Seven years ago, at our annual Board meeting, I remember how encouraged I was by our shared belief that the world could, and must, do more for the poorest and most disadvantaged children.

Because despite the progress the world had achieved in pursuing the Millennium Development Goals, too many children were — and still are — being left behind. Uncaptured by the aggregate national statistics used to measure progress towards the MDGs was the reality of millions of forgotten children being denied the nutrition, health care, education and protection they needed — and deserved — simply because of where they lived…their religion or ethnicity…their gender or disability…or the conflicts or natural disasters that kept them from the help they needed.

The world’s failure to reach these children was and is a fundamental violation of their rights — which can be summarized as the right that every child has to a fair start in life.

The denial of this right to hundreds of millions of children around the world, in every society, has vast practical consequences.
Because when we fail to provide health care, water or nutrition to a boy…when we fail to educate a girl or protect her from abuse and exploitation…when we fail to support the futures of uprooted children as they flee conflict or extreme deprivation…we condemn these children, and one day their children, to the intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality that are dividing and even tearing societies apart around the world.

Seven years ago, it was becoming increasingly clear that, while the pursuit of the MDGs was achieving real progress in reducing overall under-five mortality rates, it was too often failing to do so for the poorest and most disadvantaged. The “tyranny of averages” was obscuring the struggles of the hardest-to-reach, and therefore hardest-to-serve, children.

This was illustrated at our June 2010 Board meeting when we examined together three maps provided by the Brazilian government. The first presented an average under-five mortality rate that put Brazil on track to reach MDG 4, reducing child mortality. So the entire country was colored a beautiful green.
But the second map, broken down by state, showed a very different picture — dramatic disparities between rich and poor states. And the third, showing municipalities, was a speckled patchwork of green, yellow and red, reflecting widespread inequities not only in under-five mortality, but in other indicators of disadvantage.

These could have been maps of any country, because every country and every society grapples with the same disparities between the “haves” and “have-nots.”

Such disparities are not only unfair — a violation of children’s fundamental rights — they’re deadly. Children growing up in poverty are nearly twice as likely to die before reaching their fifth birthdays as children growing up in wealthier households. A heartbreaking injustice. Intolerable.

And so our first Board meeting together in 2010 reinforced our firm, collective commitment to making the bottom quintile our top priority.

But we were left with a question. If focusing on the poorest children was unquestionably right in principle, was it practical in financial and programmatic terms? Or would the additional costs of reaching these children outweigh the additional results achieved?
Too often, the assumption in some development quarters was that while helping those most in need was praiseworthy, focusing on them would be too expensive and too difficult — and thus would slow progress towards the MDGs.

To test this assumption, we conducted the first “Narrowing the Gaps” modelling study over the summer of 2010. I know I was surprised by the result. It showed that the greater cost of reaching the most deprived children and families was significantly outweighed by the greater results. We would achieve more progress, faster, by focusing on the most disadvantaged. Working towards greater equity was not only right in principle, but in fact, right in practice. Cost-effective.

In checking our work, we asked a group of experts to review — and challenge — the study’s methodology and findings. It supported them. That group included my soon-to-be friend and colleague as Executive Director of UNFPA, Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin — Nigeria’s former Minister of Health. I know we all mourn his sudden passing last week.
The study confirmed for us the importance of pursuing an equity strategy — refocusing on putting the most disadvantaged at the heart of our work in all our country programmes. In doing so, we were supporting an emerging global trend, as governments have increasingly put equity at the centre of national development efforts:

- Expanding immunization coverage and insecticide-treated bed nets for the poorest and most disadvantaged populations, with great results.
- Increasing access to water and sanitation for millions of children, focusing on hard-to-reach areas.
- Delivering nutrition, medicine and trained health care directly to remote, rural communities through innovative mobile health-delivery systems.
- Helping communities rebuild after natural disasters and become better prepared for future crises.

And Brazil, the country whose maps we examined together at that 2010 meeting, has registered an over 15 per cent reduction in under-five mortality between 2008 and 2014.

Governments, supported by UNICEF and our many partners, are translating a pro-equity approach into real results for children. Lives improved. Lives saved. The best result of all.
Later this month, we’ll release a new “Narrowing the Gaps” study that confirms this. The study — called “The power of investing in the poorest children” — examines updated results in 51 countries where the vast majority of newborn and under-five deaths occur.

Here are just a few examples of where governments have achieved impressive results with equity. Between 1990 and 2015:

- **Afghanistan** cut its under-five mortality rate in half thanks to improved skilled birth attendance in hard-to-reach areas.

- **Bangladesh** cut its under-five mortality rate by almost three quarters — not only by establishing community health clinics in rural and remote villages, but by improving water, sanitation and hygiene systems.

- And **Rwanda** dramatically reduced its under-five mortality rate from 152 deaths per 1,000 to only 42. A tremendous achievement made possible by dramatically expanding health coverage, bed nets and skilled birth attendance.

  In fact, in the last year alone, of the 1.1 million lives saved across the 51 countries studied, 85 per cent were among the poor.
The new study finds that every US$1 million invested in the poorest children and communities ultimately saves nearly twice as many lives as equivalent investments that do not reach the poor.

So, with the same conviction that inspired our efforts seven years ago, and now buttressed by the evidence of this and other studies, we can say with still-greater confidence that “equity is right in both principle and practice.” We are on the right track.

But while the gaps are undoubtedly narrowing, they’re not closed yet. Too many children are still suffering and dying needlessly, from causes we know how to prevent. And in some cases, inequities are widening. Unless we accelerate our current progress, almost 70 million more children will die before they reach their fifth birthdays by 2030. We have a lot of work to do.

The new study will describe practical steps to reduce inequities — from strengthening community-based approaches to health…to using disaggregated data to identify the children being left behind…to investing in proven health interventions to prevent unnecessary illness and death among the most disadvantaged.
And in fact, this approach provides the fastest path for governments to meet their commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals. Agenda 2030’s welcome commitment to “leave no one behind” requires, by definition, reaching every girl and every boy, in every society. A truly universal mandate, reflecting the fact that children’s rights are universal.

UNICEF will continue supporting governments in these efforts — as seen in our new Strategic Plan, which we’ll discuss at this session before it’s presented to you in September for approval, along with our integrated budget. A budget that will include a continued trend in increasing investments in country programmes, supported by a strong new investment in fundraising focused on increasing Regular Resources.

The Plan will support the achievement of the SDGs in five key areas:

- Every Child Survives and Thrives;
- Every Child Learns;
- Every Child is Protected from Violence & Exploitation;
- Every Child Lives in a Safe & Clean Environment; and
- Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life.
Each goal area is interlinked through cross-cutting priorities like equity, gender equality, humanitarian action, children with disabilities and adolescent development.

Most importantly, the Plan is focused on the results that will help make the SDGs a reality, and the specific strategies and enablers required to achieve those results.

That includes emphasis on continued co-operation with governments and other partners — most importantly our sister UN agencies. The Plan’s results framework includes many common indicators to measure our collective progress in addressing poverty and inequality…humanitarian efforts…humanitarian-development integration…climate change…gender equity…and better data. We look forward to continuing consultations on the Strategic Plan with the Board in the coming weeks.

To strengthen how our agencies work together at the country level, we suggest a number of common approaches as we implement our respective plans. These include mobilizing resources for joint initiatives…new monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track performance…strengthening results groups…and expanding the standard operating procedures. All with a focus on leaving no child behind, and reaching the farthest behind first.
As with equity, stronger collaboration across the UN family is “right in principle and right in practice.” Not only does collaboration help us more efficiently achieve results for children — it can also save us precious financial resources.

For example, in 2015, our UNICEF country offices reported savings of nearly $3 million achieved by sharing business costs with other UN agencies. And we’re one of three agencies leading an initiative to better co-ordinate the use of our fleet of vehicles among UN country teams, which could yield an annual savings of up to $4 million for UNICEF.

As we look to enhance efficiency with our partners outside UNICEF, we are also looking within, to how our operations can inform and support governments’ priorities, while using our resources ever-more efficiently.

Building on recent innovations in our work, our Field Results Group is working to align our resources — financial and human — in the field.

Our Global Shared Services Centre in Budapest is now processing all of UNICEF’s financial and administrative transactions.
Our evaluation function is helping design, target and deliver interventions that will make the biggest difference in children’s lives. Evaluations demonstrate what works and what does not, and help us build a strong evidence base to constantly improve our programmes. We’re now accelerating evaluation activities in humanitarian contexts, and at the same time, finding more cost-efficient ways of conducting these evaluations — including through rapid, modular evaluations, and integrated information systems that avoid data duplication.

And we’re strengthening our audit function by reinforcing new initiatives like reforming staff performance management and recruitment, and adopting an anti-fraud strategy.

We’re also working to become more energy efficient across our organization. To help us do this, last year we collected environmental data from all of our offices—our headquarters, as well as our regional and country offices and 230 zone offices around the world. This represents the largest data-gathering of its kind across the UN system. All to use our resources more responsibly — and to lead by example as we green our organization and operations.

And of course, as we’ve discussed at previous Board meetings, our emphasis on innovation is vital to our equity agenda — to reaching the hardest-to-reach more quickly.
For example, our Innovation Office has helped country offices and governments establish two “drone corridors” in Malawi and Vanuatu to test this exciting technology in supporting humanitarian aid efforts.

RapidPro is an SMS and social-media-based system that is now helping deliver UNICEF-supported programmes in over 40 country offices around the world — tracking immunizations, enabling birth registrations, and strengthening health and education systems.

And Magic Box, a data-analysis platform in its early stages of development, is already showing great promise for supporting disaster-management efforts — including the ability to predict where diseases are travelling.

These are just a few examples of many where innovations can support our efforts to reach every child.

As we reach into the most disadvantaged areas, we must also broaden our base of supporters around the world.

This includes developing new advocacy and fundraising campaigns with our National Committees, country offices and regional teams.
And it includes exploring new ways to expand the number and reach of people committed to our cause. We cannot do all that we must do without the wonderful volunteers and citizens around the world who share our commitment to reaching every child, everywhere. We want to significantly multiply the number of people who are not only supporting UNICEF, but who consider themselves part of UNICEF.

Most of all, our equity agenda will continue to be driven by UNICEF’s most essential resource — our staff. As they serve children’s needs, everyone on our senior management team — and indeed, all of our friends on the Board — must continue keeping their needs at the centre of our management efforts.

UNICEF’s recent global staff survey indicated a number of strong ratings on performance management, diversity, staff security, and knowledge and information-sharing. We also made significant improvements since the last survey on work-life balance, workload distribution, and standards of conduct.

But the survey also reminded us of the work still to be done — particularly in the area of career development. We’ll be discussing these results — and most importantly, what to do about them — at our Global Management Team meeting next week.
I’d like to emphasize one area where staff satisfaction has remained extremely high: motivation. The survey shows, once again, that UNICEF staff share an unbreakable passion and commitment to the world’s children and their rights.

As they are motivated, we are all the more inspired by their work. And all the more committed to demonstrating the lifesaving results that our staff members are helping governments and our civil society partners achieve every day — often in the face of enormous obstacles and even danger.

Results like those outlined in my Annual Report, available on PaperSmart. The 85 million children vaccinated against measles last year…the 40 million people who gained access to safe water…the 4.5 million children treated for severe acute malnutrition…the 11.7 million children living through humanitarian emergencies who received basic education services.

By changing people’s lives for the better — by achieving real results and real progress for the most disadvantaged and marginalized girls and boys — we all are showing that progress is possible. That every life has an immeasurable value. And that, ultimately, the better, more equal world envisioned by the Sustainable Development Goals is not a naïve hope, but a reachable reality.
That unshakeable belief in results, not intentions…in results for every child, especially the most disadvantaged…animates everything we do at UNICEF, every aspect of our Strategic Plan, everything you are doing as our Executive Board, and everything we will do together in the months and years ahead. Governments. Partners. Donors. All of us.

So I’m all the more grateful for your continued leadership and advice as we seek to serve every child, everywhere.

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