UNICEF Executive Board Second Regular Session 2013

President’s opening remarks

Ambassador Jarmo Viiinanen, Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Executive Director Mr. Lake,

It is a great honor for me to open the 2013 Second Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board. I am also very pleased that we are having today a Special focus session on children with disabilities – and especially on the work of UNICEF in this respect.

The Second Regular Session of the Executive Board is a continuation of the work done in February and June sessions of the Executive Board. The constructive dialogues we have had so far form an excellent basis for carrying on the work in a goal oriented manner. We continue to be guided by the best interests of the child as our primary consideration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During this week, our main task is to approve the UNICEF Strategic Plan and integrated budget. Several consultations related to the Strategic Plan and the integrated budget have taken place during this year, and our discussions during the Annual Session on the Strategic Plan were thorough. I would like to thank UNICEF staff for the constructive work in preparing the documents, and I am grateful for the consultative and inclusive process that has taken place. The Executive Board members have also worked hard in striving towards our common goals.

This week’s discussions will be crucial for finishing the process that began a while ago, aiming at directing the work of UNICEF, and taking into account the resource allocation for the coming four years. The Strategic Plan has been elaborated based on the findings of the 2012 review of the UNICEF medium-term strategic plan [2006-2013], and UNICEF will continue its crucial human rights based approach in the areas of health; HIV/AIDS; water, sanitation and hygiene; nutrition; education; child protection; and social inclusion.

The harmonized efforts by UNICEF, UNDPA, UNFPA and UN Women to improve the budgeting process have contributed to a more comprehensive approach in preparing the strategic plan and the integrated budget. Although we have come a long way with the process, the approval phase is just a starting point for the implementation efforts, which will follow in 2014 and the subsequent years.
Ladies and gentlemen,

When discussing these questions here in New York, we should keep in mind children’s everyday lives and how to improve children’s’ situation everywhere in the world. The crisis in Syria has shown very painfully how complex conflicts can be, and how deeply the devastating consequences of the crisis affect children’s and adults’ lives. The figures are shocking – over 3,1 million children inside Syria are badly affected by the conflict, not having enough food, schools being destroyed or not being able to live at home. One million Syrian children live as refugees in the neighbouring countries.

UNICEF’s continued work for Syrian girls and boys is extremely important. We praise the efforts of the dedicated UNICEF staff who are working in extremely difficult conditions. All the efforts for not losing a generation are critical. Besides UNICEF’s endless work for children’s basic needs in a crisis, – being it protection, clean water, vaccinations, or making it possible for children to go to school – it’s efforts for children’s future earn our strongest support.

So far the International Community – and especially the Security Council – has been divided on how to achieve a political solution in the Syrian crisis. In the aftermath of the use of nerve gas it is even more important to find a political solution in the Syrian crisis.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The State of the World’s Children report 2013 focuses on the status of children with disabilities in a global setting. The report discusses the challenges that children with disabilities face in their everyday lives, but it also highlights the opportunities that we can have to make our societies more inclusive. One of the key messages of the report is that no child should be defined by a disability, and that because each child is unique he or she has to be respected as such. The report calls for an attitudinal change among communities, professionals, media and governments, and it challenges us to see children with disabilities as agents of change and individuals with their own voice.

Through the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, governments are committed to ensuring that all the children can enjoy their rights without discrimination of any kind. Although families and parents have the primary responsibility for upbringing and development of their children, governments have their responsibilities in rendering appropriate assistance and ensuring the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care and protection of children with disabilities. Special care and assistance programs should, for example, be designed to ensure that children with disabilities have effective access to and benefit from education, training, health care services, recovery services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities.

Promoting the rights of the children with disabilities requires a comprehensive approach, making sure that they enjoy the same rights as other children, but also acknowledging their special needs. In order for children with disabilities to participate as members of society, and also to engage in the decision-
making affecting themselves, – social, physical, knowledge-based or prejudice-related barriers should be addressed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Children have the right to education irrespective of ethnicity, sex, language, religion, economic background, disability or other status. Nonetheless, boys and girls with disabilities are significantly less likely to be enrolled in school, and the same trend applies as regards the completion rate in primary school. In addition to confronting prejudice due to disability, many girls with disabilities are also hindered by traditional gender roles.

Promoting inclusive education is a way to address obstacles in access to education. When considering equal rights and inclusion, teachers’ strong commitment and their understanding of the concept of inclusive education becomes crucial. But teachers also need appropriate teaching aids and materials, as well as a supportive framework, whether it is linked to teachers’ training or support from the headmasters or school authorities. UNICEF has played a crucial role in supporting a human rights based approach in the area of inclusive education.

In the State of the World’s Children Report, Mohammed Absar from Bangladesh tells the story of his 9-year-old son – Hanif, who eagerly attends the second grade of the local primary school, after his family was encouraged by a non-governmental Organization for the Poor Community Advancement, which works with people with physical disabilities.

Finland has worked together with partners in inclusive education initiatives in Eastern and Southern Africa, and also in the Western Balkans – aiming at changing attitudes and practices with a child-centered pedagogy. Efforts have been widened to facilitate collaboration for youth in the realm of North-South-South exchange, among others, through study accessibility grants for the young people with disabilities. Moreover, UNICEF is an active partner in the UN Partnership for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD), supported also by Finland. Inclusive education has been one of the issues high on the agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Children with disabilities need to be protected from abuse and guaranteed the access to justice. These principles are also included in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Children with disabilities are more vulnerable to violence, neglect and abuse than other children. The State of the World’s Children report brings up the situation of girls with disabilities, who have experienced sexual abuse, rape, forced sterilization or abortion. There are needs for alternative forms of care and deinstitutionalization. These questions show the need for integration of disabilities into all outcome areas of UNICEF work.
Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me come back to the work that is ahead of us. We have a fully scheduled week, with important decisions to be made. In my capacity as the President of the Executive Board, I am doing my best for facilitating successful deliberations. With your support, I look forward to a productive and interactive Second Regular Session.