***PRESS RELEASE***

**Marathon for Children with Disabilities is used to amplify messages on ending stigma and**

**calls for inclusion**

**TASHKENT, 26 May 2024** – As part of the celebrations for International Children Protection Day, the Ministry of Sports, the office of the Child Ombudsperson, Special Olympics Uzbekistan, UNICEF and retail Giant Korzinka, today joined Children with Disabilities for a Marathon today and called for quality inclusive services, equal opportunities, combating stereotypes and ending stigma discrimination of children with disabilities (CwD).

The Marathon, in commemoration of Uzbekistan Children’s Day was held under the theme “We are different. We are equal” and brought together children, UN staff and development partners.

Evidence has shown that the greatest challenge for attaining inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Uzbekistan is rooted in the lack of awareness on the rights of CwD, which consequently leads to a debilitating perception on persons with disabilities and stigma and discrimination that transcends all layers of society.

Commenting on the Marathon and Children with Disabilities, Surayo Rakhmanova, the Commissioner for the Rights of the Child (Child Rights Ombudsperson), said that the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities intersected to protect the rights of CwD.

"This marathon is meant to demonstrate that children with disabilities have the same rights, they deserve equal opportunities and inclusion is necessary," said Children's Ombudsman Surayyo Rakhmonova. “Children with disabilities are not about charity, they are rights holders according to the international treaties we have ratified and of course constitutional guarantees. We are obliged to prioritize their rights."

A 2019 Situation Analysis on Persons with Disabilities in Uzbekistan demonstrated that a small part of the Uzbek society had regular contact with persons with disabilities, and those that did mostly acted from the place of pity. Further, a purely medical and charity understandings of disability are still prevalent both within the government.

The Ministry of Sport, which convened the Marathon, along with partners noted the importance of sport in fostering development aspirations such as inclusion.

“Sport is not only an instrument of physical health, but also a powerful instrument of education and personal development of children,” said Sharifjon Mumindjanov, Advisor to the Minister of Sports. “In our commitment to creating a better future for the younger generation, sport plays a key role, as it provides not only sporting skills, but also the values of strength, determination and team spirit needed to succeed in life.”

Mobilized by the Special Olympics of Uzbekistan, children with disabilities, were excited to take part in the race, 60 CWD participated. “The benefits of sport for children with disabilities are clear,” said Gulnara Saidova, CEO, Special Olympics of Uzbekistan. “We encourage all parents and caregivers to consider enrolling their children in sports programs, which helps to develop and make new friends.”

According to a recent KAP Survey in Uzbekistan, almost 70% of respondents believed that specialized schools are the best way to educate children with disabilities and only 13% of respondents agreed with inclusion of CwD’s in ordinary schools and in classes with peers without disabilities. Further, a mere 1% of respondents associated respect with children with disabilities.

“Sport is a powerful tool for bringing children together, it inculcates a sense of belonging and it can propel children to reach their full potential,” said Geoffrey Ijumba, UNICEF’s Acting Representative for UNICEF “What we witnessed today at the run was beautiful, there was belonging, accomplishment, and the connections made in that simple track were profound.”

The run, which saw the participation of 110 children, including 60 CwD was held at Eco- Park and was an important platform for joint advocacy to end stigma and discrimination against CwD and ensure inclusion and brought together all critical stakeholders including Development and private sector partners.

“As Korzinka, we are passionate about inclusion of persons with disabilities, we know that it is the collective responsibility of every sector,” said Zafar Khashimov, Founder and Chairman of the Board of Korzinka supermarkets chain. “As private sector we support inclusion and say productive communities are inclusive communities”.

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