High-Level Task Force for the ICPD

Talking Points for President Chissano – Keynote Address “A Future Agenda for Ensuring Dignity and Well-being for All People”

UNFPA High-Level Interactive Debate on the ICPD Beyond 2014 and Human Progress and Sustainability, April 4, 2014

Excellencies, ladies and gentleman,

As co-chair of the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD, along with my fellow co-chair, President Tarja Halonen, it’s a pleasure and an honor to be here with you today.

As we all know, the Cairo Agenda adopted twenty years ago was a landmark agreement, defining clear principles and priorities for Governments, civil society and the UN system in the areas of population and development. It placed all human rights, with emphasis on the rights of women and adolescents, including their fundamental rights in the area of sexuality and reproduction, at the centre of the global development agenda.

Twenty years later, we should celebrate all the progress achieved. This has been greatest where political leadership has driven national policies and programmes that were rooted in the key principles of the Cairo Programme of Action. However, many challenges still remain for full implementation. In addition, the world has changed since 1994, and when we look to the future, we need to do so with an eye towards what needs to be done. And this must include fulfilling sexual and reproductive health and rights for everyone, especially women, adolescents and youth, now in the 21st Century.

Too much is at stake. Despite progress that has saved and improved millions of lives, the world has fallen short of fulfilling its Cairo commitments. This shortfall perpetuates discrimination, exclusion and inequality, with the consequences falling most heavily on women, adolescent girls and communities living in poverty.

In my region of Africa, the consequences are especially stark: 53 million women who want to avoid pregnancy or space their children are not using modern contraception. Over half the world’s maternal deaths occur in our region, including the highest number of deaths related to unsafe abortion. We’re the region most impacted by HIV/AIDS, with almost 2 million new infections in 2011. Nearly half of our women experience physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Harmful practices – such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation – persist in great numbers; and early marriage contributes to our alarming rate of adolescent pregnancy.
These are only some of the real-life problems faced by so many in our region and globally. But it doesn’t have to be this way. These are preventable problems with proven, cost-effective solutions. Solving them is a matter of political will – backed up by resources to ensure our promises are kept. We will not be able to ensure dignity and well-being for all people without keeping this promise and going beyond to fulfill these fundamental human rights and freedoms.

At this critical moment of defining a new framework beyond 2014, women and girls and protection of all their human rights must feature prominently. Gender-based violence – one of the most widespread human rights violations in the world – must become part of our history. And achieving full gender equality must become a reality soon in this century. As leaders, decision-makers or simply, citizens of the world, we owe this to all women and girls and to shape a more just world.

[PAUSE]

As my fellow panelist from Indonesia has been noting, the world today has the largest generation of young people, with Africa the world’s most youthful continent: One in 3 people in Sub-Saharan Africa is between the ages of 10 and 24. This signals not only our duty to ensure that the needs and rights of young people are met; but also an opportunity to empower this generation through smart policies in health, education and employment. And fulfilling the sexual and reproductive health and rights of adolescents and youth is key, not only to them, but for everyone’s prospects of building more prosperous societies.

Adolescent childbearing is a global problem. Maternal mortality is the leading cause of death for adolescent girls in many countries. And barely a third of young people in Sub-Saharan Africa know how to prevent HIV.

This is why I share some remarks on the importance of investing in adolescents and youth, especially adolescent girls and young women: Unless young people are empowered to prevent unwanted outcomes and navigate relationships safely, unless they have the quality education and jobs they need, and unless they are protected from violence, we will never see truly thriving, inclusive communities and nations. And without these key investments – including in young people’s sexual and reproductive health and rights – we will not only be denying them their fundamental rights; but we will also be at risk of losing a demographic window of opportunity for economic growth and poverty eradication.

That’s exactly why we need comprehensive sexuality education. Beyond providing accurate information about how to prevent pregnancy or HIV, comprehensive sexuality education provides young people with skills to think critically and make decisions. It instills values of human rights, gender equality and non-violence. These are basic life skills for people to manage their health, sexuality, relationships, marriage and responsible parenthood; but also
foundations for more harmonious societies. Despite the evidence that comprehensive sexuality
education protects our young people – and doesn’t corrupt them – most young people lack this
type of education. In effect, they are left in the dark about basic aspects of life and growing up,
and left exposed to risks and severe consequences.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Our leaders have the chance now to change that. I’m speaking to you now as an Elder, who has
been witness to many transformations in our societies. History has shown us how
discrimination and violence are detrimental to our common values and principles of democracy,
human rights and justice. These are the principles enshrined almost 70 years ago, when the
United Nations was created. All persons are born equal and all must be equally and fairly
treated under the law.

The freedom to live with dignity, without discrimination based on any aspect of one’s
background or identity, is something all societies must strive for. And this means for all persons
—regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Too many of our brothers and
sisters all over the world face stigma, fear, violence and persecution, and even death—simply
because of who they are. This is not the world we want.

For meaningful, equitable development, all must be free to make decisions about their own
sexual and reproductive lives without any form of discrimination, coercion or violence.

We took a bold step in Cairo in affirming fundamental human rights and freedoms. We owe it
to both present and future generations to do the same twenty years later, for an ICPD agenda
for the future that ensures dignity and well-being for all people.