United Nations Children’s Fund
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Update on strengthening humanitarian action

I. Background

1. In 2013, UNICEF embarked on a process to further strengthen its humanitarian action in order to equip the organization to continue to reliably and predictably deliver results for children in the face of new global challenges and opportunities and to achieve the results defined in its Strategic Plan 2014–2017.

2. The UNICEF Strategic Plan 2014–2017 underlines the importance of integrating humanitarian and development programmes and sets specific measurable targets for humanitarian action. The Strategic Plan aims to achieve an even 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 the two.

3. During the first regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board (4–7 February 2014), a thematic discussion reviewed the work of UNICEF in humanitarian situations and the lessons learned from recent crises. The specific challenges identified were: strengthening preparedness and building resilience more systematically; accelerating scale-up of the response in contexts of sudden deterioration of the humanitarian situation; increasing the organization’s efficacy and speed of deployment during large-scale emergencies; and securing access to affected children in highly insecure environments.

II. Strengthening humanitarian action in UNICEF

4. In order to address these challenges and align the emergency response to the Strategic Plan, three key objectives were identified by our reflection on strengthening humanitarian action: (a) to adapt humanitarian action to emerging operational contexts and to develop specific methods and tools to address emergencies in these diverse programme environments; (b) to strengthen and expand humanitarian partnerships to take fuller advantage of South-South cooperation and a more

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† Thematic discussion on the work of UNICEF in humanitarian situations (E/ICEF/2014/CRP.4).
predictable set of relationships to enhance operational capacity; and, (c) to decide the steps UNICEF needs to take to become an even more predictable, effective and efficient humanitarian actor.

5. Throughout late 2013 and 2014, consultations were held with staff across the organization, including interviews with senior staff with extensive humanitarian experience. External partners – donors, non-governmental organizations and humanitarian policy experts – were also consulted. Based on these discussions, and supported by research and analysis, in September 2014 recommendations were developed and presented to the Global Management Team and the Executive Director.

III. Results to date

6. Between September and November 2014, the Executive Director announced several decisions to strengthen immediately UNICEF humanitarian action, including:

   (a) Stronger support to staff in complex and high-threat environments, through creating two new regional staff counsellor positions and two additional global staff counsellor positions;

   (b) Expansion of the Emergency Response Team to fill critical gaps that exist in UNICEF capacity to respond to emergencies;

   (c) Practical measures to support locally-recruited staff who are moving to international positions in Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies.

7. Continued action in the following areas will significantly contribute to further strengthening UNICEF humanitarian action:

   (a) A UNICEF corporate position on resilience has been finalized. To enhance UNICEF emergency preparedness and promote clearer links to building resilience, emergency preparedness initiatives will be integrated into annual workplans and resources to fund such initiatives will be identified.

   (b) To strengthen delivery by UNICEF of the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action (CCCs) in emerging contexts – including urban environments – user-friendly guidance will be issued on how to define and achieve targets, and benchmarks will be set to track performance against the operational commitments of the CCCs.

   (c) To help front-line staff in complex and high-threat contexts, simple tools have been developed to manage particularly challenging issues like public advocacy and risk management. Access to reliable and dynamic political and economic analysis will be improved to help strategic decision-making.

   (d) In response to commitments made in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and to the recommendations of the 2013 external evaluation of the UNICEF Cluster Lead Agency Role in Humanitarian Action, steps were agreed upon to equip UNICEF to more effectively support a collective emergency response and to provide stronger leadership and coordination.

   (e) To provide UNICEF with the human resources and expertise needed to respond to a growing humanitarian caseload, work is underway to address the needs of national staff in humanitarian contexts.
Proposals are being developed to facilitate staff movements between hardship and non-hardship duty stations; to make better provisions for staff welfare; and to expand standing and standby capacity for the emergency response.

IV. The way forward

8. As the changes described above are put into practice, work will continue in parallel on the following areas that were concluded as essential to delivering stronger results for children.

9. Firstly, UNICEF will provide staff with focused training and skills development, which will enable them to more effectively deliver results for children in humanitarian contexts. By doing so, UNICEF will be better able to manage its collective human resources and to enlarge the pool of available capacity.

10. Secondly, UNICEF recognizes the challenge of delivering in especially difficult circumstances, such as during conflict, and will further simplify procedures in order to provide country offices with options for flexible and diversified implementation modalities in humanitarian contexts.

11. Thirdly, as the world faces new global challenges, the landscape of humanitarian actors is also changing. UNICEF will identify and invest in strategic new partnerships with those entities of new or growing influence identified through the Strengthening Humanitarian Action initiative – as donors, sources of expertise and human capacities for emergency response, or implementing partners. These new partners will focus on the areas of the CCCs where gaps have been identified, or external expertise is especially required.

12. Lastly, UNICEF recognizes the need for a data-driven analysis that produces a blueprint for humanitarian architecture and resources and helps to leverage capacities and pool expertise. This will enable UNICEF to deploy human and financial resources to best advantage, in the locations and sectors where needs are most critical.