

Honorable Mayor Apolinar Salcedo, Cali, Colombia

In regard to this encounter, which is focused on technologies and disabilities, I think that technology is a right to which all human beings should have access. I therefore consider that it is a responsibility of society and of all countries of the world to continue to work, to ensure that persons with disability do not have to continue thanking others for the favor something which should be a right. We must make technology accessible, and I'm sure that just as the 129 heads of state on the 8th of September of the year 2000, met together to establish the Millennium Development Goals who said that the best way in which to eradicate poverty was by establishing a partnership between public and private entities. I believe that in like manner we can believe that access to technology will enable the public sector and the private sector to come together to make it possible for technology to bridge the gap which exist between disabilities and participation in society. Cali, and the government in which I preside in the city of Cali as a blind person who is focused on technology and since this is the first time that a mayor in Columbia and in Latin America is blind, the situation has been reversed and today the neediest persons of Cali, the children and the poorest sectors, are thankful to have a blind mayor supporting technologies so that the gap between the rich and the poor maybe resolved through technology.

I would like to convey to you that I am a model 55 man. I am 52 years old and I became blind at the age of 7. A stray bullet hit me in the head and I became instantly blind. I came from a very modest home and I went to the Institute for Blind Children in Cali to learn Braille. I then finished my secondary studies, and I learned lawyer at the University of Cali. I became a lawyer, and then I studied Public Administration.

When I was at the end of my career, I began to feel that disability doesn't mean that you are not able to do things and that it would be possible for all of us to work, to find better spaces, and I decided to enter a political career so that I would not have to beg for favors, but rather to be part of the decision making group. That is why instead of alms, instead of charity and compassion, I have fought so that Cali and the Valley of Caroga would get

me opportunities. I asked for opportunities to study and then for opportunities to work and Cali gave me the first opportunity to be the first municipal civil servant with disability in 1954. I was a civil servant for 10 years, becoming legal councilor of the municipality. In 1994 I decided that I should go for elected office, and that was the first time that a councilor, a city councilman was blind. I was elected, but I did not ask for anything special; I competed with the hundred and three candidates and I won. In 1997 I aspired to the post for a second time and I was voted in. In 1998 I was President of the Council of Cali; 467 years in Cali, and there was a blind person elected to this post for the first time. I achieved the highest number of votes, and in 2003 I aspired to the post of Mayor of Cali, breaking through a paradigm that was thought impossible, and on the 26th of October 2003 I was selected with 197,000 votes, winning by 30,000 votes in a field of 7.

Blindness is a limitation, but it does not end capacity. We persons with disabilities understand that discrimination or segregation towards us actually exists in ourselves, in our mind. I never thought, however, that because I was blind I was worth less than others. My parents always loved me. They were never ashamed of having a blind child. I believed in myself, and it was clear to me, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "Dreams are dreams as long as one dreams them one's self, but if they dreamed by two, they become a reality." I never allowed anyone to place limit on my dreams. I always thought that my limitations didn't make me different, that I could build my own life. That is why I bring testimony to you that being the leader of the third largest city of Columbia, passing laws and leading a city which praises me and which has allowed me to break through moles. No one in Columbia today can say that blindness can prevent you from being a mayor or a councilor. I bring a message to you. Disability is not English. It is not Japanese. It is not poor. It is it is not wealthy. To be disabled is to have a limitation, perhaps, but are attitude must always carry us forward to believe that we can be a part of a productive society.

When a disabled person becomes a member of society, society does not look at us as different. Then there will be no more alms. There will be opportunities. I think that I am

not an exceptional blind person. I do not belong to a different race. What is clear is that if society offers us opportunities, we are no longer in burden to our families or society. Technology should not eliminate any opportunities. Braille was invented a hundred and eighty six years ago, and today we're still teaching it, so we should not leave Braille behind. We should not leave behind the wheel chair or the cane or the earpiece. Today, technology must allow us to supplement what we need so that through technological advances we may interact on an equality of all opportunity.