**Deputy Secretary-General's remarks to the Opening of the Eighteenth Session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [as delivered]**

Welcome to the 18th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

On behalf of the Secretary-General, I extend my deepest gratitude to all of you for all you do to advance the rights of persons with disabilities around the world.

A special welcome to civil society, and in particular, to the organizations led by persons with disabilities.

Your presence fills this Hall with purpose.

Advancing equality and expanding opportunities for people with disabilities is not only close to my heart – it is central to the vision of the Secretary-General and the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.

It is a test of our common values. Inclusion of persons with disabilities is also a testament to common sense.

When persons with disabilities can fully participate in society, communities and economies are stronger.

We know this.  And so do all those who realize the Convention.

In an often-divided world, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stands as a powerful declaration:

Disability inclusion is fundamental to human rights -- and essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Yet today, we face a sobering truth.

Progress is not just slow – in some cases, it is reversing.

The UN Disability and Development Report found that nearly all SDG indicators for persons with disabilities are off track.

The message is stark:

Persons with disabilities face higher poverty, greater unemployment, deeper food and health insecurity, and more limited access to education, jobs and digital technologies.

And as this session reminds us, indigenous persons with disabilities face even greater exclusion.

This must change.

The Pact for the Future, adopted last year, reinforces the call for a more peaceful, inclusive, accessible and equitable world – one in which persons with disabilities play a full and equal role in advancing sustainable development, climate action and digital transformation.

We meet today on the threshold of two vital gatherings: the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development, and the Second World Summit for Social Development.

Your deliberations will help shape those events.

This session focuses on three critical themes.

How we finance change.

How we harness technology.

And how we honour those most often left behind: Indigenous persons with disabilities.

Let me offer a few reflections.

First, on funding change.

Progress requires investment.

Yet today, global support for disability inclusion has been cut in half – falling from $500 million to $250 million in just two years.

Behind these figures are real lives.

Children with disabilities shut out of classrooms.

Adults with disabilities who cannot get to work, if they have work at all.

Families of persons with disabilities denied essential services.

Women and girls with disabilities are denied sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We need targeted investments and tailored solutions – such as microfinance, social impact bonds and public-private alliances – that address gaps in realizing the rights of persons with disabilities.

And we must unlock capital to fund inclusion today, and build sustainable, inclusive systems for tomorrow.

This requires advancing the Pact for the Future’s calls to recapitalize Multilateral Development Banks, provide debt relief, and reform the international financial architecture – so that developing countries can invest in systems that are inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities.

Second, we must continue to harness the transformative power of technologies.

Artificial intelligence is the latest frontier – and it holds immense potential to advance inclusion.

AI can be the difference between isolation and participation.

And help individuals navigate the world through tools such as speech recognition, sign language interpretation, real-time captioning, screen readers, accessible navigation assistance and personalized support for daily tasks.

But this promise comes with a warning.

Biases are being hardwired into algorithms.

And regulations on accessibility of emerging technologies are sorely lacking.

Developed countries, in particular, have a responsibility to step up support.

Today about 70% of AI-powered assistive technologies are concentrated in developed economies.

Without global cooperation and fair technology transfer agreements, people in the poorest countries risk being excluded – again.

We must ensure that AI becomes a tool for humanity, not a mirror of entrenched inequalities.

Through the Global Digital Compact, countries have made their expectations clear:

AI technologies must empower all people, including persons with disabilities, and ensure that no one is left behind in the digital age.       
      
Third, we must do more to uphold the rights of Indigenous persons with disabilities.

Persistent barriers in intersecting forms of discrimination are limiting their rights, and the disparities are stark.

In Latin America, for example, indigenous persons with disabilities attend fewer years of school, earn half as much income, and hold fewer leadership roles.

Indigenous women and girls with disabilities face greater rates of violence, isolation and lack of support services.

Legal services are not accessible or are not culturally adequate for equal access to justice.

This is not just neglect – it is erasure.

Realizing the rights of Indigenous Persons with Disabilities requires culturally appropriate approaches – and meaningful inclusion in decision-making.

The rallying cry has never been more fitting:  Nothing about us without us.

Dear friends,

We’ve come a long way in 19 years.

Laws have changed.

Attitudes have shifted.

And political realities have shifted, too.

Armed conflict in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere is leaving countless civilians with sustained permanent injuries and deep psychological trauma.

Children with disabilities are especially vulnerable - Gaza alone has the highest number of child amputees in modern history.

Families are bearing the brunt of conflicts, and communities will require inclusive and accessible rebuilding.

Wars are draining budgets. And the foundations of multilateralism are being chiseled away by division and mistrust.

Yet this session is proof that the world can still come together – with purpose and resolve.

It is a reminder that we must make sure promises made are promises kept.

Let’s make the most of this conference – and the historic opportunities ahead – to drive action for persons with disabilities.

To build a world that is inclusive, accessible, and sustainable.

And to say in one voice:

Rights are not optional.

They are universal.

They are non-negotiable.

And they belong to all.

Thank you.