



“THE ROAD AHEAD”

THE RACE FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

**President’s Address
Opening Ceremony**

ICEVI 12th World Conference

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
July 16, 2006**

Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Dato Sri Najib Tun Razak, members of the Executive Committee of the Malaysian Association for the Blind, distinguished guests and members of the ICEVI global family: It is with great pleasure that I add my words of welcome to you on behalf of the ICEVI Executive Committee.

Today, we are gathered in this cosmopolitan capital city of one of Asia's most beautiful countries to partake in what I am sure will be recognized by future generations as a truly historic moment in the annals of our organization's service to children and youth with visual impairment.

Four years ago we gathered in the Netherlands to celebrate the golden jubilee of our organization. That was a proud and wonderful moment for all of us as we assembled for that event in the birthplace of ICEVI.

Today we share an even more important moment in our history. Today we will launch a program that will focus global attention on the unmet needs of the nearly 4 million children and youth with visual impairment who live without the access to a basic human right that so many of us take for granted: the right to education.

For the past four years it has been my great honor to serve as your president and to have the privilege of working with a team of Principal Officers and an Executive Committee that has worked hard to lay the foundation for what we will inaugurate today, a campaign that will call the attention of the world to an unacceptable situation faced by most children with visual impairment: a life without access to education.

In giving thought to what I wanted to say today I recalled a couple of unhappy days at the start of our 11th World Conference in the Netherlands. During the early days of that conference, as many of you will recall, words spread that I did not favor continuing our tradition of world conferences.

I must plead guilty to harboring those thoughts. Not because I did not want to continue this tradition but because I was having a terrible time justifying the time, energy and resources we would need to devote to this task while so many children in the developing world are without access to education.

Clearly, I was not a very popular fellow for expressing those feelings and many of you were not shy in expressing your views to the contrary. At what seemed my darkest moment, colleagues from the Malaysian Association for the Blind, whom I have

known and worked with for more than twenty years, came to me and quietly whispered in my ear what has become a national slogan here in Malaysia:

“Malaysia Boleh! Malaysia Can!”

Suddenly, I believe I understood exactly what Cinderella must have felt like when Prince Charming put that glass slipper on her foot.

Over the course of the next week you will know just how comfortably that glass slipper fits as you experience that warm Malaysian hospitality and come to appreciate the enormous effort that the Host Committee has put into the organization of what I assure you will be a great week.

Ismail, you are ICEVI’s Prince Charming and we thank you, the Executive Committee of MAB and your staff for all you have done to prepare for this day. You have proved that “Malaysia Boleh” is more than a national slogan ...it is a reality and one that you and your team have delivered on.

Of course you will all recall that there was another important character involved in getting that glass slipper on Cinderella’s foot. Where would Cinderella and Prince Charming be today without a Fairy Godmother?

Well, in this story the Fairy Godmother is someone that those who attended the 11th World Conference know well. Yes, Heather Mason took her magic wand out of storage and came to our rescue once again. She waved that magic wand over a wonderful Program Committee and now three years and several thousand e-mails later the result is a program that will provoke, challenge and educate.

Today, on behalf of all of the characters in this story, I want to thank our Fairy Godmother for agreeing to this encore performance. Thanks Heather!

I am aware that I am now venturing onto a slippery and dangerous slope by singling out individuals or groups of individuals for thanks. The danger is that I will overlook someone. However, I am a risk taker and this is one I must take. Without the support of some I will mention today, the progress of this quadrennium would never have been possible.

So please bear with me and forgive me if I overlook anyone.

Over the past four years I have had the pleasure of working with a group of Principal Officers and an Executive Committee that has labored tirelessly to achieve a level of growth for ICEVI during this quadrennium that has made it possible for us to reach so many children with visual impairment in the most underserved regions of the world.

May I ask the members of the Executive Committee to stand so that you may join me in acknowledging their service to our organization and to blind and low vision children throughout the world.

My work as your president would not have been possible without the tremendous support I have received from my own organization the Overbrook School for the Blind that next year celebrates its 175th anniversary.

There is an old expression that “behind any successful man stands a strong woman”. Clearly the person who came up with that expression had not met me, because I require two. So may I use this opportunity to thank Overbrook’s Director Dr. Bernadette Kappen and my very dedicated collaborator at the Overbrook International Program, Wenru Niu. Thanks Bernadette, thanks Wen!

Let me hold off on further thanks for a moment. I can see some of you are showing signs of fear that this may turn into one of those bad “academy award” acceptance speeches where they end up getting out the hook to drag the speaker off the stage.

For ICEVI, this afternoon represents a truly historic occasion. While I want to focus as much on the future as the past, it is important that to understand the road ahead that we reflect for a few moments on the road we have built and traveled over the past four years. This is a road that has taken us to the starting line of the greatest journey in our organization’s history.

In 2002 when we gathered in the Netherlands to celebrate our golden jubilee we witnessed two significant events that have influenced our journey over the past four years.

The first of these was the appointment of a full-time Secretary-General and the establishment of a permanent ICEVI Secretariat.

Until 2002, ICEVI relied exclusively on the effort of volunteers to achieve its mission. By the year 2000, I and many others on the Executive Committee had concluded that ICEVI had gone about as far as it could on volunteer help alone. We realized that

without the appointment of a full-time Secretary General who would function as a CEO for ICEVI that our organization was unlikely to ever realize its full potential.

Our dilemma was how to achieve this objective within our meager financial resources.

It was at this point that I had a long and serious discussion with two of our most loyal and longstanding supporters, Christian Garms, then Executive Director of Christoffel Blindenmission and Dick Porter, then Executive Director of Sight Savers International.

Fortunately for ICEVI these two individuals and their organizations agreed that ICEVI did have much unrealized potential to affect positive change for children and youth with visual impairment throughout the world. Most importantly they backed up that belief with the financial support we needed to appoint a full-time Secretary General and establish a Secretariat with a small staff.

That search resulted in the appointment of an individual who has made all the difference in the world to this organization over the past four years. We have in Dr. Mani an individual who is universally respected for his skill, knowledge, work ethic and boundless energy.

Mani, your appointment has been a watershed event for this organization and we all thank you for all that you have and continue to do each day to strengthen ICEVI and help us achieve our mission of educational equity for all children and youth with visual impairment.

I know all of you are as grateful as I am that Mani has accepted this challenge. I ask you to join me in thanking him along with his wife and children, who so strongly support his work, even though it keeps him away from his home and family much more than they would choose.

The second milestone event of our 11th world conference was the announcement of a significant matching grant from the Drs. Charles and Esther Yewpick Lee Charitable Foundation to assist ICEVI in extending its reach to thousands of blind and low vision children in the developing regions of the world. This grant became a reality through the efforts of our colleague and dedicated Treasurer, Mrs. Grace Chan.

However, we could not have taken advantage of this matching grant without the support of four important international partners: the Asian Foundation for the

Prevention of Blindness, Christoffel Blindenmission, the National Organization of the Spanish Blind and Sight Savers International.

The support of these individuals and organizations has allowed us during the 2002-2006 quadrennium to transform our organization into one that is changing the lives of children with visual impairment, particularly those in underserved regions of the world. I know you join me in thanking these individuals and organizations for their support over the past four years.

Today it is not my purpose to review in detail the accomplishments of the past quadrennium. To do that we have prepared this Quadrennial Review that you will find in your conference bag and that we hope you will take time to read.

Since we met in the Netherlands in 2002 ICEVI has been able to reach an estimated 131,000 children with visual impairment in underserved areas of the world through awareness raising and human resource development programs that have directly impacted nearly 10,000 teachers, parents and others serving blind and low vision children.

For the first time, during this quadrennium, ICEVI has undertaken serious operational research in an effort to answer fundamental questions that inform our knowledge of “best practice”. With the cooperation of the Government of Uganda, the Uganda Institute for Special Education and Sight Savers International, ICEVI carried out a research study led by our Vice President, Dr. Steve McCall and our Secretary General, Dr. Mani. I urge you to take the time to review these research findings and to share with us your thoughts on fundamental questions we need to address in our future research initiatives.

Today, developments in assistive technology have opened many new career paths for persons with visual impairment. However, these pathways are often blocked by weaknesses in math and science education. These weaknesses are not inherent in the children we serve as so many would have us believe. To those that make that claim I say, “It is time to look in the mirror”. What you will find is not the inability of the children to learn math and science, even at very advanced levels, but the weakness of the instruction we provide.

During the past quadrennium ICEVI partnered with the Overbrook-Nippon Network on Educational Technology (ON-NET) to address weaknesses in mathematics instruction, particularly at the secondary school level. Together we carried out a three-

year research and development project that has resulted in a new publication entitled “Mathematics Made Easy for Children with Visual Impairment” and a software program to make Braille mathematics materials more readily available. You will learn more about this work and these products during the week.

The Uganda research and the mathematics initiative represent an important new chapter in our history, one that we plan to expand in the years to come.

For as long as I have been involved in the field of international development there has never been a shortage of strong personal opinions often backed up by even stronger and sometimes even shrill voices to proclaim what approaches work best.

Sadly, those strong opinions and voices are not often supported by sound empirical evidence. In my opinion this is one of our greatest weaknesses.

If we are to reach the “forgotten children”, the more than 4 million who are today without access to education, we must influence public attitude and public policy.

And how will we influence such change? Do we need to shout? Perhaps at times that will be necessary and when it is we will. However, I think we can accomplish as much by speaking with hard facts and a soft voice than we can by shouting well meaning but unsupported opinions.

The situation we face today is a clear and simple to understand.

Without hard data from fundamental research we stand little chance of having any serious influence on public attitude and public policy,

Without strong public attitude and policy, funding for education of children with visual impairment is likely to stagnate or diminish and

Without resources the challenge of creating educational equity for all children remains a dream that will never become reality.

We, have an obligation to ourselves and more importantly to the more than 4 million “forgotten children” for whom the schoolhouse door remains locked to build that body of evidence and make our cause one that political leaders and education policy makers will embrace. With a strong research agenda yielding sound data our public policy adversaries can become our allies.

As we have moved through the current quadrennium the subject of “allies” has been on our mind a great deal. We know that the challenges we face in reaching the “forgotten children” is not one that we can address alone. Over the course of the past four years we have taken steps to strengthen our working relationship with many in the international and intergovernmental community. This has included our colleagues within Deafblind International, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the International Blind Sports Federation all of whom have a strong presence here this week.

However, no working relationship has been strengthened more or has shown greater results than that of our collaboration with the World Blind Union. I am deeply grateful for the collaborative atmosphere that emerged early in this quadrennium under the leadership of Kicki Nordstrom and more recently under the leadership of WBU’s current President, Dr. William Rowland. ICEVI and WBU have forged a partnership that during this quadrennium has resulted in significant joint policy documents on education, increased collaboration at the regional and local level and joint partnerships we have formed with UNESCO and UNICEF.

Recently, ICEVI and WBU were instrumental in helping to form a new UNICEF NGO Working Group on Children with Disabilities that is showing much promise.

Today, ICEVI and WBU become partners is what may be the most significant journey that either organization has ever undertaken, a journey that has at the finish line an objective both organizations cherish, educational equity for all children with visual impairment, no matter where they live in this world.

I hope by now the road we have built and walked upon for the past four years is one that you can envision clearly.

It is a road:

- That has been paved with efforts to create awareness concerning the abilities of children with visual impairment,
- That has been paved with capacity building efforts and training materials to strengthen teachers and parents,
- That has a new surface created by operational research into best practice and
- That has been constructed on a foundation of strong alliances that prepare us for the long journey ahead.

The road we have built during this quadrennium is surely not a superhighway. In fact the road we have built and walked upon may be more aptly described as an approach ramp that has led us to the starting line of the wider and longer road ahead.

Tonight his Excellency the Deputy Prime Minister has the starter's gun in his hand and in a short while he will use it to signal the beginning of a much longer journey that will in the years ahead lead us to a finish line where we will all find our reward for completing this race.

That reward will not come in the form of a trophy. However, each of the runners will receive a reward of much greater value; the reward of satisfaction in knowing that the schoolhouse doors have been unlocked and all children with visual impairment have the same access to education as their sighted brothers and sisters.

As we gather here today at the starting line it is important that we look at the road ahead, anticipate the obstacles we will encounter, review our race strategy and pledge never to take our eyes off the finish line and to never give up.

UNESCO sites 12 principal instruments that include provisions concerning the right to education, starting with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

However, despite the existence of these covenants, conventions and declarations, sadly, the vast majority of children with visual impairment still do not have access to education. It is this disturbing fact that the "global campaign on education for all children with visual impairment" has been developed to address. Education is the key to unlocking the cycle of poverty and illiteracy that has for far too long trapped millions of blind and low vision persons.

The time has come to stand up and declare with a strong and unified voice "this is unacceptable". Working together we will change this situation.

Three years ago the Executive Committee of ICEVI began to conceptualize the campaign and action program we will launch today. The framework of the campaign has emerged as a global initiative in many ways parallels that of the Vision 2020: The Right to Sight Program campaign launched by the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness in 1999. That campaign, designed to eliminate all forms of avoidable blindness by the year 2020 is now demonstrating significant results, the type of results that we pledge to match or exceed in the field of education.

We believe that the campaign we will launch today will, a decade from now, allow us to report that educational access for children with visual impairment has been so significantly improved and that the day when all children with visual impairment have access to their basic right to education is in sight.

The racecourse ahead will not be easy. There will be many steep hills to climb and weather conditions that will not always favor our efforts to reach the finish line. However, the race strategy that has been developed by ICEVI, WBU and a Task Force composed of some very elite “runners and coaches” with hundreds of year of collective experience in international development is sound.

I would like you to meet this group of veteran “coaches” and “runners”. I ask the members of our EFA-VI Task Force to stand so that we can acknowledge your hard work in designing a strategy that has today brought us to the starting line here in Kuala Lumpur.

As with any good racing team, as we approach the starting line we are giving serious thought to the course we are about to run, anticipating the challenges we are likely to encounter and reviewing our race strategy.

During the early stages of this race for educational equity we can anticipate some steep hills we will need to climb.

The very first hill will require us to complete a regional **situation analysis** and **select countries** for the first phase of the campaign. We know the goal of educational equity will not come easily and we know we cannot implement this campaign in every country where there is need simultaneously. In the early stage we will need to be selective and successful and then use the momentum and successes we create to race onward to other countries where need is great.

Even within the countries selected for phase one of this race we know that if we are to achieve our objective we will need to work at the district level and not try to tackle the challenge with a single national strategy. However, as district level strategies succeed the campaign will be expanded. This is a race that will be won a kilometer at a time, district by district, school by school, family by family and child by child.

Demand creation is, no doubt, the steepest hill we will climb in the early stages of this race.

For far too long we have focused all of our attention on what I refer to as the “supply side” of the equation. That is, we assume that if we train teachers and provide the needed supports the children will suddenly appear. Experience tells another story.

We often have based our work on inadequate or flawed demographic data and the assumption that because we attach value to education that this same value is shared by all families and all communities.

We will need to take strong action during the early stages of this race to change some of the prevailing attitudes and misconceptions that exist today, misconceptions that foster an attitude that education for a child with a visual impairment is not necessary or worthwhile.

Here we need to educate families and demonstrate through positive role models of successful blind individuals that indeed education is not only possible but is highly desirable. Look around you in this hall and you will see hundreds living examples of the value of education for persons with visual impairment.

My eyes need not wander any further than the front row. Ismail Salleh, Ph. D. in economics, advisor to the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Vice Chancellor of a major university, President of the Malaysian Association for the Blind, husband and father. What parent would not want their blind child to achieve such success? You and I know that this is possible. However, have the families of children with visual impairment in underserved regions of the world met the Ismail Salleh’s of their country? Do they understand that with an education their child can achieve comparable success?

Our partner in this campaign, The World Blind Union, is an organization of just such role models. Our challenge in climbing this hill is to find ways for parents to meet those individuals and be influenced by them. When they do I suggest to you that we will have succeeded in creating a demand that will result in the formation of organizations of parents of children with visual impairment. Those parent organizations in partnership with local organizations of the blind will become a powerful political force in achieving change.

Suddenly that very steep hill we are climbing becomes more manageable. This race we enter today will not be won at the regional or the sub-regional level. Children are not educated at the regional or sub-regional level, they are educated one at a time in thousands of communities in the underserved regions of this world. We

will need great local coaches in the form of **effective national task forces** to guide this campaign.

These national task forces need to include both the government and non-government sectors including those in general and special education. We need to involve our partners in the intergovernmental community, UNICEF, UNESCO and The World Bank as well as our colleagues in the eye health care community whose awareness and referral systems will allow us to identify and reach children early. Critical to our success will be the active engagement of organizations of the blind and parent organizations within these national task forces. They are the ones who speak with the voice of experience and quite rightly demand “nothing about us, without us”.

As we move into the middle stages of this race for educational equity **human resource development** will be the most critical factor in determining whether we reach the finish line. In recent years many governments have embraced the concept of inclusive education. This is a positive development. However, it is one that has the potential to backfire if we are not careful. Moving children into local community schools is reasonably easy to do. Assuring that these same children actually receive an education in those classrooms with teachers who understand their unique learning needs and have the training and the educational materials to make real education possible is the bigger challenge. It is a challenge that can be managed but without appropriate measures to develop the human resources needed we risk a generation of children who attend school but remain uneducated.

Access to **affordable and accessible educational materials** is still another challenge this racecourse will present to us. For all too long programs serving children with visual impairment in underserved areas of the world have had to rely on expensive imported materials. Unless we create a fundamental change in this situation the finish line will never come into view. This global campaign envisions “centers of excellence” that will address this challenge by producing these materials at the local or sub-regional level. The production of Braille books, Braille writing frames, abacuses, Braille paper, long canes and other educational materials can and should be done at a local or sub-regional level. The recently developed Low Vision Resource Center located at the Hong Kong Society of the Blind is one positive example of how, the international community, working together made it possible for all countries to have access to high quality low vision devices at an affordable cost.

We need to anticipate as this race wears on that our legs will become tired and cramped and our lungs and heart will struggle to provide our bodies with the oxygen and the energy needed to reach the finish line.

This is when doubts will arise and we will wonder if our plan is working. That is when we will look for those mile-makers that tell us where we are on the course and whether our race strategy is sound. The strategy of this campaign calls for four such mile-markers:

- ✓ *First, have education enrollment rates of children with visual impairment increased?*
- ✓ *Second, have drop-out rates among children with visual impairment decreased?*
- ✓ *Third, do children with visual impairment have access to the support services and learning materials they need to allow them to compete on an equal basis with their sighted peers? and*
- ✓ *Fourth, Is the performance of children with visual impairment on par with those of non-visually impaired children?*

If we can pass these mile-markers and answer yes at each we will know that our race strategy is working and the finish line will soon be in site.

These mile-markers combined with the feedback we will regularly receive from the results of **operational research** the campaign will generate, will give us the energy boost and mental determination we need to improve our stride and increase our speed as we move toward the finish line.

ICEVI and WBU know, before we even hear the crack of the starter's gun, that we can only win this race by working together to achieve our shared vision, a world in which all children with visual impairment have access to a quality education.

Although this global campaign and program of action is being led by ICEVI we are acutely aware that this is a race that can only be won with the full and active partnership of all individuals and organizations who share our vision.

This is not a race that can be won if any of us choose to be spectators on the sideline. This is a race where we must all be runners, runners who will not give up and runners who will reach out to encourage fellow runners when they tire and falter.

This is a race in which dropping out is not an option.

The forgotten children, the more than 4 million without access to education are waiting for us to cross the finish line so that their dream of educational equity is at last a reality.

Thank you. I look forward to seeing you at the starting line and to running along side you in the years to come.



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