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Speech of President Chissano on the occasion of the ICPD Special Session of the General Assembly,

The Rights-Based Framework for Population and Development in Africa,
Reflections on the Addis Ababa Declaration

Side Event convened by the Government of South Africa
September 19, 10.00 – 12.30 p.m., ECOSOC

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Panelists,

It is a pleasure to be here as Co-Chair of the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD, just days away from the conclusion of the 20-year ICPD review process. I first wish to thank the Government of South Africa for this opportunity and timely occasion to celebrate the Cairo vision and the Addis Ababa Declaration.

I had the pleasure of participating in the Addis Conference and witnessing the adoption of this important agreement. It contains essential elements for propelling Africa’s transformation forward. It holds solutions to solving some of the most pressing challenges that people across our continent face, particularly those living in poverty, especially our women and young people.

We have made considerable progress on tackling sexual and reproductive health problems in many of our countries – from HIV and AIDS to maternal mortality. But as we all know, there is still much more work to do to end the preventable deaths and needless suffering that afflict so many, in particular women and adolescent girls. As we commemorate the adoption of the ICPD twenty years ago, we must have the political will and vision to go much further in the years and decades to come. And we have that opportunity – and obligation -- as deliberations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda intensify, to make sure we all do our part.

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All human rights, of all people, must be front and centre of the new agenda. And as agreed in the Addis Ababa Declaration, and in other African Union agreements such as the Maputo Plan of Action, that includes the human rights of women, girls and young people, and sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

I don’t need to tell this audience that sexual and reproductive health and rights issues are often mired in controversy. But they are an intrinsic part of human rights; of people’s ability to lead healthy and productive lives; and of families’ chances of breaking out of poverty. And for
countries, they are essential foundations for sustainable development across its social, economic and environmental dimensions.

Simply put, sexual and reproductive rights are rights to make decisions regarding basic aspects of one’s personal and private life – such as whether, when and whom to marry; if, when and how many to children to have; and decisions about one’s health, sexuality, relationships, and the right to have the information and services to do so – without any form of discrimination, coercion or violence. These rights are enshrined in international human rights instruments and standards since the founding Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Is any single one of us prepared to give up these rights in our own lives? Then as leaders, we must defend these rights for others.

They are a cornerstone of the empowerment of women and girls, with impacts on all other aspects of their lives – from their overall health and very survival, to their participation in politics, the workforce, in economic, social and cultural life. We can talk all we want about how our countries’ economies can benefit from the untapped labour force participation of women, but it is not going to happen until women can make their own decisions about their sexuality and reproduction.

Similarly for young people, the consequences of not being able to exercise these rights and access comprehensive sexuality education and related services can be devastating—especially for adolescent girls. They are the prime targets of harmful practices, especially child, early and forced marriage and FGM, as well as sexual assault. Let us not forget that maternal mortality is a leading cause of death for adolescent girls in many of our countries. Our region has the highest rate of unsafe abortion in the world: with over 5 million occurring each year, 25% of them among adolescent girls – killing and disabling many. Four million of our young people are living with HIV, with many more acquiring it—each day. And we will never reap the demographic dividends of investing in our large generation of young people if we ignore their sexual and reproductive health and rights as a critical variable in that equation, alongside education and job creation.

In the face of such realities, we cannot turn the other away just because sexual and reproductive health and rights are considered ‘sensitive’ issues. They are also a matter of social injustice: The gravest consequences are borne by women, families and communities living in poverty.

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This is why a rights-based approach to population and development is fundamental. Expanding access to education for all children, decent jobs for youth and women, health services for all, are all key: but they won’t be effective if they are not rooted in the advancement of human rights and gender equality.

For example, consider the challenge of ending HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality, or concerns with curtailing population growth. We can make condoms available, but if young people’s rights to accurate information and education about sexuality is ignored, it’s not enough. We can increase services in family planning or maternal health, but if women are not able to control decisions about childbearing or contraceptive use, or even seek health care without permission from their husbands or others, little good it does them. If girls have no say on when or who to marry, we have similar outcomes: Fourteen million become child brides in Africa every year—with increased risks of HIV, maternal death and abuse, likely to abandon their schooling and have more children than they otherwise would have, given the choice.

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At the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD, we adopted a set of rights-based recommendations that echo the realities and aspirations of millions, and the views of experts around the world. Many are also reflected in the Secretary-General’s Framework of Actions report on the ICPD global review, which captures concrete, enlightened recommendations for the way forward on the Cairo agenda.

The Task Force’s recommendations center on key actions needed, including legal and policy reforms, to ensure that all people can enjoy their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Here, I will list some of them.

- We must end impunity for all forms of gender-based violence and ensure all survivors have prompt access to critical services and justice, including post-rape care. Violence against women and girls is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, both in ‘peacetime’ and during conflict. Effective responses must be considered minimum human rights obligations for all countries.
- We should be ambitious and aim to end harmful practices against women and girls within a generation--especially child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.
- In our health policies and budgets, we must prioritize completing the ‘unfinished business’ of the ICPD and the MDGs, and guarantee universal access to quality, affordable and integrated sexual and reproductive health services across the life-cycle. Such services must be guided by human rights and ethical standards.
- To ensure equitable access, we must lift all legal, financial, and cultural barriers to sexual and reproductive health services, including parental or spousal consent requirements. Such arbitrary obstacles are affronts to women’s and girls’ rights and dignity that only serve to keep them from seeking the health care they need.
For young people, we need universal access to comprehensive sexuality education, both in and out of school, as part of their basic right to quality, relevant education. Contrary to what some might believe or say: comprehensive sexuality education does not corrupt young people, it protects them.

Health services must be strengthened to end unsafe abortion as a major killer of women and adolescent girls; and access to safe, legal abortion services should be expanded. Complications from unsafe abortion also drain our health care systems, and cost our societies nearly 1 billion dollars per year in lost income due to death and disability.

We also need protections for sexual and reproductive health and rights across various sectors. This includes eliminating discrimination in education or employment because of pregnancy, motherhood, or HIV status. Pregnant girls must be supported, not expelled from school.

And overall, a major litmus test for a rights-based society is guaranteeing equality before the law and non-discrimination for all people across their social, economic, cultural and political rights, without distinction of any kind.

This means we must end gender discrimination, protect all human rights of women and girls and secure their access to justice. We must end discrimination, stigma, and violence against people living with HIV and AIDS. This is critical if we are ever to end the pandemic: One in 20 Africans is living with HIV. Criminalization and discrimination only undermine prevention efforts and spark fear that keeps people away from lifesaving services.

And equality for all means just that, for all -- regardless of any other factor, including sexual orientation and gender identity. Too many of our brothers and sisters face horrific acts of violence and discrimination on this basis. This is not the Africa we want.

Finally, rights on paper must be translated to rights in practice. That means accountability at policy, legal and service levels, backed by adequate resources, with the active participation of civil society. Independent mechanisms must be established or strengthened to ensure human rights are protected, and that when they are violated, people have recourse to justice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The term sexual and reproductive rights may sound somewhat complex, and be labelled controversial, but they are part of daily life.

They are fundamental human rights, and all individuals should be able to enjoy them equally -- regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, religion, marital, HIV, disability or migrant status, rural or urban residence, sexual orientation and gender identity, or any other factor.

We have the historic opportunity to chart the way forward and continue our transformation to a more prosperous and resilient Africa. These are priorities for any sound and effective post-
2015 development agenda. The exercise of these human rights is a prerequisite to achieving poverty reduction and inclusive, sustainable development. They are essential to fully unleash human potential, energies and talents—especially of our women and young people. It is not only the right thing to do; it’s the smart thing to do, and common sense. No country can afford to forgo opportunities to make the empowerment of women and young people, and sexual and reproductive health and rights for all, a reality in the 21st Century.