**Human Rights Council Social Forum 2017**

**Monday, 2 October 2017 at 10:00 AM**

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the Social Forum. This Forum is one of the highlights of the Human Rights Council agenda, a uniquely important event which brings together activists, academics, practitioners and, most importantly, the rights holders themselves. This year, as decided by Human Rights Council resolution 32/27, the Social Forum will discuss the protection and promotion of human rights in the context of HIV and other communicable diseases and epidemics.

Although the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health is unequivocally reaffirmed in many human rights treaties, the Constitution of the World Health Organization and the Declaration of Alma-Ata, the relationship between health and human rights has not always been well understood. The work of activists involved in the HIV movement did much to elucidate these links. Yet advocacy for a greater rapprochement between these two disciplines remains a work-in-progress.

Partly with this need in mind, the Council has been very active and engaged on health, particularly in the last few years, with resolutions on access to medicines, HIV/AIDS, capacity-building in health, mental health, as well as health in the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. The discussions over the next few days are an important part of this work, as the Council seeks to gather the views, expertise and experiences of those who find themselves, in one way or another, on the frontline of promoting and protecting human rights in the context of HIV and other epidemics and diseases.

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A theme that continues to emerge in the Council’s work - which was affirmed by the World Health Organization - is that health truly is more than the absence of disease or infirmity: it is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing. In recent years, we have been confronted by the challenges posed by outbreaks of Zika, cholera and SARS, among others. When we consider, for instance, the social impact of HIV (such as stigma, discrimination and the denial of the right to work), Zika (the abandonment of children with birth defects linked to Zika) or Ebola (the social marginalisation of even those who have recovered), it is clear that a comprehensive approach to addressing these public health challenges is critical. With Ebola, for instance, we also saw that civil and political rights became particularly relevant and, as health authorities grappled with the decision whether to impose quarantines, the need for parity of esteem between all rights was underscored – regardless of the provenance of the nomenclature we have developed for them.

What these epidemics and outbreaks have also made clear is that the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health enjoys a symbiotic relationship with other human rights, including the rights to life, an adequate standard of living, education, food and work. When the right to health is protected, the enhanced enjoyment of other rights necessary to preserve dignity, realise potential and assert autonomy becomes possible. Conversely, health can only be improved when other human rights are upheld, and so we talk about a human rights-based approach to health.

With a view to expanding on these dimensions, the programme for the Social Forum touches on a range of issues, all vital for advancing the health agenda and for the promotion and protection of all human rights. You will have the opportunity to discuss, for instance, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals through a human rights framework; the role of civil society in epidemics; health workers on the frontline; international cooperation; and access to medicines.

We are especially keen to hear your contributions on best practices, challenges and recommendations for concrete action to protect human rights. I encourage you to draw liberally from your various experiences and to be forthright about how we can all, collectively, continue the push towards protecting human rights more fully where health is concerned.

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The health and human rights movement has become a veritable force. It would be my great delight to see you join this endeavour to breach permanently the very artificial divide that has separated health and human rights, to the detriment of so many.

Thank you.