



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 May 2024

Original: English

For decision

United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Board

Annual session 2024

11–14 June 2024

Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

Annual report on UNICEF humanitarian action

Summary

The present report describes how UNICEF and its partners worked in 2023 to meet the needs of millions of children and families exposed to conflict and violence, extreme climatic events, displacement, disease and nutrition crises, lack of health care and disrupted education.

Highlighted are efforts to overcome access constraints, engage in effective advocacy globally and within countries, and manage the risks inherent in protecting the lives and rights of children living through complex and high-threat emergencies.

Elements of a draft decision for consideration by the Executive Board are provided in section X.

* E/ICEF/2024/10

Note: The present document was processed in its entirety by UNICEF.



I. Overview

1. In 2023, far too many children were exposed to humanitarian crises in which their rights to survival, protection, health care, education and clean water were ignored, or even targeted. Natural disasters and climate emergencies often compounded the difficult conditions. Children were experiencing a world increasingly hostile to their rights, especially the nearly 1 in 5 children globally living in or fleeing from conflict zones.¹

2. In December 2022, UNICEF called for \$10.26 billion to provide humanitarian support to children and families, a requirement that rose to \$11.10 billion by the end of 2023 due to more and intensifying conflicts, sudden-onset disasters and other crises. UNICEF had received \$3.48 billion as at 31 December 2023 for its humanitarian response in 2023.

3. Guided by its mandate and by the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, UNICEF and its thousands of partners – Governments, local and international non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, academia, businesses and other United Nations agencies – overcame critical obstacles to achieve key humanitarian results:

- (a) Clean water and sanitation for 42.4 million people;
- (b) Measles vaccinations for 32.4 million children aged 6 months to 15 years;
- (c) Services for the early detection and treatment of wasting and other forms of malnutrition benefiting 118.6 million children under 5 years of age;
- (d) Access to education for 17.7 million children;
- (e) Community-based mental health and psychosocial support services for 13.1 million children and families, and interventions designed to prevent gender-based violence and support survivors for 23.1 million women and children;
- (f) Access of 70.3 million children and adults² to safe and accessible channels to report sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian, development, protection and/or other personnel who provide assistance to populations;
- (g) Humanitarian cash assistance for 2.9 million households;
- (h) Delivery of \$893.1 million worth of supplies in preparation for or in response to emergencies.

4. Additionally, UNICEF led or co-led nutrition, education and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) humanitarian clusters and the child protection area of responsibility.

5. A total of \$5.5 billion – 64 per cent of all UNICEF expenses – was spent on humanitarian action to achieve these results.³

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, OCHA, 1 December 2023, p. 5.

² This figure covers both humanitarian and development contexts.

³ Contributions received for 2023 Humanitarian Action for Children appeals encompass emergency and development funds received for emergencies and recognized in fiscal year 2023. Humanitarian expenses are incurred from these funds and from resources carried forward from previous years, specifically multi-year grants. These expenses also include regular resources and other resources expenses tagged as ‘humanitarian activities’.

II. Introduction

6. This report provides an overview of the global humanitarian situation and the UNICEF response in 2023. This account of actions and results is indicative, not exhaustive.

III. The humanitarian situation in 2023

7. The number of people requiring humanitarian assistance reached an estimated 364.6 million globally in 2023, up from 324 million in 2022.⁴ The UNICEF Humanitarian Action for Children appeal estimated more than 200 million children in need of humanitarian assistance at the beginning of 2023 in countries with appeals. Conflict, global climate change and economic challenges caused the majority of humanitarian needs children and their families experienced throughout the year.⁵

An assault without boundaries

8. In 2023, extreme emergencies threatened the lives and childhoods of children in complex crises and forgotten emergencies in all corners of the globe: children living strangled by war in the State of Palestine and under the spectre of violence in Israel; in the gang-filled streets of Haiti; in the cities and rural areas of the Sudan; in numerous provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; living through war in Ukraine. It impacted children on the move in the Darién Gap bordering Panama and Colombia; those living in the cyclone-drenched hills and valleys of Malawi; internally displaced due to conflict in Myanmar; or under siege-like conditions in areas of northern Mali.

9. Grave violations against children were all too common. In 2022, the latest year for which complete data are published, the United Nations verified 27,180 grave violations affecting 18,890 children (13,469 boys, 4,638 girls, 783 sex unknown).⁶ The total number of grave violations verified in 2022 was 13 per cent more than in 2021.

10. Every kind of grave violation was present in the State of Palestine and Israel in 2023, where a brazen disregard for children's lives saw children indiscriminately killed or taken as hostages in early October; and nearly the entirety of the 2.2 million population of the Gaza Strip displaced in the ensuing retaliation and escalation of hostilities. The State of Palestine Ministry of Health reported that more than 9,000 children had been killed in the Gaza Strip between 7 October 2023 and 4 January 2024.⁷ Violence obliterated children's homes and safety, health care and education. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian children were brought to the edge of starvation.⁸ Extreme threats to lives and childhoods also occurred elsewhere. In the Sudan, where conflict erupted in April 2023, 3.5 million children were forced to flee their homes. Millions were also displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the number of grave violations against children surged in the first half of 2023 by 41 per cent.⁹ And in Haiti, 3 million children required humanitarian assistance, with

⁴ OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2023: October update – snapshot as of 31 October 2023, 9 November 2023, p. 2; and OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2022: October update – snapshot as of 31 October 2022, 7 November 2022, p. 2.

⁵ OCHA, Global Humanitarian Overview 2024, p. 4.

⁶ United Nations, Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/77/895-S/2023/363, United Nations, New York, 5 June 2023.

⁷ State of Palestine, Ministry of Health, Minister's Office, Daily report, 4 January 2024. Unless otherwise noted, country-level situation data and UNICEF country-level results and targets are from end-of-year situation reports (reporting against Humanitarian Action for Children appeals), available at www.unicef.org/appeals.

⁸ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), Gaza Strip: IPC Acute Food Insecurity – November 2023-February 2024, Rome, 21 December 2023.

⁹ United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2023, and United Nations, Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, A/77/895-S/2023/363.

children among those most vulnerable to heightened violence, including killings, kidnappings and sexual assaults by armed groups.

11. There was no shortage of climate-related humanitarian needs in 2023: storms (Tropical Cyclone Freddy in southern Africa, Storm Daniel in Libya, Cyclone Mocha in Myanmar); wildfires in Europe; drought (millions of people still facing high levels of water scarcity in Madagascar and Somalia, for example); and flooding (in Cameroon, the Niger and Nigeria, among other places). Internal displacement caused by climate change jumped by 45 per cent from 2021 to 2022.¹⁰ More frequent and more severe weather-related events, along with the global rise in temperatures, worsened conditions for children living in complex conflict situations.¹¹

12. In early February 2023, major earthquakes impacted 15.6 million people (including 1.8 million refugees) and more than 5 million children in Türkiye; along with 8.8 million people, including 3.3 million children, in the Syrian Arab Republic. Devastating earthquakes also affected Morocco in September and Afghanistan in October.

13. The number of cholera cases reported in 2023 surpassed the number reported in 2022, reaching 766,300 in 31 countries by the end of the year, with more than 5,400 deaths. Ongoing humanitarian emergencies, climate change and suboptimal water and sanitation infrastructure gave cholera a foothold. And the number of measles cases in Europe and Central Asia skyrocketed – by December 2023, cases were up 3,000 per cent compared with the end of 2022.

14. Rising food prices linked to the war in Ukraine, and global political and economic instability, among other factors, diminished the ability of the most vulnerable families to pay for necessities. These economic challenges overlapped with conflict, infectious diseases and other disasters.

IV. UNICEF humanitarian response in 2023

15. In 2023, UNICEF responded to a total of 412 new or ongoing humanitarian crises in 107 programme countries, guided by the Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action.

16. A Level 3 corporate emergency response – the highest level of UNICEF humanitarian response, necessitated by the scale, complexity and urgency of needs – was applied to 10 crises in 2023 (compared with 6 in 2022). These included the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, the State of Palestine (including related cross-border operations), the Sudan and the earthquake responses in northwest Syrian Arab Republic and Türkiye. The response to the Horn of Africa drought crisis was a Level 3 emergency until September 2023, with Ethiopia (the northern Ethiopia crisis) moving to Level 2 after that date. Emergency responses in Afghanistan and Ukraine moved from Level 3 to Level 2 during the year. The 30-country cholera/polio response enacted adapted Level 3 procedures from 26 March until 26 September. Other Level 2 crises occurred in eastern Chad, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Pakistan, the Sahel region, Uganda and Yemen.

17. In 2023, 568 staff deployments were made from internal and external surge structures. Internal staff surge mechanisms provided support to 34 countries: 21 Emergency Response Team members spent 86 per cent of their working time on 65 deployments; and another 323 staff members undertook 366 deployments. Through external surge mechanisms, 137 deployments provided support through standby partner mechanisms, 36 through the Rapid Response Team and 17 through other external mechanisms, bringing expertise to

¹⁰ OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*.

¹¹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, 'Climate Insecurity Impacts on Children and Armed Conflict', A Discussion Paper, November 2023, p. 7.

40 country, regional and headquarters offices. UNICEF deployed dedicated gender capacity to every Level 2 and Level 3 response.

18. Critical progress was made in implementing the recommendations of the second evaluation of UNICEF role as a cluster lead/co-lead agency. New guidance was developed for clusters and UNICEF country teams on cluster transition and deactivation and on how country clusters can address policy commitments on gender-based violence, localization and inclusion. Several new tools (one for cluster coordination teams and one for local women's organizations) made humanitarian coordination more accessible and relevant for local women's organizations. During the year, \$7.5 million in global humanitarian thematic funding was allocated to Level 2 and Level 3 countries with critical staffing gaps in coordination and information management to meet UNICEF commitments to reliable cluster leadership.

19. UNICEF, working with the World Health Organization (WHO), Governments and other partners, provided services and support for children and families affected by public health emergencies, including in humanitarian settings. In 98 countries, UNICEF responded to outbreaks (among them Marburg virus disease, diphtheria, dengue and cholera) or other public health emergencies. Given the continued resurgence of cholera, UNICEF established a Global Cholera Emergency Cell to coordinate its response, and with partners provided technical assistance to countries through deployments and multisectoral training. The response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and other public health emergencies informed the development of the UNICEF Operational Response Framework for Public Health Emergencies, which was finalized in early 2024.

20. Collaboration with WHO goes beyond disease outbreaks, and pays dividends in country settings where the combined expertise of both organizations is making a life-saving difference for children and families. For example, UNICEF supported – with technical and financial resources – the development of WHO guidelines for the prevention and treatment of wasting in infants and young children, which were released in November 2023. For the first time, child stimulation and caregiver well-being – cornerstones of early childhood development – are non-negotiable parts of the guidelines/treatment protocol. The new guidelines have also led to policy and programmatic shifts in managing children with wasting in food-insecure contexts. For example, UNICEF is now ensuring that children with either severe or moderate wasting and at a higher risk of mortality have access to treatment and dietary support. The transition to this approach began in late 2023, in collaboration with World Food Programme (WFP), with Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria and South Sudan designated for pilot testing, or programming, or both.

21. UNICEF signed a strategic collaboration framework with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in February 2023, and it was operationalized in Belarus, the Central African Republic, Pakistan, Tunisia and the United Republic of Tanzania.

A. Only as good as the next response

22. UNICEF continued to lay a strong foundation for its humanitarian responses in 2024 and beyond. Capacity development among UNICEF humanitarian staff accelerated: 100 senior managers were trained through the Humanitarian Leadership Workshop; and a 30-module UNICEF Emergency Preparedness and Response course was revised for global roll-out in all seven UNICEF regions, helping to make emergency learning more coherent and focused. UNICEF set up a humanitarian learning channel, which provides access to more than 200 certified humanitarian-related courses. And staff in 70 country offices were trained on the Emergency Procedures for Level 1, 2 and 3 crises.

23. Forty-four countries received support from headquarters for risk analysis and preparedness, including simulations carried out in 10 countries. UNICEF finalized its

anticipatory action framework in August 2023 and is implementing anticipatory action in 13 countries (including the first-ever cholera-related anticipatory action project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo) and developing projects in another 7. UNICEF developed the Child Climate Risk Index – Disaster Risk Model to bring Governments and UNICEF country offices together to create risk maps combining hazard exposure and child vulnerability, thus enhancing country office use of geospatial data for risk analysis and preparedness. The First Action Initiative and the Co-Funding Initiative supported 41 country offices with \$9.9 million in preparedness funding, more than double the \$4.26 million allocated in 2022.

24. UNICEF implemented components of its comprehensive approach to localization in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Nigeria, the Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen. Clusters finalized and rolled out a localization tool kit, and humanitarian learning opportunities were further extended to local partners (e.g. the Learning Passport and No Language Left Behind projects, the finalization of 10 face-to-face learning modules tailored to local partners, and a local-language pilot learning project for the staff of partners working with the UNICEF Goma field office in the Democratic Republic of the Congo). UNICEF was a global leader in promoting localization and in integrating localization considerations into guidance and review processes linked to cluster coordination and the review of humanitarian response plans. In 2023, UNICEF transferred \$2.9 billion to partners, including \$1.07 billion for humanitarian programming. Out of this, 43 per cent (\$458 million), was transferred to local and national civil society organizations, exceeding the Grand Bargain target of 25 per cent. Local civil society organizations led by women received 8 per cent (\$82.5 million). A stronger UNICEF partnership with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has enhanced localization by bringing the benefits of this global partnership to the national Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies in Honduras, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria and Tajikistan and to their UNICEF counterparts in those countries.

25. Dedicated expertise in accountability to affected populations in six UNICEF regional offices and at headquarters supported 47 countries with technical advice and the development of related strategies. UNICEF is working to better link efforts on accountability to affected populations with workstreams supporting protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, which have often been perceived as being disconnected at the country level. UNICEF continues to co-lead, along with WHO and IFRC, the Collective Service, which provides coordination, social science research and analysis, information management and a help desk to support Governments and other partners in community engagement during public health emergencies and other crises.

26. UNICEF has developed a digital engagement strategy for accountability to affected populations, which will be rolled out in 2024. Innovative efforts in digital engagement for feedback were found in Türkiye, where WASH supplies and dignity kits supplied post-earthquake came with flyers contained a QR code that led users to an anonymous online satisfaction survey. By February 2024, 659 surveys had been completed. Based on the feedback, UNICEF moved from distributing a generic WASH kit to four separate kits – family; mother and baby; baby; and people with special needs. UNICEF also customized the offering of gender-appropriate items in the kits, including undergarments, menstrual products and adult diapers. The customized kits reached more than 907,000 people.

B. Inclusive humanitarian response

27. Safe access to humanitarian programmes and services for children with disabilities was a priority, as were mainstreaming disability across sectors and providing targeted support (e.g. assistive technology). Enhanced technical and operational guidance to regional and country offices enabled 75 per cent of country offices with Humanitarian Action for Children appeals to systematically include children with disabilities in their response efforts in 2023,

compared with 65 per cent in 2022. UNICEF expanded the Integrated Social Protection Programme for Children with Disabilities from 17 countries in 2022 to 24 countries in 2023. UNICEF further strengthened partnerships with local and national organizations of persons with disabilities as part of broader localization efforts. UNICEF is focusing on integrating disability inclusion into existing preparedness planning processes. For example, in the East Asia and the Pacific and Eastern and Southern Africa regions, funds received through the Co-Funding Initiative were used to pilot approaches to integrate disability inclusion into the preparedness planning process, including through strengthening the focus on engagement with organizations of persons with disabilities during planning and response efforts.

28. UNICEF engaged more than 21.9 million young people (52 percent girls) in 92 countries; 1 million were engaged in humanitarian action, a significant increase from 340,000 in 2022 (partly due to engagement of 495,000 young people in the Syrian Arab Republic earthquake response). UNICEF provided essential services including learning and skills development, mental health and psychosocial support to adolescents and young people in Afghanistan, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Türkiye, among other places. Under the PROSPECTS Partnership, a global initiative with UNICEF, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands, the International Finance Corporation, the International Labour Organization, UNHCR, the World Bank and other stakeholders. UNICEF established such innovative partnerships as the Global Refugee Youth Network, a youth refugee-led organization. This group amplified young people's voices in humanitarian action, especially at the Global Refugee Forum 2023, which included a Youth Leadership in Action pledge signed by Member States, the inter-agency Youth Compact and youth-led organizations.

29. UNICEF strengthened the protective environment for children and their communities by reinforcing its internal systems for protecting populations from sexual exploitation and abuse. Ninety-one per cent of country offices with a humanitarian response had sexual exploitation and abuse reporting mechanisms rolled out office-wide and ensured capacity-building support to their partners; 72 per cent of country offices had established a holistic system for this, inclusive of an action plan, reporting mechanism, quality system for provision of victim assistance and referrals and partners trained. An estimated 36 million children and adults in 78 countries with a humanitarian response had access to reporting channels, compared with 31.7 million in 2022. The number of reports of sexual exploitation and abuse received through these channels increased by 53 per cent. The annual update on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse offers further details on UNICEF work in this area. UNICEF funded or contributed to inter-agency protection from sexual exploitation and abuse coordinator posts in five Inter-Agency Standing Committee priority countries.

30. UNICEF delivered \$893.1 million worth of supplies in preparation for or in response to emergencies in 81 countries and territories, with 85 per cent going to Level 2 and Level 3 emergencies. The two largest emergency commodity groups were vaccines and biologicals, valued at \$246.2 million, and nutrition supplies, valued at \$181.8 million. The Supply Division provided direct support through 58 emergency staff deployments to 17 emergency locations.

31. A total of \$5.5 billion – 64 per cent of all UNICEF expenses – was spent on humanitarian action. The country offices with the highest overall humanitarian expenses (in descending order) were Afghanistan, Ukraine, Yemen, Ethiopia and Lebanon. In Ukraine and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), more than 95 per cent of expenses were classified as humanitarian expenses.

32. Critical obstacles to the UNICEF response included new, continuing or intensifying access constraints and a continued constrained funding environment that impacted the ability of responders to reach all children targeted for assistance.

V. Intervention spotlight

33. In the State of Palestine, the children of the Gaza Strip, and their families, are trapped, living and dying under constant bombardments and attacks on homes, schools, hospitals, water systems, shelters and even food lines. UNICEF and partners have worked around the clock to try to provide life-saving support while facing nearly insurmountable obstacles: extreme insecurity, massive logistics encumbrances and a prohibition on critical supplies (for example, poles for tents are not allowed into the Gaza Strip). The situation of children and the obstructions to access together equal a complete disregard for international humanitarian law. Some needs have been met with UNICEF support, for example ensuring the life-saving supply of safe water for 1.3 million people in the Gaza Strip each week, out of 2.1 million targeted. UNICEF also supported the safe evacuation of 31 babies from Al-Shifa Hospital in northern Gaza along with WHO and others in November 2023. However, without a lasting ceasefire, open borders, regular channels for humanitarian assistance to reach people and the resumption of the commercial activities of daily life – all things UNICEF advocated for, through every channel and at every level – the humanitarian response fell far short in 2023. By early 2024, every single child under 5 years of age in the Gaza Strip – an estimated 335,000 children – was at risk of severe malnutrition and preventable death due to looming famine. Widespread insecurity undermined health services and the distribution of life-saving health and nutrition supplies. Only 4 per cent of the 311,000 children aged 6–59 months targeted for nutritional supplements (preventive lipid-based supplements, micronutrient supplementation, high energy biscuits) received them in 2023; while only 2 per cent of the targeted 6,813 children under 5 years of age who were severely wasted were admitted for treatment. UNICEF was able to get some critical health supplies into the Gaza Strip and support 15 health-care facilities. And humanitarian cash assistance reached 74,354 households in the Gaza Strip shortly after 7 October 2023, more than double the target as the strategy had shifted to providing a single round of cash to a greater number of households. Ninety-five thousand children living in shelters and camps, out of a target of 275,000, were provided with winter clothes and blankets.

34. In the Sudan, UNICEF moved quickly to tackle difficulties in access (conflict, insecurity, looting, lack of phone and network connectivity, bureaucratic impediments) to meet the needs of children and families buffeted by the lethal combination of violence, displacement, malnutrition and disease. In conflict hotspots, UNICEF delivered life-saving supplies and services; in states receiving large numbers of displaced people, UNICEF assisted displaced and host communities. And throughout the country UNICEF supported the preservation of systems delivering basic services. With UNICEF support, 5.4 million children were screened for malnutrition (92 per cent of the target) and 313,400 were admitted for treatment of severe wasting (50 per cent of the target). Mental health and psychosocial support reached 639,000 children, adolescents and caregivers, 183 per cent of the target. UNICEF and partners facilitated access to gender-based violence prevention and support services for 186,743 girls, boys and women (against the target of 20,956). And 5.9 million people (exceeding the target of 4 million) had access to safe water, including in conflict-affected areas. Yet millions of people remained unreached. The appeal was only 18 per cent funded by the end of 2023. Humanitarian teams often lacked access and programmes were disrupted. One example: Fighting in Khartoum forced the Ministry of Health to move vaccine stocks to Gezira State, where subsequent fighting further displaced national vaccination teams, delayed the procurement of immunization supplies and forced postponement of vaccine charter flights. With the Ministry of Health forced to evacuate Gezira State, UNICEF supported the relocation of vaccines from Gezira to other safe cold storage in Kassala and Gedaref States, along with preparation for a measles and rubella campaign from safer locations. Nearly 1 million children ultimately received measles vaccination with UNICEF support during the year, short of the targeted 1.7 million.

35. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UNICEF intensified its already substantial humanitarian response in the country to meet the increased needs of the population in the Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu Provinces. An extensive field presence, including multiple field offices, helped UNICEF to reach children and families in need. Around 300,000 children, adolescents and caregivers accessed community-based mental health and psychosocial support (one third of the targeted 978,000).¹² Gender-based violence response and risk mitigation included multiple pathways, among them holistic support to 4,650 survivors (just under one third of the target, and including 2,800 girls and 1,681 women and 196 boys); and humanitarian cash transfers via mobile money transfers to 8,044 households in Minova, South Kivu designed to mitigate the particular risks among women and girls in meeting basic survival needs. Between June and December 2023, UNICEF provided protection and reintegration support to 2,250 children formerly associated with armed groups. Other interventions (health care, the cholera response, treatment for severe wasting and others) reached millions of children and families. Yet, in this context of high access constraints and severe underfunding (the appeal was only 14 per cent funded), 1.65 million people throughout the country were not able to access clean water for drinking and household use and continued to live in unsanitary conditions; 674,100 children were deprived of mental health support and 711,000 were deprived of education and early learning opportunities.

36. UNICEF was instrumental in triggering a system-wide scale up of assistance for people affected by the rapidly deteriorating security situation in Haiti. Actively coordinating and responding across programmatic areas with the Government and implementing partners, UNICEF used a localized approach, in conjunction with WFP, to access populations in gang-controlled areas. More than 406,000 children were screened for wasting (68 per cent of the target), with 41,738 admitted for treatment of severe wasting (36 per cent of the target). More than 393,000 children and women received essential health care services in UNICEF-supported facilities (60 per cent of the target); 1.1 million people had access to safe water through UNICEF assistance (74 per cent of the target); and 55,881 children received psychological support (27 per cent of the target). Access constraints created by the deteriorating security situation, coupled with funding shortages (the appeal was only 20 per cent funded in 2023), made it difficult to reach all those targeted for assistance. For example, despite being well placed to help to prevent and respond to the grave violations being committed against Haitian children, UNICEF critical funding gap in child protection (only 10 per cent funded) meant that 150,000 children and caregivers could not be reached with mental health and psychosocial support; and 5,000 additional unaccompanied and separated children could not be cared for or reunited.

37. Nearly 6 million children required humanitarian assistance in Myanmar due to the protracted conflict that has led to increased protection risks, widespread economic collapse, internal displacement and the deterioration of social services. Cyclone Mocha in May 2023 caused widespread destruction in Rakhine State, while the escalation of conflict in October 2023 led to more than 600,000 people newly displaced. Meeting people's needs was hindered by significant constraints (military operations, ongoing hostilities and administrative constraints) and the politicization of humanitarian assistance. The UNICEF appeal was only 15 per cent funded, which meant UNICEF was unable to reach nearly 220,000 children with formal or non-formal education, exacerbating an already alarming education crisis where more than 4.5 million children are out of school. Acute funding shortages also led to the cessation of vital nutrition interventions, leaving thousands of wasted children under 5 years of age. Only 5,244 children were admitted for treatment of severe wasting, or 50 per cent of those targeted. And only 16 per cent of the targeted 850,000 children received explosive weapons prevention and survivor assistance interventions due to funding shortages. Yet, working with local organizations and other United Nations

¹² The specific results provided here are only for scale up of the Level 3 emergency in the three provinces noted, between June and December 2023.

agencies – and capitalizing on its seven field offices – UNICEF was able to support life-saving health care services in many parts of the country. UNICEF worked closely with WHO on a catch-up vaccine campaign for children who had missed out on their routine immunizations, and an estimated 700,000 children were vaccinated against measles (93 per cent of the target). Infant and young child feeding counselling reached 88,587 of the 134,900 caregivers targeted. Nearly 450,000 people received access to safe water (76 per cent of the target).

38. Within Ukraine, UNICEF provided humanitarian assistance to 8.76 million people, including 2.96 million children. Support for children and their families on the front lines was accompanied by recovery and reconstruction, along with policy engagement (e.g. through the Better Care programme, which supports deinstitutionalization). Mental health support was provided to 99 per cent of the 2.6 million children, adolescents and caregivers targeted, with a transition during the year from heavy use of mobile teams towards more structured and sustained services, emphasizing capacity building of professionals and quality assurance of programmes. Other interventions supported primary health care, safe water, education and cash transfers. After the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023 compromised access to sustained, safe water for 1 million people, UNICEF provided life-saving support for around 1 million people, including safe water, hygiene supplies, health consultations, psychosocial support and cash assistance. A speedy response was possible due to contingency planning and emergency preparedness actions, including pre-positioning of stocks.

39. UNICEF humanitarian programmes in Afghanistan reached millions of children and families living through a longstanding protection emergency and affected by a water crisis that has left no part of the country untouched. Girls and women have been excluded from most facets of life, including education and the workforce, significantly increasing their protection needs. A strategy of sustaining systems at the subnational level enabled UNICEF programmes to meet (or come close to) targets in many areas. This includes 20.3 million people accessing health care through UNICEF-supported facilities, against a target of 19 million; 715,480 children aged 6–59 months with severe wasting admitted for treatment, out of 875,000 targeted; 686,000 children (60 per cent girls) getting their education through community-based education classes (compared with the target of 600,000). Yet UNICEF did not meet every target. For example, only 2.1 million people out of the 6.2 million targeted accessed safe drinking water with UNICEF support, partly due to delays in government approvals of memorandums of understanding – and also due to a large funding gap for WASH activities. The Afghanistan appeal was 63 per cent funded, with health and education programmes fully funded.

40. UNICEF provided a comprehensive response after multiple earthquakes (in Afghanistan, Türkiye and the Syrian Arab Republic, among other places), with partners reaching millions of children and families with critical supplies, life-saving surgeries and trauma care, hygiene kits, immunizations, safe drinking water and sanitation services, and access to formal and non-formal education. Mental health and psychological support reached nearly 1.6 million children and caregivers in Türkiye (exceeding the target of 1 million because a greater number of caregivers than expected were provided with support, as families felt under threat after the highly traumatic events); in the Syrian Arab Republic mental health and psychosocial support reached nearly 286,000 children and adults (of a targeted 335,000).

VI. Strengthening organizational performance

A. Humanitarian access

41. Disruption and denial of humanitarian access to people who require assistance violates humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. The consequences of this are

not abstract: children requiring medical care or treatment for severe wasting do not receive it; those who require protection are not protected; those who need safe water to drink or to help to prevent diseases such as cholera do not have it.

42. Crisis-affected people in 41 countries experienced high to extreme access constraints between June and November 2023.¹³ At the end of 2023, access constraints were particularly acute in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Myanmar, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Ukraine.

43. Nonetheless, UNICEF persisted in trying to obtain and preserve access to children in need. Country offices receiving specific support from UNICEF headquarters to address access issues included Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Colombia/Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lebanon, Mali, Myanmar, Mozambique, Somalia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. Short-term access support was deployed to Haiti, Ecuador, Ethiopia and Yemen, and access Emergency Response Team members deployed in support of north-western Syria, the Sudan and Myanmar.

44. Critical access interventions included advocating for access to children in the Gaza Strip, in partnership with other organizations, and advocating to open the Rafah border crossing in October 2023. In Haiti, UNICEF played a leading role in negotiating access with armed non-State actors, spearheading inter-agency efforts in key areas of the capital Port-au-Prince. In October 2023, these efforts resulted in the rescue of dozens of children trapped amid crossfire. These access successes were due to an intentional focus on strengthening the access skills and mindset of UNICEF colleagues; inter-agency coordination work to address access concerns; public and private advocacy; humanitarian negotiations; and enhanced country office support.

45. Efforts to develop staff skills and knowledge to handle challenging access situations are ongoing. Negotiating humanitarian access is part of the Humanitarian Leadership Workshop for senior leaders. In November 2023, UNICEF piloted (with the Civil Military Coordination Service of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) two dedicated trainings for staff on United Nations-civil-military coordination. UNICEF also continues to provide tailor-made sessions to its front-line staff, including security and emergency staff globally, on the use of armed escorts, sanctions, principled humanitarian action and addressing bureaucratic and administrative impediments. In 2024, UNICEF expects to hold its biennial workshop for country Representatives on operating in complex and high-threat environments, along with the first global peer-to-peer workshop for UNICEF access practitioners.

46. Globally, around 175 million people are believed to live under the control of armed groups.¹⁴ In 2023, UNICEF initiated a baseline analysis of its humanitarian engagement with armed non-State actors at the country level to identify good practices and ways to support country and field offices while also maintaining a risk-informed approach. The results of this study, along with research on navigating humanitarian dilemmas in the field, will be disseminated among practitioners and partners in 2024.

B. Humanitarian advocacy

47. UNICEF advocacy improved and accelerated, thanks to progress in the implementation of the Humanitarian Review recommendations, including increased advocacy capacity at headquarters and in regional offices; a growing number of whole-of-organization advocacy strategies for specific major emergencies; and enhanced ways of working across teams for coherent, coordinated advocacy.

¹³ ACAPS, Humanitarian access: A snapshot of the most challenging contexts, December 2023, available at www.acaps.org/en/thematics/all-topics/humanitarian-access, accessed on 14 March 2024.

¹⁴ OCHA, *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*, p. 7.

48. Advocacy is central to efforts to deliver humanitarian assistance; secure access; promote adherence to international legal norms and standards; promote accountability of those who violate children's rights; and raise awareness and promote the rights and voices of women and children as integral to humanitarian action.

49. UNICEF continued to invest in developing humanitarian advocacy-related knowledge and skills of its staff. Targeted training modules on strategic humanitarian advocacy, including advocacy in complex and high-threat environments, were included in the Humanitarian Leadership Workshop. Teams refined and delivered a modular humanitarian advocacy training course for colleagues in the field, ranging from a one-hour introductory course on humanitarian advocacy to a full three-day advocacy strategy and capacity-building workshop. Tailored versions of this training module were rolled out in 2022 and 2023 in numerous regional and multi-country contexts, and in Haiti.

50. UNICEF humanitarian advocacy has become more intentional and coordinated at all levels. Globally, UNICEF remained a premier voice for children, engaging intensively on the agenda around children affected by armed conflict. This included UNICEF high-level participation in the 2023 Oslo Conference on Protecting Children in Conflict, which saw Member States increase and strengthen their domestic and international commitments to protect children in conflict. UNICEF also weighed in on protection of civilians and other child-related issues. The organization influenced four Security Council resolutions and presidential statements and three General Assembly resolutions, including peace operations mandate renewals where UNICEF influence resulted in strengthened language on child protection. The UNICEF Executive Director briefed the Security Council six times¹⁵ and participated in a high-level briefing on the deteriorating situation in Yemen.

51. In Haiti, UNICEF led humanitarian advocacy efforts on behalf of the international community given the role of the UNICEF Executive Director as the IASC Principal Advocate for the Humanitarian Situation in Haiti. A joint advocacy plan linked to this role was developed and implemented, along with a UNICEF-specific advocacy strategy. A key goal was shining a spotlight on the plight of children, and it was achieved through increased media and social media attention, more engagement with key missions in New York and by visits by the Executive Directors of UNICEF and WFP to Haiti in June 2023. The UNICEF Executive Director also briefed the Security Council on the situation in Haiti in October and held bilateral briefings with Member States.

52. With an integrated strategy for public and private advocacy linked to the escalation of conflict in Israel and the State of Palestine, UNICEF continually called for an immediate and long-lasting humanitarian ceasefire; safe and unrestricted humanitarian access; immediate, safe and unconditional release of all abducted children; an end to grave violations against children; respect and protection for civilian infrastructure; safe access to critical health services; and evacuation of injured and sick children. UNICEF highlighted Gaza as the world's most dangerous place to be a child. UNICEF briefed the Security Council and had high-level bilateral advocacy meetings linked to this crisis and others, including Haiti and the Sudan.

C. Mitigating risk in humanitarian action

53. Millions of children require assistance in environments where risks – linked to conflict, civil violence, bureaucratic impediments, political contexts and other factors – are extremely high, and where UNICEF often acts as a last resort when other actors cannot remain present. UNICEF works in extremely volatile contexts with high risks because the needs of children and its mandate lead the organization there.

¹⁵ The six briefings included thematic debates on children and armed conflict and protecting water from attack; two briefings on the humanitarian situation in Israel and the State of Palestine; and briefings on Haiti and Afghanistan.

54. As noted in the UNICEF Emergency Procedures, the biggest risk to UNICEF humanitarian operations is any inaction that results in a failure or delay in saving lives, alleviating suffering, maintaining human dignity and protecting rights of children and their families affected by humanitarian crisis.

55. To combat this risk of inaction, UNICEF maintains a ‘no-regrets’ approach: the organization will err on the side of deploying more capacity and mobilizing more resources in support of a response even if this proves to have been unnecessary after the fact. In other words, the benefits in terms of saving children’s lives and upholding their rights outweigh the possibility that events may not unfold as anticipated. Such a no-regrets approach is supported by a risk framework that is built into guidance for staff in the field.

56. UNICEF systems are designed to mitigate operational and other risks inherent to humanitarian operations in complex and high-threat environments. Under the direction of the Chief Risk Officer in the Office of the Executive Director, UNICEF is continuing to strengthen its overall risk management architecture. The Executive Board received an update on the development of an overarching system for enterprise risk management at its first regular session in February 2024, and will consider the UNICEF evolved enterprise risk management framework at its annual session in June 2024.

57. Two years into the roll-out of the Emergency Procedures and their accompanying guidance, risk-averse behaviours continue to constrain decision-making and programme implementation, contrary to UNICEF policy. Changing this goes beyond policy changes and requires shifts in individual mindsets and organizational culture. To better understand what is required and to overcome this obstacle, UNICEF is developing guidance on how to better implement the no-regrets approach in countries, including how to better articulate programmatic risks and overcome impediments to saving children’s lives.

58. Successfully implementing the no-regrets approach also requires risk-sharing accountability mechanisms between UNICEF offices, with its implementing partners and with its funding partners. All partners are working to manage their own risks. In some cases, however, resource partners place conditionalities on their funding to help them to manage their own risks, but the risks may then be passed on to UNICEF. Most funding for the UNICEF humanitarian response comes with some conditions attached. However, donor conditionalities begin to negatively impact children when these conditions unreasonably divert resources from programme implementation, are unrealistically inflexible, or threaten the neutrality, impartiality or credibility of UNICEF.

59. The organization looks to its partners, including its resource partners and Executive Board members, to share the risks that come with following its mandate to be present in the places where it is most difficult to be a child. Building a common understanding with all critical players in UNICEF humanitarian action of acceptable and shared risk in complex and high-threat environments can help to build the confidence needed by country office leadership and other staff in the field to use the no-regrets approach when appropriate.

VII. Resource mobilization

60. The 2023 Humanitarian Action for Children appeal sought \$10.26 billion to assist 110.3 million children in need in 155 countries and territories. By the end of 2023, total humanitarian requirements had risen to \$11.10 billion. This \$0.84 billion increase was primarily due to the escalation of protracted and new conflicts; climate-induced emergencies (e.g. floods, droughts, cyclones); natural disasters; and economic downturns in countries experiencing emergencies.

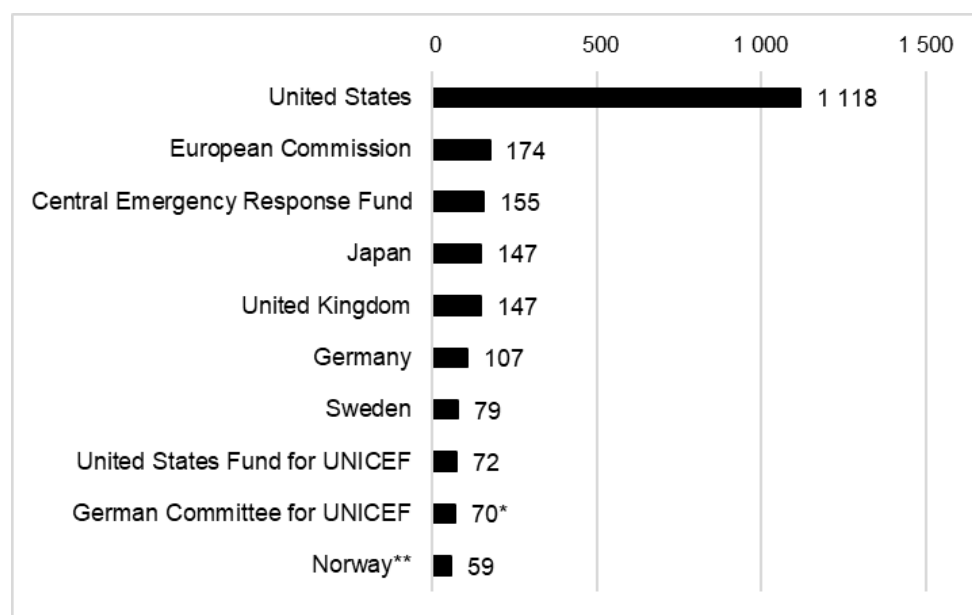
61. As at 31 December 2023, UNICEF had received \$3.48 billion in humanitarian funding¹⁶ for the 2023 appeal, or 31 per cent of the total required funds. During the year, humanitarian needs and demand for resources outpaced financial support from donors.

62. The public sector continued to be the primary source of funding, providing 86 per cent (\$2.99 billion) of total contributions received in 2023. The private sector contributed \$491.3 million in 2023, which was only 45 per cent of the amount raised from the private sector in 2022 (a year when private sector contributions were particularly high due the war in Ukraine).

Figure I

Top 10 partners for emergency funding, 2023

(in millions of United States dollars)



* Of this amount, \$1.4 million was a payout through the Today and Tomorrow Initiative.

**In 2023, Norway started a new window for underfunded emergencies as part of its overall humanitarian funding to UNICEF.

63. Of the humanitarian funding received in 2023, 50 per cent was earmarked for responses to seven crises (which represented about 50 per cent of the total funding requirements): those in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Syrian refugee crisis, Türkiye earthquakes, and Ukraine and the refugee response.

64. A Grand Bargain signatory, UNICEF continued in 2023 to advocate for quality funding for humanitarian action – emphasizing the need for multi-year, flexible and unearmarked funding. Ideally such types of funding should become the norm, rather than the exception, because flexible funding can save lives by enhancing equity for children in humanitarian responses and enabling more efficient, swift and agile responses.

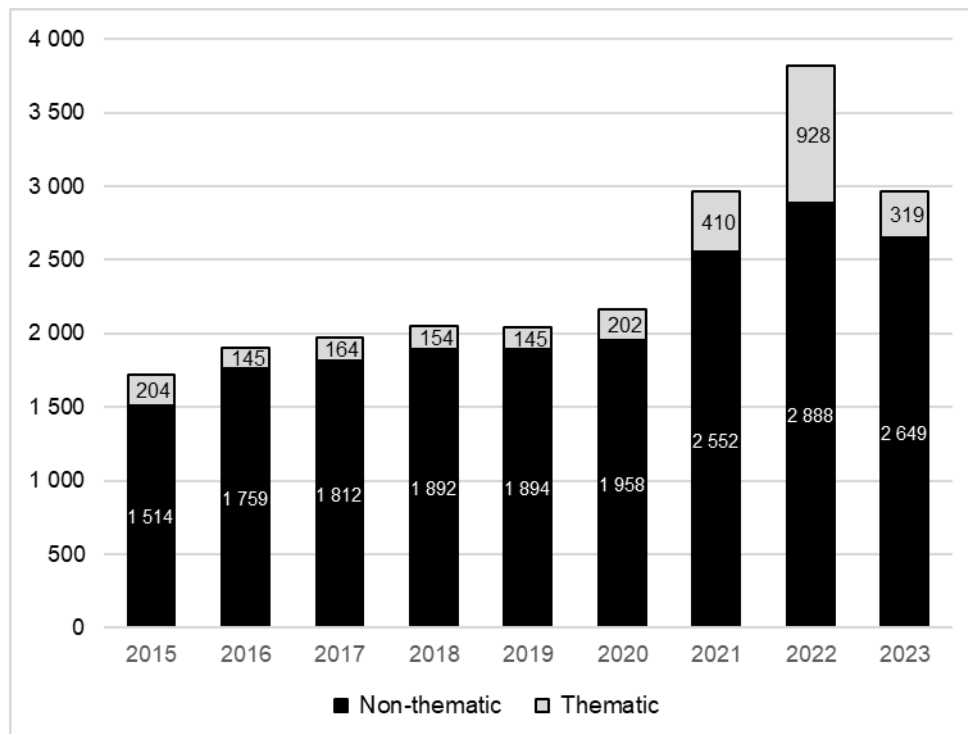
¹⁶ Humanitarian funding includes other resources – emergency (‘emergency funding’) along with \$513.8 million in other resources (regular) from public sector partners for the UNICEF humanitarian response. UNICEF implemented the Today and Tomorrow Initiative, the first child-focused climate risk financing solution to address climate change risks, and in particular the impact of cyclones, in eight at-risk countries: Bangladesh, Comoros, Fiji, Haiti, Madagascar, Mozambique, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. By December 2023, one year after the launch of the pilot, UNICEF had secured more than \$100 million in cyclone risk coverage and received \$3.98 million in insurance payouts to respond to tropical cyclone-induced emergencies that occurred in Bangladesh, Fiji, Madagascar, Mozambique, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

65. Flexible humanitarian thematic contributions (country, regional and global) reached \$319.3 million in 2023.¹⁷ Public sector partners increased their humanitarian thematic funding by 15 per cent compared with 2022, contributing \$87.8 million. Thematic contributions from private sector partners accounted for \$231.6 million. Out of \$319.3 million received, \$178.8 million (or 56 per cent) was received for five crises: those in Pakistan, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, Türkiye, and Ukraine and refugee response.

Figure II

Thematic* and non-thematic emergency funding trends, 2015–2023

(in millions of United States dollars)



* Thematic figures include the humanitarian action pools at the global, regional and country levels.

66. Global humanitarian thematic funding is the most flexible type of humanitarian thematic contribution. This type of funding promotes equity in the humanitarian response because it allows UNICEF to allocate funds where they are most needed. In 2023, UNICEF received \$96.7 million in global humanitarian thematic funding; of this, public sector partners contributed \$62.8 million, while the private sector provided \$33.9 million. There was a notable increase in global humanitarian thematic contributions from public sector partners.

¹⁷ In 2022, flexible thematic contributions reached \$928 million, 77 per cent of which was earmarked for the Ukraine and refugee outflow and Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT-A) appeals.

Table
Top 10 resource partners for global humanitarian thematic funding, 2023
 (in millions of United States dollars)

<i>Resource partner</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Germany	32.0
Netherlands	18.6
Private sector fundraising by UNICEF country offices	11.9
Sweden	11.1
United Kingdom Committee for UNICEF	9.0
Dutch Committee for UNICEF	3.6
United States Fund for UNICEF	3.3
German Committee for UNICEF	1.3
Hong Kong Committee for UNICEF	1.2
Swedish Committee for UNICEF	1.2

67. In 2023, UNICEF received \$698.8 million in multi-year funding. Public sector partners provided \$390.3 million in multi-year funding, a significant increase (50 per cent) compared with 2022, approaching pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels and ensuring predictable funding for children.

68. UNICEF received a total of \$153.01 million for 39 emergencies from the Central Emergency Response Fund in 2023, second-highest amount among all recipients. Emergency responses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic together accounted for 27 per cent of these allocations. Thirty per cent of the fund's allocations were for climate-related emergencies.

69. In 2023, UNICEF received \$425.7 million in funding from international financial institutions to support countries with Humanitarian Action for Children appeals (compared with \$222.4 million in 2022). Of this, \$11.6 million was emergency funding, including \$1.6 million in multi-year funding. Increasingly, the Asian Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the World Bank are playing an important role in supporting essential health, nutrition, WASH and education in emergencies in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Chad, Haiti and other countries.

70. In 2023, \$289.6 million in core resources, the most flexible type of resource at UNICEF, supported humanitarian programmes. One way core resources contribute to the humanitarian response is via allocations from the UNICEF Emergency Programme Fund loan mechanism, which fast-tracks resources to affected countries within 48 hours of a crisis. In 2023, UNICEF provided \$87.9 million to 29 countries through this fund, a 22 per cent increase in such loans compared with 2022.

VIII. Strategic priorities

71. With the erosion of trust in humanitarian action impacting the delivery of life-saving assistance for children in critical contexts around the world, UNICEF will continue – and deepen – its support to the transformation of the humanitarian system to make it more localized and to address this erosion of trust. Part of this means investing in local economies in areas where UNICEF delivers humanitarian action. UNICEF is committed to supporting local production of medical products and supplies and to procuring more supplies locally.

72. The triple planetary crisis of climate change, environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity is a child rights crisis. The UNICEF Sustainability and Climate Change Action Plan, 2023–2030 lays out strategies, operations and partnerships to help communities to build low-carbon, resilient services for children; equip young people to be champions of the planet; and accelerate a just transition to a nature-positive and carbon-neutral world. Support for this approach and for these goals is critical for children living in humanitarian emergencies.

73. UNICEF will invest in disaster risk reduction and in strengthening the resilience of communities, institutions and systems surrounding and supporting children. Expanded efforts in anticipatory action and preparedness planning will help to strengthen countries' capacities to prepare for disasters and mitigate their worst effects. UNICEF will continue to strengthen programming across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and support resilience-building activities.

74. The Humanitarian Review made recommendations for making the UNICEF humanitarian response more fit for purpose. In 2024, UNICEF is carrying out a mid-term review of the Humanitarian Review, coinciding with and informing the mid-term review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025. There were numerous Humanitarian Review recommendations linked to building human resources capacity for the humanitarian response, and UNICEF will continue to prioritize cultivating the skills and leadership capacities necessary to fulfil its mandate.

75. UNICEF will continue advocating for full and flexible funding for its emergency responses to meet the humanitarian needs of children, wherever they are, providing aid based solely on need, and as the provider of last resort in some places. A primary objective of UNICEF is to concentrate efforts on essential, non-negotiable humanitarian needs while upholding fundamental humanitarian principles.

IX. Conclusion

76. As the United Nations agency with the mandate to safeguard the rights of all children, everywhere, UNICEF will continue to speak out publicly, advocate privately and act responsibly and swiftly with its partners to ensure provision of life-saving assistance to children – and to ensure the extreme conditions of millions of children today are never, ever considered 'normal' or acceptable.

X. Draft decision

The Executive Board

Takes note of the annual report on UNICEF humanitarian action (E/ICEF/2024/16).