



**OPENING REMARKS**

**BY**

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THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES,  
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**AT THE**

**PANEL DISCUSSION ON**

**“HOPING AND COPING: HOW ARE WOMEN IN LDCs  
RESPONDING TO HIV/AIDS”**

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**United Nations Headquarters  
New York**

Eminent Panelists,  
Distinguished Delegates,  
My colleague UNDP Assistant Administrator Shoji Nishimoto,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Many of you have read the heart-rending story on the front-page of the New York Times last Friday datelined Blantyre, Malawi. It told us graphically how ravages of the AIDS pandemic that claims about 2.3 million lives a year in sub-Saharan Africa add up to the miseries of the surviving family members due to long-existing stubborn, heart-less traditions. The touching story focussing on the situation in Malawi, one of the world's fifty Least Developed Countries (LDCs), demonstrated the plight of a woman who lost her husband to the pandemic and the custom that forces her to be disinherited and all property taken away from her and the children. The women are left with nothing but the disease, the reporter laments. Such realities in many of the LDCs encourages us all the more to focus on women and HIV/AIDS so that there is greater awareness of their situation and so that we can continue to support their efforts of coping with these harsh challenges.

In this context, it is indeed my pleasure to welcome you all to this morning's Panel Discussion on "Hoping and Coping: How women in Least Developed Countries are Responding to the HIV/AIDS challenge". We are honoured by your presence here today. This event has been jointly organized by my office, UN-OHRLLS, the Office of the High Representative for Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP. I extend my appreciation for the work done by all our colleagues in both offices and to my colleague Shoji Nishimoto, Assistant Administrator for his keen interest on the subject. Our partnership symbolises the importance of building synergies within the UN on the HIV/AIDS challenge that, as we all know, continue to cause untold devastation to families and communities in many of the LDCs. It is therefore an

imperative that we continue to stay focused on this challenge as we aspire to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and the goals of the Brussels Programme of Action for the LDCs.

This morning we have with us the distinguished speakers who have deep understanding, wide experience and indomitable zeal with regard to the issue of our panel discussion. They have made both institutional and personal contributions in facing the challenge of HIV/AIDS as well as in tackling the issue of gender disparities and empowerment of women. We will hear some personal experiences from one of our speakers. We will be reflecting on the situation of women in LDCs and how they are coping with this pandemic in its various dimensions.

You would recall that the Brussels Declaration and Programme of Action adopted in May 2001 emphasized that “LDCs greatest assets are their women, men and children, whose potentials as both agents and beneficiaries of development must be fully realized.” Efforts in building and developing the human and institutional capacity in most of these countries have been affected by many challenges that include recurring natural disasters, extremely poor health, sanitation and education facilities and the prevalence of the HIV/AIDS.

This situation has been further exacerbated by an unsustainable debt burden. During 2002, LDCs paid about US \$5.1 billion in their debt-servicing obligations. Debt service payments diverted a large part of scarce resources from crucial programme sectors of education and healthcare and in battling the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Debt servicing in some LDCs like Senegal, Malawi and Sao Tome and Principe absorbs about 30% of the public income. For Zambia it is 24%. It so happens that the countries most seriously infected by HIV/AIDS are also the most heavily indebted. It is a critical challenge for these countries as they are forced to choose between servicing their debts and investing in health and education and tackling poverty and HIV/AIDS which are essential for building and

developing their human and institutional capacity. Human capacities and expertise in various sectors particularly in health, education and agriculture in LDCs like Zambia and Malawi are eroding faster than they can be replenished. The attrition rates of teachers and agricultural workers are very high. Women whose families have been affected and are engaged in various vocations have to divide their time in nursing the sick, nursing themselves and earning livelihood for their families and households. This undoubtedly is the most complex development challenge of our time.

The essential message of today's discussion is Hoping and Coping as the women in the most vulnerable countries face the challenge of a deadly pandemic. The publication and posters that we will be launching later this morning, and the substantive contributions from our distinguished panelists are aimed at underscoring the critical need for awareness and active engagement of individuals, families, communities and countries.

With these words, I would like commence our deliberations. I thank you again for your presence and participation at this morning's event.

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