OPENING SPEECH

BY

THE HONOURABLE

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MINISTER OF EDUCATION, MALAYSIA

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Marriott Putrajaya Hotel
Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh and good afternoon

Dr. Qian Tang, Assistant Director General for Education, UNESCO

Ms. Wivina Belmonte, Deputy Regional Director of UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office

Distinguished Ministers from Asia and Pacific countries

Excellencies, High Commissioners, Ambassadors, Delegates and Speakers

Honoured Guests

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with great pleasure that I welcome all of you to the Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education 2016. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deepest gratitude to our partners, The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) and all other stakeholders who have made it possible for us to deliberate on various issues, challenges, and opportunities concerning policies on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).

The first Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) was successfully held in Seoul, Korea in September 2013. A key message from this forum was that care and education investments in the early years of a child’s life has greater returns for the child and society at large. As the Chinese proverb said, if you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are
planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.

This year, the second Asia-Pacific policy forum carries a new theme, *The Transformative Power of Early Childhood: Innovations for Inclusivity and Quality*, with an agenda to increase the stronghold of ECCE policy within this region. We target our efforts towards ensuring that our children are given the best care and education that they need and deserve.

The sub-themes focus on innovations in policies and policy formulations, financing and partnerships, pedagogical approaches and human resource development. Our goal in this policy forum is to provide a platform for delegates, to discuss innovative and effective strategies to increase access, develop capacity, enact policies, and implement innovations in inclusive education thereby fostering partnerships for ECCE.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Delivering education is a universal principle requiring universal involvement. We are here today because of our serious commitment in our efforts to continuously improve the quality of ECCE services in our respective countries. Let us reflect on our achievements and put our thoughts and minds together to further develop future programmes to an outstanding success. It is essential that we continue to deliberate on the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015.

Our main responsibility in fulfilling the Education Agenda is to implement systemic action plans within our own countries and at the regional level to facilitate the effective translation of sustainable development policies into concrete actions at the various member states.
It is fantastic to note that in all sub regions of the Asia Pacific, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for ECCE doubled from 26% in 2000 to 55% in 2012. While it is noted that high-income and middle income countries in the region recorded strong GER improvements, it is brilliant to see that countries with lower-middle incomes have shown a mutual effort to ensure that a majority of children have access to and participate in pre-school education. These lower-middle income countries recorded GERs of between 30 to 50%. To ensure continuous progress in the upward GER trend, it is important that monitoring is a key aspect that is built into ECCE initiatives.

For countries in the Asia Pacific region more than 50% of our children entered primary school with some form of ECCE experience. As policy makers, we should place great importance on ECCE. A child’s ‘window of opportunity’ is available up to the age of 8 and it is significant for us to take this opportunity to develop a child’s potential to the maximum. ECCE is seen as a means to break away from the vicious cycle of poverty as it provides an avenue to inclusiveness and social equity through education. In making ECCE accessible to all sections of society, children with ECCE experience have shown considerable gains in various aspects of their lives.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As most of us are signatories to the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC), it is our duty to ensure that every child is given the rights to proper health care and quality education so that the well-being of the child is taken care of to enable him to contribute to society and the nation at large in the long run. We must be committed to give every child the opportunity to develop his potential to the fullest through quality ECCE services. These services include programme infrastructure such as space and furnishing, class size, child to teacher ratio and teacher experience. The child’s direct experience in the classroom must also be given prominence.
To guarantee quality childcare services, strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms have to be put in place. Follow up and review processes based on active monitoring, reporting and evaluation policies are essential for the achievement of ECCE. In order to drive through the ECCE agenda in Malaysia, collaborative multi-sectorial initiatives within Cabinet involving the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and the Prime Minister's Department should be commended.

Malaysia’s efforts to further develop quality early childhood education programmes is led by the Prime Minister's Department through the PERMATA programmes. PERMATA was introduced in 2006 with the theme, “Every Child is a Jewel”. The programmes under PERMATA carry an important philosophy that reflects the government’s initiatives and emphasises an integrated and holistic early childhood education system. For PERMATA, every child is a National Treasure.

PERMATA programmes are designed to unleash potentials and sharpen talents of our children at a tender age in order to increase national growth and develop a leading generation that Malaysia can and will be proud of. Malaysia owes this to PERMATA's visionary leader, non-other than the First Lady, Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These efforts by the government are solid proof of our serious commitment towards ECCE. We pledge our commitment towards creating education opportunities for young children to develop holistically to succeed in the 21st century.
Regional and international efforts need to be further strengthened to create a collaborative workforce to advocate, develop and implement ECCE policies.

It is through platforms such as this policy forum that we intend to acknowledge our weakness and challenges, openly share our experiences, best practices, aspirations and expertise and find workable solutions with our neighbouring partners in addressing the issues and challenges surrounding ECCE.

We must ensure that APFEC 2016 is the turning point for this important change of our future generation.

I am certain this intellectual discourse will provide a wider perspective in improving and implementing more inclusive and sustainable ECCE policies in the Asia-Pacific region. I wish you success as you engage and participate in the forum. I am sure this engagement will enhance greater ties among member states to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals Target 4.2 for the benefit of all participating countries.

On that note, it is with great pleasure that I officially declare open the 2016 Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum with the theme:

**The Transformative Power of Early Childhood: Innovations for Inclusivity and Quality.**

Thank you

Wabillahi Taufik Walhidayah Wassalamualaikum
Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh