Remarks by the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator, Ms. Ursula Mueller, at the High-level side event on Partnering with the Private Sector: How Data Can Improve Humanitarian Response

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As delivered

Good afternoon, excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for being here and I am pleased to welcome you to this General Assembly Side Event on “Partnering with the Private Sector: How Data Can Improve Humanitarian Response.”

My name is Ursula Mueller, I am the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator in the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, commonly referred to as OCHA.

And I am very pleased to be joined by a distinguished group of panelists to deliver opening remarks in this session.

To my left is Ms. Reina Buijs, Vice Minister for Development Cooperation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Great that you are here.

On my right is Ms. Monique Pariat, Director-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, known as ECHO, glad you are here Monique.

And finally, seated on the end of the table is Ms. Sanda Ojiambo, the Head of Corporate Responsibility at Safaricom. Great to welcome you here from Kenya.

Today, we aim to highlight and explore some of the innovative ways that humanitarian and private sector organizations are working together to respond to humanitarian needs and emergencies.

And we will focus specifically on how the sharing and use of data can help build local capacity to prevent, prepare for, and respond to, and recover from crises.
My background is in economics. So, as I am an economist, I firmly believe in the value of reliable facts and figures. It is of utmost importance that humanitarian decision-making is driven by high-quality accurate, and timely data.

And one of the consequences of the information technology revolution is that more data is available now than ever before in human history.

And there are few places left on earth where an at least rudimentary connection to the internet is not available. More than 5 billion people – that is two-thirds of the world’s population – now have access to mobile services, and more and more systems, sensors, and people come online each day.

So, we have an enormous opportunity, but also an enormous challenge. The opportunity lies in using these new technologies and data sources to inform our decisions and improve the lives of affected people. But the challenge lies in obtaining and sharing data from hundreds of sources amid the chaos of a humanitarian emergency.

It is for these reasons that OCHA established the Centre for Humanitarian Data, which opened nine months ago in The Hague. And I am grateful to the Government of the Netherlands for supporting and hosting this Centre for Humanitarian Data. The Centre is dedicated to increasing the use, impact and sharing of data in humanitarian response.

Among other activities, the Centre for Humanitarian Data manages an open platform for sharing data from a range of partners across multiple sectors and crises. As the Centre has grown, in the last nine months, we have started to see the potential for new insights and improved situational awareness in some very difficult contexts.

For example, as part of the response to the Rohingya refugee crisis, OCHA worked with the International Organization for Migration to combine satellite and drone imagery with other data sources to determine variations in elevation. Equipped with this knowledge, our partners were able to identify refugee camps that were most at risk of flooding in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh before the rainy season began, saving the property and also the lives of people who have already been through much suffering.

However, we must recognise that the private sector is in many respects more advanced and experienced, and definitely faster when it comes to these issues.

We need the support of the private sector to accelerate our progress and take advantage of new sources of data. This is especially true when we consider the potential risks that arise with increased collection and sharing of data.

And we need to look to partners like Amazon and Microsoft, who we will be hearing from later today, to ensure that we handle personal and sensitive data securely, and in a manner that respects the privacy and rights of affected people.
As the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said earlier this month, "the private sector is driving much of the progress" of new technologies, and it is also incumbent upon the United Nations to work in partnership, be humble, and continue to learn.

The Connecting Business initiative, or CBi is a very dynamic example of how UN agencies engage across the humanitarian and development spectrums together with the private sector.

Launched by OCHA and UNDP at the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 in Istanbul, CBi is a multi-stakeholder commitment to remove unnecessary barriers to collaboration and more actively capitalize on each other’s strengths.

Last year, eight of the 13 private sector networks, which were supported by the Connecting Business initiative, responded to emergencies in their respective countries. Among other activities, these networks participated in joint needs assessments, channeled financial and in-kind contributions, built information systems, and re-built critical infrastructure.

And later in the session, we will hear some examples – one from Mexico and one from Sri Lanka – of how the Connecting Business initiative networks and their partners have supported emergency response and recovery efforts.

I will now give the opportunity to the opening panelists to deliver their remarks. I look forward to an engaging discussion.

Thank you.