Thank you, Mr. President and welcome to all members of the Executive Board. Your ongoing leadership and support for UNICEF is critical to delivering for the world’s children.

When I first walked into UNICEF House as Executive Director in January 2018, I knew millions of children in every corner of the globe were facing incredible challenges: violence, conflict, poverty, inequality, discrimination, and poor access to essential services.

In the years since, these challenges have persisted and even intensified. Today we are confronted with a true child rights emergency in which COVID-19 and other crises are combining to deprive children of their health and wellbeing.

Around the world, the pandemic is wreaking havoc on their young lives. Economic instability is disrupting essential services and making it harder for families to make ends meet. Rates of domestic and gender-based violence are on the rise, especially in the most vulnerable communities and households.
Primary and secondary schools remain shuttered in 19 countries, affecting over 156 million students. The first day of school – a landmark moment in the life of a child – has been indefinitely postponed for 140 million children globally.

The number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million worldwide – an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years – with millions more at risk due to the impacts of COVID-19. This is the first increase we’ve seen in two decades.

Malnutrition continues to persist in all its forms, with children paying a high price: in 2020, over 149 million children under five were estimated to have been stunted, or too short for their age and more than 45 million – wasted, or too thin for their height.

UNICEF and our UN partners recently projected that Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger by 2030) will be missed by a margin of nearly 660 million people. Of these 660 million, some 30 million may be linked to the pandemic’s lasting effects.

Meanwhile, the world’s worst humanitarian crises for children have further deteriorated over the course of this year.

Even before the recent upheaval in Afghanistan, at least 10 million children across the country were dependent on humanitarian assistance to survive. We anticipate that the humanitarian needs of children and women will increase over the coming months amidst ongoing insecurity, a severe drought, and the onset of winter.
Months of armed conflict across northern Ethiopia have placed 400,000 people, including at least 160,000 children, in famine-like conditions. We are projecting a 10-fold increase in the number of children who will suffer from life-threatening malnutrition in the Tigray region over the next 12 months.

In Yemen, home to the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, almost 21 million people, including more than 11 million children, need humanitarian assistance. More than 2 million children are malnourished and nearly 400,000 children under five suffering from severe acute malnutrition are at imminent risk of death. More than 10 million children and close to 5 million women cannot properly access health services.

Away from the headlines, protracted emergencies in countries like Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Niger and Syria have also intensified, while the economic situation in Lebanon has continued to deteriorate.

In addition, the number of climate-related disasters has not only tripled in the last 30 years but has also increased in frequency and intensity, threatening food security, increasing water scarcity, forcing people from their homes, and heightening the risk of conflict and public health emergencies.

Approximately 1 billion children – nearly half the world's 2.2 billion children – live in one of the 33 countries classified as “extremely high-risk” to the impacts of climate change. These children face a deadly combination of exposure to multiple climate and environmental shocks and high vulnerability due to
inadequate essential services, such as water and sanitation, healthcare and education.

Child displacement is also on the rise. An estimated 36 million children, more than ever before, are living in displacement due to conflict, violence and disaster.

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These are incredibly difficult times for the world’s children and young people. Some might even feel hopeless given the immensity of the challenges they face … Some might have doubts about where this world is headed and what their place will be in it.

But that’s why UNICEF is here … to be THERE for children and young people in their moment of greatest need and beyond to help them reach their full potential. And I AM hopeful because UNICEF is with them as they confront these challenges so that they can live their best lives.

I am hopeful because I have seen tremendous resilience of children and their families in the most difficult of circumstances. I have also seen the UNICEF team and our partners continue to make a real difference for millions of children and their families.

Even in this darkest of years, the tireless dedication of UNICEF staff on the ground in countries the world over is helping children to make it through. They are
delivering immunizations, health care, clean water and nutrition. Providing education and protection services like counselling and safe spaces. And working with local authorities — and parties to conflict — to gain access to the most vulnerable children.

These are the intelligent, courageous, inspirational people of our organization. People who walk the marbled halls of power and the dusty roads of the hardest to reach villages, carrying our message and delivering our mission for children.

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As our COVID-19 response has shown, UNICEF is resilient, agile and prepared to shift priorities at a moment’s notice — and do so at a global, even historic scale.

Together, we quickly and seamlessly adapted to the mounting needs. From the rapid delivery of water, tests, supplies and PPE to communities…to equipping and training healthcare workers to deliver the vaccines…to providing information on how people can stay safe. To our central role in the COVAX facility, putting our expertise, experience and networks to lifesaving use supporting the greatest vaccination drive in history.

When the world looks back on the global response to COVID-19, UNICEF’s leadership will shine brightly.
Despite the impact of the pandemic on the global economy, supply chains and working modalities, we are reaching an historic number of children and families with vital services and support.

A key reason for this is the work of UNICEF and our partners on the development-humanitarian nexus. Our 75 years of experience have demonstrated that early and sustained investment in development programming strengthens community resilience to new humanitarian crises and enables accelerated recovery. That’s why we had systems and programming in place that could be quickly scaled up to ensure continued service delivery for children and families during the pandemic.

Last year, for example, we were able to reach 244 million children with services to prevent, screen and treat malnutrition. We kept lifesaving immunization campaigns up-and-running — including immunizing 17 million children in humanitarian emergencies against measles.

We reached 48 million children with education and tools for learning.

Seventeen million more people gained access to safe water.

We registered the births of over 21 million children. A birth certificate serves as evidence of a child’s eligibility for nationality by proving the country in which they were born, and by documenting the identity of their parents. Without a birth certificate, a child is at greater risk of statelessness and exclusion from essential services including health care and education.
We reached more than 130 million children with cash transfers across 93 countries, to help keep their families afloat during this devastating time.

Our protection programming continues to keep girls and boys safe from the scourges of child marriage, child labour and violence.

And we remain committed to stay and deliver in humanitarian emergencies.

From enduring crises in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen and the central Sahel, to Myanmar, Venezuela and Ethiopia, we are on the ground.

As part of this work, UNICEF plays a major role in supporting peace and social cohesion worldwide. Through a child-centered approach to peacebuilding, we are working to address the fundamental grievances related to inequity, exclusion and marginalization that are driving today's social unrest, instability and conflict.

Our peacebuilding approach aims to strengthen relationships between and among communities, between communities and governments and individual capacities to contribute to peace. This approach also helps to create conditions at the community level to ease the transition from humanitarian response to longer-term development.

UNICEF is now one of the largest partners in the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund, with 51 joint projects currently being implemented globally.
We are also taking on **new and expanded areas of work.**

For example, in education, we want to reach 500 million children by the end of this year with world class digital learning and skills programming. 97 per cent of our country offices are now putting plans in place to do this, including by providing learning devices and mapping out school connectivity. And for the youngest children, we are now dedicating 10 per cent of our education budget to early childhood development.

Through our Reimagine Education initiative, we obtained a global picture of access to quality education, including the number and percentage of children and young people reached with world-class digital learning. We are now using these findings to address the global learning crisis and to transform education by giving children and young people equal access to quality digital learning services.

The availability and potential of technology means that digital learning should be part of a basic basket of essential services for every child and young person. This means connecting every child and young person – some 3.5 billion by 2030 – to world-class digital solutions that offer personalized learning to leapfrog to a brighter future.

Fostering partnerships across public and private sectors – and with young people themselves – is the only way to do this. We are urging the international community to increase investments in digital learning solutions, connectivity in schools and at home, access to devices, affordable content and data, and engagement with young people.
One of the ways we’re working towards these goals is through GIGA, which has now mapped over 800,000 schools in 30 countries. With this data, GIGA is working with governments, industry, civil sector, and private sector partners to craft compelling investment cases for blended public-private funding to build the connectivity infrastructure needed to deploy digital learning solutions and other services.

Reimagine Education is also supported by Generation Unlimited, which aims to ensure that the largest generation of young people in history is prepared for the transition to work and engaged citizenship. Gen U has four key focus areas: connecting every school and learner to the internet; scaling up online learning, skilling, and livelihood platforms; boosting entrepreneurial skills and opportunities; and engaging youth as changemakers.

Climate change is another example of our expanded work. Just last month, we introduced the Children’s Climate Risk Index – the first comprehensive analysis of climate risk from a child’s perspective. It ranks countries based on children’s exposure to climate and environmental shocks, such as cyclones and heatwaves, as well as their vulnerability to those shocks, based on their access to essential services.

This index will help UNICEF, our partners, and policy makers to better map climate-related vulnerabilities and inform our programming. Our efforts are already helping communities adapt to climate change and mitigate some of its impacts. This includes working to deliver rehabilitated and more reliable water systems, including using solar-power solutions, water filtration and sanitation
systems that can bring health and green jobs to communities…and of course, reducing the environmental footprint of our operations around the world.

To support the campaign to ‘Reimagine WASH’ and to ensure water security for all, UNICEF has developed an index which combines data on drinking water service levels and physical water scarcity risks. This has helped to identify the 1.42 billion people, including the more than 450 million children, who are threatened by high and extremely high “water vulnerability”. This is a set of tools for in-depth analysis of crisis situations where people cannot access clean water and sanitation, helping us to respond more quickly and effectively.

We are innovating and exploring new ways to support children and young people. UNICEF may be 75 years old, but we are young at heart, fearless in our commitment to embracing change and innovation, both internally and across our programming for children. From digital fundraising tools, to frugal innovations. We are opening doors to a true cross-pollination of ideas and solutions, whether from children and young people themselves, or from technology companies, vaccine manufacturers, foundations and governments. These joint initiatives can be a true engine for development.

In Darfur, for example, we are preventing diseases using hands-free hand washing devices made with low-cost salvaged materials. While in Cambodia, we are improving water quality and curbing the spreading of water-borne disease through clay water filters.

And at Supply Division, UNICEF is turning ideas into scalable solutions. Product innovation involves the development of fit-for-purpose and value-for-
money products that respond to the unmet needs of children. By working with field partners and programmatic experts to understand those needs, businesses and academia to develop products that meet those needs, and with programming partners and donors to bring those new products to scale, product innovation at UNICEF is having a tremendous impact for children.

We continue to strengthen our existing public and private sector partnerships, while forging new ones to leverage fresh ideas, innovations and investments for the benefit of children. We are working with technology companies to balance the promise of the online world and artificial intelligence with the need to protect and educate children and adolescents.

Our collaboration with international financial institutions, foundations, corporations, governments AND individuals is also reaching new heights — our work with the World Bank to deliver cash transfers to struggling families in Yemen is part of this collaborative effort.

In fact, we are scaling up this partnership model to implement cash transfer programmes within the humanitarian response to other crises. Evidence shows that cash can make a positive difference for children – helping to prevent families from resorting to harmful coping strategies, responding to children’s survival needs and contributing to the recovery of local economies in humanitarian settings. In the longer term, cash transfers often build a household’s resiliency, helping families to better respond to future shocks.

I am also pleased to confirm that the inaugural event of the Global Forum for Children and Youth will take place virtually this December. Our ambition is to
make the Global Forum the authoritative event and platform to convene children and young people alongside leaders from the private and public sectors, civil society and the UN. Together we can call the world’s attention to the most burning issues affecting children and youth and mobilize collective action.

And we are **constantly improving our organization.** This includes strengthening our organizational culture, addressing systemic discrimination, as well as gender-based and racial harassment. It also means committing to our people-centred approach to human resources.

UNICEF continues to actively implement and play a leading role in UN reform. We are more collaborative, agile, effective and cost-efficient by tapping-in and joining up with our UN agency partners’ processes, partnerships, supplies and human resources. Across the globe, our staff are also actively engaged with UN Country Teams to implement the reform mandate in our country and regional operations.

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Yet as we take stock of how we’ve delivered for children, we must also look ahead. More children are in need than ever before and we have far more to do on their behalf.

This week you will be discussing our new **Strategic Plan** for 2022-2025.

The Plan reflects all of what we have learned together over the last four years — including the hard-learned lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic — as we strive to help countries and communities rebuild, recover and strengthen all of the
systems that support human development. From health care that can reach children with vaccines and emergency care in their communities, to education systems that can reach every boy and every girl no matter where they live, to stronger protection systems, to resilient water, sanitation and hygiene in every community.

We especially need to do far more for girls, young women and children with disabilities. The pandemic has reversed so many of the gains we have made in recent years. With child marriage, child labour, gender-based violence and the exclusion of children with disabilities all on the rise, our Plan features gender and disability prominently across every aspect of our programming.

The plan reflects UNICEF’s universal mandate to reach all children, including those living in middle and high-income countries. This is in line with our commitment to the SDGs and the pledge to ‘leave no-one behind’. Global crises, including climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, and mass displacement, have exacerbated inequalities within and between countries in all parts of the world. Child rights monitoring and strengthening child rights accountability mechanisms in high income countries will be key to these efforts.

I know that there are different views on aspects of our Strategic Plan. While the Plan is not an inter-governmentally negotiated document, in its implementation we will continue our long-standing practice of agreeing on priorities with national governments, and fully respecting national priorities and ownership, while always speaking out for the rights and wellbeing of children everywhere. The endorsement of our Plan is hugely important for UNICEF. I know that we are strongly united in our shared conviction that more must be done for children, and I know you will all gather behind this Plan as it is carried out across our offices worldwide.
But in order to truly deliver on the next Strategic Plan, we need to have the right funding support. The pandemic has plainly shown how critical flexible resources are to our ability to mount an efficient, swift and agile response to sudden-onset emergencies and to provide countries and communities with effective support that builds their long-term resilience.

For the past few years, the ratio of regular resources to UNICEF’s total overall income has been decreasing. This trend must be halted. Without sufficient core resources, UNICEF will struggle to pivot and adapt to the evolving needs of children; to modernize, streamline and innovate; and to further strengthen our initiatives to keep children safe.

UNICEF needs to work with Member States to urgently meet their Funding Compact commitments so that we can reverse the widening gap between flexible and earmarked funding, and multi-year and short-term funding.

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UNICEF is needed more than ever. Children and young people are looking to us to support them. Across our work, we carry their hopes and dreams with us.

In the children we encounter through our work, we see not only the challenges they face in a world so often turned against them — we see resilience and opportunities. We see possibilities.
Children like those I met in Tal-Amara school in southern rural Idlib — their faces smiling, bright and hopeful despite all they’ve endured. They proudly showed me their schoolwork, their eyes filled with faith in a better tomorrow.

Or children like Rukaiya, an 11-year old Rohingya girl I met at a learning centre in Cox’s Bazar. She found hope and help through her teachers — now she wants to do the same for other children. She told me she wants to become a teacher herself one day and dedicate her life to supporting the next generation.

And because of COVID, many children want to become doctors and nurses. They see how important and fulfilling a life of service can be.

Children like these keep our faith strong, because in their faces, we can see the future. We can open opportunities for them. We can involve millions of young people to be more than beneficiaries, but partners, working side-by-side with us on solutions.

That is where my optimism comes from. Meeting children who have endured the worst of humanity opting instead to be part of the best of humanity.

The UNICEF family represents the best of humanity, too. Our staff members, our National Committees, our dedicated Executive Board, our non-profit and business supporters, and our philanthropist partners worldwide — have exceeded my expectations at every turn.
I hope you take just a moment every day to reflect on the children and families you have helped — directly or indirectly — through your work. On the children and young people who are healthy, thriving, happy and hopeful, thanks to you.

Being Executive Director has been a great pleasure and a great privilege. I will never forget you, and I am deeply grateful for having the chance to work with, and learn from, all of you.

I wish you and your families health, joy, peace and happiness in the years ahead.

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