



دولة قطر  
State of Qatar



## **Sustainable, inclusive, science-and evidence-based solutions to individuals, families and communities dealing with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), affects 1 in 100 children; approximately 75 million people, or 1% of the world's population, have ASD, a prevalence that has increased 178% since 2000. While ASD represents a spectrum or diversity of characteristics, it is most often represented as difficulties with communication and social interaction; Autistic individuals may also present with maladaptive behaviors, such as self-injury and aggressive behavior. Some Autistic individuals may require less support, while others may require significant and lifelong care. The latest findings from the Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD) show that the largest number of young Autistic children live in low-and middle-income countries where health resources can be more limited, particularly for individuals with severe social-communication and behavioral challenges. Enhanced national and global health policies are needed to ensure that those living with autism can receive access to care and support; de-stigmatizing ASD, raising awareness and acceptance, and increasing appropriate resources remains critical. In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly designated 2 April as World Autism Awareness Day to affirm and promote the realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for Autistic people on an equal basis with others. The General Assembly resolution (A/RES/62/139) emphasizes the importance of raising public awareness.

ASD is particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3: *Good Health and Well-Being*, SDG 4: *Quality Education*, SDG 5: *Gender Equality*, and SDG 8: *Decent Work and Economic Growth*. Inclusive healthcare, educational, and vocational opportunities for Autistic individuals directly contributes to SDG 3 by ensuring systems are more responsive to Autistic individuals and their families, especially in countries with limited resources.

ASD further intersects with gender equality, as research shows disparity in diagnosis across gender. *Partnerships* (SDG 17) are at the heart of this issue; collaboration across organizations is vital to creating sustainable and inclusive solutions that ensure no one is left behind. This side event aims to offer policy and global collaboration recommendations that contribute to inclusive societies where Autistic individuals and their families will thrive.

**Date of Side Event:** 21 July 2025



دولة قطر  
State of Qatar



**Time of Side Event:** 13:15-14:30 (1:15-2:30PM ET)

**Location:** Conference Room 11, UN Headquarters and Webcast

**Welcome Remarks:** ACI Board Chairperson, Tondra Lynford

**Moderator:** WHO Director, Dr. Werner Obermeyer

**Keynote Address:** Permanent Representative of Bhutan to the United Nations,  
Ambassador Pema Lektup Dorji

**Panelist Presentations:**

- Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations, Ambassador Sheikha Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani
- Uganda: Mr. Stephen Kabenge, Community Outreach Director with EmbraceKulture
- India: Mr. Richard Rakesh, Co-Director, Vinayaka Anderson Center for Autism
- Anderson Center International: Dr. Noor Syed, ACI Director, Turben Director of Autism Advocacy: Center for Autism Advocacy: Research, Education, and Supports (CAARES) at SUNY Empire State University

**Q s A:** 10 Minutes

**Closing statement:** Dr. Werner Obermeyer

### **Biographies**

**Ambassador Pema Lektup Dorji** is the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations, New York. Ambassador Dorji joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1992. Since then, he has worked in various capacities at headquarters and served at the Royal Bhutanese Embassies in New Delhi, India, and Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Ambassador Dorji also served as Bhutan's Representative at the Secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in Kathmandu, Nepal, and as Deputy Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations, New York. Before taking up his current assignment, he served as the Director General, Department of Immigration, Ministry of Home Affairs, from July 2017 till March 2023.

He was appointed as Ambassador/Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Bhutan to the United Nations, New York, on 8 February 2023 with



دولة قطر  
State of Qatar



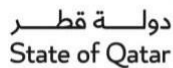
concurrent accreditation as non-resident Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bhutan to Brazil and Canada. He presented his credentials to the UN Secretary-General on 7 June 2024 and to the Rt. Hon. Governor General of Canada on 3 March 2025. He graduated from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University in 1991, and has a Master's degree from the Fletcher School, Tufts University.

Ambassador Dorji is widowed and has two children.

**Ambassador Sheikhha Alya Ahmed Saif Al-Thani** is Qatar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, a role she has held since 2013. Ambassador Al-Thani also served as Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, and Permanent Representative to the UN Office in Geneva, where she was also accredited to the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization, and other international bodies. She has chaired and co-facilitated multiple UN processes, including those related to sustainable development, humanitarian coordination, international law, and Security Council reform.

Ambassador Al-Thani has authored and promoted landmark UN General Assembly resolutions, such as the International Day to Protect Education from Attack and the International Day of Women Judges. She co-chairs several influential UN Groups of Friends, including those focusing on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), education in conflict, gender parity, and global health security. Recognized as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2013, she continues to be a prominent voice for multilateralism and inclusive diplomacy. Ambassador Al-Thani earned a Bachelor of Science in Economics from Qatar University and a Master's degree in International Studies and Diplomacy from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.

**Tondra Lynford** is Co-founder and Trustee Emeritus of [Resources for Children with Special Needs, Inc. \(RCSN\)](#), one of New York City's leading nonprofit organizations that works across all five boroughs to ensure that children with disabilities are able to access the full range of public services they need in order to become contributing, independent citizens. RCSN guides parents to make informed choices as they navigate the challenges they face and helps educators, service providers, and public officials to provide responsive, responsible services. As an advocate for special needs children, Tondra serves in many roles and capacities, currently as Chair of the Board of Directors for Anderson Center International, Chair of the Advisory Board of Hunter College's Research, Practice, and Policy Center; as a member of the Executive Committee of the Anderson Center for Autism Foundation Board of Directors (Staatsburg, NY); and as a member of the Dean's Advisory Council at the NYU/Silver School of Social Work. Previously she has served as the President of the Board of Trustees of the Vista Vocational Life Skills Center (Madison, CT), and as a Trustee Emeritus of the Maplebrook School (Amenia, NY).

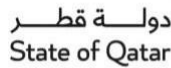


Internationally, Tondra advises NGO's operating in many nations, including Ethiopia, Bhutan, China, and India. Through the Lynford Family International Fellowship Program (endowed at the Weill Cornell College of Medicine in 2005) four medical students are selected annually to travel to provide medical treatments for under-served populations in developing nations. To date over 30 doctors have cared for indigent patients in 17 of the world's poorest nations. Tondra is a founding trustee of the Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative (ESRI), a multi-faceted pre-K program integrating cognitive learning, parent education, micro-finance, medical and nutritional components.

In recognition of her hand-on work, Tondra has been the recipient of awards from many of the organizations she has assisted, including A Founder's Citation from the [Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative](#) in 2015 and the Community Service Award of Excellence from the [Anderson Foundation for Autism](#) in 2011. Tondra holds a BA from Barnard College, a MS from Columbia University School of Social Work, and attended Bank Street Graduate School of Education. She is married to Jeffrey H. Lynford, the CEO of Educational Housing Services, Inc. (a nonprofit organization that provides safe and affordable dormitory housing for New York City's college students) and who serves as a Commissioner of The Port Authority of New York C New Jersey and as a Trustee of New York University. They are proud parents of four children.

**Werner Obermeyer is Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) office at UN Headquarters in New York.** His portfolio includes the promotion of health in the General Assembly and other inter-governmental bodies and processes, the WHO's relations with the UN system entities based in New York, as well as non-governmental organizations that focus on public health. He was responsible for the negotiations which culminated in adoption of the 2011, 2014 and 2018 Political Declarations on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases, the 2016 and 2024 Political Declarations on Anti- Microbial Resistance, the 2018 and 2023 Political Declarations on Tuberculosis, the 2019 and 2023 Political Declarations on Universal Health Coverage, the 2022 Political Declaration on Road Safety, and the 2023 Political Declaration on Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness and Response. He has steered many resolutions through the General Assembly, including the first ever decade on healthy ageing, and the decade of action on nutrition.

He oversees initiatives related to the sustainable development goals, global health and foreign policy, universal health coverage, health security and social protection, road safety, malaria, NCDs, climate change and health, disabilities, narcotics and drugs, mental health and tobacco control. Prior to joining the World Health Organization he was the representative of the UN Environment Program (UNEP) in New York, responsible for environmental governance, health determinants and sustainable development. Before



joining the United Nations he served in the South African Foreign Service, holding various senior diplomatic assignments.

**Richard Rakesh Aaron** is a distinguished professional in the field of Autism and behavior analysis. With a strong educational foundation, he completed dual master's degrees in Psychiatric Social Work and Arts from Madras University - India, with a thesis on "Effect of Music Therapy on Children with Autism" in 2014.

Richard's professional journey includes serving as a Case Manager and Research Assistant at Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), India, where he focused on medical management of individuals with advanced comorbid conditions with Autism. He further honed his expertise as an International Fellow at Anderson Center for Autism, USA, gaining hands-on experience in evidence-based practice (ABA).

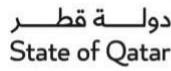
Certified as a Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB), Richard has also completed a Verified Course Sequence for Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). Currently, he serves as Chief Consultant, Neurodivergence Wing, at Vinayaka Missions Research Foundation (Deemed to be University), Salem, India, and Executive Head, structuring "Vinayaka-Anderson Center for Autism", a unit of VMRF-DU, in collaboration with Anderson Center for Autism, USA.

With over a decade of experience in the field, Richard continues to make a profound impact on the lives of individuals and families affected by Autism, driving innovation and excellence in behavior analysis and therapy.

**Stephen Kabenge** is a Ugandan Community Development and Behavior Intervention specialist with experience in outreach to vulnerable communities spanning over 10 years working with various non-governmental organizations including USAID among other projects in Uganda. His work is focused but not limited to designing, implementing, and leading inclusive programs for persons with disabilities, especially children and youth with Autism, Down Syndrome, and Global Developmental Delay.

Stephen leads outreach efforts at EmbraceKulture, driving a national movement to reduce stigma against children and youth with disabilities in Uganda. He has led the iKnow Program, in partnership with the Global Livingston Institute and Global Down Syndrome Foundation, reaching tens of thousands annually. His work has identified and supported hidden children with disabilities while shifting community attitudes through culturally sensitive, rights-based approaches. Collaborating with top national experts— from universities, the Ministry of Health, and Parliament—he has developed rural- focused intervention trainings. Stephen also co-led the development of Uganda's first internationally recognized Behavioral Intervention Program for Autism and helped create





national community guidelines for the care and inclusion of persons with autism, following a landmark legal case in eastern Uganda. These guidelines now inform disability inclusion efforts across rural areas. Internationally, he completed a fellowship at the Anderson Center for Autism, advancing his skills in ABA, family-centered care, and support systems for individuals with complex developmental needs. He has completed a Masters in Psychology, degree in Community Based Rehabilitation both from Kyambogo University and a diploma in Project Planning and Management Makerere Institute for Social Development in addition to several other short courses.

**Dr. Noor Syed** is an Associate Professor of Applied Behavior Analysis, as well as the founding Director of the Center for Autism Advocacy: Research, Education, and Supports (CAARES) with SUNY Empire State University. She supported the launch of and coordinated a Masters of Science in ABA with SUNY Empire, in which a core tenet is affirming, responsive practice. Dr. Syed has also been named the Turben Director of Autism Advocacy with CAARES, whose primary initiative is to help SUNY Empire become a fully inclusive and supportive college for those who identify as neurodiverse through a multi-tiered system of support framework. The university was designated an Autistic Supportive™ institution in 2022. In addition, Dr. Syed is the director of Anderson Center International, an organization dedicated to providing training in evidenced-based strategies for scholars from under- resourced areas globally, and is President of the New York State Association for Behavior Analysis. She is an Adjunct Doctoral Advisor in ABA with Endicott College, and is a certified general and special education teacher. Dr. Syed serves on the ABA Ethics Hotline and on the Scientific Council with the Organization for Autism Research. Dr. Syed has consulted with and supported autism centres around the world, including in Uganda, India, and Saudi Arabia. She is a Trustee with the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies and co-leads their Distinguished Scholars program. Dr. Syed graduated with her Bachelor of Arts from SUNY Binghamton University in 2008 and with her Masters of Art, Masters of Philosophy, and Doctorate of Philosophy from Teachers College, Columbia University in 2011, 2017, and 2018, respectively. Noor is Neurodivergent and came to this work because of her beloved cousin who was born with significant intellectual, developmental, and physical disabilities.