UNICEF Regional Director’s Speech at the Opening Ceremony to the Second Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030, 16-18th November 2016

Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers and High Level Officials
Development Partners, both UN, bilateral partners and Civil Society Organisations
Distinguished Delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure and honour to welcome you on behalf of UNICEF alongside our trusted partner, Dr Kim from our sister agency UNESCO.

First of all – our sincere condolences over the recent loss of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who reigned over this great country for over 70 years. He was a great advocate for education and supporter of many education projects especially for the most hard to reach children. He will be greatly missed.

My thanks to the Royal Thai Government for continuing to host these critical regional meetings on education during this period of mourning and for their enduring commitment to ensuring equity and quality in their own education system.

Thanks to all of us who have come together to help align ourselves with the Education 2030 agenda and the SDGs in this region. This region has led the global education agenda since the first Education for All Conference at Jomtien in 1990. It is great to see this tradition continue as we re-group around the Education 2030. We already have strong partnerships in place, but we now have an opportunity to review and expand partnerships, including those
with inter-governmental organisations, new donors and of course the private sector. Civil society needs strengthening in many countries to ensure greater accountability for the SDGs. We also need to ensure that SDG partnerships span the different sectors. SDG 4 is vital for the achievement of all the 17 SDGs as they all depend on knowledge and skills.

**SDG4 sees education as life-long learning.** This means improving the education sector as a whole. Different partners will provide support according to their comparative advantages. For UNICEF our focus is on the child from birth to adolescence. UNICEF support for education in this region will focus on three key areas.

**Firstly, unfinished business! All children must attend and complete basic education. We are still way off target!** Asia-Pacific remains home to the largest number of out-of-school children in the world. The total number is now estimated at 17.3 million\(^1\). In 2013, 1.2 million more children of primary school age were not enrolled in school in the Asia-Pacific region, compared to 2010. We are regressing! Many of these children, particularly girls, are concentrated in South Asia, whilst in other areas we see a worrying trend of boys dropping out. The SAARC Framework for Action on SDG 4 represents a bold commitment by South Asian countries to reduce the number of out-of-school children as you will hear in Session 3 today.

Numerous barriers prevent children from attending school, including: poverty, distance, inadequate support for children with disabilities, gender, language and ethnicity. These challenges require high quality analysis as we have seen through the Out of School Children Initiative, but they also requires transparency in publishing the data, and commitment to apply the analysis to planning and most importantly actual implementation.

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Getting all children into school also means more equitable financing. **Too often governments spend less on marginalised children than on those from wealthier backgrounds.** The reverse should be true.

**Innovative approaches are also required.** We need schools that are inclusive and ensure diverse learning needs are met. Of all the marginalised groups in this region children with disabilities are probably the most neglected. National data on the number of people with disabilities is highly unreliable. It is estimated that 1 in 10 children have a disability yet the Global Partnership for Education in 2016 estimates that **90% of children with disabilities** in low income and lower-middle income countries do not go to school. UNICEF is supporting the enhancement of data and the global agenda for inclusive education.

**Secondly, many children who do go to school learn nothing!** We must address ‘the global learning crisis’ In 2012 it was estimated that 250 million children of primary school age failed to attain the basic skills in reading and mathematics. Incredibly more than half of these were in school, at grade 4 or above, yet they had still failed to attain the basic skills. This indicates the need for further analysis of why many children are not learning. There may be a variety of reasons including a prevalence of teacher centred methodologies which are not sensitive to the needs of the learner and fail to help children develop thinking and problem solving skills. In some cases teacher absenteeism can also be an issue. **We must therefore not only identify and address those issues excluding children from school, but also those excluding them from learning in the classroom.**

**Children need a critical range of skills if they are to lead positive lives.** This includes not only the foundations for employability, but must also for more peaceful and environmentally
sustainable societies. This is why our flagship initiative with SEAMEO – the South East Asia Primary Learning Metrics, includes the assessment of global citizenship. **Global citizenship education** involves developing the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need for securing a world which is more just, peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure and sustainable. We are delighted that seven ASEAN countries have committed to this initiative and that ASEAN is now also jointly leading the partnership with SEAMEO and UNICEF.

**Education is essential if we are to address gender inequalities**, including gender based violence, early marriage, teenage pregnancies and equitable access to work. Hence the interventions that we support through UNGEI.

**Thirdly, we must ensure that no child has his or her education interrupted due to an emergency or crisis.** 1 in 4 of the world’s children and youth live in countries affected by crisis. We need to bridge the gap between emergency responses and longer term development and address migration more broadly. UNICEF has played a lead role in the development of the **Education Cannot Wait initiative**. A global fund for education in emergencies is expected to reach US $ 1.5 billion over the next 5 years.

**Finally a poor girl or boy, suffering from malnutrition in a remote area affected by conflict cannot be rescued by the education sector alone!** As the UN agency for the child, UNICEF pledges to play a critical role in helping partners across the sectors identify how they can work together to address the needs of those suffering from multiple deprivations. Support from social protection, health, water, sanitation and nutrition are required is all children are to be well educated. Every school should be child friendly and free from corporal punishment and violence.

**Focussing on equity means starting with the youngest.** Neurological research has recently driven a growing global commitment to early childhood development. A child has to be fit,
healthy and safe if she is to be ready to learn when she enters primary school. The investment case is clear yet few government invest much in early childhood development or pre-primary education. So inequalities emerge early in life which are often very difficult to reverse.

As we plan our collective commitments for the next 15 years I assure you that UNICEF is ready to assist you in ensuring that education helps make the world a more equitable, safe and sustainable place.

I wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to the outcomes of this key meeting.

Improving the lives of children will bring about a brighter future for Asia Pacific.