

**Roundtable Discussion on International Cooperation and Partnership at the High Level
Event on Disability and Development**

68th UNGA September 23, 2013

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Good morning. I am honored to be here today to represent my country which from its very inception recognized the rights of persons with disabilities. A further testament to its dedication to persons with disabilities is the fact that it has signed the UN CRPD and its optional protocol, and allocated ____% of its budget for the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Bangladesh like many developing countries has significant economic, political and environmental challenges. The Bengali culture values family ties and education above everything else. And until recently, persons with disabilities were the recipients of charity and compassion and not included in mainstream society. Through the launch of the Global Autism Public Health Initiative in 2011 (with technical support from WHO and Autism Speaks), and my guidance, we have come a long way in changing both the negative attitudes and the scope of services for persons with disabilities. Using the platform of a complex neurodevelopmental disorder like autism spectrum disorders (which transcends social, cultural, economic and geographic boundaries, and which occurs in 1 out of 54 boys in the US and costs \$2.4 million per individual across his/her lifespan), we have conducted extensive awareness campaigns. We have also partnered with local NGOs, parents and experts in the region to organize sensitization and professional trainings regarding all disabilities, to administrators, doctors, health care providers, educational professionals and parents.

In 2012, we formed a National Steering Committee on Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disabilities under the Ministry of Health. This Steering Committee is comprised of 8 ministries

(health, education, social welfare, labor and employment, rural development, information and communication, women and children and finance) which is guided by The National Advisory and a Technical Guidance Committee composed of both parents and experts. We have also established a regional partnership named Southeast Asian Autism Network (SAAN) of 7 countries. With the help of this network we were able to establish ASD as a separate agenda item within the action plan of the WHO SEAR office. It was also through this extensive process of collaboration and networking that we were able to rally support for the resolution [REDACTED] at the 67th session of the UN General Assembly titled: Addressing the socioeconomic needs of individuals, families and societies affected by autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disorders on 5 December 2012. And this May at the 133rd session of the Executive Board of the WHO adopted a resolution on the comprehensive and coordinated efforts for the management of autism spectrum disorders, which was cosponsored by more than 50 member countries.

The tremendous progress in science and technology has significantly changed our previously held beliefs on neurological processes and functioning and we now know that early diagnosis and evidence-based interventions can significantly reduce many of the debilitating effects of complex disabilities. However most underdeveloped and developing countries do not have access to these interventions and diagnostic tools except through small research based programs. Further, current intervention procedures developed in resource rich countries, require expensive time consuming training and tools in order to implement these programs effectively. And before we can hope to adopt such programs we realize that most are not culturally appropriate and nearly impossible to implement.

1. We need to create policies and programs that are based on scientific evidence, are supportive of families and enable persons challenged by disabilities to become included in all aspects of society.
2. Explore ways to implement policies uniformly and not be impeded by social stigma and prejudice.
3. Create opportunities so that relevant local stakeholders can engage the participation of policymakers.
4. Educate the general public, professionals and decision makers, by disseminating information that contains research based information and challenges the many myths that exist about disabilities.
5. Include disability specific content in the curriculum of doctors and allied health professionals, teachers and school administrators, as well as social support workers. **This is particularly necessary for mental health and developmental disabilities such as autism.**
6. Adopt a holistic approach to programs and services that enables persons with disabilities to access medical, educational and employment opportunities throughout their entire life.
7. And rather than developing new programs and risk the possibility of creating parallel services, incorporate disability specific issues in all existing development programs so that they may be feasible and sustainable by governments, and have the opportunity to grow further.
8. Current research on brain plasticity gives us hope that if we can identify children at a very early age, then provide them with research based interventions many physical, mental and developmental challenges can be reduced and even reversed. With effective programs that provides culturally sensitive and economically feasible solutions there is hope for those with disabilities.

It is only through cooperation between countries, effective partnerships between organizations and government and regional collaboration that we can hope to meet the daily challenges of those with disabilities particularly in situations of poverty. Through collaborative international partnerships, not only will developing countries gain access to current research, technology and expertise available in wealthier nations, but developed countries would also gain from our valuable experience in building cost effective, and sustainable health, educational and social systems that are inclusive of persons with disabilities. The time has come to develop innovative partnerships and procedures so that we can all work together to enable those challenged by disabilities to become active, productive and contributing members of our global community.