

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Executive Board First Regular Session 2018
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Opening Statement by Henrietta H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director

I begin with a heartfelt “thank you” to the Secretary General and members of UNICEF’s Executive Board for giving me the extraordinary opportunity to lead one of the best, and most consequential, organizations in the world. There is no more important cause than children. As they hold our futures in their hands, we hold their futures in ours. Thank you for lending your commitment and ideas to this mission.

I would also like to thank my six predecessors for shaping this wonderful organization over the decades. In particular, my predecessor, Tony Lake. His leadership has left the organization in an enviable position: as a credible, respected partner in serving children around the world. I hope we will continue to see him visiting our programs in the years to come.

I was reminded of this organization’s unquestioned importance during my recent visit to South Sudan. I saw, first-hand, example after example of children being supported — and children being saved — thanks to the work of the dedicated women and men of UNICEF. Examples of hope amid the hardship that country is enduring.

By helicopter, we visited Ganyiel — a remote area. Surrounded by swamps, the town has poor road access, making it hard for humanitarian workers to reach. Severe malnutrition rates are high... vaccination rates are low...and water and sanitation is limited.

On a regular basis, UNICEF and WFP fly in health, education, nutrition and protection experts or supplies. People walk for days so they can reach distribution sites to receive supplies

and support. We met mothers bringing their babies to be vaccinated and screened for malnutrition. We met children excited for the new school being built in the area. I saw vital, lifesaving supplies being distributed — mosquito nets and water-purification tablets.

We also met two children — a boy aged 17 and his sister, nine. They were forced to flee their home when fighting broke out in Bentiu in early 2014. They were separated from their parents. Their father went to look for them — but he was killed during his search. After three years of living with their grandmother, their missing mother was finally located. They rode with us from Ganyiel to Bentiu, where — for the first time in four years — they were reunited with their mother, thanks to UNICEF and our partners. On average, we are able to reunite five to seven families per week — but we are facing a backlog of thousands of children separated from loved ones.

And in Juba, we met John — a former child soldier. At 16 years old, John has seen far more than most adults, let alone people his age. He saw his mother die before him at age six — his father was killed in the war four years later. He lived with some relatives, but there was never enough food to go around. So when an armed group offered him food and a place to sleep, his relatives let him go. Like tens of thousands of others, John became a child soldier — made to do things no child should do, and seeing things no child should see, including friends killed in front of him.

After being shot himself, a friend took John to meet UNICEF staff, who helped him get medical care and a place at Juba's centre for former child soldiers — Confident Children out of Conflict — where he underwent a two-year program to start rebuilding his life. John now goes to school and hopes to become a doctor.

This is one young life. But in South Sudan alone, an estimated 19,000 children have been recruited to the fighting.

As our Board members, you are all a part of UNICEF's efforts to support these children, and millions like them. These stories of hope and help should give all of us at UNICEF a feeling of satisfaction, that our work is achieving real results for the people of South Sudan. Last year, we vaccinated 1.8 million children against measles...treated more than 180,000 children against severe acute malnutrition...and helped 300,000 children access education. A wonderful record of results being replicated in countries around the world, in which children's lives are at stake.

But our trip also reminded me of the work still to be done. Four years of devastating conflict in South Sudan have left children sick, hungry and — often — on the brink of death. The humanitarian needs are massive — 2.4 million children fleeing their homes...more than a quarter million severely malnourished and at risk of death. As a global community, we must continue gathering around these lives.

Especially when we know that children living through humanitarian emergencies are the most vulnerable of all — an issue we will discuss in greater detail during our session on UNICEF's humanitarian action.

And addressing urgent humanitarian crises is, in fact, a better way to achieve lasting, long-term development. By investing in the needs of the children of emergencies — their health, their protection, their education — we are investing in the future of their societies.

In short, we cannot achieve a sustainable tomorrow if we fail to serve the needs of children and young people today. All children, everywhere. The children of conflict...of disadvantage and discrimination...of poverty... these children remind us why equity is at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals, focused on leaving no child behind, and reaching the farthest behind first. No matter where they live.

Especially when we know that, compared to children from the wealthiest households, the poorest children in each country are on average twice as likely to die before reaching age five...twice as likely to be stunted...and five times as likely to be out of school.

And when we know that girls, children with disabilities and children from minority groups are particularly vulnerable — more likely to be illiterate, more likely to suffer violence, and more likely to be out of school.

As a global community, we must ask ourselves: what will their futures look like? Will they be healthy and nourished? Will they have the opportunity to go to school and learn? Will they gain the skills and tools they need to participate in their local economy as citizens of their countries? Will they be protected?

Like you, I see addressing these questions as being at the heart of my job as Executive Director — just as they are at the heart of our Strategic Plan, which you approved at the last session of the Board.

The Plan sets out an ambitious agenda for children and young people — a results-driven roadmap for the next four years and as the world sets its sights on 2030.

The Plan's success depends on being as ambitious in our work as we are in our goals — and as we have been over the last 20 years. A time of unprecedented progress for children — with more children living to their fifth birthdays...more going to school...and fewer stunted than ever before.

Reaching the children still being left behind means not only scaling-up our current efforts to build on this success, but also being new, bold and innovative in everything we do — especially in how we work with a range of partners. We are a team at the United Nations. Which is why the

Plan emphasizes continued co-operation with governments and other partners — including our sister UN agencies.

UNICEF is committed to the Secretary General’s plans to reform how the UN works — including among ourselves, as our agencies’ staff members work side-by-side in communities around the world. In everything we do as a UN family, we must put the focus of our work where it belongs: not on process, but on progress. Real, tangible progress for children everywhere.

Working with our sister agencies (UNDP, UNFPA and UN Women), UNICEF is implementing the commitments we made to you in the common chapter. We are acting collectively on two fronts. Firstly, we are drafting clear, flexible guidance for our country offices to help them use existing mechanisms, processes and programmatic activities to drive collaboration, while avoiding duplication. Secondly, we are examining ways of going further to increase development impact through greater collaborative advantage, making full use of our existing collective programmatic footprint, expertise and operational assets as well as complementary mandates. Initiatives that might emerge from this analysis would target collective results and joined-up effort aimed at transformational change, and offer a sound basis for partnerships with other entities of the UNDS and beyond. We look forward to providing further updates on implementation of the common chapter over the coming year.

We are also in active discussions with our sister agencies as we look ahead to so-called “frontier” issues that are changing the world around us, and that will require a collective UN response. These include the challenges and opportunities of biotechnology, cyberspace and artificial intelligence. In April, UNICEF and UNESCO will co-lead a discussion on what technology means for the future of education, and what we can do to prepare today’s children for

tomorrow's jobs. I would like to discuss these emerging areas of opportunity with you at future sessions.

We are also looking to deepen our co-operation with businesses — both local and global. The business community has always been a key ally for UNICEF — including as a generous source of resources, technology and expertise. At this session, we will discuss our fundraising and partnerships work plan for 2018.

But as we work to increase private sector funds to UNICEF, we should also be looking for ways to work with companies to develop products, technologies and innovations that can more directly serve children's needs. For example, in Malawi, UNICEF is testing the use of drones to reduce waiting times for HIV testing of infants — a great opportunity to use new technology to support children's lives.

UNICEF will continue developing at least 30 priority integrated partnerships with companies to achieve and accelerate results for children in a range of areas. From delivering education to hard-to-reach communities using online learning tools...to reducing the costs of toilets and water delivery in disadvantaged areas...to our ongoing work to shape vaccine markets...the global business community is transcending its traditional role as a donor alone and helping us reach children in new and more effective ways.

But as we look to realize the ambition of our Strategic Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals, and as the world commits to finishing and sustaining this unfinished business of the first decade of children's lives, we are also compelled to do more to address their second decade.

We cannot in good conscience invest in the first years of children's lives and assume this will be sufficient to secure their long-term prosperity. Instead, we must invest across the continuum of the first and second decade — investing in the whole child throughout their whole childhoods.

Today's 1.2 billion adolescents present an enormous opportunity to make targeted and timely investments in their lives that can pay enormous dividends — for young people themselves and for the world as a whole.

Adolescence is a time of urgent, unprecedented change in people's lives, marked by critical milestones that determine their direction in life. We know from experience that adolescents face an array of challenges — and we know that how they respond to those challenges will determine their futures. We must find new ways to prepare them for a rapidly evolving world in which education and skills can make a critical difference in their lives.

Especially as we support governments as they live up to the Sustainable Development Goal 4 target to make sure that all girls and boys gain access to quality primary and secondary education, as well as technical, vocational or tertiary education to build the skill set they need to gain employment in the future.

To meet this goal, UNICEF is pursuing an ambitious agenda focused on every young person being in school, learning, training or employment by 2030. With a particular emphasis on the most vulnerable: girls, children on the move, and those living through humanitarian emergencies. I saw this in South Sudan, where well over half of all children are not in school.

Our goal is to co-create and shape this agenda with a full range of partners: governments, global and local businesses, NGOs and other UN agencies like UNFPA and UNDP.

As we did during the child-survival revolution of the 1990s, we can — together — achieve more impact and more results by identifying and applying accelerators like knowledge, data, digital solutions and innovations.

This is a calling of our time today. Governments, civil society and UNICEF staff members in the field are telling us that a generation is at stake.

They see the need growing around them every day — the need to urgently scale-up support for the tens of millions of young people around the world who are 10-18 years old, and not gaining the skills or opportunities they need to build better futures for themselves or their societies.

They understand that more than 100 million young people cannot read — and that about 56 per cent of primary school aged children do not reach the minimum proficiency in reading, leaving them unprepared for continuing their education into their adolescence.

They understand that, based on current trends, only one in 10 young people will gain the secondary-level skills they need by 2030.

They see the economic benefits of education. According to the Global Partnership for Education, achieving universal primary and secondary education would lift 420 million people out of poverty — reducing the number of poor people by half.

They also see the enormous opportunity before us to take full advantage of the demographic dividend of 1.2 billion adolescents, the largest cohort in the world, who will one day shape their societies and our common world — a window of opportunity that will soon close.

We cannot afford to let these young people down — at any stage of their childhoods...from birth to adulthood. So as we re-commit to finishing the unfinished business of the first decade of life, I look forward to hearing your ideas on how we can better support children in that critical second decade of life, too.

I also look forward to your views this session on our ambitious agenda for our evaluation function over the coming year.

Our staff members operate in a dynamic and unpredictable environment. We must be able to adapt and evolve in real-time and determine what works and what does not, as we strive for results for children.

This Board session includes three items related to evaluation: our Plan for Global Evaluations for 2018-2021...the revision of our current policy... and the results of a report evaluating UNICEF's humanitarian action between 2010 and 2016, including recommendations for the future.

In particular, the revision of the current evaluation policy is an opportunity to strengthen this vital function. Member States are welcome to join the Evaluation Office next week — on February 12 — to help us develop this policy. We need your ideas and input as we shape a stronger policy that will inform decision-making at all levels of the organization. I look forward to our discussions on this.

And a final word about UNICEF's greatest asset: our staff members. In my short time here, I have been enormously impressed by UNICEF's staff members — their commitment, their knowledge, even their bravery. I am committed to supporting them, as they, in turn, support the children and young people around the world, in every circumstance.

As I said in my first message to staff after I arrived, UNICEF did not become the world's leading children's agency by chance — it happened because generations of staff members dedicated their careers to improving the organization year by year, and to bringing fresh ideas to every corner of UNICEF's work.

The same can be said for our National Committees, and indeed, the millions of people that contribute to our cause. Last year was a record year for UNICEF revenue — with 70 per cent coming from our government partners. We appreciate — and thank — all of our partners and supporters, for their donations, large and small, and for advocating for children and young people in their communities and in the halls of power.

And of course, the same can be said for our Executive Board members. Year after year, you are demonstrating your commitment to, and your vision for, a better world for every child. I look forward to hearing your ideas and working with you to achieve this goal, and to better realize the rights that every child has to health, to education, to protection — to a future of her or his own making.

Thank you for all that you do — and all that you will do — as we support the lives, and futures, of children and young people around the world.
