Mr. President,

1. I have the pleasure to present in short some key elements of the report of the delegation of the Board, comprising representatives from Denmark, Djibouti, the Netherlands and my own country Albania, that carried out a field visit to Sudan from 26 April to 2 May 2014, which I was pleased and honoured to lead. The full report is already available so I will limit myself to some key remarks.

   I would like to start by expressing the delegation’s appreciation to the Government of Sudan for its cooperation in preparing the visit and for the welcome, as well as the opportunities for substantive dialogue with authorities at the federal and state level. Our particular appreciation goes to UNICEF country team in Sudan for the well-prepared and well-organized visit, and to the country representative Geert Cappeleare and his team for the support, the level of commitment and dedication. We thank the Office of the Secretariat of the Executive Board, which provided a much needed support and assistance in planning and carrying out the visit. On a personal note, I would like to thank the other members of the delegation for their very active participation in all meetings and discussions and their thoughtful contribution in all respects to make this visit a useful one.

2. We were able to visit Khartoum, Northern State and North Darfur. In all three major locations we met with ministers or high-level representatives of several line ministries, visited several places closely linked with various UNICEF supported programmes, to exchange views on the situation of children and women in Sudan, especially the poorest and most vulnerable ones. We met with the UN country team and representatives of international and local civil society — primarily those dealing with issues related to children and youth — including youth organizations and movements. We met also met with senior officials of the United Nations system, African Union/United Nations Hybrid operation in Darfur (UNAMID) and select international cooperation partners in Sudan. The delegation visited one of the established camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), Zam Zam, one of the highlights of the visit, so as to witness the protection and services provided to children and families sheltered there as well as to inquire about the situation of recently arrived people displaced by resumed conflicts in the Darfur area.

3. The Political and Security context in Sudan is complex. In a population estimated at 37.3 million with half of them being children under 18, Sudan is a country of youth. When describing the situation in Sudan one needs to take into account a combination of different factors linked to domestic developments and government choices, the upsurge in instability in several part of the
country, a loss of oil revenue after separation with the South, instability in South Sudan, which has somewhat shadowed the situation in Sudan, the bilateral economic sanctions and, not least, nature. Poverty is deeply entrenched, is largely rural and more widespread in areas affected by conflict, drought and famine. The upsurge in violence in Darfur and in three other states (South Kordofan, Blue Nile and Abyei) is putting at risk achievements made in Darfur since the signing of the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur in 2005 and is undermining security in large parts of the country.

I wish I had the time to dwell in details about the situation of such a vast country as Sudan. I don’t. So I will concentrate on some key recommendations, which may be of interest to the Board.

4. Despite efforts and some progress, Sudan has still much to do to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. A firm and stronger commitment by the Government to put children first and to keep children at the heart of the national development agenda is crucial. A national dialogue has been initiated by the President. The delegation firmly believes that the country needs a committed, vigorously pursued and an all-inclusive national dialogue. There is no other alternative for the political parties and other stakeholders than to embrace the initiative, put an immediate end to all conflicts in the country and come together to build a future for all and by all. This is one fundamental call we heard everywhere we went in meeting with children, parents, social workers, citizens or the civil society. The war must stop.

5. The humanitarian operation of UNICEF in Sudan is one of the largest in the world. There are over 100 locations throughout the country in need of humanitarian assistance. We visited Zam Zam camp where 40,000 IDPs live in deplorable conditions, most of whom have been there for more than a decade. We were impressed by the activities of UNICEF and partners but we also witnessed the considerable challenges they face. In order to implement programmes and have sustainable impact, immediate, unhindered access to the people in need is essential. This was a key message the delegation highlighted in various meetings, particularly in Darfur. For three years, UNICEF has been without access to significant population segments in Blue Nile and South Kordofan, and obtaining travel and access permits for IDP camps in other locations is accompanied by delays and difficulties.

6. Health and nutrition issues are closely linked in Sudan, where the under-five mortality rate and the maternal mortality ratio are high and even worse in areas affected by conflict and natural disasters. Malnutrition in Sudan is an issue of great concern and is more a consequence of underdevelopment. There are over 2 million children under 5 nationwide with Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) and the problem is amplified in conflict-ridden regions. A national nutrition strategy was endorsed in 2009 and preventive activities and a nutrition information system are functional in 15 of the 17 states. Government financial contribution has increased but more efforts in this respect, including by development partners, are needed. A major challenge faced by UNICEF is the flexibility of funds to allow local purchases in country, as highlighted in more details in the report.
The delegation was particularly impressed with the innovative and multifaceted approach and involvement of stakeholders in the FGM/C Saleema campaign, including religious leaders, health workers and communities. It is clear that a shift in social and cultural traditions altering the practice of FGM/C will take a long time, but the decline in FGM is a promising signal of progress. The delegation highlighted the need for more involvement and support for the campaign at the federal level.

Limited access to clean water and sanitation services is a huge problem in Sudan and a large contributor to poor health conditions. Only 27 per cent of the population use improved sanitation, and 60.5 per cent have access to drinking water facilities. The increasing number of internally displaced people, around 2 million, adds to this challenge. Therefore clean drinking water is an immediate and critical need to keep people alive and prevent illness and the spread of diseases.

Sudan has made remarkable progress towards achieving Universal Primary Education and Education for All. The Gross Enrolment Ratio for basic education has increased almost 10 points between 2005 and 2011. Despite this, multiple challenges remain: Sudan is among the countries with the highest number of out of school children (1.8 million children aged 6-13); other inefficiencies affect the education system such as poor learning environments, especially for girls and other vulnerable groups and poor quality of teaching. Dropout rates are extremely high.

7. In the area of Child Protection, the enactment of the Federal Child Act (2010) is a milestone, aligning domestic legislation with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A regulatory and policy framework to implement its provisions is being established. A new Civil Registry Act (2011) reflects international standards and will support the modernization of the birth registration system. However, national legislation and judicial practice regarding the definition of a child are inconsistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as concepts of adulthood as per Sharia law are often applied. In addition, the act does not criminalize FGM/C, although it has been banned through state legislation in 5 of 18 Sudanese states.

8. As mentioned, Sudan has a predominantly young population; over 62 per cent are under 25 and adolescents constitute 23 per cent. The delegation was very happy to meet with a number of youth organisations, but discovered a landscape that is fragmented and there is no clear platform for youth participation on issues pertaining to their lives. The delegation was encouraged by the equity approach applied by UNICEF to address the needs of out-of-school adolescents by providing life skills based on alternative learning programmes as well as efforts to boost their employability. But we also noticed the limited resources available for this crucial sector, which may need to be reviewed in the future.

Mr. President,

9. A single short visit with a clear focused mandate on the situation of the children and women would hardly be enough to fully grasp all the issues at stake in Sudan. We thing nevertheless that the complex architecture of the United Nations presence in Sudan requires stronger coordination
and integrated assessment and planning among the various agencies on the ground to achieve synergy and magnify its impact. Speaking to different actors on the ground, the delegation was left with the impression that, despite coordination efforts between different actors, joint decision-making on operational planning, shared delivery of results, and evaluating activities of common interest, is limited. Therefore, a new vision based on an integrated analysis of the volatile situation in Sudan is needed. It should consist of better and clearer prioritization, a strategic and operational planning system that mobilizes resources around defined priorities, and a strong, integrated and timely reporting and evaluation system. It should allow all key actors and decision-makers to have a shared picture of short- and long-term developments and maximize the work of the United Nations and most of all it would maximize the continued and much appreciated hard work of the UNICEF team in Sudan to maximize their results in favour of those millions of children in Sudan who still need help and assistance and deserve a better life and a better future.

I thank you