

**As prepared for delivery**

**Second Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board  
6 to 8 September 2022**

**UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell  
Opening Statement  
6 September 2022**

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Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

Good morning. I am very glad to be here and look forward to our work together this week.

I want to begin by congratulating Ambassador Maritza Chan Valverde, who has assumed the role of President of the UNICEF Executive Board. I am delighted to welcome you here today.

I am grateful to Ambassador Mlynár for having served as the interim President of the Executive Board.

And as always, I would like to thank the Bureau and all the members of this Board for your support – and for your leadership.

We need it more than ever – because children need it more than ever.

It has been a summer of crisis for millions of the world's most vulnerable children. The trends we discussed in June – the converging impacts of conflicts, crises, COVID-19, and climate change – all continue to take their toll on children's rights, children's lives, and children's futures.

We see this with painful urgency in Pakistan, where horrific flooding has already devastated one third of the country. It is a catastrophe for Pakistan's children.

We estimate that 16 million children are affected – and more than 3 million children are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. At least 350 children have already died and at least 1,600 have been injured.

Water-borne diseases have already been reported, deepening the risks to vulnerable children. And this is happening in a country where 40 per cent of children already suffered from stunting before the flooding began.

UNICEF and our partners are working with the Government to reach children and meet their most urgent needs as flooding continues. With winter only 8 weeks away in some parts of the country, we are working against time to restore systems.

We are also seeing the risks to children grow rapidly in Africa.

Historic drought in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa has blighted crops, killed livestock, dried up water sources, displaced millions of people from their homes – and unleashed the threat of famine.

Across both regions, we currently anticipate that some 6.3 million children will experience severe wasting, the painfully accurate term for what happens to children experiencing severe acute malnutrition.

The world needs to take action to prevent the situation from getting any worse.

We are grateful to our donors for stepping up support for RUTF – ready-to-use-food that is a miracle for children suffering from severe acute malnutrition. But we need to do more, and we need to do it right now.

And I must note here that while the situation in the Horn and the Sahel is dire, more than 2 million additional children in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Madagascar, and Yemen are also at imminent risk of severe wasting.

Children are also increasingly vulnerable in Sri Lanka, where political instability and the crushing economic impact of COVID-19 have plunged millions into poverty and an uncertain future. Nearly half of Sri Lanka's children already require some form of emergency assistance. Their health, their nutrition, their education, and their well-being are all under threat.

And we see the impact of proliferating conflicts on children's lives – acutely right now in Ukraine, where I have just visited.

It was a sobering mission, to say the least. The children of Ukraine have now endured more than 6 months of brutal war. An average of five children have been killed or injured every day. And with at least 3 million children across Ukraine in need of humanitarian assistance, and

at least two thirds of all children displaced from their homes, virtually every child in Ukraine has been affected.

As winter approaches, the challenges facing children and families in Ukraine will get worse. Among other critical interventions, UNICEF is focused on providing families with cash assistance to help them prepare for the months ahead. Our humanitarian cash assistance programme has now reached more than 350,000 children in Ukraine.

I visited one beneficiary family of this programme on my recent trip. They have a profoundly disabled son and would not be able to care for him without this help.

The impact of the war in Ukraine has spread well beyond its borders – exacerbating the global food and nutrition crisis and endangering children a world away.

In all these crises – and in many other less well-known emergencies all over the world, including in the Tigray region of Ethiopia – UNICEF is working around the clock with our partners to deliver lifesaving assistance and support.

Our work also continues in earnest to address the tremendous secondary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s development, especially those who are already vulnerable.

I would like to touch on two of the most serious threats to these children: disruptions in routine immunization, and the impact of the pandemic on learning.

We know that health systems have been strained to the breaking point by the pandemic – especially those that were already weak. The impact on immunization rates has been swift and serious.

Data published recently by WHO and UNICEF show that in 2021 alone, 25 million children did not receive the basic vaccine against diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis – a marker for immunization coverage in general.

This is the largest sustained drop in the rates of routine childhood vaccinations in a generation – potentially wiping out 30 years of progress, if we don’t get back on track.

The cost of inaction will be measured in children’s lives. We have already seen outbreaks of measles and other vaccine-preventable diseases in an increasing number of countries over the last two years.

We need urgent action to reach the ‘missing millions.’ UNICEF is calling on all Member States with high numbers of children who have missed immunization to invest in dedicated catch-up campaigns now. We do not have a moment to lose.

The COVID-19 pandemic also continues to have a potentially devastating impact on the learning of an entire generation – exacerbating what was already a global education crisis.

Even before the pandemic, we knew that about half of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read and comprehend a simple story.

In June, UNICEF and our partners reported that globally, that number had risen to nearly two thirds of all 10-year-olds. This number is even higher in low- and middle-income countries.

Basic learning skills form the foundation of all higher learning. They are the platform on which children build better futures for themselves and their families. Children who don’t master these skills may struggle for the rest of their lives. Learning poverty fuels economic poverty.

In just a few days, world leaders will gather for the Secretary-General’s Transforming Education Summit. This is not the time for empty promises. It is the time for real commitment and urgent action.

UNICEF will be there calling on all Governments to ensure that every child – and every girl – can realize their right to an education, wherever they are, and whatever their circumstances.

Specifically, we are calling on all Member States to commit to reducing the learning poverty rate – and by 2030, cutting in half the number of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries who can’t read and understand a simple story.

We are urging new effort and investment to re-enrol and retain all children in school ... to increase access to remedial and catch-up learning ... to support teachers and give them the tools they need ... and to support children’s health, nutrition, and well-being so they are ready to learn.

And we are calling on the international community to close the education resource gap – driving new investment to transform education for every child.

Investing in learning is smart, strategic, and cost-effective. Evidence shows that we can provide remedial education and strengthen education systems for a little as \$10 to \$15 per child.

And the consequences of failing to invest could be catastrophic – measured in unrealized dreams and untapped potential ... slower growth and widening inequality.

This is a pivotal moment – and we need to make the most of it.

As you will hear later during our session with Ted Chaiban, we are making progress in our effort to scale up vaccination in every country and reach every community – but there is much more to be done. And as long as the pandemic continues, the risks to children continue as well.

Of all the challenges children face in the world today, none is more far-reaching than the intensifying impact of climate change.

We see this growing impact across our programmes in every country and every sector. As the emergencies unfolding in South Asia and Africa demonstrate so starkly, the climate crisis is not a future threat. It is here, and it is already killing children.

As the effects of climate change grow, we cannot be a children's organization without taking into account how they threaten children.

UNICEF is already making smart investments to help countries ensure that the critical services children rely on are adaptable and resilient to the impacts of climate change.

For example, in our work with partners to support primary health care, we are helping communities and health facilities transition to climate-resilient, solar-powered electricity, water, and waste management systems.

We are also working to prepare children to survive and thrive in a climate-changed world, including by supporting more green skills training.

We need to build on these efforts in our programmes and our advocacy – because waiting for crises to strike before investing in adaptation and resilience is a losing battle.

This is a huge opportunity to protect children today and well into the future – and to help build a greener, safer world for everyone.

We know the road ahead will not be easy. And I know that I do not have to tell you that amidst so many challenges facing children, the funding environment is also becoming more challenging.

Major emergencies dominate headlines and command greater resources, while far too many other emergencies remain grossly underfunded.

I cannot stress enough the growing need for more flexible, high-quality funding for all our vital work on behalf of the world's most vulnerable children.

We are deeply grateful to those donors who have risen to the challenge of this moment by increasing core contributions to UNICEF. But the reality is that UNICEF's core funding has stagnated over the last 20 years. It now constitutes only 17 per cent of UNICEF's overall funding. In 2021, core funding to UNICEF dropped by 4 per cent – the equivalent of \$62 million.

We must reverse this trend. Core funding is at the heart of our ability to achieve progress in all our work – in emergencies, in resilience building, and in development.

Under the funding compact, Member States committed to raising core resources to at least 30 per cent by 2023. They also pledged to increase the share of multi-year contributions, doubling the levels of resources channelled through development-related pooled and thematic funds. But in 2021, only one of UNICEF's top 20 government resource partners met the 30 per cent commitment for core funding.

I call today on Member States to advocate with constituencies, parliaments, and decision-makers to meet their commitments – and increase core and flexible funding for children.

We know that the public supports our mission and our work – and trusts our ability to deliver. In fact, the contributions of nearly 10 million individual donors make up the largest percentage of UNICEF's core funding.

The bulk of this vital funding flows via our remarkable National Committees for UNICEF in Asia, Europe, and North America. Member States can – and should – leverage this strong social base to advocate for more core contributions. Investing in children must always come first, not last.

Excellencies,

The challenges facing children – and facing UNICEF – sometimes seem insurmountable. But even in the most challenging circumstances, we can make a difference for children – and because we can, we must.

It is exactly in times like these that we need to leverage the enormous strengths of UNICEF – and the entire United Nations system.

In my time at UNICEF, especially during my field visits, I have seen how pivotal UNICEF's work with other UN agencies and NGOs is in supporting country efforts to save and improve children's lives.

We are working within UN country teams... enabling more comprehensive and systematic approaches... providing coherent and impactful support ... and driving greater alignment with national needs and priorities.

This is exactly what UN reform is all about: a well-coordinated, efficient, and accountable UN development system to achieve results that support a more sustainable future for everyone.

In my time at UNICEF, I have also seen our extraordinary staff in action all over the world. The results they achieve and the respect they command are an inspiration. Making sure they have the resources and support they need to deliver is our highest priority.

That includes strengthening our organizational culture – in part by deepening our commitment to living our core values of care, respect, integrity, trust, accountability, and sustainability.

We are about to launch a new campaign to challenge 20,000 UNICEF employees around the world to live these core values in their day-to-day work. I'm looking forward to participating in this important effort.

Finally, in a world where children's needs grow by the day, UNICEF's governance, internal controls, and risk management must also keep pace.

I am pleased to be presenting our updated accountability system, reflecting the structures through which the organization assigns responsibility and enables accountability, complemented by clear oversight mechanisms.

The new system is part of UNICEF's well-functioning internal controls, governance systems, and risk management, as attested to in 2021 by the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations, OIAI.

The OIAI just concluded an audit of our enterprise risk management, and we have already begun to act on its recommendations.

We are grateful for the excellent work of our independent offices: Ethics, the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations, and Evaluation. And I am absolutely committed to strengthening and supporting the independence of our internal oversight systems. This is a top priority for me as Executive Director.

I will conclude now where I began, with thanks to all of you for everything you do to support UNICEF's work for the world's most vulnerable children – and for every child.

I look forward to our work together this week and in the months and years ahead.

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