Esteemed Members of the E.I. Executive Board, Distinguished Congress Delegates, Fellow Agency Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director, let me begin by thanking Mr. Fred van Leeuwen, EI Secretary General, for his kind invitation to UNICEF to participate in this 4th World Congress. Due to previous commitments, Mrs. Bellamy was not able to attend, but she sends her warmest greetings.

Fourteen years after the World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, and four years after the World Education Forum in Dakar, we are all united in the knowledge that poverty and ignorance are the greatest obstacles to a just, peaceful and prosperous world – and that those barriers will be eliminated only when there is universal access to and enrolment in quality basic education, but particularly for girls and the most excluded children and youth.

The international community's commitment to fulfilling the right of Education for All is clear. Governments have pledged to ensure that every girl and boy not only has access to, but completes, a primary education that is free, compulsory and of good quality. And they have vowed to eliminate gender disparities at both primary and secondary school levels.

Yet global monitoring reports show that many countries are behind, - at a time when educational systems and teachers are feeling the impacts of HIV/AIDS, armed conflict, local violence, natural disasters and tumbling economies. For many countries, the elimination of gender disparity in education by 2005 remains as an overwhelming challenge. But this is no reason for them and their development partners to ignore or sidestep the 2005 goal.

Too many school-age children are still excluded from education, while others are consigned to environments that discourage real learning - environments that are unhealthy, unsafe, ineffective, and unfriendly to girls, indigenous children, those with some form of disabilities and for others discriminated against due to specific religious, social, economic and/or cultural backgrounds.

Too many children in the early years are denied the right to a good start that they need to prepare their minds and bodies to learn. And too many young people and adults are still denied access to the knowledge and development of skills they require to build a better future.

The complexity of the task makes it imperative that efforts are reinforced and accelerated. For it is increasingly clear that to eliminate gender and all other forms of disparities in education, we must not only address the common education issues, but also those critical aspects of early childhood development, nutrition, health, water and sanitation, and child protection. Addressing the alarming situation of teachers is part of this complex undertaking.

Moreover, it is a feasible goal. A significant number of educators throughout the world collectively know what works and how to tackle the difficult problems of providing quality basic education for girls and boys alike. But, as we know, teachers need increasing support and should not be required to tackle all the previously mentioned issues.

Globally, the present centrepiece of UNICEF’s efforts to achieve Education for All is the UN Girls’ Education Initiative, which the Secretary-General launched in Dakar in April 2000 – and which UNICEF is privileged to serve as lead agency. This initiative is a ten-year effort by 13 UN entities designed to help governments meet their commitments to provide a quality primary education for girls everywhere. The immediate objective is to close the gender gap in education by 2005 in 25 countries. This effort is combined with other specific regional and country initiatives that attempt to attack the wider-range of disparities and exclusion affecting both boys and girls, providing the foundation for a sustainable effort to enrol all children in quality based education programmes and guarantee their completion, by 2015.
As noted, this strategy is not just about what UNICEF does in these countries. It is about creating partnerships to accelerate progress as a means of achieving MDG and EFA goals. Within the UN System, we are constantly striving to strengthen partnerships among our sister agencies—fortified by the active participation of NGOs and the positive response of many governments.

So, how does all this related to this 4th EI World Congress? As stated, investing in partnerships is crucial for achieving a wider and sustainable impact on education goal achievement. UNICEF is but one partner of a larger field of key actors that include governments, local authorities, teachers and school principals, teachers unions, parents groups, NGOs, communities, faith-based groups, media, bilateral and multilateral agencies and last but not least, children themselves as key stakeholders.

As one explores the significant similarities between EI’s aims and UNICEF’s mandate and priority actions, it becomes even clearer as to the common interests of both organizations. Presently, we are seeing an emerging partnership process:

• Although no global agreement has been established between EI and UNICEF, numerous country offices are now working with local teachers unions around such issues as child labour eradication, promotion of child rights to education and teacher preparation for emergency situations;

• As for UNICEF’s partnership with the Global Campaign for Education; the GCE is represented on the United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI) advisory committee through one of their member-NGOs, along with other NGOs and bilateral and multilateral agencies.

For the future, I would suggest that new areas be explored and/or existing partnerships reinforced for more systematic cooperation:

• there is an urgent need to support expanded joint HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives, both in the workplace (as teachers are threatened) and in regard to the growing orphans’ problem;

• more intensified work is required to get girls in school by 2005 and to guarantee quality learning for all, both components aimed at eliminating all forms of gender disparities and exclusion;

• in the context of increasing violence within and around school settings and local neighbourhoods, specific initiatives are required with families and a wide range of partners to guarantee the wellbeing of children and teachers, as well as working towards the organization of child-friendly schools and quality learning environments for children; and

• natural disasters and economic melt-downs are increasingly hindering the provision of educational services, often reversing positive trends and progress. More efforts are required to prepare and support teachers, families and local communities to respond to emergency situations. We recognize that teachers are so important in reducing the impact of emergencies on children, but they are also among those most affected.

In closing, there is much to be done together and I do hope it will be possible for us to establish a closer working relationship in the near future. As stated by Carol Bellamy: “the world we seek, where every child can grow to adulthood in health, peace and dignity— in short, a world fit for children— is an age-old dream. But UNICEF is convinced that working together, with enlightened leadership, with the kind of committed partners assembled here today, and with an appropriate plan of action and a commitment to resources, we can make that dream a reality— for each and every child on Earth.”

THANK YOU AND BEST WISHES