

**Keynote Address by the UNSDG Special Advisor to the UN  
Secretary General on Disability  
5<sup>th</sup> Session of the Children's Parliament of Namibia  
21 August 2019  
Windhoek, Namibia**

Hon. Professor Peter Katjavivi - Speaker of the National Assembly  
Hon. Nevel Ndoli – Speaker of the Children’s Parliament  
Ms. Rachel Odede – The UNICEF Representative in Namibia  
Hon Ministers and members of parliament present here today  
Honorable members of the Children’s Parliament  
Members of the Diplomatic Corps  
Representative from the Development community  
Members of the media  
Distinguished guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

I am truly honored to be here today.

I was born in the same year that Namibia gained its Independence from South Africa. So in many ways, this feels like a homecoming. I spent my formative years here. I owe Namibia a debt of gratitude for planting a seed of possibility in my consciousness

I am particularly delighted to be here in my capacity as one of the UN Secretary-General's newly appointed Global Advocates for the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2015, 193 Heads of State adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The global goals represent a comprehensive, holistic package of ideals and ideas for creating the world we as humanity aspire for... I am deeply passionate about ensuring that the needs and

aspirations of the most vulnerable and neglected segments of society are reflected in all of the SDGs, so that the agenda – in its entirety – speaks to everyone, equally.

I am the youngest as well as the only disabled member of the UN Secretary-General's 17 member group of eminent personalities charged with helping the Secretary-General and the United Nations raise global awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals and the need for accelerated action.

A disabled person is seldom seen “in the driver's seat of international development, changing the world in real time.

I want to demonstrate to children with disabilities, using my life as a point of reference, that they can grow up to become the protagonists in the story of their own lives, that they themselves are the ones they have been waiting for.

I am here to remind you that you are the ones you have been waiting for.

It is my understanding that this Children's Parliament is meant to offer you platform to engage lawmakers and decision makers. The adults. To have your collective voice amplified.

But, let me tell you something. Young people across the globe are not asking for permission to speak and lead. Young people are taking it upon themselves to lead and speak up for justice and fairness.

You are already leaders because you are the generation of Sweden's Greta Thunberg, South Africa's Zuleika Patel and Nigeria's Elizabeth Williams.

Humanity is in the midst of an existential crisis. Climate change, rampant inequality, nationalism, gender inequality, and structural violence are the markers of this existential crisis. And the only way

to emerge from this crisis is through existential defiance. Existential defiance means to use your life to advance humanity, to be in service of a vision that is bigger than you.

NOTES FROM THE FIELD: Reflecting on my humanitarian mission to Rwanda in my roles as Global Ambassador for Humanity & Inclusion and one of the UN Secretary-General's newly appointed SDG Advocates.

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I live with a severe degenerative disability and one of the things I have always wanted to do was show the world that despite my physical disability it is possible for me to travel to some of the most remote places on earth to shine a spotlight on the issues facing the most vulnerable people in society. We seldom get to see a disabled person in the driver's seat of international development, changing the world in real time.

So when I received a call a few weeks ago from the Nobel Peace Prize Winning Charity, Humanity & Inclusion (HI), asking me if I would consider visiting Rwanda in my capacity as HI's Global Ambassador for Inclusive Education, I said yes without hesitation.

This special mission was an opportunity to not only gain a first hand appreciation for the lived experience of disabled kids and their families, but was also a moment for me to blur the lines between benefactor and beneficiary as a prominent voice calling for more nuanced representation of disability.

My humanitarian mission to Rwanda was scheduled a few days before the 25th Anniversary commemorating the 1994 Genocide, a sobering time for deep reflection and to show solidarity with Rwandans with disabilities across the country.

My visit to the land of a thousand hills also coincided with my appointment as one of the UN Secretary-General's new SDG Advocates, so all in all, the timing could not have been any more serendipitous.

I spent a week in Kigali as well as in neighboring districts outside the capital city.

From a logistics and accessibility standpoint, I knew that this would be one of the most grueling field trips I have ever been a part of. And indeed, it was. It was grueling physically and emotionally because I had to put my body on the line. I pushed through the physical pain and discomfort associated with navigating my weak and small frame through treacherous terrain, and at times heavy downpours, in order to meet the most beautiful children with disabilities and their families who live in remote villages cut off from critical social services.

As strenuous as this mission was, I forged ahead stridently and saw it through for one simple reason: to demonstrate to children with disabilities, using my life as a point of reference, that they can grow up to become the protagonists in the story of their own lives. I wanted to show them that they themselves are the ones they have been waiting for.

It was a physically draining mission, but it was also one of the most moving experiences of my life because looking into the eyes of each of the kids I met I saw the very best of humanity. I saw hope. I saw brilliance. I saw joy on full display.

These are my notes capturing the moments that stood out to me from this life-changing trip.

Day 1: Discovering my contribution to the struggle for inclusion!

When I woke up this morning I didn't really know what to expect. But I told myself on my way to breakfast to just go with the flow

and remember that I am here to learn as much as I can. Going in with an open mind and an open heart enabled me to hit the ground running from the outset.

I kicked off Day 1 of this mission with special visits to a rehabilitation center for children with disabilities and a psychosocial support group for refugee survivors of gender based violence. Both projects demonstrated the powerful role that communities can play in their own healing and self-actualization.

What struck me on the drive to these projects was the absence of accessible transportation. There are no adaptive vehicles for people who use mobility devices, none whatsoever. Ahead of my visit to Rwanda, HI converted one of its UNHCR sponsored SUVs with hand-built ramps fitted onto the trunk, enabling me to wheel myself in and out of the vehicle. In addition to this, I traveled with a team of extra assistants to provide me with physical back up when traversing rugged terrain.

I couldn't help but think about all the disabled children who are forced to stay at home because they live far from school and have no access to adaptive transportation. I kept asking myself, how many disabled people are denied access to critical social services because of the absence of adequate transportation?

Without freedom of movement, the worldview of children and young people with disabilities will remain confined to the doorstep of the under-resourced communities in which they live.

Surely, this is something I can help fix? Perhaps this is my contribution towards ensuring that children and young people don't get left behind.

Day 2: Bearing witness to Inclusion in action!

Today we were joined by Neil, our photographer and videographer, whose task was to follow me around and capture the magical moments between me and the kids.

If I thought yesterday was challenging, then today would push me beyond my physical limits. But I suppose the reward for this was an exhilarating and truly inspiring day.

Today I met Olivier, a special young man with Cerebral Palsy who lives with his mum and dad about an hour north of Kigali.

The trip itself was anything but smooth. In fact, as soon as we got closer to Oliver's village the tarmac roads turned into russet earth lined with potholes and channels hollowed out by torrential rains. I was in the passenger's seat, genuinely concerned that I might topple over. But thankfully I was in the safe hands of the HI team who made sure we drove slowly.

I thought about Oliver the entire time. How on earth does he get around?

We eventually arrived outside Oliver's home, a small, gated village made up of square houses and occupied by an inquisitive community.

We were warmly welcomed. Actually, Olivier - who we saw positioned next to his parents as we drove up to the front yard of their home - was bursting with excitement. Although he can't express himself verbally, his exuberance was written all over his face. He was particularly excited to see my fancy motorized wheelchair, so much so that the first thing he did when we sat next to each other was reach for my joystick. Thankfully, I had switched off the motor; otherwise he would have driven me into the wall.

When we arrived, Oliver was getting ready to go to school, an inclusive education model school developed by HI and funded by UNICEF. But before accompanying Oliver to school, I had the

pleasure of witnessing a special moment between him and his dad that challenged my own preconceptions about the dynamics surrounding family and community acceptance of a child living with a disability.

Oliver's parents told me that he loves to dance. They subsequently pulled out an old radio and egged their son on to show us his dance moves. Oliver was then wheeled outside, much to the curiosity of the entire village, and danced for the cameras. I was worried this was going to turn into a spectacle. I almost instructed the team to turn the cameras off because I felt uncomfortable for him. But then the most beautiful thing happened. Oliver's dad proudly stood next to his son and danced with him, unbothered by the prying eyes. When the beat ended, Oliver's dad kissed Oliver on the forehead. I was so moved.

The inclusion I witnessed extended beyond Oliver's heart-warming relationship with his dad. I also bore-witness to inclusion in action when we visited Oliver's school. I was thoroughly impressed at how Oliver's teacher was able to include and attend to all his students, with disabilities ranging from intellectual to hearing impairments. The teacher spoke verbally while signing simultaneously, and even engaged learners with developmental disabilities using objects and toys aimed at improving dexterity and sensory-motor skills. It was quite the sight to behold and proof that education can and should be for all.

Last day: Joining forces with the UN to make inclusion a reality in the lives of kids everywhere!

It's my last day here in Kigali. I am exhausted, but it's the kind of exhaustion that has me feeling deeply fulfilled. This trip has reminded me why I do the work I do. And today I get to meet like-minded people, leaders who share my political conviction that no one should be left behind in the collective pursuit of the SDGs.

Accompanied by Jean-Francois, the Country Director for Humanity & Inclusion in Rwanda, I paid a courtesy visit to the United Nations compound in Kigali. As we drove up to the main building, we were welcomed by Mr Fodé Ndiaye, UN Resident Coordinator and Representative of UNDP for the greater sub-region.

Mr Ndiaye introduced us to his colleagues who head up the various UN agencies operating in Rwanda and the sub-region. He then congratulated me on my appointment as one of the Secretary-General's new SDG Advocates, and we delved straight into a really important discussion on the need for world leaders to prioritize the meaningful inclusion of people with disabilities, particularly children with disabilities, as part of the promise to leave no one behind in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

I left this meeting feeling hopeful about the future of children with disabilities. It is not lost on me that much remains to be done if we are to get people with disabilities to move beyond zero, beyond survival. I won't rest until children and young people with disabilities begin to see themselves as active citizens and not just as beneficiaries. For that to happen, it's time we all recognize that the words disability and possibility belong in the same sentence.