WELCOMING ADDRESS

BY

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SECRETARY GENERAL
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Bismillahirrahmanirrahim

Assalamualaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh and a very good afternoon.

Her Excellency, Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor, wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia and patron of PERMATA

Honourable Dato’ Seri Mahdzir Khalid, Minister of Education, Malaysia

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 Pacific countries

Excellencies, High Commissioners, Ambassadors, Delegates and Speakers

Honoured Guests

Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Good afternoon and welcome to the Asia-Pacific Regional Policy Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education 2016. We are honoured to have with us Honourable Dato’ Seri Mahdzir Khalid, Minister of Education Malaysia and Her Excellency, Datin Paduka Seri Rosmah Mansor, the wife of the Prime Minister of Malaysia and patron of PERMATA. I bid a warm welcome to all ministers, deputy ministers and senior officials from countries across the Asia-Pacific region and participants who are present with us here today. I also extend my appreciation to our co-organizers, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) who have worked collaboratively with us to make this policy forum a reality. Malaysia is indeed honoured to be given the opportunity to host this second policy forum.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

2. Children are precious and each of them is unique, in Malaysia we called them the Jewel of our nation, “Permata Negara”. The learning path of each of these children needs to be designed and charted according to his or her own developmental profile, innate abilities
and potential. The talent of each child should be tapped through various learning domains and enriching learning experiences imbedded in the early childhood curriculum and program. Early childhood is a time where children should be allowed to explore freely. This early exploration provides an early start to the children as they continue with their learning journeys in primary and secondary schools.

3. As policy makers of our own countries, we need to scaffold and provide sufficient support to the formulation and implementation of these quality early childhood programs. Children have diverse needs. In responding to the diverse needs of children, it is necessary for us to take cognizance that the needs of children cover a vast variety of areas involving multiple stakeholders, from prenatal care to health care, early stimulation to nutrition services, sanitation to hygiene services, clean water to child protection, childcare to early childhood education. This has prompted UNESCO, UNICEF and other agencies through the just completed Education for All (EFA) as well as Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to repeatedly emphasise the importance of multi-sectorial collaboration as a necessary feature for quality and sustainable ECCE. Thus, it is imperative that successful collaboration is forged amongst agencies in order to ensure the healthy and holistic development of the child. These children are the future capital assets of a nation who will be responsible global citizens of the future.
4. An old African proverb said that ‘It takes a whole village to educate a child’; in traditional Asian and Pacific societies, the extended families as well as the community where the child is raised has the obligation and privilege of assisting in caring and nurturing of the child. As the infant grows into a child, the same community share the responsibility to provide advice or even reprimand the child when need arises. ECCE is thus, the business of the whole community, right from the family unit to the neighbourhood, the transport company to the security personnel, hospital to the social welfare, city council to the school. This sense of collaboration needs to be translated into communal actions supported by governmental policies and regulations in the Asia Pacific region.

5. Hence, governments as the driver and choreographer for national development, in the Asia-Pacific region need to formulate policies and design good governance in ECCE by first of all, bringing together various Ministries and agencies related to ECCE, to cooperate and spearhead collaboratively comprehensive policies and action plans for the holistic development of the child. The focus should be on quality care and early stimulation, sufficient and proper nutrition, provision of health care, safe water and proper sanitation.

6. In some countries (such as in the Philippines), a ECCE council is set up as a separate entity to ensure multi-sectorial collaboration. The council is made up of officials from various Ministries and meet regularly to
ensure continuity and problem solve issues which arise due to implementation of ECCE policies as well as to design new policies if there is a need. In some countries, collaborations are achieved through regular meetings between Ministries or setting up of Task Forces (*such as in Malaysia*). Yet in some countries, a dedicated Department or Ministry converging services from all relevant sectors such as education, child care, and health care is set up, and legitimatised, to handle all issues related to ECCE. Each country has its historical and local context and there is no one formula which fits all of us. Whichever governance structure is adopted it is important to stress that vertical coordination including the rank and file and horizontal coordination between all related agencies needs to be established and sustained. Working in silo creates gaps in implementation resulting in increased financial burden as well as redundancy and confusion; an integrated service would be ideal, needs of the children are to be addressed not in isolation.

7. That’s the very reason we are gathered here in Malaysia to further enhance the provision of quality access to early childhood services through various innovative strategies. During the first ECCE Policy Forum held in Korea, we deliberated on the need for ECCE advocacy as the key element to inform governments and to educate the people of the importance in investing time, effort and finance in ECCE. Much progress in ECCE has been recorded in this region. It is now time for us to reflect and to move on to ensure sustainability of this
momentum. We need to establish strong governance, develop efficient monitoring mechanisms and design comprehensive evidence-based practice to ensure the continuous development and expansion of quality ECCE in this region.

8. This second policy forum serves as the platform for policy advocacy and sharing of monitoring mechanisms and evidence based innovative practices, exchange of knowledge and experiences among countries as well as to discuss innovative strategies to improve the equity and quality of ECCE within the Asia-Pacific region.

9. The theme for this second policy forum is “The Transformative Power of Early Childhood: Innovations for Inclusivity and Quality”. This theme articulates the need to showcase innovations and to identify the Asia Pacific region’s priorities and strategies to achieve the goals of providing access to quality early childhood care and education.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

10. The sub-themes of this policy forum will enable us to explore how various dimensions in early childhood education can be leveraged upon to benefit children and society. The four sub-themes that will drive our discussions and deliberations for the next three days include matters regarding policy, service delivery, financing and partnerships, holistic development and human resource development.
11. It is hoped that the discussion of these sub-themes will inform policy makers of the latest research evidence and innovative approaches to improve Early Childhood Care and Education. We believe that you will take this opportunity to share the latest innovative and interactive pedagogies to structure a regional ECCE programme for our young children.

12. The organising committee has assembled an array of sessions to meet the diverse and ever-expanding ECCE needs of all our participating members. The keynotes, plenary and concurrent sessions will definitely create a platform for discussions. Two ministerial round-table discussions will be held during the forum. These round-table discussions have been planned for the ministers and high officials in attendance to deliberate and discuss matters pertaining to ECCE and the Putrajaya Declaration which will be the highlight of this forum. Another highlight is the exhibition which has been meticulously planned showcasing some best practices of ECCE. I hope all delegates and participants will take this opportunity to expand horizons and forge partnerships to create quality ECCE services for the betterment of children in this region.
Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

13. Challenges are aplenty; the Asia and Pacific region has much to gain from mutual cooperation. I believe this policy forum is the platform to deliberate and formulate concrete suggestions towards realising quality and equity in ECCE. I hope that you will seize the opportunity to rekindle ongoing connections and spark new ones. On that note I wish all of you a successful and engaging time at this forum.

Thank you