Thank you for inviting me today to address your conference. It is a real honour. And it is wonderful to be back in the UK and to be amongst so many friends and familiar faces.

I have had the pleasure of working closely with the UK’s development and humanitarian NGOs throughout my career. I have seen first-hand how passionate, dynamic and creative you can be. You make a real difference in some of the most difficult places around the world. And you never failed to keep me on my toes when I was a DFID Minister! That I do remember.

Perhaps most importantly, I know exactly what we can achieve when we work together as partners.

Together, as many of you who were involved will remember, we took huge strides towards defeating malaria and neglected tropical diseases. This is a commitment I have been engaged with for over 35 years, and yes, together, we saved millions of lives as a result. Together, we built cross-parliamentary support for international development in the UK, lifted the issue above party politics, and secured a majority. That led us to our legal commitment to 0.7% of GNI spent every year on overseas development assistance as defined by the OSCE-DAC on the UK’s statute books. These are no minor achievements.

Your ability to mobilise support and deliver results is exactly why I am so eager to be with you to address the BOND conference this year. Because once again, we need to work together and I need your support, your energy, your ideas and your advocacy.

In less than three months from now, the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, will hold a World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul on 23 and 24 May. This will be the first Summit of its kind in the United Nations’ 70 year history. We are less than three months away from this crucial moment and there is still a huge amount of work that needs to be done if we are to realise the Summit’s potential.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the scale of the challenges we face as humanitarians; why I am cautiously optimistic about the future, and indeed about the Summit; what we hope to achieve in Istanbul; and how you can get involved and help us deliver a successful outcome.
Ladies and gentlemen,

The stakes for this Summit are indeed high. The world is at a critical juncture. The level of suffering that millions of our fellow human beings are experiencing is staggering. Men, women and children caught up in conflict or those struck by repetitive natural disasters risk being left behind.

The complex drivers of modern conflicts make them more intractable, more internationalised, and when seemingly resolved – more likely to relapse. This has meant that 80% of humanitarian need, tonight, is now in conflict settings.

In addition, the impacts of climate change are making natural disasters more frequent and more devastating. The poorest and least resilient are inevitably hit the hardest. This year El Niño has created some of the worst drought conditions ever seen in parts of Southern Africa, Central America and in Ethiopia, putting 60 million people at risk. Meteorologists warn that we need to start preparing now for the effects of La Niña which may well be felt before the end of this year.

As I speak to you today, 125 million people in 37 countries are in need of humanitarian assistance - the highest number since the Second World War.

Behind these statistics are 125 million personal stories: A child in Yemen unable to access the vital medical care she needs. A woman in Aleppo forced to flee her home with her children from the terror of barrel bombs and airstrikes. A farmer in Ethiopia who wonders how he will feed his family during the drought. Families taking perilous journeys on rickety boats across the high seas to escape brutality and violence in their homelands.

That is why it was so important to recognize - I think in this very hall – that the London Syria conference was a pioneering model of how you invest in people and in what they want to do. Put the people up front and centre of our decision-making. This is precisely what we want to do by raising this issue at the World Humanitarian Summit.

And if I look at the world as a whole, the United Nations has called for $20 billion dollars to help nearly 90 million people who are the worst off, whose lives need saving, who need protecting today. But last year we only received 53 per cent of what we actually needed. So this funding gap has real-life, real-death implications.

It is easy to become despondent – even exasperated, but I haven’t seen anyone give up - when faced with these statistics, and the seemingly unrelenting bad news that we hear day after day. The UN’s Deputy Secretary-General, Jan Eliasson, – a seasoned diplomat with many decades of experience in international affairs - often describes himself as ‘an optimist who worries a lot’. I put myself in the same category as Jan.
Every day I worry deeply about the people caught up in crises around the world. But I am fundamentally optimistic about our shared ability to meet their needs; and the possibility of change in the humanitarian system to help us do that.

Let me give you three reasons why:

First, we should remember that the world has never been more generous. As a humanitarian system, we are reaching more people in need than ever before in absolute terms. We should be proud of that fact, even though we know that the demand is outstripping supply as we speak.

The passion and commitment of our people is also a reason to be positive. Since I started in my new role in June last year, I have travelled to almost all of the main crises around the world. In Syria I have crossed conflict lines in Homs and walked through the rubble of homes, schools and hospitals, including crossing the conflict line in Al-Wear. I have driven up a street littered with IEDs in Aden, Yemen, even though the battle lines had moved on. I spent that night on a World Food Programme Boat in international waters off Aden because it was simply too dangerous to remain in the city itself. I have visited UN camps in South Sudan that are providing protection to those fleeing from that senseless civil war.

And with each visit, I have come away cautiously optimistic. Because amidst the carnage and the suffering, I have seen for myself the outstanding efforts of our colleagues working in the field – the United Nations, local and international NGOs, and many other partners. Their commitment and bravery is humbling. There are so many heroes in our community whose stories are rarely told. If we can harness that talent in the right, coordinated system, we can achieve so much.

Secondly, I am an optimist because of my own personal experiences. In both politics and in the private sector, I have seen first-hand how to bring about ambitious change.

As founder of the UK’s Malaria consortium, we found solutions to help beat – we are not there yet – the leading killer of children in the developing world.

And how did we do it? By motivating a diverse coalition of partners around a collective vision. By establishing a clear goal and ensuring we had the right business model to reach it. And by securing high-level political backing. Through this approach, we successfully helped increase malaria funding from millions of dollars per year to over two billion, and helped save millions of children’s lives. That work continues. All of these lessons are relevant to the humanitarian sector today.

Similarly, my experience as a business leader in the private sector taught me that a business thrives when it innovates and changes in response to its customers. Who are our customers today? The innocent men, women and children caught up in crises. As the nature of crises change in the 21st century, we must adapt our system to keep up. Affected people must – as I said earlier – be at the centre of all our decision-making.
The third reason for my optimism is the fact that there is a major opportunity for change on our immediate horizon. That is what brings me to the World Humanitarian Summit. It is the moment when world leaders have the opportunity to come together to say “enough is enough”. The world cannot continue this way. Humanity can do better.

So what does change look like for the humanitarian community?

The UN’s Secretary-General has set out his ambitious vision for change in his recently issued report: “One Humanity, Shared Responsibility”. If you haven’t had a chance to read it yet, please do so. A lot of work went into it and it is an important read. It’s visionary and it synthesizes all the consultations, showing how much we all need to share this responsibility.

To develop this vision, we launched an extensive two-year consultation process involving 23,000 people across the globe to hear from the bottom-up what needed to change. NGOs played a vital role in this process, as well as affected people from all corners of the world.

The Secretary-General took on these ideas, and building on his own boyhood experience as refugee in war-torn Korea; and all he has seen in ten years as Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon launched his Agenda for Humanity last month, calling for the world to shoulder five core responsibilities:

First, global leaders must assume their responsibility to prevent and end conflict. In short, we need to find ways to reduce the level of demand on the humanitarian system. They must make conflict resolution their highest priority and move from managing crises to preventing them. This is mainly about political will. But we also want to see increased investment in international mediation capacities; and more consistent support for countries emerging from conflict to avoid relapse.

Second, states must uphold international humanitarian law and human rights law, and do more to protect civilians. Put simply, wars have rules. But these are being flagrantly violated with complete impunity on a day to day basis. It is utterly unacceptable that Member States of the United Nations are now routinely failing to uphold their obligations in conflict.

The Secretary-General is therefore calling for global leaders to champion a high-level watchdog to track, analyse, investigate and report on violations of international humanitarian law; as well as to commit to improving justice systems to end impunity for violators.

Third, the Secretary-General has called on us to meet our promise to leave no one behind – to make real on the promises of the Sustainable Development Goals to which we all signed up last year. This means putting the lives of people living in conflict, disaster and acute vulnerability at the heart of international decision-making.
In practical terms, we must find more sustainable solutions for those who have been forcibly displaced. We want leaders to make concrete commitments towards halving internal displacement over the next 15 years, and to bring an end to statelessness for millions of people, worldwide. Leaders will also be asked to present their commitments to empower and protect women and girls, so that they can play their rightful role in taking decisions on how a community should respond to a crisis; and their commitments to hold perpetrators of sexual and gender-based violence to account.

Fourth, we need to change people’s lives by moving from delivering aid to ending need. We want a new business model for the humanitarian system that aims at more sustainable, longer term set of solutions. The humanitarian system will fail if we are trying to deliver life-saving assistance year after year in perpetuity.

Instead, we must reinforce, not replace national systems; we must support the resilience of people and communities who will always be the first and last responders in crises; and we must think about success differently – measuring it by how people’s vulnerability and risk are reduced, not by how we meet needs year after year.

To achieve this, each of us must move beyond the siloes in which we currently operate and seek to maximize our comparative advantage. This will involve some tough choices for all of us. As part of this effort, we must bridge the historical divide between humanitarian actors and development actors.

Fifth, we must expand our resource base and be smarter about how we invest. The Summit will be a crucial moment for leaders in all sectors – including UN agencies – to announce how they intend to deliver on the ‘Grand Bargain’ as recommended by the High Level Panel on Humanitarian Finance to which I am very deeply grateful. The Secretary-General’s vision goes beyond humanitarian financing though. He calls for the establishment of an international financing platform which will allow different actors with an interest in financing – in particular the multilateral development banks – to provide support. This will hopefully allow for a more sustainable financing model in protracted crises and help us deliver multi-year outcomes. We need a shift from grant based funding to financing, and there is the need to invest directly in local capacities. Donors must be part of this change process: by funding collective outcomes rather than individual, often unconnected projects and furthering fragmentation.

The Summit will be a key political moment to take action across all 5 of the core responsibilities. But we cannot rely only on success at the Summit itself. What happens after the Summit is equally important. The Secretary-General aims therefore to use the Summit to launch a process that institutionalizes change over the next 3 years and beyond. After the Summit, he will deliver an implementation report that outlines how to take forward its outcomes. The aim is for the Agenda for Humanity to become a common framework for accountability for all of us. We will develop concrete targets and indicators and measure progress on implementing the Agenda for Humanity. We therefore need our partners’ sustained commitment and focus to make that change happen.
And now I finally get to the most important part of this speech – how can you – you – help turn all of this into a reality? How can you get involved?

I know that once this group is committed to an issue, it is an unstoppable force. You can mobilize millions of people here in the UK and across the globe. The World Humanitarian Summit will only be a success if it has your active support. So I have two requests:

First: advocate, advocate, advocate for the Summit. It is too easy for world leaders to shy away from a discussion on difficult topics like conflict prevention and upholding international humanitarian law. Don’t let them off the hook. Mobilise your networks across the world. Demand that world leaders attend the Summit. Not by chastising them, but encouraging them to be there in your name, with you, carrying your hopes and making clear your high expectations that they must make meaningful contributions towards realising the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Humanity.

My second request is for you to consider what civil society’s ‘offer’ at the Summit will be? As is too often the case, everyone is very eager to call for change; but rarely do we actually want to change ourselves. I stand guilty. But if we are to truly implement a new business model we must all take a hard look at ourselves and find ways to improve. Let us not miss this opportunity.

The Secretary-General has already called for changes within the UN system. In particular he has called to empower field leadership more, to insist we plan collectively on a multi-year basis and deliver collective outcomes based on comparative advantages. This will be hard for us, but the Secretary-General knows that if we continue with business-as-usual we will simply not be able to help the people that need us.

What will be the NGO community’s commitment to change? What can you commit to contribute to help deliver on the Secretary-General’s Agenda for Humanity? For instance, how much can INGOs help the capacity growth of local NGOs? A subject I know there were discussion on today.

There will be many opportunities in Istanbul to announce and discuss your commitments, including a plenary, a series of high-level roundtables, special sessions, and a number of side events.

We will also hold a number of Special Sessions at which partners will launch initiatives. These include: the platform and fund for emergency education – vital for the tens of millions of children barred schooling due to conflicts and crises; the Urban Crisis Alliance; a humanitarian fund based on Islamic Social Finance; a partnership for humanitarian innovation; initiatives to empower youth and to put people with disabilities at the heart of humanitarian action.
Ladies and gentlemen,

The World Humanitarian Summit is a once in a generation opportunity to meet our responsibilities to the people of the world caught up in crises. Let us not squander this chance. I urge you all to join me in making this Summit a success. I know that with your strong support and energy we can tackle even the most insurmountable challenges, save lives, to protect people and help people to not only survive – but also thrive.

Thank you.