

Mai Naomi Thang

Remarks at the opening session of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development at its third session

3 April 2016

Dear Chair, delegates, UN representatives and my civil society friends,

I am honoured to address you today at this historic meeting – A meeting that could have real importance to my community, in the Southern part of Chin State, Myanmar; One of the poorest communities in one of the poorest countries in this region.

As a teenager I began to advocate for the world I want – a world where women have decision making power and a chance to shape our future. Even speaking about the world and future I want has consequences for young women in patriarchal communities. For me, it can mean being attacked and criticized by family and community

Yet, here I stand before you, governments of our region – taking a stand for Development Justice

Last year I was selected to become a young feminist participatory action researcher. Women from remote Chin communities came together to decide what kind of development we want. As a first step, we decided to focus on our right to inheritance. In my community women are denied the right to inherit and own land. Secure land right have been proven to be one of the single most effective ways to prevent poverty, to prevent

hunger, to adapt to climate change, to reduce violence against women, and achieve gender equality.

Land is life, land is livelihood, land is dignity.

But as our community research has grown I have learnt that secure inheritance rights might not be enough to secure the future we want.

As a resource rich country Myanmar now faces the threats and challenges many other poor countries have faced – pressure to liberalise our economy means our land may be bought by wealthy foreign investors. Land concessions for ‘development projects’ and agro-business have robbed many Indigenous and rural peoples of their land. And Climate change threatens the very land we are fighting to inherit.

So while I work to change our customary laws I know that my work must get bigger. Global political and economic rules mean we are inheriting a world where 80% of the world live on less than \$10 a day while 62 extremely rich people own half the world’s wealth and, with it, much of the world’s political power; where 1 trillion dollars a year flows out of our developing countries into developed countries.

When I started my work to claim our inheritance rights I did not know that governments were negotiating new development goals. I did not know that you would set a target to “ensure women’s equal right to own and control assets and productive resources”.

I did not realize that I, together with the women in the community, am the means of implementation. I promise to you that we will work to

secure the target you set. But you must work with us. You must ensure that assets and resources and a livable planet remain for us to inherit.

Like me, there are many young women around the world taking risks to create the world we want. I encourage you to take some bold, maybe even courageous, steps to deliver a roadmap for the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development that makes our work and vision possible and delivers Development Justice.

Thank you