

**Rethinking Solutions to Crisis in the Decade of Action:
High Level Event Preventing Atrocity Crimes: The Role of Countering and
Addressing Hate Speech**

Remarks of Special Adviser Alice Wairimu Nderitu

5 March, 8:00-9:30am

Good morning.

It is a great pleasure to be part of this event jointly organized with UNDP, represented by Assistant Administrator, Asako Okai, and moderated by Fernand de Vareennes, the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues.

I am also delighted to be joined by so many United Nations colleagues and members of civil society.

This collaboration is an important one that comes at an opportune moment – when we are seeing a disturbing increase in hate speech and incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence around the world.

We know that the impacts of hate speech on communities and on individuals can be devastating. Hate speech makes those targeted more vulnerable to violence, exposes them to exclusion and discrimination, exacerbating underlying social and economic inequalities, and undermining social cohesion.

History also teaches us that hate speech can be a precursor to the commission of atrocity crimes. We saw this in the Holocaust, and in the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica where hate speech and the dehumanization of ‘the other’ was present long before violence broke out and atrocity crimes were committed. Countering and addressing hate speech before it reaches this level is therefore crucial and must be part of our prevention efforts.

No country is immune to hate speech. Hate speech draws on deep divisions, sometimes pitting people who have previously peacefully co-existed against each other. Indeed, in many countries, we have seen politicians and influential public figures encouraging xenophobia and discrimination against migrants, refugees and minorities so as to gain political power.

In countries with conflict situations, underlying causes of violence are exploited by those spreading hate speech, resulting in cycles of reprisals and revenge killings.

Divisive and discriminatory messages are also multiplying online, with devastating impact. Diaspora communities around the world voice their grievances through social media, using vitriolic language and images.

In the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing trends of hate speech that scapegoat and stigmatize individuals or groups along identity lines. The pandemic has also aggravated misinformation and disinformation at a time when facts and science are more important than ever.

So ladies and gentlemen,

For these reasons, action to combat hate speech needs to be at the heart of prevention efforts.

By addressing this divisive and harmful language, we can avoid escalation of tensions that could spill over into violence. These measures also help to build societies that are resilient and inclusive.

Our discussion today will highlight the efforts of multiple stakeholders collaborating at the global, regional, national and local community levels.

In addition to considering the achievements of various initiatives and the challenges of taking these forward, I also welcome debate about the opportunities that exist for future collaboration.

In June 2019, the Secretary-General launched the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. Our office – the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect – is the UN focal point on the implementation of the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech. The Strategy and Plan of Action enhances UN efforts to address the root causes of violence, including marginalization, discrimination, poverty, exclusion, inequality, lack of basic education, and weak state institutions and enables the UN to respond effectively to the impact of hate speech on societies.

In this context, our office coordinates system-wide efforts to counter and address hate speech, including by supporting UN field presences, Member States and civil society at national and grassroots levels.

This also includes engaging with religious leaders and actors under the UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence – or the Fez Plan of Action, named after the City in Morocco in which it was launched, – on their role in speaking out against hate speech.

Other UN entities, including UNDP, are also taking innovative approaches across multiple contexts to tackle hate speech in line with the UN Strategy, using technology to monitor hate speech, establishing early response mechanisms and engaging with civil society.

Dear friends,

Experience shows that placing communities at the core of action is the most effective way to turn the tide on hate speech. Indeed, prevention is local. Bringing together civil society and community leaders that represent a wide variety of constituencies to share their experiences is vital if peace gains are to be sustainable and felt by all.

Moreover, it is imperative that those with influence in communities, political, religious and community leaders, and civil society actors - be agents of transformation, contribute to changing narratives and encourage everyone to do their part to advocate for peaceful coexistence.

The strength of community stakeholders lies in their in-depth knowledge of their context, and therefore in their ability to recognize when divisive language is being used. It is important to support them to actively counter it, including with positive and alternative narratives, enabling policies, linking early warning to early response, improved information systems and strengthened partnerships. Actions to support victims are also vital.

It is particularly important that the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable are heard. The work of organizations led by women and youth, that stand up for women's rights and represent their interests are especially important.

This should all be done while protecting and promoting freedom of opinion and expression and the right to equality and non-discrimination.

While we face many negative trends, we are also seeing cause for hope in the incredible work of individuals, communities and civil society organizations.

This session provides us with an important opportunity to come together to learn from each other in order to mobilise for effective action. I am confident that we will all take away key insights and good practices to enhance collaboration in order to counter and address hate speech.

I thank you all and look forward to a vibrant discussion and to working closely with UNDP, UN entities in the field, and our civil society partners on this ambitious agenda to build a more resilient future free from intolerance, hatred and violence.

Thank you.