AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

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Opening Remarks
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Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, colleagues and friends: Good morning and welcome to the meeting – and thank you for welcoming me so warmly to UNICEF.

I want to thank His Excellency, Ambassador Abdul Momen, for such a kind introduction.

I am grateful to all of the members of the Executive Board and the Secretary-General for all you have always done to support UNICEF – and for giving me this greatest opportunity of my life.

And I owe an enormous debt to my five predecessors, who have left us such a magnificent organization.

This is not only a great opportunity; it is a great responsibility. I will work very hard to meet it. And nothing could make me happier.

In fact, I wake up every morning wanting to go to work – which is an unusual blessing in anyone’s life.

There are two reasons why I am so enthusiastic.

First, I get to work every day in a cause that inspires us all. And, second: I get to do that work with the highly accomplished, committed, passionate people of UNICEF.

Indeed, UNICEF is its people.

I saw this many times at the U.S. Fund, while on various trips to the field, and while volunteering on a UNICEF project in South Africa – and I have seen it every day since I rejoined the UNICEF community.

I have never failed to be impressed by the courage and commitment of our field staff ... and I have never failed to be moved by the bravery and resilience of the children they serve.

I will never forget the children I saw on my first trips into the field – the most disadvantaged children, deprived of every benefit, but still able to hope ... and even to smile in the face of crushing poverty.

I often wonder about those children -- whether they survived, thrived, went on to school and the fullness of life.
Sadly, we know that millions and millions do not, while millions more are victimized, exploited and abused every year.

Protecting those children – and making progress for all of them – has always been UNICEF’s mandate. As we approach 2015, the stakes could not be higher.

In the last 12 months, we have marked two major milestones -- the 20th anniversary year of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 10th anniversary of the Optional Protocols to that convention, which have done so much to protect so many children from unspeakable exploitation and abuse.

These are more than anniversaries to commemorate; they are a daily call to action – and the people of UNICEF answer it every day. I am committed to ensuring that we continue to do everything we can to fulfill the rights of every child.

Jim Grant used to say there had been more progress in the last fifty years than in the prior 500 years – and the last 15 years have accelerated the pace.

The under-five mortality rate has declined by more than 50% since 1970. Compared to 1990, 10,000 more children are living to see another day, every day – although the total figure remains unspeakably high.

That number – and the desire to see it drop to zero preventable deaths -- is one of the main reasons everyone at UNICEF works so hard.

Working in close coalition with our many partners at the UN and in civil society, we are making an impact.

Last year, UNICEF procured nearly 3 billion doses of life-saving vaccines, averting an estimated 2.5 million deaths every year.

In 2009, UNICEF also distributed 43 million bed nets in 49 countries – a 125% increase in only one year, saving an untold number of lives.

Worldwide, 34 million more children are attending school today than 20 years ago.

We are helping children in crisis and post-crisis situations to keep learning in places like Southern Sudan, where in only four years we have helped to quadruple the number of children in school.

And 2009 also saw the release of thousands of children from involvement in armed conflicts.

We know that our work is saving children’s lives -- and changing children’s lives.
But even with such meaningful gains ... even with these coordinated efforts ... even with so many dedicated people working around the clock out in the field, it is clear that our collective progress on behalf of children is uneven at best.

As the world measures its progress toward meeting the MDGs, data is beginning to show widening rifts between rich and poor countries and glaring disparities within nations – injustices that should make us all furious.

It is outrageous that a woman in Niger has a 1 in 7 chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth over her lifetime. In the richest countries, that number is 1 in 8000 on average.

It is unthinkable that since 1990, while the rest of the world has seen enormous reductions in the rate of children dying before they reach the age of 5, in Afghanistan, that rate has remained flat.

That’s a tragic truth in the DRC too, and in other nations.

It is in countries like these – in Africa and South Asia -- where the disparities between the rich and poor nations are the widest, and where children are suffering the most -- that UNICEF’s assistance is most desperately needed.

And it is not only between rich and poor nations that we see such disparities; we are seeing gaps widen between and within countries in the developing world also.

Disadvantaged children in the developing world are:

- Two or three times more likely to be underweight than children from the richest quintile of their societies – and two to three times more likely to suffer from stunting.

- Two or even three times less likely to attend school than the richest children – and the majority of those left out are girls.

- Worst of all, children from the bottom quintile in their societies are two to three times more likely to die before reaching the age of five as those in the richest quintile.

And since mothers in the poorest quintile are up to three times less likely to have a skilled birth attendant than those in the richest, there is a correspondingly tragic disparity in the number of women dying in childbirth, and in the number of stillbirths and birth injuries and newborn deaths.

These injustices are exacerbated by the global economic crisis, natural disasters and the worst effects of climate change – all of which affect those least able to bear them.

When you add the special discrimination facing girls, indigenous people and children with disabilities – and the special needs of children living in conflict-filled countries and chronic emergency situations -- the picture becomes even more grim.
These are the forgotten children, marginalized simply because of the economic and social inequities in their societies ... left behind simply because they were born female, or poor, or in the wrong place.

And the data increasingly suggests that in the global acceleration to meet the Millennium Development Goals, we are simply not doing enough to help them – and to break down the real barriers to more equitable progress.

So, as we consider our final, five-year push to meet the MDGs, we should take a very careful look at the strategies available to us. Two broadly described methods come to mind.

The first is through averaging.

The world could be – and to some extent, is -- focusing its efforts on the largest developing countries, or, within nations, on the easiest areas and people to reach.

This could lead to substantial statistical progress – at the expense of missing those in greatest need ... and with the unintended consequence of widening the inequities both among and within nations.

The best illustration of this possibility I’ve seen is an eye-opening set of maps that a UNICEF colleague from Brazil recently shared with me, based on data from the Brazilian Ministry of Health.

**SLIDE #1**

The first slide you see is a map of Brazil.

As you can see from the first slide, at the country level, on average, Brazil has a low mortality rate of less than 17 per thousand live births. It is a very satisfactory green.

But take a look at the same map, broken down by state.

**SLIDE #2**

As you can see, when you do this, a very different picture emerges.

**SLIDE #3**

If you further disaggregate the data to the community level, you quickly notice how much work remains.

And that is exactly the point: If we focus on averaging alone, we could easily miss all the work that needs to be done. Such a result might yield a statistical success, but a moral failure.
To be clear, this is a map of Brazil – a middle-income country that is working very hard to reduce disparities in its society. But it could be a map of any country. Imagine similar maps in Africa.

I don’t think anyone in this room wants to see us engaged in an effort that widens the gaps between rich and poor -- especially not now, when we are engaged in the greatest push to reduce global poverty the world has ever known.

At such an historic moment, the bottom quintile must become the world’s top priority.

Wherever the poorest children are ... wherever the most vulnerable children are ... wherever the forgotten children are ... that is where we must also be – in ever greater measure.

That would be the second way of meeting the MDGs -- one that maintains what we are doing, but focuses new attention on overcoming the systemic, structural and cultural barriers to achieving sustainable change in even the poorest communities.

Such an increased focus on the bottom quintile is the best way to honour our commitment to protect the rights of the world’s most vulnerable children.

This commitment is at the core of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is at the heart of UNICEF’s history, our mission and our mandate: It is who we are, and what we do.

It is also deeply imbedded in our organizational priorities. Our own Medium Term Strategic Plan explicitly directs us to focus “resources, attention and assistance on the poorest, most vulnerable, excluded, discriminated and marginalized groups.”

Above all, it is the right thing to do.

But beyond the moral imperative, there are a number of practical reasons for focusing on the forgotten children.

To begin with, our initial analyses show that in many nations this new focus can move us just as steadily – if not more so -- to reaching the MDGs.

This is because it is simply not enough to reach the greatest number of children in the most reachable places; to make progress, we must save the greatest number of children in the greatest need, and protect them from exploitation, neglect and abuse.

This approach is also more strategic and sustainable.

If we focus our efforts on the “easy wins” now, the forgotten children will not magically disappear in the march to statistical victory.
Instead, we could find ourselves in 2015 still facing the toughest challenges of reaching these children — but with fewer resources, political exhaustion and a public that has moved on.

In other words, we could wind up like sprinters crossing the finish line — only to discover that we are still in the middle of a marathon.

Focusing on the forgotten children is also the best — and in some cases, the only — way to achieve many of UNICEF’s key initiatives, all of which are integral to achieving the MDGs.

We have been able to virtually eradicate polio because we have penetrated into the hardest to reach places. But to prevent such deadly diseases from making a comeback — and to defeat other deadly scourges like measles and malaria — we need that same focus.

The same can be said for achieving universal primary education — something we know may be the single most important factor in achieving sustainable progress on all of the MDGs.

Studies suggest that a staggering 50-70 percent of all children out of school worldwide are from indigenous and ethnic minority groups — and the majority of those children are girls, possibly the world’s most forgotten children.

So imagine our progress on MDG 2 if we focus our efforts on removing the barriers that are keeping those children out of school to begin with — and on improving the quality of the education they receive there.

I travelled to Senegal in May to attend the United Nations Girls Education Initiative conference, and everything I learned there reinforced a central truth: By investing in girls’ and women’s education and empowerment, we are investing in the success of all of our work.

Finally, let’s not forget another reason to focus on the forgotten children — a reason I hesitate to call practical, because it represents such a fundamentally emotional appeal: The best way to build public support for the MDGs is not with an abstract statistic, but with a human face — the face of a child.

Taken all around, such an approach is a marriage of principle and practical reality — and we believe it is achievable.

I can tell you that in my meetings thus far with government officials from many member states, both here in New York and on travel to Asia and Africa, and in conversation with our colleagues in National Committees and across civil society, there is great enthusiasm for this new focus.

I can also tell you that they are looking to UNICEF and our sister UN agencies to lead this effort.
Such a strategy will require UNICEF to work more closely with governments, international partners and local NGOs to do still more of what we already do: Work in the poorest communities and in some of the toughest areas around the world.

It will present serious challenges. But we also believe it offers remarkable opportunities to meet them.

This is not only because the MDGs have driven unprecedented political will and increased public attention. Today, technology and ingenuity have made new tools available for community-based efforts that could only be dreamed of even a decade or two ago.

For example, SMS texting technology is enabling us to track everything from vaccine shortages to pandemic outbreaks to bed net distribution and incipient famine.

The development of new vaccines for Rotavirus and pneumococcal pneumonia will help us fight the two greatest killers of young children – diarrhea and pneumonia.

And innovations like Mother-Baby Packs can help HIV positive mothers from passing on the virus to their children.

Let me conclude, then, with a brief outline of some of the things we will be working on, with you and with our regional and country offices, as we think through this new focus.

First, we need to make better use of enormous quantities of high quality data UNICEF generates – disaggregating it to better identify disparities and better target our efforts to address them.

Second, we must do more to assist governments in building their own capacities to overcome systemic deficiencies, and to address the underlying causes of inequities.

Third, we need to make sure that children in countries facing the worst difficulties – chronic emergencies and other fragile situations – are not further marginalized. We are now seeing disturbing funding gaps growing for our programmes in countries like Somalia, Sudan, Chad, DRC, Niger, Pakistan -- and continuous neglect of children in silent emergencies.

Fourth, we will invest further effort in our own organization, by making UNICEF even more results-focused, and improve our country programmes’ ability to develop integrated cross-sectoral community interventions. For example, our gains in health could evaporate over time if we don’t also invest in the education that can help lift a community out of poverty.

We will continue to improve efficiencies across all our functions, from our performance management and talent development, to our strategic communications and decision-making processes.

And we need to be more accountable – to one another, accountable to our donors and partners, and most of all, accountable to the children. Because, in the end, what matters is not our rhetoric, it is our results.
This leads me to my next point. We cannot hope to achieve the results – the victories -- we seek for children if we try to go it alone.

In all of our efforts, we must recognize and respect the principle of comparative advantage. If another partner or organization can do something better than we can, we should support them, just as we look to their support in the areas of our own greatest strength.

Nowhere is this more essential than in our most important partnerships of all: Those we enjoy with our sister UN agencies.

Joint programmes do not diminish our individual mandates, they enable us to deliver more tangible results to more children. That is what it really means to “deliver as one.” If we work together, we will succeed – and we cannot afford to fail.

This is a long list, but it is not a wish list.

We know it will not be easy – for these are highly complex challenges. But we have an unprecedented opportunity to make sustainable progress for the forgotten children at a critical, historical moment. And we are ready to try.

Clearly, it is a work in progress – and we will need not only your support, but your wisdom as well, not only during this week, but in the months and years ahead.

I look forward to our work together. And I thank you again for this opportunity to join you in this great cause.

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