

FINAL AS DELIVERED
02-07-2017

Anthony Lake, UNICEF Executive Director
Opening of the Executive Board
New York, NY
February 7, 2017

I'd like to begin my statement by welcoming our new Executive Board — including the Board's new President and Vice-Presidents. I'm already enjoying and appreciating their commitment and good counsel — at an exciting and challenging moment for our organization, and indeed for children everywhere.

Our work together has never been more important. Every one of you here is contributing to an important tradition — a tradition of results. Our Board is vital to progress for children...to reaching more children...and to expanding UNICEF's work. For example, with the Board's support and guidance, in 2016, we and our partners:

- Reached nearly four million people in Syria with new or improved water and sanitation infrastructure.
- Treated 159,000 Nigerian children — and 215,000 Yemeni children — for severe acute malnutrition.
- Helped 100,000 more people in Myanmar — and 325,000 people in Madagascar — gain access to sanitation.

- And helped 2.5 million people in Ukraine re-gain access to safe water.
- In addition, almost 22,000 children in Burkina Faso benefitted from early-learning school-readiness programmes in 345 schools.
- Over 800,000 people living in high disaster risk areas of Haiti were vaccinated against cholera.
- And 693,000 children in South Sudan received critical child-protection services in the midst of the conflict that continues to tear apart their young country.

All real accomplishments. All helped by how well the Executive Board has worked...by our mutual confidence...and by our ability to address problems together.

In our traditional spirit of open discussion, I'd like to consider an issue today that we've never specifically addressed before. An issue all the more important in an increasingly divided world. A world fractured by violence, conflicts and political fissures. A world of inequalities. A world darkened by fear and mistrust. Too often, a dangerous world in which to be a child.

Country after country — region after region — is increasingly breaking down along growing political and ideological lines: lines defined not only by geography, but sadly and so often, by ethnicity and religion.

UNICEF must try every day to avoid letting our work fall victim to these same divisions. Not only out of principle, but for the sake of delivering for the children.

For their sake, UNICEF must remain as non-political as possible in everything we do. Our mission is to serve every child. No matter where he lives. No matter who her parents are. No matter his ethnicity...her religion...his disability.

A mission that began with our founding. Seventy years ago, our first Executive Director, Maurice Pate, accepted the job on one condition: that UNICEF serve all children who had suffered from the ravages of the Second World War — including those from so-called “ex-enemy” countries.

Our non-political mission has continued on — from the children of that war...

To the children of the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam.

To the children living throughout the Horn of Africa suffering from drought after drought.

To the children of Haiti, the Philippines, Nepal and elsewhere looking for relief and safety in the aftermath of devastating natural disasters — and are bracing for the next one.

To the children today caught in conflicts for which they bear absolutely no responsibility — but within which they pay the heaviest price: Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Myanmar and elsewhere.

The uprooted children desperately looking for safety and a future in a faraway land.

Children targeted in deliberate attacks on schools and health care facilities.

Children made to fight — and kill — as part of armed groups...seeing things that no child should see...doing things that no child should every be forced to do.

Children in every country being denied their rights to health, education, water, food and protection — to a future.

UNICEF has been there — UNICEF is there — for these children. Fighting for their rights. Negotiating for access across the lines and borders of conflicts. Rallying global support — and resources. Working with partners like you to expand and sustain services. Transforming nightmares into dreams...into hope.

This hope is driven ultimately by our Board members. All of you. A Board that has always strived to approach the work we do together by setting aside the politics of the day to unite around what really matters: the long-term as well as pressing needs of children. If the member states of the United Nations cannot unite around our children, what cause can bring them together?

I do not mean to be unrealistic. This is seldom easy, for any of us. What human action cannot be placed, in some way, within a political context? Everything we do can have political implications. Diplomats know this well. The use of almost any word, in some context, can offend someone else. Similarly, the avoidance of words can have the same effect on others.

While we'll never succeed in avoiding actions that have political consequences of some kind, we will always work to avoid actions that have a partisan political purpose. As I remind our staff working in the most sensitive and contentious areas, we must try to be smart enough about politics to do our best to avoid it.

Instead, we'll approach our work from the only perspective that matters: "the best interests of the child," as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In doing so, we are investing in our own posterity, in hope for humanity's future. Investing in the future of our children, in their education, in their protection. And more, we must invest not only in their ability, but in their willingness to one day shape a more peaceful future.

Children are not born as angels, ready to build peace. (Every parent in this room knows this all too well.) Competition, jealousies and individual hatreds can infect the hallways of a school just as it can the halls of a business or government.

But children aren't born to exclude or to hate other groups. Political, ethnic and religious divisions are unwelcome gifts that we bestow on them. Through our words. Through our actions. In the way we treat others.

Because as children learn the divisions of prejudice from us first, children also suffer their consequences first — first and most seriously. The indigenous child, or the child living with disabilities. The girl at home doing housework instead of learning in a classroom. The refugee children suffering because of adults who have failed to settle political and religious differences.

It is for them that we must resist politicizing either our work or our advocacy on behalf of children. Let me address **two** — among numerous — practical reasons why this is so.

The **first**, I believe, is obvious. To reach all children, we must work in all areas — and with those who control those areas. We must sometimes work with groups with whom we disagree — groups that don't support the values that shape our mandate. Indeed, this may include groups that traffic in the same violence we abhor. But this is necessary to deliver services to the children who need them so desperately.

We would lose this vital access — and lose it quickly — if we politicized our work. If we abandoned humanitarian principles. If we linked our work explicitly to the political efforts of governments, or indeed the UN itself, to combat any particular group. If we shifted our focus away from children.

I deliberately put this in such a direct way to lead into my **second** reason, which is built around something of a paradox: That in acting in a non-political way, we — in fact — best serve one of the broadest, often political, purposes of the UN: building peace.

It is common sense: there is no better way to build a peaceful future than by serving today's children — who are, after all, tomorrow's leaders and tomorrow's decision-makers. Who hold in their hands peace itself.

But if we and our humanitarian partners are perceived to be political in our purposes, by supporting one side or another in a conflict, we will dramatically limit our ability to help build intergenerational peace through educating the minds and healing the hearts of all the children.

So a non-political approach is a requirement for more, and better, results. More children reached. More children saved. More children able and willing to look to the future with hopeful eyes — with minds better able to shape futures of their own choosing, rather than the futures demanded of them by the voices of division and intolerance.

The same point applies to our advocacy. We will never stand by when children's rights are violated. Indeed, we will stand up — and speak up — for these rights. But we will always seek to do so in a fair and factual way — avoiding local partisan or ideological language or perspectives that perpetuate division and mistrust. We must remain politically impartial — but we will never be neutral about violations of children's rights.

To summarize, only a determinedly non-political approach to our advocacy and our work will allow us to achieve all the results for children possible. Results built into our new Strategic Plan, which we'll be discussing at this session.

The Plan represents UNICEF's contribution to Agenda 2030 over the next four years, combined with our humanitarian work. And it's the framework for our next quadrennial budget.

Over the last year, we've taken what we've learned from the mid-term review of the current Plan to help shape our approach. And thanks in part to our informal consultations, its development is on track with the timeline approved by the Board, including its presentation for your approval in September.

We'll focus on the results that will help make the Strategic Development Goals a reality. As you know, our Plan is built around five key goals:

- Every Child Survives and Thrives;
- Every Child Learns;
- Every Child is Protected from Violence & Exploitation;
- Every Child Lives in a Safe & Clean Environment; and
- Every Child has an Equitable Chance in Life.

Each goal is not only interlinked with the others, including in such cross-cutting areas as equity, gender, disabilities, climate and urbanization. Each also aligns with the SDGs. As we developed each, we did so in consultation with partner UN agencies and other organizations working in that area. We will continue to do so.

Internally, UNICEF will deliver on the Plan through an unrelenting focus on managing for results — and, as always, managing our resources accordingly.

The Plan will include an integrated “results and resources” framework that will estimate how much will be needed to achieve these results. And to achieve them in increasingly high-risk — and thus, high-cost — regions of the world, where security and logistics are not only essential to the results we achieve, but to those brave UNICEF staff members who are helping us achieve them.

Being effective also means having the right staff in the right places — and supporting them in every way we can.

Which is why we're emphasizing reforming our Human Resources practices to improve recruitment, talent-management, and performance and evaluation.

And why our Field Results Group will continue to help us align our resources — financial and human — in the field. This includes new simplified procedures for cash transfers...a “scorecard” for country offices to measure performance...and training over 3,000 staff members so far on results-based management.

We'll also continue expanding innovative tools like MHealth, Edu-Trac, U-Report and a new birth registration app.

And we'll work to achieve cost efficiencies wherever possible. For example, I just learned that last year, our supply function achieved its largest savings ever — approximately \$520 million...even more than the 2015 savings of \$423 million. A great result.

Externally, we will carry out our Plan — as always — with our many strong, mutually-supportive partners around the world: governments, donors, NGOs, civil society, the private sector, and of course, our sister UN agencies. Through our many campaign efforts, we'll engage millions of people in our cause for children.

Because a focus on children must never divide us...it unites us. Because it provides the best pathway to peace, today and tomorrow.

I was reminded of this when I was in Bogota last week, at a gathering of Nobel Laureates — a distinguished group that UNICEF joined in 1965 when it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

As I listened to the many speakers praising Colombia's long-awaited peace agreement, I contemplated the work ahead. I was reminded that peace is not found in a piece of paper. It will be built around the lives of people as they repair their country. Not only in Colombia, the end of a diplomatic peace process must, in fact, be the beginning of a new process of building peace. A peace found in the daily lives of people. I know we all congratulate our Colombian colleagues at this hopeful moment and join in wishing them every success.

Let me close with the words of another of my predecessors, Henry Labouisse. In accepting the Nobel Prize on UNICEF's behalf, he said: "The welfare of today's children is inseparably linked with the peace of tomorrow's world."

Through our work, in everything we do, UNICEF is building peace. By serving those who will not only benefit most from peace, but in their own lives — build it.

So thank you for lending your hands, your hearts and your voices to our mission of reaching every child, everywhere, across every kind of division. The most vital, most urgent mission there is.
