UNICEF Executive Board
Second regular session
7–10 September 2021

Opening statement by the President of the Executive Board
H.E. Mr. Rytis Paulauskas, Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the United Nations
(7 September 2021)

Excellencies, Distinguished delegates, Executive Director Fore, Ladies and gentlemen:

This has indeed been a challenging year for all of us. The COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions and caused tragic setbacks in the progress of for children.

But the year has also brought opportunities for innovation, new approaches to working and a better understanding of best practices in such areas as remote learning for children and adolescents. And the protracted nature of the global crisis has reinforced our understanding of the importance of linking development and humanitarian programming, of planning and implementing humanitarian responses to flow into sustainable progress after the crisis has resolved.

With its dual development and humanitarian mandate, UNICEF has long and deep experience in responding to humanitarian crises, whether caused by conflict, natural disaster or climate change. But not since UNICEF’s founding in 1946 has a humanitarian crisis been as widespread as the one caused by this pandemic. It has gripped the entire world, including all the countries in which UNICEF delivers programmes, as well as all the countries that so generously support those programmes.

The pandemic made the delivery of services for children exponentially more difficult, whether in education, nutrition, child protection or immunization. UNICEF could have decided that continuing to work in the field was too risky. And yet the organization, through the phenomenal drive and the commitment of its staff, persevered, finding workarounds to continue
to reach children. And continuing, when much of the world was understandably focused on other pressing issues, to raise awareness of the unique and pressing needs of children – and of their rights.

The importance of the role that UNICEF plays as an advocate for children with Governments, with diverse partners, including the private sector, and with communities, especially during humanitarian crises, cannot be overstated. Because it is precisely during such crises that those most deeply injured, those left farthest behind, are children.

And while the pandemic created unusual circumstances, the programme work that continued in the context of such widespread and dire humanitarian needs provided UNICEF with many lessons that have informed the new Strategic Plan, which will be considered for endorsement at this session. Those lessons have made the Plan stronger, more comprehensive, more flexible and more relevant. The new Strategic Plan promises to be an effective and agile framework capable of guiding UNICEF as it works to achieve the broad outcome-level results needed to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. We are very grateful for Executive Director, ED Fore and her team, for a very consultative process, and to the Member States who contributed so constructively during the series of workshops and briefings, including during the August meeting.

The consultations, which brought to the fore the diverse national priorities, guided UNICEF in developing a balanced document. As a broad framework rather than a prescription, the Strategic Plan is able to embrace that diversity. I’m sure I speak on behalf of the Bureau when I say that I trust that we will reach consensus on a strong endorsement of the new Strategic Plan, which is so crucial to empowering UNICEF to leave no child behind.

At this session, we will also consider specifically the evolving UNICEF approach to linking humanitarian response with development work when we discuss the evaluation on that topic. The evaluation’s findings and recommendations also contributed positively to the Strategic Plan.
I am pleased to note that the area of children with disabilities has gained new prominence in the Strategic Plan. Globally, at least 1 in 10 children has a disability. Eighty per cent of them live in developing countries. Almost 50 per cent of them do not go to school. Children with disabilities are among the most excluded and least visible in policy planning and service delivery – and the pandemic has only made their situation worse. Reaching these children is the key to fulfilling the UNICEF promise to leave no child behind. Under the new Strategic Plan, UNICEF has committed to advancing disability rights in everything it does as a cross-cutting priority, including through support to the families, parents and caregivers of children with disabilities.

This approach promises to enhance the robust programming that UNICEF has already undertaken in many countries. In 2020, its disability-inclusive development and humanitarian programmes reached more than 2.2 million children with disabilities across 144 countries, up from 1.7 million across 142 countries the year before. These are really good results, but we need to do more – every child with a disability needs our action.

The link with the United Nations human rights framework is of utmost importance for UNICEF, whose action is guided by the rights set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The human rights model of disability, enshrined by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, underpins the UNICEF approach to the rights of children with disabilities. In addition, the focus on the full inclusion of children with disabilities, with particular attention to inclusive education, family life and inclusion in the community, is anchored also in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Specifically, this focus will enhance opportunities to achieve Sustainable Development Goals 4 (Inclusive and equitable quality education) and 10 (Reduced inequalities).

In my own region alone, in 2020, UNICEF supported multiple projects: A multi-functional national child help line, which provides alternative ways to report abuse. The child-led “visa4children” campaign, with an outdoor exhibition of wheelchairs and backpacks in a public square that led to increased investments for children with disabilities. A pilot programme to provide a symbol-based communication tablet for children with developmental disabilities, which promises to radically enhance the ability of such children to express themselves.
Enabling children with disabilities to reach their full potential requires their full social inclusion in education, in their communities and in the larger societies in which they live. They need not remain excluded. But this work demands an embrace of the human rights model of disability. It demands commitment and innovation, as well as support to families. I hope that more Member States will recognize the importance of such efforts and help to support them.

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Another group too often left behind are girls and women, particularly those with disabilities. Girls and women make up half of the world’s population. Their exclusion robs the world of fresh ideas, powerful capabilities and far-reaching potential. Their full participation in society is crucial if we hope to see sustainable development. At this session, we will also consider a new Gender Action Plan, which will guide UNICEF’s continuing efforts towards making gender equality a reality, as provided for under Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Innovation is also key to finding effective solutions. UNICEF develops new ways to address persistent problems even while identifying and tackling emerging ones. We will do a deep dive into one such area during the two-part thematic presentation of the 12 country programme documents, representing every region in which UNICEF works. The first part will detail the UNICEF approaches to addressing worsening undernutrition, including stunting, wasting and micronutrient deficiencies. The second part will address the new face of malnutrition: childhood overweight and obesity. I would like to thank the panellists who will be joining us.

In keeping with its mission of reaching every child, everywhere, UNICEF works around the world. And as the economic status of a particular country improves, UNICEF adapts its approach, while always keeping front and centre the importance of leaving no child behind. I know that we all look forward to discussing the progress update on UNICEF experience in high-income countries and in countries transitioning from upper-middle-income to high-income status
within the framework of the UNICEF universal agenda for child rights. It is important to have clarity on the way forward so that UNICEF can plan its work appropriately.

Distinguished delegates, finally, we will consider the new integrated budget, which will support the implementation of the Strategic Plan over the next four years. I take the opportunity to remind the Member States of the importance of regular resources. They provide the flexibility that enables UNICEF to put its resources where they are most needed. In this time when needs are so great, I hope that all Member States will commit to increasing their regular resources support.

I mentioned at the start of my remarks that this would be the last session of the year. But it is also the last for an extremely significant reason: it is the last session for UNICEF Executive Director, Ms. Henrietta Fore, who is stepping down in order to devote her energy to her husband’s health. We will have an opportunity a little later this morning to say farewell to Executive Director Fore.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, in my short time here at UNICEF, I have noted one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Executive Board: its commitment to putting children first. Our countries have widely divergent customs, histories and political systems. We feel strongly about what we think is right for children and young people. But in spite of our different viewpoints, we always find our way to agreement for the benefit of children. I trust that this session will remain solidly in that tradition of mutual understanding and compromise.

I sincerely thank you.

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