

KEYNOTE STATEMENT

2017 ZERO PROJECT CONFERENCE

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“Enable, Employ, Empower: Ensuring disability-inclusive development”

Vienna, 22 February 2017

Your Excellency Minister Alois Stoeger,
Mr. Martin Essl,
Mr. Jacob Von Uexkull,
Ms. Christine Stix-Hackl,
Excellencies, experts, colleagues and friends from the global community
working in the field of disability and development,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honour to be here with you again at this year’s Zero Project Conference, meeting and exchanging ideas with so many leading experts, policy makers, development practitioners and disability-rights advocates. I am delighted to engage with you on this year’s timely topic, “Employment, Work and Vocational Education and Training”.

The United Nations promotes heavily the facilitation of job-rich economies and full employment as a crucial element of development policy. Just recently, in his message for the World Day of Social Justice, Secretary-General António Guterres referenced equitable and inclusive access to decent work and income generating activities as central to building resilient societies. Many of the global frameworks and commitments guiding development policy today, also give clear recognition of the role of employment, including the recently adopted 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

For persons with disabilities; however, too often the access to employment opportunities remains far out of reach, despite these central commitments.

Working- age persons with disabilities are less likely to be employed than their peers without disabilities. Studies have found the employment rate of persons with disabilities to be around 20 per cent lower in some countries. In fact, in many countries, persons with disabilities are even less likely to participate in the labour market at all.

Why is this the reality?

Persons with disabilities are often discouraged from looking for a job. There is even data that shows that many people consider it unfair to give work to persons with disabilities when persons without disabilities cannot find jobs. *[Insert personal example here]* For those who look for work, employment opportunities are scarce due to inaccessible work places and information, discrimination, negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities and misconceptions about their capacity to work.

Colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

This is a telling and disturbing reality.

Despite the tremendous advancement achieved globally in improving international normative standards, there still remains a gap between the commitments made and the daily experiences of persons with disabilities on the ground. In many parts of the world, persons with disabilities are still largely neglected or excluded in development policy and programming.

But there is promise.

In the United Nations our dialogue, has shifted from an understanding of disability as a charitable cause, or an issue to be addressed only from a medical perspective. We have adopted a focus on disability-inclusion and we recognize persons with disabilities as agents of change.

With its entry into force in 2008, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities laid concrete legal grounds for empowering

persons with disabilities. This premise has since made its way into many international commitments, including the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contains specific commitments to persons with disabilities in regard to employment, decent work, socio-economic inclusion and vocational training. Beyond the rhetorical commitments, the agenda includes clear indicators for monitoring progress from a disability-perspective.

[May consider inserting an anecdote related to one of the following: SDG 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere) SDG 4 (Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all)

SDG 8 (Promote sustained , inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all)

SDG 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries.) commits that by 2030 empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex and disability ... or other status]

SDG 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels)

SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development)]

What this means is that, for countries to be considered successful in eradicating poverty, in promoting inclusion and reducing equality, they will have to prove that they did this also with and for persons with disabilities. The needs, voices and agency of persons with disabilities are no longer relegated to the fringes of development policy.

Beyond the moral imperative that this fulfils, there is growing recognition of the socio-economic injustice to society that is created by the exclusion of persons with disabilities.

Available data and studies show that the cost for excluding persons with disabilities in the labour market could be steep- as high as nearly 7 per cent of national GDP in economic terms.

For example, the World Bank in one report published in 2008 shows, that in Bangladesh, the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market results in a total estimated loss of US\$891 million/year; income losses among adult caregivers adds an additional loss of US\$234 million/year.

In another study, based on the data from a Canadian case, the annual GDP loss was estimated between 8.8 and 6.7 per cent.

So what is being done? What can we do?

Rather than the passive provision of services and opportunities to groups or segments of society in need, the focus of our effort must be on empowerment.

Persons with disabilities and other social groups facing the disadvantage of prejudice and discrimination must be included in our policies and programming. They must be empowered through concrete actions to remove barriers, and through creating enabling conditions to ensure equal opportunities for them to participate in a meaningful manner on equitable terms.

In issues directly related to persons with disabilities and the realization of their specific accessibility rights their participation is well championed. But what we need to achieve is the mainstreaming of disability as a natural consideration in all issues of development; and to mainstream the disability perspective and participation of persons with disabilities in this regard.

Encouragingly, Governments, civil society and the private sector have been taking initiatives to promote employment among persons with disabilities on an equal basis with the rest of the population.

More and more countries [*for instance Brazil, Costa Rica, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda*] enacted anti-discrimination laws covering areas such as recruitment and the salaries paid to persons with disabilities.

Many countries [*such as Brazil, China, Ecuador, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kuwait, Mauritius, Mongolia, Peru, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand*] are implementing affirmative measures such as quota systems with the aim of increasing job opportunities and greater participation of persons with disabilities in the labour force . they are trying to level the playing field.

The effectiveness and impact of these policy intervention or mix of policies will need to be closely assessed over the time. We are still learning and there is no silver bullet that can fix all issues or challenges facing us.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In-depth exchanges of experience such as those we will have at this conference are very helpful in opening our eyes and mind.

By learning from each other, all of us can do better to inform policy making and practices on the ground in our countries and communities.

Neither Governments nor the United Nations on their own could achieve the implementation of CRPD, or the 17 SDGs. We must work together.

Cooperation and multi-stakeholder partnerships among Governments, the United Nations, academic institutions, civil society organizations and the private sector must continue and must be strengthened. And we must give greater weight to the the voice, skills and abilities each person with disability has.

The commitment to inclusion in jobs, employment, vocational training of persons with disabilities is undoubtedly present. Now we have to adjust the way we work by changing the mind set of Governments, formal education and vocational training centres and the private sector.

On behalf of my Division, the Division for Social Policy and Development of UNDESA, I would like to extend my special appreciation to the Essl Foundation and World Future Council for your initiatives --

making today's gathering at the Conference possible to share experiences, ideas and good practices with a view to finding practical and innovative solutions.