Dear Distinguished chair, members of the panel, participants, colleagues

First of all, allow me to thank the government of Qatar for their hospitality and generosity in hosting the first Arab States Regional South-South Development Expo. I have to say, the last three days have been invigorating, and fascinating. As an Arab, I am incredibly proud to see so many excellent interventions, so much enthusiasm, and so many solutions being presented.

We had the UN WOMEN-led forum yesterday afternoon, wherein we, and our partners, presented no less than 8 solutions in the realm of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

For those of you who were there, you know that these solutions span across a broad spectrum of areas, including responding to and ending VAW, developing gender sensitive housing policies, fighting for equality in the right to own and inherit land, preserving their communities, and advocating for equal citizenship. Gender battles are fought on all fronts, every day, by women and men who believe that at the very core we are born equal, and thus should be awarded equal opportunities. Choices. So everyone can choose to go to university (or not to), and choose who they marry (and when), and choose the number of children they have.

But I digress – we are here today, on this panel, to discuss south-south cooperation. How we can strengthen this and how it can contribute to effective policy change. To me, the answer is simple, as Arabs we share a common cultural heritage, and while we may eat taameeya in Egypt and falafel in Palestine – the ingredients remain the same. Within that culture, we also share common constraints – and thus can share the same opportunities.

Take the socially responsible women’s run school canteens as an example, this project has taken something as simple as meals for children and made it into a social enterprise. Governments (local and national alike) got behind the project, and to this day several women have been able to access decent employment, often being the sole breadwinners of their families, as a result. In addition to providing an income, the project has created a dialogue within communities, and households on the role of women, and created a spiral of change – wherein the traditional roles shifted and some of the women were now the sole breadwinners of the family, this shift may seem like a small step, a drop in the ocean, but to those families, and to the little girls growing up in these families – this shift is the exact change we need. The project has not yet been duplicated outside Palestine, but this is something that I believe can easily be done. Our role, therefore, as UN agencies, should be to facilitate such duplication. The lessons learned are already in place, the beneficiaries and the communities we will be working with are similar, and, at the very core, the inequalities that tear us apart are shared across our borders and not contained within them.

I was asked to speak of the challenges and disadvantages in the region when it comes to the south-south agenda. I think that the opportunities far outweigh the
challenges, the school canteen project is merely one example of the tremendous work that is being done everyday. I think the areas for duplication are many, but the forums for sharing are not. We often get caught up in our own silos of work, focusing on our reporting, our deadlines, and in doing that we sometimes forget to take a step back and look around. Such a space as this has been a great opportunity to do just that, and we need more fora, including virtual ones for this. UN WOMEN is very keen on keeping this dialogue open, so I hope that many of you here will be in touch with us on how we can take some of the solutions forward.

We also need to recognize the importance of individual projects, and how everything we do as individuals contributes to the collective. The solutions I have heard are all about change happening from both the top down and bottom up approach, of a collective of individuals coming together to create something new, to break down barriers and overcome obstacles – not for the sake of their own gain, but for the sake of their community, and, perhaps most importantly their children.

I read something once, along the lines of “if you think you are too small to have an impact, try sleeping in the same (small) room as a mosquito” – nothing is too small to make a difference, except not trying.