**Human Rights Council 40th Session**

**Annual Full-day Meeting on the Rights of the Child**

**Opening statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet**

4 March 2019

9:00 – 11:00, Room XX, Palais des Nations

Mr. President,

Excellencies,

Colleagues and Friends,

I’m pleased to welcome you to this meeting, which gives us a crucial opportunity to focus on empowering children with disabilities, and realizing their rights – particularly through inclusive education.

We have made great strides forward since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989. It’s become the most widely ratified of all human rights treaties, committing States to making children’s rights a reality. But even as we celebrate this 30th anniversary, we have to acknowledge some uncomfortable truths: that millions of children around the world continue to have their rights denied each and every day; and that a disproportionate number of these are children with disabilities.

In fact, the world’s estimated 93 million children with disabilities are more likely to have their rights violated from the moment they’re born. Their birth may not even be registered. They may be placed in institutions that deny their right to home and family, fail to support their inclusion in education, and where they are at risk of violence, abuse and neglect. Their voices may not be heard, even on crucial questions such as where they live, who they live with, and what is in their best interests. They face particular risks in situations of conflict or humanitarian crisis.

Excellencies,

Faced with these unacceptable realities, we can have only one response: to redouble our commitment to empower all children, including those with disabilities, so they can realize the rights they hold. Empowerment is both the means and the end-product of respecting and realizing human rights. It enables children to be fully included in their families, communities and societies. It ensures they are protected from violence and abuse. Crucially, it guarantees that they are heard.

At the heart of this empowerment is inclusive education. This is about far more than imparting knowledge to children. The right to education is a multiplier; it can be used to realize all human rights. Its importance cannot be overstated. It’s about empowering children through strengthening their voices to participate in their communities, lift themselves out of poverty, and be safeguarded from exploitation. As the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has emphasized, it entails a transformation in culture, policy and practice to accommodate the diversity and identities of all students – inclusive education is thus a right of all learners and benefits all of society.

Mr. President,

Inclusive education is a concrete road to inclusive societies. But there are barriers which must be acknowledged and understood, so that they can be dismantled.

Some of these barriers are practical – for example, when schools are not adequately equipped or adapted. Inclusive education is not simply about placing children with disabilities in mainstream schools, and leaving them to adjust to standardized requirements. It’s about adapting systems, teaching methods and facilities to ensure that students can be fully included and accommodated.

Stigma and discrimination, lack of awareness, or unfounded beliefs that children with disabilities cannot learn are another type of barriers. (And later today, we’ll hear first-hand accounts of some of these experiences, to enhance our understanding).

Data – or rather, the lack of it – is another significant roadblock. Millions of children with disabilities are left out of education because no one is adequately measuring their numbers or needs.

And we know that girls may be disempowered on the grounds of gender and disability, as well as other grounds. These multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination demand our urgent attention.

Mr. President,

While these challenges are great, the opportunities to overcome them are greater. In my Office’s recent report to the Council on this matter, I outline concrete recommendations on how children with disabilities can be empowered to decide for themselves, and placed on an equal footing with all children. This requires upholding their rights in national laws, policies and strategies at all levels, and ending harmful stereotypes and discrimination so that they can live within their own families and communities. It also requires urgently generating the data we need to highlight the gaps and build on achievements.

Putting these recommendations into practice, State by State, will enable us to deliver on key commitments made in the Sustainable Development Goals, with the full participation of everyone, including all girls and boys with disabilities. The only way to deliver SDG 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all by 2030 is to ensure that children with disabilities are a central focus of national plans and actions.

And of course, our commitment to empowerment does not end with inclusive education. Children with disabilities must have a say in all matters that affect the course of their lives. They must be effectively protected from violence and abuse, and enabled to access justice, when violations of their rights have occurred. They must be empowered to reach their full potential and enjoy their full human rights – and this requires us to change both attitudes and environmental factors.

Excellencies,

Children with disabilities are among the most likely to be left behind and the least likely to be heard. We must work together to foster enabling environments and provide the appropriate support so they may speak for themselves, so that we may all better listen, and to ensure their empowerment through the full enjoyment of their human rights.

I urge you all to work with commitment to enable all children to live a life of dignity, build their dreams, strive for their goals and achieve their brightest futures.

Thank you.