Closing Remarks by Wivina Belmonte
UNICEF EAPRO Deputy Regional Director

Selamat Pagi.

HE Dato’ P. Kamalanathan
Deputy Minister of Education
Ministry of Education Malaysia

Ministers, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentleman:

On behalf of UNICEF, let me extend our heartfelt thanks to all of you, for having gathered here to share your experiences, insights and wisdom. Let me also congratulate you for the bold commitments made in the Putrajaya Declaration. And let me also extend our sincere thanks to the Education Minister of Malaysia and his whole, exceptional team, for the warm and wonderful welcome. Terima kasi.

Many of you have traveled a great distance to be with us at this forum.

So bear with me, as I ask you to travel once again....and for a moment let’s time travel....to the year 2030 — the year when the Sustainable Development Goals are meant to be reached. Imagine for a moment what that means for your
country in the year 2030? What does it look like? What would it take?

Well for one, we have all gathered here because we share a common conviction: We believe in the transformative power of early childhood as a way of achieving inclusivity and quality. It’s a good start.

The global roadmap to transforming our world by 2030 will be matched by continued, dynamic and exponential change across this region. It will be characterized by a more digitalized/service based global economy, that requires investing in the brain power needed to compete and grow.

Mounting evidence from neuroscience and economics clearly indicates that investing in the first 8 years of life, is one effective way of achieving the SDGs.

So ---- as we reflect on what we’ve discussed over this time together, what have we said that would take....

1. For one – it’ll take evidence-based, holistic policies and costed implementation plans that reach the most marginalized. The implementation should be supported by holistic coordination mechanisms, whether through an independent entity or through other structures. And the policies and plans...should be resilient to natural disaster and conflict.
2. We also know that both Equity and Quality of ECD services are imperatives. When we speak of reaching all children, we must think of girls and of boys, urban and rural, wealthy and poor, abled and disabled children from all language groups, ...ethnic minorities, linguistic minorities, stateless children, migrants, in times of peace and in times of crisis – all children should have opportunities to access Quality ECD.

One proven strategy for promoting equity amongst children who speak a minority language, is to begin the first years of education with mother tongue language instruction. And slowly transition to teaching in the other languages.

Equity should remain a critical principle in all our efforts.

Our efforts on the Quality front should continue as well, to strengthen holistic standards, credentialing, accreditation and professionalizing the ECD workforce.

3. It would also take strong families -- well supported by an infrastructure of ECCE programmes and services. Parents and other family members should be supported and engaged as partners to help their children reach their fullest potential. For example, MOEs can help ensure that early learning centers and
preschools are platforms for reaching out to caregivers as partners, in the process of promoting holistic early childhood development.

4. The SDG agenda encourages us to think differently. Stakeholders in the education sector can leverage partnerships in the ECD space for service delivery and monitoring. A strong framework for partnership is essential to achieve the SDG goals in a coordinated, multisectoral fashion. Government, civil society organizations, the private-sector, communities and families need to work together to scale-up ECD opportunities, particularly for the most marginalized.

5. We’ve also talked a lot about the need for strengthened accountability, robust metrics and sound monitoring, with intermediate targets and indicators, as a useful step in keeping on course.

6. Last but not least, there’s the need for increased investment in holistic ECD, and the pursuit of innovative and sustainable forms of financing. The forum has highlighted several modalities including social protection measures, cash transfers, sectoral funding, intersectoral funding, social impact bonds and other means of financing: There is an urgent need to explore, prioritize and secure these.
Many of us in the room today are rooted in the Education Sector and are following the directive of SDG 4 on early learning, with a focus on children aged 3 and up. Our discussions over the past 3 days have reminded us that development begins even before birth -- being ready for school, requires a nourished, healthy, safe body as well as being equipped with the skills and tools that come from early learning.

The head of the World Bank is a passionate advocate on this point. He talks about the importance of the first 1000 days of a child’s life, and the neuroscience that shows how the extent of a child’s cognitive capacity is determined during those first 1000 days. We can invest in all kinds of things afterwards, and they’ll matter -- but the cognitive capacity is etched then.

In that regard, I’m happy to say that the Malaysian Government will be hosting a high level regional forum later this year, on that very point -- to which your counterparts from ministries responsible for children, as well as ministries of planning and finance, will be invited – where we will discuss strategies to promote the brain development of the one billion children across Asia Pacific...focusing on smarter children and healthier economies.

It is also why, when you go back home, we urge you to identify opportunities to engage with colleagues in ministries addressing child and family welfare, health and
nutrition in order to ensure that children start school ready to succeed. That will mean addressing continuing challenges identified in this Forum – together -- with a commitment to strengthened programme planning, implementation, and coordination...it will require **quality** in the light of expanding private ECD services, **stronger, more holistic ECD information systems, obtaining relevant and accurate data**, especially on vulnerable groups, **and it will require systemic/seamless linkages** between families and centres, ECD/pre-primary education and the primary school curriculum and teaching methods. It also means improved **monitoring and evaluation** of ECD policies and programmes, ensuring high quality ECD for children left behind – for example, children left behind by migrating parents. And we’ve noted the need to go from parents to caregivers... and beyond parent education to family support.

That’s a busy agenda. We can draw energy, from the fact that when it comes to ECCE -- the right of every child is in the self interest of every nation”.

We often hear people say, “Children are the future” – and that’s true. What the science tells us is that if we don’t invest in their development in the earliest days and years, we are short changing their future and the future of our respective countries too. **So,** the right to a fair start in life ... also means dividends in sustainable development and
growth...and **that’s** the transformative power of early childhood. No time travel required.

Terima kasi Thank You.