

Statement delivered by Stevie Wonder, United Nations Messenger of Peace

**High-level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on
Disability and Development**

New York, 23 September 2013

Good Morning,

Your Excellency Ambassador John William Ashe, President of the General Assembly,
Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Your Excellencies,
Representatives of Civil Society Organizations and Organizations of Persons with
Disabilities,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to participate in this High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on disability and development. I am very happy to be here today at this historical event.

In 2009, I was appointed United Nations Messenger of Peace with a focus on persons with disabilities. In this role, I have had the opportunity to advocate internationally for the most fundamental goals of the United Nations – peace, development and human rights for all.

Today, at this High-level Meeting, we have the opportunity to focus on these goals for persons with disabilities and their communities around the world.

I have always been a man of dreams and hopes. I know that working together we can create a world where persons with disabilities face no limits – and can freely live, work, enjoy life and contribute their talents to society. We have already accomplished so much in this regard.

Just two months ago, I travelled to Morocco to participate in the “Diplomatic Conference to Conclude a Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Work by Visually Impaired Persons and Persons with Print Disabilities”.

For society and development to be inclusive of persons with disabilities, we need to have equal access to education and to knowledge and information. Yet, out of millions of publications each year, fewer than five per cent are made available in accessible formats for visually impaired persons. In developing countries, an even smaller percentage of publications are available in accessible formats.

The Marrakesh Treaty – as it is called - will greatly expand the availability of artistic and literary works in accessible formats, such as Braille, large print texts and audio books.

This can make a real difference in the lives of the world's more than 300 million visually impaired persons.

Excellencies,

One year ago, in October 2012 during the commemoration of the 67th anniversary of the United Nations, I gave a concert at the General Assembly Hall. On that occasion, we celebrated the many achievements of the United Nations. But we also recognized that more needs to be done.

We need to make sure that real participation and voices of persons with disabilities are included in everything we do for peace and development around the world.

As we look to the future and the advancement of disability inclusive development, let us all, in our own way, be messengers of peace. Many of us here in this room are already working to create a world inclusive of all.

I want to share a story with you that is personal to me. It is kind of how I ended up here today. I was blessed to have a mother who allowed me to discover the world and from discovering the world and discovering that around me, I took chances. Some of those chances she was against, but she believed that I would not be irresponsible. She always said to me: "If you do something that is out of what I have said you will get the belt". Now I am sure you all know what the belt is. But obviously on one occasion I took the chance of maybe it turning out good in the end. I had a little thing that I did with my friends, I would sing in the alley, I would sing different songs to a person who was a very spiritual man and every time he would see me and my friends in the alley we would be saying bad words to each other and talking crazy. Every time I would see him come and he would say: "You know Stevie, your voice is much better than that than to be using it for bad things. You should sing wonderful gospel songs". And I would say (*sings*) "You are so right Mr. Heinz. Life is so good to me, and I know that I should be singing to the lord. Yes I should". After that was all done he would give me some money. And I would go to the store with my friends and get candy. This one particular time I was hearing this music from some blocks away and I said to one of my friends: "If you walk me across the street" - because if I walk across the street by myself I would get the belt, and he didn't want to see me get the belt either and I didn't want to feel the belt. Therefore he walked me across the street and we walked a few blocks. There were two people playing the guitar and I still happened to have my little bongo drums and it was from that that I was able to meet the cousin of one of the members of the group "Smokey Robinson and The Miracles" who obviously was with Motown Records. From that Ronnie White made it possible for me to have an audition at Motown where Berry Gordy discovered me. Now the truth of the matter is through me being able to have this opportunity of being discovered at Motown, I was able to, through the goodness of you appreciating the music that I had done and was doing, make it possible for the dreams that I had and prayers of my mother to come true; but as well, to be able to have various things that were not accessible and available to me, available economically. And through

travelling in the world I was able to see and meet various people of various countries and discover the various technologies.

I wish for a day when there would be technology available for the blind, things will be accessible available for us to be able to do things when using various technologies of synthetic speech or voice.

We have been very fortunate in that, this has moved to that place. But I believe we must make this technology more available and accessible to every single blind person or person with disability all over the world. For me, there should be no one anywhere that lives without being able to have accessibility throughout the world. So I would encourage all of you, of all the various nations, whether it be subsidizing this technology, make it possible. Not only will taxes be less, but more importantly every single person with disability will be more independent and feel freer.

I thank you for allowing me to speak today and am looking forward to when I can write a song about how great, not only one nation but all the nations of the world, open up and handle what they need to do - making the world accessible for those with any disabilities at all. Thank you.