Opening remarks by Mia Seppo, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative

Your Worship, I’m honoured, on behalf of the United Nations, to make these opening remarks at this very important event. I would like to start by thanking and commending the Public Affairs Committee for organising the All Inclusive Stakeholders Workshop on Transparency and Accountability. UNDP and the Royal Norwegian Embassy are privileged to have assisted PAC to host this 3rd All-Inclusive Stakeholders Conference.

Let me also say how I’m impressed I am that Malawians have displayed the courage to discuss what could be explosive issues at this time when every initiative is seen through the lens of party politics and short term election campaigning. I believe this is a sign of a universal determination to create a new Malawi and I’m truly honored to have been asked to make these comments before you start your deliberations.

St Matthew’s gospel chap 7, v 24 – 29 recounts the parable of the house built on a rock and compares it with the house built on sand. The more solid foundation withstood floods, winds, and rain, while the house on the weak, shaky, and shifting foundation was washed away.

Malawi at 50 is seen by some as a country adrift. This conference will dig deep to find that rock on which to build the foundations for the country and its economy.

A South African proverb says: “Change is the essence of life. Use the opportunity to give up what you are for what you could become.”

Malawi is at the cusp of significant change. You who are gathered here today will provide the key to what Malawi could become. Your deliberations in this meeting, the manner in which you conduct your conversation, and the recommendations
that you make will all determine whether Malawi succumbs to its current crisis or uses this moment of change to build a better future.

The country is facing many changes today. Trust in the accountability and transparency of the country’s institutions has eroded greatly. The frustrations of the largely youthful population have grown.

Yet these challenges provide the opportunity for significant reform, and for a moment of national reflection to strengthen unity and cohesion where all can rise above partisan interest and work for the public good, for Malawi.

As we approach election day, this conference can serve as a reminder that national interests have to be safeguarded even as the competition for political power continues.

In many countries, a minimum national agenda has provided a common platform from which the public can evaluate the promises of different parties and independent candidates. The primary beneficiaries of this are political parties themselves. Instead of being judged on each other’s rhetoric or even slander, they can be assessed on the extent to which their proposals correspond with the national agenda.

This All-inclusive Conference then provides an opportunity to develop a checklist for Malawians to compare candidates and a checklist to hold the winner to account after the elections. A checklist that gives space for women and youth, and that reflects the Malawi all citizens would like to see irrespective of the party in power.

As development partners, we cannot tell you what a national agenda should contain. But having accompanied citizens of other countries as they have sought similar change, the UN can share a few ideas.

First, you may wish to start with a shared reflection on the Malawi that you want to see twenty years from now, when your children have reached adulthood. What type of country do you wish to see your children grow into?
Second, and based on these shared goals, you may wish to identify the changes in attitudes and behaviours that will be required to bring about the new Malawi. Surely, a culture of accountability will be a crucial start, so that national resources are wisely invested. The ability to collaborate in the national interest even in the heat of political competition will be equally crucial.

Third, you may wish to identify the pathways to these changes. Perhaps the most important will be the modeling of the right attitudes and behaviours by the leadership. If leaders demonstrate by personal action a commitment to reform, then the public will follow. If political deadlock in the institutions of government gave way to constructive negotiation, and especially in the period following elections, people will be motivated to trust and engage with public institutions to a greater degree.

As far as this conference is concerned, the manner in which you conduct your deliberations over the next few days might be just as important as the outcome of the conference. If bitterness and acrimony cause this meeting to disintegrate into chaos, or if the view of one group of persons is presented as the consensus, it will be difficult to inspire public trust in this meeting and its results.

Here allow me to make one observation as a friend from afar. The current difficulties in Malawi are the result of several years of accumulated unsolved challenges. It is not the fault of one political party or only one group of people. In one way or the other, everyone shares a part of the blame and everyone has a role to play in defining and implementing solutions.

This meeting is a critical step in laying the foundation for a common national agenda. This is a daunting task which may require that a process rather than a conclusion emerges from this meeting, and that issues are not forced before all are on board.

Going forward, I can foresee PAC as continuing to play, with the wisdom and foresight that it already has displayed, the powerful role of a national convener and facilitator of crucial conversations, and of national dialogue. Some of the content and substance for these conversations could then be provided by the High-level Development Council.
It is our hope that this conference will provide a constructive space for Malawians to interact with trust and reflect on the way forward; a space in which you bring your ideas, interests, concerns, beliefs and values to the table.

Your challenge is not to avoid conflict, since conflict is normal, natural and inevitable, but to work together in a legitimate and peaceful manner to transform relationships, generate rationality and build consensus. Your task is to engage in open, transparent and respectful discussions, the kind of discussions that can make a country known as the warm heart of Africa proud.

Let me close by quoting the African Charter for Popular Participation in development and Transformation, (1990), Arusha, as I believe it captures the spirit in which the deliberations the next two days should be conducted:

“…nations cannot be built without the popular support and full participation of the people, nor can the economic crisis be resolved and human and economic conditions improved without the full and effective contribution, creativity and popular enthusiasm of the vast majority of the people.”

The elements of a national vision with a foundation built on rock, not sand, are there: sound legal frameworks, institutions in place and an unprecedented level of openness as evidenced by this conference. What is now required is the construction of the house above the foundation – a house which is shared by all Malawians and benefits all.

I wish you fruitful deliberations.

ZIKOMO!