

**22 May 2017**

## **Deputy Secretary-General's remarks at University of Maryland**

**Distinguished Faculty of the University of Maryland,  
Distinguished Graduating Class of 2017,**

**I am inspired to be with you today to share in your celebration. I love the vibrancy in this hall. Our world needs your energy and your commitment to doing good which is the right thing.**

**I know that after you graduate, half of you will seek jobs in federal, state, and local government, while the rest will look to work in the world of non-profits, business or academia.**

**Some may even join us at the United Nations. I certainly hope so!**

**Wherever you end up, the world will depend on you using your expertise to do good and make a difference. This has been the driving reason for me for most of my professional life, ever since I worked for architects and engineers designing schools and hospitals in Nigeria. I saw the need for governments and institutions to be organized to deliver for the people they are supposed to serve, especially the poor and most vulnerable members of society. It is the reason I became an activist for quality education and it is why I was offered and accepted a role in government to promote sustainable development that delivers for people. And it is why I recently accepted the privilege and honour to become Deputy Secretary-General – to help make a difference in a world of 7 billion people.**

**On that note, I would like to pay tribute to your Dean, Professor Robert Orr, for his initiative to promote the concept of the Do-Good Generation. I worked very closely with Bob, as I know him, for quite some time when we both worked for Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Bob was integral to the Secretary-General's climate change strategy and he and Mr. Ban deserve much of the credit for the successful conclusion of the Paris climate talks in 2015.**

**Over the same period, I was working very closely with Member States to finalize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. With its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, this is a pledge by the governments of the world – including your government – to work together in partnership for a world of peace, prosperity, dignity and opportunity for all on a healthy planet.**

**That is the world you should inherit and it is the world that you are already starting to shape – as consumers, as voters, and as leaders in your own communities. You are part of the largest population of young people our world has ever seen. Some 1.8 billion people are between the ages of 10 and 24 – and each one has his or her own unique, hopes and dreams.**

**You are the do-good generation, and we need you to make that impact felt in the entire world, beginning at home in your own families and communities, but always thinking globally. That is what I have always tried to do.**

**Today, I have four daughters and two sons and I am about to become a grandmother. But I still remember what I was like at your age. I was impatient. I didn't want to wait for a better world. I was always being told "take it easy, your time will come." I was thinking "My time is now". That's what you should be thinking. It is still what I think.**

**Today, I have a fancy job title – Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations. But my job description is simple. It's about a world that I want to build, where every girl and every boy has the tools, the structures and the support to make their dreams a reality. My dreams were realised with the support of a basic education in Nigeria in a place today that birthed Boko Haram. A place where girls are kidnapped, raped, turned into suicide bombers and if they return, they are broken and often shunned by their communities. BUT you and I know terrorists are not born; they are man made. We must address those root causes and make the links between policies and practice from global to local that ensure our results are inclusive of everyone.**

**We have no time to wait or to waste. We live in a world that is seriously out of balance, where eight people have as much wealth as half of humanity – and all of them are men, by the way.**

**Joblessness, particularly for young people, is on the rise. In many parts of the world it is completely off the charts. Mistrust and insecurity are growing. When we see jobless numbers we see statistics. But we must always remember that each statistic is a person – a mother or a son, a father or a daughter, struggling to have a better life. We must always give statistics a human face. We must never lose sight of these human stories and the right we all have to a life of dignity.**

**The promise of the 2030 Agenda is to leave no one behind. So it is important to have a good idea of who these "no ones" are. They are the people without a voice, living on the margins of society. The poor, the hungry, the powerless.**

**They could be indigenous peoples, or abused women, or the homeless person you see on the way home or the educated person excluded from the economy. We have to care about them, because they are US. If you forget one person, you forget the rest.**

**One person in eight lives in extreme poverty. One in ten suffers from hunger or**

**malnutrition. Two people in five lack access to adequate sanitation.**

**Rates of maternal, new-born and child mortality are unacceptably high. Millions of children and adolescents are out of school. Millions more in education need a quality outcome, not one where they pass through school but education doesn't pass through them.**

**Women and girls are still deprived of equal rights and opportunities. Gender equality and women's empowerment are an imperative. If we believe, as I do, that our greatest assets are our human resources then surely it makes no economic sense if we only invest in half of them.**

**So too must we invest in affordable and clean energy for all people and a transformation to a low-carbon economy. This applies to the home in Baltimore that cannot pay for power as much as those in a rural African village. Climate change is real and gathering pace. The capacity of the planet to sustain us hangs in the balance. We have a roadmap in the Paris Agreement, so it is left for us to implement it now not tomorrow. We know climate change is man made (I underscore man because if women were in charge we would not be in this dilemma) therefore we have the resources, knowledge, skills and collective responsibility to act now. We in the developed world have as much right as all others to a life of peace and prosperity but we have no right to contribute to Islands going under where people may survive but will lose their homes, country, identity and right to thrive.**

**This added to prospects for peace and justice that are being undermined by widening inequalities within and between countries, unplanned urbanisation and a lack of resilience to economic and environmental shocks.**

**These are just some of the challenges of sustainable development. This is the world you are entering as graduates, and it is the world you need to change. Young people have already begun the change and demonstrated that technology is empowering people across continents and touching sectors like health, education, migration and financial inclusion.**

**How can you do more? The challenges are so huge. What can one person do against such massive odds?**

**The answer is: do SOMETHING. Because if we each do something, no matter how small, it adds up to a lot. And I really do mean DO something. Talk is easy. Retweeting and liking on Facebook is easy. All are important because communication is key to breaking the silos and barriers to sustaining peace but we need to do more, we need to connect the talk to the walk and in some cases run! In Nigeria, we typically say – Na grammar we go chop! Which means – are we going to eat words or books?!**

**It may seem like whatever we do is just a drop in the ocean, but what is the ocean after all but a collection of raindrops? I am reminded of a sign I saw at the recent women's march on Washington. People of compassion and integrity who care about the environment and human rights and peace have been sneeringly referred to as "Snowflakes". Well, this sign said, "Watch out: enough snowflakes make an avalanche!"**

**My recent experience as the Minister of Environment in Nigeria gave me deep insights into many challenges but also opportunities.**

**And that is what we need from you. An avalanche of good leadership informed by great thoughts, good deeds, good habits and good living that can make our world a better place for all. As you begin your careers you will work from 9-5 making it count but remember to make the results count for when you go home and become one of the 7billion in the world that needs to be a better place for all.**

**I have enjoyed this opportunity to share my thoughts and experiences with you. I believe sharing our stories is one of the most important things we can do for each other – to help us be comfortable in our skin, to help us have empathy and compassion for others, to help us have the courage of our convictions and to walk the path that we must walk for humanity. Today at 56, I am a proud mother of 6, the 2nd highest civil servant in the world, a woman of colour from the south and a faithful Muslim with a grandfather who was a Presbyterian Minister of the Church. I am a survivor not victim of single parenthood, gender violence and discrimination that continues even today.**

**My story continues in the belief that things don't have to be the way they are for those left behind. I can and will do something about it but I know also that I will go further if everyone is onboard. Partnering will be essential.**

**And so, knowing that every one of us here today, has a journey to make and the path you choose is what you make of it (even when we never really know where our path is going to lead) and so what I ask of you today is to make every step and milestone count for you but much more for the others that just happened to born into a different circumstance remembering, it could have been you.**

**Thank you, and congratulations Class of 2017.**