Protocols

I am honoured and privileged to stand here on behalf of UNICEF to contribute in this closing session. The strong UNICEF team here includes Ms Lotta Swylander the UNICEF Representative in Viet Nam, Sun-ah from Cambodia, my colleagues Cliff Meyers and Lieke Van De Weil, and other colleagues from both Regional and Country Offices. Our presence here is a message to all of you that we are in this with you and for the long haul. Just as we did for this Forum: Standing shoulder to shoulder with our partners in organizing this very important meeting.

First of all, a very big thank you to the Government of the Republic of Korea for hosting this landmark Forum and for the hospitality throughout the days we have been here. A big thank you also to KICCE, UNESCO, ARNEC, KDI and all partners whose efforts made the Forum a great success. I must also thank the powerful delegations from Asia and Pacific countries for voting with your participation to confirm the centrality of education as a foundational investment for sustainable development, but especially for underlining the critical importance of early childhood care and education in that equation.

The Post-2015 Agenda has employed many channels – including social media – to find out what the general population believes are the top priorities governments should invest in after 2015. Through the Future We Want Campaign, the public from all walks of life voted for education, health and governance and the top three results areas they would like public resources spent in. Education ranks among the top 3 which means that ordinary people understand where value-for-money is. We have gained great momentum, and we need to entrench it by starting where the impact is greatest – in high quality early childhood care and education. There is an overwhelming and convincing meeting of minds.

Case studies, including our host country the Republic of Korea, show clearly how strategic investment in quality education can leap-frog a country’s development. In this Forum, we have heard the overwhelming confirmation from meta-analyses of how quality early childhood care and education improves learning outcomes, emotional development and employment opportunities by creating superior trajectories throughout the life-cycle. Professor Barnett cited references from the US and elsewhere. My friend G-J showed us the Heckman curve, which remains valid after over 10 years. He first saw it in 2001 and yet it remains relevant today: that care and education investments in earlier parts of the life cycle have exponentially greater returns when compared to delayed ones. Current research is also making us aware of the potential of high quality ECCE services to build peace, social cohesion and harmony through
sustained interactions with parents and other caregivers, and the promotion of peaceful interactions within classrooms and other ECCE contexts. Newer hypotheses also suggest that there could be trans-generational impacts of ECD contexts that foster peace. Said differently, children who experience peaceful lives with positive, nurturing and stimulating environments are more likely to reflect such life experiences when they become parents themselves.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
We have the evidence. What we need now is to act. We need to accelerate the investment process to ensure that all children benefit from this proven service. It is a right that they must all claim and which they deserve to realize. But the reality today – as we heard in this meeting – is that in most places, ECCE is still patchy and uneven. It is my contention that its availability or absence will be the main driver of disparities in education outcomes in the coming years. Our challenge is to close these gaps as soon as possible. The potential underlying drivers of disparity in education which must be addressed include:

i) Poverty, which has largely been addressed by abolition of school fees and other measures;
ii) Geographical location, which can be addressed by effective monitoring of performance and incentive-based grant systems;
iii) Gender, which can be addressed by gender-sensitive curricula reform, dealing with school-related gender-based violence, strengthening gender-responsive teacher training in ECCE and classroom environmental improvements;
iv) Disability, which can be addressed through effective inclusive education practices; and
v) Disasters, which can be addressed through various effective disaster risk reduction, preparedness and response measures.

By the way, on disabilities, ECCE is a proven channel for prevention and early diagnosis. Good ECCE will identify children with disabilities before it is too late; and it may prevent many disabilities.

Going forward, progress will be made in ECCE if we bear in mind the following five steps:

i) Improve and strengthen education data integrity to track and report on ECCE performance, aiming to reach all children;
ii) Agree on minimum quality service standards, (but nevertheless retaining the vision for the more-desirable high quality standards) taking account of the supply side (the quality and number of teachers, the curriculum, learning materials and the learning environment, etc.) and the demand side (community and family valuation, support and use of ECCE);
iii) Maintain a transparent communication with all stakeholders including parents, teachers and communities;
iv) Mapping who remains unreached and devising modalities to include and reach them.

v) Strengthen our coordination mechanisms for provision of holistic services, especially at subnational and local levels

As you depart to your stations, I request that you all become ever more fervent advocates and stronger champions for ECCE. I also urge you to identify concrete steps and measures that you will take immediately upon return to your countries: For example, reporting back to your Prime Ministers/Presidents/Heads of State on the relevant outcomes from this Forum, reaching out to key stakeholders in other Ministries and beyond, and formulating strategies for policy implementation and/or evidence-based advocacy. UNICEF Offices will be ready to work with you to develop and argue for a strong investment case, and support you in strengthening and implementing your policies and action plans. I know that all our partners will be ready to walk that journey with you too.

This Conference has been a great beginning. We’ll use many future opportunities to continue to press the case. The next stop in New Delhi at the High-Level Meeting on South-South Cooperation for Child Rights will underscore ECCE as one of the three themes – the others are adolescents and urbanization. In particular, I request you to get in touch with the delegations that will attend this meeting, and brief them on key points from this meeting, so that we sustain the momentum to intensify coordination and integration across sectors to build a better world with equity for all children. Many thanks for your attention.

Kamsahamnida.