Before I turn to my formal remarks, let me begin with a word on the situation in Syria — a regional crisis that brings into sharp relief the plight of children in conflicts not of their making but who are so often their major victims. And a word about our staff serving in Syria and in neighbouring countries — including our regional office there.

As you know, if two words can describe UNICEF’s mission in situations of crisis and emergency they are “stay” and “deliver.”

As we meet, our staff in Syria and neighbouring countries continue to do all they can in a strictly non-political way. Thanks to their commitment to “stay and deliver,” both inside Syria and in the region — and thanks to the generosity of global donors — millions are now receiving drinking water…children have been immunized…given access to education… and provided counselling and safe places to play.
Our Regional Director just provided an update of our staff’s activities there. For example, working with our partners, UNICEF staff members have provided school supplies in six governorates — with all fourteen governorates covered by tomorrow. They’re working on cold chains for vaccines in Deir ez Zour — and conducting a needs assessment mission in Dara’a.

But the needs continue to grow. Two weeks ago, we passed a grim milestone — the one millionth Syrian refugee child fleeing the conflict, while two million more displaced children remain at particular risk inside Syria. Hundreds of thousands of children have witnessed — or been the victims of — horrifying violence. Things no child should see or endure.

At gatherings like this one, we should always take a moment to honour the dedication and bravery of our colleagues in the field, working…and achieving results…in the midst of tragedy.

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When we last met in June, I outlined some of the choices and challenges we faced in developing the Strategic Plan for 2014-2017, and how it would help all of us, as an organization, set in motion a new cycle of service to children — especially for those whose rights are most denied.

The Strategic Plan and the Integrated Budget that we’re presenting at this session span that seminal year of 2015, when the General Assembly will meet to celebrate our collective successes in meeting some of the MDGs…to learn from all too many areas where the world has failed to meet the promises it made in 2001…and to shape our future goals.

Those goals and associated targets, of course, will be the subject of intense and, we all hope, productive discussions with the UN and beyond.

So with two years of debate on the post-2015 agenda ahead of us, I’d like to focus my statement today on UNICEF’s commitment to putting children and equity at the heart of the post-2015 agenda…on ways to pursue such a focus in practical, cost-effective terms…and on how UNICEF is preparing for the coming period.
We should start with a central principle that guides the work of the United Nations in the 21st century. The UN Millennium Declaration states that: “As leaders, we have a duty to all the world’s people…in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.”

“Duty.” We must…we are obliged — by the Millennium Declaration…by the Convention on the Rights of the Child…and by the universal, human instinct to protect our young ones — to do all that we can to realize their rights to health, education, protection and participation. Now, and in the decades to come.

This means preparing children to meet the greatest global challenges of the post-2015 era — climate change…urbanization…migration…resource scarcity. Challenges that are likely to hit all children hard. And the most vulnerable children hardest of all.

If we fail in that duty — to prepare today the leaders of tomorrow to build strong and equitable societies — what will become of their children?

That preparation is not only about their health, growth and learning. It is also — fundamentally — about the view of the world they will carry into the rest of their lives.
Because, as noted in our latest Innocenti Report Card, children’s views of the world are highly influenced by their own realities and the examples and norms set by their families, communities and societies.

If their societies are marked by greed, inequity, conflict and discrimination — as we’ve seen too often in the opening years of the 21st century — then how will they see their own futures? Indeed, there is an uncertain future for all of us when we dim the hope that all children — rich and poor alike — carry within themselves for a better and more just tomorrow.

It may be a cliché that “children are our future.” But like many clichés, it’s also true.

The children of today will be the employers and employees, the politicians and the voters, the producers and consumers of tomorrow. The future of humanity, indeed the future of our planet, depend on giving them the best possible start in life — quality health care, nutrition and education… clean water and sanitation… protection from violence, abuse and exploitation… and a decent standard of living.

The benefits of investing in children go well beyond individual gains or moral responsibilities.
When we invest in a child’s education, we do more than just give her knowledge and skills. Quality education sets in motion a path towards prosperity, empowerment and inclusion not just for the individual but also for societies and economies.

Education enhances productivity and output. Increasing the mean years of schooling of a nation’s labour force by just one year has been shown to raise the level of output per capita by between three and six per cent. And it boosts a nation’s capacity to develop new technologies.

What about investing in a child’s protection?

Too often, abuse occurs in the shadows… undetected… unreported…and worse, accepted. Through our new campaign to fight violence against children, UNICEF is joining a growing global movement to shine a light on this issue… and “make the invisible visible.”

When we invest in a child’s protection, we do more than just safeguard him from violence, exploitation and abuse. Beyond the psychological and physiological damage to the individual — beyond the social costs — child abuse also has the potential to deeply affect productivity, well-being and prosperity.
A recent study in Vanuatu has shown that the lifelong impact of child abuse amounts to around seven per cent of annual GDP in that country. The study also showed that investing in the prevention of child abuse costs less than one third of the financial losses associated with child abuse every year.

And when we invest in a child’s health, nutrition and survival, we do more than just save a life. As child survival improves, so of course does life expectancy. And a one-year improvement in a population’s life expectancy is associated with a four per cent increase in national economic output.

And more — investments in health, nutrition, education and protection form a symbiotic whole. Without proper nutrition, for example, no child can grow, learn and earn as she should.

Putting children at the heart of the post-2015 agenda must include all children. This is more than a question of principle. Only as we move closer to realizing the rights of all children will countries move closer to their related goals of development, prosperity and peace.

And that is why equity must be a central tenet of the post-2015 agenda. For equity is the cornerstone of all stable, as well as prosperous, societies.
As we seek to accelerate progress before 2015 and define it thereafter, it’s important to face an unfortunate and unpleasant probability — that one of the causes of our missing most of the MDG targets at the global level in 2015 will have been our lack of ambition in 2001.

We were content then to set broad national targets that focused on achieving average social and economic gains. And then, too often, we sought gains by concentrating efforts on some of the world’s people…and some of the world’s children. But not all.

In our haste to set and achieve the MDGs, we did more than sacrifice our moral duty to the most disadvantaged children and families. Ironically, we also sacrificed the most practical path to achieving the greatest possible progress towards our goals. Because we now know that pursuing equity is cost-effective.

Our Narrowing the Gaps study, for example, showed that we can achieve greater results, more cost-effectively, more rapidly, when we design policies and programmes not around the easiest, but around the hardest-to-reach — the most disadvantaged and marginalized. The additional costs of reaching the hardest-to-reach are more than outweighed by the additional results. Picking the low-hanging fruit, the study showed, is not nearly as cost-efficient as addressing the whole tree.
A new UNICEF analysis, to be published within weeks, shows that regions that have narrowed the gaps in equality across income levels have also made the fastest reductions in child mortality.

The same point goes beyond specific development programmes and policies. Highly unequal societies are more unstable and grow more slowly and erratically. A 2011 IMF staff study found that, globally, a 10 per cent decrease in inequality increases the expected length of an economic growth period by 50 per cent.

And an investment in equity can strengthen a country’s resilience, and lessen its dependence on assistance in the future. In Ethiopia, for example, the development of community-based health and nutrition programmes following previous droughts helped many more children survive the 2012 drought than would otherwise have been the case.

So, for reasons moral, economic and humanitarian — and as a means to promote peace and opportunity for every person — equity must be embedded throughout the post-2015 agenda, especially as we pursue a sustainable future, which must, by definition, be built around the citizens of the future…today’s children.
Which is why we welcome the report of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda calling for a transformative shift to “leave no one behind,” and the Secretary General’s new report on the MDGs and the post-2015 agenda highlighting the importance of addressing inequalities.

And we must never forget that behind these arguments and statistics are millions of children. Individuals whose childhoods and adulthoods — and often, those of their own children, in turn — will be blighted unless we act now to build more equitable societies.

I am thinking of… a girl in a rural village striving to reach her full potential. Will she stop short, certain that she is not as smart or capable as her brothers, as she has always been told? Will she be forced to marry young, bearing children who will, in turn, begin life at a huge disadvantage?

I am thinking of… a boy in an urban slum. Does he believe that, with hard work, he can succeed and prosper — or will he succumb to a life of the petty crime that surrounds him, and lead his own children down a similar self-destructive path?
Or a child of Syria…one of millions traumatized by conflict and bloodshed …by the loss of her home and her community…by the terrifying journey to a refugee camp. Will she regain the years of lost learning and recover to fulfill her potential? Will she be robbed of her childhood, denied an education and the opportunity to earn a living?

Think for a moment. When these children become adults, will they embrace the spirit of civic pride? Or will they be blinded by jealousy — even anger — at others’ better fortune? Will they substitute cynicism for citizenship and allow this bitterness to foment into frustration…even violence?

These are not abstract questions. Allowing inequalities to endure comes with a high cost — a cost measured in lives…in missed opportunities…and in poor health.

If millions today are living and dying on the margins of hope, what chance do future generations have of a more equitable, healthier and more prosperous world? The answer: a far better chance if children and equity are at the heart of the post-2015 agenda.
But setting equity-based targets in the post-2015 agenda — while absolutely necessary — will not, by itself, be sufficient. We must also overcome the practical barriers and bottlenecks that stand in the way. Because, as we often tend to think, our challenge is not just for governments, donors, NGOs and the private sector to supply goods and services — it’s also about increasing the capacity of the most disadvantaged people and families to take advantage of them.

Conventional child survival and development strategies have, to date, focused mainly on the supply side. But analysis from our Narrowing the Gaps study shows that it is essential to balance the supply side with greater community engagement, quality assurance and practical policy measures to help poor families afford the cost of services, while lowering these costs over the long term.

For instance, financial barriers are a major impediment to poor families in Brazil that wish to access health and education services. Bolsa Familia overcomes these barriers by providing cash transfers to millions of poor families. The result? Gaps between income groups have been reduced and social progress has been accelerated among the poorest.
Understanding the needs of poor families has also been an obstacle to progress. In Uganda, this is being overcome with U-Report, which we have described at previous Board meetings. This free SMS service gives tens of thousands of people a direct line to their governments to report on what services are working…and what needs improving.

And beyond supply and demand bottlenecks, we must overcome structural impediments by fostering a supportive environment that enables poor people to access and use essential services. Laws and regulations, adequate resources, and efforts to fight all forms of discrimination and exclusion are critical to accelerating progress.

For example, without formal birth registration — a child’s passport to protection — children may find themselves excluded from vital healthcare services, education and social security. Additionally, it is almost impossible to prosecute cases of underage child marriage when a child’s exact age cannot be firmly established through legal identity documents.

The lessons we’ve learned on overcoming barriers and bottlenecks from country experience and our own refocus on equity in the last three years are informing our work on A Promise Renewed — the global movement to end preventable child and maternal deaths.
Later this month, APR will launch its annual progress report — and there is much to celebrate. 176 governments have signed the APR pledge and thousands of civil society groups and private individuals have mobilized actions and resources to dramatically reduce mortality rates even further. When concerted action, sound strategies, adequate resources and strong political will are consistently applied in support of child and maternal health, it is possible to sharply lower child mortality rates — including among the poorest groups.

Civil society groups and the private sector are also increasingly playing a role.

In India, for example, the Advocacy Group on Community Action is holding the government accountable by tracking the flow of public healthcare funds to communities and relaying citizen concerns about the quality of care to policymakers.
Joining forces with USAID, NGOs and the UN Foundation, Johnson and Johnson launched the MAMA initiative — the Mobile Alliance for Maternal Action. Through it, mobile-ready SMS messages can be sent directly to a mother to educate and encourage her to take the best care of her child. That includes tips on breastfeeding and nutrition, hand washing, preventing malaria, reminders for health appointments, and how to access essential drugs such as ORS, zinc and antibiotics for pneumonia. Already, in Bangladesh, there are over 100,000 subscribers.

We can also take heart that healthy lives, good nutrition, universal access to water and sanitation, and quality education have all been proposed by the High Level Panel on post-2015 as possible universal goals. And on that point, let me note my appreciation to our post-2015 team, headed by Richard Morgan, who is working hard to keep children’s issues at the heart of these negotiations.

As we work on the goals for the post-2015 world we want, we’re also asking ourselves how — during and beyond our new Strategic Plan — UNICEF can be most effective in helping to build that world.
We’re undertaking an ambitious consultation involving staff members and partners in civil society, youth groups and the private sector. We call it “UNICEF 3.0,” focusing on how UNICEF can best be structured in the world that is likely to emerge in five to ten years. Another study, “UNICEF 4.0,” is considering the likely global environment as it will affect children, in two or three decades hence.

In a related but more immediate effort, as we prepare to roll out the new Strategic Plan, our Efficiency and Effectiveness Improvement Initiative — or “E&E” — is identifying new ways of simplifying our business practices, and providing value for money across our programmes and operations.

Some parts of these initiatives will move at a faster pace than others. We will continue to inform and consult the Executive Board, through the Bureau, as work progresses and even accelerates.

And, for the first time, along with UNDP, UNFPA and UN Women, we are presenting an integrated budget, spanning 2014-2017. The integrated budget can be read against the results of our four-year Strategic Plan and will allow us to better judge the value of the results we want to achieve against their costs.
By the end of the next Strategic Plan, UNICEF will have celebrated its 70th anniversary. The next steps of our journey will depend on our willingness to adapt to the changing world around us…to infuse equity throughout our programmes and the post-2015 targets…and to find new ways to realize the rights — and brighten the futures — of the most disadvantaged children around the world.

That notably includes the lives of children living with disabilities.

Their lives are the focus of our first session today — at which we’re very fortunate to be joined by members of the International Disability Alliance, including the Alliance’s President, Yannis Vardakastanis.

For the first time in a UNICEF Strategic Plan, disability will be mainstreamed in all programme areas with corresponding targets and indicators — and that is, in large part, thanks to the inspired leadership and dedication of Rosangela Berman-Bieler and her team.

Their work could not be more important, because no group has had its rights compromised more consistently or more cruelly than children with disabilities. So often, children with disabilities receive the least of everything, last. The least healthcare and nutritious food. The least education and protective services.
And girls are doubly disadvantaged…less likely than boys to receive care and food…more likely to be left out of family and community activities.

In this year’s *State of the World’s Children* report, we called on governments to keep their promises to guarantee the equal rights of all children — those living with and without disabilities.

And we called for a general change of attitude. With all the challenges they confront, children with disabilities face yet another devastating blow when people impose limitations upon them… and judge them through the lens of what they cannot do rather than what they can.

Too often, the true disability is actually our inability to recognize their true talents. Their daily struggles for recognition should inspire us to bring down the barriers that keep all children from realizing their full potential. UNICEF will continue seeking out ways to match our efforts to their struggles.

Let me close by telling you about an extraordinary young woman I met in Da Nang in May — Nguyen Phuong Anh, or Crystal, as she is known.
Crystal has an energy and strength of spirit few of us possess. Not only is she a tireless champion of rights for children with disabilities, she is also a gifted singer, and an example of how all of us must never allow a child’s disability — such as Crystal’s “glass-bone disease” — to stand in the way of seeing her true talents…worth…and potential.

Crystal will be coming to New York during the UN General Assembly to take part in the Global Partnership on Children with Disabilities. She reminds us all that every child, everywhere, has something to share…a talent…a unique perspective…love…potential…gifts that only they possess, but that are too often penned in by prejudice and discrimination.

Our focus on equity — on the rights of children — represents our best chance to help all children unleash these gifts…develop their full potential…so they can change their world…brighten our world…and inspire future generations as they build their own.

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