**General Discussion on the Right to Education of Persons with Disabilities**

**Geneva, April 15th 2015**

Hello everyone, I am Rabjyot Singh Kohli and the name of my disability is ‘Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita with Deformities Both Upper and Both Lower Limbs’. I am 17 years old and currently doing my 12th standard in ‘Commerce with Maths’ from St. Marys School, New Delhi, India. Let me begin by saying that it is a real honour for me to be here and I would like to thank UNICEF and the CRPD Committee for inviting me to come and speak at this discussion.

I want to share with you all that my school is celebrating its golden jubilee this year. It gives me great pride to say that St. Mary’s has been practising inclusion for the last 50 years. I have spent some time in thinking what is it that makes a school pick up inclusion? Why is it that my school was practicing inclusion much before the CRPD came into place and continues to do so, whereas, there are so many other schools that put up so much of resistance to the idea. I realized that the key factors are: One, a Rights and not a charity based approach to education and Second, is the great commitment with which the school works with teachers, parents and community to ensure that parents particularly understand the importance of their role in the development of the child.

Yes, I believe that inclusive education is the right approach to make children with disabilities more able to find employment and be independent. But I cannot emphasise enough the need to change attitudes and understanding in society and among educators about children who have different needs but the same rights. In addition to studying I have made so many good friends in school… and it is so important to me and to all other children who are in school. Because I learn and play together with my friends… many of those who do not have any disability… helps us to understand each other better. Children with disabilities whose learning styles are different from the typical children also need to be assessed in a manner different from the timed, written examination that is so popular in schools. It is our right to be taught and assessed in a manner that we best respond to.

I cannot emphasise enough the great need to empower parents and to liberate them from the chains of popular thought that children with disabilities are a burden or a cross that they have to bear. Children with special needs are forced to stay mostly at home throughout their lives because their parents feel embarrassed to take them out in front of society. It is the responsibility of all countries who have ratified the CRPD to care for the basic needs of their children so that when a child with a disability is born in any part of the world, the parents would accept the child with an open heart, rather than being sad and depressed. An empowered, informed parent can make a child, and, a disempowered parent can break that same child.

I feel I am lucky… my teachers are sensitive and make all effort to include me in everything but I know this is not a reality in every school. Teachers all over the world need to be able to teach all children including children with disabilities in regular class rooms. I also want to highlight the importance of school based nutrition programmes. If children like me do not get proper nutrition at the appropriate age, then in what way will we be able to participate fully in the education process? Education is important, yes, but without health I will not be able to participate fully in the education process.

This brings me to the very important area of meaningful implementation. How do we know that article 24 is actually being implemented on the ground? There are many countries which have ratified the CRPD, but are they enforcing and implementing the policies laid out? Forgive me if I am asking for something that you have already thought about but I would like this Discussion group to put some thought on formulating implantation parameters through which we can see whether those who have ratified the CRPD are actually implementing it.

To conclude let me say that it is with much sadness that I realize that little has been done for children with disabilities at least in Delhi, in India since I came to speak at the UNCRPD convention in New York in 2012. The CRPD is a wonderful document. This august group needs to think, what is the use of a document if there is no implementation. If there is no change on the ground. I don’t want that, in the future, children born with disabilities should have to face the same discrimination and difficulties that I faced when I was looking for admission to 1st standard. Difficulties that I continue to face when looking for medical assistance and advice. I am never able to be truly comfortable anywhere except at home and in school. Even the big, famous and posh places such as monuments, malls and hotels are not built to be accessible to children like me. Simple things like ramps are not installed and if they are, the angle of inclination makes it impossible to use. The hearing impaired have to constantly deal with audio presentations. The visually impaired have to step through pot holes and barriers. School books are rarely available in accessible formats for children with disabilities. The onus is always on the challenged to conform and normalize, never on the abled to be different.

When I came to the UN in 2012, my father was taking me around on a small manual wheelchair. I didn’t have my own electronic wheelchair at that time. The Government of India didn’t provide me even this time. But today I am on an electronic wheelchair. But that is because my classmates and school raised money through the Slow Food Festival. They raised money through the sales of yummy food to buy me this wheelchair so that I do not have to be carried around. They worked hard to restore my dignity to me. The inclusive environment of my school has made students and parents sensitive to the needs of others . If I were to look at implantation parameters to assess whether my school was inclusive I would say that the fact that parents, students and teachers worked together to ensure that the rights of every child is met , that the rights of one child to equal opportunity was met, makes it a true practitioner of the CRPD.

Even after having such a supportive family and school, I am at a loss about the road that I should take after 12th standard because my decisions can only be based on the facilities that will be available to me.

If I am facing so much difficulty in fulfilling my dream, then what about those children who didn’t even get the small opportunities, which I am lucky to have in my life. Developing countries like mine are fighting on multiple fronts. The child with a disability should not get lost in this muddle. I look to all of you, to ensure that children with disabilities are not forgotten.

Millions of children like me want and should have the opportunity to go to an inclusive school and study and play alongside all other children. That is how we will not only learn better but also make our society more inclusive. So my call to you is that let us all focus on how we make inclusive education a reality around the world.

THANK YOU!

Rabjyot Singh Kohli
XII Standard Student
St. Mary’s School, Safdarjung Enclave
Mobile: +919312055821, +919818542946
Email: amarjyot97@gmail.com
Skype ID: amarjyot97
Residence Address: A-579 Double Storey, Kalkaji,
                         New Delhi -110019 [INDIA]