PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON INEQUALITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION
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STATEMENT BY:

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Your Excellency Mr. John Dramani Mahama, President of Republic of Ghana

Honourable Ministers
Distinguished guests and participants

It is my great pleasure to be here at this Pan African Conference on Inequalities. On behalf of UNICEF, let me sincerely appreciate the leadership and vision that has made the gathering this week possible. At this juncture in world history, the issue of inequities is probably one the most critical ones to address given its link to human and social development, economic growth and building a peaceful and sustainable future for humanity.

I share with you a quote from the UN Millennium Declaration that 189 world leaders signed up to in September 2000: “We have a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level. As leaders we have a duty therefore to all the world’s people, especially the most vulnerable and, in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.”

As we speak of inequities it is always helpful to put a human face to the issue – how do inequities manifest in terms human lives? I will focus specially on children – for they are our future – and in this continent we have pay even greater attention to this as projections are showing that by 2050, 1 in 3 children that are born will be in Africa.

When it comes to children and inequities in the continent here are a few illustrative facts:
We have the wealth divide: Children born into the poorest 20% of African households are at least 50% more likely to die before their fifth birthday.
than their compatriots in the wealthiest 20% of households. In some countries more than twice as likely.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, primary school net attendance is 90% in the richest wealth quintile and 55% in the poorest. In Western Africa the rate of stunting caused by chronic under nutrition is 48% poorest quintile and 17% in the richest; and let me say here that the consequences of under nutrition are far beyond that of being thin or small or unhealthy – chronic under nutrition leads to compromised brain function, affects learning ability and productivity in adult life.

Let us look at the rural / urban divide in sub-Saharan Africa: urban children are 2 times more likely to have been born with skilled attendance (78% urban, 40% rural) urban families are 1.8 times more likely to be using improved sanitation facilities (42% coverage urban, 24% rural); this has an impact on children’s health, education and also protection, especially of girls

And also at gender differentials: Adolescent girls in sub-Saharan Africa are much more likely to be married, to be HIV-positive, to have inadequate knowledge of HIV/AIDS, to be anaemic, to be illiterate – compared to young boys. These are just some examples. There are other dimensions of inequities too – related to where people live in the country, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or other status. And let us remember that there are children who are born to and live in situations of multiple adversities. Let me give you an example of this as well:

If you are a rural Hausa girl in Nigeria you get on average 0.3 years of schooling compared to a boy from a rich family Nigeria who gets an average of 10.3 years. They are both children – one by chance of birth and identity has a world of opportunities – the other does not.

So we live in a world where people and children are being marginalized and deprived of their basic rights – right from the word go - and hence are unable to reach their full potential as children and consequently also are not as productive as they could be as adults. These children could have been the next generation of bright innovators, visionary leaders or even ordinary citizens who contribute their level best to building peaceful and prosperous nations and a sustainable world.

As has been noted, one of the biggest shortcomings of the MDGs was their failure to specifically address inequalities. While we have celebrated progress on the MDGs based on national and global level statistics, we know that in many countries this progress is not equally shared and in fact we even seeing growing inequities in many countries.
The obligation to address inequalities is born out of both international treaty standards and human moral perspectives. One would be hard-pressed to find someone who thinks it is morally acceptable that a child dies before his or her 5th birthday of a preventable disease just because they are poor or belong to a certain ethnic group; that a mother dies giving birth simply because she did not have access to a skilled birth attendant; or that any woman, man or child does not have access to potable water and food. I hope we can lay to rest the moral imperative.

There is also a practical case to be made - growing inequalities have negative economic, social and political consequences. Increased inequalities are not just bad for the individuals thereby disadvantaged, but for society as a whole. For example, highly unequal societies tend to grow more slowly than those with low income inequalities, are less successful in sustaining growth over long periods of time and recover more slowly from economic downturns.1

From a children’s perspective UNICEF has also put forth the argument that it is in fact cost-effective to focus on the most disadvantaged children. Diseases, poor nutrition, poor educational outcomes and so on are concentrated amongst the poorest children and hence there are greater returns to be made if one focuses on these populations than continuing to investing in the better-off strata of society at the expense of the worse-off. A concrete example: immunizing children who have not been reached as yet brings a life-saving intervention for the child, helps build what is called “community immunity” and reduces the transmission of the disease from to other communities. It simply makes sense.

Education – without education poor children will be trapped in a cycle of poverty; poor uneducated women who give birth are less likely to know how best to care for their children thereby perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage for the child; adolescents and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not had proper education may not be gainfully employed and can be lost resource to society and some may turn to activities that can de-stabilize societies.


So these are some concrete issues we need to think about – equitable human development.

Precisely to help the thinking, UNICEF, together with partner UN Agencies, Civil Society and the support of countries like Ghana, Denmark and others have been seeking to bring the voices of ordinary people into the Post-2015 Debates. It is critical for these voices to be heard – both as an inspiration to leaders to craft a transformative agenda that truly has an impact on people’s lives, but also because without the support of the people of the world, the next agenda will lack legitimacy, relevance and ultimately will fail to be implemented with success.

The message from the millions of people who have participated in Post-2015 Consultations to date is clear: eradication of extreme poverty – in all its multidimensional forms -- and achievement of all future SDGs will only be reachable when we address issues of inequality, exclusion and discrimination. As noted in the Post-2015 High-level panel report, “Targets should only be considered ‘achieved’ if they are met for all relevant income and social groups.”

Many political decision-makers and Member States have recognized the need to address inequalities as being critical to the success of the next agenda. This must be done boldly and explicitly with targets on various aspects of inequalities present throughout all future goal areas.

We have a unique opportunity to do this with the data revolution we are seeing in the world.

We will need to be deliberate and committed to having disaggregated data that will help us track inequalities and monitor “narrowing of the gaps”. Disaggregation by age is especially vital to segment progress for children as they transition from one developmental stage to another. To the extent feasible data should be disaggregated by sex, age, race, ethnicity, income, location, disability and other grounds most relevant to specific countries and contexts (e.g. caste, minority groups, indigenous peoples, migrant or displacement status, etc.)

We can harness innovations and new technologies to make data collection, analysis and use much more efficient. Several governments and organizations are investing in real-time monitoring where data from the ground is informing programmes and policies.

We also have many examples of bringing in the voices of the most disadvantaged in monitoring the effectiveness of policies and programmes.

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and helping to shape these so that investments and actions really do help in reducing inequities. This citizen led monitoring can be harnessed at scale for social good and improving accountability.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to end by noting that we are at a historic juncture. The data reveals the situation in the countries in Africa - those where there is economic growth, a steady trajectory of social development and political will to tackle inequities; others where we see situations of conflict and fragility unravelling the gains with a grave human toll; and many other differentiated realities in between. Wherever in this continental mosaic each country may be, the critical imperatives of addressing inequities and that of investing in children as a pillar for national and continental development holds firm. I sincerely hope that these messages come out strongly in “The Africa We Want” statement that is expected as an outcome of this Conference.

I thank you for your attention.