Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, it is a privilege to present the Republic of the Maldives Country Programme for the period 2016 to 2020. The Maldives is at a critical juncture in its development. The next country programme provides an opportunity to take bold actions for every girl and boy to realise their full potential.

The Maldives graduated to ‘Middle Income’ status in 2011. Thanks to the commitment and leadership of the Government, supported by UNICEF and other development partners; by 2008, The Maldives had achieved five out of the eight Millennium Development Goals, ahead of schedule. It is the only ‘MDG Plus’ country and highest ranking on the Human Development Index, in South Asia.

The Maldives provides a state funded universal, unlimited, national health insurance scheme. There are a number of social protection programmes that help provide safety nets for the most vulnerable and contribute to poverty reduction. UNICEF supported the establishment of the Maldives child protection database that links social services with police information systems to strengthen case management and referral mechanisms at national and
community levels. The child friendly “barabru” or ‘perfect’ school initiative supported all pre-schools and primary schools in the country to obtain minimum ‘child friendly’ school standards. UNICEF’s deliberate and consistent advocacy and strategic partnerships have helped raise the profile of children at the highest levels, including for national planning and resource allocation.

While impressive gains have been made, inequality and climate change are key challenges. In one if the world’s most geographically dispersed states, significant inequalities exist, particularly between Malé (the capital), and the atolls, as well as between atolls. Stunting in the north-central region are significantly worse than in Malé; 23 per cent in north central versus 16 per cent in Malé. There are also major disparities in the average pass rates at lower-secondary between Malé (at 58 per cent) and the regions (at 30 per cent).

There is a widening income inequality gap, with the richest 10 per cent of households earning almost half of total income. Only 56 schools out of the 219 schools across the country have higher secondary education. While only 52 schools provide some form of education for children with special needs. There are inequities for girls in access to tertiary education, employment and decision making. In addition, there is emerging “conservatism” with some reports of resistance to immunization and girl’s education. This poses a threat
to the gains made for children and the positive traditional status of Maldivian women.

Maldives is the flattest country on earth making it extremely vulnerable to rising sea levels. The Maldives faces **unprecedented threats**, firstly to its future development - which relies heavily on the tourism and fishing industries; both inextricably linked to the environment. Secondly, the country faces the very real possibility that the majority of its land mass will be underwater by the end of this century...unless **drastic measures** are taken to reduce global warming. In a sense The Maldives is a ‘test case’. In the next Country Programme, UNICEF will support the strengthening of capacity and coordination for disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness and response. Specific attention will be given to the development and institutionalization of climate change adaptation plans and programmes at national and subnational levels.

In order to overcome the key challenges of inequality and climate change, governance needs to be strengthened at all levels.

The new programme is based on extensive consultations with partners, is fully aligned with the national development strategy and the UNDAF; which was signed by the Government and the United Nations in August, last month.
In **health** the programme will focus on strengthening child and adolescent nutrition interventions. Integrating hygiene promotion and safe water use, especially in regions with high levels of stunting. UNICEF will work to support the development of policies, frameworks and strategies for the development, implementation and monitoring of inclusive and equitable child health programmes.

In the areas of **quality education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)** the programme emphasises inclusive and alternative quality education for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable children and adolescents. Support will be provided for school improvement and strengthening life skills and vocational training programmes.

The **child protection** programme will strengthen child protection systems at national and community levels. To prevent, protect and respond to violence against children that exists in the home, school and community. This was highlighted in a 2009 study that found 28 per cent of boys and 19 per cent of girls under the age of 18 have experienced emotional or physical punishment at some point in their lives.

The **social inclusion** programme aligns with the Government’s focus on strengthening systems for generation and use of disaggregated data, to
monitor results and to inform gender-sensitive policies and strategies across sectors.

The midterm review and recent evaluation of the UNICEF country programme noted that evidence based policy advocacy is an area where UNICEF continues to have a comparative advantage. UNICEF’s 2016-2020 programme will continue to focus on up-stream work to influence national policy formulation, system strengthening, legislative reform and national planning and resource allocation processes.

In the area of adolescent programme we will address the multiple challenges facing young people in The Maldives. There is a clear correlation between low rates of educational attainment and youth unemployment with drugs use, an increase in young people joining gangs and high rates of juvenile delinquency. For instance, 61 per cent of juvenile offenders were school dropouts, with 40 per cent of the cases related to drugs and another 18 per cent linked to violent assaults.

The new country programme will build upon existing partnerships with the Government, cooperating partners and civil society organisations, including at grass root levels. New and innovative collaborations will be explored with the private sector, particularly the tourism industry and South to South Cooperation will be enhanced. The areas of social accountability, monitoring
and reporting on equity, in service quality and coverage, will be especially important in order to meet our obligations to the children of The Maldives and positively transform their lives.

“SHUKURIYA”