Thank you, Madam President, for your leadership of this Board over the last year. This is your last session with us. While we will have time to celebrate you in the time ahead, I wanted to thank you for all you have done throughout this extraordinary time. You will always be a part of our UNICEF family.

And to our Board members, calling in from all over the world — welcome.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us not only of the basic importance of health.

It also reminds us how interconnected we are, and how important our families, friends and colleagues are to our lives.

The same is true of our extended UNICEF family.

Each and every one of you are a part of this family.
And we appreciate your guidance, support and oversight as we serve and support children around the world.

Because the pandemic has changed our work. But it has not stopped our work.

Together, we are responding to children’s needs in the midst of the largest global pandemic since the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920.

Together, we are carrying on the vital work of this Executive Board.

From our discussions around working methods, evaluation, finances and how we are growing our partnerships around the world.

To the country programme documents we will discuss today. Documents that are derived from the new UN Sustainable Development Co-operation Frameworks, and, as always, our fundamental commitment to serve every child, everywhere, in a politically neutral way. In the best interests of the child.
To highlighting our vital work with UNHCR in support of people on the move, with High Commissioner Grandi joining us.

Together, we are charting a course for the future through our new Strategic Plan — an opportunity to double down on the building blocks of human development, and help communities recover and reimagine a better future.

And together, we are moving our organization forward in a time of dramatic challenge and change. And doing so with a spirit of purpose and, above all, optimism.

Despite all that he had endured over the years, Nelson Mandela had this to say about optimism: “Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward.”

I am proud to be part of an organization that is heeding Madiba’s counsel. We are moving forward. With vision. With hope. With optimism.

In my calls and check-ins with staff members around the world, I continue to be inspired by their spirit of solidarity and common purpose.
Despite enormous challenges — personal, logistical, technological — they are supporting children and families through this unprecedented crisis. They remain the beating heart of our organization.

I am equally inspired by their determination to support communities as they build stronger systems for health, learning and water and sanitation for the future. Systems that can better support people and development. Systems that can last.

In short: our staff members understand that our work for children must continue, even in the face of a global pandemic.

We were tragically reminded of the importance of continuing this work last month, with the explosions in Beirut.

Our hearts break for the communities and families affected. Over 178 deaths. 6,500 injured. More than 300,000 affected by damaged or destroyed homes. An estimated 100,000 children affected — 1,000 children injured — four children killed — and 31 who required hospitalization. Hospitals and schools damaged or destroyed. And a global port — a vibrant hub of commerce and trade — destroyed altogether.
Sadly, UNICEF was not spared. One of our colleagues lost his spouse, one lost her son, seven of our staff were injured and dozens of colleagues’ homes were damaged.

But in true UNICEF spirit, our teams at the Country, Regional and Global levels rallied to the cause. They took action quickly and effectively as part of the overall response.

Supporting survivors with urgent health, water, protection services, counseling and other support.

Assessing the extent of the damage done to schools, water systems, and other infrastructure across Beirut.

Rescuing about 90 per cent of the vaccines that were stored in port warehouse that was damaged in the explosions.

Scaling-up emergency cash assistance to families in urgent need of housing and other essentials. And doing so in the context of a collapsed economy in need of urgent and lasting support.
This is what UNICEF does. This is who we are.

But we could not achieve results like this without the continued strong support of this Board. So thank you for continuing to sound the alarm on children’s needs in your capitals.

And thank you for standing with UNICEF through this extraordinary time for our organization.

Because even before the pandemic hit, the world was dramatically off-track in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

COVID-19 has accelerated this.

It has upended not only the lives of children — but entire economies.

It has exposed the fault lines of development in every country that continue to separate the haves and have-nots. Between those who have ready access to health care, water, sanitation, nutrition, and economic protections — and those who do not.
At the same time, the pandemic has accelerated our work at UNICEF to change how we design and deliver programming for children across all of the priority areas we discussed in June.

From using online tools to put education and quality learning in the hands of every child — with over 227 million children now being supported with remote learning tools like the Learning Passport.

To using our expertise and experience in delivering education to develop a framework for re-opening schools, with our partners at UNESCO, the World Bank, WFP and UNHCR.

To reaching over 40 million women and children in 75 countries with essential healthcare services — including antenatal, delivery and postnatal care, newborn care, immunizations and screening for common childhood illnesses.

To training 2.8 million healthcare staff and community health workers in infection prevention and control.
To quickly scaling-up our community engagement and information-delivery services to reach 2.6 billion people with urgent COVID-19 messaging on prevention and service access — including in emergency settings.

To UNICEF supporting the delivery of vaccines through the COVAX facility. It brings together governments, manufacturers and other partners to ensure that a vaccine is delivered fairly and equitably around the world. UNICEF is not only the single largest vaccine buyer in the world — we have longstanding experience and leadership in training and building local capacity to deliver vaccines. COVAX represents yet another strong vote of confidence in our expertise and ability.

To using the communications networks we have developed for polio communication and vaccine delivery to promote other healthy practices — like handwashing and physical distancing.

To helping countries re-start vital immunization campaigns — reaching 14.4 million children in Ethiopia, for example, since the pandemic began.
To supporting over 50 million children, young people, caregivers and frontline responders with mental health and psychosocial support.

To scaling-up our work to provide water, sanitation and hygiene services for households, schools and healthcare facilities. This includes reaching over 54 million people with WASH supplies and services — and our work with WHO and others to ensure that WASH becomes a permanent fixture in government plans, programmes and budgets.

To using online tools to deliver not only education — but skills, training and mentorships to a generation of young people facing an increasingly uncertain job market. As countries look to lasting economic recovery, our Generation Unlimited partnership is more important — and more urgent — than ever.

To our work to ramp-up innovative health products like “SPRINT” — a project to scale-up proven pneumonia treatments and oxygen therapy.
To our work on social protections. Across 100 countries so far, we are working with governments to rapidly expand social protections — like cash transfers — reaching over 35 million households, so they can better afford food, health care and other basic needs.

And all this work must be underpinned by the best-available data, even though COVID-19 has rocked data systems the world over. Our Country Offices have done an incredible job of collecting national data, and helping us better target and inform our response.

As we discussed at our last session, COVID-19 is also revealing the depth and breadth of our partnerships with our sister agencies.

This includes our work with FAO, WFP and WHO on our recent call for at least $2.4 billion to provide a package of lifesaving interventions to prevent and treat child malnutrition in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.
It includes our work with WHO on the health response. Our work with WFP around cash transfers, school-feeding, and malnutrition treatment and prevention. And our collaborative efforts with UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women, ILO, UNOPS, and so many more.

And it includes our work with statisticians across the development system to collect and analyze up-to-date data around COVID-19.

As UNICEF continues contributing to a unified response to COVID, we are also squarely focused on doing our part to contribute to the reform of the UN Development System more broadly.

Our representatives are now actively working under the leadership of Resident Co-ordinators within their UN Country Teams to continue bringing the reform to life. This includes operationalizing the three outstanding reform elements — the Regional Review, the Multi-Country Office Review and a new approach to System-Wide Evaluation.
In fact, all of this work — all of this adaptation, innovation, partnering with sister agencies, and our commitment to reforming the UN system — is helping us shape our next Strategic Plan.

The Plan will be perhaps the most ambitious that UNICEF has ever undertaken. We want to support children across the first two decades of their lives. And to do so in all contexts — development and humanitarian, rich and poor alike.

Once again, your guidance will be critical.

And throughout, we will apply the many lessons learned from COVID-19.

For example, the pandemic underscored how much work we have to do on primary health systems. Systems are stretched to the limit, and families who rely on local, community-based care are not getting the support they need because of lockdowns and service disruptions.

And so our Plan will continue our work to help build stronger local primary health systems that can reach every child — and deliver a range of interventions in one place. Including vital services that support our commitment to SRHR.
The pandemic also showed the weaknesses in nutrition systems. Already, three billion people in the world cannot afford a healthy diet — and up to 132 million more are expected to go hungry due to COVID-19. Over the next year, this could result in an additional 6.7 million children under 5 years of age suffering from wasting — and an additional 10,000 deaths per month.

So our Plan will include new efforts to continue helping governments secure access for their citizens to nutrition and good, balanced diets.

The pandemic showed the lingering gaps in child protection services — in both development and humanitarian contexts. We are likely to see the first rise in child labour after almost 20 years. We have also seen a rise in violence — particularly gender-based violence — and disrupted services for victims have been severely affected by lockdowns and budgetary constraints.

And so our new Plan will include revitalized programming around child protection — from prevention, to psychosocial support and counselling for victims.

And of course, the pandemic underscored that we need nothing short of a revolution in learning, education, skills and training.
We have already shown what we can do — even in the midst of a pandemic — to deliver remote education to hundreds of millions of children.

With our partners, we will identify and deliver more world-class digital solutions — like the Learning Passport — that can reach even more children and young people.

We will continue drawing partners around our GIGA initiative to expand internet access to every child, every community and every school by 2030.

We will work with more mobile phone companies to provide “zero rating” solutions to provide access to online learning tools — as we have done in Africa and Latin America.

And we will work with companies to provide students with new learning devices that are preloaded with relevant, topical and accessible curriculum.
We will also continue with our early childhood development efforts — which are essential to setting children on a solid foundation for future learning. As you know, we have committed 10 per cent of our education budget to this priority, and will continue finding ways to deliver these programmes in an innovative way — including online and from a distance.

And we will apply this same innovative thinking as young people approach adulthood, and begin seeking out skills and training for the workforce.

At last week’s Gen-U leaders’ meeting, leaders from the public and private sectors re-confirmed their commitment to gather around these needs, and develop and deploy new tools — and new investments — to our work.

A generation of young people needs our support to shape their minds and skills for the future. We will not let them down.

Running through all of these challenges is the thread of poverty. The economic fallout of COVID-19 will likely push more than 100 million children into poverty.
The needs are immediate — but also long-lasting, if we fail to support families while their economies recover.

Our Plan will include strong support for countries as they seek out new ways to help these families through stronger social protections — including cash transfers, which have been a cornerstone of our COVID response.

But as we re-imagine our programmes for the future through our Strategic Plan, we are also re-imagining how UNICEF designs and delivers these services.

As you know, we are in the midst of moving UNICEF to a different model of work.

Because just as COVID-19 has changed daily life for people in every country, it has also changed how UNICEF works now — and will work in the future. From our operations, to programme delivery, to our structural setup.

We are using this opportunity to make UNICEF a more agile, forward-looking organization — one that embraces innovation, technology and new approaches to accelerate results.
Before the pandemic, we had already begun relocating some functions to lower-cost locations, closer to the children and communities we serve. We will do more.

We will also continue to embrace technology across all of our work. This includes modernizing our data systems, to ensure that decision-makers across the organization have swift, reliable, single-point access to the data they need. Our journey to become a “real-time UNICEF” will continue.

In fact, along with our flexible working policies, our recent investments in technology are one reason why we were able to adapt to remote working so quickly, without interrupting our vital services for children.

But COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that we can deliver results using different work modalities beyond the classic office-based structure.

In conjunction with staff, UNICEF is now undertaking an organization-wide review to look at various work modalities, including which functions can be performed remotely and which require an onsite or office-based approach.
Of course, we will always be a field-based organization, so a “one-size-fits-all” approach is not the answer. Some jobs can be performed remotely — others need to be onsite, or office-based. We will make this distinction in our approach — while also giving our staff members the opportunity to work in different work modalities throughout their careers.

We will explore new contracting options, as well as surge mechanisms and other avenues to ensure that we can continue delivering on our mandate.

This is an important opportunity to diversify how we work, while preserving the necessary physical presence at the regional, country and field levels.

There is also a clear financial imperative to “do things differently.” We are now assessing the full impact of COVID-19 on our current and future income estimates. We need to be realistic about the need to revise some of our work in the face of any potential downturn in resources.

We know that many of our donors are re-calibrating their financial support to our organization.
In response, we have revised our financial estimates for the period 2020-2023. We are anticipating a projected decrease in regular resources, which will be offset by a similar projected increase in other resources.

And so we are reducing our planned regular resources expenditures the remainder of the current Strategic Plan to stay within affordable levels. This includes adjustments to our planned expenditures for Global, Regional and Country Programmes, investment funds for private sector fundraising, and our institutional budget.

As we discussed in June, Charlotte is leading an effort to strengthen and simplify our partnerships model in the current context. This includes revitalizing our engagement with our European partners, and accelerating our work around campaigns and advocacy.

This work has already helped us summon more funding to our COVID-19 response. On behalf of the entire UNICEF organization, we deeply appreciate the generosity and commitment of our government and private partners.
As always, we are committed to matching this trust with our best efforts to be as efficient as possible. We are in the midst of an organization-wide effort to find more efficiencies across every corner of UNICEF.

We are asking staff members to help us find opportunities to improve our organization in all offices, across all programmes and functions.

This means re-imagining our business models to move our capacities — and decision-making — closer to the country level.

It means continuing to improve the coverage and quality of our humanitarian responses — tailoring them to different contexts, while better linking them to our long-term development work.

It means reviewing and streamlining our partnership models — especially with our family of National Committees — to increase results for children.

It means simplifying and automating our programme planning and delivery to free up more than 1.7 million hours of staff that is currently spent processing transactions. We can do better. We will do better.
It means establishing a digital centre of excellence for UNICEF that will ensure our staff members and partners in the field have the digital tools they need — while identifying and deploying new tools that can save us time and money.

And throughout, it means continuing our journey to create a more inclusive and people-focused workplace. Our staff members have risen to the challenge of COVID-19. As an organization, we will meet their best efforts with our own, and provide the tools, training, and career opportunities they deserve.

This includes our ongoing work around improving UNICEF’s culture. As we discussed in June, we are committed to ending discrimination in the UNICEF workplace. We have established an organization-wide Task Team, whose work has now begun. As always, we look forward to your ideas and advice on this issue, which goes to the heart of UNICEF’s spirit and mandate.

Once again, thank you for standing with UNICEF during this challenging period.

But the challenge of the pandemic is matched with a unique opportunity to take what we have learned, and adapt our organization for the future.
Together, we are bringing to life the spirit of optimism that Nelson Mandela so wonderfully expressed. Keeping our heads pointed towards the sun. And keeping our feet moving forward. With hope. With confidence. With optimism.

Thank you for taking this journey with us.

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