Opening of the 4th Central Asia Child Protection Forum –

'Creating inclusive policies, systems and services for children with disabilities in accordance with the UNCRPD'

Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 1 August 2013

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Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Kurbanova Rukia Atoevna,
Distinguished members of the governmental delegations,
Members of partner organizations: associations of parents of children with disabilities,
Disabled people’s organizations,
Dear colleagues,

It is a real pleasure for me to be here with you at the opening of the 4th Central Asia Child Protection Forum, an important gathering where we will discuss: “Creating inclusive policies, systems and services for children with disabilities”.

What would the world be like without Einstein? A man known for his genius and not for his difficulties with dyslexia. What would the world be like without Ludwig van Beethoven? A most talented and influential composer and pianist who became almost totally deaf. These are just two examples of people who could have been ignored if all that mattered was their perceived disabilities, and who were able to make significant contributions to our world, contributions we are all benefitting from.

UNICEF has been advocating for the rights of children with disabilities, including their care, protection and wellbeing, since our creation 65 years ago. Building on the Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets the normative framework for the rights of all children, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides us with a unique opportunity to renew our commitment for promoting the rights of all children with disabilities, without exception. I am very pleased that this Central Asia Child Protection Forum is dedicated to this important subject. In our region the lives of children with disabilities, their talents and aspirations, are often constrained by ignorance, intolerance and stigma.
Children with disabilities remain largely **invisible and forgotten**. They are often hidden from view, put away in institutions; they are left out of birth registries. Despite our efforts, children with disabilities are not visible in policies, in data, or in communities. They are on the margins of society and too often, out of the reach of social services. They do not receive the health care and education opportunities that other children have, and are more likely to be subjected to neglect and abuse. Children with disabilities often grow up segregated from their communities and separated from their families. Their families find themselves struggling to get access to support services. And, almost everywhere, children with disabilities and their families are victims of demeaning attitudes, stigma and discrimination.

**Children with disabilities are first, children!**
They are entitled to all rights covered by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In addition, by signing and ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, governments commit to ensure that **the rights of children with disabilities are also fully enforced**. With a better understanding of the situation of children with disabilities and their families, it is possible to develop appropriate policies aiming at supporting families.

It is also possible to provide services and inclusive education, allowing more and more children with disabilities to live and develop in a nurturing family, and study together with children from their own communities. And, importantly, the Convention promotes a change in attitudes and opportunities for children and persons with disabilities to contribute to society as a whole.

However, this is not easy. Despite significant reforms and positive changes in Central Asia, reality is still made up of challenges we must overcome together!

**First**, we need to recognize that children with disabilities are among the most vulnerable in society, with many barriers to overcome. Acknowledging this fact will allow us to change our perception of disability. We need to **focus on the child, not on the disability**. We need to understand that a disability is a relative and evolving concept. Being disabled is a result of attitudinal and environmental barriers in society, not an inherited and irreversible trait. Discrimination against any person on the basis of disability is a violation of their inherent dignity as a human being.
Second, **families are the cornerstone of societies.** They are entitled to protection by society and the State. Children with disabilities and their families should receive the necessary protection and assistance to guarantee the full and equal enjoyment of their rights, starting with their right to live as a family. Creating the conditions for families, who are the primary caretakers, to raise their children in their homes and communities, requires protecting their rights and extending to them a combination of services, cash benefits and social work. In the case of families of children with disabilities, this also requires a variety of community-based services and specialized assistance, including adequate training, counseling and respite care. Reshaping service provisions for children with disabilities and their families will require the reallocation of the resources that are usually found under institutional care. Health, education and social welfare services must be affordable and reflective of a child’s abilities and age-appropriate needs. For far too long, countries in the region have relied on institutional services as the means to address the needs of the most vulnerable. Making several of the services – such as rehabilitation, physiotherapy, speech therapy – that are today only provided in institutions, available in the community, close to the families where children live, would allow children with disabilities to thrive and develop in their families, where they belong.

Furthermore, in the region, children with disabilities and their parents often face negative attitudes, even among professionals. Supporting children with disabilities and their families will require addressing as well, the ways in which services are provided. Protection programmes, shelters, main public services, and relevant buildings must be accessible and in line with universal standards. This is the responsibility of the governments in the region. However, **overcoming stigma and discrimination, negative attitudes and social norms is the responsibility of ALL of us.**

Third, it is imperative that we gather a comprehensive picture of the situation of children with disabilities – in each country, and in the region as a whole. We need to address the failure to register children with disabilities. They need to come into the child welfare and social protection systems, be recognized, and no longer swept under the carpet. There is no census data on the number of children with disabilities in our countries. The best we have to work with, are estimates. **How many children with disabilities are missing from these estimates, simply because they are hidden due to stigma and discrimination?** Countries need to generate reliable and comparable data in order to better plan and allocate resources. We need to ensure that children with disabilities are identified as soon as possible and receive essential services so that that they are able to reach their full potential. Societies are not inclusive or equitable unless children with disabilities are accounted for, visible and active members in their communities.
Fourth, we must improve access to and quality of basic services, among them health care and education. We all know that the youngest children with disabilities have very limited access to specialist care and services in many countries of the region. Children with disabilities have little to no access to health care services; both the specialized care many of them need, and to the most basic health and nutrition follow-up; and, when these services are provided, they remain remedial, insufficient and are either only organized in urban areas - far out of reach for many of the most vulnerable families living in rural areas - or offered in environments that lead to further segregation.

I would like to thank the Government of Tajikistan for hosting this milestone event. We have in this room, not only high-level government representatives from the five Central Asian republics, but also high-level government representatives from countries beyond Central Asia, parliamentarians, representatives from disabled people’s organizations, ombudspersons, experts from many countries, who have come here to share their experiences and learn from one another. The importance and relevance of the multi-stakeholder nature of this meeting cannot be underestimated, because realizing the rights of children with disabilities requires a multi-sectorial approach.

Together, guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we can implement social policies that can remove the barriers faced by children with disabilities and their families. Such social policies need to unite all actors behind a common set of goals. Social inclusion of children with disabilities and their families must be accelerated by providing all information in accessible formats, such as Braille, sign language and easy-to-read texts. Social inclusion requires equal access to new communications technologies and systems, as well as facilities. Sector strategies are not enough. What will make a difference is a holistic and integrated policy. This requires working together.

Let us work together to make this 4th Central Asia Child Protection Forum a turning point in our common goal. Let us make sure that the voices of children and people with disabilities are heard in each and every step of this process. Focusing on the rights of children with disability will help us make significant progress towards the realization of the rights of all children and the development of inclusive and prosperous societies for all.

I wish you all a fruitful debate during the next three days and I thank you for your attention.