

**Statement at the 2026 UNICEF Executive Board Annual Session on behalf of 70 countries and observers<sup>1</sup> in their national capacity and as members of the Group of Friends of Children and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

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Mr. President,

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of 70 members of the Group of Friends of Children and the Sustainable Development Goals.

At the outset, we thank the Executive Director for her leadership and for presenting the Annual Report for 2025. We also express our deep appreciation to UNICEF staff around the world who continue to work tirelessly to advance the rights and well-being of children.

Allow me to quote Francisco, a 16-year-old climate activist and human rights defender from Colombia, who addressed the Group of Friends of Children and the SDGs last month:

*"We need to put children at the centre and give them a seat at the table to speak and express their needs and demands."*

His message was simple, yet profound. Our responsibility is to protect the rights of children and ensure that their voices are heard and reflected in the decisions that will shape their lives.

As we mark UNICEF's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary later this year, Francisco's message serves as a reminder of why UNICEF's mandate remains as relevant today as it was eight decades ago.

For eighty years, UNICEF has stood for what effective multilateral cooperation can achieve. Across generations, it has helped save lives, expand opportunity, strengthen national systems, and uphold the rights and dignity of children, working for and with children.

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<sup>1</sup> Andorra, Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Armenia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Republic of Korea, Lesotho, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Morocco, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Romania, Senegal, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Türkiye, Uganda, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Uruguay, European Union (observer)

UNICEF has been far more than a development partner. It has been a trusted ally in strengthening national capacities, responding to crises, and ensuring that children remain at the centre of public policy and investment.

Yet UNICEF's anniversary comes at a moment of profound global uncertainty.

Around the world, children are facing the consequences of escalating conflicts, displacement, climate-related shocks, deepening inequalities, persistent poverty, and emerging technological risks. At the same time, the multilateral system is confronting one of its most challenging financing environments in recent memory. Declining levels of official development assistance, growing fiscal pressures, and widening gaps between needs and available resources are placing significant strain on institutions tasked with delivering for children.

Behind every reduction in resources are children at risk of losing access to critical social services during a time when they need the international community the most. Therefore, our collective commitment must not waver.

For the Group of Friends, UNICEF at 80 and UN80 are deeply interconnected.

Both provide an opportunity to reaffirm the value of multilateral cooperation and to consider how the United Nations development system can be strengthened to better serve current and future generations. Both challenge us to ensure that our institutions remain efficient and effective.

The decisions taken under UN80 will influence how effectively the UN can support countries in delivering on their national priorities. For this Group, one principle must remain clear: a stronger United Nations must be stronger for children.

In this regard, as discussions on UN80 move forward, the Group of Friends would appreciate regular updates on UNICEF's role in the various Work Packages.

Mr. President,

As Member States consider reforms and efforts to strengthen the effectiveness of the United Nations system, it is essential that we preserve and reinforce the capacities that have consistently delivered impact for children over the past eight decades. That is, whether responding to humanitarian emergencies, supporting national systems, bolstering social protection, advancing

children's rights, or helping to accelerate progress towards SDGs, we must ensure that the system remains equipped to reach every child.

The Group of Friends therefore reaffirms its unwavering support for UNICEF and its mandate. We remain committed to championing children's rights and well-being across intergovernmental processes and to ensuring that children's perspectives and priorities remain visible.

The decisions we make today will shape the world inherited by children and future generations so let us ensure that children remain at the heart of UNICEF and the United Nations.

I thank you.