

**AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

**Annual session of the UNICEF Executive Board  
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**UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell**

**Opening statement**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues ... Welcome to the annual session of the UNICEF Executive Board. Thank you to Ambassador Wegter and the Bureau for your steadfast leadership and support to UNICEF over the first half of this year. And thank you in advance to our Executive Board members for your engagement and invaluable insights during our discussions this week.

We have an ambitious agenda ahead of us that includes important decisions on annual reports ... repositioning of the UN development system ... UNICEF programme cooperation ... protection against sexual exploitation and abuse ... and how our organization can more effectively champion the rights of every child.

We will discuss UNICEF's new country programme in Chile and hear how our organization is delivering results for children in a high-income context. And we will recognize the impactful work of UNICEF colleagues across the globe with the presentation of our Staff Team Awards. I am looking forward to what I'm sure will be a fruitful session of the Board.

Excellencies, our discussions this week come at roughly the halfway mark of what is shaping up to be a critical year for children ... and a critical year for UNICEF. It is a year in which we have significant yet dwindling opportunities to act on a range of issues that could shape the lives of children for generations to come.

And we must act – because children are our most precious resource ... they are our future leaders, innovators, caregivers, educators and advocates ... and they are our planet's best hope for creating a greener and more sustainable future.

We need to set them up for success and this starts with achieving the SDGs. But we are quickly running out of road to meet the 2030 Goals, as decades of progress for children have been unravelling. The number of children living in multidimensional poverty has increased by 15 per cent to 1.2 billion globally in just the last three years ... nearly 600 million children are not meeting minimum reading standards ... 35 million children are suffering from wasting ... and each day, nearly 14,000 children under the age of five are dying from largely preventable causes like diarrhoeal diseases and malaria.

The only way to get back on track towards meeting the 2030 Goals is by putting children at the heart of our collective efforts to achieve the SDGs ... by prioritizing their rights and well-being as we strengthen social service systems ... and by reaching the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children – children living in poverty, children affected by conflict and the climate crisis, children with disabilities ... and in all of these areas, maintaining a sharp focus on girls.

UNICEF is the global custodian for children in the SDGs and we have consistently aligned our programmatic work with the SDGs since their adoption.

Now it's time to get the rest of the international community on board. As the Secretary-General has said, the upcoming SDG Summit in September is an opportunity to sound a “rallying cry” and “pivot forward” towards achieving the SDGs. It's up to us, our partners and our supporters to galvanize broad action from Governments and the international community to put children first. This means using the Summit to secure real political commitments to prioritize children – especially the most vulnerable – in ongoing pandemic recovery and the strengthening of social services.

But accelerating progress on the SDGs also means tackling the array of crises that children today are facing, not least of which is climate change.

For those of us in New York last week, the hazardous wildfire smoke that blanketed the city was yet another reminder that the consequences of the climate crisis can be severe and are not contained within national borders.

We also know that children are the least responsible for climate change, yet they shoulder the greatest burden of its impact. Globally, over 1 billion children live in countries that are at ‘extremely high-risk’ from the impacts of climate change. This means half the world’s children could suffer irreparable harm as our planet continues to warm. They could lose their homes or schools to increasingly violent storms ... they could suffer from severe wasting because the local crops have dried up from drought ... or they could lose their lives to pneumonia brought on by air pollution.

In fact, this is already happening, and we expect the situation to worsen.

Heatwaves, for example, are becoming longer, stronger and more frequent. Already, about 559 million children are exposed to high heatwave frequency. Children are more vulnerable to the impacts of extreme heat and heatwave events than adults – putting them at heightened risk of health conditions like heat stroke, chronic respiratory infections, asthma and cardiovascular disease.

Late last year, the UN issued a report forecasting more severe heat waves, as well as drought, flooding and wildfires. The impact on livelihoods, food and water systems will be devastating. Children will suffer most of all. So, the real question is what can be done to mitigate the damage ... to keep them safe ... and to help them adapt to a climate-changed world.

As you know, climate action is now a priority across UNICEF. Together with our partners, we are working to make the systems that children rely on – water, health care, education – more resilient to the effects of climate change.

We are working in communities to support mitigation and adaptation strategies. And we are helping to equip children with the education and skills needed to play a leading role in creating a more sustainable world.

But we must do more to put children at the top of the climate action agenda. The Secretary-General's Climate Ambition Summit in September and COP 28 in November provide critical opportunities to do just that.

Ahead of both summits, we are calling on world leaders to recognize children as a priority vulnerable population ... and to protect them from the worst impacts of the climate crisis by providing resilient essential services. At COP 28, it is critical that leaders deliver on the commitment to double adaptation finance by 2025 – with a focus on services for children and communities.

The Secretary-General has said that we need “non-negotiable credible, serious and new climate action and nature-based solutions that will move the needle forward and respond to the urgency of the climate crisis.” I couldn’t agree more. Excellencies, about 4.2 billion children are expected to be born over the next 30 years and climate change will be their reality. It is our collective responsibility to ensure they are prepared.

Climate change is also driving a health and nutrition crisis for children, especially for those living in areas affected by drought and flooding. Last year, UNICEF launched a programmatic response to protect children in the 15 hardest-hit countries ... and we have delivered strong results – reaching 5.5 million children with life-saving treatment for severe wasting – a 37 per cent increase over the 4 million children treated in 2021. Globally, UNICEF and our partners reached 182 million children under five with services for the early detection and treatment of child wasting last year.



But this crisis is far from over. Malnutrition remains one of the leading causes of disease and death globally and is a major threat to children's growth and development. Worldwide, 149 million children under five are experiencing stunted growth and 45 million are suffering from wasting.

Adolescent girls and women are disproportionately impacted by the crisis. In the hardest-hit countries, the number of pregnant and breastfeeding women and adolescent girls suffering from acute malnutrition has soared from 5.5 million to 6.9 million – or 25 per cent – since 2020. And more than 1 billion adolescent girls and women worldwide are suffering from undernutrition.

Our response continues to focus on early prevention of child malnutrition, beyond general food assistance to address the underlying causes.

This means ensuring that children and their mothers have access to nutritious and safe foods, essential nutrition services ... and positive feeding and care practices. And it means strengthening the supportive systems that children rely on, like health care and education.

UNICEF is also working to strengthen social protection systems to prevent malnutrition, which includes cash transfer programming for vulnerable families. And we are putting financial resources in the hands of women so that they can obtain the foods and services that they need for themselves and their children. In 2022, for example, Governments reached over 129 million children with cash transfer programming thanks to UNICEF support.

Of course, when prevention fails, treatment is a must, and so we are also working to increase the availability of Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and UNICEF USA, we have provided \$46.4 million in advance payments to RUTF suppliers through the Vaccine Independence Initiative. This has helped manufacturers to expand their capacity, significantly increasing the production of RUTF this year.

In the most marginalized and hardest-to-reach communities, the delivery of quality nutrition services and health care more broadly – essential to achieving the SDGs – is highly dependent on the capacity of the local health and care workforce. This includes community health workers.

Across the globe, community health workers serve as important sources of trusted knowledge in their communities ... as providers of integrated primary health care ... and as advocates for local priorities and needs. In many places, they are the only health-care providers for vulnerable populations, especially in humanitarian settings.

Over the past year, I have met with community health workers in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa and seen their incredible work firsthand. This includes their heroic efforts to reverse the backsliding in children's vaccine coverage – a consequence of the pandemic's devastating impact on health systems and service delivery.

Equitably paid and protected frontline health workers are essential to the provision of quality community-based health care ... which, in turn, is critical for achieving universal health coverage and for pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

With Governments emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the High-level Meeting on pandemic preparedness in September is an opportunity for UNICEF and our partners to advocate for the prioritization of community health programmes and workers in pandemic preparedness and response efforts.

This includes calling for increased investment to support women community health workers who account for 75 per cent of the workforce. UNICEF is already working with partners to expand apprenticeship opportunities for girls within the health sector ... an initiative we hope will make careers in health-care a promising option for young women.

This work goes hand-in-hand with our Adolescent Girls Strategy which we launched in recognition of the incredible, but at-risk, potential of today's 600 million adolescent girls — the largest generation of potential earners, innovators and changemakers the world has ever known.

The strategy is based on three pillars that have been developed with and for girls. These are adolescent girls' health and nutrition – including menstrual health and sexual and reproductive health and rights ... obtaining quality secondary level learning and skills ... and securing freedom from violence, exploitation, abuse and poverty.

The strategy, which aims to reach a minimum of 20 million girls in 30 countries by 2025, reflects UNICEF's commitment to integrating gender equality in our operations and programmatic work. It is also a means of accelerating progress on SDG 5 – achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. We will hear more about the Strategy during our discussion on the Gender Action Plan later in the session.

In addition to adolescent girls and women, UNICEF is continuing its programmatic focus on reaching other vulnerable groups of children – another critical component to successfully reaching the 2030 Goals. This includes children with disabilities. In February, we launched UNICEF's first ever Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy. This strategy will help us to achieve our vision of a more inclusive world by 2030 – a world where all children, including those with disabilities, live in barrier-free and inclusive communities ... where they are included and supported to realize their rights and fully participate in society.

And of course, UNICEF is as dedicated as ever to reaching children affected by humanitarian crises.

At the time of our last Board session in February, northern Syria and Türkiye had just been struck by devastating earthquakes. Nearly four months on, 2.5 million children in Türkiye and 3.7 million in Syria are still in need of humanitarian assistance.

Since then, new crises have erupted like the grueling conflict in Sudan – now nearly two months in – that has left 13.6 million children in need of life-saving humanitarian support, the highest number ever recorded in the country. At least 335 children have been killed and nearly 2,000 injured in the violence.

Meanwhile, pre-existing crises have continued apace – in countries like Afghanistan, Haiti, Somalia, Ukraine and Yemen.

Today, we estimate that 400 million children across the globe are living in or fleeing conflict zones ... or about 1 in every 5 of the world's children. Children are being killed and maimed ... they are being abducted, subjected to sexual violence and recruited into armed forces and groups. At least 36.5 million children have been displaced from their homes and there are more children in need of humanitarian assistance globally than at any other time in nearly eight decades.

These children are among the world's most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. And the SDG's commitment to 'leave no one behind' must include them.

Across all emergencies, UNICEF and our partners are on the ground working to reach children in need – even in the most challenging of circumstances. We are providing immediate life-saving assistance while also strengthening the systems that children rely on – like health care, water, sanitation and education – to support development goals.



So far this year, we have delivered 2,300 metric tons of health, nutrition, WASH and education supplies to Sudan and helped to maintain 80 per cent of malnutrition centres for children, despite the fighting ... we have provided 1.5 million children and women in Ukraine with access to essential primary health care services ... and we helped reach more than 210,000 children in Afghanistan with treatment for severe wasting, thanks in large part to the courageousness of our female staff.

These are strong results, but they are not enough. Reaching all children who need humanitarian assistance requires far greater commitment, action and financing from Governments and the international community. I hope you will join us in calling for increased political and financial support from leaders at upcoming humanitarian fora, including at high level pledging events and the General Assembly.

Excellencies ... our capacity to successfully reach children in need ... to tackle the crises they face ... and to leave no one behind ... is dependent on whether we can continue to improve our organization.

Earlier this year, we held our Global Leadership Meeting which brought together over 190 Representatives, Heads of Offices, and leaders from across the organization. Over the course of the meeting, we agreed on five key commitments that we are now taking forward. These include commitments to boldly defend children's rights ... to engage with all partners and stakeholders to get results for children ... to lead with our values ... to adjust our business model for maximum impact ... and to make tough decisions as 'One UNICEF'.

We have also recently formalized our Global Technical Teams – an initiative aimed at strengthening the quality of our programmes in all country contexts.

These are virtual teams bringing our experts together to share best practices and technical knowledge between headquarters, regional and country offices.

As you will hear later in our discussions, we are also making progress in our work to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse. In a recent survey of over 5,000 UNICEF personnel, almost 99 per cent reported that our policies on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse are clear and taken seriously. Country offices have improved measures to increase partner reporting and most partner organizations of UNICEF have now been assessed as having satisfactory capacity to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse. In 2022, 65 country offices had put measures in place for the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, compared to 53 in 2021. Globally, over 49 million children and adults now have access to a safe and accessible channel to report sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian, development, protection or other personnel.

This is progress, but we must remain vigilant.

UNICEF is also continuing its active engagement in reform of the UN development system. This includes working within UN country teams, under the leadership of Resident Coordinators, to provide stronger support to Governments in making progress on the SDGs. And we are supporting the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks. UNDS reform is now delivering more impactful support to countries and is driving greater alignment with national needs and priorities. Four years since the reform roll-out, it is now time to shift the discussion to impact and results.

Excellencies ... we have much work before us for the rights of every child to be realized. It starts with using the remainder of this year to put children at the heart of SDG acceleration. This is challenging, but we are committed.

In the days ahead, all of us at UNICEF look forward to working with all of you in the Executive Board, to redouble our efforts to create a world fit for children.

Before closing, I'd like to welcome Ted Chaiban back to UNICEF as the Deputy Executive Director for Humanitarian Action and Supply Operations. Ted is returning to UNICEF after serving as the Global Lead Coordinator for COVID-19 Vaccine Country Readiness and Delivery. And I welcome Kitty van der Heijden who will be joining us in August as the Deputy Executive Director for Partnerships. Kitty joins us from the Netherlands where she has been serving as the Director-General for the International Cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Finally, I extend my heartfelt thanks to Karin Hulshof who has been serving as the acting Deputy Executive Director for Partnerships over the last 18 months. Karin has spent more than 30 years working with UNICEF – serving previously as the Regional Director for East Asia and the Pacific, and as Regional Director for South Asia.

Karin – thank you for your leadership, support and tireless work to deliver essential programmes for the world’s children.

On behalf of UNICEF, I also offer my heartfelt thanks to Marie-Pierre Poirier, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa ... and Mohamed Fall, UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa ... both of whom are retiring after years-long careers in service of the world’s children. Marie-Pierre and Mohamed have spent decades with UNICEF working in humanitarian and development contexts alike. Thank you for all that you have done to protect and uphold the rights of children everywhere.

Once again, I look forward to this session of the Executive Board and I wish you a productive week. Thank you.