



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

SPEAKING NOTES BY

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FOR THE

D20 CONFERENCE

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Chair of the Conference;

Representatives of the United Nations and international organisations;

Distinguished delegates from global and regional disability organisations;

Partners in government, civil society, academia and community leadership, colleagues and friends,

Allow me to express profound appreciation for the opportunity to open this important engagement that will craft critical resolutions within both the global and South African declarations.

Today's programme will deepen our collective understanding of disability inclusion as a long and deliberate journey of structural transformation, grounded in justice, equality and the commitment to remake our societies so that no one is left behind.

The work ahead of us will empower civil society engagement groups to recognise disability inclusion as a process that requires sustained advocacy, equitable budgeting, responsive governance systems and a re-imagination of administrative practices across G20 member states.

Across the world, and painfully so within many G20 economies, persons with disabilities remain structurally located at the lowest rungs of socio-economic power.

This is not an accident of history, but the result of social, economic and infrastructural systems that were never designed with persons with disabilities in mind.

When infrastructure—from education to public transport, from digital platforms to financial systems—is not attuned to the diverse realities of persons with disabilities, exclusion becomes the default outcome. And exclusion, left unchallenged, becomes generational.

This is why the principle of inclusivity and intersectionality must guide our work today. Persons with disabilities do not experience discrimination in isolation. Inequality compounds.

A woman with a disability in a rural area navigates patriarchy, poverty, geography and sometimes the policing of identity. A young person with a disability navigates both exclusion in education and the structural violence of unemployment.

Intersectionality is not abstract theory—it is the lived architecture of marginalisation. Justice demands that we respond to this architecture with urgency, intentionality and empathy.

Across the G20, persons with disabilities continue to be more likely to live in poverty, experience violence and be denied equal access to rights such as land, employment, education and community participation.

Children with disabilities are still excluded from mainstream schooling. Adults with disabilities still face barriers in accessing financial and digital services.

These realities reflect structural injustice, and they reveal the extent to which global commitments have not yet fully translated into national implementation.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enshrines the right to autonomy, dignity, independence, equality and full participation. Our responsibility today is to ensure that our deliberations strengthen the realisation of those rights in practical and measurable ways.

Global figures continue to underline the scale of this challenge. An estimated 1.3 billion people, 16% of the global population, are persons with disabilities. They remain 50% more likely to experience extreme poverty. Only 28% of working-age persons with disabilities are employed, compared to 60% of their non-disabled peers.

The International Labour Organization has affirmed that global GDP could rise by as much as 7% if persons with disabilities were included equally in the labour market. This reality is not simply a social imperative; it is an economic opportunity.

But to unlock that opportunity, we must dismantle the barriers in education, employment, accessibility, digital inclusion and community support systems. These barriers exist within all G20 economies and require coordinated, intentional and courageous action.

It is therefore essential that the G20 commits itself to concrete deliverables that speak directly to the lived realities of persons with disabilities.

Our declarations, our commitments, and our solidarity must translate into measurable actions that improve quality of life, expand freedoms and reinforce the basic rights that the CRPD affirms as universal and non-negotiable.

It is in this spirit that South Africa advances and strongly supports the establishment of the D20 engagement group as a mechanism designed to guide member countries in shaping a coherent and bold global disability rights agenda, while also strengthening the capacity of civil society to prioritise disability inclusion as a central mandate of development.

This D20 process must drive a set of transformative interventions that allow us to move from rhetoric to implementation.

One such intervention is the development of a comprehensive, rights-based G20 Disability Inclusion Report that provides a baseline assessment of disability inclusion across our economies. Without such a baseline, our commitments remain abstract; with it, we gain the evidence needed to hold ourselves accountable.

Equally important is the crafting of global policy recommendations that integrate disability inclusion into national economic frameworks, gender equality strategies and the broader development agenda. These recommendations must draw from a global compendium of best practices on rights-based disability inclusion, allowing member states to learn from one another and to implement approaches that are both context-sensitive and globally informed.

Another crucial intervention lies in establishing a digital accessibility review mechanism, a tool that enables us to interrogate the accessibility of digital platforms, assess the inclusivity of emerging technologies and AI systems, and identify gaps that impede participation. The digital future cannot be allowed to replicate the exclusions of the past; it must be a frontier of possibility for persons with disabilities.

Finally, South Africa calls for the institutionalisation of a permanent G20 Disability Forum, a sustained space for governments, civil society, the private sector and the United Nations system to come together, monitor progress, exchange innovations and consolidate global leadership on disability inclusion. Such a forum would ensure continuity, coherence and the long-term vision required to build societies that honour the full dignity, agency and participation of persons with disabilities.

Full and effective participation on an equal basis with others is not a favour extended to persons with disabilities. It is a prerequisite for sustainable development, the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the full realisation of the CRPD.

Participation is the foundation of social cohesion, economic justice, violence prevention and poverty reduction. And participation is impossible without accessibility. Without accessibility, rights remain theoretical. With accessibility, rights become lived.

Yet within many of the G20's own declarations, agreements and workstreams, disability inclusion remains insufficiently mainstreamed. Persons with disabilities are often excluded from the development of

economic partnerships; disability-disaggregated data remains limited; and knowledge on disability inclusion remains fragmented.

Today's programme gives us an opportunity to address these gap openly and decisively.

South Africa therefore reaffirms its commitment to the establishment of the D20 engagement group. This initiative represents a historic opportunity for G20 member countries to craft a global disability rights agenda, strengthen civil society engagement and elevate disability inclusion at the centre of global economic planning.

A rights-based disability inclusion report, global policy recommendations, digital accessibility assessments and an annual G20 Disability Forum are not administrative tasks. They are building blocks of a new global architecture of inclusion.

The discussions that will unfold today will give shape to the strategic priorities we have proposed: advancing inclusive technologies and AI, ensuring universal accessibility and independent living, and strengthening dignity, data systems and meaningful participation.

The best practices that member states will share—from accessible urban design to inclusive education and community-based support—will reaffirm what we know: inclusion is achievable wherever there is political will and investment.

As we embark on today's work, we must recognise that the D20 agenda must be supported by clear budgeting and resourcing. Disability inclusion cannot flourish where commitments are not matched by financial priorities.

Today we begin the work of ensuring that our resolutions lead to meaningful change across governance systems, development frameworks and service delivery value chains.

I would like to thank all participants, nationally and internationally, for your presence at this opening session. Your time, intellect and commitment will guide the direction of our work throughout the day.

Together, we now begin the task of shaping a global disability inclusion agenda that is worthy of our people and worthy of the world we seek to build.

As I prepare to take leave of the stage, we must remind ourselves that the struggle for disability inclusion is not a marginal struggle, but a human struggle at the core of justice.

The late disability rights giant, Judith Heumann, captured this truth with clarity when she said: ***“Disability only becomes a tragedy when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives.”***

Her words echo across continents and decades because they name a simple truth: it is not disability that disables people, but the failures of systems, infrastructures and attitudes.

Today, guided by this wisdom, we commit ourselves to the task of building societies where inclusion is not aspirational, but inevitable.

I thank you.