

Director of Proceedings,

Esteemed participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and privilege to speak on this prestigious platform on this special day. As you know, we annually celebrate the International day of Persons with Disabilities on 3 December. This year's theme is **Building Back Better: Towards a disability inclusive, accessible and sustainable post COVID-19 World.**

The observance of the Day aims to promote an understanding of disability issues and mobilize support for the dignity, rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. It also seeks to increase awareness of gains to be derived from the integration of persons with disabilities in every aspect of political, social, economic and cultural life.

I have tried to identify the connection between this year's theme and the focus of the networking project that the University of Exeter and the University of Namibia have with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) and the National Federation of Persons with Disabilities in Namibia (NFPDN), namely "*Disability in Namibia: Religious and Cultural Perspectives.*" I have realised it is such an important and necessary theme to do research on, because the attitudes of the society are mainly displayed through religion and culture, and they are indeed main indicators of how inclusive our societies are.

Ladies and Gentlemen

In the Human Rights approach towards disability, the themes of inclusivity and accessibility are running through like a golden thread. The way in which we *refer* to persons with disabilities is a strong indicator of the attitude of that culture towards persons with disabilities. Many people use derogatory language and display behaviour that is as exclusive and dehumanizing to persons with disabilities. I am so glad that we have already launched the **DISABILITY INFORMATION ETIQUETTE**, compiled with UNAM as the consultant. The booklet was an outcome of

the preliminary findings of the Baseline Registration of Persons with Disabilities under the theme “**DONT ‘DIS’ MY ABILITIES**” which took place in 2018. Among the key findings of the baseline registration was that, although the Namibian society is aware of persons of disabilities and their needs, there is a general lack of support and acknowledgement of disability as a welcome part of the society. Persons with Disabilities are often viewed as different and hence interactions may be uncertain, and can cause discomfort for all involved. Beliefs and attitudes are predominantly formed through family, school and media- we cannot get away from the CULTURE in which we find ourselves.

These attitudes can be negative and create barriers for Persons with Disabilities in all areas of their lives. Once we have fully rolled-out the Etiquette booklet, I believe it will help and guide *society on how to approach, assist, communicate and interact with Persons with Disabilities as well as create a better understanding of the daily needs of Persons with Disabilities*. My hope is that it will further enhance knowledge and understandings that value inclusivity and promote the development of inclusive cultures in homes, schools, communities and ultimately in the Namibian society.

Religious leaders, activist, academics, Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, NGO’s can play a crucial role in ensuring that the society learn the correct terminology and they must set the example of how persons with disabilities must be included and accommodated, e.g. by ensuring they have trained Sign language interpreters in their gatherings. I am glad to observe here today that a SL interpreter is indeed very much part of this meeting.

Ladies and gentlemen

When we look at the current situation on the ground with the COVID-19 Pandemic, we can evaluate whether religion and culture have narrowed or widen the gap for persons with disabilities in this highly stressful period of time. During this unprecedented times of the pandemic, *isolation, disconnect, disrupted routines and diminished services* have greatly impacted the lives and mental well-being of people with disabilities right around the world.

Religious leaders especially have a big role to play here by spreading awareness of the impact on persons with disabilities, especially invisible

disabilities, as well as these potentially detrimental— and not always immediately apparent— impacts to mental health, is crucial as the world continues to fight against the virus. I can just hope and pray that society has treated persons with disabilities with more compassion during this period of time, because if they don't, we still have many more miles to walk.

Director of Proceedings

If I have to assess the situation of persons with disabilities in Namibia for example regarding education, health, social protection and services, and participation in the job market, I will say that we make good progress in some areas, and it is indeed very important for the Government of the Republic of Namibia, to deliver on national and international commitments such the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, The Protocol on the African Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that will soon be discussed in Cabinet, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Harambee Prosperity Plan.

Education is indeed one key aspect that is a great equalizer to turn the table for persons with disabilities, and I must say Namibia has done quite well to promote SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion *of life-long learning opportunities for all*. Namibia has embarked upon a funding programme that caters for students with disabilities at tertiary institutions, since the commencement of the funding in 2019, 106 students have benefitted.

The National Disability Council of Namibia has an agreement with the University of Science and Technology in Namibia (NUST) to train persons with disabilities in entrepreneurial skills. Since 2014, a total of 143 students, 65 female, 78 male were trained. We are excited because in such a way we are providing opportunities for persons with disabilities to obtain qualifications that could make them more employable and help them to become independent.

By providing **education** to persons with disabilities, we are not only addressing SDG 4, but simultaneously SDG Goal 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger) and Goal 8 which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for persons with disabilities.

Namibia is proud of her achievement to provide social nets in the forms of disability grants that we are offering to persons with disabilities. Although it is not sufficient to provide in all the needs, it allows for a form of dignity for the person in desperate need of it.

I am excited about the **Disability Mainstreaming Plan** that we have compiled with the help of the University of Namibia as consultant. TONIGHT we have the launch of the Plan, but I am confident that, once implemented it will increase, among others, economic empowerment of Persons with disabilities through projects and other interventions, and include all spheres of life to get involved in making the Namibia society more inclusive.

Ladies and gentlemen

Some major challenges observed from Government's point of view are the following: The Organisations of Persons with Disabilities are in need of more funds to execute programmes that can improve the living standards of persons with disabilities, they must train them on how to become more self-sustainable and raise their own funds, and how to plan strategically to engage with various other organisations to benefit from existing programmes. The OPDs also need coaching on compiling strategic plans and how to do monitoring and evaluation on these plans.

I know that Government and NGOs can do so to make persons with disabilities more aware of their rights, but we are proud that Namibia indeed has a very good coverage for radio broadcasting and it is heart-warming to notice that the *talk shows are addressing real issues of concern* and allow people from all spheres of life to express themselves. The role of the radio in the Namibian society cannot be over emphasised, and is a tool can be utilised even more effectively to reach people.

Furthermore, we need to capacitate persons with disabilities to utilise digital platforms more vigorously, to prevent further isolation and disconnect especially during crisis time.

Ladies and gentlemen

In Conclusion, I think Religion and Culture are often so intertwined that one cannot separate them. Both religion and culture can build a society, but can unfortunately also destroy the society if there is not a close monitoring of the situation. I want to mention an extreme situation, that fortunately is not the case in Namibia, but we are devastated when we hear that persons with disabilities, for example Persons with Albinism in some of our neighbouring countries lose their lives or body parts because of some “religious practises.” The religious leaders must regard themselves as watchmen on the walls to ensure that persons with disabilities are protected and enjoy life like all other citizens.

I want to share my experience when going to church, that once you enter with a wheelchair, you became the topic of the sermon. I therefore often decide to pray to God in the privacy of my home.

To Dr. Helen John and her team, all the best with your research and please ensure that the findings and recommendations are shared on national and international platforms when you are ready, in such a way we all ensure that it is not becoming another research shelved, but an active instrument that reform culture and religion.

Finally, the vision of the Department of Disability Affairs in the Presidency is to advocate for a “*society for all*” which recognizes and value individual differences and acknowledge common humanity. We will play out part to ensure that we roll out our plans to the community at large to ensure that we create more inclusive societies were no **ONE IS LEFT BEHIND**.

I thank you