

HLPF KEYNOTE - EDDIE NDOPU

Madam President, your excellencies, friends and comrades.

I sit here before you not just as an individual, but as a living embodiment of what is possible when we shatter barriers and strive for inclusivity. Today, as I address this august gathering, the historical significance is not lost on me. I am honored to be the first person with a disability to keynote this convening, but this is not just my moment – it is a milestone for the millions of people with disabilities across the globe.

This achievement is a testament to the resilience and unyielding spirit of those who fight against the odds, turning challenges into opportunities. But it is also a stark reminder of the lengths we still have to traverse in our journey towards a world that does not just accept, but embraces, diversity in all its forms.

The strides we have made in accessibility and inclusion are substantial, yet they are only a small fraction of the path that lies ahead. As the first disabled person to address this gathering, I stand at the intersection of this reality. I am a symbol of progress, yet also a beacon for the continued action that is urgently required.

As I take this podium, I do so with a profound sense of responsibility. I am not just a voice for the disabled, but a catalyst for change. It is my hope that my presence here today will inspire further strides in inclusion and equal opportunity. I look forward to the day when having a disabled individual address such a convening is not a historic moment, but rather, a norm.

As we assess the trajectory of our journey towards the 2030 Agenda, we are met with a sobering reality check. Our quest for the Sustainable Development Goals is akin to a long distance race, and the midway report tells us that we are not leading the pack.

Far from it, only 12 percent of our targets are in sight. The rest are either stumbling in a slow-motion advance or have reversed into regression.

My friends, this is our planet's fight for survival, and we're behind at half-time.

In our noble pursuit of leaving no one behind, it is the marginalized, the impoverished, those living with disabilities, women, children, and our indigenous populations, continue to be forgotten. Time, that relentless taskmaster, is not on our side and our strategies must adapt accordingly.

To fully comprehend the magnitude of our challenge, we must confront the harsh statistical truth. The count of those living in extreme poverty is on the rise, hunger, a specter we vowed to banish, has once again reared its ugly head, and gender equality, a fundamental right, remains an elusive goal, hundreds of years away at our current rate of progress.

Climate change remains an unyielding adversary, persisting as our time dwindles. The seas rise, forests fall to flame, species vanish, and yet our collective response seems paralytic, perhaps overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task at hand.

We've relegated millions of children to the sidelines of society, their potential wasted as poverty dominates. A digital divide widens, further obscuring the path to opportunity for the already disadvantaged.

I am also here today to underscore the importance of meaningful youth participation in decision-making processes. For we are not just passive beneficiaries of policies crafted for our supposed benefit; we are active contributors, capable of insightful, innovative solutions.

Young people hold a unique perspective, viewing the world through a lens of hope and possibility. With every sunrise, we see a canvas waiting to be filled with the vibrant colors of change. We believe in the power of possibility, the strength of unity, and the promise of a future forged by our own hands.

This perspective isn't idealism detached from reality. It is, rather, a wellspring of energy and innovation that can catalyze the transformative change required to achieve our shared goals. We are the digital natives, the climate warriors, the social innovators – we are the dreamers and doers of a better tomorrow.

Yet, too often, our voices are silenced, our contributions minimized, our involvement constrained to symbolic gestures. How can we expect to adequately address the myriad challenges of our time without the full and meaningful participation of those who will bear the brunt of their consequences?

When we speak of the future, we are speaking about the generation that is here, waiting in the wings, ready to inherit the world. If we are not included at the table where decisions are made, if our voices are not heard, if our ideas are not taken seriously, we are failing not just the youth, but the world at large.

We must demand a global financial system that serves all, not just the privileged few. A system that places developing nations at the heart of its agenda, that fosters access to finance, and bolsters sustainable, inclusive economic growth.

This is the defining moment. The question is not are we doing enough, but rather, are we doing everything within our power? Can we honestly tell future generations that we strived to pass on a world that's better, fairer, more sustainable than the one we inherited?

I am here as a testament to the triumphs of inclusion. My wheelchair is not a mark of my limitation, but a testament to the boundless progress that inclusion offers.

Our Sustainable Development Goals are not simply targets on a sheet. They represent the hopes, dreams, and survival of millions who depend on us to get this right. As we prepare for the second half of this race, let's recommit ourselves. Let's advocate for inclusivity, equality, and sustainability. Let's invest in technology, education, healthcare, clean energy, and climate action.

Let's envision a world where resources are shared equitably, where every individual has access to opportunities, and where no person is left behind, regardless of their birthplace, gender, or abilities.

The whistle for the second half is about to blow. The stakes are high, but so too is our resolve. If we do not rise to this challenge, our 2030 Agenda will merely serve as a sad remembrance of a world that could have been. Let's flip the script. Let's turn this race around. I believe we can. I believe we will. Thank you.