

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

UNICEF's Support for Children with Special Educational Needs

Opening address at the 2nd National Early Childhood Intervention Conference 2008
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SPEECH BY

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Distinguished speakers,

Respected guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel honoured and humbled that the organisers of this conference have given me the opportunity to share my thoughts with all of you today.

Between 500 million and 650 million people worldwide live with a significant impairment. In Malaysia, at least 150,600 people with disabilities were registered with the Department of Social Welfare in 2005. What is being done to protect their rights, especially the children? What currently stands in the way of their equal participation in the community?

I have no doubt that everyone involved in this conference will toil over the next several days to address these important questions.

It is most encouraging that you have chosen to focus on the importance of building partnerships to address early intervention services for children with special needs. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this national conference and the efforts made to engage multiple stakeholders.

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Indeed, a “Grand Alliance” is what we need, with the best interests of all children at its very core, to ensure that we have a strong foundation to push this agenda forward. Everyone at each level of this alliance plays a key role – our responsibilities are to identify all the social and environmental obstacles that impair children with special needs, to do our part in eliminating these barriers, and to ensure that these children are always included in development programmes.

The emphasis on early childhood intervention is key because the period of early childhood has the most significant effect on a child’s development and learning. For children with disabilities, including those with special educational needs, early childhood intervention programs need to be specifically targeted, so as to identify and assist with impairments at an early stage, and increase the chances of these children having as much functional independence as possible.

Challenges faced by children with special needs

Children are not disabled because of how they are born – they are disabled due to barriers in people’s attitudes and the environment that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with persons without disabilities.

Environmental obstacles come in many guises and are found at all levels of society. They are reflected in policies and regulations created by governments, such as those relating to health, welfare and education systems. Such obstacles may be physical – for example barriers in public buildings, transportation and recreational facilities.

Attitudinal obstacles come in the form of widespread underestimation of the abilities and potential of these children, creating a vicious cycle of under-expectation, under-achievement and low priority in the allocation of resources.

These obstacles largely explain why poverty is so closely linked to disability. Poverty is both a cause and a consequence of disability. The World Bank has estimated that persons with disabilities account for up to one in five of the world’s poorest people – that is, people who live on less than one dollar a day and lack access to basic needs such as food, clean water, clothing and shelter. Environmental obstacles feed into correlates of poverty, such as inadequate medical care, unsafe environments, malnutrition and lack of education, which contribute to both the incidence and impact of disability among children.

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As long as these environmental and societal barriers exist, children with disabilities will continue to be excluded from society and be perceived as objects of charity or passive recipients of welfare.

Discrimination is the underlying cause of all these environmental and societal barriers. Discrimination causes us to close our hearts and minds to the needs of these children. Discrimination causes us to shut these children out from our plans for the future.

Let us eliminate discrimination against these children and their families, and learn to be a part of their lives. Let us move towards inclusion for children with disabilities and involve everyone in the process, so that we all learn to live in an environment where diversity is the norm rather than the exception.

A child with special needs does not have to be handicapped – as long as his or her rights are protected, by providing adequate support, access to social services and proper healthcare intervention.

Protecting the rights of children with special needs

Protecting the rights of children with special needs requires us to see the whole child, not just the disability. It requires us to respect their capabilities, protect their dignity and worth, and include them as part of society.

But beyond that, it requires us to shed light on the truly shadowy areas where children with special needs are most vulnerable – in education, protection from harm and exploitation.

Protection for children with disabilities must include providing equal access to quality education, protecting them from violence and neglect at home, and protecting them from institutionalisation and separation from their families.

- **Access to education**

Educating children with disabilities remains a challenge to most countries, and education targets are not being attained. Many children with special needs do not have access to any kind of school, much less regular education that develops their talents and capabilities to the fullest potential.

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Inclusive education is still a challenge for many countries, due to hurdles in legislation, capacity and societal attitudes – for instance, lack of community support, shortage of properly-trained teachers, as well as school facilities and curricula that are not adapted to the needs of children with disabilities.

Children who are not in schools or not able to achieve their potential in school are more likely to begin working at a disproportionately early age, and are vulnerable to exploitation.

- ***Protection from institutionalisation***

In some parts of the world, placement of children in institutional care remains a common response to disability. Often the parents or caregivers find themselves unable to cope with the child's disability, because they are isolated in a community that does not accept the child's impairment; or they lack financial and social support, as well as information, to care for the child.

But institutional care is more detrimental to the well-being and development of the child, because the child is cut off from the family and community. Even in a well-staffed institution, a child rarely gets the amount of attention he or she would receive from their own parents and families. Children growing up in such environments can experience developmental delays and potentially irreversible psychological damage, and are at increased risk of neglect, social isolation and abuse.

If institutionalisation is unavoidable, then an immediate priority should be to create better conditions within the institutions and enforce rigorous monitoring.

- ***Protection from abuse and neglect***

Considering the vulnerability and powerlessness of children with disabilities, they are significantly more likely to be victims of physical, sexual and psychological abuse than children without disabilities. The social isolation and stigma faced by these children also make them vulnerable to violence and exploitation, in their own homes, schools, in care centres, institutions or on the street.

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Children with impairments appear to be “easy victims” because they are less able to defend themselves, report the abuse or convince others of their credibility. Imagine a child who requires assistance with washing, dressing and other intimate care activities – and how easy it is for someone to take advantage of that and sexually abuse the child.

The protection and inclusion of children with special needs is a matter of social justice and an essential investment in the future of society. It is not based on charity or goodwill but is an integral element of the expression and realisation of universal human rights.

International frameworks and legal conventions

Our efforts in protecting the rights of children with special needs are guided by several international legal frameworks.

The basic rights of every child are enshrined in the **Convention on the Rights of the Child**, a treaty founded on the basis of respect for the dignity and worth of each individual, regardless of colour, caste, creed, ability or disability.

The four foundation principles of the CRC embody the spirit of protecting the child as a whole entity – that every child has the right to life, survival and development; the right to be treated fairly without discrimination; the right to have their views respected; and the right to have states and adults act in their best interests.

In particular, Article 23 of the CRC states that children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the CRC, so that they can enjoy full and independent lives. This includes for governments to provide assistance for the disabled child and family to ensure access to education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities.

Article 23 also specifies that children with any kind of disability are entitled to all the rights in the CRC, including the right to receive an education that develops each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest.

The CRC also specifies that all children, including those with disabilities, have the right to be cared for by their parents and not be separated from their parents.

The rights of children with disabilities are further protected by the new **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, which identifies persons with disabilities as legitimate decision-makers in their own lives, and sets out a code of implementation for governments. The CRPD promotes broader issues of equality and elimination of legal and social barriers to participation, social opportunities, health, education, employment and personal development.

The CRPD is a landmark convention because it finally puts the spotlight on persons with disabilities – the world’s largest minority – and makes them legally visible in their societies and in the international arena. Malaysia signed the CRPD in April 2008, but has not ratified it yet.

In 2002, during a Special Session of the UN General Assembly, the world came together to rally for children and adopted a new agenda to build a **World Fit for Children**. The outcome document recognises that governments have to ensure children with disabilities have effective access to integrated services, as well as inclusive education that promotes continued attendance and successful completion of school.

All these international instruments mark the strong commitment by UN agencies, as well as the signatory countries, to protect the human rights of persons, particularly children, with special needs.

National overview

The government of Malaysia is to be commended for recognising the needs of children with disabilities, giving priority to the best interests of these children in national development programs.

- ***Ninth Malaysia Plan***¹

People with disabilities were given a focus in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, although it did not specifically address children with disabilities.

¹ Ninth Malaysia Plan

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The 9MP identified the need to further intensify the registration process of people with disabilities with the Department of Social Welfare, to enable them to access programmes that provide care and support.

The 9MP also plans to establish more community-based rehabilitation centres to integrate the disabled into the mainstream activities of society. These centres provide training and employment opportunities to assist people with disabilities to be self-reliant, and also provide welfare and information services.

As planned under the 9MP, the Persons with Disabilities Act was introduced in July 2008, to actively promote and protect the rights of the disabled to live with dignity and self-respect. The Act is aimed at ensuring their rights to an inclusive society, greater access to education and vocational training, employment, barrier free environment as well as access to ICT.

The 9MP also promises to provide financial assistance that will enhance development programmes for people with disabilities, to encourage them to support themselves. These include the Disabled Worker's Allowance of RM200 per month to those earning less than RM750 a month, and launching grants of up to RM2,700 per person to assist people with disabilities to venture into small businesses.

- **MOE Policies on education / intervention for children with special needs²**

Education, particularly in the early years of childhood, play a critical role in promoting children's development, raising awareness of their rights, and overcoming prejudice and discrimination.

In 2005, more than 15,000 children with special needs in Malaysia were attending integrated classes in mainstream primary schools. Unfortunately, there is no adequate estimate of the total number of children in Malaysia with special needs and how their education needs are being met.

Students with special needs are provided education opportunities in special schools, as well as in integration programmes in mainstream primary and secondary schools, and technical/vocational secondary schools. Early intervention programmes have been

² Education For All Report

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established for children aged 5 and above with hearing and visual disabilities in special education as well as in mainstream schools. Emphasis is also being given towards inclusion programmes, where children with disabilities are placed fully in mainstream classes or partial inclusion in mainstream classes for certain subjects.

As it currently stands, only children with a single disability are registered in MOE schools; while children with multiple disabilities have to be referred to the Ministry of Women, Family & Community Development. This latter point is important to note as it limits access to education for many children with special needs.

Another important area that needs attention is the inclusion of special needs children in Early Childhood Care and Education. One difficulty in making provisions for children with special needs is the relative lack of information about the number of children with special needs, the kinds of disabling conditions that affect them, their location and the barriers they experience to full participation in Early Childhood Care and Education.

The Education Ministry is also focusing on early intervention programmes, looking into extending early intervention to children with disabilities below the age of 2 until 4, as well as training pre-school teachers on early intervention skills.

UNICEF commends the Education Ministry for being proactive in identifying several actions to be taken to improve education for these children: (i) amending the Special Education Regulations Act of 1997 to accept students with two disabilities; (ii) increasing the capacity of preschools and schools to address children with special needs; and (iii) setting up a database of special needs children.

UNICEF activities and programs

Children with special needs do not deserve special rights – their rights are just the same as any other children in the world, as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They are equally deserving of fair, non-discriminatory treatment, state and community support, as well as access to social services that will protect their health, education and safety.

As the guardian of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF's responsibility is to support the implementation of the Convention, help change the legal and policy

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framework of States parties and improve understanding of the Convention itself at all levels of society. UNICEF also supports the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors implementation of the Convention and Optional Protocols by States parties.

In 2007, the Committee made several Concluding Observations to the Government of Malaysia – a few recommendations specifically addressed the rights of children with special needs, calling for a national policy and plan of action; collection of adequate statistical data; ensuring equal access to social and health services; and more community-based programmes and services to support their inclusion in society.

The Government has already made significant progress towards achieving a few of these recommendations, namely with the formulation of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the signing of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities earlier this year.

In all of UNICEF's program and advocacy efforts with our partners, we continuously endeavour to bring the CRC and the recommendations of the Committee to the fore.

One example of a program that highlighted the needs of children with special rights was a project in 2005 to support children with autism. UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Health Malaysia to conduct a pilot study looking into improving early detection of autism so that early intervention efforts can be carried out before children begin schooling. Previously, early detection of autism had been found to be poor: of the 187 children under age 13 diagnosed with autism (in 2004), only 50% of them were diagnosed before they entered primary school.

The pilot study tested the implementation of a screening tool to screen children between the age of 18 and 36 months, with the aim of providing evidence to support the implementation of a nationwide screening program. As part of this pilot study, UNICEF also funded the training of health personnel in 5 states to identify the effectiveness of the screening tool, as well as any implementation problems. As a result of this UNICEF-initiated study, the Ministry of Health has implemented a national screening program, and every newborn child in Malaysia will be screened for early signs of autism at 18 months.

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UNICEF is also working towards better data collection and monitoring of children with special needs, specifically through the development of the Malaysian Child Index. In this regard, UNICEF is working with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development to establish the Malaysian Child Index, which aims to ascertain the situation of children in different states and territories of Malaysia and how their rights are being met. Efforts are being made to dedicate a section of the Index for children with special needs, to look at their situation and how provisions are being made to fulfil their rights.

In general, UNICEF's work in protecting the rights of children with special needs comes under a broad and far-reaching framework that addresses not only the immediate issue of disability, but also the underlying societal and institutional factors that perpetuate disparities and exacerbate the vulnerability of children.

We work to influence change, not only through research and capacity-building, but also through advocacy and communication. Through communication with the media and the public, we make ongoing efforts to highlight the vulnerability of children, including those with special needs, and link it to other social issues on various platforms, such as by advocating for their rights on Universal Children's Day.

Our key strength lies in engaging with all parties who have an obligation towards children, and have the power to make a difference.

Community-based efforts

I believe that I stand here today speaking to a group of people who have great power to make a difference. Although the title of my address is 'UNICEF's Support for Children with Special Educational Needs', civil society and community-based organisations have the potential to play a more meaningful role than UNICEF in taking ownership of this issue.

As you rightfully identified in the first National Early Childhood Intervention Conference in 2006, parents, practitioners and policy makers should work together in positive partnership. You have demonstrated the strength of that partnership by coming together amongst yourselves, putting aside your differences and working hand-in-hand towards a common goal.

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Your passion in engaging the government, your peers and the public have translated into initiatives that are aimed at creating real change. What you do at the grassroots level does not have to remain at that level – you can create pressure from the ground up and provide the momentum to keep the issues on everyone’s radar.

In many ways, you are giving a voice to children with disabilities. You are leading the way for the next generation of children to live in an inclusive society, where there are no barriers to the full participation of any child. When children with disabilities have all their rights fulfilled, they can succeed in every way possible.

I commend all of you for your efforts and wholeheartedly encourage you to continue fighting a worthy battle.

Thank you.

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