated that there are 200 million people with intellectual disabilities across the globe. Although they are a minority, they are a significant minority, comprising approximately 3% of the world's population. Despite this, all too often they are denied the human rights to which they are entitled. They are more likely than others to live in poverty and to have poor health. They are more likely to be excluded from education, employment and health care. Often they are unable to participate in society and are deprived of resources and recognition.

Following my years under house arrest I understand all too well how it feels to be isolated, to be removed from society and to be parted from those one loves. However, at least I had a radio to link



me to the outside world, I had books to read and I knew that there were people rooting for me. Importantly, I had hope that one day things would change for the better. Far too many people with intellectual disabilities are denied even such hope.

I drew strength from my favourite passages in the preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

"..... disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspirations of the common people,

..... it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law . . ."

I continue to draw strength from these passages. Human rights are the birthright of all and we must ensure that people with intellectual disabilities are allowed to enjoy their rights.

I would like to paraphrase the comments of a mother of children with intellectual disabilities:

The lives of children with intellectual disability are like boats without an oar; they are not able to propel or steer themselves; they can only float along the stream or flow with the tide. If they are faced with large waves, they can't help but sink. Only if they're tied to other boats with oars can they be steered to shore.

This seems to me to capture the situation. It is crucial that we help these boats to gain traction and find direction.

Burma is perhaps a microcosm of the developing world as a whole when it comes to treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. The picture I have to paint is not a pretty one but we need to confront reality in order to address it.



In Burma there is a lack of education regarding disability. There is also a widely held superstitious belief that any kind of disability is a punishment for bad deeds in a previous life. As a result people with intellectual disability are neglected, viewed as abnormal and looked down upon. Many become lonely and suffer from depression. They are ostracized from their communities with few (if any) people trying to help them. Although some community members will acknowledge them, often this is confined to looks and expressions of pity. Bullying, name-calling and finding a disabled person amusing are commonplace. Parents will tend to view a disabled child as a burden and some will go so far as to abandon the child.

After years of neglect Burma has one of the poorest health care systems in the world. In 2008, the military government spent less than \$1 per person on health and Burma ranked among the worst performing countries in nearly every category of health care funding. Although the current Burmese government has quadrupled the health budget, it is important to retain perspective and to understand the low base from which we are coming. There are very few specialised health care facilities in Burma for people with intellectual disabilities and there is a shortage of experts who can offer them the care they need.

Although the previous military government enacted a child disabilities law and signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it failed to implement these effectively. Disabled persons were not given access to any special care or assistance from the State. The military government effectively ignored the disabled population and refusing to take responsibility for it. This left parents with sole responsibility for their disabled children's education, healthcare and general wellbeing.

Therefore a disabled person's quality of life very much depends on the family into which he or she was born. If they are wealthy, a disabled person may live a satisfactory existence as the family can provide accommodation, food and medical treatment. But for those who are not wealthy, terrible problems arise.

Employment prospects for people with intellectual disabilities are very low. According to a national disability survey, more than 85 percent of people with disabilities in Burma are unemployed. The



government Labour Department does not provide any job opportunities for disabled people. If they are lucky enough to gain private employment, the job is likely to be poorly remunerated. Many are forced into begging on the streets where there is a heightened risk as regards disease and personal security.

Deprived of health care, education and employment opportunities, there is no way that people with intellectual disabilities in Burma can improve their living conditions and be lifted out of poverty.

However, there are some positive anecdotes which can give us hope and show us the way. A disabled student, who initially attended a government state school in Burma, was accused by his teachers of misbehaving, stealing a classmate's property and fighting. The teachers eventually forced him to leave. His parents then had to send him to a private school where he was transformed – he became very keen to study and exhibited excellent behaviour. His teacher there was quoting as saying:

"We... ensured he received enough attention to understand what was going on. We encouraged other students not to isolate him. Even though we don't have special schools for disabled children we welcome all students and treat them equally. We also provide funding for parents of disabled children who cannot afford to pay. We would like all children to access educational opportunities."

This type of attitude is essential in fostering a healthy environment for people with intellectual disabilities.

In Burma we are moving from a military dictatorship towards democracy. I am on the record as indicating that this is a time for cautious optimism. At the moment we have a military-backed civilianized government. We have to take a long and difficult path to full democracy and proper respect for human rights. However, we have made some progress. The ratification of the UN



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (“CRPD”) in late 2011 was a breakthrough. The right to equal recognition enshrined in Article 12 of the CRPD entitles people with intellectual disabilities to equal health, education and employment opportunities.

Of course ratifying a Convention is one thing and complying with both its letter and its spirit is quite another. However, if Burma, until recently one of the most isolated and oppressed countries in the world, can start to acknowledge the rights of people with intellectual disabilities, every developing country should be capable of doing the same, if not more.

Imposing assistance on people with intellectual disabilities is not the correct approach. It is they who really know their own needs and who are best placed to shape their own futures. They should be given the opportunity to participate in decision-making and to be active in their communities. As Daw Yu Yu Swe, Assistant Director of the Department of Social Welfare in Burma, rightly stated:

“people with disabilities want opportunity, not charity”.

They should be included at all levels. Getting to participate is an important step on the road to enjoying all human rights.

The former President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, has stated:

“Unless disabled people are brought into the development mainstream, it will be impossible to cut poverty in half by 2015 or to give every girl and boy the chance to achieve a primary education by the same date”.

I agree wholeheartedly with that comment. In order to achieve our poverty reduction goals, we must include people with intellectual disabilities in the mainstream. The cost of excluding such people is massive. I am certain that Burma’s gross domestic product will be much higher if people with disabilities are properly included in the workforce.



During my Nobel lecture in June 2012 I mentioned that when I met Burmese migrant workers and refugees on my visit to Thailand, many cried out “*Don’t forget us!*”. To be forgotten is to die a little. It is to lose some of the links that anchor us to the rest of humanity. People with intellectual disabilities have been living in the shadows but they are not forgotten. We are here today to convey that message, to examine their urgent needs and to address those needs. Together, we can create solutions to end the cycle of poverty and exclusion. We must be inclusive, we must encourage participation and we must empower.