Statement to the UNICEF Executive Board

by Marie-Pierre Poirier

UNICEF Regional Director, CEECIS

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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates,

It is my pleasure to submit to this Executive Board a brief summary of results achieved and lessons learnt in Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, as documented by the Mid-Term Reviews (MTRs) of the four UNICEF Country Programmes.

I am happy to report that the MTRs were thorough and participatory, involving technical assessments with partners, as well as consultations with UN agencies, international organizations, NGOs, media, the private sector, and children themselves. The process culminated with high-level MTR validation meetings.

There is consensus among partners that, despite good progress in national averages, children and adolescents continue to face social and economic disparities and that significant equity gaps remain - to different degrees - in the four countries. While the economic situation is diverse - ranging from low income to upper middle income, as measured by GNI - the four MTRs demonstrate that, by positioning the most vulnerable children at the centre of national policies, budgets and programmes, the partnership with UNICEF adds value to countries’ own reform efforts.
In practical terms, this requires greater attention to enabling social sectors to reach out to the most excluded children: children from ethnic minorities, rural children, children from disadvantaged urban communities, children of migrant workers, as well as marginalized and stigmatized adolescents. And we have agreed that priority should be given to children with disabilities.

As a consequence, UNICEF is increasingly focusing on a few result areas that address key violations of child rights, explicitly contributing to closing equity gaps and leading to sustainable results for children and adolescents. These regional priorities align closely with the impact results outlined in the 2014-2017 UNICEF Strategic Plan.

Mr. President,

I would now like to focus on a few selected examples of the pioneering work in child care, early learning, and inclusive education, where our collaboration with governments and civil society is generating important lessons for regional and global learning on how to translate norms, policies and legislation into high-quality and inclusive services for all children including from excluded and marginalised groups.

Regarding CHILD CARE, within the emerging social protection agenda in CEE/CIS, accompanying the reform of the child care system remains a key priority in a region where an estimated 1.2 million children are growing up in formal care, half of them in residential institutions. Of these, almost 200,000 children have disabilities and 30,000 are in infant homes.

In Armenia, the MTR recorded encouraging progress in child care reform, thanks to the reorganization of child protection services following the introduction (supported by UNICEF and the World Bank) of the new Integrated Social Services System (ISS). The ISS introduces a new approach to addressing social issues, where families are active participants in working out and taking ownership for improving their situation and where various institutions in social protection,
health and education cooperate to ensure improved well-being for families. Both the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education are fully engaged in transforming the residential care system into community-based and family-oriented care.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, which a delegation of the Bureau of this Executive Board had the opportunity to visit earlier this year, the MTR found that critical support to programme development and budgeting capacities of key actors at local level led to higher allocations for social protection and inclusion in 60 per cent of model municipalities. As a result, access to some essential public services, such as day-care centres for children with disabilities, has increased.

Turning now to **EARLY LEARNING**, in CEE/CIS socio-economic status strongly correlates with access to preschool, as enrolment is much higher in urban than in rural areas, and is lowest in poor households. Investing in early childhood education is critical not least because of its implications for equity. Children who participate in preschool are better prepared for schooling and have improved educational achievement, which in turn is directly related to better employment and higher productivity.

When I visited **Tajikistan** last month I was impressed to see the low-cost and sustainable early learning model successfully introduced and expanding with community, government and partner resources, including from the Global Partnership for Education, while UNICEF continues to enhance a conducive policy environment promoting access to quality early learning.

During my visit to **Turkmenistan** on the occasion of the MTR, I had the opportunity to discuss how the government’s new National Programme on Early Childhood Development and School Readiness will prepare children for school, improve standards, and increase parents’ knowledge of ECD. It was encouraging to see that the government also intends to create an integrated
information system to monitor the implementation of this National Programme, with a focus on disadvantaged children.

Regarding **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**, while there has been significant progress in CEE/CIS, 2.5 million children remain out of school, one-third of who are children with disabilities.

In **Armenia**, to tackle bottlenecks to high-quality education for excluded children, inclusive principles were adopted in the new Education Law, while school management information systems are being introduced and synchronized with existing databases to identify out-of-school children and dropouts.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, where the separation of the educational systems remains a significant barrier to social inclusion, the programme saw the development of national standards for primary school learning outcomes. This was complemented by peace building and inclusive and intercultural education at local level, covering about 15 per cent of primary schools.

In **Tajikistan**, the programme tested an innovation to promote girls’ enrolment and attendance in seven priority districts, and is now ready to be replicated, with adjustments, nationwide for all out-of-school children. A Centre for Gender Pedagogics was also established to ensure gender mainstreaming in the curriculum, in teaching aids and textbooks. This will contribute to addressing the acute gender inequities in education.

In **Turkmenistan**, the new national child-friendly school certification, to be introduced this year, will enable the government to better assess and monitor the inclusion of all children in education.

**Mr. President,**

I would like to conclude by briefly summarising the key recommendations from the four MTRs regarding UNICEF evolving engagement in CEE/CIS.
Governments in the region are placing growing demands on UNICEF to support them to meet international standards of best practice and help to address persistent inequities. The four MTRs concurred that UNICEF is responding to these requests, and should place greater emphasis on – 1) providing policy advice and technical expertise of the highest calibre; 2) contributing to the design of effective and innovative services for children; 3) facilitating the costing and assessment of policy models and national programmes to ensure the best value for money and sustainability of results for children.

Indeed, the four programmes of cooperation clearly show that the renewed emphasis on equity is calling for UNICEF to focus its evaluation work towards supporting national assessments of ongoing social sector reforms, and for governments to have more reliable, disaggregated and comparable data, so that trends in disparities, including in gender, can be better monitored.

Mr. President,

We are fully aware that overcoming deep-set barriers and redirecting social sectors towards quality services for the most disadvantaged requires working closely with the small but growing civil society to strengthen capacities to engage in communication for social change, and to harness their positive energy. Our programmes of cooperation will therefore increase collaboration with diverse development actors, including the corporate sector and citizens, to support improving the quality and inclusiveness of services for children and adolescents and strengthening national institutional capacities.

Thank you, Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, for your kind attention. I look forward to your comments, questions and guidance.