

Opening of COSP pre-recorded video message, Idriss Maiga,

Excellencies and dear colleagues, I would have liked very much to be there with you all in person. Instead, I am speaking to you from hundreds of kilometers outside Niamey, the capital of my home country, Niger.

I want to share my deepest gratitude to you all, in your work to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and make good on the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals, a theme of this year's COSP.

With those two watershed agreements, we have agreed on a vision of a more equitable and equal world. A world where a person with a disability can rely on agreed-upon norms of non-discrimination, and enforce them with judicial systems, if necessary.

This is the ideal.

And these ideals are under threat. I am here to tell you that the threat is **not only** Covid-19.

Covid-19 has disproportionately killed persons with disabilities, it is true. It has caused us untold suffering.

Covid-19 has been the catalyst for violations of our right to life, to health, to live independently.

And it is also true that persons with disabilities have been impacted by a lack of access to COVID-19-related information; we have experienced barriers in accessing social protection measures; and we have been excluded from COVID-19 response efforts at all governmental levels.

It is the **systems** we rely on for supports and services, for informal and formal employment, for our health, have been decimated.

And so the threat I am looking toward is the threat of policy decisions that change those decisions leaving us further behind. That ignore our equality. These decisions represent apathy at best, and intentional discrimination leaving persons with disabilities to die at worst.

How will the world respond? If we don't build back better, we **will build back worse**.

The solution to this threat simple, even if it isn't always easy. Persons with disabilities must participate in all levels of decision making about the public policy response to this pandemic. We must decide.

Findings from the International Disability Alliance's Global Survey on organizations of persons with disabilities' participation in development programs and policies suggest that the majority of respondents were dissatisfied with the level of engagement with their government, and that support to enable participation was largely insufficient **before** we went into a global crisis.

Remember that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was founded on the principle of "nothing about us without us." Remember that the Sustainable Development Goals and targets are built on grassroots stories that were shared globally during the post-2015 negotiations. In both processes, governments translated real-life challenges into policies.

I will leave you with this idea: this is no longer a public health crisis. This is a crisis of what we stand for. Including persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in all response, recovery and rebuilding will help to ensure we really do build back better.

END