

As prepared for delivery

**Annual Session of the UNICEF Executive Board
14–17 June 2022**

**UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell
Opening Statement
14 June 2022**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues,

It is an honor to be here again to address the Executive Board of UNICEF.

I want to begin by thanking Ambassador Carazo for his leadership and stewardship as President of the Executive Board. This has been an extremely busy first half of 2022, and your support has been invaluable. I also want to thank the Bureau and all the members of this Board.

When we met for the first time in February, we spoke about how the COVID-19 pandemic was rolling back years of development progress – and the challenges we face to meet children’s urgent needs.

Little did we know then how quickly those needs were about to grow.

Two weeks later, the war in Ukraine began – a violent onslaught that has created the worst humanitarian crises in Europe since World War II. In only 100

days, two thirds of Ukrainian children have been displaced. Hundreds have been killed and injured.

The ripple effects of the war quickly spread well beyond Ukraine, especially with many countries so heavily dependent on food exports from Ukraine and Russia.

As I will say more about in a moment, rising food prices and supply disruptions are plunging the world more deeply into a food crisis – in turn, exacerbating a global nutrition crisis that is intensifying risks to the most vulnerable children.

Meanwhile, other serious emergencies – most acutely in the Horn of Africa and now, in Sri Lanka, but also in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen – receive less attention but endanger many millions more children.

Unquestionably, we are living in a time of cascading crises and linked shocks. Conflict and crisis in one part of the world can impact the lives of children thousands of miles away. Fragility can spread.

But so can resilience. So can solidarity. And so can progress – if we have the will to make it happen. The world must find that will.

Excellencies,

Since we met in February, I have made it my priority to see UNICEF's work in action.

And everywhere I have visited, I have seen UNICEF's capacity to move rapidly ... to adapt to changing circumstances ... and to deliver emergency assistance in a way that builds resilience for the future.

I have visited our country programme in Pakistan, where I saw the effort to finish the job of eradicating polio, and to make education available to every child – including girls and children with disabilities.

I have visited Afghanistan, where our teams work ceaselessly to support children who have endured years of chronic conflict and economic crisis – and chronic underfunding.

I have visited our extraordinary Supply Division in Copenhagen – the epicenter of the greatest vaccine drive in history to combat COVID-19 – where I watched staff pack emergency supplies bound for Ukraine and neighboring countries.

The next day, I traveled to the border of Romania and Ukraine, where UNICEF and our partners were setting up mobile centers to help meet the immediate needs of hundreds of thousands of refugees. I later met remotely with our courageous staff in Ukraine, who have been working non-stop in an extremely complex and often dangerous operating environment.

UNICEF continues to call for an end to this war, and for all parties to protect children from violence ... to avoid the use of explosive weapons ... and to refrain

from targeting civilian infrastructure. We continue to call for safe, continuous humanitarian access to reach children and families in urgent need.

And until there is a political solution, we will continue to do everything we can to meet the humanitarian needs of children and families affected by this brutal war.

Since I joined UNICEF, I have also visited our country programmes in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I saw our teams deliver in so many contexts – demonstrating the power of UNICEF’s dual mandate to provide both humanitarian assistance and development support.

Most recently, I traveled to the Somali region of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa – which as I just mentioned is experiencing the most severe drought in decades. We estimate that at least 10 million children are affected right now. Across Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia, more than 1.7 million children are suffering from severe wasting and require urgent therapeutic care to save their lives.

In a further example of how cascading crises are increasing risks to the most vulnerable children, the war in Ukraine has driven up prices for food staples, as well as the therapeutic food that can save the lives of severely malnourished children like those suffering right now in the Horn of Africa.

Only immediate and collective action can avert catastrophe for these children. During my visit to the region, I addressed the High-Level Roundtable on the drought remotely from a hospital in Gode, Ethiopia, where UNICEF and our partners are working against time to help children survive.

My message was clear: We understand the pressure of different emergencies, but we cannot turn our backs on children in the Horn of Africa.

Excellencies, we are all seeing the challenges to children grow. We cannot pretend otherwise. The evidence is clear. We need to act.

UNICEF was created to respond in complex situations ... to give priority to the children and families in greatest need... and to help realize the rights of every child.

We do this because it is the most sacred duty of every generation to nurture the next generation. We do this because every child is equally precious, equally deserving of the chance to make the most of their lives. And we do this because it is the surest way to secure a more peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable future for everyone.

That was the vision that created this organization, and it is the vision that will sustain us in this rapidly changing world. And our work has never been more important.

Seven years ago, the nations of the world committed to building a more peaceful, prosperous, sustainable future for everyone, everywhere – leaving no one behind.

The pandemic has upended our progress toward reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. Our recovery has been inequitable – with higher income

countries better able to support their populations, while lower income countries struggle not only with the impact of COVID-19 but other urgent crises.

As the Secretary-General has said, we need to rescue the SDGs.

The best way to achieve the SDGs is by making children our top priority. In fact, there is no other way.

How can we hope to rescue SDG 1 – No Poverty – without addressing the 100 million additional children who have fallen into poverty since 2020? We need to invest in social protection programmes to help families cover income losses and cope in times of crisis.

How can we meet SDG 2 – Zero Hunger – without taking urgent action to reach the more than 13 million children under the age of 5 who suffer from severe wasting – and to prevent malnutrition in the first place?

We could reach virtually every child in danger of severe acute malnutrition this year with just \$300 million in additional funding – 0.1 per cent of total official development assistance spent in a year.

I will be addressing the Executive Board of the World Food Programme in Rome next week and discussing how we can work together more closely to prevent and fight malnutrition.

Next, SDG 3 – Health and Well-Being. In 2020 alone, an additional 23 million children did not receive essential vaccinations because of pandemic-related

disruptions. The pandemic also revealed the weakness of primary health systems – striking hardest in communities without adequate access.

To future proof health systems, we need to invest in primary health care and a more resilient health work force. And we need to launch a global movement to get regular vaccination back on track before potentially life-threatening diseases like measles gain ground.

Now consider SDG 4 – Quality Education. As we discussed in February, the pandemic has exacerbated what was already a serious global learning crisis, especially for children who were already being left behind.

We now estimate that more than 70 per cent of all children in low-income countries cannot read a simple sentence by age 10. How can we meet SDG 4 without focusing on these children?

UNICEF is calling on all Governments to take rapid action: to reach every child and retain them in the classroom ... to assess their learning levels ... to prioritize teaching the fundamentals ... to increase catch-up learning and help children progress ... and to develop psychosocial support systems that promote well-being – so every child is ready to learn.

UNICEF is proud to be part of the Secretary-General's Transforming Education Summit Taskforce. The Summit will be a crucial opportunity for Member States to seize the moment and commit to taking concrete action to ensure that every child is learning – including every girl.

We will not achieve SDG 5 – Gender Equality – without investing in girls’ education, health, protection, and empowerment. The pandemic has forced millions of girls out of school – and once they leave, far too many never return. We estimate that it has also put an additional 10 million girls at risk for child marriage.

I have a strong interest in seeing how our work supports and empowers girls.

Our Gender Action Plan prioritizes the needs of girls across all our strategic goal areas – and I look forward to seeing how we can do even more to help adolescent girls reach their potential.

Next, how can we achieve SDG 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation – unless we focus on reaching millions of children around the world who are most vulnerable to WASH-related disease – but who still lack access to safe water and improved sanitation?

Over 700 children under age 5 die every day due to lack of appropriate WASH services. Children living in areas affected by conflict are nearly 20 times more likely to die from diarrheal disease than from the conflict itself.

And finally, how can we achieve SDG 13 – Climate Action – without addressing the impact of climate change on children?

UNICEF’s Children’s Climate Risk Index shows that climate change is already affecting the lives of every child on the planet. Fully half of the world’s children are now living in places where they are exposed to extremely high risk.

The children living in the countries least responsible for emissions are paying the highest price.

Climate is having a growing impact on virtually every element of children's lives – and so it will also impact virtually every element of UNICEF's work.

We need to take a closer look at how we can improve UNICEF's contribution to creating a livable planet and a sustainable future for every child – across our entire organization. And we need to continue engaging with young people to ensure that climate action reflects their lived experiences of climate risk.

The simple answer to all these questions is that we cannot achieve any of these goals – which represent the majority of the SDGs – without first making progress for children.

Our new Strategic Plan is a blueprint for driving progress towards all the child-focused SDGs. In these first few months, I have been encouraged by its early implementation across our organization – and by the enthusiasm that has been shared by country teams, regional directors, UN Resident Coordinators, and National Committees, as well as by donors.

But to realize the plan's ambitious goals we need to 'future proof' UNICEF's ability to reach children wherever and whenever they need us.

First and foremost, that means securing the funding that makes all our work possible. As we discussed in February, UNICEF's total income in 2021 was a record-breaking \$8.1 billion – an increase of 13 per cent compared to 2020.

That is the good news. But as welcome as it is and as grateful as we are, this increase was driven primarily by highly earmarked contributions from public and private partners. The bad news is that unrestricted funds – Regular Resources – declined by 4 per cent.

Regular Resources fuel our ability to innovate, to respond rapidly, and to meet the needs of any given moment.

They also support our ability to respond in underfunded emergencies. In 2021, 68 per cent of the earmarked funding we received went to only 10 emergency appeals. The ten least-funded emergencies accounted for only 2 per cent of total funding.

If we want to future-proof UNICEF’s ability to reach the most disadvantaged children – and reignite progress toward achieving the SDGs – we must reverse this trend.

The need for these core resources has never been greater. So, I urge Member States to meet their commitments to dedicate 30 per cent of their contribution to Regular Resources.

We are also concerned about signs of a decline in official development assistance – another likely impact of the war in Ukraine. Some government partners have already announced reallocation or reduction of ODA contributions. We hope this does not become a trend – not when needs are still growing. These cuts will have consequences.

Especially in this new fundraising environment, we need to continue exploring other sources of funding and financing.

The war in Ukraine has generated unprecedented levels of private support. Seventy per cent of these donors are new to UNICEF, with an opportunity for their support in other emergencies and – longer term – core resources.

This is an opportunity we must seize. But as important as private sector support is becoming, it should never be seen as a reason for reallocating official assistance away from children.

UNICEF's successful fundraising in 2021 certainly reflects the urgency of the moment. It is also a testament to the expertise of our staff ... to the power of our advocacy ... and to the trust our donors place in us.

I have only been at UNICEF for a brief time. But in that brief time, I have already seen how UNICEF's ability to deliver on our mission is closely tied to our reputation for transparency, accountability, and integrity in everything that we do.

UNICEF has a well-functioning internal control and risk management system in place, ensuring effective and efficient use of resources – and safeguarding the assets we hold in trust for children.

Our commitment to transparency, accountability, and integrity is supported by management reviews, strengthened internal audit, investigations, and

evaluations capacity. You will hear more about this from our independent oversight offices later this week.

We have put in place strong safeguards for whistleblowers. When wrongdoing is suspected, it is immediately investigated – and disciplinary action is taken when wrongdoing is confirmed.

UNICEF has also put a strong system in place to tackle sexual misconduct and build a stronger organizational culture.

This is a continuous process of working to strengthen the effectiveness of governance, risk management, and controls, and to build an inclusive, safe, and welcoming workplace – all to ensure effective delivery of results.

As UNICEF Executive Director, I have zero tolerance for mismanagement or fraud, or any conduct that undermines UNICEF’s ability to deliver on our mission.

I expect every manager to communicate these expectations – and I am counting on every staff member to hold themselves accountable for living our core values of care, respect, integrity, transparency, accountability, and sustainability. These values are the foundation of our ability to drive change for children – and they unite us as one UNICEF family.

As I mentioned in February, I am proud to be part of an organization that is committed to evolving and adapting to meet the challenges of changing times. And I am personally committed to the continued transformation of our workplace.

I am also proud to be part of the remarkable United Nations system. UNICEF has always been strongly committed to UN reform as a way to increase results – and it is my honor as Executive Director to build on the efforts of my predecessors. Especially in these challenging times, we need to work more closely and efficiently than ever with all our UN partners.

Excellencies, this is a time of urgency and opportunity. We face enormous challenges. Children’s lives and futures hang in the balance.

But we need to remind ourselves that our situation is far from hopeless. Over the last several decades, the world has made enormous progress for children, spanning every sector. We can do it again – and we must.

If we are ever in need of inspiration, we need only look to children and young people themselves – our most important partners, and a gathering force for positive change in this world. They cannot afford to lose hope – and neither can we. We are UNICEF, and we never give up.

In conclusion, I want to thank you all once again for everything you do. I am grateful for your support, and I look forward to our conversations over the next few days.
