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Special Olympics can alter image of people with intellectual disabilities – UN



Wilfried Lemke, Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace

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The United Nations Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace today hailed the power of the Special Olympics to transform the public image of persons with intellectual disabilities.

“Special Olympics transforms communities from closed to open ones, from intolerant to accepting ones and by using sport to accomplish this, has come to represent the good, the power and the true spirit of sport,” Wilfried Lemke added during an event held on the sidelines of the XIII Special Olympics World Summer Games that opened yesterday in Athens, Greece.

The Games are held every two years and bring together athletes with intellectual disabilities in what is one of the world’s largest sporting events.

Mr. Lemke has been a strong advocate for a greater use of sport and physical activity as avenues for fostering the inclusion of persons with disabilities in communities and societies, and for empowering them.

Yesterday he competed with Special Olympic athletes in a 1,000-metre cycling time trial aimed at raising funds for the Special Olympics movement, which was founded by the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver, a sister of former United States president John F. Kennedy.

“The World Games are a powerful display of the potential of sport as a tool for advancing social goals and deeply impacting the lives of people in a positive way,” Mr. Lemke said after the race.

“The Games offer the opportunity for the world to focus on the abilities of the athletes as opposed to the common perception that focuses on their disabilities.”

As Special Adviser, a position he has held since 2008, Mr. Lemke is tasked with leading and coordinating the efforts of the UN system to promote understanding and support for sport as an instrument for development and peace.

Also on the sidelines of the Games, Timothy Shriver, Ms. Shriver’s son, and Anthony Lake, the Executive Director of the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)), today signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen their joint commitment to uphold the rights, dignity and inclusion of children with disabilities.

“Children with disabilities have the same hopes and dreams as all children, and the same right to make the most of their potential,” said Mr. Lake. “The denial of that right is a loss, not only for those children, but for our societies. And it is unconscionable.

“By strengthening the partnership between Special Olympics and UNICEF, we will help to protect this right for more children with disabilities, and in so doing, enable them to contribute even more to their communities and countries,” he stated.

Since 2007 UNICEF and Special Olympics have worked together to raise awareness of the abilities and rights of children with intellectual disabilities, change perceptions and challenge negative attitudes.

In recent years, the two organizations have worked together to establish the first family support networks for children with intellectual disabilities in Cambodia; provide opportunities for children in Jamaica to participate in Young Athletes programmes; and provide health screenings, counselling on nutrition, and family health education in several locations in Kazakhstan.

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