Thank you, Madam President, for your leadership through this extraordinary year.

And to our Board members — welcome. We appreciate your advice, guidance and oversight as we serve children around the world.

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 partnerships.
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.

To highlighting our work with UNHCR to support people on the move, with High Commissioner Grandi joining us.

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 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 check-ins with staff around the world, I continue to be inspired by their spirit of common purpose, their commitment and their mindset to overcome all obstacles.

They understand that our work for children must continue, even in the face of a global pandemic.

We were tragically reminded of this last month, with the Beirut explosions.

Our hearts break for the communities and families affected.

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 rallied to the cause.

Supporting survivors with urgent health, water, protection and counseling.
Assessing the damage done to schools, water systems, and other infrastructure across Beirut.

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

Scaling-up emergency cash assistance to families. 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.

And this is who you are, as our Board.

Thank you for supporting our work and sounding the alarm on children’s needs in your capitals.

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 the lives of children — and economies.

It has exposed the fault lines of development. Between those who have 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 our programming.

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 developing 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.
To training 2.8 million healthcare workers in infection prevention and control.

To reaching 2.6 billion people with urgent COVID-19 messaging on prevention and service access.

To UNICEF supporting the delivery of vaccines through the COVAX facility to United governments, manufacturers and other partners to ensure that a vaccine is delivered fairly and equitably around the world.

To helping countries re-start vital immunization campaigns.

To supporting over 50 million children, young people, caregivers and frontline responders with mental health and psychosocial support.

To reaching over 54 million people with WASH supplies and services.

To ramping-up innovative health products like “SPRINT” — a project to scale-up proven pneumonia treatments and oxygen therapy.
To our work on social protections like cash transfers — reaching over 35 million households across 100 countries.

In other words, UNICEF is focused on immunization to save lives. Distance learning to save futures. Water to save communities. And mental health to save families.

We are also working with our sister agencies, as we discussed in detail last session.

As UNICEF continues contributing to a unified response to COVID, we are also squarely focused on reforming the UN Development System more broadly. Our representatives are now actively working under the leadership of Resident Coordinators within their UN Country Teams to continue bringing the reform to life.

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 apply the many lessons learned from COVID-19.

For example, the pandemic underscored weaknesses in 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.

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 and gender-based violence.

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.

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 — made worse by lockdowns and budgetary constraints. 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 so, our new Plan will include revitalized programming around protection — from prevention, to psychosocial support and counselling for victims.

The pandemic will likely push more than 100 million children into poverty.

And so, our Plan will include strong support for countries as they help families through stronger social protections — including cash transfers.

And of course, the pandemic underscored that we need nothing short of a revolution in learning, education, skills and training.

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, and especially girls.
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.

We will work with companies to provide students with new learning devices that are preloaded with relevant, topical and accessible curriculum.

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

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

But as we re-imagine our programmes for the future, we are also re-imagining how UNICEF designs and delivers these services.
We want to make UNICEF a more agile, forward-looking organization.

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 are also modernizing our data systems, to give our teams 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 helped us quickly adapt to remote working, without interrupting vital services for children.

COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that we can deliver results using different work modalities. When a donor's cash arrives, we know we can turn around and get it out to the field within 20 days. This focus on time is critical.
In conjunction with staff, UNICEF is now undertaking an organization-wide review to look at 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. We will make this distinction in our approach.

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 know that donors are re-calibrating their financial support to UNICEF.

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.
As we discussed in June, Charlotte is leading an effort to strengthen and simplify our partnerships model in the current context. This work has already helped us summon more funding to our COVID-19 response.

And we are in the midst of an effort to find more efficiencies across every corner of UNICEF and reimagine business models.

This 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 that will give our staff members and partners in the field the digital tools they need — while 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. 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.
In short — the challenge of the pandemic is matched with a unique opportunity to take what we have learned, and adapt UNICEF for the future, and to emerge stronger from the time of COVID for millions and millions of children and young people.

Together, we are bringing to life the spirit 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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