

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, my name is James O'Brien. I am here today representing VSO Ireland (Voluntary Service Overseas). As the Chair of the Post-2015 Volunteering Working Group I am speaking on behalf of volunteer groups.

I want to begin by thanking the co-facilitators for the opportunity to speak today, and for maintaining a meaningful space for civil society in these negotiations. I have two brief points to make - on gender and on volunteering.

To begin, gender equality and the fulfilment of women's rights must be recognised as an ambition in its own right as well as being an essential precondition of sustainable development. Women make up two-thirds of people living in extreme poverty. As such, no agenda can be considered transformative if it does not tackle the root causes of perpetual gender inequality. To do this, the agenda must be bold enough to address the discriminatory social norms and practices and the structural disadvantages that exist in all countries and at all levels of society.

I also want to recognise the millions of people worldwide volunteer their time and energy to help their local community, their country and their world. Too often, the contribution of these active citizens, people who are often themselves from poor and marginalised communities, has not been fully recognised. From the community caregivers bearing the burden of care for the HIV epidemic in southern Africa, to the volunteer 'sisters' in Nepal who are supporting vulnerable girls to attend school, volunteer action is supporting the delivery of a range of MDG-related public services and playing a unique role in extending the reach of those services to the poorest and most marginalised people.

We welcome the fact that the Secretary General has recognised this in his Synthesis Report, highlighting volunteerism as a 'powerful and cross-cutting means of implementation' **that can 'help to localize the new agenda by providing new spaces of interaction between governments and people for concrete and scalable actions.'**

VSO has supported the work of over 50,000 volunteers in its 55 year history. One thing we have learned is that volunteerism is a double-edged sword. When volunteers are properly supported by government and civil society, and integrated into development planning, they can be an indispensable ingredient in sustainable development. When this support is lacking or absent, the efforts of volunteers can go to waste and volunteers can be seen merely as an inexpensive form of labour.

When we talk about a Declaration that is inspiring, we must ask ourselves what we want to inspire people to do, and as we struggle with the challenges that face us in communicating 17 goals and 169 targets to 7 billion people, we should also be thinking ahead to what action people will take in their own lives and communities to achieve this agenda. We must make sure that this Declaration and the Post-2015 Agenda as a whole supports them in their work as active agents in their own development.

To conclude, volunteer groups are calling for a Declaration that recognises and supports volunteerism not because volunteerism is good; but because this agenda is an opportunity to create an enabling environment at international, national and local level where the work of volunteers has the greatest possible impact on sustainable development.

Thank you.