High-level Event on the Contributions of Women, the Young and Civil Society to the Post-2015 Development Agenda
6 – 7 March, 2014, ECOSOC Chamber
Panel Discussion I, Opening remarks

President Tarja Halonen, Co-Chair of the High-Level Task Force for ICPD

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by commending the President of the General Assembly for organizing this timely high-level event on the “Contributions of women, the young and civil society to the Post 2015 Development Agenda”. It’s a great pleasure for me to chair this morning’s discussion given the theme of this panel. Women and young people, and civil society at large, are the key drivers for a truly inclusive, equal, just and sustained development agenda.

Women and young people are in fact the largest groups worldwide facing systematic discrimination and inequalities. Many of them face multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion due to their national, racial or ethnic background, the class they belong to, because they live with disabilities, because of their sexual identity, and for many other reasons.

Fulfilling their human rights is also central to the mission of the High Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development that I chair together with the former President of Mozambique, Joaquim Chissano. For us at the Task Force, there are three critical pillars for achieving inclusive and sustainable development:

1. gender equality and the human rights of women and girls,
2. the rights and empowerment of adolescents and youth,
3. and sexual and reproductive health and rights for all.

To turn our aspirations into realities, we need a strong, vibrant civil society, which is able to participate in decision-making. The civil society can monitor how decisions get implemented and funded. From my own experience as President, I know they can be useful to decision-makers by holding the responsible entities accountable. This is also true for the Post 2015 Development
Agenda. So for all these reasons, I am most pleased to join you here today and welcome you warmly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We have a choice to make. We can choose the easy option: a Post 2015 Agenda that is not much more ambitious from its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals. But the MDGs were a brave step back in the year 2000, which I remember from co-chairing the Millennium Summit. Now I suggest that instead of the easy option, we take another brave step.

In the new development agenda, priority should be put on gender equality and on young people. This investment has high payoffs for the well-being of children and families. It also advances poverty reduction, economic growth, environmental sustainability and inclusive governance. It is a long-lasting investment.

My mother used to say. “Young girl, life is not always fair. But we are here to make it better.” And so I urge us to have the courage to do so.

It is evident that if women can’t actively participate in society, half of the world’s population is left aside. So for societies to be successful, we need: women’s empowerment, gender equality, and protection of sexual and reproductive health and rights. This way we can enhance sustainable development.

Education is a human right that still far too many women do not enjoy, although it is a key to promoting equality. It is vital for the eradication of poverty and for breaking down cycles of gender-based violence.

Domestic violence is present everywhere in the world, including my own country Finland. I am afraid there might even be an increase in domestic violence and sexual violence, as a set-back to advancing gender equality. But more and more women report the violence they experience. Women, girls, boys and men who encounter the threat of sexual violence need to be human rights defenders in their own lives.

As we know, women earn 10 per cent of the income in the world, although they perform almost 70 per cent of all the work. The figures are even more dramatic, when it comes to women’s rights to own land. These facts can’t be bypassed when discussing the Post 2015 Development Agenda.
We heard the calls for a stand-alone gender equality goal from many Member States and stakeholders throughout the consultations held so far on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the post-2015 development agenda. A stand-alone goal, and gender mainstreamed across all other goals, can address all priority areas for fulfilling the human rights of women and girls in a holistic way.

I urge you to propose indicators on gender for all possible goals of the new Development Agenda.

We have heard less about adolescents and youth. Yet we know we have the largest generation of young people in history. I propose we must do more to bring them to the forefront of our discussions. This includes addressing youth unemployment, but also their sexual and reproductive health and rights as well as education.

You may have heard recent calls for a stand-alone goal on adolescents and youth—and perhaps we will hear your views on this in our discussions today.

And civil society must be supported to participate meaningfully. This means access to decision-making from local to global levels, to information, to freedom of expression and of organization, and it means adequate funding to support their role.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We cannot underestimate the opportunity and responsibility of the task in our hands. Lessons must be learned from the past and here is our chance to inform and shape the agenda of all countries for the next 15 years and beyond in order to achieve poverty eradication, equality and sustainable development.