

**AS DELIVERED**

**UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell**

***First regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board –  
Opening Statement***

**6 February 2024**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues ... good morning and welcome to the first regular session of the UNICEF Executive Board for 2024. Thank you to Ambassador Rwamucyo, President of the Board. Thank you to the Bureau, and our Executive Board members. Your support is invaluable to our organization and the children we serve.

Excellencies ... we have put together an ambitious agenda for this first session of the year. It includes decisions on seven country cooperation agreements ... recent developments in UNICEF's humanitarian action ... a discussion on our work to achieve universal child benefits ... and an evaluation of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. We will also have a special focus

session on polio eradication.

Thank you in advance for your engagement and collaboration over the next few days.

Excellencies ... before looking ahead to our work together in 2024, I would like to briefly take stock of the situation for children in 2023.

Across several critical indicators, we saw the wellbeing of children improve. In many countries, for example, economies and service delivery continued to recover from the worst effects of the pandemic. As a result, more children received primary health care, essential immunizations and education than the year before.

While we don't have the exact figures yet, our initial estimates for 2023 show a decline in the global number of deaths in children under five. And we expect the number of non-vaccinated or under-vaccinated children to have declined. Also last year, UNICEF and our partners

reached seven million severely malnourished children with treatment – the most ever – helping to turn the tide against the global malnutrition crisis.

But 2023 also had its challenges. Notably, the intensification of new and protracted conflicts made this past year one of the worst for children in recent memory. In places like the State of Palestine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Sudan and Ukraine, children suffered terribly ... with clear violations of their rights.

Turning first to Gaza, where more than 27,000 people have reportedly been killed inside the territory since last October ... and up to 70 per cent of the casualties are estimated to be women and children.

The entire population of Gaza – roughly 2.2 million people – are experiencing crisis or worse levels of acute food insecurity. And UNICEF projects that child wasting – the most life-threatening form of

malnutrition – could increase by nearly 30 per cent in the coming weeks, affecting up to 10,000 children.

Despite the dangerous situation, UNICEF and our partners remain on the ground working to reach children and families. We have provided medical supplies, including 600,000 doses of vaccines, as well as nutritional supplements and vitamins, to children and pregnant women. UNICEF and partners have also provided safe drinking water to over 1.3 million people ... and we have reached over 500,000 households with humanitarian cash transfers.

But given the severe constraints on humanitarian access, our response pales in comparison to the scale of the needs.

UNICEF continues to call for the implementation of a humanitarian ceasefire so that we can help to roll out the massive, multi-agency operation inside Gaza that is so desperately needed. We continue to call for the release of all hostages still held in Gaza. We call for

authorities to allow more aid trucks through border checks ... to lift restrictions on the movement of humanitarian workers ... and to guarantee safety for people accessing and distributing aid.

Excellencies ... last year saw the outbreak of brutal conflict in Sudan. The country is now home to the world's largest child displacement crisis, with nearly four million children forced to flee their homes. We estimate that 14 million children across the country need lifesaving assistance, and that 19 million children are now out of school. There are reports of extrajudicial killings, especially in Darfur, and gender-based violence is widespread.

Making matters worse, the fighting has continued through the December/January harvest period, which will likely worsen food insecurity ... and could tip parts of the country into famine. Rates of severe acute malnutrition in children under five are already exceptionally high, with more than 700,000 children in need of treatment.

UNICEF is calling for an immediate ceasefire across Sudan. And we continue to call on all parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian and human rights law. This includes ensuring that children are protected ... and that we are given rapid, safe, unimpeded humanitarian access to children and families in need.

Meanwhile, in Haiti, extreme violence in 2023 deepened the country's already desperate humanitarian crisis. Half the population now needs assistance, including nearly 3 million children. Basic services are on the verge of collapse.

And in some communities, life is more dangerous now than it has ever been.

Years of political turmoil and devastating economic conditions have led to the proliferation of armed groups. An estimated two million people, including 1.6 million women and children, live in areas under their effective control. Communities are being terrorized ... and women

and girls are being targeted with extreme levels of gender-based and sexual violence.

Unfortunately, we anticipate an increase in violence and humanitarian needs over the short term. In response, we are expanding our child protection operations, by establishing transit centers for children. And we are strengthening our capacity to monitor, prevent and respond to child rights violations.

Excellencies ... this is just a snapshot of how conflicts affected children in 2023. Conflicts rob them of their wellbeing and extinguish their hopes for a brighter future.

Today, we estimate that well over 400 million children worldwide are living in or fleeing from conflict zones. This year, I ask you, as members of UNICEF's Executive Board, to reiterate our calls for immediate cease-fires ... so that children can have the chance for a

brighter future.

Making matters worse, in 2023, these new and protracted conflicts coincided with other devastating crises ... from the catastrophic floods in Libya to earthquakes in Afghanistan, Morocco, Syria and Türkiye. Climate change continued to wreak havoc on young lives – causing severe droughts, heatwaves and more intense storms.

These emergencies resulted in enormous deprivations for children – from the lack of access to adequate health and nutrition services, to missed school days and surging food prices.

Overall, in 2023, UNICEF responded to more than 400 emergencies, in more than 100 countries, reaching millions of children with essential services and supplies.

We expect global humanitarian needs to remain near record levels in 2024. As part of our humanitarian action this year, we will continue to



prioritize working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus ... providing immediate life-saving assistance, while also strengthening the systems that children rely on ... like health care, water, sanitation and education ... to support longer term development goals. And we will work with governments to make those systems more resilient to climate change and other shocks.

Excellencies ... as you know, UNICEF is aiming to reach more children in the hardest-to-reach places – including those living in humanitarian crises – by strengthening community-based primary health and nutrition care.

With this in mind, UNICEF and its partners launched the Community Health Delivery Partnership last year. The partnership will leverage new investments in women community health workers – to ensure that they receive the salary, support, and supplies they need to deliver vital health and nutrition services.

As we roll out the partnership, our intent is to unite all partners behind government-owned plans and budgets. Once the Partnership is implemented across the priority countries, at least 66 million children and 100 million women will benefit annually.

A key component of the strategy is investing in women, who make up 75 per cent of the community health workforce. Fair compensation for women frontline workers is a serious problem. On average, women are paid 24 per cent less than their male counterparts. And women workers are more likely to experience violence, sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment.

This needs to change.

We must provide ALL community health and nutrition workers with equitable pay, quality education and training, and a safe working environment. This will ensure that they can provide the care on which millions of vulnerable children and families depend.

And by providing this largely women-led workforce with the right support, we will also help to reduce gender inequality ... strengthen community health systems ... AND accelerate progress on universal health care and the Sustainable Development Goals.

As we increase support to these workers and local systems, the impact will be profound. If community health workers reach at least 90 per cent of children in need, we will reduce the child mortality rate in high burden countries by a third.

The Partnership goes hand-in-hand with our work to protect the rights and well-being of adolescent girls.

There is abundant evidence showing that every dollar invested in adolescent girls will yield benefits for themselves, their families and their communities multiple times over. From nutrition services ... to education and skills training ... and from sexual and reproductive health

and rights ... to protection from violence ... investing in adolescent girls will contribute to healthier and more equitable societies.

Prioritizing girls is part of our organization's mission to reach the most vulnerable children ... children with disabilities ... children living in marginalized communities ... and children disproportionately affected by the intensifying consequences of climate change.

For the first time last year, the UN recognized the unique vulnerability of children and youth to climate change ... and called for an expert dialogue on this theme. This was due in part to the advocacy of UNICEF, Executive Board member states and youth advocates, who argue that children must not be neglected in climate discussions. In the lead up to the UN's Climate Change Conference later this year, I urge you to continue to this critical advocacy work.

Governments and communities must adapt essential services for children ... making them more resilient to droughts, floods, wildfires,

and environmental degradation. UNICEF has developed a sustainability and climate action plan, which is already helping our partners to build resilient systems for service delivery. Together, we can take this work further by facilitating increased investment in climate action for children.

In addition to the Expert Dialogue and COP29, the Summit of the Future in September will mark another critical opportunity for us to champion the child rights agenda. Ahead of the Summit, there are several key points that we should emphasize during our discussions with governments and partners.

The first is that increased public and private investment in social services for children is essential ... both to advancing the rights of every child ... *and* to accelerating progress on the SDGs.

Second is that the global crises we face ... from climate change to growing inequality ... can only be solved through a multilateral approach, working collaboratively within the international system.

And finally, that children constitute a distinct group of rights holders under international law. We must engage with them as critical stakeholders before, during and after the Summit. And we must be accountable to them in our follow-up actions.

Despite our efforts, children's rights were noticeably absent from the Political Declaration of last year's SDG Summit. Let us work together during the upcoming negotiations to ensure that children's rights are enshrined in the Pact for the Future.

Excellencies ... we cannot achieve our goals in 2024 without strengthening and broadening our partnerships with development partners ... including civil society organizations and young people.

Equally, we need the generous support of our donors, now more than ever, to meet the targets set out in our Strategic Plan.

I take this opportunity to again emphasize how essential core resources are to our work. UNICEF depends on core resources to fund our country programmes, and to meet the needs of children equitably. Yet core resources make up an insufficient proportion of our funding. This year, I hope we will work closely together to reverse this damaging trend.

Here, I would like to recognize our National Committees for their essential contributions to our fundraising and advocacy. In 2023, we raised just over \$2 billion in net income from private sector revenue, thanks to National Committee and Country Office fundraising efforts, and to our private sector partnerships.

At the same time, we must stretch every dollar to achieve the greatest impact for children. As part of this effort, UNICEF is an active

participant in joint UN efficiencies work. We have moved over 50 per cent of our offices to common premises. And we are participating in common back offices, and other joint initiatives such as fleet management.

Internally, we have moved some headquarters functions to Kenya and Türkiye. This has helped us to position our resources and capacities optimally across locations that are closer to the children we serve. And we continue to move more administrative functions to our Global Shared Services Center – freeing up staff time for programme-related work.

As you know, UNICEF recently commissioned an independent review of our business model. The process, now underway, will help us to ensure that our organization can more readily adapt to the complex environments in which we operate ... so that we can maximize results in line with our Strategic Plan.



UNICEF also remains committed to UN reform, working with partners to make the UN development system more impactful as a whole.

Last year, more than 90 per cent of UNICEF country representatives responded to the UNDS reform survey. They expressed overwhelming support for UNDS reform to increase the UN system's collective results for children. Our Representatives also reported that Resident Coordinators are increasing access to joint and pooled funding opportunities, which are crucial to accelerating progress on the SDGs.

Excellencies ... in many respects, 2024 represents an inflection point ... a year of potential peril and of promise. This year, we can accelerate progress on the SDGs before it is too late ... we can increase our support to the most marginalized children ... we can put resilient systems in place to sustainably provide services to children, even in the face of shocks linked to climate change ... and we can boldly advocate

with parties to conflict to keep children safe, and to seek accountability when they do not.

In 2024, we can do these things and we must. Because the world's children are counting on us.

Thank you for being here this week. I wish us all a productive session.