Situation of children with disabilities globally

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Excellencies, Dr. Cisternas, Chair of the CRPD Committee, Mr. Vardakastanis, President of the International Disability Alliance, UNICEF colleagues, Distinguished members of the audience and partners, I am honored by the opportunity to share with you information on the situation of children with disabilities globally and to report on UNICEF’s efforts to implement the CRPD and make the provisions of the Convention a reality for children with disabilities around the world.

For me, to be here with you today, on my first visit to Central Asia it is very special – an opportunity to learn from your culture and practices and to be able to share experiences from the world around us.

I was born in Brazil and, having lived with a disability since I was 18 years old, gave me an opportunity to experience different human dimensions: resilience, determination, capacity to transform one’s reality; but also social dimensions: discrimination, poverty and exclusion.

In Rio, the city where I was born, my neighborhood was surrounded by slums that we call “favelas”. I had the luxury of belonging to an urban community where I could access health services, education, where “system” is present. Instead, if I was born in a favela, I would have survived for no more than a year as a paraplegic and would certainly not be here today to celebrate these achievements with you.

I will base this presentation on the findings of our annual flagship publication - State of the World’s Children Report that in 2013 is dedicated to children with disabilities. This is the first global report ever published on children with disabilities and it was launched in Vietnam and in 50 other countries last May. You can find copies of the Report in your materials.

The Report states that ensuring that children enjoy their rights to the same degree -- regardless of whether or not they have disabilities -- is essential to fulfilling the promise of equity and of universal human rights. It is a matter of social justice and an investment in the future of society as a whole.

The international community has already recognized the link between disability and development, as well as the socio-economic impacts of exclusion. Now we need to transform development processes to be more equitable and sustainable if we hope to benefit all members of society, including children and adults with disabilities.

The nations of the world have repeatedly affirmed these positions and, as a result, the situation of many children with disabilities and their families has improved and continues to change for the better. Progress has varied between and within countries, however, and too many children with disabilities continue to face barriers to their inclusion in the civic, social
and cultural affairs of their community and country – and in the making of decisions that affect their lives.

Children with disabilities must be at the centre of efforts to build inclusive societies – not just as beneficiaries, but as architects and agents of change. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) commits States Parties to ensure that children with disabilities can exercise the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, and in so doing reaffirms the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The first key message of the report is that children with disabilities’ issues must be addressed through a rights based approach.

Children with disabilities are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups around the world. Facing daily discrimination in the form of negative attitudes, lack of adequate policies and legislation, they are effectively barred from realizing their rights to healthcare, education, and even survival.

Another key message of the Report is about the lack of reliable data available on children with disabilities…

Estimates suggest that there are at least 93 million children with disabilities in the world, but numbers could be much higher – up to 200 million. They are often likely to be among the poorest members of the population. They are less likely to attend school, access medical services, or have their voices heard in society. Their disabilities also place them at a higher risk of physical abuse, and often exclude them from receiving proper nutrition or humanitarian assistance in emergencies.

The Report recognizes that these barriers are often more disabling than any impairment itself. The discrimination children with disabilities face arises not from the intrinsic nature of their disability, but from social exclusion that is so entrenched it traps these children and their families in a life of poverty, social isolation, ignorance and lack of services and support. Yet, no country can hope to achieve sustained growth as long as its people with disabilities – the world’s most neglected minority – continue to experience such flagrant violations of their rights.

Protecting the rights of children with disabilities is not a new theme for UNICEF. It has been an integral part of our programming since the Convention on the Rights of the Child – the first international treaty to explicitly recognize the rights of children with disabilities – was adopted in 1989. But with the passing of the CRPD, our disability work has gained momentum. UNICEF is gratified to have played a key role in ensuring that children were prioritized within this widely ratified Convention.
The momentum has continued to build with UNICEF’s intensified focus on equity, which seeks to identify and address the root causes of inequality so that all children – particularly those who face the worst deprivations in society – can realize their rights. The equity-based approach is one of the foundations of our disability agenda, the main goals of which are to mainstream disability across all of our policies and programmes – both in development and humanitarian action – and to develop leadership on the rights of children with disabilities, building capacity among staff and partners.

But how does this commitment translate into concrete action?

At the country level, it not only means that the number of UNICEF-supported disability programmes continues to increase, but that we are shifting from a project-based to a more systematic approach – one that includes policy advocacy and legislative reform. In the field, this can take many forms. For example:

- In Viet Nam, where the global launch of this Report was held, UNICEF helped the government develop its draft Law on Persons with Disabilities, and undertook a legal analysis of domestic legislation on people with disabilities.
- In Cambodia, UNICEF supported research on children with intellectual disabilities and on attitudes towards residential care. These studies resulted in the development of national guidelines on community-based rehabilitation for children with disabilities.
- And as a result of UNICEF efforts in Turkey, Mozambique, and Uruguay, children and adolescents with disabilities are participating in consultations that are contributing to the development of national policy.
- Montenegro’s recent ‘It’s About Ability’ campaign launched by a hundred national and international organisations, set out to tackle negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. Billboards showed them as active members of society…athletes, friends, musicians, dancers and students. A year on, the campaign was found to have contributed to an 18 per cent increase in the number of people who consider children with disabilities as equal members of society. Behaviour towards… and communication with children with disabilities also improved.

This State of the World’s Children Report stresses the need for changing social norms, to combat stigma and discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities have the same rights as others do. Their voices must be heard. Their needs incorporated into policies and programmes. Their families’ needs must be addressed too.

- Our report highlights the efforts of low income and middle income countries…Bangladesh…Brazil…Chile…India…Lesotho…Namibia…Turkey…Viet Nam – that have launched cash transfer programmes so that parents are not left alone to shoulder the additional cost of raising a child with disabilities.
• Social protection initiatives, such as these, are still too few. And they can only be better targeted and scaled up when governments, agencies and partners collect more reliable data.

• Serbia’s education laws, for example, based on anti-discrimination and the best interest of the child, are encouraging schools to be more inclusive – not by targeting children with disabilities, but rather by dismantling the barriers they face in their everyday lives.

• In Mozambique…Kenya…Burkina Faso…and South Africa, NGOs, disabled people’s organizations, parents’ groups and local authorities are working together to promote inclusive education and build inclusive capacity.

• **Excellent examples are coming from Central Asia countries on areas such as early identification of disability and early interventions for children 0-3 age; communication for development initiatives to combat stigma and change attitudes, inclusive sports and youth participation with kids with intellectual disabilities; community based rehabilitation, inclusive social protection and many other policies and services.**

In UNICEF, while we recognize the work ahead, we are gratified by the progress that has been made in recent years. We are humbly proud to see that, in 2012, 85 UNICEF Country Offices from around the world have reported work on disability.

Overall, UNICEF’s work on children with disabilities contributes to realisation of the following broad areas of the CRPD: Policy advocacy and legislative reform (CRPD Article 4); Early childhood development (Article 7); Awareness-raising and changing perceptions (Article 8); Accessibility (Article 9); Protection against violence, abuse and exploitation (Article 16); Birth registration (Article 18); Child care systems reform and alternative care including in an AIDS context (Articles 7,19,23); Inclusive education (Article 24); Water, sanitation and hygiene (Article 28); Participation in cultural life and sports (Article 30); Research and data collection (including data collection, analysis, monitoring and evaluation) (Article 31); Innovative partnerships and cooperation (Article 32).

I would like to share with you a few examples of our ground-breaking work in the field of inclusive education.

Inclusive Education recognizes the needs to foster schools that include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs. The merit of such schools is not only that they are capable of providing quality education to all children; their
establishment is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating welcoming communities and in developing an inclusive society.

- In Nicaragua, UNICEF has helped restructure the National Teacher Training System so as to ensure that teachers have the skills and knowledge to address the specific needs of children with disabilities.
- In Viet Nam, UNICEF successfully campaigned to improve the legal framework for children with disabilities in the education system.
- As part of the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children, a methodology for tracking out-of-school children with disabilities has been developed and field tested in Cambodia.

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UNICEF continues to convene partners and to champion efforts to mainstream disability in the global child rights agenda, ensuring that children with disabilities are front and centre.

The past two years have been particularly fruitful for UNICEF, both as a leader and a convener of organizations, governments and other entities eager to work together to pursue disability rights.

In 2012, UNICEF and partners launched the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities. A network of more than 240 organizations that aims to advance the rights of children with disabilities at the global, regional and country level, the Global Partnership includes NGOs, Disabled People’s Organizations, governments, UN agencies, academia and the private sector. Access to nutrition, inclusive education, assistive technology and disability in emergencies and humanitarian action are some of the areas we are focusing in.

UNICEF is currently also chairing the Policy Board of the UN Partnership on the rights of persons with disabilities (UN PRPD), which has been established to generate and manage resources towards implementation of the CRPD.

Current contributors to a multi-donor trust fund associated to this Partnership include Australia, Finland, Cyprus, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, Mexico and other countries will be joining soon. This mechanism is allowing UN Agencies, government and civil society to advance the rights of persons with disabilities, including children.

We are grateful for the partnership with the Government of Australia. Through a close collaboration the Rights, Education and Protection (REAP) partnership for children with disabilities (CWD) was established between AusAID and UNICEF as a three-year project (2011-2013). The purpose of REAP is to advance the fulfillment of the rights of children with disabilities through enhanced education and child protection systems which are more sensitive, responsive and inclusive of these children.
UNICEF also works in close partnership with Special Olympics to advance the rights and opportunities of children with intellectual disabilities through activities that promote inclusion and highlight their abilities as valuable members of their communities in over 20 countries.

Together partners are demonstrating that no progress is possible when so many human beings are excluded and discriminated against. More importantly, we will learn from our work with children with disabilities how to promote inclusion with dignity for all.

UNICEF remains actively engaged in promoting ratification of the CRPD, but we recognise that this is only the first step towards realizing the rights of children with disabilities. Translating the Convention into reality will take time, commitment and resources. What’s more, it will require close collaboration between the government – including national parliaments – civil society, private sector, UN agencies and, most importantly, the disability community.

At UNICEF, we believe that realizing the rights of children with disabilities is both an investment in the future and a requirement for development. We remain committed to building partnerships and forging new models of cooperation.

We value our partnerships with governments, civil society, the private sector and, most importantly, Disabled People’s Organizations. Our hope is that this report being launched by UNICEF can contribute to ensure that future societies are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

Thank you.