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**The promotion and protection of the rights of children and youth through
education**

Chairperson – Rapporteur of the Social Forum
Director General of UN Office in Geneva
President of the Human Rights Council
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, as the Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Social Forum 2018, let me take this opportunity to congratulate you Madam Kadra Ahmed Hassan on your assumption of office as Chair of the 2019 edition of the Social Forum. I wish you and the Secretariat every success.

The Social Forum creates the ideal space for an open, vibrant and interactive multi-stakeholder dialogue by bringing together Government representatives, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and other stakeholders including the academia. As we celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the focus of this Forum on the promotion and protection of the rights of children and youth through education and the transformative power it entails, is most appropriate.

The right to education is a fundamental human right that lies at the core of the 2030 Development Agenda. All children and youth have an equal right to an education in a safe and secure setting irrespective of their gender, family income levels, religion, ethnicity, or geographical location. Conflict and violence, climate change and natural disasters and irregular migration and displacement are among contributing factors that deprive children of education. A hate-free atmosphere that inculcates in children and youth the value of inclusivity and diversity and that leaves no room for stereotyping or the rejection of the other, is a crucial element in education that helps build lasting peace and contributes to the strengthening of the social fabric.

Access to quality education that ensures that no child is left behind is essential to empower children and youth, provide access to gainful employment and earning potential, alleviate poverty, bring about upward mobility and achieve sustainable development goals.

Further, while almost one billion children attend school daily around the world, this does not always result in learning due to the lack of security, dearth of trained teachers and learning material, poor nutrition and inadequate health care.

The 3rd International Conference on Safe Schools held in Spain in May this year discussed the need for safety and protection at schools for an atmosphere conducive to learning, while the International Youth Day in August 2019, focused on transformative education to make education more relevant, equitable and inclusive to contribute towards achievement of the sustainable development agenda. This forum can take these discussions further forward.

Let me take this opportunity to share with you some of the experiences of Sri Lanka in providing education for all.

Sri Lanka's commitment to promote and protect right to education for all its citizens is enshrined in Article 27 (2) of the Constitution, which pledges to establish a Democratic Socialist society the objectives of which, inter alia include "the complete eradication of illiteracy and assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels." This is further re-enforced by Education Ordinance No. 31 of 1939 which provides the legal basis for the system of education and advocates for compulsory school attendance, under Regulation No. 1 of 1997 which requires schooling for all children between the ages of five to fourteen years.

In order to ensure the equal right to education for all social groups, Sri Lanka took the initiative in 1945 to provide access to free education from kindergarten to university, including free textbooks and student welfare facilities such as free health services, mid-day meals, uniforms and financial assistance through scholarships at the secondary and higher education levels.

A significant step taken by Sri Lanka in ensuring access to education for all was that those who missed out on their schooling during the conflict period were facilitated to gain formal education, undergoing special education programmes under the "Catch up Education Scheme". Hundreds have entered or qualified to enter universities over the years since the end of the conflict. Further, hundreds of child combatants, once recruited by the LTTE, received vocational training in order to be gainfully employed.

While only 66% of countries have achieved gender parity in primary education, Sri Lanka has made progress in achieving gender equality at all levels of education. The ratio of girls to boys' enrolment has increased at all levels and has reached the target of 100% in secondary schools.

In the fifteen public universities and five institutes attached to them, which provide free education to undergraduate students, females constitute 60.3% of the student population. Female students are a majority in most streams according to the university enrolment figures of 2015 – Arts 76.7% ; Education 85.2%; Law 50.9%; Management and Commerce 55.1%; Science 58.5%; Agriculture 61.9%; Medicine 55.8%; Dental Surgery 63.5%; Veterinary Medicine 64.4%; Architecture 51.7%; Indigenous Medicine 76.6%, totalling 64% women in these courses.

The right to universal and equal access to education at all levels has also been upheld consistently by the Judiciary of Sri Lanka, in a number of cases pertaining to school and university admissions. These rulings derived their strength and logic from Article 12 providing for the right to equality and Article 27 referring to the *complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to Education at all levels*. The principle embodied in the Constitution that *all are equal before the law and are entitled to the equal protection of the law*, remains the bedrock upon which democratic governance rests.

By raising the minimum age of education from 14 to 16 and the minimum age of employment from 14 to 16, as per the 'National Policy on Elimination of Child Labour in Sri Lanka', the right to education is re-enforced. Further reforms including a mandatory 13 years of education are also being designed, intended to ensure that all children attend school ranging from the primary to secondary levels of education, thereby leaving no room for their exploitation in the social or cultural domains, or for labour.

To ensure the special education needs of children with disabilities, 714 schools provide special education through designated units in government schools for disabled children. 25 special schools for severely disabled children are operated by the private sector and receive financial assistance by the Government. A further 25 schools for disabled children which are operated by the private sector are partially funded by the government. A special scheme of university admissions for persons with disabilities also exist.

Such measures have resulted in remarkable social indicators in recent years, such as high enrolment rates in education, reduction of school drop-outs and universal primary education reaching 99.7% (2014).

Thank you