



Remarks

by

H.E. Mr. John W. Ashe

President of the 68th Session of the United Nations

General Assembly

High-level Event on the Contributions of Women, the Young and Civil

Society to the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Opening Ceremony

New York

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Please check against delivery

Excellencies,

Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women,

Mr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund,

Mr. Ahmad Alhendawi, Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth,

Mr. Paul Quintos, Programme Manager, IBON International and representative of the
NGO Major Group,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this High-level Event on the contributions of women, the young and civil society to the post-2015 development agenda. As we continue on our collective quest aimed at setting the stage for our shared 2015 development agenda, let us, this Assembly of Nations, amid daily reports of strife and violence in the world around us, take a brief moment to recognize the vital role of women, youth and civil society, who have given their lives to secure a more equitable and sustainable peace in their respective countries.

In her essay, *In Quest of Democracy*, 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi, wrote [and I quote] "Where there is no justice there can be no secure peace...just laws which uphold human rights are the necessary foundations of peace and security would be denied only by closed minds which interpret peace as the silence of all opposition and security as the assurance of their own power." [end quote]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If our post-2015 development agenda is to be a shared one then we must welcome contribution from all stakeholders, so as to ensure that the process has the greatest buy in and that there is a broad commitment to equality, inclusiveness, and participation. The enormous efforts to capture millions of voices from the around the world, from all segments of society marks a radical advance from the process by which the Millennium Development Goals were crafted nearly fifteen years. And I think we all know that to

truly realize the “Future We Want” requires unprecedented levels of openness, transparency, collaboration and accountability.

It is in recognition of this spirit that I open this High-level Event. Over the next two days, let us carry forward this spirit of openness, this desire for inclusiveness and this willingness to collaborate. We will focus on how women, the young and civil society can and should participate as actors, partners and contributors to the development and subsequent implementation of a shared post-2015 development agenda that has the eradication of extreme poverty as its overarching objective, and enables us to achieve sustainable development.

Let me share why I think each of these groups deserves a prominent place in our shared development agenda, starting with the role of women.

As a child growing up in a small Caribbean island, I was awestruck by the indomitable spirit, courage, and tenacity exhibited by both my grandmother and my mother, and although we were a large family, we all knew the true source of power in our family. In my part of world, there is a truism: men bloviate; women dominate.

Distinguished Guests

Women contribute to our societies in countless ways. Women farmers feed the world, women doctors cure cancer and women leaders provide sage guidance and counsel. Women underpin the global economy through their work in the informal sector and as entrepreneurs. Women shoulder the responsibilities of unpaid care work. In these and so many other ways, women not only subsidize economies, but they sew the social fabric of their communities together, and are the primary drivers of nutrition, health, education and well-being of future generations.

But let us also recognize that we have not made enough progress in implementing the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) which highlighted twelve

critical areas affecting women at the forefront of development. Despite this progressive step, gender inequality exists and persists. Women and girls continue to face increasing violence, discrimination and unequal access to resources and assets, social protections and fundamental rights such as education and health; as well as to political participation and decision-making processes.

On Saturday, we will commemorate International Women's Day with the theme, "Equality for everyone is progress for all" – which is a fitting complement to our event. As a civilization, we will never reach our full potential without realizing the rights – including sexual and reproductive health – of 50% of our population, and making full use of their talents and skills.

Which brings me to the young who make up one-quarter of our population and are the guardians of our future. The world's 1.8 billion adolescents and youth are one of our greatest assets. While they are often denied the investments and opportunities to make use of their full potential – whether due to lack of employment and education opportunities, disease burden or child marriage – they are well aware of what they want and need: quality education and healthcare; job opportunities; protection from all forms of abuse; removal of barriers that hinder inclusion and participation; and open and transparent governance. Across the world, youth have shown the impact they can have in social and political movements ranging from the Middle East and Eastern Europe to Latin America and Africa. This impact is an indicator of the profound influence youth can have on sustainable development if opportunities are present and energy is well-harnessed.

A number of documents, such as the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have provided internationally recognized frameworks for improving the situation of children and young people. However, many youth continue to struggle and they make up a disproportionate number of the world's working poor. Children, due to their specific vulnerabilities, require basic health care and nutritional support, as well as participation in early childhood and formal education, to aid in their cognitive development and physical growth.

Civil society organizations are the trusted partners of the United Nations in advancing human rights, development and peace and security. You who represent the nations in this Assembly need the support and inputs of the diverse stakeholders who comprise civil society in your respective countries, because delivering on the promise of a more equitable and sustainable tomorrow cannot happen without our civil society partners at all levels – global, regional, national and local. In the post-2015 process, we will increasingly have to rely on civil society to join with us in shaping the agenda, setting priorities, monitoring implementation and ensuring transparency and accountability. Civil society is absolutely vital in identifying and helping to break down the systemic, policy and programmatic barriers such as unequal or blocked access to development, food, education, clean water, sanitation, energy, healthcare and justice; in preventing violence and gender inequality; and in ensuring freedom of expression and protecting universal human rights.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me turn now to why we have selected our three themes for today's event: equality, inclusiveness and participation.

Widespread inequalities remain prevalent in many areas of human development, both among nations and regions, but also within countries. From inequalities in income and wealth, to disparities in access to natural resources, education, healthcare and decent work, these imbalances are mutually reinforcing and often linked to discrimination on the basis of gender, age, religion, disability or ethnicity among other factors. They hinder the potential to fully realize sustainable development, and structurally undermine efforts to eradicate poverty. This concern has been expressed by the General Assembly in its resolution 67/230 and more recently by the Open Working Group in its eighth session. This was also one of the areas of focus that emerged from the widespread consultations held through The World We Want platform.

A first step on the road to removing pervasive inequalities is to recognize and heed the voices of all human beings. As we embark on a new development agenda – post-2015, there is a growing paradigm shift in the way development is delivered; this shift is toward more effective participatory development through full, meaningful, informed and sustained participation of all stakeholders. Such a bottom-up approach should ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized are not only able to share in the benefits of sustainable development, but also to fully participate in its implementation. To this end, building capabilities of all stakeholders is critical for effective engagement.

Distinguished Guests,

Each one of us who takes part in these discussions is part of a great civic movement that has the power to impact individual lives, communities, social services, the economy and the planet. As we include and empower more people and groups in this movement, even more people around the world become caretakers of its sustainability. Inclusion and participation mean our global community grows even stronger.

All groups and all people have a stake in this development agenda and have a right to be included and heard. The post-2015 development agenda must embody a profound tenet of our United Nations Charter: that all people have rights and fundamental freedoms. It must reflect the principles of universality and non-discrimination, and enable meaningful participation and accountability.

Before concluding, I invite you to consider a few relevant questions posed for discussion in the Background Paper for this High-level Event:

1. What transformative strategies or approaches could effectively overcome the deeply-rooted discrimination that prevents women and girls from both enjoying the full spectrum of their human rights and from living a life free of poverty?

2. What can be done to better equip young people to meet the needs of today's labour market, such as the role of ICTs to support their development, inclusion and full participation in societies?
3. What provisions, policies and measures could most effectively address the high levels of child poverty that are prevalent across many regions and the specific impact of inequalities on children's survival, growth and development from earliest years of life, in the context of the Post-2015 Development Agenda?
4. How can we improve the operating space so as to ensure civil society make meaningful contributions to the implementation of the Post-2015 Development Agenda?

In an effort to offer you an inclusive and participatory agenda for this event, we received valuable inputs from our virtual community of stakeholders and I thank you all for your contributions. As we move ahead with 'Setting the Stage', I look forward to the outcome of your deliberations and its contribution to the process.

Thank you.
