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Distinguished Colleagues and Friends.

There has never been a more important time for children to discover the gift of sport, nor has there ever been a more important mission for the Olympic Movement than to provide real and meaningful leadership in bringing this gift to them.

But the many challenges of the Obesity epidemic, which predominantly affects young people and is now the scourge of over 1,000 million lives around the globe, continues to grow.

Obesity can result in a higher risk of heart disease, type-2 diabetes and other diseases including cancer. Despite numerous initiatives and high levels of funding from governments, world bodies and brand-owners, there has still been no significant progress in arresting its spread. Let me give you some examples:

- In my country, the average 14 year old is nearly 4 stone (24kgs) heavier than their grandparents were at the same age. (*University College Cork – February, 2009*)
- This is the first generation in the history of mankind with a declining life expectancy, living an expected 2 years less than their parents by 2050 (*New England Journal of Medicine*).
- Being even moderately obese cuts two to four years off a person's life while more severe obesity can remove over 10 years from their life expectancy. (*Oxford University Report, March, 2009*).

The corresponding economic consequences are equally startling:

- “Obesity is already creating a major economic burden for governments, overtaking tobacco-related illnesses and consuming up to **8%** of overall health care budgets”. (*World Health Organization*).
- “Obesity could affect economic output as severely as malnutrition, slicing up 3 percent off gross domestic product in the hardest-hit countries” (*World Bank*).

Only the Olympic Movement has the unique expertise, brand, role models and infrastructure to provide meaningful leadership in this challenge.

Our Olympic charter proudly declares our goals to be **“teaching youth through Sports’** and **‘encouraging people to follow a way of life based on the joy found in effort’**.

Furthermore, at the 11<sup>th</sup> World Sport for All Congress, we released the Havana Declaration that stated - *“particularly for the sake of the youth of the world, it is time for urgent, real, targeted multi-sectoral action – in health, education and sport sectors - at all levels of society and government in regard to physical activity.*

A list of recommendations to promote personal physical activity were prepared, including suggestions on the provision of community sport and recreation facilities, as well as increased sports and physical education in schools.

Our President, Jacques Rogge, has already begun to deliver on these commitments. When he was President of the European Olympic Committees, he created the European Youth Olympic Festival as the supreme celebration of education through sport in Europe. He has now expanded this vision through, and provided the foundations for an even greater event - the Youth Olympic Games, a similar concept, but on a world scale. And this is an event that has the true potential to inspire children, to capture the hearts and minds of young people and to get communities active, everywhere.

In 2007, the European Parliament added to its “Resolution on the Role of Sport in Education”, saying that physical education was “the only school subject, which seeks to prepare children for a healthy lifestyle and focuses on their overall physical and mental development, as well as imparting important social values such as fairness, self-discipline, solidarity, team spirit, tolerance and fair play”.

With the kind support of our friends in Samsung, our own European Olympic Committees have also introduced a Schools and After Schools programme that uses a 'train the trainer' model to assist in bringing tens of thousands of children into an active lifestyle. Funding for such projects can often be a challenge, but good initiatives that service your communities will find a way!

So what more can we do, and where have we been going wrong?

As proven by its ever-growing TV audiences, sport still occupies an esteemed position in people's 'repertoire of interests' but, most importantly for children in this 'Digital Age', there has been significantly reduced active participation. This is most likely due to time pressures, academic obligations and limited infrastructure, but at a time when a privately owned social network like FaceBook can recruit over 200 million young users in a little over 2 years, it is clear that Computer Games and online communities now increasingly command a majority of young people's leisure time.

Therefore, we need to challenge our own thinking on alternative approaches to recruiting young people into a more active lifestyle, fundamentally re-evaluating approaches to exercise and sports and creating more readily accessible solutions that address behavioural patterns of participation, while offering '**everyday active fun**' with significant corresponding health benefits for everyone.

For me, sports will always be about getting young people onto playing pitches, gyms, halls or into clubs. Social Networking for me was the local Judo Hall, where I could meet friends and enjoy the spirit of friendly competition, and I sincerely wish that every child could share this experience, enjoy the camaraderie, and learn the true meaning of Olympic values like peace, friendship and harmony, rejecting prejudice and violence, and enjoying a healthy environment and lifestyle.

And be clear that this should extend beyond those children who can compete 'higher, faster or stronger', with a system that gives everybody the chance to discover the delights of sports participation for themselves - let our potential champions emerge from a culture that gives every boy and girl their chance to play!

But, for the future of our children and in fulfilling the vision of our founder Pierre De Coubertin's dream, I believe that each and every one of us must be more diligent in responding to the challenges of our times in finding new ways to engage young people in sport.

As one of the other themes of this Assembly is The Digital Revolution, I will tell you of another initiative currently being developed by the European Olympic Committees. Working with some academic and commercial partners, we are developing an 'Active Network' online, where we will replace 'social' networking with challenge-based motion control games that require a high level of physical participation to play.

The Mayo Clinic has said that one of the best ways to now re-engage young people with sports is using computer games. These games therefore have the potential to educate children on the rules of the sport and build their confidence in that discipline, but the system not only builds key-stage skills and gives them an aerobic workout, but ultimately helps the child to find the sport that is of particular interest to themselves, with the website ultimately acting as the conduit to the local club.

[Video]

This is just one of many things that can be done, but as we move forward from this Assembly, my message to you will be first and foremost, to capitalise on the benefits that the Youth Olympic Games can bring in your home territories. Then work with your National Olympic Committees, your Sports Federations and your Athletes to find new ways and innovative ways of building sports participation among children.

Success will deliver a significant dividend both at home and abroad, while presenting a contemporary vision of the Olympic brand for sponsors and increasing the perceived 'relevance' of the Olympics between Games.

The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.

It is however generally accepted that 'lessons learnt young, stay with you for a lifetime', so perhaps by focusing on placing sports for the harmonious development of children, we might better achieve our goals, blending sport with culture and education to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. So let's increasingly prioritise sports participation among children, coming up with 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions that 're-engages' young people in our sports.