

## **Agenda Items 2 and 3**

### **Opening statements by the President of the Executive Board and the Executive Director of UNICEF and Annual Report 2023**

Thank you Chair, Madam Executive Director

I am speaking on behalf of the European Union as a donor.

We would like to reiterate our appreciation for the commitment of UNICEF staff and its partners in 2023, a year marked by a multiplication of conflicts and an unprecedented number of grave violations against children. In this challenging context, we commend UNICEF's efforts to help maintain basic services for children and protecting their rights, including for children on the move.

Despite the COVID-related setbacks identified in the mid-term review of the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the worrying lack of progress towards the child-related Sustainable Development Goals, we welcome the progress identified in terms of immunization coverage across all regions and in basic water and sanitation coverage, as well as general progress in UNICEF programme results in 2023. We strongly support the review's recommendation to increase partnerships with key actors in contexts where UNICEF faces the greatest challenges and to develop a coordinated approach to accelerating sustainable progress in Africa, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa which has the most off-track SDG indicators.

Considering the significant delays in terms of education SDGs and high disparities worldwide, we support the mid-term review recommendation to focus on educational transitions at ages 5, 10 and 18 years to address the skills gap, and we welcome the integration of four cross-cutting areas – education in emergencies; digital transformation; gender, equity and inclusion; and climate education – into this strategy. We also welcome the priority given to monitoring country progress towards the Transforming Education Summit commitments.

We welcome UNICEF's continued support to the implementation of the UN Development System Reform and its contribution to mainstreaming child rights across the UN. In view of the funding gap affecting all aid organizations in a context of rising needs, we continue to encourage UNICEF to strive for efficiency gains through joint-up approaches with other UN agencies.

Regarding the Gender Action Plan 2022–2025, we welcome the progress achieved at mid-term, including for adolescent girls, and the fact that UNICEF programmes are more gender-responsive. We welcome in particular that in 2023, UNICEF scaled up its efforts to address gender-based violence in emergencies. We also welcome the significant increase in the percentage of countries with gender-responsive systems for education access, from 38 per cent in 2021 to 53 per cent in 2023. Despite all progress, we regret the lack of resources for girl-focused programming which hampers the implementation of system reforms. We would like to hear how UNICEF intends to advocate for investment in the rights of women and girls and internally increase its own gender expertise.

We welcome UNICEF's ongoing efforts in protecting from, and responding to, Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) and Sexual Harassment (SH) and its transparent communications around this important issue. Effectively combatting all forms of SEA-H in humanitarian, development and peace settings requires collective action, partnership and multistakeholder collaboration. In this respect, we appreciate and support UNICEF's leadership in various inter-agency initiatives, including the development of a global framework for cooperation with governments. Nevertheless, despite significant progress, many challenges remain to ensure that all personnel adheres to the core values and standards expected by UNICEF. In particular, the results of the Pulse Check in November 2023 show that a significant number of the staff feel unsafe about raising concerns, highlighting outstanding issues in relation to safeguarding organisational culture and trust. We strongly encourage UNICEF to continue its efforts to enhance its PSEA-H policies and resources to tackle SEA and SH within UNICEF and across UN operations and uphold the rights of victims-survivors.

As one of the main contributors to UNICEF, we note a decrease of 14 per cent in total revenue from 2022, including a decrease of 22 per cent in private sector revenue. In view of the continuous increase in needs worldwide, we therefore encourage UNICEF to continue enlarging its donor base. We stress the need to achieve a more balanced funding structure which draws on the resources of traditional, emerging and potential donors, philanthropic foundations, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders.

Thank you.