

**AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY**

**Catherine M. Russell, UNICEF Executive Director**  
**Opening of the Executive Board**  
**New York, NY**  
**February 8, 2022**

---

Thank you, President Carazo, for that warm welcome. It is a privilege and a pleasure to be here today to address the UNICEF Executive Board for the first time.

I want to begin by thanking Secretary-General Guterres and all the members of the Executive Board for the opportunity to lead this extraordinary organization.

Children are the world's most precious resource. There is no greater cause than championing their rights and well-being. I am committed to this cause with all my heart, and I am proud to join the UNICEF family.

I would like to acknowledge and thank my predecessor, Henrietta Fore, for her leadership of UNICEF over the last four years -- especially for skillfully guiding UNICEF's global response to the COVID- pandemic, and for engaging every sector to support the world's most vulnerable children.

For 75 years, UNICEF has stood for a powerful truth: Every child has the right to grow up healthy and strong. To be nurtured and protected. To be educated and prepared to contribute to their societies. And for 75 years, UNICEF and our partners have worked to help children realize those rights, wherever they are.

It is an honor to be joining this vital effort now.

Today, UNICEF is strong, agile, and innovative – a tireless champion for the world's children, and a partner of choice.

Over the past several years, UNICEF has hit record fundraising targets, including more than \$8.1 billion in 2021, thanks to the tremendous generosity and support of our donors.

That's a testament to our record of delivering results -- and a measure of the trust our supporters have placed in UNICEF.

The last four years have also seen a significant expansion of UNICEF's partnerships with governments, NGOs, civil society and, increasingly, the private sector. These partnerships are producing concrete results for children and youth, and I look forward to building on them -- and forging new ones.

In all these ways and more, UNICEF is in an excellent position to deliver on our mission -- and this is critical, because we will need to use every tool and advantage we possess to help the millions of children who are at risk in the world today.

The humanitarian needs of children are greater now than ever before.

Globally, 426 million children and counting live in conflict zones -- more children than at any time in UNICEF's 75-year history. The magnitude of the grave violations committed against them is commensurately high: They are being killed and maimed. They are being recruited to support or directly participate in the

fighting. The schools they attend and the hospitals they visit are threatened, attacked, or occupied by armed actors.

Meanwhile, the number of climate-related disasters has tripled in the last 30 years, with a profound impact on children. Approximately 1 billion children – nearly half the world’s children – live in countries classified as at extremely high-risk to the impacts of climate change. This includes approximately 600 million children who are highly exposed to flooding and 920 million children who are at risk from water scarcity.

Climate change and conflict are also driving children and families from their homes in record numbers. Last year, over 82 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced – 42 per cent of them were children.

All these threats to children are harmful enough on their own. COVID-19 has exponentially increased their impact.

From the very first weeks and months of the pandemic, UNICEF has been responding to the direct risks COVID-19 posed to children and families. Through COVAX, we are helping lead the largest vaccine procurement and supply

operation in history, using our unique expertise as the world's biggest vaccine buyer and our on-the-ground delivery capacity.

We continue to focus our efforts on expanding vaccine access for communities in low- and middle-income countries -- and reaching those hardest to reach. It is unconscionable that in the world's poorest countries, fewer than 10 per cent of people have received at least one dose of vaccine.

UNICEF is working with our partners to change this, including by procuring and delivering COVID-19 vaccines to African Union Member States, on behalf of the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust.

We still have a long way to go to turn vaccines into vaccinations -- and to reach every arm. To achieve vaccine equity, we need more partners to join us, and we must have a fully coordinated global effort. That is why we are requesting your endorsement for the establishment of a new senior position to support COVID-19 vaccine country-readiness and delivery. This role will coordinate inter-agency efforts to forecast vaccine needs, as well as provide financial and technical assistance to overcome bottlenecks.

We will continue working to make progress on vaccine distribution and access. But the last two years have shown us that it is not enough to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. We also need to mitigate the pandemic's impact on children.

The numbers are staggering.

We estimate that 100 million more children are now living in poverty because of the pandemic -- a 10 per cent increase since 2019. Increasing poverty could push an additional 9 million children into child labor by the end of this year.

More than 616 million children are still affected by full or partial school closures, something I will say more about in a moment.

In 2020 alone, an additional 23 million children didn't receive essential vaccinations that protect their lives and their healthy development.

An additional 9 million children are at risk of wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition -- many of them caught in humanitarian crises without access to treatment.

UNICEF estimates that an additional 10 million girls are at risk for child marriage, and there is mounting evidence of increases in gender-based violence and sexual abuse.

And children's mental health has been severely impacted during the pandemic, in high-, middle-, and low-income countries alike.

These figures represent the lives and futures of millions of children -- and the future of their societies. The economic impact of pandemic-caused school closures alone could cause a \$17 trillion loss in lifetime earnings for this entire generation of schoolchildren.

The world cannot continue to overlook children in the COVID-19 response and recovery. Children should not have to bear the cost of this pandemic for the rest of their lives.

UNICEF is calling on governments to put children at the center of global, national, and local pandemic response and recovery plans.

We need to invest in systems that support children and families, like primary health care and social protection.

We need to focus on reaching the most excluded and marginalized children, especially children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children living through crises, and girls.

We also need to focus urgently on the global crisis in education and learning -- a subject I had the chance to discuss last week at the ECOSOC Coordination Segment on Science, Technology and Innovation.

As I mentioned a moment ago, 616 million children are still affected by school closures. In only two years, many children have lost significant ground. We need to do everything we can to change this.

UNICEF is helping lead the effort to vaccinate teachers and school staff so they can safely return to school. We are calling on governments and partners to invest in helping children recover their education -- especially literacy and numeracy skills that are the foundation of future learning.



And especially now, schools also need to help children recover their physical and emotional well-being -- helping deliver nutrition, WASH, social protection, and psychosocial support programmes.

More broadly, we need to transform education for these challenging times -- innovating and forging new partnerships to reach the children at greatest risk of being left behind.

We estimate that education disruptions in low- and middle-income countries have left up to 70 per cent of 10-year-olds unable to read. That is inequitable and unacceptable.

Even before COVID, UNICEF has been focused on using new digital tools and innovating to improve access to education -- and just as important, as a supplement to improve the *quality* of education for children and young people.

For example, UNICEF and Microsoft developed something called The Learning Passport, a digital learning platform that gives children access to their school curriculum online, wherever they are — including textbooks and

instructions in their national language. Over 2 million children now have access to this programme in 17 countries.

UNICEF's work to improve educational and economic opportunity for children and young people is truly one of the enduring legacies of the last four years. I look forward to working with our partners to build on this legacy.

I also look forward to strengthening our work to support girls -- work that is close to my heart and has been a central focus of my career in public service.

Around the world today, millions of girls are denied their right to access to health care and education. They are denied their right to live free from gender discrimination, sexual violence, and harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM. They are denied their right to make decisions concerning their own lives.

Our new Gender Policy and Action Plan prioritizes girls and women across all our programmes and initiatives and in our advocacy -- with a special focus on programmes that support and empower adolescent girls' learning and development.

We will continue making the case for investing in girls and for breaking down barriers and practices that hold girls back.

This is indeed a moment of exceptional, unprecedented challenge -- and it is exactly in these moments when UNICEF's leadership is so indispensable. This organization was founded 75 years ago in such a moment of global crisis. It has evolved and adapted to meet each new challenge. And we will continue to do so now.

The new UNICEF Strategic Plan is a blueprint for achieving sustainable change for children -- and in doing so, accelerating progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Strategic Plan is structured around five goals to ensure that by 2030, every child survives and thrives ... every child learns and acquires skills for the future ... every child is protected from violence, abuse, and harmful practices ... every child has access to water, sanitation, and hygiene and lives in a safe environment ... and every child lives free of poverty.

These are ambitious goals. They are transformative goals. To achieve them, we will need to work more efficiently and effectively than ever before. We will need bold thinking and bold action – finding new ways to solve persistent problems.

We will also need better coordination and cooperation across the UN and with our partners. I am committed to ensuring that UNICEF continues to play a leading role in UN reform – so critical to achieving the SDGs and all our goals. There is no doubt that we will achieve more for children by working together.

To achieve our goals, we also need to explore new funding streams, working more closely with our partners in every sector to mobilize resources for children.

But we also need to increase core resources.

UNICEF's financial outlook is very strong. Our preliminary estimates show that our income in 2021 increased by 13 per cent to more than \$8.1 billion, compared to 2020. But we also project that our total regular resource income decreased by 4 per cent.

These resources are at the core of our ability to adapt to rapidly changing needs. Flexible funding has greatly strengthened our COVID-19 response and all our humanitarian work. And core funding also enables us to modernize, streamline, and innovate. I urge all Member States to increase their commitments to providing these critical resources.

Ultimately, our greatest asset in meeting the goals of the Strategic Plan are the people of UNICEF: Our staff in 190 countries and territories who work every day, often in tremendously difficult circumstances, to reach the world's most vulnerable children.

They are the heroes of UNICEF, and I feel extremely fortunate and privileged to be joining the UNICEF staff.

Making sure that they have what they need -- especially those in the most dangerous places -- is my first concern and will always be my first priority.

I am equally committed to carrying on the effort to transform UNICEF's organizational culture.

I am proud to have joined an organization that is passionate about its mission -- and about its core values: Care. Respect. Integrity. Trust. Accountability. Sustainability. These values underpin our ability to achieve our mission.

UNICEF must always be a place where everyone feels respected, supported, and empowered to do their best work for children. I look forward to participating to the fullest in this ongoing organizational transformation.

This is my second week as UNICEF Executive Director. It is a time for me to listen and to learn -- so I can help lead this extraordinary organization. Very soon, I will make my first visits to UNICEF country offices as Executive Director. I am very eager to meet our staff, our partners and, of course, some of the children and young people we are reaching through our programmes – in so many ways, they are among our most important partners.

In my previous role as US Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, I traveled to dozens of countries and I've seen the impact of UNICEF's work first-hand in children's lives. I have also seen the magnitude of the challenges and obstacles they face.

On one mission to Central Asia, I visited a school for girls. It was a wonderful place. The girls I spoke with were so bright and so determined to achieve their dreams.

But at one point, the school's director quietly pointed to a girl whose father had tried to sell her into marriage to help the family make ends meet. It was clear this was by no means an isolated case.

I think about those girls, and all the children I have met, especially now, as their rights to education especially are being threatened by the pandemic and persistent crises. And I know that UNICEF will not rest until we have reached them.

More than 50 years ago in a speech at the United Nations, the great cellist, and humanitarian Pablo Casals captured it perfectly: He said, "you must work, we all must work, to make this world worthy of its children."

There is no organization better equipped to help realize this goal than UNICEF.

In closing, I again extend my deepest thanks to the members of the Executive Board for your guidance and for your commitment to children. I look forward to meeting you individually, to learning from you, and to working with you to help make this world more worthy of its children.

###