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We're brought together by an issue that affects nearly every aspect of global development: health, education, equity, economic progress, even peace. This is not an abstraction. Safe water... effective sanitation... good hygiene are all critical to the health of every person and every community. All essential to building fair and healthy societies.

Over the next day and a half, I hope we can bear in mind a central strategic question about our efforts — one that falls short of an insoluble dilemma...but one that demands making priorities.

Sustainable Development Goal 6 — achieving universal water and sanitation coverage — is a call for safely managed water and sanitation services for all. This means water that is free of contamination, available when needed, and on premises. And it means sanitation systems that contain, empty, transport, treat and dispose of waste safely. A high bar to clear — and expensive. So progress will require governments, and indeed all of us, to make tough choices as we design and adopt strategies to pursue this essential SDG.

Let me try to frame clearly a central choice.

Do we focus first and primarily on fully achieving safely managed services for those in the easiest-to-reach communities? Or do we focus the bulk (but not all) of our efforts on achieving at least the basic levels of the Goal for the most disadvantaged — those in the hardest-to-reach areas? Those that lack even basic access to water and sanitation?

In short, should our first priority be the “perfect” for some — or the “good” for all?

Let me emphasize that this is not a binary, “either/or” choice. We need to make progress on all fronts. But it is an important question of strategic priorities.

And I would argue that focusing primarily on improved services for the most disadvantaged citizens — while maintaining progress for those communities that already enjoy a basic level of service — is not only the fairest, but the most effective pathway forward. Because in reaching the most disadvantaged, we achieve the greatest return on investment — and the greatest, most broadly based results.

A 2013 study¹ by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine showed that improving sanitation for the poorest households actually brings the greatest, most immediate health benefits for all, since children in the poorest households are at greatest risk of diarrheal diseases and early mortality. And because these households tend to have the most children, we achieve more results, quicker, for every dollar spent. And because eliminating open defecation within a community likely benefits everyone, rich and poor alike.

And more: when we reach the most disadvantaged people — when we do more, and better, in the most disadvantaged communities — we dramatically improve an entire society's health, education, equality and economic prospects over the long term. As we improve water and sanitation in the most disadvantaged communities and for the most disadvantaged children, we reduce today's inequalities and tomorrow's — inequalities that can tear the social, political and economic fabric of any nation.

And we avert more of the high economic costs of poor sanitation and inadequate water, which result in a global GDP loss of

¹ "Estimating inequities in sanitation-related disease burden," London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2013

\$260 billion annually, when we seek the broad-based benefits that bring us closer to our ultimate goal of sanitation and water for all.

Governments clearly understand that investing in this sector is not only a moral necessity, but a practical one. Tomorrow, we'll meet with Finance Ministers to discuss how existing resources could best be used, while making the case for increasing investments.

In that spirit, I would suggest two core accountabilities — two clear policy goals — to shape our approach.

First — as soon as possible, every person should have access to at least a basic level of drinking water service that also addresses water quality. A “basic plus” level of service: this is, drinking water that is not only available when needed, but also free from bacterial or chemical contamination.

Second — every person should be able to use a safe toilet that separates waste from human contact, with handwashing facilities available. A toilet that affords privacy, dignity and safety — especially when inadequate sanitation keeps so many girls out of school.

And more — we must make these services available in every context. In every school and health centre. In times of stability and

conflict alike. In the midst of natural disasters — and, especially, once those disasters subside and communities rebuild.

Our work is far from finished. By “our”, I mean governments, civil society, the private sector, UN agencies – all of us. But huge progress is possible. Over the next day and a half, we have an opportunity to shape the outlines not only of an approach that builds on the world’s wonderful achievements so far — but one that will bring us ever-closer to the commitments the world made through the SDGs.

An opportunity to reach our promises, so the people we serve can reach their potential.
