Opening remarks at the UNICEF Executive Board’s First Regular Session, February 5, 2013

By the President of the Executive Board, Ambassador Jarmo Viinanen, Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Executive Director Lake, President Kim

It is both a great honor and pleasure for me to open the 2013 First Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board.

Welcome to all participants, especially those who have travelled long distances to attend, and to the new Executive Board members participating for the first time in our sessions.

I am pleased and honoured to be working with Mr. Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director, whose enthusiastic support of the work of the Executive Board is very much appreciated.

Thanks to all of you who have worked hard to ensure this session will run smoothly: (i) the secretariat of UNICEF, including the Deputy Executive Directors who will join us during these meetings; (ii) Nicolas Pron, Christine Muhigana and their staff in the Office of the Secretary of the Executive Board; (iii) and of course the UN Conference Services, in particular the indefatigable interpreters.

I would like to recognize and thank all representatives of National Committees for your invaluable work for the children.

I’d like especially to acknowledge and welcome the presence of the President of the World Bank Mr. Jim Kim. It is good to have such a great partner here today! We appreciate and support cooperation between UNICEF and the Bank both at headquarters and in the field.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we are commencing our work, it is appropriate to remind ourselves of a key provision in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 3 of the Convention reads: “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.”

This should be the guiding principle in our work as the Executive Board of the UNICEF.
The state of the world’s children is far from perfect. There is continued progress in children’s health, education and probably also in protection of children. But there is a lot of work to be done. And we must do much better.

19 000 children die every day from preventable causes, millions of children go hungry and without access to education. In humanitarian crises it is the children who suffer and lose the most. Countless children are victims of dangerous physical labour, commercial sexual exploitation or child trafficking.

Within these walls, when dealing with strategies, plans and decisions, we have to remember that there is a real world out there. In that real world children suffer every day. It is our duty to relieve them from their suffering and build a better future for them.

Think about Syria. A United Nations joint mission to the western Syria, in which UNICEF took part, found that in Homs 420,000 people need immediate humanitarian assistance. Half of them are children.

In Syria – and in Mali, in Darfur, in Somalia and in any humanitarian crisis caused by political crisis – children are main victims, losing their lives and future because of reckless actions taken by adults. The very same adults who should protect and have the best interest of children in their mind.

But children are not only victims; they are active agents of change, wise beyond their years, as demonstrated most recently by inspiring Malala Yousafzai. She is a resilient young advocate for girls’ education, brutally targeted with bullets for her activities, now on her way to recovery. I wish the very best to Malala and her family.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is the first time ever Finland is presiding over the UNICEF Executive Board. But we are no strangers to this organization.

Over 65 years ago, when UNICEF started its mission to help the world’s children, Finnish children received support from UNICEF. Finland had survived a devastating war and was the only Nordic country suffering from food shortage. The leading cause of child mortality was diarrhea and we had 20 000 children who couldn’t go to school in the winter for the lack of shoes.

Already in 1951 Finland gave its first contribution to UNICEF to help children in other countries. We are very proud that we as a receiving country managed to become a donor country in only three years. Our commitment has been there ever since and we have constantly increased our financial and human contribution to the organization.
How did we recover so rapidly and become a donor so quickly? The solution lies in the very areas of work UNICEF still focuses on today:

Education was and will be a priority for us. We have always been educating the whole society – girls and boys, rich and poor, disabled and marginalized children.

Child and maternal health are dear to us. We started to introduce organized regular health checks for expecting mothers and babies already in 1920s. These clinics were and are still used also to spread information and distribute support.

And in the field of child nutrition, free school meals for children were introduced early on.

These are key ingredients of our society even today and our recipe for success. Therefore it is only natural that we committed to support UNICEF in its effort to fulfill its mandate based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Ladies and gentlemen,

UNICEF’s mandate remains global and relevant to all countries. After all, child-friendly policies are not dependent on the income level of the country.

UNICEF has achieved good progress in some areas, such as reduction of child mortality, while the extent of other areas of work may not even be known to us for the lack of reliable data, such as on violence against children.

This is an important year in the UNICEF Executive Board. The Board is expected to discuss and adopt the new medium-term strategic plan (MTSP) for the coming four years.

We have heard promising updates from UNICEF about a stronger emphasis on tackling inequality, targeting activities to benefit the most vulnerable, and better integration of human rights, gender and environment on all issues.

The new MTSP should more clearly show the results of UNICEFs humanitarian activities and gear UNICEF’s work towards improving resilience of communities.

All these improvements will continue to enhance UNICEF’s work. The updated evaluation policy is also one aspect of results-based management, and offers solid ground for evidence-based decision-making.

Ladies and gentlemen,
We have less than three years to reach the MDGs. At the same time discussions on the post-2015 development agenda are intensifying.

UNICEF has a key role and responsibility to advocate that wellbeing and rights of the child remain a priority in global development. The priorities of UNICEF must be reflected in the new goals. We have to ensure that UNICEF contributes to the achievement of today’s and future development goals.

It is a true honor to take up this important task. In my capacity as the President of this Executive Board I shall do my utmost to facilitate successful deliberations. I will aim to chair the Executive Board in a spirit of openness and constructive dialogue which is interactive, inclusive and has as its guiding principle the best interests of the child.