



**Opening remarks by
H.E. Mr. Oh Joon
President of the Economic and Social Council
“Special Meeting of the Economic and Social Council on
Inequality”
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Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have the honour to welcome you to the Special Meeting of the Economic and Social Council on Inequality.

Some might ask, “why does the UN need to discuss inequality now?”

Over the last few decades, poverty rates have declined in every region of the world; emerging market economies have grown with unprecedented speed; and life-changing technologies have dramatically improved our standards of living.

However, the numbers clearly show that gaps in income and wealth have been consistently widening around the world. Today, seven out of 10 people in the world live in countries where income inequality has risen, in many cases, to the highest level in 30 years. It has become a cliché to say that the richest 1% has come to possess more than half the total wealth of the world.

We all witness these dramatic contrasts quite often in Manhattan, where homeless people, with only ragged blankets to survive the winter, are seen lying underneath a window showcasing luxury dresses priced at thousands of dollars,.

Inequality is more than an issue of income and wealth disparities. It is compounded by unequal access to basic human needs such as food, healthcare, education, drinking water, and sanitation.

Around the world, women in rural areas remain three times more likely to die in childbirth than those in urban areas; persons with disabilities are up to five times more likely to incur

catastrophic health expenditures; and children born in poorer households are less likely to complete their primary education.

When we see them, we all realize that something may be seriously wrong; that if such trends continue, our communities might suffer social and political instability, often leading to the emergence of extremism.

The international community has long fought against poverty and hunger. We have had some success. Still, the fact that the gaps between the rich and poor are widening, despite improvements for the poorest, indicate that there are structural elements which cannot be properly dealt with by poverty reduction efforts alone.

Whether you call those elements ‘the rules of the game’ or ‘a level-playing field’, they need be discussed at the United Nations, our shared forum in pursuit of global public goods.

Indeed, against this backdrop, inequality has been recognized as a fundamental and universal challenge, affecting all countries and people.



Last September, when adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Member States of the United Nations committed to reducing inequality and to leaving no one behind. Addressing inequality is incorporated in the 2030 Agenda, simultaneously as standalone Goal 10 and as a crosscutting objective all over the Agenda.

This ECOSOC Special Meeting on Inequality comes at the very first phase of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. We have yet to establish concrete plans to fulfil our pledges. Your insights and ideas to be presented today on how to address inequality, would therefore be most welcome.

I am sure that all of us in ECOSOC and the United Nations will benefit from them when we need guidance in our long journey. Thank you.