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Assistance

Forum Disability Ministers Meeting

Rarotonga, Cook Islands

Opening keynote address:

Disability and development in the Pacific

9.45am Thursday 22 October 2009

Acknowledgements

Ministers, representatives of Disabled People's Organisations,
distinguished delegates

I am deeply honoured to be here and would like to thank the Secretary General for inviting me to present this first keynote address. It is a great honour.

I would also like to thank the Prime Minister and government of the Cook Islands for hosting this historic first ministerial meeting on disability.

I remember on my previous visit in July last year meeting with the Disability Action Team. I was impressed with their work and their overall approach to the issue.

I commend you Prime Minister and your government for the progress you have made in improving the rights and lives of people with disability.

You are doing what all governments should do – striving to meet the needs of their citizens – all of their citizens, and particularly those experiencing disadvantage.

People with disability must have their human rights recognised and realised and be given the opportunities like others to participate fully in their communities, and an equal right to pursue their hopes and dreams and to develop their talents.

As you have said in the past – this is not an equal world and extra effort is needed to bring balance and fairness to everyone, no matter what their circumstances.

The efforts of Cook Islands show us that moving towards an inclusive society is possible and positive in the Pacific.

This is the most important message we need to hold onto throughout this meeting and beyond.

This meeting has been called to take stock of our progress and to strengthen our efforts to promote and protect the rights of people with disability.

The impetus for this meeting has been growing for some time and was formally announced at the recent Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Cairns.

Leaders acknowledged in the Forum Communiqué that people with disability, including those in the Pacific, are among the poorest and most vulnerable in the world.

Leaders agreed that more attention needs to be paid to people with disability, and that this meeting should consider a regional disability strategy with an associated plan of action for implementation.

With more and more countries around the world, including in the Pacific, signing and ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we now have a common framework to guide our actions that builds on the progress achieved through the Biwako Framework.

These steps lead us further on from the days when the needs of people with disability were determined by medical and charity models.

The challenge

Our collective challenge, in both developed and developing countries is to right the wrongs of the past by making sure that people with disability have the same opportunities to contribute and lead a decent life as everyone else.

As many people here would be aware from their direct experience, people with disability in Pacific Island countries, like those in many other parts of the world, have less chance of receiving vocational training, employment or opportunities to participate in public life than people without disability.

Women and girls with disability face particular problems.

They are often confronted with multiple forms of discrimination, and tend to be more socially isolated and poorer than their male counterparts.

If girls with disability don't receive an education, their life prospects are reduced.

Their chances of getting any work, let alone meaningful work, are diminished and the prospects of being well paid aren't good.

If women with disability are living in isolated areas, not only do they not have access to any support services, they are at greater risk of violence with even fewer opportunities to escape.

Another area of particular concern is the high proportion of children with disability who do not go to school or receive much in the way of an education.

This is not right in the 21st century.

Children are our future citizens, educators, parents, business people and lawmakers.

Children and young people with disability have their own ideas of what they would like to do with their lives and they are entitled to realise them.

Improving the quality of life for children with disability will in itself build sustainable development, and lasting change.

Here I congratulate the Cook Islands again for your determination many years ago to make education compulsory for all your children.

The two points I'd like to make are: that disability can no longer be someone else's problem, and that Australia stands ready to help any Pacific country that gives priority to assisting people with disabilities to access their rights.

The challenge is big, but there are many ways we can make a difference.

Perhaps the first step is changing attitudes and beliefs.

There are times when we all struggle with the term 'disability.'

The fact is that none of us is a perfect human specimen.

We all have strengths and weaknesses in the way we are made – we are all different - and the world would be a richer and stronger place if we did a better job of acknowledging and valuing this diversity.

We need to remember that each of us may be touched by disability throughout our lives in one way or another.

Each of us or a friend or family member, at some stage, will become unwell or injured.

We will all get older and find ourselves unable to do everything we used to be able to.

When this happens it isn't the physical or mental impairment that gets in the way of our participating to the fullest and contributing our talents to the advantage of our families and the society as a whole.

It is the artificial barriers that society creates that are the main problem.

These barriers can be social, cultural, economic, political or embedded in the physical environment.

Once we recognise this, we can work towards building communities that no longer exclude a significant proportion of their members.

Disability in the Pacific

Pacific islanders have a reputation for caring for their extended families and communities and that is a wonderful characteristic to have and to hold onto.

It is important, but it is not enough.

Furthermore, circumstances and expectations change - there is growing urbanisation, people are migrating, young people have different aspirations to their parents and grandparents.

The time has come to find additional ways to ensure that people with disability have the same opportunities as everyone else to make the most of their lives and contribute in their communities.

We are not talking about displacing the old ways but looking at how to mesh the old and the new.

To some degree this has already started in the Pacific – through Disabled Peoples Organisations and by governments adopting the Biwako Millennium Framework and taken further by those who have signed or ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Biwako Millennium Framework

The Biwako Millennium Framework in its time helped us make the shift away from the charity-medical model approach to disability to a rights-based approach.

Biwako raised the need for early detection of disability, early intervention and education and training of people with disability.

It galvanised partnerships between governments, disabled people's organisations, NGOs, church based groups and the private sector.

It highlighted the need for the development of disability policies, research, awareness raising and monitoring and evaluation of services and approaches.

And it encouraged international agencies such as the International Labour Organisation, UNESCO and the World Health Organisation to incorporate disability into their everyday thinking.

Biwako gave us a framework for change.

In decades to come, we will look back at Biwako as one of the defining points in the realisation of human rights and equality opportunity.

But it's time to move on to the next stage. Implementation of the Convention. It's time to build on the good work of ESCAP and the Forum Secretariat to take our support for the rights of people with disability in the Pacific to a new level.

The Convention

The big distinction between Biwako and the Convention is the layer of legal protection it introduces.

Biwako does not have binding obligations. The Convention does.

With the Convention, we have a comprehensive set of articles that take us beyond non-binding international standards to formally binding legal obligations.

This is the key point. It provides a platform to advance the rights of people with disability.

I recently attended the Conference of State Parties to the Convention in New York, where countries had an opportunity to take stock of their progress and their compliance with the convention.

Countries that ratify the convention have to adopt legislative and administrative measures that give people with disability equal rights.

Australia was one of the first countries to ratify the convention.

We did so because even in a country which has the resources to look after every single citizen, we recognised that people with disability were still missing out in many ways.

It has only been in the past few years for example that the railway stations in Sydney started to be upgraded with lifts to accommodate wheelchairs.

We have made a lot of progress but we have a long way to go.

Australia is keen to share our experiences and help our development partners face their own challenges, but we are also keen to learn more about your efforts, and be guided by your successes.

Development for All in the Pacific

In Secretary General Slade's invitation to make this address, he noted that this meeting will look at how member countries can use the Convention to guide their work, and how development partners such as Australia and New Zealand can use the Convention to map out our support for Forum countries.

This is very much in line with Australia's disability-inclusive development strategy, Development for All.

Development for All is about ensuring that our aid works for everyone – including people with disability.

When preparations were underway for the development of a disability strategy for the Australian aid program, we held consultations in many of our partner countries.

These consultations occurred with individuals with disability, Disabled People's Organisations, civil society groups, representatives of government and other development agencies.

In this process it became clear to us that a lot of work had already gone on within your countries to progress the rights and needs of people with disability.

Several countries have Disabled People's Organisations and Disability Councils and national disability policies.

Several have signed and some have gone on to ratify the Convention.

Others have conducted surveys of people with disability to increase understanding.

As your countries sign the convention and move towards compliance, the benefits will flow through your communities.

We have already begun discussions with some of our partner countries on how Australia can assist, including through our overarching Pacific Partnerships for Development.

Only recently we have agreed to work with education officials in Samoa to help children with disability make the transition from primary to high school.

And we are also working on a number of fronts to build the capacity of Disabled People's Organisations across the Pacific to effectively lobby their governments for a stronger focus on people with disability in the development process.

Leadership & Partnerships

This brings me to two key points: the importance of partnerships to help and guide each other, and leadership.

It is important to have strong partnerships between government and development agencies.

But it is even more important to build partnerships between government and Disabled Peoples Organisations.

This is the first Pacific ministers meeting to reflect real partnerships – showing by example that people who have been silenced for too long have the right to be heard.

It opens opportunities for new kinds of leadership and responses to challenges that face us.

Political leadership is necessary, but leadership from people with disability is also critical if we want to:

- Focus attention on the need to address issues facing people with disability.
- Build greater awareness on the importance of allowing those with disability access to greater and more equitable opportunities to improve their quality of life.
- Allow people to fully enjoy all inalienable human rights.

A key task for us at this meeting is to endorse a regional disability strategy that puts people with disability at the centre of our efforts.

This will not always be easy.

The dispersed and diverse nature of many islands and communities presents problems, but none are insurmountable.

We need to think big but we also need to be realistic.

The Convention provides the strongest framework we have to keep us on track, both in terms of what we do, and how we work.

Not every country in the Pacific has signed the Convention of 3 May 2008. *Not every country has ratified it.*

But, it is a framework that we can all share. It can guide our implementation and our monitoring of performance.

It makes sense to use the Convention to shape the regional disability strategy and I urge all of us at this meeting to confirm our commitment to the UNCRPD as our shared framework for action.

In conclusion

This first meeting of Ministers responsible for disability here in the Pacific is an historic first step.

But, people with disability need to see practical steps that result in genuine and sustainable progress.

They need evidence that their ability is being noticed, not their disability.

All of us need to work towards the day when disability isn't seen as different – where it's an ordinary part of everyday life and is accommodated in the same way as other differences.

The MDGs don't refer specifically to the situation of people with disability. But it's clear that if we don't meet the needs of the people with disability, then we can't meet the MDGs by 2015, or ever.

Thank you once again for this opportunity to address the meeting and I look forward to working with you over the next two days to advance the rights of people with disability.

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