*Check against delivery*

**Opening of the 20th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**



**Opening remarks by Ms. Kate Gilmore**

**United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

Geneva, 27 August 2018

Salle XVII, Palais des Nations

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Secretary-General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights, it is my honour to welcome you here, for the 20th session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

And may I wish you a happy birthday!

For we celebrate – in the course of this session - **the 10th anniversary of activities of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**. This gives us pause too – a time not only for appreciation but also for reflection, for reaffirmation and necessarily for renewed determination to bridge - solidly, sustainably - those still yawning, inexcusable gaps between promise and actual delivery.

Bridging appalling unconscionable distances between the commitments freely made by State parties and what has been delivered in fact is urgent, not merely as a matter of principle, but directly as a matter of duty – a compelling duty to those whose suffering remains unacceptable where it could have been alleviated; whose denial of justice and remedy is made all the more bitter because it need not be so and those whose dignity has perversely become even more elusive over this past decade when, with good policy and reasonable practice in place, it could so readily have been elevated.

There are many ways perhaps to define the success of this important committee and a wide choice of metrics by which to measure its impact. But none is as important as the measure of the extent to which your work – alongside that of others, of course – transforms – transforms – access to enjoyment of rights by people with disabilities.

Friends,

Those of us fortunate enough to serve in the international human rights system must not allow ourselves to be distracted from where lies our deepest duty, our greater accountability nor from full focus on the target of our best efforts. Ours is not loyalty to a single treaty; certainly not to particular governments, any more than it is to our own elevation. But it is to people – to persons –in whose name we serve - and it is to them that we owe account for what we achieve and for what we don’t.

This is why anniversaries do matter. With the passing of time at critical intervals, it is our practice as a human community to recall what truly matters; through ceremony, ritual and liturgy to remember the gifts of our fore-parents, to reflect on their legacy, and to consider too the implications for what lies ahead.

2018 is indeed a year of significant milestones for rights. It is the 10th anniversary of the activities of the Committee on the rights of persons with disabilities and it is the **20th** anniversary of the Human Rights Defenders declaration, the **25th** anniversary of the Vienna Declaration that established the High Commissioner for Human rights; but critically, also the **70th** anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Tough as rights standards are at times to uphold; inconvenient as they are to power that seeks to be unaccountable and while under pressure human rights standards remain, nonetheless, they endure. Their gift persists. For rooted they are, deep in this fundamental proposition to which explicit opposition is inconceivable: – that born we all are equal in dignity and rights.

Conceived in Holocaust, including specifically against those with disabilities – the child of two world wars and born of unfulfilled longings – centuries old; forged neither in privilege nor in prosperity, but amidst rather, the global rubble, wrack and ruin of reckless rancour, the adoption in 1948 of the UDHR gifted to us an enduring encapsulation of what makes for a legitimate, humanizing relationship between power and relative powerlessness.

Today’s politicized fictions may tempt us to believe otherwise, but the Declaration was not the “mere” impost of privileged, white, liberal neo-colonialism. In fact, its negotiators were drawn from across the world, meeting 81 times over 168 resolutions.

The West was among the more reluctant drafters as much of the Declaration’s content was the product of demands from newly de-colonized states.

Latin American states were the strongest promoters of social and economic rights; the Soviet Union concentrated on race discrimination, while the US Chair of the drafting group - Eleanor Roosevelt - had little to do with actual wording.

India and Pakistan argued persuasively for equal pay, equal distribution of property, and equal application of marriage laws - specifically against child marriage. And, it was a member of India’s Constituent Assembly, Hansa Mehta, who ensured the gender inclusiveness of the first Article, arguing successfully that instead of the proposed “all men are born equal”, it must, and it does, read ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.’

As the Chilean drafter observed, adoption of the UDHR was “… a truly significant historic event in which a consensus had been reached as to the **supreme value of the human person**.” The **supreme value of each and every human person – each of us, to the exception of none of us, in the interests of all of us**!

Excellences, ladies and gentlemen,

This is an extremely important and busy session for your Committee, during which you will adopt a much-needed general comment on involvement of persons with disabilities in decision making processes.

Context is a critical variable in exercise of human rights and in this respect the rights of persons with disabilities in humanitarian, migration and disaster management contexts is of critical importance, as was expressed by the Second Conference on Disability and Disaster Risk Management (Dhaka), the forum on Disability-Inclusive Humanitarian Action in Istanbul and as is reflected in the proposed Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which includes agreements necessary for protection and support, for migrant persons with disabilities.

Friends,

The circumstances too of people with mental health conditions and those with psychosocial disabilities deserves particular attention. The High Commissioner has emphasized that forced treatment – such as forced medication and forced electro convulsive treatment, as well as forced institutionalization and segregation, should no longer be practiced. “To be banished from humanity – seen as unworthy of belonging and confined in seclusion – is deeply damaging to the human soul … not only for the individual, but also for the community as a whole.”

Which is why the draft additional Protocol to the Oviedo Convention authorizing involuntary treatment and institutionalisation of persons with disabilities is cause for grave concern and an issue on which to stress to state parties the weight of their international obligations under the CRPD.

Thus, this session’s joint meetings with the CRC are of critical importance – specifically with regards to the deprivation of liberty of children with disabilities and for the enjoyment of human rights by children with disabilities, including through inclusive education.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

Treaty body work is under strain – with challenges issued to substance, working methods and resources. However, in his meeting with their Chairpersons, the UN Secretary-General, who expressed his strong support for treaty bodies. His next report on treaty body strengthening will be an opportunity to engage the various challenges faced by treaty bodies, including in terms of resources.

However, the UN is among those systems that must change. The Secretary-General has initiated the process for adoption of a system-wide policy, an action plan and a monitoring framework, for inclusion of persons with disabilities in the work of the UN, including programming. Furthermore, I am delighted to confirm the rights of persons with disabilities will be a critical priority for our Office over the next four years.

The struggle against a system’s discriminatory practices - against stigma, coercion, abuse and violence - has never been most courageously undertaken by those empowered by those systems or benefiting from their toxicity. The leadership by and participation of people with disabilities is simply essential if those systems are to be truly transformed.

In this, the leadership of your Committee has a critical part to play and the Chair of your Committee of course is key. Thus, we celebrate the leadership provided by Theresia Degener and her example from which so many have drawn strength. Thank you and thank you again. And now while warming welcoming all new members, we note just how welcome are the six - much needed - new women members, moving the Committee closer to the representation that is essential for its fuller credibility. We further congratulate those reelected and thank most warmly all those whose terms of office have concluded.

I wish you once more, on behalf of the S-G and the HC, a fruitful and engaging session.

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