Regional ECCE Policy Forum (Seoul, Korea 10-12 September 2013)

Opening Speech by Mr. Tang

- His Excellency Mr Nam-Soo Seo, Minister of Education, Republic of Korea
- Mr Kunihiko Chris Hirabayashi, Representative, UNICEF Tokyo
- Ms Young Lee, President, KICCE
- Mr Joon-Kyung Kim, President, KDI
- Ministers, Vice-Ministers and Country Delegates
- Representatives of partner agencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good afternoon!

It is a great honour to be the first speaker this afternoon for the opening of the Regional ECCE Policy Forum “Are children ready to learn? Are schools ready for children?”

Most importantly, I bring with me the heartfelt greetings from our Director-General, Mrs Irina Bokova, to all the distinguished Delegates and representatives of partner agencies in the Asia-Pacific Region.

Please allow me to also express the deepest gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Korea for hosting and co-organizing this Forum. I am impressed to see how this Forum has brought together such high level delegations from the regional countries to discuss together the future agenda for ECCE in the region. I understand that all sub-regions of this vast and diverse region are represented here from Central Asia, East and West Asia, South and Southeast Asia, and the Pacific. It certainly is evidence of the importance and timeliness of this theme.

The importance of ECCE

UNESCO has named “lifelong learning for all” as its central goal, and ECCE is critical for reaching that goal.
I say this because research has showed that supporting ECCE is among the best long-term investments that countries can make. Decades of careful study clearly document the importance of ECCE in promoting school achievement and lifelong well-being. Children with supportive and stimulating environments early in their lives are more likely to complete school, have better health outcomes, and are less likely to develop ‘anti-social’ behaviour later in life.

It is therefore essential to invest more and better in ECCE.

I would like to recall the commitments that countries and international organizations have made to ECCE in recent years.

Since the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals were adopted by the international community, enrolment in primary education has continued to rise, reaching 90.75% in the world average. However, the pace of progress has stagnated in recent years, and is insufficient to ensure that, by 2015, all girls and boys complete a full course of primary schooling.

While we have also made some progress in ECCE, we have not yet achieved the goals of quality, accessible ECCE for all children. Only slightly more than half of eligible children worldwide had access to pre-primary education in 2011 (UIS).

Quality in ECCE must also be addressed. Too many ECCE teachers are not trained, with several countries having less than 60% of ECCE teachers trained. We must ensure that children are not only attending, but also experiencing quality ECCE that is essential for reaching learning goals.

At the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education held in Moscow in 2010, countries and international organizations therefore agreed to prioritize ECCE. For UNESCO, the follow-up to the Moscow Conference has been a central part of the ECCE programme, which has been kept high on the sector’s agenda despite limited resources. Building on these prior and current commitments, this Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum addresses two key
issues:

- To mobilize stronger action for ECCE, by adopting policies to promote access in ECCE; and
- To reinforce effective ECCE program delivery, ensuring quality equity and inclusion in ECCE

We therefore come to this Forum today with two important questions: Are children ready to learn? Are schools ready for children?

Science demonstrates that learning begins at birth, and to reach our goals, we must recognize the critical importance of supporting learning from the very start – as stated in 1990, in the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (Article V).

This forum is therefore asking us to redefine what we mean by readiness to learn. I would like to encourage you to keep in mind two important issues in the next 2 days:

- First, to promote “lifelong learning,” we must reconsider what we mean by “school readiness” – it is not just about children’s skills and knowledge when they enter school, but also whether that child has received the nutrition, health care, and cognitive stimulation from birth that unlock potential for learning. Children’s development and learning is holistic and depends on health, nutrition, social protection, and education. This requires the commitment and action of multiple sectors and actors.

- Second, we also must ensure that schools, communities and societies overall are ready for all children during the transition to school – by ensuring well-trained teachers who understand how to teach young children; by ensuring that health and nutrition needs are addressed, and that families are engaged and supported. And, also how well the schools are prepared to help each child reach their potential.

**Objective of this Forum**
The objective of the Forum is “to provide a platform to share knowledge and discuss strategies for capacity development, policy formulation, good practice, partnerships and research.”

This diverse region of Asia and the Pacific has many innovative and successful examples to learn from, and has been a leader in expanding access. As mentioned earlier, at the global level, only slightly more than half of eligible children worldwide had access to pre-primary education in 2011, whereas, in East Asia and the Pacific, enrolment increased from 40% in 2001 to 62% in 2011, and in South Asia, from 26% to 50% for the same period.

Therefore, countries of Asia-Pacific can showcase innovative methods to the rest of the world, and can be global leaders in demonstrating how to reach quality ECCE at scale – these innovations are critical for reaching goals for lifelong learning.

But tremendous disparities persist between countries. Overall children in Asia are below the world average on how long they attend ECCE. Discussing existing gaps and challenges that countries are facing at a policy forum like this one, can help identify the bottlenecks and possible solutions as well as encourage future collaboration among countries.

To realize the promise of ECCE, Asian-Pacific countries must continue to develop the capacity of the ECCE system, formulate and implement good policies, and prioritize strong partnerships with NGOs and researchers.

Please be assured of UNESCO’s continued support and cooperation to reinforce our collective efforts towards realizing a holistic ECCE through knowledge sharing, advocacy, and country capacity-building on ECCE, all of which are also central to this Forum.

By the end of this week, I hope we will be able to jointly identify priority areas and mechanisms for collaboration for the region that can serve as the roadmap for the region, and can be shared at upcoming meetings such as the High-Level Meeting on South-South
Cooperation for Child Rights in the Asia Pacific Region, to be organized in New Delhi in October 2013.

With these brief remarks, I wish you all a very fruitful deliberation during the next three days and look forward to hearing about the successful outcomes.

Thank you very much.