

As prepared for delivery

**First regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board
7–10 February 2023
UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell
Opening statement**

7 February 2023

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

Welcome to the first regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board. It is good to be with you here this morning. And I look forward to our discussions over the course of the week.

Before we get started, I want to again express my heartfelt condolences to the people of Türkiye and Syria after the devastating earthquakes there – the most powerful in decades.

Thousands of people have reportedly lost their lives, with many more injured. Buildings, including hospitals, are in ruins. This disaster

comes at a time when cold winter temperatures are making it ever more treacherous for children and families.

In response, I have allocated funds from our emergency program fund to kickstart the operations and have asked our National Committees to mobilize resources to address this emergency. UNICEF is already preparing essential supplies to dispatch quickly – we know that every minute counts when it comes to saving lives.

We are coordinating with the United Nations and other humanitarian partners on the ground under the leadership of the Government and local authorities.

Our hearts and thoughts are with the many people impacted by this catastrophe – especially the most vulnerable, including children.

It is nothing short of heart-wrenching.

Excellencies,

Congratulations again to Ambassador Wegter who has now assumed the role of President of the Executive Board for 2023. Thank you to the Bureau and to our Board members for your leadership and unwavering support of UNICEF and the children we serve.

It has been a little over a year since I joined UNICEF as Executive Director. I have seen clearly how critical our organization is to protecting children's rights ... helping to meet their basic needs ... and expanding opportunities to reach their full potential.

But this past year has been an extremely difficult one for the world's children. They have faced an unprecedented array of crises – from conflict and climate change, to soaring rates of malnutrition and the persistent socioeconomic consequences of a global pandemic.

I have been fortunate enough to meet with children and families trying to navigate these challenges.

Children like Wahida, a three-month-old baby girl I met at a medical facility in Kandahar during my mission to Afghanistan. She was so malnourished that when I held her, I could barely feel the weight of her in my arms.

And children like Blukwa, a 14-year-old I met at a camp for people displaced by violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Several months before, Blukwa had narrowly escaped being killed in a massacre of civilians in a nearby village. During the attack, Blukwa witnessed the decapitation of his best friend – a horror so extreme he wished he had died as well.

Wahida, Blukwa and the more than 2 billion other children around the world are the reason UNICEF exists. And this past year, we again had to be at our best because more of them were in need than at any

other time in our organization's history.

Through the dedication of our staff and partners working across more than 190 countries and territories, we delivered real results. From Brazil to Ukraine, from Afghanistan to Myanmar – UNICEF was there.

And we still are – providing children with lifesaving assistance during humanitarian emergencies ... and strengthening the systems that children rely on – like health care, water, sanitation and education – to support their development.

This past year, we reached millions of children living through humanitarian crises. This was made possible in part through a significant increase in global humanitarian thematic funding from our public and private sector partners. We will present our complete results for 2022 humanitarian action at the next session of the Executive Board. But we can confirm that in the first half of last year, UNICEF and our

humanitarian partners helped vaccinate nearly 24 million children against measles ... treat 2.6 million children for severe acute malnutrition ... provide 28 million children with access to education ... and reach almost 26 million people with safe drinking water.

In addition to UNICEF's humanitarian action, the organization maintained its leadership in ACT/A-COVAX to promote vaccine equity. The COVID-19 Vaccine Delivery Partnership has delivered vaccines for 92 low- and middle-income countries and economies, including 34 countries that were at or below 10 per cent vaccine coverage.

Our work in response to the pandemic also went far beyond vaccine delivery. UNICEF has continued to play a leading role in tackling the global learning crisis. After the Transforming Education Summit last September, our teams worked with countries to secure National Statements of Commitment that will form the basis for action on the ground. And we welcomed the endorsement of the Commitment to Action on Foundational Learning – a crucial opportunity to help

children attain basic literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills.

On top of the learning crisis and humanitarian response, UNICEF also looked to expand its work for children affected by the climate crisis.

As part of this effort, we elevated climate action as a priority across the organization. And we will soon be adopting a climate action plan. The plan is anchored around three pillars: resilient and sustainable services, enhancing the voice and engagement of young people around solutions to the crisis, and looking at our own environmental footprint. We will also be expanding our support to communities as they develop and implement climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. And we will help local authorities transition to climate-resilient, solar-powered electricity, water, and waste management systems.

As we saw clearly in 2022, the climate crisis has led to recurrent droughts that are fueling food insecurity. In the 15 countries most affected by the nutrition crisis, there are almost 200 million people

facing severe food insecurity, including 27 million children under five. In response, we launched the No Time to Waste initiative. The plan is accompanied by a resource mobilization commitment from USAID, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation and others to expand UNICEF's actions for early prevention, detection, and treatment.

This past year, UNICEF also developed the Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy. Adolescent girls are at the forefront of driving positive change for children ... they are on the frontlines of climate action ... they are tireless advocates for children's rights ... and they are present and future innovators, leaders and peacemakers. This strategy shapes how UNICEF country programmes align their interventions with and for girls. We will share more details about the strategy during the Gender Action Plan update in June.

Our work on social protection has also grown in scale and impact to better meet the challenges presented by the pandemic, conflict and climate change. In Yemen – where I visited in December – we

developed the Humanitarian cash Operations and Programme Ecosystem – HOPE – to equip our country offices implementing humanitarian cash transfers with a standard, risk-informed digital solution. HOPE has been deployed in 12 countries including Afghanistan, Ukraine and Yemen.

To fulfill our organizational commitment to disability inclusion, UNICEF adopted its first ever Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy – a milestone we will mark later this week. This strategy will guide our critically important work on disability in programmes and organizational processes.

And UNICEF continued its programming in middle-income countries where children also suffer significant child deprivations. We worked closely with governments to produce data and evidence about the situation of children ... and then used this information to direct investments into policies that support children and their families. This includes child grants and other social protection schemes designed to

reach the most vulnerable children, as well as family friendly policies.

But we know that the success of our programmes for children is dependent on who we are as an organization and how we operate. This past year, we continued to take a hard look at how we can do better.

As part of this effort, UNICEF remained a steadfast driver of UN Reform. Working with UN country teams, we provided countries with resources and impactful support in line with national needs and priorities.

We also took steps to strengthen organizational oversight. These included creating a dedicated fraud investigations team as part of our Office of Internal Audit and Investigation's increased focus on identifying, responding to and preventing fraud and corruption across our operations. We are also undertaking proactive reviews in areas of high risk such as our supply operation in Afghanistan. And UNICEF recently welcomed Jacob Van Der Blij as its new Chief Risk Officer.

And we have furthered our work on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. UNICEF has allocated \$43.4 million to PSEA efforts across more than 50 country and regional offices since 2018.

These programmes are essential ... they engage communities on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse ... they provide systems for children and adults to safely report exploitation and abuse ... and they help survivors access medical and social services. But UNICEF needs additional resources to fund these programmes. We are appealing to Member States for financial support so that we can expand PSEA programmes in both humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts.

UNICEF has also deepened its commitment to strengthening its internal culture. Our core values campaign is already paying dividends, with staff around the world striving to live the values of care, respect, integrity, trust, accountability, and sustainability.

In our country and regional offices around the world, and here in New York, I have come to know the people of UNICEF. I am inspired by their courage and dedication to delivering for children – even under the most challenging of circumstances. Our people are the lifeblood of this organization, and I am proud to work alongside them.

And now in 2023, we will need our people more than ever ... their leadership, creativity and perseverance ... because the stakes are higher than ever and the window to act to secure a sustainable future for our children grows smaller by the day.

This year has already given rise to new crises. The devastating earthquakes serve as a stark reminder of why our organization is increasing investment in disaster preparedness and anticipatory action.

Beyond sudden onset emergencies, we also expect this year to bring further entrenchment of existing crises. For one, we anticipate that without urgent action, the pandemic's harms will continue to be counted.

This is especially worrisome amidst the ongoing global learning crisis, with nearly two-thirds of all 10-year-old children unable to read or understand simple text ... the precipitous drop in global immunization coverage for children ... and the 10 per cent increase in the number of children around the world living in poverty.

These numbers mean we are running out of road to meet the SDGs. The three-year decline in child well-being indicators should be setting off alarm bells in every hall of government. The upcoming SDG Summit in September is a true pivot point, an opportunity for the international community to accelerate progress towards meeting the 2030 goals. As the custodian for children in the SDGs, UNICEF is raising awareness, taking action and holding decision makers accountable for progress.

We are calling on governments to put children at the heart of pandemic recovery planning and systems strengthening. And we are committed to reaching the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children –

children living in poverty or conflict, children with disabilities, and girls.

We know that access to safe water is essential to the health and wellbeing of children. The 2023 Water Conference in March – the first UN conference on water since 1977 – is another key moment to push for action on the SDGs. Using data from our Water Scarcity Index, we will seize this opportunity to advocate for accelerated action and concrete commitments to the WASH sector in the run up to 2030.

In 2023, we also expect that threats to democratic rights and the rights of girls and women will persist. UNICEF will continue to stand in solidarity with children and women ... and call on authorities to respect and protect their right to life, freedom of thought and peaceful assembly.

Excellencies,

UNICEF is planning to achieve lasting systemic change for the world's children in 2023. But we can't do it alone.

The organization depends on our National Committees for their tremendous advocacy, influence and fundraising capacity – particularly for core resources. We will also look to deepen engagement and innovative work with our partners in Government, the private sector and other UN agencies.

As ever, UNICEF and our implementing partners need the right support to deliver programmes for children where they are needed most.

Timely, predictable and flexible funding enables us to respond quickly and anticipate future risks. It also helps us to provide countries and communities with support that contributes to their long-term resilience and future development.

Before closing, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Paloma Escudero for leading our Global Division of Communication over the past eight years. And I warmly welcome Naysan Sahba back to UNICEF as he assumes leadership of the Division.

I am also very pleased to welcome Garry Conille who has joined our organization as the Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean. I am very appreciative of Youssouf Abdel-Jelil for the leadership he provided as interim Regional Director.

Finally, I thank you, our Board members in advance for your contributions during the sessions this week. We have much to accomplish, including the approval of 15 country programmes.

And on behalf of everyone at UNICEF, thank you for your leadership, ideas, support and advocacy for the rights of children everywhere. I look forward to working closely with you in the days

ahead. Together, I know we can accomplish much for the world's children, this year and beyond.
