

(Darija Udovicic Mahmuljin) So, good afternoon everyone! Do I need to do this? Good afternoon everyone, thank you for inviting me here! I will be talking about improving quality of life from a different angle that you have been hearing until now.

And that is through the improving access to the high quality and appropriate education to the children and youth who are deafblind or with additional disabilities.

I come from Perkins International and that is a part of Perkins School for the Blind. Just a second, yeah. Perkins School for the Blind was the first school for the blind in the United States that was established nearly 200 years ago. And it was also the first school in the world that educated a person that was deafblind. And that was not Helen Keller, that was Laura Bridgman, even 50 years before Helen Keller. And I would also like to mention Helen Keller, as well. But not the way that you would think I would.

I would like to mention her with her teacher that was Anne Sullivan, who was mentored by Laura Bridgman and who had a strong believe that Helen could learn. And her

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dedication and her quest for the ways that Helen could learn, actually brought Helen to what she has gained later on in life. And Anne Sullivan remained her teacher, as you all know. But I want to stress that because that is what we in Perkins do and that is what we are good at: The expertise of teachers for children and youth who are deafblind and with additional disabilities. We do think that quality teachers with the right dedication really do make change in their life.

So, Perkins International was established in 1989 - the Perkins School for the Blind - to support the development of that quality education through the world. Our mission is to ensure that all underserved children and young adults with blindness and additional disabilities and visual impairment receive and have access to equality and appropriate education. We work on our goal through the partnerships with orphanages, schools, universities, ministries, family organizations at local, regional level. So, wherever we find a partner that truly believes in our course and that is willing to do a change. We want to break the isolation and neglect these children fates, transforming their future through the power of learning.

But, so, Perkins International today, we work in 70 countries throughout the world, through Europe, Asia, Latin American and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, building capacity at local, regional and national level to develop independent and sustainable educational systems that will transform the future of those children.

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We do those trainings and those partnerships, even on a grassroot level. Even if there were programs, we build partnerships, programs with only two children and one teacher, with family organizations we only wish to make a change. And sometimes, even those programs with our support and other support, made a huge change and impact to the society and local community. Because every child counts and we think, all of these children and all of these possibilities add up to bigger change and bigger impact to the society and community there.

But, we have a challenge, and the challenge is that according the World Health organization, there are 6 million children and young adults from 0 to 24 in the world that are deafblind and or with additional disabilities. Unfortunately, the majority of that huge number is not receiving the education, they would need. So, we consider them as the world most vulnerable children. For too often, they are excluded from the education systems. Instead of going to school, they are left at home. And unfortunately, in many cases, they are left in orphanages and children's homes, where they are being isolated and neglected. And for those children who are lucky enough to go to attend schools inadequate teacher training is a fundamental issue. Because teachers do struggle, if they do not have the special skills, how would they meet the unique needs every and each of those children have.

Thankfully, the world community has acknowledged needs for solutions. So, with sustainable development goals, disability education is a renewed priority. Global

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leaders have committed to providing quality education for all children, including those with disabilities. That was that sustainable development goal number four, quality education for all until to 2030, it provided us a window of opportunity to create a systemic change to achieve that goal.

So, Perkins International with its expertise is committed to make quality education accessible for that vulnerable group of children. Further on, U. N. Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, had a declaration where they said, „Inclusive education is a human right, including those with disabilities.“ And in that declaration, the committee specifically identified individuals with deafblindness and multiple disabilities among those, who are most at risk of being excluded. So, we do have to do something about it and build on that momentum. Perkins has designed a global strategy to achieve quality education for some of the world’s most vulnerable children. We had consolidated 97 years of global teacher training with it since 1920. And we launched a global campaign in 2017 in the United Nations through Perkins International Academy to help governments to meet their commitments for the Sustainable Development Goals.

We designed Perkins International Academy to be implemented in partnership with governments, universities and NGO’s. The course establishes international competence standards for teachers working with children with multiple disabilities. There are four levels of education finishing with ,Train the trainers‘ which is a blue print of how

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we can reach a bigger number of children. Our strategy is not only through the courses, but also - as I have already mentioned - through building, through partnerships model programs, centres of excellence, that will be models for best practices, training and application.

The communities need a place where children and their families can go for quality education, for resources to support their children at home, for inclusive settings, to get the resources, how they could meet the needs of their students at a best and appropriate way. We also do have technical systems and support through our country representatives, where we do on-site mentoring and trainings, government agency support, NGO support and of course, a lot of it to family organization support.

And as a final thing, we do have an International Educational Leadership Program and that is 9 months intensive program that supports international educators from all around the world, where they learn best practices at Perkins and Boston College and disseminate them in their native countries.

The history was in late 1920, when we started this teacher program, but it became solely international in 1989. So every year, 15 teachers around the globe come and get their skills and when they come back to their native countries, usually they are at the forefront of change in the education system and policy systems in their country. Because not only that they learn skills, but they witness the power of change that really appropriate education has

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to life of children, and youth, and their families. And they really become the major ones that do the change and our partners in their countries.

So again, of this short presentation, I would really like to emphasize that knowledge and skills are the cornerstones that create good practice model programs and policies for children with disabilities around the world. But also attitudes. For too often, we have been encountered with the situation that we couldn't even believe that was coming from even persons and organizations, we would not expect it.

And that is, at the heart of the issue is often deeply-seated misbelieve that children with especially profound disabilities and multi-sensory impairments cannot learn. And whatever we do, we have to have that in mind and we have to change the attitudes and perceptions, because without that, we have to change it not only with policy-makers, but also with teachers too many times and also with families. So, we have to have that in mind to change it, because in their attitude and perception of that they have powerful ability to determine, whether these children can achieve a good quality of life or not.

We believe that all children can learn and thrive. We believe that education enriches lives of individuals and prepares them for active roles in communities, in their families and schools. And we have worked on that and we believe that all children have the right to be given a chance to learn new skills. Because only, when learning

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new skills, that is the way to get a sense of accomplishment. And we all need a sense of accomplishment to feel recognized and we feel recognized and that we accomplish something. That is how we get to be a part of society and that is what it gets us to lead a more fulfilled life. Thank you! (applause)