

Statement at the 2021 High-level Political Forum on behalf of 63 countries as members of the Group of Friends of Children and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 58 countries as members of the Group of Friends of Decent Workⁱ

Delivered by Ms. Lachezara Stoeva, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Bulgaria

Excellencies,

I am pleased to address the High-level Political Forum this year on behalf of members of the *Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs*, together with the members of the *Group of Friends of Decent Work*.

2021 has been designated as the *International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour*. As such, our two Groups came together in April for a first-of-its-kind joint meeting to discuss the critical issue of ending child labour.

According to the latest data released by the ILO and UNICEF, for the first time in two decades, the number of children involved in child labour has increased, to a total of 160 million, i.e. 1 in 10 children worldwide. An additional 9 million children are at risk of being pushed into child labour as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we address this Forum, the world -- in particular the poorest countries and the most vulnerable people within those countries -- is still reeling from the consequences of the pandemic. Estimates indicate that up to 124 million people fell into poverty in 2020, and an equivalent of 255 million full time jobs were lost. However, and notwithstanding the grave challenges caused by the pandemic, there has been positive progress.

Our scientific communities came together and created effective vaccines in record time. It is imperative that those vaccines are distributed equitably and effectively to all people globally.

By working together and through joint action, the international community can defeat this virus. Once the immediate health crisis is contained, we will have an equally important and daunting task – rebuilding our societies, creating decent jobs and combatting the myriad of secondary impacts caused by lockdown measures and global closures, *particularly on our children*. We need swift and decisive action to alleviate these adverse impacts.

First, on education. At the height of lockdown measures, 93% of children globally – over 1.5 BILLION children – had their schools closed and education disrupted. For the more fortunate children, schools and teachers were able to pivot to online learning, so that their education did not completely come to a halt. However, for 400 million children globally without internet access, this was not an option. Many of these children may never be able to catch up and may face lifelong disadvantages stemming from this disruption. *This is not acceptable.*

As we look to safely reopen our communities and our schools, we need to invest more in education and reimagine better systems, curricula and skills-building to set children up for success, including in decent jobs that will be available to them when they transition to the workforce. While online education is not a substitute for in-person learning, *every child* should have digital connectivity and safe access to the internet.

Second, on social protection for the most vulnerable children and full and productive employment and decent work for their families. Due to the economic consequences triggered by global shutdowns, UNICEF

and Save the Children estimate that, in 2020 alone, 142 million additional children fell back into monetary poverty. This, in turn, has led to the erosion of other child rights: families cannot afford to send their children to school; child labour is on the rise; children's access to healthcare, nutritious food and clean water has been threatened; domestic and sexual violence against children has increased, and the stresses of dealing with the pandemic pose a major risk to children's mental health and physical safety.

Trillions of dollars globally have and will continue to be deployed as part of the COVID-19 response and recovery through both domestic budgets and development assistance. It is imperative that resources are also committed towards protecting children's rights and well-being by ensuring adequate, efficient and effective social spending. Additionally, we must prevent and combat all forms of violence, including domestic violence and abuse, sexual exploitation of children online and offline, and cyberbullying, while also bridging the digital divide through safe access to the internet for all.

Third, children and youth must be fully engaged in creating a safe, fair, inclusive and sustainable recovery through mechanisms that enable meaningful child and youth participation at local, national, regional and global levels. *The face of social change is the face of a young person*, and it is imperative that we continue to engage with children and youth as stakeholders, solution creators and agents of change in the context of the HLPF and the 2030 Agenda as a whole, including through improved mechanisms and opportunities here at the UN.

Excellencies,

Next year, global events such as the 5th *Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour* and the 5th *United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries* offer all of us opportunities to make specific commitments to take action in support of child rights. 2022 is also the 20-year anniversary of the last UN GA Special Session on Children. It is, therefore, an opportune time to discuss how we build back, fairer, safer, healthier, more sustainable, and more ambitious — for all children today and for future generations.

Thank you.

ⁱ Countries as members of the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs and Group of Friends on Decent Work: Angola, Andorra, Argentina, Armenia, Antigua and Barbuda, Austria, Australia, Bahamas, Bangladesh, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, European Union (observer), Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Lesotho, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, Mozambique, Nepal, The Netherlands, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Norway, Panama, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Rwanda, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uganda, Uruguay, Vanuatu, Vietnam.