

Distinguished guests, panelists, and colleagues, good morning

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. This is a day to celebrate the achievements of people with a disability all over the world. A day to raise awareness of disability issues, and to discuss the gains to be derived from the integration of this population in every aspect of society.

But an international day, on its own, is not going to redress the discrimination which persons with disabilities face everywhere. So, the international day should not only be a celebration, but an opportunity for us to look both at what has been achieved, and what is still left to do.

The focus of this year's international day is empowering persons with disabilities, so in my remarks I will address two areas which, in my view, are very relevant to the empowerment of people with disabilities: participation in public affairs and employment. I will speak in general terms, but bringing some successful initiatives underway in Brazil in these two areas.

Regarding participation in public affairs, I begin by recalling the phrase "Nothing About Us Without Us", a motto that has fueled the disability rights movement over the years, and has become the rallying call for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The motto expresses the conviction of people with disabilities that THEY know what is best for them, and, therefore, their voice should be heard in any policy planning process, and should never simply be an after-thought.

In 2009, the Brazilian government created the National Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, linked to the Ministry of Human Rights. The Council offers an institutional space for people with disabilities to participate directly in the process of planning and monitoring public policies related to them. Other councils with the same purpose were created in the state and municipal levels. These are relevant fora for the design of public policy, and ideally, similar spaces of inclusion should be offered in the private sector as well.

The Brazilian Inclusion Law, approved in 2015 with constitutional status, has an exclusive chapter on the right to participation in public and political life. Among other legal provisions related to political participation, the State should encourage persons with disabilities to participate in all levels of government, including through the use of new assistive technologies. Hence, every official announcement, voting procedure, and public selection process in Brazil must be accessible, and feature sign language interpretation and audio-description.

Additionally, there are currently discussions underway in congress regarding bills that aim to guarantee a certain percentage of people with disabilities as candidates in official elections, or to reserve seats in congress and state legislatures for them.

This brings me to my second point, which is employment, a fundamental aspect for the empowerment of persons with disabilities. Today, in Brazil, by law, 5% of the positions offered in public selection processes have to be filled by persons with disabilities. In the private sector, there is also a similar provision, but percentages vary according to the number of employees in the company. These legal requirements are one of the factors behind the 20% increase, in the last 5 years, of persons with disabilities in the Brazilian workforce.

Despite this progress, much remains to be done, especially with regards to changing the work culture towards more inclusive environments, not only in Brazil, but worldwide. When considering hiring persons with disabilities, employers should evaluate the talents and capacities of persons with disabilities, just like any other professional. From the moment they have the tools they need, they must undertake their professional functions like any other person.

The lack of access to health and education is detrimental to the population at large, but it affects more significantly the population with disabilities. Disability and poverty, as we know, go hand in hand. There is a mutually reinforcing nature between special needs and low socioeconomic status, whereby people with disabilities are more likely to become impoverished and people who are impoverished are more likely to become disabled. Moreover, in general, people with disabilities have less schooling and poorer health, which leads to having less employment opportunities.

Investing in training and professionalization is part of the solution, and companies must also have this responsibility, by offering courses and in-house qualification opportunities. At this moment, the government of the state of Sao Paulo is holding an award ceremony, at Conference Room 11, for good practices of employability for workers with disability. The award will be given to companies from 7 different countries, which showed innovative ways to integrate persons with disabilities into their workforce. They offer examples that can be followed even here, at the UN.

The responsibility for achieving a more accessible society does not lie only with people with disabilities - it rests with all of us. We are glad to see the efforts here in the United Nations, to keep the matter in high priority in the agenda not only today, but during the entire year. We are looking forward to read the first UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development, and to see the result of this extensive data collection on the relation between disabilities and the SDGs.

People with disabilities are not heroes, and are not victims. They are agents of their own destiny, seeking an equal place in the world community, and it's a task for all of us to see that this place is guaranteed.

I thank you,