

**AS PREPARED**

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*Annual session of the UNICEF Executive Board – Opening Statement*

**11 June 2024**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues ... it is good to be with you for this annual session of the UNICEF Executive Board. Thank you for being here ... for your collaboration and insights ... and for your steadfast commitment to supporting UNICEF's work for children.

I am grateful to the President of the Board, Ambassador Rwamucyo, and to the Bureau, for your leadership and support so far in 2024.

Excellencies ... once again, we have a packed agenda featuring a broad range of topics – some of which I will briefly highlight here.

We will have decisions on the extension of four country programmes, including Sudan ... and we will have important updates on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse ... and on organizational culture and diversity. As always, we will depend on your engagement and guidance over the next few days.

This session will also feature an update on UNICEF humanitarian action. This comes at an especially critical time, given the array and severity of crises around the world. Conditions remain especially precarious for the more than 400 million children living in conflict zones, where parties are actively committing grave violations of their rights.

This includes the Gaza Strip, where horrific conditions for children and families continue to deteriorate.

The most recent evacuation orders linked to military operations in Rafah have resulted in the displacement of more than 1 million people. Many of these children and families have already been displaced multiple times, further increasing their acute levels of vulnerability.

Nearly all of Gaza's children have been exposed to the traumatic experiences of war, the consequences of which will last a lifetime. Many have been killed ... while many more are badly injured, exhausted, sick or malnourished. And the threat of famine remains high.

In Haiti, meanwhile, the situation for children is catastrophic, and grows worse by the day. Violence perpetrated by armed groups has caused widespread insecurity, and the collapse of basic services. Today, five and a half million people, including three million children, need humanitarian assistance. Shockingly, UNICEF estimates that between 30 and 50 per cent of armed group members are children who are subject to coercion, abuse and exploitation.

And after more than a year of war in Sudan, that country is now home to largest child displacement crisis in the world. We estimate that today, 4.6 million Sudanese children are displaced internally, and across borders. The brutal violence between armed forces and groups has decimated the country's infrastructure, leading to the collapse of basic services. We fear that some areas are slipping into famine.

In these and all other crises ... from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ukraine ... to emergencies away from the headlines in Burkina Faso, Myanmar, and Yemen ... UNICEF and our partners continue to stay and deliver.

We are providing safe drinking water for millions of children and families ... we are delivering desperately needed medicines, vaccines, and medical equipment ... we are reaching malnourished children and mothers with nutrition support ... and we are ensuring that children have access to psychosocial and protection services.

But our work is becoming increasingly difficult. In some contexts, parties to conflict are trying to limit our ability to safely reach those in need. This includes access constraints, and attacks on humanitarian workers. Parties are also working to publicly discredit the humanitarian sector, and the principled nature of our mission, using dis- and misinformation. And we see that parties consistently choose to continue, or even increase hostilities, rather than find diplomatic solutions.

Excellencies ... we urge you to join us in strongly advocating with parties to conflict to abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law ... to protect children, and the infrastructure they rely on ... to ensure that humanitarian actors can safely reach civilians in need ... and to urgently cease hostilities. In speaking out strongly, unequivocally, together, for the rights of children affected by conflict, I believe we can more effectively push parties to do the right thing.

At the same time, we must also continue to advocate for the rights of all children, including those affected by the intensifying consequences of climate change.

Last week, Secretary-General Guterres announced data showing we are likely to breach 1.5 degrees Celsius in warming above pre-industrial times in the next five years. The consequences of this would be catastrophic for children, and the planet.

In his remarks, the Secretary-General said that “It is a disgrace that the most vulnerable are being left stranded, struggling desperately to deal with a climate crisis they did nothing to create,” ... and that “We cannot accept a future where the rich are protected in air-conditioned bubbles, while the rest of humanity is lashed by lethal weather in unlivable lands.”

I wholeheartedly agree. Children are not responsible for the climate crisis, yet they are most affected by it. Today, over 1 billion children – nearly half of the world’s children – live in countries that are at ‘extremely high-risk’ from the impacts of climate change. But national borders do not protect them. The consequences of our warming planet are affecting children everywhere.

From the moment of conception until they grow into adulthood, the health and development of children’s brains, lungs, immune systems, and other critical functions are affected by the environment they grow up in. Children under the age of five shoulder nearly 90 per cent of the global disease burden linked to climate change. And an estimated 450 million children live in areas of high, or extremely high, water vulnerability ... which means they are at risk of experiencing water scarcity.

UNICEF estimates that 559 million children are currently exposed to frequent heatwaves. And by 2050, all the world's children are expected to be regularly exposed to heatwaves. Children exposed to heatwaves are at greater risk of developing health problems including chronic respiratory conditions, asthma, and cardiovascular diseases.

Climate change has stark, immediate and long-term implications across the full range of children's rights. Yet children are rarely considered in countries' responses to climate change, including in their policies, and in climate finance.

But the good news is that we are seeing some governments increasingly prioritize the rights of children in climate action. As you know, at COP28, Parties to the UNFCCC mandated an 'expert dialogue on the disproportionate impacts of climate change on children, and relevant policy solutions.'



That dialogue took place on June 4th during the Bonn climate conference – the preparatory meeting for COP29. The expert dialogue on children marked a monumental landmark in the 30-year history of the UNFCCC process.

UNICEF welcomed the expressions of support, and engagement of Parties during the dialogue ... the exchange of good practice, and policy solutions ... and – critically – the many tangible recommendations on next steps. There was a strong focus on the need to effectively mainstream consideration of children’s vulnerabilities, and perspectives, in climate decision making at all levels.

This includes consideration in key decisions to be taken at COP29, and in the greater integration of children in revised Nationally Determined Contributions, and Adaptation Plans. We look forward to assisting Parties in these efforts.

Excellencies ... beyond conflicts and the climate crisis, advocating for the rights of all children means focusing on those from all marginalized groups ... including children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and girls.

As part of this effort, UNICEF launched our Gender Action Plan last year – which you will hear more about this week during a dedicated session. The Action Plan is already producing results, notably in terms of access to health and nutrition services for girls and women ... and in making social protection systems more gender responsive.

Yet in other areas – including grave rights violations like child marriage, and female genital mutilation – we are still falling short of our commitments. We also continue to see that new HIV infections, domestic violence, and school dropouts, remain persistent threats to adolescent girls and women.

I believe that adolescence is the most significant period in a woman's life. If a girl is supported, protected and given access to opportunities, she will thrive and lift entire communities up with her. If she is not, however, the cycle of poverty and marginalization will most likely continue. That is why we are doubling down on our efforts to work with governments and partners to accelerate progress for girls.

UNICEF's focus on girls, and children from other vulnerable groups, reflects our commitment to leaving no one behind – a principle at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals. But with five years to go, we remain off track towards achieving the SDGs. In some areas, progress is being undermined. While in others, we need more government engagement, and flexible resources.

Excellencies ... during this annual session, we will discuss the midterm review of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, and the integrated budget.

I believe this is an opportunity to consider what steps our organization can take to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda. This is also an opportunity for us to discuss how we can better drive results for children as we begin developing the next Strategic Plan.

Building on the important discussions during last year's SDG Summit, we are re-doubling our efforts to support nationally led acceleration efforts. And UNICEF's commitment to realizing the SDGs means consistently looking for ways our organization can be more effective, and evidence-driven ... including as part of the broader UN Development System reform.

Now in its fifth year of implementation, UNDS reform is embedded in UNICEF policies and procedures. The Management and Accountability Framework guides our country and regional offices in their interactions with Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams.

Our Cooperation Frameworks feature customized support to governments that reflects both national development priorities, and SDG acceleration efforts. These frameworks are the source for all country programme documents, as confirmed by the Resident Coordinator letters.

While competition for funds remains an issue, we know that by increasing the quantity of pooled and quality funding, this roadblock can be overcome. This, in turn, will lead to better, more integrated joint programming. We expect that the new Funding Compact will also improve the quality of funding. And we look forward to its full implementation. It is imperative that we leverage our partnerships to increase investments for SDG acceleration and services for children.

In the coming months, we need your help to ensure that children's rights are embedded in the outcome documents that will guide the UN development system moving forward.

This includes the Pact for the Future, and the quadrennial comprehensive policy review for development.

Excellencies ... we are just months away from the Summit of the Future. Here, I reiterate my full appreciation to the Secretary General for his leadership, to the many member states who are facilitating negotiations. I expect that the Summit will be a solemn occasion to reaffirm international support for key principles of multilateral cooperation, including the UN Charter and Human Rights. I hope it will also be an opportunity to reinvigorate the multilateral system ... and to make it fit for the challenges of today and tomorrow.

I urge you as members of the UNICEF Board to use your influence to ensure that all outcomes recognize Children as a group of distinct rights holders under international law. They are distinct from youth, and they should be explicitly mentioned.

The full scope of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights should be included both as subjects of the Summit, and in its outcome documents. It is also imperative that children are included as active actors before, during, and after the Summit.

The 2030 Agenda recognizes children's right to be heard. And it emphasizes the pivotal role they can play as agents of change to shape the implementation ... *and* monitoring of the SDGs. Accelerating the implementation of the Goals requires a whole-of-society approach that involves children, including the most marginalized, in an inclusive manner throughout all related processes.

Let us make sure that the voices of children, including adolescent girls and children with disabilities, will be loudly heard in the lead up to and during the Summit.

Let us also remember, reaffirm, and concretely implement the commitments we made during the Transforming Education Summit last year.

Finally, I hope that the Summit of the Future will put in place provisions to ensure that the rights of every child are respected, protected, and fulfilled in the digital environment. The potential of new and emerging technologies, including AI, for children must be harnessed, while safeguarding against risks.

We must bridge the gendered digital divide, especially for adolescent girls, through innovation and policy reform. Digital platforms and resources must be accessible, equitable, and safe for all children and youth. This is the aim, and the promise of a Global Digital Compact that can deliver an equitable, and safe digital future for us all.



Excellencies ... when we met earlier this year, I said that 2024 represents an inflection point ... a year of potential peril, and of promise.

Six months in, I believe we are seeing that play out. The perils of climate change, conflict, deprivation and discrimination are denying millions of children their fundamental rights. But UNICEF and our partners are still here, and we are delivering even in the most complex of environments.

Whether we succeed in our mission ... to leave no child behind ... and to achieve the SDGs ... is ultimately a matter of choice. Member States and non-state actors can choose to wage wars ... to hurt children ... and to destroy the planet. Or they can choose peace over violence ... and sustainability over destruction. Let us together be relentless in calling on all parties to make the right choice. And let us deliver on our promise, and our mission for every child.

Thank you, and I wish us all a productive session.