

Ovide Mercredi – ILC Canada Ambassador
Speech to the United Nations Open-ended Working Group on Aging
The Right to Inclusion

Excellencies, distinguished colleagues,

I am here today, at the United Nations, the pinnacle of human rights, to share with you my hopes and dreams for a truly inclusive world for older people and for Indigenous people.

Social inclusion is the process of achieving equal opportunity for all, without distinction of any kind, such as age, sex, ethnic origin or identity, to ensure the full enjoyment, as a collective or as individuals, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In my imaginary world I see Indigenous peoples and individuals of all ages free and equal to all other peoples, occupying a fundamental place of belonging and exercising their right to self-determination.

One that is founded on the values of justice, fairness, equality, diversity, and the two basic human rights: the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct characteristics, while retaining the right to social inclusion, and if they so choose, to participate fully in the life of the State.

I see us conquering the outcome of social exclusion that is: poor health, loneliness and high rates of suicide, premature deaths, the lack of voice and recognition, and the exclusion from participation, decent work, assets and land.

In my vision of the world, I see no ageism, racism, sexism or ableism. I see a world that frees humanity from the tyranny of poverty, hunger and want. I see inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence.

Of course, you know that this vision of a socially inclusive world does not currently exist. Inequality has reached crisis proportions around the world, and it poses a growing threat to our future. Yet if we believe in our collective humanity, there is no reason why we should not try to establish this heaven on earth.

I can hear the detractors and the apologist for the way things are today say to me: get realistic.

I am a realist that happens to believe that the ideal socially inclusive world can be a modern reality. Perhaps to some surprise, in spite of all the injustices and oppression experienced by older persons and Indigenous people, we still hold

high expectations for justice, reconciliation, and the joint creation of the ideal inclusive society.

I hope you all do.

So why does the goal of an inclusive world still appear elusive?

Inequality is a consequence as well as a cause of human rights deprivations. Many of the key determinants of inequality can be framed as manifestations of denials of internationally guaranteed human rights.

Unsurprisingly, panel discussions like the one we are holding today, identify the two areas of social inclusion and human rights as interlinked and indivisible. However, we must increase our efforts to deepen the exploration of the relationship between theory and practice.

Because our focus is on the rights of older persons, and we want to make human rights “real” for older persons everywhere, we must consider how to move beyond calling for opportunities and access to basic services only, towards national policy capable of realizing the fuller vision of dignity and equal worth that underpins human rights.

This requires fundamental change, as the alternative, which is to protect the status quo, places all of us in a moral decline.

Let’s step up to building older-age inclusive societies around the world.

We can do that by adopting a comprehensive vision that incorporates the intersecting dimensions of inequality and builds on the concept of the indivisibility of human rights into operationalizing social inclusion. Because stepping down will take us down a path of deep failure and the decline of democracy, peace and equality.

You might ask how we can achieve a truly inclusive world for older persons?

This is established by two means – a normative international instrument and political commitments by Governments. In other words: A comprehensive convention to protect the rights of older persons, including indigenous elders, and States that sign-up to agree to respect, protect and fulfil these rights.

Incorporating the convention into national law, will ensure that domestic policy and practice are consistent with what is required by the treaty, and as such are just for older people of today and tomorrow.

This Working Group has deliberated for over a decade towards fulfilling its mandate: to strengthen the protection of the human rights of older persons.

So, I hope in our interactive discussion to follow, that we hear less from Member States about older persons as “objects” of social inclusion and protection, and more about considering them as “subjects” with rights.

How can Members of the Open-ended Working Group on Ageing contribute to the goal of a truly inclusive society for older persons?

Fulfil your mandate to present to the General Assembly, a proposal containing the main elements that should be included in an international legal instrument to promote and protect the rights and dignity of older persons, which are not currently addressed sufficiently by existing mechanisms.

This mandate is clear, and the General Assembly awaits this proposal. It has been waiting for you to report back to it for 10 years.

Member States may choose to ignore tough messages from civil society, but what justifies choosing to ignore a reporting request by the General Assembly?

Knowingly ignoring a mandate from the resolution is silence. And we need to break that decade-long cycle of silence.

Now is the time to begin drafting the convention. Thank you.

(896 words = 6 mins)