

## **Address at the Africa Regional Disability Consultative Conference**

Johannesburg, 6th May 2003

Chairperson,  
Minister Essop Pahad,  
Delegates,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you very much for making it possible for me to be part of the closing session of this important conference on disability, the Disability African Regional Consultative Conference.

I hope that our visitors had a good stay in our country and would take memorable experiences back home.

I am confident that the deliberations that have taken place in the last few days and the outcome of this meeting, would assist all of us to make the necessary progress in improving the quality of life of disabled persons and ensure that we improve our work in promoting, protecting and advancing the rights of disabled persons.

We are almost half way through the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, which as we know, was adopted in 1999 by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

I therefore hope that this conference has given us an opportunity to make a review of the progress that we have made as government, civil society and private sector.

I am sure we would all agree that to respond adequately to the challenges of disabled persons, we must address critical issues such as:

- Wars, instabilities and conflicts;
- Lack of human rights, justice and peace;
- Abuse of vulnerable groups in society, including disabled persons, women and children;
- Homelessness and inadequate shelter and housing;
- Lack of sanitation, health facilities and services;
- Absence of facilities and programmes for persons with all types of disabilities, including physical, psychiatric and developmental;
- Lack of jobs and economic development;
- Lack of education and access to educational institutions, and;
- Numerous others that characterise the conditions of poor people.

It is important, therefore, that we must continue to understand the foundation of the work that we are doing in this sector as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

As we know, the United Nations has, since 1948 adopted many declarations and resolutions dealing with specific areas that affect disabled persons.

Accordingly, for us to address the needs of the persons with disabilities, we must, at the same time, fulfill our obligations with regard to the realisation of the human rights of our citizens.

While many regions of the world have made progress with their developmental challenges, since 1948, we, on the African continent have, in many respects regressed further and further into underdevelopment.

The reasons for this are well-known. The consequence of this underdevelopment has been that we have been unable to attend fully to the social, political and economic rights of our citizens.

A further consequence has been the marginalisation and impoverishment of people with disabilities.

Clearly, for us as Africans, it is urgent that we attend to all these needs to accelerate the process of our rebirth and ensure that we pull ourselves from the morass of poverty and underdevelopment.

It is in this context that we approach the issues of disability, both as the challenges of themselves as well as part of the broader challenge of the reconstruction and development of our continent.

Undoubtedly, the work that you are doing in this sector is directly related to the overall efforts to face the challenges of peace, stability, democracy and development on the African continent.

Accordingly, it is unavoidable that, as we make the review of our work in this sector and plan further programmes that would help us realise the objectives of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, we would have to reflect on the work that we are doing together to regenerate our countries and continent.

We would have to link our efforts to the programmes and initiatives that the African Union (AU), is doing through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

I am told that there are about 80 million persons with disabilities on our continent and that in most countries one out of ten persons has one form or another of disability, and that this number is growing.

A painful addition to these numbers was the senseless, brutal and inhuman maiming of many people in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the countries of the Great Lakes Region, Sudan and Angola.

As we have, said through the New Partnership, we seek to regenerate our countries individually and collectively and set our continent on a sustainable development path. This, as we know, cannot be achieved in conditions of war, instability and conflict.

We therefore have to continue working hard to bring peace and stability to all our countries because war and conflict affect people with disabilities more than any sector of our society.

We need peace and stability because it will benefit all our people and give us the chance to realise the objectives of this important Decade of the persons with disabilities.

There is no doubt that when we have brought peace and stability to our countries we would be better able to address the needs of our societies, specifically of the disabled persons, including, democracy, human dignity, justice and development.

Indeed, we need democracy because it gives all our citizens the opportunity to influence national policies and accordingly ensure that the government responds to our collective demands.

In this way, we are able, as the people, to advance the rights and needs of persons with disabilities. Clearly, we need to entrench democracy on our continent because a truly democratic government would ensure that it attends to the needs of its people, especially those with disabilities.

We know from our experience that we cannot fully enjoy human dignity and justice, when these rights are denied to any section among our societies.

In this context, the on-going efforts of the African people to consolidate democracy, human rights and justice must and will benefit particularly this important sector of our society.

Chairperson;

It is important that as we make periodic reviews, all of us should ask a question whether we have developed the appropriate policy and legislative frameworks to ensure that disability issues are indeed at the centre of the work of our governments.

Have we, in all our countries ensured that government, civil society and the private sector, have created conditions for the realisation of the rights of persons with disabilities?

Can we honestly respond in the affirmative as to whether we have mobilized the entirety of our societies to respond positively to the needs of persons with disabilities?

For us to attain the goals of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities, we have to make great progress in ensuring that disabled persons lead normal lives, and, have easy access to rehabilitation, housing, health facilities, education, training and employment as well as sports and cultural activities.

I am encouraged by the fact that the organisations of disabled persons have relentlessly pursued the objectives of this Decade even in the face of formidable obstacles.

Obviously, in taking this work forward we have to organise all sectors in our countries. This is not a task that is facing only people with disabilities, but all the people in our countries.

At the same time, there has been concern about the existence of disunity among some structures of the disabled persons. At times, this is due to work being done solely and exclusively around specific types of disabilities.

While there is always a need to ensure specific focus so as to ensure appropriate responses, it would, at the same time be better to work for maximum unity for the entire sector so as to bring about the required impact.

We come from countries with varying degrees of development, which would invariably affect the speed with which we address these many challenges.

It is therefore important that we work closely with our continental body, the African Union, particularly the Commission on Human and People's Rights, so as to have a unified approach to our challenges.

The South African government will host the secretariat of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities. We will do everything in our power for the secretariat to function normally and effectively.

Once more, I am happy that you have convened in South Africa to work out for all of us this important programme that must give impetus to this important Decade of disabled persons.

I thank you.