

Estonian Statement at the First session of the UNICEF Executive Board

6 February 2024

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Madam/Mr. President, Madam Executive Director,

First, I would like to congratulate Executive Director, Ms. Catherine Russell, for her excellent work and thank for the overview of the UNICEF work in 2023.

The world today is in deep crisis and multiple conflicts and wars it is the children who suffer first and who suffer most. Not only is their life threatened but also their mental health, safety, security and right to education that all children are entitled to.

The war in Gaza is one of the most horrific situations for children. In 4 months since the beginning of the conflict, 17 000 Palestinian children are separated from their family and all children – about 1 million will need mental health assistance. In response to the UN emergency appeal in November 2023, Estonia more than doubled our humanitarian assistance to the civilians in Gaza, contributing additional 100 000 EUR to UNICEF, World Food Programme and UNRWA.

Every child has the right to a safe and happy home and school. Yet, the crime scene that has unfolded in Ukraine has caused unimaginable suffering. Since the war in Ukraine began, 575 children have been killed, over 1,000 injured, and more than 19,000 have been abducted and deported to Russia. We do not yet know the fate of Ukrainian children in occupied territories. Nearly two thirds of Ukraine's children have been forced to flee their homes. Moreover, estimated 1.5 million children are at risk of post-traumatic stress and other mental health conditions, while 7,000 schools remain inaccessible to children, restricting their right to education.

We underline the need for accountability for all violations against children in Ukraine. We must stand up for the future and safety of Ukrainian children.

Estonia highly values the global role of UNICEF in improving the conditions and defending the rights of children and adolescents around the world and UNICEF's direct interventions in response to war in Ukraine.

Education is one of the main priorities of Estonia's development cooperation. New strategy that was adopted in the beginning of this year reaffirms that. Estonia was also one of the first countries to respond to the call of President Zelenskyi and embarked on recovery and reconstruction in Ukraine. Among more than 30 projects implemented in Ukraine, in 2023 Estonia **built a kindergarten with an integrated bomb shelter and conducted training for** education managers, teachers and psychologists in Ovruch, located in our focus region - the Zhytomyr Oblast. This year we are starting to build houses for foster families in cooperation with Olena Zelenska Foundation.

Madam/Mr. President,

Providing quality education for children and youth is a cornerstone for both UNICEF and Estonia. We ensure that **childcare and education is available to all children who have fled the Russian aggression in** Ukraine. The number of refugees from Ukraine in Estonia is among the highest in Europe per capita. Estonia has received almost 18,000 Ukrainian refugees aged up to 19 who have remained in Estonia. These young people will be building up Ukraine one day.

To guarantee their education the Freedom School for Ukrainian children was opened in Tallinn already in 2022.

Madam/Mr. President,

In our bilateral development projects, we have put a great emphasis on the modernisation of education, focusing specifically on **equal access to education** and **digital skills**. Estonia has been following UNICEF GIGA's journey and is impressed with its accomplishments to date. We are proud to support Giga's global market shaping endeavours around fair pricing for Gigabytes, and we invite other members of UNICEF's board and those present in this room to support this initiative.

Finally, the children all over the world deserve a peaceful and happy childhood. It is crucial to strengthen our efforts ensuring the dignity and well-being of every child in the world.

As this is the first session where Estonia participates as the Executive Board member, allow me once again reiterate our strong support to UNICEF for its tireless work in protecting the rights of the children.

Thank you!