It’s a great honour to be with you all at the 12th APA Conference representing the High-Level Task Force for ICPD. I think this is the 3rd or 4th APA-organized event I’ve spoken at that has focussed on the UN development framework review processes that have been going on for the last 2 years or more. Following these processes, let alone trying to influence them, has taken an extraordinary amount of time, energy and resources. The sheer complexity of these processes has been mind-boggling, requiring multiple flow charts and diagrams simply to understand what the UN system was doing.

At the same time, the UN system was engaged reviewing the implementation of the ICPD agenda after 20 years, assessing the achievement of the MDGs after 15 years, and developing a new set of Sustainable Development Goals. And as these processes have fully or mostly come to their end, despite the palpable fatigue, we find that we cannot rest because the 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action is now underway. This review needs to be on the agenda of SRHR advocates not only because the Platform contains important policy provisions relating to sexual and reproductive rights (and Governments should be assessed on their implementation efforts) but also because the review has the potential to impact the development of the post-2015 agenda despite the Beijing review taking place later in the post-2015 process.

Without a doubt, a lot has happened over the last two years, including a number of forward steps and some disappointing and worrying developments.

The ICPD 20-year review process is now over. However, instead of ending with a brilliant display of fireworks to honour the Cairo spirit, the UNGASS was much more of an indoor cracker leaving a fair bit to be desired.
Some government statements showed limited understanding and commitment to the important paradigm shift brought about by the ICPD and revealed that the ICPD agenda’s implementation has often been fragmented or only addressed in piecemeal fashion in their national development plans and programmes—rather than fully in line with the Cairo human rights-based vision. The CPD 2014 made no steps forward within the outcome resolution despite valiant efforts by numerous outspoken Asian and Pacific governments honouring their own regional outcome of the ICPD review.

And that of course brings me to the numerous accomplishments of the ICPD review, in particular, the strong regional outcomes especially in Asia Pacific and Latin America. And prior to the CPD, In February 2014, the Secretary-General released the findings of the 20-year operational review, Framework of Actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the ICPD. The report makes strong recommendations for advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights, reflecting the most progressive outcomes of the regional reviews. Of note are the calls to realize “sexual and reproductive health and rights” of all people, including adolescents and youth; comprehensive sexuality education and SRH services and information for young people starting at age 10; elimination of all forms of violence against women and critical services for survivors, including post-rape care; affordable access to modern contraception, including emergency contraception; removing legal barriers to safe abortion including revising existing laws; and for governments to address violence and discrimination against people based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

In July, the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals, an intergovernmental process mandated by the Rio+20 outcome to develop proposals for Sustainable Development Goals, issued its proposal for 17 goals with 169 targets.

• The health goal includes targets to, by 2030: “ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes”; reduce
global maternal mortality to 70/100,000 live births; end the AIDS epidemic and other communicable diseases; among others.

• The goal “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” includes a proposed target to: “ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with ... the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcomes of their review conferences”; among numerous other targets.

At this stage, the proposal has been acknowledged by the GA. The Secretary-General will develop his synthesis report in some weeks and then there will doubtless be further negotiations of the post-2015 framework (which will include the SDGs) with the process culminating with the adoption of the post-2015 at a High-Level summit next September.

So, some accomplishments in the processes, some disappointments, and some more work to be done.

When I heard about the APA conference this year, I was quite excited for its themes - accountability and inequalities with a focus on the post-2015 and ICPD+20 processes. The HLTF has consistently drawn particular attention to key problems that have been at the root of why the existing MDG targets on maternal mortality, reproductive health and HIV were not achieved:

- lack of legal and policy guarantees that protect the human rights of individuals to decide freely on matters of sexuality and reproduction, without discrimination, coercion or violence;
- the persistent barriers to access, in law, policy and/or practice;
- the fragmentation of service delivery;
- inequalities, including in access to services, and limited availability of quality services that comply with human rights and public health standards;
- and a real accountability deficit.

We’ve heard many advocates for SRHR use the slogan “quality, equality and accountability” as the central elements of what has been missing from the MDG framework as well as from development efforts generally.
Beyond the SRHR field, in the SDGs and post-2015 discussions, ensuring accountability and addressing inequalities have been very prominently featured.

Accountability in relation to these development frameworks is necessary not just at the international level but at local, national and regional levels as well. In fact, the APPC6 outcome mandates a couple of clear provisions for national and sub-national accountability for the ICPD PoA and the APPC declaration:

206. Designate a national focal point agency to coordinate the full and effective implementation of the present Declaration at the national level;

215. Empower communities to ensure the accountability of Governments in the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the recommendations of the present Declaration, as well as the accountability of health and social service providers;

These are two solid pegs upon which to hang the accountability hat in discussions with AP governments.

But what do we mean by accountability? How do we ensure governments and other actors are properly held accountable for their obligations and commitments? When civil society actors demand that these pearls from the APPC declaration be implemented, what are the systems and mechanisms of accountability that they will demand?

First of all, the calls for a rights-based and people-centered development agenda must entail human rights accountability. Indeed, accountability is the lynchpin of a human rights approach and much of the substance of these development agendas have corresponding or related substantive human rights obligations.

When accountability is rooted in human rights, it is robust and multi-layered, and gives effect to the human rights principles of participation, empowerment and transparency.
Human rights accountability encompasses AND entails multiple forms of accountability. This is a vital point. We have heard since 2010 consistent pushes for greater accountability in international initiatives. But when implemented, the accountability envisioned has been highly restricted usually simply coming down to monitoring and evaluation of specific indicators or monitoring spending on commitments. Now, with this, an important shift in our thinking is needed. When we envision accountability from a human rights perspective we must go beyond the technocratic model of accountability that is often espoused of assessing spending or commitments through monitoring and evaluation. We need to move towards supporting systems of accountability that are participatory, transparent and effective and that are pre-occupied with how efforts and initiatives are actually working to realize the full range of sexual and reproductive rights.

Monitoring and evaluation IS certainly part of the accountability that is needed, but it is only a part of it. And monitoring from a human rights perspective is different than how it’s often thought of and done. For example, human rights monitoring is not just concerned about measuring outcomes; it is also concerned about monitoring structural factors and process indicators. Measuring inequalities through disaggregation of data along key grounds of discrimination or inequality is also key to human rights monitoring.

Human rights accountability can also mean judicial accountability, using the courts to enforce rights, to claim reparation. BUT human rights accountability does not just involve resort to courts, national human rights institutions or other tribunals as many often think.

It involves different and multiple forms of review and oversight of multiple actors all geared towards remedy. Under international law, remedies can take many different forms, especially restitution, compensation, guarantees of non-repetition or declarations of wrongfulness. When you consider this broad range it becomes clear why legal accountability does not need to necessarily be engaged for remedial action to be taken.

Instead, forms of accountability must include appropriate systems of political accountability wherein the government is accountable to
legislators at national and subnational levels and can justify the criteria used and decisions taken. The oversight of parliamentarians and local legislators must be meaningful and that involves the transparent sharing of budget and planning documents and results, and providing adequate time for deliberation.

Systems of administrative accountability must also be effective, which involves ensuring that internal rules and norms in health facilities and the health ministry set clear standards for conduct, making subordinates accountable to superiors, and are monitored by an independent person or committee, such as an ombudsperson.

Social accountability is another critical part of the necessary accountability and this is a burgeoning area where there has been real creativity on the part of civil society, communities and citizens’ groups. These have included community scorecards or citizen report cards focussed on qualitative and quantitative assessment by communities or service users of public services and institutions, with the public sharing of results and dialogue between service-providers and community members. Social audits where communities assess the impact of government projects or services and compare stated and actual benefits along with challenges or negative effects in implementation are also important tools. For maternal deaths, it is necessary to move beyond simple investigation of the immediate medical cause of death to look at lessons that can be learned at all levels of the health system - from the individual behaviour to national policies - with a view toward taking remedial action to prevent future deaths rather than attributing blame. Basing maternal death reviews in communities can be an important way of achieving this. “Near miss” reviews involving the participation of the woman herself are also key.

Looking at social accountability underscores that for all accountability mechanisms the human rights principles of participation and empowerment must be given effect. Voice accountability is crucial at all stages of designing, implementing and evaluating programmes, projects and policies.

The essence of a human rights-based approach is that it is transformative - it seeks to fundamentally change the power relations operating in
society which serve to disempower certain groups or which deny them their ability to exercise, claim and enforce their human rights.

Giving effect to the principle of non-discrimination in voice accountability involves ensuring that the most marginalized are empowered to participate in decisions that directly affect them and it is critical to broader systemic changes geared towards reducing inequalities.

Lastly, a human rights approach requires the fostering of accountability of multiple actors at various levels, including government actors within and beyond the health sector. This includes professionals, institutions, health systems, private actors and donors.

International accountability is a critical dimension of the accountability landscape. Regional and global mechanisms must be effectively used by civil society organizations to have their governments held accountable. It is great to see regional bodies being used or established for monitoring and follow-up to the UN development frameworks - for the AP region, in 2018, ESCAP will be convening a review of implementation of the ICPD PoA and the APPC declaration and the Asia Pacific Forum on Social Development was established this year and it is anticipated that it will be conducting an annual regional review for accountability of governments to the implementation of the SDGs. Given events at the 6th APPC, it is clear that the persistent efforts of SRHR advocates in these regional spaces will be needed to ensure that the implementation of policy commitments relating to SRHR will remain prioritized and to highlight shortcomings in government efforts. At the global level, the High-Level Political Forum was established last year as a political accountability mechanism for the SDGs. Of course, the Commission on the Status of Women and Commission on Population and Development in New York will also continue their work to follow-up Beijing and Cairo, respectively. But SRHR advocates cannot put all their eggs in the basket of these particular accountability mechanisms. For one, these two “functional” commissions of ECOSOC I’ve just mentioned are not all that functional. For the CSW, we need to recall its failure in 2012 as well as events surrounding this year’s SADC resolution on HIV women and the girl child. For the CPD, this year’s negotiations brought 300 SRHR advocates to NYC… we had some of the most progressive and exciting high-level side events to support the advocacy… and yet not a step forward was taken. And, how many of us
have spent too much time arguing about “reproductive health services” versus “reproductive healthcare services” (without a hyphen), “reproductive health-care services” (with a hyphen), and “reproductive health care and services”? I suspect there are many weeks of our lives that we might demand back from the UN at some point. Suffice to say, reform of these commissions is needed, and I am glad to see these discussions taking place at least in some corners.

As I’ve said before, the substantive content of current and future development frameworks can also be found within the binding obligations of international human rights law, which also goes a lot further than these development frameworks. Yet, the accountability mechanisms of the international human rights system are vastly under-utilized by SRHR advocates. This includes treaty-monitoring bodies, the system of special procedures of the Human Rights Council, and the Universal Periodic Review of the Council. A lot more can be done with these HR tools to ensure that governments are held accountable internationally to respect, protect and fulfil sexual and reproductive rights.

So, to conclude, as we proceed with our discussions over the next two days of this exciting conference, I would urge us to think of accountability not only in terms of the multiple actors that need to be held accountable... not only about the multiple forms of accountability that either do or should exist... not only the spheres of accountability at local, national, regional and global levels where we need to see the multiple forms, but also how we ensure true voice accountability so that not only civil society voices are strengthened but more significantly that the voices of women, young people and the most marginalized are empowered to seek accountability and claim their sexual and reproductive rights.

Thank you.