Oral update on UNICEF humanitarian action

Update on humanitarian action with a focus on emergency preparedness

I. Introduction

1. From natural disasters to public health emergencies and protracted conflicts, children are facing an increasing number of humanitarian crises today. Globally, more than half a billion children – almost one in four – are living in countries affected by emergencies. That includes nearly 50 million children who have been uprooted from their homes due to violence, poverty and other factors.

2. In line with recent discussions with Member States, this paper provides an update on selected humanitarian responses undertaken by UNICEF in the second half of 2017, with a particular focus on the organization’s approach to emergency preparedness and immediate response.

II. Humanitarian situation and response 2017

A. Update on the humanitarian situation

3. As the global humanitarian caseload continues to grow, conventional drivers of crisis such as fragility, pandemics, violent conflict and natural hazards are interacting with diverse drivers such as unplanned urbanization natural resource scarcity and climate change.

4. Over the course of 2017, UNICEF continued to respond to an unprecedented number of complex and large-scale emergencies, including the protracted conflicts in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and the Lake Chad Basin. Many of these conflicts have spilled over borders and generated subregional displacement crises and led to the collapse of public services, increased disease outbreaks and the threat of famine.

* E/ICEF/2018/1.
5. The year also saw millions of people impacted by sudden-onset emergencies and the escalation of existing crises. In August, renewed violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar, drove hundreds of thousands of Rohingya across the border into the Cox’s Bazar district of Bangladesh. As of mid-October, more than half a million people had entered Bangladesh, bringing the total number of Rohingya and affected local communities to more than 1.2 million, including 720,000 children. The magnitude of the situation – both the sheer number of affected people and the extent of their needs – and the constant flow of new arrivals has stretched the response capacities of the Government and humanitarian organizations, including UNICEF.

6. In September, Hurricane Irma, one of the most powerful hurricanes ever recorded over the Atlantic Ocean, and Hurricane Maria, which followed soon afterwards, caused devastation across the Caribbean and an extensive breakdown of essential services in several countries. More than 1.4 million people, including more than 350,000 children, required assistance. In the most affected islands of Barbuda and Dominica, 95 per cent of buildings were destroyed or damaged. The breadth and depth of the impact across so many affected islands meant that UNICEF had to respond at scale in new areas, including in countries where it did not have an established presence.

7. In the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an estimated 380,000 children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition and more than 3.2 million people are food insecure. Security remains volatile and ongoing violence has displaced more than 1.4 million people.

B. UNICEF response and key challenges

8. UNICEF is working to deliver a faster, more effective humanitarian response at scale, in line with its Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action and the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021 in all situations, including health emergencies, mass population displacements, protracted conflicts and climate-related crises. Key approaches include continuing to build organizational capacities; strengthening systems across sectors; advocating for more flexible funding and multi-year planning; facilitating community engagement; strengthening risk-informed programming; developing more predictable partnerships; and increasing investments in emergency preparedness.

9. In Bangladesh, for example, UNICEF invested in emergency preparedness and response training for staff in the two years prior to the August crisis triggered by the influx of Rohingya. In addition, in December 2016, following the arrival of 74,000 Rohingya from Myanmar, UNICEF Bangladesh received regular resources from the Emergency Programme Fund to establish an office in Cox’s Bazar.

10. The massive scale of the influx in 2017 was not anticipated, however, and underlines the importance of thinking through scenarios in order to facilitate appropriate contingency planning. The crisis in Bangladesh has also faced site planning and camp management challenges that merit reflection with United Nations sister agencies, to agree on the lessons learned for future rapid influx situations.

11. Recognizing the severity of the crisis in Bangladesh, UNICEF declared a Level 3 emergency in September, and by November, $19 million in regular resources had been allocated for the procurement of offshore supplies, the deployment of surge capacity and the roll out of interventions with partners. Under UNICEF sector leadership, the response has focused on the provision of safe water and sanitation to prevent waterborne diseases, child protection support, mass immunization and screening, early detection and treatment of malnutrition.

12. In the Caribbean, where UNICEF had no staff presence on several of the islands most affected by the hurricanes (e.g. Dominica and Puerto Rico), the organization’s emergency response was initially constrained in scale and scope. However, UNICEF was able to deploy
technical experts to the affected islands, and, thanks to the regional contingency supply hub in Panama, to distribute pre-positioned emergency relief supplies – such as water purification tablets, tarpaulins, water tanks, water bladders, mosquito nets and education, recreation and hygiene kits – just one day after Hurricane Irma hit.

13. In the following weeks, the humanitarian response across the region was hampered by heavy rains, insufficient stocks of building materials and ongoing logistical constraints linked to telecommunications and the transportation of humanitarian relief. These factors highlight the need to reinforce national preparedness capacity across all of the Caribbean islands, including contingency stocks, transportation options, clear evacuation plans and safe locations.

14. UNICEF implemented a two-track response in the Caribbean: humanitarian relief to affected populations; and long-term recovery and resilience support across hurricane-affected communities. The latter has included supporting the establishment of safe and resilient schools, including storm-proofed school facilities, and pre-positioning of emergency supplies; strengthening social and child protection systems, including integrated psychosocial support; conducting child-sensitive risk analyses and assessments; linking social protection systems to humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction; and replicating national disaster risk reduction plans at the local level.

15. In the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Rapid Response to Movements of Population (RRMP) mechanism was deployed in June 2017 to respond to the urgent needs of affected populations. Building on an efficient humanitarian early warning system, contingency planning and the pre-positioning of funds, partners and supplies, the RRMP is now reaching 20,000 households with multisectoral assistance in non-food items, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and nutrition. Over the course of 2017, the mechanism has assisted more than 1 million vulnerable people in the provinces of Haut Katanga, Ituri, North Kivu, South Kivu and Tanganyika with a multisectoral package.

III. Investing in emergency preparedness

A. Introduction

16. Given the increasing humanitarian caseload, most UNICEF offices will be involved in an emergency response at some point in their programme cycle. All UNICEF staff and offices must therefore be ready to respond – to all potential types of crisis – to save the lives of those children who are most in need. Faster delivery of essential supplies and services in the critical first days of a new emergency can prevent the escalation of suffering and make the difference between life and death.

17. Emergency preparedness is comprised of the mechanisms, systems and capacities that are established in advance to enable an effective and immediate humanitarian response and mitigate the escalation of a crisis. It is based on an analysis of the risks in a particular context and takes into account national and regional capacities. Emergency preparedness is not new to UNICEF – ongoing efforts to advance and refine systems, mechanisms and capacities are building on lessons learned from multiple emergency responses over many years.

B. Returns on investment in emergency preparedness

18. The shift towards multi-year humanitarian funding in high-risk contexts presents an opportunity to make better investments in light of emergency risks. To optimize resource allocations, however, the humanitarian sector must be able to quantify the potential returns on investment in emergency preparedness.

19. To this end, UNICEF has partnered with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for
Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme (WFP) on the Ready to Respond project, which was launched in 2014 with funding from the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID). The project aims to strengthen emergency preparedness and forecast returns on investment generated by emergency preparedness in relation to the time and funds spent on emergency response.

20. Across the four entities, the project analysed preparedness investments of $11.1 million across a diverse range of early interventions, including supply pre-positioning, contingency contracting with partners, infrastructure development and data systems. This investment generated $20.3 million in net savings towards future emergency responses, representing a significant return on investment. For the 34 UNICEF investments analysed through Ready to Respond, on average, more than $4 was saved for every $1 spent, and operational speed in the emergency response improved by 12.8 days. In addition, preparedness increased the speed of response by 14 days on average, and demonstrated notable carbon savings.

21. As an example, in Uganda, which is a pilot country for the Ready to Respond project, the establishment by UNICEF of emergency contingency activation agreements with key humanitarian partners has sped up the mobilization of an emergency response by more than two weeks. Analysis of a single contingency agreement between UNICEF Uganda and a national non-governmental organization revealed that in the critical first days of a crisis it accelerated humanitarian delivery to 50,200 affected people by 15 days.

22. The results of the Ready to Respond analyses are compelling and demonstrate that investing in emergency preparedness facilitates a swifter, more effective response to humanitarian crisis, therefore helping UNICEF to deliver on the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. Should donors and Governments be willing to increase their investments in preparedness, humanitarian actors would collectively be better able to plan, anticipate threats and make preparedness investments that deliver a more efficient response.

C. Inter-agency preparedness actions

23. Under the Ready to Respond project, OCHA, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP have invested in increasing response readiness in target countries. This has included improving access to supplies, logistics and trained personnel, and ensuring that adequate agreements are in place with operational partners and preparedness and response systems. For example, in Madagascar, WFP launched a cash-based response and sped up beneficiary registration using kits that had been pre-positioned through the project. In Haiti in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, UNICEF mobilized life-saving supplies that had been pre-positioned as part of Ready to Respond, and WFP maintained connectivity in remote areas using pre-positioned emergency information and communications technology kits. In Afghanistan, UNICEF mobilized non-food items that had been pre-positioned, with project support, for 10,000 internally displaced persons and returnees from Pakistan.

24. At the global level, United Nations agencies have developed common approaches in a range of operational areas, including cash-based programmes and supply and logistics operations. In addition, the UNHCR Preparedness Package for Refugee Emergencies is being rolled out globally. To date, 43 countries are using the emergency response preparedness approach guidance to identify risks and plan preparedness activities, and 36 countries faced with existing or potential refugee situations have conducted risk analyses and prioritized preparedness action using the UNHCR preparedness package.

D. UNICEF emergency preparedness system

25. UNICEF is in the process of rolling out a system designed to enhance the organization’s early warning and early preparedness. The emergency-preparedness system
is underpinned by the corporate Procedure on Preparedness for Emergency Response, the
new humanitarian learning package and a network of offices and staff with defined roles
and responsibilities, and will be supported by the online Emergency Preparedness Platform
(EPP).

26. The Procedure on Preparedness for Emergency Response was designed to ensure that
preparedness is mainstreamed across UNICEF country, regional and global offices. It
includes mandatory minimum preparedness actions and standards for analysing risks and
systematic contingency planning and monitoring of progress towards agreed preparedness
standards. These benchmarks are designed to increase the organization’s preparedness for
types of humanitarian situations, including slow, sudden-onset, protracted, recurrent and
acute crises, whether human-caused or natural hazards.

27. The EPP, which will be rolled out by mid-2018, is an online tool that will help teams
to analyse risks, self-assess the capacity in-country, identify high-return actions and get
ready to respond before an emergency happens or a situation deteriorates. This includes
actions such as the pre-positioning of emergency supplies; identifying and contracting
implementing partners for critical interventions; and conducting emergency preparedness
and response training for staff. The Platform will be flexible and dynamic, allowing
continuous changes and improvements as risks and operating contexts change. It has been
designed to foster strong collaboration and learning across countries and regions, as well as
at the global level.

E. Risk-informed programming

28. UNICEF guidance for risk-informed programming, which is currently being piloted in
Bosnia and Herzegovina, India and Malawi, and is due to be rolled out in Pakistan and Viet
Nam in 2018, is designed to assess the risks of a humanitarian crisis related to conflict,
disaster, climate change and health emergencies. Risk-informed programming is used at key
moments in the programme cycle, such as the situation analysis or mid-term review, and
brings together UNICEF staff to identify measures – including key preparedness actions –
to prevent and mitigate risk. Risk analysis informs the EPP, as well as the preparedness
measures undertaken by partners.

29. While the guidance for risk-informed programming is still in the pilot phase,
programming informed by a risk assessment related to disaster, conflict or climate has
already demonstrated results in a number of countries. For example, in Bangladesh, child-
centred risk assessments triggered the creation of flood-resistant WASH systems, the
construction of schools and health centres on elevated ground, and the provision of
swimming lessons and child-friendly spaces. In areas of Somalia where access to water has
been a source of contention, UNICEF supported community-based water management with
a focus on peacebuilding, which has fostered resilience and reconciliation.

30. At the country level, UNICEF is working to scale up risk-informed programming via
three parallel tracks: (a) enhancing regional and global capacities to support country office
application of risk-informed programming through training and the development of an e-
learning module; (b) embedding risk-informed programming in the results-based
management and programme policy and procedure; and (c) linking risk-informed
programming to the humanitarian learning package and EPP roll-out.

31. Successful scale up will require that UNICEF advocate with Governments and local
authorities to address gaps by establishing a more coherent approach to risk analysis among
climate, disaster and peacebuilding communities; strengthen the accountability of country
office management and United Nations country teams for risk assessment and risk-informed
programming; enhance the evidence base for risk-informed programming; and mobilize
additional financial and technical resources to support risk assessment.
F. Country-level preparedness examples

32. Although UNICEF is still in the process of scaling up, systematizing and financing emergency preparedness, examples of how preparedness is already contributing to a more efficient and effective humanitarian response are emerging from crisis-affected countries.

33. In August 2016, heavy rains caused by Typhoon Lionrock in the North Hamgyong Province of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea caused water levels in Tumen River to rise by 6 to 12 metres, flooding large areas in six counties and causing the widespread destruction of roads, bridges and crops. Some 600,000 people were in need of assistance due to the disruption of water supplies and damage to health, education and sanitation facilities. Damage to the water purification and pumping systems increased the risk of outbreaks of waterborne and communicable diseases, especially diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections. UNICEF and humanitarian partners facilitated an immediate response to the typhoon through the release and distribution of pre-positioned emergency relief stocks, including food, nutritional supplements, shelter kits, health and education supplies, as well as water purification and sanitation supplies to prevent disease outbreaks. Following a joint needs assessment of affected areas and in line with the resulting response plan, UNICEF released additional pre-positioned WASH, health and nutrition emergency supplies.

34. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the winter months compound the existing challenges facing conflict-affected children and their families, who struggle to afford winter supplies and stay warm in temporary shelters. In December 2016, the 35,000 people evacuated out of East Aleppo faced dropping temperatures and heightened suffering in the Big Orem and Darat Izza displacement sites. Continuous risk monitoring and preparedness planning ahead of this wave of displacement enabled the UNICEF office in the Syrian Arab Republic to anticipate the outflow of people from East Aleppo and to invest in the pre-positioning of winter relief items. As a result, UNICEF was able to deliver warm clothing and boots to families only a few days after they left East Aleppo. The lessons learned during the 2016 winter response in the Syrian Arab Republic are being applied to the 2017 winter response.

G. The way forward

35. Emergency preparedness allows UNICEF to meet the needs of children in crisis, as well as the expectations of Governments and donors who want to partner with organizations that have the capacity to deliver an effective early response. Although UNICEF has shown its ability to provide life-saving support to children in the early days of an emergency, the organization needs to be more agile and better prepared to scale up its humanitarian response as soon as a crisis strikes.

36. In collaboration with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, UNICEF is progressively incorporating emergency preparedness into its procedures and operations at the country, regional and headquarters levels. This has included the creation of several human resources and supply and logistics mechanisms at the global level to enhance the organization’s ability to respond rapidly to emergency situations. Once implemented, this will contribute to an improved emergency response.

37. In many cases, however, given that humanitarian funding typically prioritizes response activities at the expense of longer-term planning, the integration of emergency preparedness into UNICEF programmes needs to be more consistent in terms of preparation and mitigation. UNICEF staff and partners require additional capacity-building to implement the Procedure on Preparedness in Emergency Response across country programmes, monitor risks at all levels and quickly boost preparedness in the case of an escalating crisis. In addition, predictable, multi-year and flexible financing will be essential to the organization’s ability to invest in these new approaches.
38. Supporting preparedness through a mechanism such as a humanitarian pre-financing window is a critical step the international community could take to break the deepening cycles of vulnerability and build genuine resilience against future shocks. While increased multi-year humanitarian funding could be instrumental to facilitating the efficiency and effectiveness of UNICEF in humanitarian contexts, it is still at an early stage and insufficient to meet the demands. United Nations entities involved in humanitarian action need to explore innovative financing mechanisms in order to overcome this challenge.

IV. Conclusions

39. UNICEF is actively learning from recent emergencies, including the unique challenges encountered in Bangladesh and the affected countries in the Caribbean. These experiences are generating valuable lessons for how the organization can adapt its approach to facilitate tailored and at-scale immediate responses when emergencies strike. In 2018, UNICEF will prioritize knowledge management in the context of preparedness to facilitate more systematic learning and adaptation.

40. As the humanitarian caseload continues to grow, and as countries face more complex and large-scale emergencies with greater frequency, the importance of boosting the ability of UNICEF to respond faster and more flexibly at the onset of a crisis cannot be overemphasized.

41. The new UNICEF emergency preparedness system is currently being rolled out, and the organization is working not only to develop the procedures, tools (e.g. the EPP) and learning resources that comprise this structure, but also to pull all parts of the organization together to tackle emergency preparedness in a more consistent way. These efforts will be bolstered by the increased focus on linking humanitarian and development programming in the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2018–2021.

42. The roll out of the EPP in 2018 will provide country offices with the tools they need to implement the Procedure on Preparedness for Emergency Response, and in so doing, activate and scale up emergency response as soon as crisis strikes. The resulting experiences will generate valuable lessons for further improvements to the organization’s emergency-preparedness system.

43. To support these efforts, UNICEF will continue to work with partners to identify alternative and innovative financing mechanisms that facilitate consistent and robust investments in emergency preparedness.