

Keynote Address

On

"Disability and Development – Practical Strategies"

By

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Mr Chair, respected Chief Guest and Honorable Chief Advisor, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Honorable Advisers, Special Guests, Brigadier General (Retd) M A Malek, Special Assistant to the Honorable Chief Adviser, In-charge of Ministry of Social Welfare, Mr M A Hye Howlader, Secretary, Ministry of Social Welfare, Mr Nicholas J Krafft, Director, Network Operations for the Human Development Network, World Bank, Excellencies – Members of the Diplomatic Corps , Delegates to the 3rd General Assembly and Conference of Asia & Pacific Disability Forum, distinguished guests, representatives from the print and electronic media, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great privilege for me to stand here and to make the keynote address for the APDF 3rd Conference. I thank the APDF leadership for kindly choosing me to be the Keynote Speaker and for selecting the most appropriate theme "Disability and Development – Practical Strategies". I would like to start by thanking APDF for acknowledging the capacity of Bangladesh and selecting us as the host nation for the APDF 3rd General Assembly and Conference.

This is the month of February that upholds a special meaning to all Bangla speaking people. It was on the 21st day of this month in 1952 when brave students and members of the public sacrificed their lives to establish Bangla as the State language of this land. This sacrifice by the Bengalis is now recognized by the UNESCO and 21st February is acknowledged as the International Mother Language Day. I pay my tribute to those martyrs, whose greatest sacrifice was the source of inspiration for the creation of a society free from political, economic, cultural, social exploitation and discrimination. This movement had led to the war of independence in 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh.

Disadvantaged people worldwide always had to raise their voice for their rights. There is no exception in case of persons with disabilities. The positive changes that we experience today would not have been possible without the efforts, initiatives, learning and experiences from the past. Since the 17th century till the middle of the 20th century services to the disabled persons were considered only as a charity issue. It was neither recognized as a mainstream development issue nor as rights based issue, particularly in the developing world. Needs and aspiration of people with disabilities were more addressed from the perspective of sympathy rather than responsibility.

Gradually this approach started changing from the 1950s when it was more seen from a welfare trend. Different programmatic and structural interventions were initiated worldwide. Educational institutions, rehabilitation centres, homes were established for the people with disabilities. It was mostly addressed from medical perspective and hardly from any social viewpoint.

It was for the first time in 1975 the United Nations considered to discuss the issue at the General Assembly and decided to observe 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons. Following the observance of the year, the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons from 1983 to 1992 was declared and observed. The UN Standard Rules in 1993 with its agenda was adopted as a strong instrument in this respect. It strongly called for actions that would lead the people with disabilities to find equal rights as others of this world community. To expedite this movement in the countries of the Asia and the Pacific

Region, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) decided to observe Asia Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons from 1993 to 2002. Other regions started to adopt their own Decades to promote the rights of people with disabilities. All these were strong indicators of the universal mandate to switch over from welfare to rights based approach with regard to disability.

The outcome of these actions by the Member States of the ESCAP, primarily disabled people's organizations, development organizations and Governments of the respective Member States started realizing to address the needs and aspirations of the persons with disabilities. Thus, in 2003, BIWAKO Millennium Framework was commenced with agenda for action to follow until 2012 in this region. These have created positive influence in respective countries for promotion of services and protection of rights of the disabled. The framework was followed with a proposition for drafting International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Bangladesh is honored as one of the Member States to second the motion when Mexico delegation at the UN proposed to initiate the process for drafting the convention in 2001. It is worthwhile to mention that within a span of 4 years the task of drafting the "UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" was completed on the 25th August 2006, where many of us being disabled from all parts of the world had actively participated.

It is a matter of pride for Bangladesh that the Article for Children with Disabilities in the Convention was incorporated in the draft at the 7th session of the Ad Hoc Committee, while six children with disabilities from Bangladesh, People's Republic of China and United Kingdom were present and participated in the session. Finally, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the UNCRPD on 13th December 2006. This instrument is a milestone for the persons with disabilities and the first UN human rights instrument in the 21st century. This instrument has given the people with disabilities increased opportunities for better life and promising future. Now, time has come for key actors – Governments, Donor Agencies, NGOs, DPOs and Civil Society, to take greater responsibility to translate the provisions of the convention into reality.

This APDF conference is one such attempt and is expected to make significant contribution in this process. The conference is going to deliberate on issues in 12 areas concerning issues of persons with disabilities, from early detection and prevention of needless disablement, education, gender, accessibility and use of assistive devices with technological advancement, information technology, employment, sports, culture & entertainment, support to persons with disabilities during and after disasters, legislative provision and legal protection etc.

I would like to take this opportunity to express deep appreciation and thanks to the Government of Bangladesh for their serious and firm commitment to promote and protect the rights and services for persons with disabilities of the country.

Firstly, the Government of Bangladesh signed the convention as the 91st Member State of UN on the 40th day upon it was opened by the UN. The Government also ratified the Convention except for the optional protocol on the 30th November last year. This has proved how our government has expressed its solidarity and commitment to the UN

instrument for promotion and protection of rights of persons with disabilities. I trust that soon the Government will ratify the optional protocol of the convention to demonstrate their meaningful commitment to this International Human Rights instrument.

Secondly, we acknowledge with thanks that the Government of Bangladesh last year has established 46 Focal Points in different Ministries, Divisions and Departments to oversee the interest of people with disabilities in its respective planning, resource allocation and execution.

Thirdly, the proposal is now under active consideration of the Cabinet Division of the Government of Bangladesh to amend the Rules of Business in order to accelerate the services to meet the needs of disabled citizens so that different Ministries will initiate and include plan for persons with disabilities to avail benefit.

Fourthly, the National Foundation for Development of the Disabled Persons has been restructured into the "Jatiya Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation" as an autonomous self-governing institution with comprehensive focus on integrated and pragmatic multi-sectoral approach to empower persons with disabilities and enhance their quality of life.

Bangladesh has a proven track record of working in effective partnership with Government and NGOs in disability sector. This 'partnership' has been recognized by the UNESCAP as one of the best practices in 2001. The National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled is the best example of such effective national platform for the persons with disabilities to liaise with the Government, donors' community and other stakeholders. Such model may be replicated in other countries, including the Asia & Pacific Regions to improve the quality of life and create opportunities for people with disabilities.

Undoubtedly, the journey for implementation of principles and provisions of the UNCRPD will not be completed without challenges. It will be a very long and strenuous journey with many barriers. We must mobilize ourselves at the national, regional and global levels to overcome the barriers to attain the set objectives in line with the Millennium Development Goals and other International Declarations. We should bear in mind that disability is the cause and effect of poverty. Unfortunately, however, resources are generally available at a lesser quantum for this segment of the population.

The mind-set of the political leadership, planners and policy makers, intelligentsia, corporate sector, and the donors' community and development partners must be changed. The history of progress of the development of persons with disabilities overcoming the geographical distances, political differences, economic diversity, social dissimilarity and cultural distinction are common everywhere.

Currently, there are tools and instruments at national levels but there is a lack of awareness, technical capacity, skilled human resources and financial resources that limit attaining the desired results. Further, there is lack of coordination among the important stakeholders that could ensure optimum utilization of limited resources. Some of the existing legislation and policies are not rights based in some of the countries of the region including Bangladesh. The time has come to amend those legislations in line with the

UNCRPD as well as to enact non-discrimination law ensuring equality, equity and fair justice to all including persons with disabilities. In addition, legislations and government policies are sometimes not compatible with the legislation concerning persons with disabilities. For example, persons with intellectual disability still in Bangladesh are deprived by law of inheritance to enjoy the right of ownership of property.

These challenges must not discourage us from engaging ourselves; rather they should help intensify our efforts to ensure equalization of opportunities and to enjoy full participation in life. The voices of the people with disabilities need to be further raised through organized platforms. People with disabilities must come to the forefront in leadership in all spheres of national and international arena. There should be greater cooperation and collaboration among the comity of nations for sharing resources, technical assistance and expertise in promoting the services and rights of persons with disabilities. The issues of women and children with disabilities must be considered with preferential attention. All programs for people with disabilities must be inclusive with adequate resource allocation and legal support. All these may be challenging to materialize but certainly it may be possible through positive intentions, skilled human resources, institutional development, capacity building of people with disabilities and our meaningful participation, appropriate planning, intensive monitoring, effective and efficient management. It is also important that national governments, international organizations, the UN System, bi and multilateral donors and private foundations and the corporate sector allocate and spend more resources for scientific, medical and educational research to combat disability and improved social and economic rehabilitation of the disabled population.

I am confident that this conference will conclude with a set of recommendations benefiting the delegates from different countries around the region. The conference will allow us to throw wisdom with essential strategies and actions so that the outcome of the deliberations will lead us to "Disability and Development – Practical Strategies".

Fellow brothers and sisters with disabilities, my final message to you in particular is that we want to live, we want to struggle and through this we want to show that, human spirit is indomitable. Let us all present here take the vow that we shall work closely, hand in hand, to create a rights-based, barrier-free inclusive society for all to live in a democratic society with equality, equity, dignity and justice.

I thank you all for your patient hearing.