

Presentation by H.E. Ms. Susanna Huovinen
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I am honoured to be here today and would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak to you this afternoon.

Finland is a relatively small country in Northern Europe with a population of 5.5 million. At the end of the Second World War Finland was a post-conflict developing country with income per capita at the level of lower middle income countries. The economy was dominated by subsistence-based agricultural economy, ten percent of the population was resettled as internal refugees after the war and the country was badly indebted and received international aid.

I remember well, as a young girl, how my mother had to search for day care help from small announcements at the local store. Nowadays, all children under the age of seven have a right to municipal day-care services in Finland. My mother has also told me how she at the age of five received a pair of shoes from the municipal social services, as her parents could not afford them. In the course of the life time of my parents, in some 60 to 70 years, Finland has developed from a developing country into a wealthy information society.

The rapid industrialization and structural change created an upward economic spiral. One central element in ensuring that the economic growth translated into well-being of the people, was the emphasis on equality. Policies providing access to education for all, including free school meals for all pupils, access to health care for all, basic pensions for all, libraries for all – simply, creating a society for all, was the source of positive social and economic development.

Of course many challenges remain and new ones are arising, as I experience every day in my work. The economic realities of today challenge the basic social protections system continuously. Every day I need to defend the system against cutbacks.

However, equal opportunities for all and equity of outcomes remains our basic philosophy. The principle of guaranteeing all residents universal access to affordable health care, income security and essential services at every stage of people's lives has been the policy anchor of our social and economic policy for decades. This has been our way of implementing step-by-step the social protection floor principles in our societal

context.

People are, and they wish to be, active agents in their own lives. We must review and revise our social protection and social and health services according to this understanding. Our social welfare legislation is based on this fact. We see social protection and social policies as an enabling environment for people to manage their own lives meaningfully.

In the review and further revision of the social sector legislation and practices we try to apply the idea of activating springboards. This means that social protection and social services must be designed to empower people to regain their capacities to manage their own lives. Appropriately designed social policies are an investment in people and the future society.

In fact, Finland has in recent times taken new steps to enhance participation and empowerment. Let me mention some examples across the life course:

The first example is based on a family model where both parents share the responsibility to provide for the family and to participate in childcare. One of the main topics in this area is the reconciliation of work and family life. As a mother of two, I face this issue on a daily basis, as well.

The measures include a well-run day-care system, afternoon care for young schoolchildren and family leave arrangements - for both parents. Today, the length of maternity leave is in Finland approximately four months and that of paternity leave nine weeks. Parental leave, which can be divided between both parents, is approximately seven months.

The second example concerns the youth. In order to prevent social exclusion of young people, we started implementing a cross-sectoral youth guarantee scheme last year. It supports the transition period from education and training to working life through multi-sectoral cooperation. In practice, it guarantees each person under 25 years of age, and recent graduates under 30 years of age, either work, training, education or rehabilitation after their unemployment has lasted no more than three months.

As our former president and Nobel laureate Mr. Martti Ahtisaari has stressed and history has proven, if there are too many young people - especially young men with nothing to do, it can lead to unrest in the whole society. I think this is a good observation and it is something we need to take into account.

My third example relates to working life. We believe that work is not only the best form of social protection but also essential in enhancing participation and empowerment. We also believe that it is very important that everybody can be an active member of the society. In this connection, we launched last summer a programme to involve people with partial work ability in work life. One objective of the programme is also to reduce prejudice against them. The aim is to ensure that there is a seamless chain of services that helps these persons to secure employment.

My last example is in the field of ageing. The Finnish population is ageing rapidly. This is a big challenge. The reality is that when the population is ageing, we have to re-think how to organize our services in a sustainable way. We want to promote health and well-being, improve primary services and reduce health inequalities. A new Act on Supporting the Functional Capacity of the Ageing Population and on Social and Health Care Services for Older People was adopted last year. The purpose of the act is to guarantee the rights and needs of older people and to support their dignity, functional capacities and active participation.

As reflected in the Secretariat's concept note, there is a need for a two-track approach to empowerment:

First, to ensure through general policies and measures an enabling environment to all people so that they can fully and equally participate in all arenas of life and to have basic security and access to essential services throughout their life course; and

Second, to ensure with particular targeted measures that people and groups that are vulnerable and poor, marginalized or even socially excluded, have a right and actual access to empowering extra support they need in order to regain their life skills and to participate in the society on an equal basis.

It is important to realize that these are not alternatives. The integration of both action lines in national policies is necessary. The social and health sectors alone cannot meet the challenges of poverty eradication, social integration and decent work, however well they perform in efforts to empower people to achieve well-being. Prevention of chronic diseases, prevention of social exclusion, creation of trust and confidence in the future call for integrating the goals of health and social equality in all policies, in all sectors.

Rising inequalities, exclusion and disempowerment are the crucial causes to societal disintegration and even conflicts. It is time to seriously act against these unequalizing forces. Rising inequalities are a sign of lack or even reversal of social development. We

all should work towards *A society for all*, where all people have equal rights and equal opportunities to participate in and to benefit from development.

Keeping all people “in the same boat” is a particular challenge in the middle of the current economic, environmental and demographic transformations. This is something rings close to home also in Finland as we are living in a difficult economic climate.

The vision of an inclusive society for all is still topical. Rising inequalities and the economic crises have pushed many people aside from the mainstream of society. This is the case in both high- and low-income countries. This is an alarming sign of lack of social development or even an indicator of recession in the social development process.

In conclusion, may I warmly welcome the initiative of the UN Family to join efforts to promote the principles of social protection floors for all. We have been participating in and supporting the Social Protection Floor Interagency Board, which we see as a useful instrument for pooling the resources and skills of the UN Family and Member States. The aim is to guarantee step-by-step the realization of creating access to basic social security and essential services, including health services, for all people.

Thank you.