Welcome to our first consultation in preparation for the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.

Why are we all here? Because we recognise that as the scale and depth of conflict and natural disasters around the world increase, we need to look at how we respond. How can we be faster and more efficient? How can we bring together the organisations and individuals from different sectors doing humanitarian work? How can we work better together, recognising that within our diversity lies our strength?

We’re all here today because we recognise one thing: global humanitarian action needs to change.

Today’s humanitarian landscape is unrecognizable compared to 20 years ago. Global challenges like urbanization, population growth in some countries, environmental degradation, conflict, climate change and resource scarcity mean that humanitarian needs are rising beyond the capacity of the global humanitarian system to cope. And costs are rising too.

Between 2004 and 2013, that’s less than 10 years, humanitarian funding requests roughly doubled from $6bn to over $10 billion per year. In that same period, the number of people targeted through inter-agency appeals rose from approximately 30 to 70 million.

And on this continent we face some significant challenges.

In the Horn of Africa, in 2010, it was clear that the food security situation was extremely serious. Millions of people were hungry and humanitarian agencies warned donors and the media that we faced a potential famine. We appealed for funding. We stepped up our response and did everything we could to mitigate the famine that hit parts of Somalia in 2011.

But it was not enough. We now know that nearly 260,000 people died in Somalia between 2010 and 2012, half of them children under 5. This is a scandal in the modern world, where we have so much data and early warning information, and should be able to prevent famine.
Today, the food security situation in Somalia is again very serious. An estimated 800,000 Somalis need food aid, including 200,000 malnourished children under five. We have a funding gap of $750 million for humanitarian work in Somalia this year.

We must do better. And we must do better together.

I know that changing the way we work will not be easy, but we have already seen some incremental change. What we now need is a step change in the way we work together.

First, we need to put people, particularly women and children, at the centre of our response efforts and listen to what they tell us about what they need. Good information flow and two-way communication are an essential and integral part of effective humanitarian response. I’m delighted that people affected by disaster are in the room today.

And technology is helping us to drive that change. In 105 countries in the world there are now more mobile phones than people. That means that in many cases, people can tell us where they are, what they are short of and what they need; and we can tell them how they can get it. We must make sure that we are making the best use of this information, asking people the right questions, acting on what we hear, delivering and monitoring the effectiveness of our operations.

Second, we need to focus on managing risks, not only on responding to crises.

Most humanitarian emergencies are actually predictable and are rooted in known risk factors like climatic patterns and long term geo-political changes. For example, in the last decade, the protracted crises in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Somalia accounted for half of all the requested funding in the global humanitarian appeals.

That tells us a lot about the complex, ongoing crises which can stem from a multitude of factors including conflict, poverty, resource scarcity and of course poor governance.

We need to improve the relationship between humanitarian and development actors, and look at how best to link funding for humanitarian and development efforts.

And certain countries face recurring crises that cause huge loss of life and set back development gain. For example, in this region, cyclical droughts and food insecurity have a huge impact on the countries of the Sahel. And in other parts of the world, we know that for example typhoons will continue to hit the Philippines and that annual flooding will affect Pakistan and Bangladesh.

We have the knowledge. We have the information, but we are not acting on it early enough.

Less than 0.5 percent of the $3 trillion spent on international aid between 1991 and 2010 was spent on preparedness and prevention. Clearly, this needs to change. We need to find ways of aligning funding for humanitarian aid and for development with the known risk of humanitarian crisis because prevention not only saves lives; it’s also far more cost-effective than responding to a crisis once it has taken hold.

Third, we need a more joined-up, a more coherent approach. That can only come from building and strengthening partnerships.

No one organization can meet the challenges we face alone, even the United Nations. The Governments that lead response efforts, regional organizations, donors, civil society

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Disasters have an impact at every level of society. We need a truly global, diverse and inclusive humanitarian system in which everyone plays their part. And that’s why this consultation and those that follow it are focused on capturing the views of a wide range of partners.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The solutions to the challenges we face must be locally grown and locally owned. Solutions imposed from the top or from outside are not sustainable.

The success of these consultations will rely on your support – support from grass roots organizations, affected people, NGOs, regional groupings, national disaster management agencies, philanthropists, politicians and decision-makers: the entire spectrum of humanitarian actors.

And we are beginning our consultations in West Africa where West and Central African countries are dealing with the effects of climate change and conflict, displacement and refugee flows, desertification and rapid population growth. This is an opportunity for us to listen to each other, to learn from our experiences and bring the lessons learned to the wider world.

This is the first of eight consultations and I hope its success will serve as an impetus and an example to the later ones.

My thanks to the Governments of Cote d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Heads of the Economic Community of Central African States and the Economic Community of West African States for hosting us today, and for their engagement on the Regional Steering Group that has prepared the ground for this meeting.

We are also grateful for the support of partners from outside this region, including Turkey, Denmark and the Republic of Korea. We count on the participation of representatives from the African continent in other regional consultations and thematic groups, to share experiences and to share best practices.

This meeting is the start of an important process. We are relying on you to be strong advocates and to build support in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit as we grapple with four key themes: humanitarian effectiveness; reducing vulnerability and managing risk; innovation; and serving the needs of people in conflict.

And please remember the online consultation, which is open to everyone.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I will end with the words of Zara Ahmad, a mother I met at a transit camp in Ndjamen in May. Zara and her children had fled violence in the Central African Republic.
“We lost everything. There is nothing left,” she told me. “It’s hard for us mothers. But the children are suffering the most.”

We’re here today to find a better way to support Zara, her children, and the millions of people like her all over the world.

Thank you again for being here, and I’m really looking forward to our discussions.