Final Draft ADG speech

(Orally added address to the Minister, Secretary General, Ministers and Vice Ministers of participating countries, and Distinguished guests)

On behalf of the Director-General, Mme. Irina Bokova, it is an immense pleasure for me to welcome all the participants to this second Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) titled “The Transformative Power of Early Childhood: Innovations for Inclusivity and Quality” on behalf of UNESCO.

I would like to start by conveying my sincere appreciation to the Government of Malaysia for hosting the Forum and for enabling us to gather in this beautiful city of Putrajaya.

This Forum could not be more timely.

In September 2015, the world community adopted a new global development agenda consisting of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the fourth one being on education. As repeated at numerous occasions by UNESCO, SDG 4 is essential for reaching each and every one of the SDGs - from ending poverty and fighting hunger and malnutrition to improving child and maternal health, and ensuring gender equality, inclusion, and social, economic and environmental sustainability. There is no better place to set sustainable development on track than the first years of a child’s life.

In the words of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, “SDGs recognize that early childhood development can help drive the transformation we hope to achieve over the next 15 years”. The transformative power of early childhood – which the forum refers to – is immense and far-reaching.

In the earthquake- and disaster-stricken areas in China and Japan, ECCE initiatives have helped transform the lives of suffering children and families. By giving them opportunities to engage together in play activities and to express and share their feelings, children and families regained a sense of security and routine, which opened doors to more
optimism and community building.

In communities with high percentages of ethnic minority inhabitants in Viet Nam, an ECCE action research has demonstrated the positive changes in children who were left behind in ECCE classrooms thanks to the introduction of mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) approach and teacher training. Teachers were trained on how to assess and concretely improve the wellbeing and involvement level of children under their care. As a result, teachers came to adopt pedagogical strategies that enabled children to feel more confident, to have better relationships with their peers, and to be more active, motivated and involved in daily activities.

Quality ECCE enables children to begin their lifelong journeys of learning and development with strong minds and bodies, better skills and confidence. It is every child’s right. The SDG target 4.2 – which reads, “by 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education” – is the very foundation for reaching all of the 7 core targets of the SDG 4.

ECCE benefits the wider society. It is an astute social and economic investment. A vast body of evidence shows that quality ECCE contributes to better educational and wellbeing outcomes, gender equality, social cohesion, democratic and peaceful societies, improved employability and earning prospects. It is a cost-saving strategy with the highest economic returns among all levels of education. It impacts the most sensitive and formative years of life, where the pace of brain development is at its peak, innate drives for understanding and connecting with the world are the most vivid, and vulnerability to adverse factors is the greatest.

The making of universal quality ECCE as a stand-alone global development target in the SDG era testifies the worldwide recognition of its significance in human and sustainable development.

I am inspired by numerous spearheading efforts and significant progress in the Asia-Pacific region in developing national ECCE policies, tackling child survival and malnutrition, and expanding
access and improving quality of ECCE programmes. The total enrolment in preprimary education in the Asia-Pacific region increased by 83% from 59.5 million to 108.8 million between 1999 and 2012. Two-thirds of this increase occurred in South and West Asia, where 32.3 million more children were enrolled relative to 1999. The largest increase occurred in East Asia and the Pacific, where the GER increased from 38% in 1999 to 71% in 2013. These advances have not been possible without governments’ high-level political commitment. I commend the important role that the first Asia-Pacific Policy Forum on ECCE in Seoul, the Republic of Korea, in 2013, in bolstering this commitment.

However, despite the progress, opportunities to benefit from the transformative power of early childhood are, unfortunately, distributed unequally. In addition, low quality of ECCE provision is hampering its potential as a true and effective game changer.

The Asia-Pacific region is also characterized by its highly varying stages of development in ECCE across countries: while the region has marked remarkable progress in child survival, the region also accounts for a large share of under-five child mortality. In 2013, under-five mortality rates still high in many countries of the region, ranging from 58 per 1000 live births in Kiribati [pronounced Kiribas], 71 in Lao PDR, to 97 in Afghanistan, which is the world’s second highest under-five mortality rate. The attendance of 3 and 4-years-old children in early childhood education programmes in recent years (2010-2014) range from 1% in Afghanistan to 84% in Thailand. In Central Asia, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) in pre-primary education remained quite low in 2013: nearly 20 percentage points below the world average. ECCE remains among the most under-funded sectors; and the financing strategies need improvement for making the investment more effective. Policy implementation is uneven within countries, and may not be well coordinated across relevant sectors, public-private providers, and levels of administration. There are challenges of reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized children and of increasing the quantity and quality of ECCE teachers and caregivers in an equitable manner. More and better evidence and data is required to better monitor progress and to inform effective policies and practices.
Ladies and gentlemen, I wish to call upon every one of you to work together so as to harness the transformative power of early childhood and to bring it to every corner of societies. With the robust research evidence we have now, ranging from neuroscience, economics and social sciences, early childhood care and education is the foundation of peace building and sustainable development. Indeed, ECCE is not only integral part of SDG 4 but is highly interlinked with other Sustainable Development Goals. I believe that governments have a particularly special role to play in this endeavour.

I eagerly look forward to the adoption of the Putrajaya Declaration, which will be discussed by the participating governments during this policy forum. The Putrajaya Declaration will mark an important milestone for the countries of Asia and the Pacific in joining hands for strong advocacy to achieve SDG Target 4.2 and commit themselves to intensifying their efforts and monitoring their progress toward this target.

This second Forum thus provides a key opportunity to reaffirm the commitment and to accelerate momentum by strengthening existing partnerships and crafting new ones for innovations for inclusivity and quality in ECCE. With UNICEF, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood and other partners, UNESCO is in full support of this important regional forum. I am confident that it will point to concrete strategies, including a new regional monitoring mechanism for SDG target 4.2, so that universal quality ECCE becomes a reality for all children in this dynamic region.

In this spirit, I wish you a very successful forum.