

United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

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Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

Thematic discussion on the work of UNICEF in humanitarian situations

Background document

I. Global context and humanitarian action in UNICEF

1. As noted in the new UNICEF Strategic Plan for 2014-2017, approved by the Executive Board in June 2013, the caseload for humanitarian action is expected to grow over the coming decades, and the operational contexts for delivering assistance will become more complex and diverse. An increase in the number of natural disasters resulting from climate change is expected. Rising global prices, migration, urbanization and the 'youth bulge' will also pose new challenges. At the same time, new opportunities to further improve humanitarian assistance will arise. These opportunities include the growing capabilities of national institutions, the increasing number of humanitarian partners, and the expanding benefits of technology for accountability, communication and monitoring.

2. Humanitarian action in UNICEF encompasses interventions focused on effective preparedness, response and early recovery -- to save lives and protect child rights, as defined in the Core Commitments for Children (CCCs) in Humanitarian Action. It also includes UNICEF's work to address underlying causes of vulnerability to disasters, fragility and conflict through its response to humanitarian crises and through its regular programmes, focused on building resilience.

3. The UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2014-2017, underlines the importance of integrating humanitarian and development programmes and sets specific measurable targets for humanitarian action. The plan aims to achieve more effective response to crises, to invest more systematically in building resilience through risk-informed humanitarian and development programmes, and to forge stronger links between these two areas.

4. This background paper will support a discussion on the work of UNICEF in humanitarian action taking place at the 2014 first regular session of the Executive Board (4-7 February). The aim is to update the Executive Board on UNICEF's strategic approach to humanitarian action and working with national governments and other partners so that affected children and women receive the assistance they require. The Board briefing will highlight successes achieved in the second half

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of 2012 and in 2013, list the challenges UNICEF is currently addressing, and explain the efforts UNICEF is making to remain ‘fit for purpose’ in the changing environment.

5. Specifically, the discussion will aim to elicit feedback from the Executive Board on the Strengthening Humanitarian Action initiative UNICEF is undertaking in order to meet the commitments laid out in the strategic plan. The initiative builds on the improvements UNICEF has already made to its tools, systems and capacities for more effective humanitarian action, based on lessons from the crises of 2012 and 2013. It also takes into account feedback from partners in government and civil society and from affected populations themselves, as well as from members of the Executive Board and donors and partner organizations, both United Nations and non-governmental.

6. This paper describes how UNICEF plans to further strengthen its contribution to the wider humanitarian system, specifically through the Transformative Agenda of the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC). This contribution will enable UNICEF to remain a reliable humanitarian partner for national governments, civil society, the United Nations family, and other humanitarian actors.

7. This paper builds on the thematic discussion on the work of UNICEF in humanitarian situations, held at the second regular session of the Executive Board in September 2012, and is informed by the discussion on the thematic synthesis report on evaluation of humanitarian action, held at the annual session of the Executive Board in June 2013.

II. UNICEF humanitarian action: results achieved, lessons applied, and systems further strengthened

8. In 2012, UNICEF and partners responded to 286 humanitarian situations of varying scale in 79 countries. UNICEF reported to the Executive Board on the results achieved through humanitarian action at the second regular session of 2012. By the end of that year, UNICEF had supported the treatment of more than 2.1 million children with severe acute malnutrition and the vaccination against measles of 43.8 million children in crises.

9. By the end of October 2013, more than 1.9 million children with severe acute malnutrition (72 per cent of those targeted) had been admitted to therapeutic feeding programmes; over 19 million people (83 per cent of target) were given access to safe water; over 24 million children (89 per cent of target) were vaccinated against measles; some 2.7 million children (66 per cent of target) were accessing formal or non-formal basic education; and more than 835,000 children and their caregivers (62 per cent of target) were receiving psychosocial support. In terms of funding requirements, the humanitarian appeal made by UNICEF in 2013 grew to more than \$1.8 billion, an unprecedented amount, driven to a significant extent by the response to the Syria crisis.

10. The organization and its partners responded to a number of major emergencies during this period, in particular to the nutritional emergency in the Sahel, to the complex emergencies in the Central African Republic, Mali, the Syrian Arab Republic and neighbouring countries, and most recently, in South Sudan, and to the devastating impact of Typhoon Haiyan, which struck the Philippines in November 2013.

11. Lessons from recent humanitarian crises informed the responses to new emergencies in many ways. For example, the experience in the Horn of Africa in 2011 considerably informed the

response in the Sahel. In concrete terms, this led to the following: adopting an approach to build resilience; applying risk-informed development programming; investing in systems that address vulnerability systematically; and strengthening capacity to respond to vulnerabilities and risks. In Ethiopia and Niger, for example, UNICEF contributed to the development of decentralized community health extension programmes and Government-led social protection systems and food safety-nets, which helped address food security and nutrition-related vulnerabilities. This approach is being extended to other countries in the Sahel.

12. Another major lesson from the Horn of Africa was that early warning signs did not necessarily trigger early action. Applying learning from this experience to the Sahel crisis, UNICEF fully engaged with the national Governments and partners in the humanitarian system to mobilize the world's attention to the crisis early on. This resulted in timely and significant funding allocations, before the worst of the nutritional crisis was felt. Thanks to the resulting mobilization of resources and funding, UNICEF was able to work with governments and other partners in 2012 to provide treatment to 920,000 of the estimated 1.1 million children under 5 with severe acute malnutrition. The number of children treated represented an increase of more than 300,000 over the number in 2011, amounting to 84 per cent of the total number of children with severe acute malnutrition.

13. As previously reported to the Executive Board, UNICEF in 2011 adopted the Corporate Emergency Activation Procedure (CEAP) for Level 3 emergencies, complemented in 2012 by standard simplified operating procedures (SSOPs). In the final months of 2012 and in early 2013, UNICEF developed and adopted the procedure for Level 2 emergencies, which included a system for designating this level of emergencies and clarified accountabilities for managing the response. The Level 2 procedures introduced prioritized support, simplified procedures and streamlined requirements, all based on best practices and results of monitoring.

14. Several other improvements have also been introduced. UNICEF has continued to improve its reporting on results and results-based management of humanitarian action across the organization. This has resulted in clearer, more regular situation reports that include monthly updates on results achieved against targets as well as annual reporting that includes aggregate global figures. UNICEF also developed and disseminated new tools providing up-to-date guidance for staff on humanitarian action, such as the CCC e-toolkit and the UNICEF e-deployment kit. Equally significant, UNICEF held its first-ever Humanitarian Innovators Network Lab in October 2013. This brought together more than 30 emergency practitioners from UNICEF and other UN agencies as well as external partners to exchange ideas on how innovation can improve humanitarian action. Participants identified concrete innovations that will be supported as well as ideas that will be tested. Innovation in emergencies includes, for example, the use of mobile technology for rapid family tracing and re-unification.

15. Innovation was championed in many ways to achieve results in conflict and high-threat environments. One good example was the support given to children affected by nutritional crisis in the south-central region of Somalia through the provision of unconditional cash transfers. In another example, in northern Mali, critical delivery of services, including education and water, sanitation and hygiene, was maintained through the use of partnerships with non-governmental organizations and strong third-party monitoring systems to manage risks of diversion of resources. In the Central African Republic, mobile teams were deployed to provide real-time needs assessments, re-establish services, document rights violations and assist those affected by the crisis.

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16. UNICEF has used innovative means to achieve results in complex and highly insecure environments. For example, staff members have been trained on international humanitarian law and on methods for securing humanitarian access that involve maintaining a presence as well as dialogue with relevant parties and communities. In situations where security conditions have not allowed the full-time presence of UNICEF staff, the organization has implemented responses remotely and has managed the risks created by carrying out cross-line field missions (missions that span conflict-affected zones within a country), using third-party monitoring, and establishing other controls. As one example, in 2013 these measures allowed UNICEF to work with partners to provide 10 million people inside the Syrian Arab Republic with access to safe water.

17. These enhanced procedures, systems and tools have been put to the test. In January 2013, UNICEF activated its Level 3 procedure for the Syria crisis, as did the IASC. As a result, greater resources were made available for the response which resulted in the two year total for personnel deployed on a surge basis to the affected countries standing at 409. The Syria crisis has also shown that many of the Level 3 procedures need to be better adapted to complex emergencies.

18. In November 2013, in response to the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan, the UNICEF Executive Director activated the CEAP for Level 3 emergencies. The IASC also activated the system-wide Level 3 mechanism. With all aspects of CEAP employed fully for the first time, an opportunity was created to assess its effectiveness. An early assessment showed that UNICEF has been able to mobilize and ramp up a significant and timely response. A full Immediate Response Team (IRT) was deployed to support the country office within days. Surge staff members have been swiftly identified and placed in the country. A 'no-regrets' (fast-track) allocation from the Emergency Programme Fund allowed the country office to rapidly procure supplies and activate several pre-established contingency partnerships. Simplified procedures in many areas have reduced the burden on staff. A detailed response plan in support of the Humanitarian System's Strategic Response Plan (the new system-wide mechanism that replaced the Consolidated Appeals Process) was elaborated within three weeks of the emergency, and its specific targets are being monitored regularly to support accountability, transparency and real-time improvements to the response.

19. UNICEF responded to other major emergencies as well. At the time of the writing of this paper, both UNICEF and the IASC had declared the situation in the Central African Republic a Level 3 emergency. That country had been designated as a Level 2 emergency in May 2012. While it was too early to determine how the Level 3 designation would impact the response, it had already resulted in a mobilization of additional financial and human resources. This occurred despite the challenges of identifying sufficient francophone staff and operating in an unstable high-risk environment. Another major emergency was declared in South Sudan, which UNICEF designated a Level 2 emergency. A particular challenge may be the potential over-stretching of humanitarian response capacity, given the multitude of simultaneous responses to major emergencies.

20. In addition to continuing to strengthen its internal capacities to respond to emergencies, UNICEF also worked with others to strengthen the capacity of the IASC by contributing to support for coordination, finalization of the Transformative Agenda protocols, improving results-based monitoring and accountability, and simplifying procedures.

21. A couple of measures helped to improve the performance of UNICEF-led clusters in slow-onset and new sudden emergencies such as those in Mali and the Philippines. The measures included consolidating in Geneva the management and oversight of support to humanitarian clusters, as reported on previously, and increasing investment in rapid-response capacity. These

improvements were reflected in an Independent Evaluation of UNICEF's Cluster Lead Agency Role, finalized in 2013.

22. Further, UNICEF contributed to IASC efforts to improve humanitarian action. The experience of UNICEF informed the development of a joint performance monitoring system; the development of normative and operational tools addressing gender; and the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance in conflict settings. UNICEF also provided leadership in the development of a Common Framework for Preparedness, in a Level 3 simulation and in the finalization of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle.

23. The organization also further strengthened key humanitarian partnerships, including with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme. Senior leaders of the three agencies undertook joint missions to the Sahel and the Middle East to review work modalities among the three agencies and improve on operations. UNHCR and UNICEF developed a template for a country-level letter of understanding to facilitate cooperation between the two agencies. In 11 countries, a specific letter of understanding has been signed, improving synergies between the two institutions, to the benefit of implementation partners, governments and affected populations.

III. UNICEF humanitarian action: challenges looking ahead

24. In several cases, including in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Niger, humanitarian action has led to investments in national systems that reduce vulnerability to disasters and shocks, and therefore build resilience. UNICEF is taking steps so that country programmes of cooperation address preparedness and resilience more systematically.

25. Despite improvements in systems and procedures, it remains challenging at times to “change gears” when a situation deteriorates or when a sudden emergency occurs in a country where UNICEF has limited humanitarian capacities. UNICEF is looking at measures to accelerate scale-up in these contexts.

26. The response to Typhoon Haiyan has demonstrated that, while UNICEF has definitely improved its ability to rapidly deploy staff in a sudden-onset Level 3 emergency, surge capacity still relies too heavily on the use of staff from other UNICEF offices. In addition, support mechanisms such as temporary office space, ‘accommodation in a box’, telecommunications, and care and stress management for staff still need to be strengthened. UNICEF will be reviewing options to increase its surge capacity and speed of deployments to large-scale emergencies.

27. Securing access to affected children in conflicts and highly insecure environments remains extremely difficult. The crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic is just one example of this challenge. To address the issue of access, UNICEF will work with a range of partners to review a number of measures, including the application of programme criticality (the framework for determining the criticality of activities carried out by UN personnel within the guidelines for acceptable risk) and UN security protocols. Partners will discuss how to engage in integrated missions and issues related to monitoring and risk management.

28. Emergencies are occurring in more diverse environments. UNICEF is developing a range of strategies and partnerships to be able to operate in these environments, which include urban

settings, countries where there is strong national capacity for emergency preparedness and response, and situations where UNICEF needs to provide specialized support.

29. The violation of human rights in humanitarian crises is another critical issue being addressed. In an increasing number of situations, targeted or indiscriminate violence – including sexual violence, abuse and exploitation – constitutes a violation of rights in itself and leads to further consequences, including external and internal displacements. Oftentimes, millions of people are at risk of grave violations and with little or no access to basic social services or humanitarian assistance. UNICEF is addressing violence and its consequences, including prevention. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, UNICEF worked with partners to assist almost 16,000 survivors of sexual violence and provided access to psychosocial support for more than 80,000 children.

30. Nonetheless, as noted by the United Nations Internal Review Panel on Sri Lanka in November 2012, the system as a whole needs to equip itself with stronger means to prevent widespread violations of human rights. For UNICEF, this includes reinforcing its capacity in conflict situations to provide co-leadership for the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism on Children and Armed Conflict. It also involves working in close collaboration with the Secretary-General's Special Representatives for children and armed conflict and on sexual violence in conflict, as well as with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and other actors in human rights and protection.

IV. Strengthening humanitarian action in UNICEF: the way forward

31. Significant progress has been achieved in strengthening UNICEF humanitarian action, but challenges remain, as described above. The organization is committed to addressing these challenges so that it can be even more effective in its response.

32. As part of the process to increase efficiency and effectiveness within the organization, UNICEF has embarked upon a Strengthening Humanitarian Action initiative with three key objectives. The first is to adapt humanitarian action to emerging operational contexts and to develop specific methods and tools for being fit for purpose to address emergencies in these diverse programme environments. The second is to strengthen and expand humanitarian partnerships to take fuller advantage of South-South cooperation and a more predictable set of relationships to enhance operational capacity. The third is to decide which steps UNICEF needs to take to be an even more predictable, effective and efficient humanitarian organization.

33. Specifically to meet these objectives, UNICEF will develop new methods, procedures and tools, including the following:

(a) a resilience strategy that will detail how UNICEF intends to systematically integrate resilience into its planning, programming, operations and communications;

(b) mechanisms to foster innovation and specific investments in innovative tools for data collection and analysis to support performance monitoring;

(c) new solutions for effectively deploying human resources in crises, including surge staff at the onset of an emergency, while placing less strain on existing operations;

(d) a “how to” guide for the CCCs, which will explain more specifically how the organization will work to achieve results for children in various humanitarian contexts;

(e) an updated corporate position on the work done by UNICEF and partners related to children affected by armed conflict;

(f) strengthened mechanisms for accountability to affected populations;

(g) specific investments in knowledge management, including information management and its role in enhanced performance monitoring, and explicit learning from evaluative exercises. continued focus on improving results-based management and reporting through the dissemination of clear guidance, including organizational standards and accountabilities;

(h) further simplification of procedures related to cash management, contracts and other business practices.

34. This process to strengthen UNICEF humanitarian action is taking place in the context of the IASC Transformative Agenda and the lead-up to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Accordingly, UNICEF is taking concrete steps to reflect the commitments of the Transformative Agenda, and to further internalize the protocols of the Transformative Agenda throughout the organization, with internal procedures adjusted accordingly.

35. UNICEF values its many partners who are addressing humanitarian needs and providing sustainable solutions for humanitarian work on behalf of children and women affected by disasters and instability. The main partners are first and foremost governments, civil society actors, first responders, local service providers and the affected populations themselves. Strengthening humanitarian action will entail building strong partnerships that leverage and support national efforts, foster South-South cooperation and develop capacities and resilience for the long term.

36. Engaging partners in its initiative to strengthen its humanitarian action is a high priority for UNICEF, and several opportunities for such engagement will be organized in the first half of 2014.

37. UNICEF will continue to build its systems in a way that enables national efforts and develops capacities for effectively addressing humanitarian needs, while reducing the vulnerability to risks that women and children face during crises.
