



No Excuses. The Moral Imperative to Integrate People with Disabilities Into the Global Development Agenda

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

I am honored to address you today at this most historic and important gathering. Our gathering is to stimulate increased and urgent action in support of a population long underserved. This is a critical, moral, and practical challenge.

I have spent all my life advocating on behalf of the poor oppressed and marginalized. As a social justice and human rights activist, and now President of the Republic of Malawi, I have a deep appreciation for the challenges of those on the margins of society. I have seen first-hand, the dangers and consequences resulting from indifference, intolerance, and most alarmingly, inaction.

The plight facing children and adults with intellectual disabilities, both in Malawi and throughout the world, is only now becoming fully recognized. I therefore commend the organizers of this Summit, leaders of these Games and all organizations that have taken it upon themselves to represent the most oppressed. This is a population that has gone without for far too long.

Summits of this type help to foster, not only understanding, but also real commitments to make a difference.

The challenges facing those with intellectual disabilities, indeed all people with disabilities, are very close to my heart, as President, as a wife and mother, and as a citizen. That is why one of my very first acts as President was to establish a full Ministry of People with Disabilities and the passage of the first-ever National Disability Act, mandating in law the rights of people with disabilities and the support structures that our nation must provide in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As a democratic society, Malawi has a moral obligation to ensure that each and every injustice, whether through acts of commission or mission, is met with deliberate and tangible action. It is our obligation to expose injustice and engage the entire nation to right what is wrong. And, such an inclusionary approach is essential to sustainable development, which must be development for all.

Ladies and gentlemen, dearest to my heart are children with disabilities. Children whose needs and whose potential are generally ignored. Compared with other children, they are more at greater risk of malnutrition and poverty and are usually ignored by the people who should protect them. Children with disabilities are not only vulnerable to discrimination but to outright segregation as well. They are the ones who will most likely never go to school and never enjoy the thrills of childhood. Many of them are hidden away making it even harder for social services to reach them. Hidden away by the people and the communities that are supposed to protect and cherish them. Children with disabilities are more likely to suffer from neglect, abuse and violence. Sadly, child protection systems rarely address the challenges that children with disabilities face. We must therefore do more to identify these children and tailor make programs that support their needs. This is a universal calling, that all countries develop comprehensive programs in health, education, nutrition, psycho social support, that support children with disabilities so they can make the



most of their lives.

To confront these challenges head on we must first have a clear, realistic understanding of people with intellectual disability which rejects stereotypes. We must educate the public and perhaps 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. 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.

I am pleased that this is what the Special Olympics is all about. From working at the grass roots level, including the innovative work of national country chapters of the Special Olympics including our very own Special Olympics Committee in Malawi, to advocating change at the highest international level, through events such as today's Global Development Summit.

Ladies and gentlemen, poverty is a central theme of this gathering, and one that I would like to address specifically. I was most impressed in reading the title of this Summit, given the way in which poverty creates exclusion, exclusion creates poverty - and hence, perpetuates this dangerous cycle. Poverty is not just about financial resources, as is commonly believed, but more importantly about social resources- such as advocacy, access, training, and understanding. I have always said that I want Malawi to attain growth that should not just be seen in GDP, but in the growth of opportunities for all, protection for all, and equality for all. I commend Special Olympics, and the entire disability community, for bringing this cycle to light, and to providing such a loud global voice to turning the tide to include this most deserving population.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, much as it is generally acknowledged that it is quite difficult to establish global statistics for people with intellectual disabilities; statistics show that Malawi has approximately 400,000 people with intellectual disabilities. In view of this, Malawi is taking action to improve the lives of people with intellectual disabilities, not only in accordance with the United Nations Conventions, but in accordance with the values, principles and dreams of the people of Malawi. As already alluded to earlier, Malawi Government passed the National Disability Act which, in addition to providing both legal and policy frameworks also galvanise the country's efforts to integrate people with special needs and those with disabilities into the country's development processes.

In line with the act, Malawi has made some considerable efforts to improve the plight of children with intellectual disabilities. Such efforts are geared towards promoting the rights of people with special needs and creating an enabling and economically empowering environment that will enable them to realise their potential and ensure their full integration into the country's socio- economic development processes. Such interventions include:

- Criminalization of all forms of actions, conducts, sentiments, practices, stigmatization, and beliefs that amount to abuses to people living with intellectual disabilities;
- Economic empowerment of mentally disabled children and their parents through micro agribusiness such as piggery and crop production farming;
- Sensitising parents and communities on proper care of mentally disabled children;
- Promotion of special needs education by introducing a special needs programme for training of special needs teachers in some of the country's teachers training colleges;



- Involvement of stakeholders such as volunteers; healthy officials; parents; and the private sector

Despite our limited resources Malawi continues to actively participate in the Special Olympics. I am proud of our 5,148 athletes of the Special Olympics Malawi some of whom I recently met with on December 3rd as part of Malawi's celebration of the UN day for disabilities. I am pleased to inform you that we have been doing very well in some international competitions and managed to get a total of 32 medals from three competitions as follows;

- In Ireland 2003: we got 5 gold medals ,4 silver medals and 5 bronze medals
- In China 2007: we got 2 silver medals and 9 bronze medals;
- In Greece 2011: we got 3 gold medals, 3 silver medals and 1 bronze medal

However, I strongly believe that above all these efforts and interventions, political will remains a critical factor. No national policy can be realized without sustained practice, and no injustice can be corrected without firm action. As a person who holds an office of authority, I am committed to ensuring that integration of the people with special needs into all spheres of life is no longer a mere rhetoric. It has to be action, action and more action. So I would like to state that I am committing myself, and my country, to action. My message to the global development community is clear:

I commit to forming a national partnership with Special Olympics Committee in Malawi, and the development community, to further integrate this population into existing and future development programs and strategies. I commit to empowering my ministries to work hand-in-hand with Special Olympics and the Malawian disability community in strengthening our structures, our strategies, and our programming. But I believe the opportunity is greater still. This is a population that has gone yet untapped in terms of contributing to the future of my country, and my continent. Inclusive development means representation and contributions from all, and so we cannot look forward to a post 2015 MDG framework without ensuring inclusion of these individuals.

With this in mind, I commit to working closely with Special Olympics, UN agencies and the development community in Africa in support of my wish to host an African Leaders Forum, in the Malawian capital of Lilongwe, to formally address the plight facing those with intellectual disabilities in an African context. There is so much that can, should, and must be done - and I believe it is our obligation as leaders to use influence to foster increased collaboration, teamwork, and support in creating a better and brighter future for all people.

The road ahead will not be easy. Surely this was in the minds of each of the more than 2,000 athletes present here at these Games when they began their training. There is an African proverb that I believe is fitting for the challenge at hand, one that we must keep in the forefront of our minds as we embark on this journey together: "How do you eat an elephant? "One bite at a time." We must understand that we will learn along the way how to improve our systems. We will celebrate successes and reflect on mistakes. But we must take the example shown here from these athletes and the over 4,000,000 athletes across the world, and inspire our nations to demonstrate the same bravery, the same determination, and the same excitement.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a call to action - to Malawi, to Africa, to the world. I ask the global



development community to join me on this journey to champion equality and equity for all. There can be neither more noble cause, nor a population more deserving. This is the future of inclusive development. Yes the challenges and problems are numerous but together we can make a huge difference in the lives of people with special needs; hence I wish to end my key note address with the following recommendations that all countries the world over need to seriously consider:

1. Development of global alliances and movement to promote the rights of people with intellectual disabilities. This movement should focus on making sure that the sector of people with intellectual disabilities receives the required focus as we draw up the post 2015 agenda. The movement should also persuade countries to develop the relevant national policies and programs to support people with special needs.
2. Establishment of innovative resource mobilisation strategies that should increase funding avenues for the Special Olympics Committee and other organisations working in this sector.
3. Advocate for the fulfilment of obligations that member states have made in the various commitments that are already signed for.
4. Provision of relevant infrastructure by both government and the private sector to support work in this sector.
5. Develop national capacities in the health, education and social sectors to have skilled personnel that should work in this sector and among other things support early identification of children with intellectual disabilities so that they can begin to receive the right therapies while young.
6. Increased representation of the sector of people from this sector in discussion of matters that involve them as the saying goes ' nothing for us without us'.

So Ladies and Gentlemen, let this noble gathering mark both a milestone and a turning point in addressing the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. Let's start the future today-together.

Thank you. God Bless You.