

**PANEL DISCUSSION ON THE THEME
“PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN TIMES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS”
12 NOVEMBER 2009 - ILO, GENEVA**

**REMARKS BY MR. JUAN SOMAVIA
DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION**

Introduction

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon. Thank you, Zohreh, for the introduction.

First, a very special welcome to Marlee Matlin!

I would like to convey what I feel and what we all feel by quoting one response to her You Tube feature on decent work for disabled persons:

It said:

“Marlee Matlin is an inspiration to anyone with a disability that you can do whatever you want to do, and don’t let anyone tell you you can’t do it!”

I can only echo this – what an example and an inspiration to us all.

And how much better we would all be if we lived by her philosophy:

“There is no limitation to what I can do as a person with a disability – obviously I can’t hear but if I am good at something then I will do it. If I don’t know how to do something then I will try it. And if I do it well I will continue it. And if I can’t, well then I’ll find something else to do.

Pure positive energy and most importantly, ACTION.

At the ILO, we were honoured when she lent her POWERFUL message to our call for decent work for persons with disabilities in 2007. And she has stayed with the cause.

And as Marlee told me when we met: we have to make a lot of noise if we want to end discrimination against the disabled.

Ms. Marlee Matlin we are so humbled and happy to have you with us today.

Ambassador O Ceallaigh,— our sincere thanks must go to your Government for your support for our work on disability.

Peter Purton; and Bernie Jones, thank you for sharing your experiences.

Colleagues who organized today's event, thank you.

Dear friends,

Today we focus on people with disabilities but we also have in mind all those who are most vulnerable.

Even before this economic crisis, we were experiencing a crisis of unemployment and social exclusion.

Now millions more of the world's most vulnerable are being pushed into unemployment, informality and poverty.

And jobs recovery is not yet on the horizon.

Behind the statistics are real life stories of women, men, girls and boys.

The disabled all too often have stories of disadvantage; of rejection for jobs; social isolation; family hardship.

And Marlee has connected with so many who are suffering – NOT because of their disability but because of societies' attitudes to disability.

One in ten people - some 650 million in the world has a disability. 470 million are of working age. And about 80 per cent are in developing countries.

Disability is both cause and consequence of poverty.

It can often be prevented yet many lack access to health and rehabilitation services.

They are among the most vulnerable in times of crisis.

Yet the enormity of this crisis has stunned the world into recognizing that old ways of operating were morally unacceptable and also unsustainable. We know that we can't go back to business as usual.

So out of crisis has come a sense of opportunity – to do things differently, to be guided by values, to start making markets work for people.

We are all familiar with the law and policies setting out the rights of disabled people.

These rights must come to life in action.

The ILO approach to disability is rooted in the Decent Work Agenda – centred on the dignity of work.

What does this mean?

First, the rights basis - non discrimination - one of the fundamental rights at work. People with disabilities live with unique forms of discrimination and challenges.

Second, it is a matter of opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. Despite some progress, people with disabilities remain under-represented in the workforce and over-represented in low-paid informal economy jobs.

Third, it concerns the extension of social protection, supporting those unable to work, facilitating the entry or return to work of those who can.

Fourth, organization, voice and dialogue are fundamental in advancing these objectives. This includes helping to shape social and economic policies that embrace the disabled.

It's about ensuring that the disabled are counted in, not counted out. That as any other worker, they are both protected and empowered.

What are some of the things we are doing in our own work, from the ILO?

First – helping to set the policy and legal foundation. In doing so we draw on the ILO's international labour standards on disability and on the practical Code of Practice on Managing Disability in the Workplace.

Second through research evaluation and identification of good practice in vocational rehabilitation, skills development, employment and self-employment as well as access to credit – Irish support has been important in helping us to document good practice;

Third, we work with employers' and workers' organizations, enterprises and others to build capacity to work on disability issues.

Let me highlight the role of Employers' and Workers' organizations as advocates; they can also lead by example and hold governments to account.

And to get there we are engaged in constant advocacy and awareness building.

And having Marlee Matlin's conviction involved in this effort is indispensable to make the world at large see the abilities of the disabled and not just their disability.

People with disabilities can contribute to economic recovery and sustainable development. And recovery cannot be at the cost of the most vulnerable.

The Global Jobs Pact adopted by workers, employers and governments at the ILO's International Labour Conference in June of this year sets out an approach for the application of the Decent Work Agenda in crisis.

It presents a balanced set of policy measures, centred on accelerating employment creation, jobs recovery and sustaining enterprises, building social protection systems,

protecting people and respecting labour standards, supported by other dimensions of the Decent Work Agenda.

The Pact specifies the need to help vulnerable groups most hard hit by the crisis. This includes the disabled.

It has met a very positive response. And it gives us a strong foundation for building an integrated and mainstreamed approach to disability.

Because for the ILO the fight for the rights of the disabled is also about the fight for the dignity of all work and all workers. For non-discrimination at the workplace.

I am certain that today's discussion will help to identify action and approaches that can help to ensure an inclusive recovery.

But we know that a key dimension in the struggle for change is the inspiration we draw from those that have dared. Listen to a posting on ILO's website.

"I can't put into words just how much I love Marlee. She's such an inspiration to me and I'm sure many others...I'm so in awe of everything she's accomplished".

Thank you, Marlee, for being here. Ambassador, Peter Purton, Bernie Jones, thank you for sharing your experiences to support the ILO effort to deepen and expand consciousness and action to bring dignity and opportunities to disabled people at work.

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