



Exclusion of People with Intellectual Disabilities in Development Strategies

Dr. Timothy Shriver

PhD, Chairman and CEO, Special Olympics International

Thank you

Distinguished guests

Athletes of Special Olympics

President Banda: All of us at Special Olympics are deeply honored and humbled by your presence here today. You are a star in the African sky and despite so many responsibilities, you have come to join our simple movement of dignity. Thank you for reminding us of President Mandela's campaign message: Amandla! O way too!

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, words cannot adequately express our gratitude. Political leaders of mighty nations court you; wise men and women seek you out. Millions are reduced to tears by the sight of you—with all your strength and courage. Still, you have come to see our humble gifts of human aspiration and to celebrate the poor and the forgotten. History will remember your journey to lend your voice to the athletes of Special Olympics and our dignity revolution.

In our time, no value has better captured the hopes and dreams of the human family than the value of equality. The United Nations, at its birth, claimed the mantle of the equal rights of all human being. We have heard it repeated over and over again in every corner of the world: we are all created equal.

Truthfully, we gather today with a hint of sadness about these many proclamations because we gather side by side with many whose claim to equality has gone mostly unheard or worse, rejected. We gather today with a question lurking in our hearts: how far will we go for the ideal of equality? And maybe another question lurks still deeper: do we really believe in the dignity and beauty and sacred equality of all human beings?

As leaders of government and business and culture, we must confess that we have failed to understand the pervasive inequality—economic and cultural—that confronts our brothers and sisters all around the world. It is an inequality driven by the persistent and stubborn myth that people with intellectual differences are somehow hopeless. We come here with a goal no less clear than this: to end the scourge of discrimination against people with intellectual challenges once and for all.



And let us make no mistake: this is a story that is not restricted to poorer nations or to those of any region or culture. The stain of bigotry mars the wealthiest countries and the least wealthy too. Over and over again, we have heard the voices of people with intellectual disabilities wonder, “why am I like this?” and then, seemingly in the same painful breath wonder, “how could you treat me like this?”

We have heard a woman named Florence of Uganda say, “I was complete trash,” but then discover in the kindness of others the strength to say, “I am someone good.”

We have heard a man named Frank of the United States say, “I wish I could be like my brother and my dad and drive a car and go to work” but then insist against a callous world with gentleness and strength, “My life is worth living.” We have heard an American sister, Claire Nolette, share her mother’s pain and dismay when the family doctor withheld a medical prognosis and treatment of her brother David, simply because he had Down’s Syndrome and was a person with an intellectual disability.

Last year, it all came home to many of us when we saw the picture of Aaron, a nine year old boy living in a village in sub-Saharan Africa, 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 help his impoverished mother. “Tied.” The word is enough to break my heart. “Tied.” Through no fault of his nor even of his mother’s he was hidden, like thousands of others, never to hear the words of the United Nations Declaration on human rights or 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 mother so she could be proud of him in the eyes of the world.

Like millions of mothers, she probably heard the words that are almost too painful to mention but which echo across the centuries: “your son is a cabbage, a curse, a defect, a retard, a possessed, an invalid, hopeless.”

And they echoed in the ears of my own grandmother who was told her daughter was “retarded” and who wrote that she was “heartbroken.” But then she made it her life’s work and the life’s work of all her children to heal the world of the dreaded scourge of fear of intellectual disability. And so her daughter, my mother—Eunice Kennedy Shriver--spent her entire life fighting the institutions that brazenly abused people with intellectual disabilities, fighting the indifference of political leaders who callously overlooked the dreams of citizens with intellectual disabilities, fighting the arrogance of medical professionals who sentenced them to die, fighting for the simple joy of swimming in a pool or playing on a field for those same citizens who deserved that and so much more. She was a revolutionary and deep in her heart was her own sister—Rosemary-- so often forgotten, so often hidden away, but never forgotten by her.



Our challenge today, is to not repeat the mistakes of history but to correct them. We have come here because a voice echoed from a deep place within each of us and told us that our mission was to come here and make a difference.

To do so, we need a new vision of equality. The equality challenge of people with intellectual differences is unlike that of almost any other group because it does not rest on the ideal of achieving sameness but rather on the opposite ideal of welcoming difference. It is rooted in strength but also in gentleness. It is powered by the hope of unleashing hidden abilities but also by the honesty of accepting hidden weaknesses. Its aim is to teach us all that in all of our wonderful varieties we are each gifted with the equality of spirit that is our sacred birthright.

These are big ideals. And we are a small group here today and the world is big and complex and scary. We are each trained in our respective disciplines but the task at hand requires that we somehow blend our skills into a team. The team will have to overcome the overwhelming fear that ASSK spoke of many years ago when she said, *"It is not power that corrupts, but fear."* *We must become a fearless team that is able to confront the age old human fear of difference that lies at the heart of inequality.*

Let us help shape the new Millennium Development Goals. Let us live up to the hope and promise of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Let us turn those aspirational rights into realities. Our fearless team must demand that they focus not on general targets but rather on how to reach the hardest to reach, the poorest of the poor. I hope we will succeed in demanding a focus on the excluded and demand that the voices of people with intellectual disabilities be heard and that a proportionate share of the world's effort address their needs.

Let us set our sights on clear and unequivocal targets: Every child with an intellectual disability deserves:

- Equal access to health care.
- Equal access to schooling.
- The chance to play and be included in the sports and social life of all communities.

Every person with an intellectual disability deserves the chance to:

- Work and contribute to bettering the world.
- To teach us all how to we all can become agents of inclusion, how we can become grassroots advocates for the enforcement of human rights ideals, how we can mobilize to respond to the worldwide epidemic of physical inactivity and unhealthy lifestyles, how we can end the scourge of discrimination once and for all.



Ladies and Gentlemen, the Special Olympics movement welcomes you to this historic gathering with humility and pride. We are a movement of activists,, not discussants. We are a movement with very limited money and we operate in thousands of villages and towns without recognition or sanction or power. But we have one thing that money can't buy: we believe in the value and the goodness and the spirit power of every human being.

We ask you therefore to join our dignity revolution. Open your mind and unleash your heart. Believe in these athletes and in their millions and millions of fellow citizens. Together we can.