

Estonian Statement at the UNICEF Executive Board Annual Session

11 June 2024

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Madam/Mr. President, Madam Executive Director,

First, I would like to congratulate Executive Director, Ms. Catherine Russell, and UNICEF's staff, for their excellent work at such devastating times in the world. Estonia is re-joining as a Board member, as we are committed to contribute to your most valuable work and because children remain our top priority. As we are keen on protecting the rights of all children and contributing to their wellbeing, children will also be our main priority if Estonia is elected to the **UN Human Rights Council for the period 2026-2028**.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Current state of world affairs is such that there is little joy for millions of people facing the devastating **humanitarian situation in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo** and in many other hotspots. It's always the children who suffer the most from aggression, conflicts and violence, from poverty inequality and sexual abuse. There are a staggering **181 million children living in severe food insecurity** in the day and age where food is in abundance. Let me use the opportunity to thank the all the UNICEF staff on the field for their tireless work, often in extremely difficult situation.

Over the last 5 years, Estonia has supported UNICEF with over **4.4 million euros**. Our priority topics are **education and innovation**, especially digital transition in education, as well as equal treatment of **girls and children in armed conflicts**. We've been contribution to UNICEF's work in in **Syria and Afghanistan, Ukraine and Georgia**, and we have responded, of course, to the humanitarian needs of children in **Gaza**, as well as reaching the digital connectivity goals through GIGA initiative in **Kenya and Namibia**.

Madam/Mr. President,

Let me turn to **Ukraine**, as this affects us in a most direct way as well as through the 60 000 Ukrainian war refugees in Estonia, who are mostly women and children. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has robbed hundreds of thousands of children of their homes,

schools, parents and childhood. More than 2000 **Ukrainian children lost their lives or been wounded, tens of thousands have been deported.** As Russia's aggression continues, we urge everyone to do more to help bringing Ukrainian children home! We highly appreciate the valuable work done by **Qatar in this respect.** We in Estonia are also working hard, so that children deported by Russia in violation of international law and norms, can return safely home. Let me also stress that the **reconstruction of Ukraine,** where Estonia is also contributing, is important also for internally displaced children, and those who lost their close ones and homes. In addition to opening a kindergarten in **Ovrutš** in 2023, we have, in cooperation with the Olena Zelenska Foundation, started building **family houses for Ukrainian children orphaned in the war.** We also contribute financially to the **organization of summer camps,** to help the students from Zaporizhya region with their education while at the same time providing consultations regarding their mental health. Let me use the opportunity to **thank UNICEF representative and his staff in Ukraine,** who are doing an excellent job.

Madam/Mr. President,

Lastly, we welcome the second annual report of the UNICEF Executive Director on the **implementation of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025,** incorporating findings from the midterm review of the Strategic Plan. It provides a clear view of gaps in achieving our goals and we welcome the steps proposed in the document to strengthen the organization. And in closing, please allow me to strongly support your call that **children and their rights should feature prominently in the Pact for the Future,** as children are our future.

Thank you!