DRAFT ONLY
CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

ECOSOC

Remarks by Ann M. Veneman, Executive Director, UNICEF
Capacity Building and Innovations in Technology
16 July 2009 • New York, NY

Your Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen.

Pulitzer Prize Winner, Thomas Friedman has been quoted saying the internet: "...created a global platform that allowed more people to plug and play, collaborate and compete, share knowledge and share work, than anything we have ever seen in the history of the world."

In today's world, technology is developing more rapidly than at any other point in human history. Technological change has interconnected the world in ways we would not have imagined a few years ago. The power of computers is doubling every 18 months, and the amount of technical information is doubling every two years. It is estimated that the unique information generated in 2008 alone exceeded that of the previous 5000 years combined.

Innovations increasingly support development and humanitarian work. UNICEF has been working in broad collaboration with other UN Agencies and partners to explore ways of better putting technology at the service of humanity. In February, UNICEF hosted the Web 4 Development Conference on behalf of UN Agencies, with broad participation from the UN, NGOs, academia and the private

sector. The conference highlighted innovative uses of technology for development.

Mobile phones have proven to be an extremely powerful development tool. Mobile phone technology is allowing developing countries to overcome the absence of expensive traditional communication infrastructures, and connect people with the information they need at an affordable cost.

Today, there are more cell phone subscribers in Africa than in the United States and Canada combined. In Africa, networks are growing rapidly and ownership of mobile phones is on the rise. It is estimated that by 2010, nearly one in three Africans will have access to mobile phone.

Mobile technology can provide information on commodity prices to farmers, collect vital health data from remote areas, and help track supplies and logistics all around the world. Mobile phones are helping combat malnutrition, an underlying cause in one third of under-five child deaths.

In 2007, I helped inaugurate Ethiopia's first factory for Plumpy'Nut, a ready to use fortified food that effectively treats severe acute malnutrition. The production line was built with the support of Ethiopian private enterprise, the generosity of a private donor, the readiness of the Ethiopian government, to address the problem of malnutrition and the help of the nutritional expertise of UNICEF and

its partners. The goal was to manufacture the life saving food, not just in Europe, but also in Africa and closer to those most at risk of malnutrition. Yet despite bringing the production line to the country, monitoring the distribution of Plumpy'Nut to ensure that those most in need received the fortified food, remained a challenge.

The solution came in the form of using mobile-phone-based transmission of essential data on children and their families, collected directly from the most remote and vulnerable communities. Health workers in Ethiopia, using their own very basic mobile phones, send text messages to a central server in Addis Ababa reporting stock levels, the number of beneficiaries and urgent needs. As a result, essential data about the requirement to replenish stocks, or scale up production and distribution for the more than 1,850 distribution centers, is readily available and can be acted on immediately. In the past, it took two weeks for information to move from community health centers to Addis. For a malnourished child, two weeks can mean the difference between life and death.

In East and West Africa, WFP is working to collect food price and market related information in drought-prone areas. In Nigeria, the Roll Back Malaria partnership is using Rapid SMS to monitor the distribution of insecticide treated mosquito nets. In Uganda, text messages provide public education and information services on prevention of HIV/AIDS. In Madagascar, UNDP and UNICEF are using SMS technology to facilitate youth participation in key issues. And in Malawi, through a partnership involving Columbia University

in New York and the Malawi Ministry of Health, community health workers are using mobile phones to monitor the nutritional status of children. The program in Malawi won USAID's 2008 award for best mobile application and helps illustrate how collaboration with academia has added value to the investment in technology.

Universities, by nature, provide environments that are supportive of rapid learning and experimentation, particularly in technology, that can add flexibility and energy to the thinking of international organizations. For the Malawi project, Columbia University's graduate School of International and Public Affairs dedicated a course, in which students developed monitoring and evaluation frameworks for the nutrition and food security surveillance. Students from the course traveled to Malawi to work with health extension workers and UNICEF programmers to ensure that the system would meet the needs of users.

In addition, New York University offered a graduate course called "Design for UNICEF," during which students developed technological prototypes for many useful tools, from inexpensive water purity sensors to youth communication and engagement platforms. These university students are also spending time in the field with UNICEF and its partners, working to further projects with similar classes from the University of Addis Ababa.

Meanwhile, the involvement of private sector technology experts is key to ensuring that investments in technology for health are sustainable and can be brought to scale. Companies have helped development programs in numerous ways including:

- providing toll-free lines;
- offering free text messages;
- building new cell towers in areas without connectivity;
- and offering valuable technical advice and support for innovative projects.

Under a recent initiative of the Global Humanitarian Forum, weather stations are being installed on mobile network sites throughout Africa, to monitor weather, in the face of the growing impact of climate change. Southern Africa is experiencing the worst consecutive flood and cyclone seasons in recent history, affecting more than 1.6 million people for three consecutive years. Data on weather patterns in the region is severely lacking. Such weather related information is critical for farmers and for predicting droughts and floods.

In Bangladesh, Grameen Shakti, an NGO that helps people break free of poverty while also protecting the environment, offers affordable and sustainable solar power. Beneficiaries can buy the solar panel by paying monthly installments for three years, after which time they own a system that is expected to last them 20 years without additional cost. The solar panel makes enough electricity to power a few lights, a small television and a cell phone. The collaborative development

has also led to advances in solar-powered solutions for healthcare and communication.

Professional organizations, including the International Electrical and Electronic Engineers, and the American Institute of Graphic Artists, are increasingly looking for ways to involve their highly skilled members to address humanitarian challenges.

Young people in Africa, many of whom are entrepreneurs, engineers and innovators, are often best equipped to find solutions to local problems that are more appropriate, relevant and effective than anything that can be imported. International development agencies can help create local capacity and support locally-developed sustainable solutions.

Efforts to bring connectivity and access to information to remote areas, work best when they are developed in close cooperation with local populations. Such collaboration, ensures that equipment and solutions suit local environments and meet local needs and that solutions can be maintained and expanded.

It is by working in broad public and private collaboration with local communities and experts in the field that results can best be maximized. Academia helps provide fresh thinking, while private sector technology companies can help provide the specialized knowledge to turn ideas into reality.

Local partners in developing countries help identify problems, shape solutions and build internal capacity so that solutions are sustainable. Technology and innovation can have a positive impact on many areas of development and humanitarian work. The challenges in addressing humanitarian issues are many, but the opportunities that technologies provide in responding, are endless.

Thank you.

###