



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HON. SINDISIWE CHIKUNGA, MP,
MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES DURING THE UGANDA
DELEGATION FOR THE SOUTH-TO-SOUTH BENCHMARKING VISIT
TO SOUTH AFRICA ON DISABILITY INCLUSION IN SOCIAL
PROTECTION SYSTEMS AND PROGRAMMES**

**“Building an Inclusive Society: South Africa's Inclusive Approach
to the Rights of Persons with Disability”**

Monday, 06 October 2025

Time: 09:00

Venue: Capital Hotel, Menlyn Maine, Pretoria

- **Minister of State for disability affairs, Republic of Uganda, Hon. Asamo Hellen Grace,**
- **The entire Uganda delegation,**
- **Government officials**
- **Distinguished Guests, ladies and gentlemen.**
- **Good Morning**

1. Background

My name is Sindisiwe Chikunga, and I am Minister in the Presidency responsible for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities.

It is with **profound honour and a deep sense of solidarity** that we come together to share the journeys of two countries toward building truly inclusive societies.

Honourable Minister Asamo, your presence here represents more than a diplomatic visit exchange; for us, it symbolises a shared commitment of two African nations to uphold the dignity, equality, and fundamental human rights of all our citizens, particularly those whose interests and well-being are often relegated to the periphery of development work.

Crucially, at the invitation of HE Cyril Ramaphosa, **HE Mr Yoweri Museveni, President of the Republic of Uganda, paid a State Visit to the Republic of South Africa on 28 February 2023.**

The purpose of the visit was to review and strengthen the current state of bilateral relations, evaluate progress made in implementing agreed-upon areas of cooperation, and explore cooperation in other areas of mutual interest.

During that visit, our leaders, President Ramaphosa and President Museveni, witnessed the signing of the following Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs):

- MOU on Cooperation in the Fields of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
- MOU on Cooperation in Tourism
- MOU on Cooperation in the Field of Correctional Services and Prisons
- MOU on Cooperation in Transport-Related Matters
- MOU on Cooperation in the Field of Information and Communication Technologies

I am deeply pleased that today, we are giving practical expression to one of these MoUs in the critical area of disability inclusion.

2. The Constitutional Foundation: A Nation Built on Equality

Programme Director

Our disability inclusion story begins with a **constitutional promise**. When South Africa emerged from the darkness of apartheid in 1994, we made a sacred covenant with all our people. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, adopted in 1996, is not merely a legal document but a revolutionary manifesto that declares unequivocally that South Africa belongs to all who live in it. **Section 9 of our Constitution** enshrines the

principle of equality and specifically prohibits unfair discrimination based on disability.

Our constitutional commitment recognises that **disability is not a medical condition to be pitied or hidden away**, but rather a natural part of human diversity that must be embraced, celebrated, and accommodated. Our founding document established that persons with disabilities **possess inherent dignity** and **must enjoy full and equal participation in all spheres of life**.

The **White Paper** on the Rights of Persons with Disability, therefore, **does not exist in isolation**. It is the practical expression of our constitutional values, **a roadmap for transforming noble principles into lived reality** for the 7.5% of South Africans who live with disabilities—approximately 4.2 million of our citizens whose **potential, contributions, and dreams** can no longer be constrained by societal barriers and prejudice.

3. The Paradigm Shift: From Charity to Rights

Before we explore the pillars of our White Paper, the Rights of Persons with Disability, I wish to acknowledge a **fundamental paradigm shift** that underpins our approach. For too long, globally and in South Africa, disability was viewed through a medical or charity lens. Persons with disabilities were seen as

objects of pity, as burdens to be cared for, as eternal children requiring perpetual guardianship, or as broken individuals needing to be fixed.

This patronising perspective denied agency, autonomy, and the full humanity of persons with disabilities. It created systems of institutionalisation, segregation, and benevolent oppression that, however well-intentioned, robbed millions of their fundamental rights to self-determination, dignity, and participation.

Our White Paper embraces instead the social model of disability and the human rights-based approach championed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which South Africa ratified in 2007. This approach recognises that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

The problem, in other words, is not the person with a disability. The problem is society's failure to accommodate, include, and value all its members. Our task, therefore, is not to fix individuals but to transform society itself.

In education, for example, we must begin by naming the uncomfortable truth: **the greatest barriers faced by learners with disabilities do not reside in their bodies or minds, but**

in the environments, we create for them. The obstacle is not the learner's difference—it is the **exclusionary design** of our schools, our systems, our curricula and often, our attitudes.

In resource-constrained environments, such as our two countries, these barriers are magnified. Too many of our schools still operate in buildings **never designed with accessibility in mind**—classrooms without ramps, corridors too narrow for a wheelchair, and toilets that cannot be used by a child with mobility needs. These physical impediments are not neutral; they actively exclude. **If a child cannot enter a classroom with dignity, the conversation about inclusion has already failed before the lesson begins.**

4. The Constitutional and International Framework

Our White Paper is anchored in multiple legal and moral frameworks that work in harmony to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities:

The South African Constitution provides the supreme law foundation, guaranteeing equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination. It obliges the state to take positive measures to protect and advance persons disadvantaged by unfair discrimination and to promote the achievement of equality.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities offers the international human rights framework that

South Africa has committed to implement. This Convention represents a paradigm shift from viewing persons with disabilities as objects of charity to recognizing them as subjects of rights, capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives.

Domestic legislation including the Employment Equity Act, the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, and sector-specific laws create the legal architecture for implementation.

The White Paper serves as the comprehensive policy framework that translates these constitutional and international commitments into **concrete strategies, programmes, and actions** across all sectors of government and society.

5. The Eight Pillars: A Comprehensive Approach to Transformation

Our White Paper is structured around **eight key strategic pillars** that together constitute a **comprehensive, integrated approach to realizing the rights of persons with disabilities**. These pillars are not isolated interventions but interconnected elements of the systemic transformation our country has committed to.

Pillar One has to do with the Protection and Promotion of Rights

The foundation of our approach is the absolute commitment to protecting and promoting the human rights of persons with disabilities **in all spheres of life**. Under this pillar we argue that rights are not privileges to be granted but inherent entitlements to be protected, respected, and fulfilled.

WHAT WE ARE DOING: The very **establishment of the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities** is responsive to this pillar's commitment to **ensure all legislation, policies, and programmes comply with constitutional and international obligations**. For example, we have been deeply involved in ensuring that the **Public Procurement Act** is responsive to Disability Inclusion.

What we have learnt is that the protection of rights requires vigilance against both obvious discrimination and **subtle forms of exclusion embedded in seemingly neutral policies and practices**. It demands that we actively dismantle barriers rather than passively avoid creating new ones.

Pillar Two has to do with Mainstreaming Disability Inclusion across society. Mainstreaming is perhaps our most significant commitment because it involves rallying all of society behind our vision. It represents our recognition that **disability inclusion cannot be addressed through separate, specialized programmes alone**. Instead, disability considerations must be **integrated into the core planning, budgeting,**

implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes of every government department, every sphere of government, and every sector of society.

WHAT WE ARE DOING: In response to this pillar we have an **Inter-Ministerial Committee on Disability Inclusion** that is **Chaired by the President** to ensure that Disability Inclusion is not a mere part of what we do but at the centre of everything we do.

Our IMC seeks to challenge the silo approach where disability is sometimes seen as the responsibility of a single department. We have come to terms with the facts that **education, health, transport, housing, economic development, arts and culture**—every sector—must take ownership of disability inclusion within its mandate.

Pillar Three has to do with Promoting Access to Services

Programme Director,

Access is the bridge between rights and reality. A right to education means nothing if **schools are physically inaccessible**, if **teachers are untrained in inclusive pedagogy**, or if **learning materials are not available** in accessible formats. A right to healthcare means nothing if clinics cannot accommodate wheelchairs, if medical professionals

cannot communicate with deaf patients, or if persons with psychosocial disabilities face stigma and discrimination.

WHAT WE ARE DOING: Our disability unit will outline a range of inter-governmental initiatives we have been driving in this regard.

Pillar Four has to do with Economic Empowerment and Livelihoods

Pillar 4 recognises that Poverty and disability exist in a vicious cycle. Breaking this cycle requires comprehensive economic empowerment strategies inclusive of: **Employment, Social protection and Economic participation.**

WHAT WE ARE DOING: Working with our colleagues at the DPSA, we will soon be disseminating a circular that will ensure that, across the public service, employment equity targets are not left to chance.

Pillar Five has to do with Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture

WHAT WE ARE DOING: Sport has been a powerful site of transformation in South Africa. Our Paralympic athletes have demonstrated excellence on the world stage, challenging stereotypes and inspiring millions. Our task is to ensure that

every person with a disability has the opportunity to participate in sport and recreation, from grassroots to elite levels.

Pillar Six: Promoting Participation in Political and Public Life

WHAT WE ARE DOING: We are also of the view that Democracy cannot be complete when any section of our society is excluded from political participation. The right to vote, to stand for office, to participate in policy-making, and to hold the government accountable are fundamental to citizenship.

Above all, in support of this pillar, our country to for persons with disabilities to stand for political office, and the Protection of the right to vote independently and in secret

For us, the principle of "**Nothing About Us Without Us**" must not be a slogan but a fundamental constitutional imperative. **Persons with disabilities must be at the centre of designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating all policies and programmes that affect their lives.**

In response to Pillar Seven: Promoting Social Inclusion, beyond access to services, one of our top priorities is addressing the attitudes, beliefs, and practices that marginalise and exclude persons with disabilities from full community life. Stigma, prejudice, and ignorance remain among the most powerful barriers to inclusion.

Pillar Eight: Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation, recognises that even the most comprehensive policy is worthless without effective implementation, monitoring, and accountability. This pillar establishes the governance and accountability mechanisms necessary to translate policy into action.

WHAT WE ARE DOING: We have conceptualised a **Disability Inclusion Observatory Centre of Excellence (Nerve Centre)** that will anchor our work in Institutional **coordination, Budgeting, Data and research, Monitoring and reporting, Capacity building** and **Partnerships** with organisations of persons with disabilities, disability rights advocates, academic institutions, the private sector, and international partners.

6. The Implementation Challenge: From Policy to Practice

Distinguished guests, I have outlined the comprehensive vision of our White Paper, but I have to acknowledge that implementation challenges remain. South Africa continues to grapple with the legacy of apartheid, persistent inequality, high unemployment, poverty, and limited resources. Our service delivery capacity is stretched, and attitudinal barriers remain deeply entrenched.

Many persons with disabilities in South Africa still face: Unemployment rates that are significantly higher than the

general population; **Barriers to accessing quality education; Inadequate provision of assistive devices; Inaccessible built environments; Violence and abuse, particularly against women and children** with disabilities and **Stigma** and discrimination in communities, workplaces, and even within families

Our progress has been uneven. Some sectors have advanced more rapidly than others. Some provinces have shown greater commitment than others. Implementation capacity varies widely across municipalities.

Yet, we persist. We learn from our challenges. We celebrate our victories, however small. We hold ourselves accountable. And we continue to believe that transformation is possible.

The Power of Partnership: Learning Together

This brings me to why your visit is so important. We do not claim to have all the answers. The challenge of disability inclusion is complex, context-specific, and evolving. We have as much to learn from Uganda as you may have to learn from us.

We face common challenges:

- Limited resources and competing priorities
- Deeply entrenched stigma and discrimination
- Inadequate data and research

- Capacity constraints in implementation
- The need to balance specialized services with mainstreaming
- Ensuring that the voices of persons with disabilities themselves drive the agenda

We can learn from each other's innovations, adapt successful strategies to our contexts, support each other in regional and international forums, and hold each other accountable to our commitments.

A Call to Action: The Road Ahead

As I conclude, I want to emphasize that our White Paper is not merely a government document. It is a social contract, a call to action for every sector of society. No Government can achieve inclusion alone.

To the private sector, we say: Disability inclusion is not only a legal obligation but a business imperative. Persons with disabilities represent talent, innovation, and a significant market. Accessible and inclusive businesses are better businesses.

To civil society, we say: Continue to hold us accountable, to advocate fearlessly, to provide services where government capacity is limited, and to ensure that the voices of persons with disabilities are heard.

To persons with disabilities, we say: You are not passive recipients of services but active agents of change. Your leadership, your advocacy, and your participation in all spheres of life are essential to transformation.

To our Ugandan colleagues, we say: Let us continue this dialogue, share our experiences, learn from each other, and work together to build an Africa where no one is left behind.

7. Conclusion: A Vision of Ubuntu

I want to close with a word that is central to African philosophy: Ubuntu. "I am because we are." It is the recognition of our shared humanity, our interdependence, our responsibility to each other.

A society that excludes persons with disabilities diminishes us all. We lose the talents, perspectives, creativity, and contributions of millions. We betray our humanity when we deny others theirs.

After all, the true character of any nation is revealed by how it treats its most vulnerable members, including persons with disabilities.

Thank you. Ngiyabonga. Ke a leboga. Siyabonga.

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