Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director  
Opening of the Executive Board  
New York, NY  
September 12, 2017  

To start, a word of thanks to the Board for working so closely with us on our draft of UNICEF’s new Strategic Plan. Throughout the Plan’s development — including our many discussions and consultations that shaped it as well as the Integrated Budget that supports it — your commitment has been critical.

And your commitment will continue to be critical as the Plan guides our work for the next four years. Four years that will see great opportunities through new technologies and expanding partnerships dedicated to children — four years of hard work on behalf of the rights of all children, everywhere.

But our opportunities will be narrowed by a host of challenges. Confidence in public institutions is eroding — and often with reason, as the daily lives of millions of people around the world continue to worsen in downward spirals of disadvantage. These spirals affect not only the poorest citizens, but many middle-income citizens as they struggle to build better lives for their children than they themselves enjoyed.
All accompanied by climate change and impending natural disasters. Competition for resources. A stubbornly unequal world, in which the great promise of globalization is being accessed more by the fortunate few than by the many. A rise in nationalism. A mistrust of international co-operation. Pressures on traditional aid.

And of course, metastatic humanitarian emergencies — natural disaster and conflicts — that push children out of their communities in search of safety — a massive wave of children on the move, the greatest since the Second World War.

These are intensely human emergencies. In a hospital in Yemen in July, I was moved by the courage of mothers who stoically comforted their severely malnourished children — among the nearly two million Yemeni children suffering from acute malnutrition. I met a little girl who looked years younger than she actually was — her body starved. With impossibly large eyes she looked up at her mother with trusting hope...as her mother, in turn, looked at the medical staff for the help that would save her child’s life.

It was a stark metaphor for Yemen and the grave human toll that the conflict is taking on its people. A metaphor for its citizens as they look for hope that their families can forge a future in Yemen, when the crisis engulfing that country finally ends.
The inability of the parties to resolve this and other conflicts, like those in Syria, Iraq, Somalia and South Sudan, makes us ask what kind of societies the so-called “victors” will inherit as the destruction grows. It calls to mind the warning of the Roman senator and historian Tacitus: “They create a desert and call it peace.”

Like the deserts of disadvantage, poverty and want we see elsewhere, when millions of the world’s children go without basic nutrition, health care, education or protection. Without the help and hope they deserve.

Because hope and help for children are not only humanitarian necessities. They are the building blocks of the future of any nation…including the building blocks of peace. Without them, what kind of society will the deprived children of today be able to build tomorrow? Without more help now, will hopelessness become increasingly the enemy of progress, peace and stability?

Which is why UNICEF’s commitment to reach every child — to protecting the rights of children everywhere — is more important than ever. For both moral and strategic reasons.
Moral, because who in good conscience can stand idly by while a child goes hungry? Or suffers from a preventable illness? Is illiterate? Or faces a future of disadvantage and discrimination simply because of where he lives or how much his parents earn? Or because she has a disability…is a girl…or is trapped by a conflict?

And strategic because each child served — each child saved — is not only having her rights protected…but will more likely grow up to be an ambassador of hope and progress in the future, lending his hands, his mind and his heart to strengthening his society. Can there be a better definition of sustainable development?

So as UNICEF’s staff members — and our heroic local partners — fight for access during conflicts…as they help rebuild communities after conflicts and disaster subside…as they support governments as they work towards the SDGs and serve the most disadvantaged populations…as they deliver nutrition, education, protection and health care in the poorest parts of our world…as they do all this, they are, in fact, helping to make these societies today and tomorrow, stronger — and more peaceful. Practical peace building.
Achieving these results — and fulfilling the rights of every child, everywhere — defines our new Strategic Plan. Grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals, and thus the overarching principles of equity and “leaving no one behind,” the draft Plan, which we’ll be discussing in detail today, is not only a roadmap for the next four years. It paints a picture of potential…of a future in which our work has dramatically improved…and saved…many lives.

The Results Framework contains many statistics for the next four years. As we consider it, let’s recall that every number represents individual human beings.

Like the 120 million individual mothers giving birth more safely in UNICEF-supported health facilities in targeted countries by 2021 — a dramatic increase from 25 million today.

Or the 60 million out-of-school children, including those in humanitarian situations, who will gain access to pre-school and secondary education by 2021.

Or the 80 per cent of children recruited and used by armed forces and groups, who will be provided with services and reintegrated into their communities by 2021.
Or the 60 million additional people who will gain access to safe drinking water services, and another 60 million to basic sanitation.

Or the 12 million more vulnerable children reached by UNICEF-supported cash transfers by 2021.

But as the Plan demonstrates what we will have done in four years, it also suggests who we will be. What UNICEF will be. What UNICEF will look like four years from now as a critical global partner in supporting children’s rights…and as we gather more voices, hearts and hands to our common cause.

First — UNICEF is on track to become by 2021 an ever-more efficient and cost-effective organization.

The many current reforms to our structure and operations will result in a new and different UNICEF over the next four years. One marked by strengthened financial controls and reporting structures…simplified business functions such as new workplan procedures and toolkits for our Country Offices…stronger fraud-detection measures…decreased travel costs…and a simplified system — called “ezHACT” — for approving, tracking and recording payments to our partners in the midst of fast-moving emergencies.
And our organization will be technologically “linked” as never before, with all staff members having access to UNICEF information and systems, no matter where they’re located...an increased use of cloud technologies to respond better to emergencies...and stronger measures to safeguard data privacy.

All of these efficiencies will be built on the many changes we’ve discussed at previous sessions, including the creation of the Global Shared Services Centre, our Field Results Group, our HR reform efforts, and increased efficiencies across our organization. These efforts are already bearing fruit, driving our institutional costs from 11.9 per cent of our total budget in 2014-2017 to 10.5 per cent this year. And management costs are planned to decrease from 8.2 per cent in 2014-2017 to only 6.7 per cent in the 2018-2021 integrated budget.

Second — UNICEF’s mission will be matched, all the more, by systems and a culture of managing for results.

Four years from now, results will be more explicitly at the centre of all of our programmes — from initial conception and design, to implementation, to budget formulation, to monitoring and evaluation.
As we continually evaluate our programmes based on results, we’ll do the same for our greatest asset: our staff. Our most recent global staff survey demonstrated that motivation remains very high. And is even growing. Their commitment to our mission matched by a commitment to results. Which is why, in four years’ time, it should be routine that staff performance will be evaluated directly on the results we each achieve. And why we’ll continue fostering a “speak-up” culture, in which every staff member feels free to speak her mind about what’s working and what is not.

Third — UNICEF’s programmes will be increasingly integrated across sectors. This is an area where we have made progress, but, frankly, less than we should have — and can. As all governments know, working across sectors in integrated ways, while preserving the efficiency of each, is far easier said than done. But it must be done.

Early Childhood Development and the so-called “second decade” of a child’s life is an area in which we will increasingly be working across sectors — like education, protection and nutrition — to focus on critical windows of development. In four years, these efforts will be supported by co-ordinated teams of experts — each with different skill sets, but all focused on common specific goals.
Gender is another such area — especially when the simple fact of being a girl or a woman brings with it a set of challenges across a range of sectors — from health and education, to protection and poverty. In four years, through our Gender Action Plan — which is being discussed at this session — gender will have been fully integrated across all of our results areas.

And on Friday at our Global Management Team meeting, we discussed how to co-ordinate, across all sectors, our new work on urbanization.

Perhaps most important, four years from now, UNICEF’s emergency programmes will increasingly be designed and delivered not only around immediate relief, but also with attention to development in the future. Health emergencies, for example, are good opportunities to work for the future of the most fragile communities in shaping stronger national health systems.

And as always, disaggregated data will be critical to meeting these inter-related needs. In the next four years, the new Plan calls for supporting 30 countries in improving their data systems and capacity to shape programmes for their children.
Fourth — UNICEF’s partnerships will be broader and more strategic. There is almost nothing UNICEF does without partners — with governments, CSOs, businesses, and of course, our Board Members.

Most important, and consistent with the new QCPR and the reform efforts of the Secretary General, our joint efforts with our sister UN agencies will be more closely co-ordinated than ever, harnessing our comparative advantages. The “common chapter” in our Strategic Plan — the first of its kind — records our commitment to plan and collaborate more closely on SDG implementation and broad issues like eradicating poverty and addressing climate change — all to achieve ever-greater results.

At previous sessions, we’ve discussed how we seek to change the dynamics of all our partnerships from “vertical” relationships to more “horizontal,” truly co-operative ways of working together.

Partnerships in which we work with donors to design programmes and innovations together, from the start.

Partnerships that bring together governments, NGOs and UN agencies to lend their comparative advantages to new efforts, like No Lost Generation.
Movements that are not led from “on high,” but which UNICEF helps lead from *within* — like the SUN movement.

Partnerships built not simply around formal processes, but for the sake of shared priorities. Our close work with WFP, UNHCR and WHO in a variety of countries is a case in point.

Partnerships demonstrate mutual benefits for UNICEF and for our partners. Beneficial, for example, for donors who can use our enhanced reporting to demonstrate to their taxpayers the impact their resources are having.

And partnerships that can help us explore new or under-explored areas of work like direct cash transfers, part of our expanding efforts with the World Bank in places of fragility, conflict and violence, as I saw in Yemen.

And certainly, partnerships in the business community. While financial contributions to UNICEF from businesses will increase over the next four years, UNICEF is moving from being a *recipient* of funds to a *partner* that works with the private sector on-the-ground, as well as harnessing products, market reach, and research and development to better, and more directly, serve children’s needs.

The benefits can be huge.
Water and sanitation is an exciting example of how we can work with businesses to shape markets and develop new products. A lack of affordable household sanitation products is a key bottleneck in delivering universal access to basic sanitation — a critical commitment under Agenda 2030. In four years, we’ll have worked with businesses to reduce the costs of household toilets by at least 50 per cent in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

We see similar opportunities to shape vaccine markets. UNICEF currently reaches almost half of the world’s children with these vaccines, currently made in Asia, Europe and the US. But by 2025, UNICEF will have targeted additional vaccine supplies processed and packaged in Africa — a great opportunity to deliver vaccines far more directly to the communities that need them.

And in four years, our innovation partnerships with businesses will be ever-stronger. From drones to deliver support to hard-to-reach communities… to durable and affordable “wearable” technology to directly connect children to the support they need…to our work with Facebook to deliver more rapidly critical information to people in communities affected by Zika…to using big data like Magic Box. Magic Box is an emerging technology that collects and interprets mobility data, and has the potential to help build predictive models to better target our resources during complex emergencies.
In fact, in five years, UNICEF will have 30 priority integrated partnerships with companies to help them focus their core business, R&D and marketing power on our common cause of children.

Such relationships with the business community also allow us a positive context in which we can encourage their commitment to corporate social responsibility.

And fifth — in four years, UNICEF will have a broader base of support than at any time in our history, by including tens of millions more supporters and volunteers in our organization, championing our cause.

UNICEF is already blessed with a committed base of millions of individual supporters around the world, raising money, campaigning and — in some countries — volunteering their time to work for children. Thanks, in great part, to the excellent work of our National Committees, who have been, and will continue to be, a critical and growing part of our organization.
In four years, we’ll have dramatically built on this base of support, using technology to include millions more people in the UNICEF family — not offering support for us, but becoming part of us. A UNICEF driven by the action, energy and ideas of people around the world would not only draw more attention — and resources — to our cause, but it would bring us closer to the communities we serve.

This is the idea behind “Our UNICEF” — the working title of a new volunteer initiative that aims to involve more people in our mission, whether they’re existing supporters of UNICEF or newcomers to our cause. Led by our network of Country Offices and National Committees, the initiative will give people from all walks of life an opportunity to be part of our work. From service activities…to organizing events and volunteer projects…to addressing issues affecting children in their communities…to joining our campaigns on issues like child survival, refugees and ending violence against children.
In fact, overall, the Strategic Plan’s goal is to double the number of supporters from our current 50 million. This will include doubling the number of pledge and individual donors to 15 million…increasing our digital campaign supporters to 75 million…and building a volunteer force, 10 million strong, of our most committed members, who will lend their time and skills to our cause. We’ll encourage all these supporters to be ever-more active as a part of UNICEF.

This expansion of involvement will be good not only for UNICEF — but good for the UN as a whole. And for governments. Because having more citizens involved in our common cause would help them as they build the national consensus necessary to invest in, and reach, every country’s SDG promises.

All of us, working together, lending our energy, time and resources — and our voices — to delivering the hope and help that every child, every society and every country needs. The hope and help that we measure in lives improved…lives saved…futures brightened.

We must be realistic. Yes, the world is becoming darker for children in so many of its corners. But that is no reason for succumbing to hopelessness.
Let’s remember: The difference between our doing all we can do and succumbing to self-defeating pessimism is measured in millions of children’s lives. If we and our partners lose hope…if we are infected by the disease of humanitarian fatigue…we will help consign millions of our young to lives of despair.

So what can we do, when despite growing efforts, the escalating needs seem to outstrip our capacities? We can do our jobs. We can do our best. We can make every effort to translate the promises of the Sustainable Development Goals into real, measurable results — into the hope and help that every child deserves. That every child has a right to.

Our Executive Board — all of you — will be critical to this. Once again, thank you for all that you’ve done so far — and for all that you will do — as we implement the Strategic Plan and shape the UNICEF of tomorrow.

***