

Mr. Chairman, honourable delegates,

In my work as youth representative I have had the opportunity to experience daily life in the slums of Hyderabad. Seeing poverty at firsthand gave me passion and energy in writing my speech. It made me realise that young Dutch people like myself have so many more opportunities than our peers in the slums. It made me realise how privileged I am to be able to address you here today.

During my stay in India last August, I met fifteen-year-old Shanata. Shanata was orphaned as a baby, beaten by relatives, denied an education until the age of 12 and forced to work without pay. She told me:

'... Please, do not let other children and young people suffer like I did. They should go to school, not work. All children and young people should be treated well, equally and without discrimination ...' (Kashapaga Shanata, 15 years old)

Everything turned out well for Shanata. She was given the chance to leave her life of deprivation behind. Unfortunately, many children and young people are not given such opportunities. Her story made me realise that we should never abandon the values of equality. Unfortunately, inequality still exists today, but steps can and should be taken to improve this situation.

Today, injustice caused by social, economic and political inequality is still widespread. It is not isolated in one place, one group or one specific country. Inequality crosses borders and therefore affects us all. The following examples illustrate what I mean.

In the Netherlands, all children and young people have the opportunity to go to school. They may not work in a proper job until the age of sixteen at least. Then they may choose to work, to go to school or both. At the same time, 218 million underage children, just like Shanata, must work to support their families. There is no question of choice in the matter; they don't have the opportunity to go to school.

Secondly, for many of us, new technology has brought infinite opportunities: chatting with friends on the Internet, worldwide communication, more interaction between cultures and new possibilities for youth development. But for young people in war-torn regions the only advanced technology they see are the weapons which ruin or disrupt their lives.

The last example concerns the political participation of young people. The youth representatives here today have the opportunity to participate. At the same time, other young people, like Shanata, are struggling to make their voices heard. Worldwide, there are 2.8 billion people under the age of twenty-five. Young people are the world's biggest stakeholders. But many of us have no say whatsoever in national and international decision-making processes.

Mr Chairman, in 1995, Member States adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth, promising improvements in areas such as education and youth participation. So what happened? Is it time for a new impulse? I believe so. The United Nations have the power to do something about inequality in education and political participation. They should also focus on the impact of new technology on armed conflict.

Millions of young people see their efforts to improve their situation frustrated by discrimination based on skin-color or social origin, or religious and political systems. This will continue as long as people keep stressing the differences between each other in a negative way and make them the basis of their actions. People differ, but I believe that above all, we are equal.

Social exclusion, discrimination and inequality can be overcome by focusing on the humanity shared by all of us. Leaving aside all social, economic and political differences, what we share is humanity. Let this be a focal point for change and for a renewed resolve to increase cooperation between Member States. Let the agenda be decided by what we have in common, not by how we differ. Let us rediscover solidarity, one of the eight elements of the Decade of Culture of Peace.

I would like to highlight three projects in which solidarity and humanity are the driving force and which the Member States could support.

Firstly, the MV Foundation, a regional-based organisation in India. It is dedicated to eliminating child labour and making universal primary education the standard in the state of Andhra Pradesh. It motivates parents, children and, ultimately, whole communities to send children into full-time education. Instead of going to work and being socially excluded, they go to school and invest in a better future, just as Shanata eventually did.

The second inspiring project is the Return to Happiness programme, supported by the United Nations Children's Fund. Through creative activities, children learn to cope with the pain and loss caused by conflicts or natural disasters. Young volunteers, themselves often survivors of past events, are trained to give therapeutic support and encourage trust and hope among young children. The Return to Happiness programme has been introduced in different countries all over the world, such as Mozambique and Colombia. It is carried out by local organisations.

The last example I want to give, concerns youth participation. Young people play a crucial role in the development of each country. By including a youth delegate, delegations can broaden their countries' horizons. The participation of young people in conferences, discussions and policymaking sessions creates mutual understanding between generations and between peers. It creates understanding and solidarity among young people worldwide. I am happy, therefore, to see the youth delegates of Malta and Romania in the Third Committee for the first time.

In summary, I urge the Member States to remain committed and to take their political, social and economic responsibility for a world founded on equality and our shared humanity. Young people call on you:

- to guarantee that all young people worldwide can go to school until the age of fourteen, which means that Member States need to abolish the age discrepancy between ILO Convention 138 and MDG 2.

- to start a proactive campaign to recruit young people on the side of peace, by providing them with opportunities for decent and meaningful work. Otherwise, young people run the risk of joining disruptive factions.

- to fulfil your promise of bringing a Youth Delegate to the United Nations General Assembly. I hope my successor will meet 191 Youth Delegates next year!

Shanata's words echo in my mind and I hope in yours.

'...Please, do not let other children and young people suffer like I did...'

Thank you.