UNICEF Closing Remarks
4th Child Protection Forum for Central Asia - Dushanbe, Tajikistan - 1-3 August 2013

Presented by Rosangela Berman-Bieler, Chief, Disability section, Programme Division, UNICEF HQ

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.

UNICEF is grateful to the Governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan for continuing to promote the Child Protection Forum for Central Asia, this year focusing in creating inclusive policies, systems and services for children with disabilities in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) …and for everything that you do to improve the lives of all children of Central Asia.

And I emphasise the word “all”. Because all children -- here and around the world -- deserve a happy childhood. It’s their right to be safe and secure… healthy and protected… educated and able to fulfil their dreams.

If any of those rights are compromised -- by natural disaster… conflict… poverty… stigma and discrimination or lack of access to services – all of us have a responsibility to restore them. No one group has its rights compromised more consistently or more cruelly than children with disabilities.

Our Executive Director Anthony Lake shared with me the words of one young girl from Vietnam - Lan, during the launch of the SOWC Report last May, referring to her life and dreams now that she studies in an inclusive school. She said:

“Before… I didn’t dare to answer when people were laughing at me. Now, I want to tell them: I’m a valuable person. I can use a computer and I have friends. Don’t tease me anymore; I have a future.”

Yes, she does. Lan has the ability to learn… earn… look after herself and a family… and contribute to her community.

Every child has something to contribute to the world if only we give him or her that chance. When they have opportunities to exercise their rights, all they show us… and all we see… are their abilities.

That’s how it should be all over the world. But for millions of children, the reality is sadly different. When they’re not objects of pity, they’re frequently targets of abuse.

It’s possible and beneficial and right to include children with disabilities in all aspects of society. And it starts by changing attitudes -- in every country of the world.
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.

We must adopt and implement urgently measures for realising the promise of equity through inclusion.

Signing and ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the first and most fundamental step. The CRPD calls for each child to be recognised as a full member of society. It highlights the need for investment to remove physical… cultural… economic… communication… mobility… and attitudinal barriers that violate children’s rights.

Turning promises into practical action and positive change is not just a job for national governments. It’s everybody’s job. Local authorities… employers… teachers… disabled people’s organizations and parents’ associations must work together to apply policies and monitor progress.

Only then will we begin to overcome discrimination. Because it’s not the disability…it’s discrimination that marginalises children.

I want to leave you with the words of Chaeli Mycroft. Chaeli received the 2011 International Children’s Peace Prize. She’s an ability activist and avid wheelchair dancer. And she’s preparing to study politics and philosophy at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Listen to what Chaeli attributes her success in life:

“I am surrounded by people who believe in my ability and are positive about my contribution to society – people who counter my negative days. I really love them for that. My lifetime goal is to have disability become something that is completely accepted and embraced by the global community. It may be a big task, and it may have many facets, but I believe it’s entirely possible. It starts with believing.”

Chaeli and millions of children like her remind us that overcoming disabilities may start with believing – but it ends with acceptance… acceptance not of limits, but of potential… not of what we can’t do, but of what we can all do… together.

Our special thanks to the Government of Tajikistan and the Dushanbe local authorities as well as UNICEF colleagues, for hosting the fourth edition of this important event and for all the efforts to make it inclusive and accessible for all.

We look forward to continue collaboration closely with the Central Asia Countries to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, survive and thrive through a quality and inclusive life.

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