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Thank you, Ambassador Plepytė, for your inspiring words.

And congratulations, once again, on your election as President of the Executive Board for 2021.

We welcome you back to the UNICEF family in your new role and look forward to working with you in the year ahead.

I would also like to recognize the Vice-Presidents, members of the Board, and all of the observers — including UNICEF staff — who are tuning in today.

This year, UNICEF marks its 75th anniversary. This is an important milestone, and an opportunity to highlight the role our organization, and generations of staff members, have played in serving and supporting children.

It will also be an opportunity to continue our necessary work to change and adapt our organization for the future.

As we have discussed at previous sessions, the challenges that children face have changed dramatically over the last 75 years.

How we support them must change, too.

We begin this momentous year for UNICEF faced with a number of enormous — and even unprecedented — challenges.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the world was already off-track in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals.

Children's safety, lives and futures were threatened by worsening humanitarian emergencies...by continued violence...by poverty, exclusion and discrimination...by the effects of a changing climate...by a denial of their basic rights to health and education...and by economic and societal inequalities that limited their futures.

Quite simply, we were not achieving the results we needed to achieve.

The pandemic has made this situation much worse.

When we met one year ago, the virus was just beginning to spread.

One month later, our world was changed entirely.

Combined with global economic woes — including the high likelihood of a prolonged recession, reduced social spending and development aid, and growing humanitarian needs — the number of people needing our support will multiply.

Countries will need unprecedented levels of assistance to achieve lasting development progress in the midst of COVID-19. Not only to rebuild shattered systems — but to build them back stronger than before. All while supporting populations in new ways, as households struggle to recover.

In particular, the pandemic has upended the lives of children.

Lockdowns. Transportation and movement restrictions. Interruptions in vital services like immunizations and basic healthcare. School closures. Economic impacts.

1.6 billion¹ were shut out of school — often without internet access at home.

Two billion faced disruptions in their countries' violence prevention and response services.

Food insecurity and malnutrition have spiked — with an additional 132 million people poised to go hungry this year, including 44 million children.

Interrupted health care services like vaccinations could result in an additional two million under-five deaths and 200,000 stillbirths around the world this year.

And economies — both household and national, regional and global — are facing what appears to be a deep and prolonged recession.

The World Bank recently reported² that the number of people plunged into poverty last year reached 124 million. In 2021, the Bank estimates that this number could rise to between 143 and 163 million.

UNICEF estimates that the economic pain is only beginning — especially for those who are already poor and without access to social protections.

Without immediate action and investment, the total number of children living in poor households could reach just over 725 million. Nearly two-thirds in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

¹ Stats from Board document: “Updated road map to the development of the UNICEF Strategic Plan, 2022–2025”

² “Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty” — WB, Jan. 11, 2021

This is especially worrying when we consider the disequalizing effects of a two-tier exit from COVID-19. Vaccine nationalism, over-contracting, and supply hoarding by rich countries — primarily in North America and Western Europe — remain a serious risk. The effects of which could be felt for generations.

Dr. Tedros from the World Health Organization recently reminded us that the world is on a brink of a catastrophic moral failure if we vaccinate the world's richest countries at the expense of the world's poorest.

He is right. But such a failure would also be a catastrophic practical failure.

A new study³ commissioned by the International Chamber of Commerce finds that if wealthy nations are vaccinated while low-income countries are not, the global economy could suffer a loss of up to \$9 trillion.

And vaccinated or not, wealthy countries whose economies depend on the global purchase and movement of goods and products will feel that pain.

As people in developing countries have less to spend.

And as continued lockdowns and restrictions interrupt supply chains, and hinder the transportation and movement of parts and components for finished products upon which entire industries depend.

More broadly, this failure would also result in potentially historic levels of need that the global community would need to support on an urgent and indeed, sustained, basis. Needs that wealthier countries would be called upon to fill.

In short — COVID-19 lit the fuse of what could be the largest disruption to global progress for children in modern history. One that will cause deep and lasting pain to all countries. Including those struggling to climb the development ladder, but also richer countries which depend on global trade and to whom the world will turn for support.

This worrying picture is darkened further by the disastrous effects of the humanitarian crises scarring our world.

From Yemen, which is teetering on the brink of a famine.

To the unrest in Tigray, Ethiopia, which is sending over 56,000 people across the border to Sudan.

To Niger, where children are being caught in the violence — with 17 more killed on January 2.

To the children across Central America and Mexico fleeing violence, crime and poverty — and the devastating effects of the recent hurricanes Iota and Eta.

³ <https://iccwbo.org/media-wall/news-speeches/study-shows-vaccine-nationalism-could-cost-rich-countries-us4-5-trillion/>

To ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, South Sudan, Nigeria, Central African Republic, Mozambique and Cameroon.

To the Sahel, where more than two million people have fled because of conflict. Joining the ranks of the millions of internally displaced, migrant and refugee children around the world who have fled their homes as a result of conflicts, or from the effects of a changing climate.

To the recent suicide bombings in a crowded Baghdad market that killed over 30 people — a grim reminder that peace remains stubbornly out of reach in Iraq.

To the children of Syria — a generation of them growing up under the shadow of a 10-year conflict, facing continued violence, shattered systems and daily threats to their health and safety as they face another harsh winter.

The children and families living through these emergencies are placed under a double burden — from the dangers they face each day from the conflict, and now from a deadly virus that threatens not only their lives, but their livelihoods, and all the systems they count on.

But amidst this darkness, thanks to the support of this Board, UNICEF is hard at work.

We are innovating and creating new solutions. Not only to respond to the virus, but to set the stage for a more equal recovery...to ensure the fulfillment of the rights of every child...for more results for children...for more progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and our commitment to leaving no one behind...and for more support for countries and communities as they recover, rebuild, and strengthen systems for the future.

And our work began immediately after COVID-19 struck one year ago.

Our staff members sprang into action to support the global response, led by WHO.

As communities struggled with the virus and its many impacts — including disruptions to transport and logistics — UNICEF was there⁴.

We maintained a steady pipeline of lifesaving supplies to communities in need. Last year alone, we procured supplies worth \$4.43 billion — the highest in UNICEF's history. A major driver of this historic procurement was COVID-19 supplies like PPE, clean water, hygiene supplies, soap, oxygen concentrators and diagnostic tests.

As families tried to protect themselves from the virus, UNICEF was there to provide information, guidance and tools to stay safe — reaching more than three billion people with this support.

⁴ Stats from Board document: “Update on UNICEF humanitarian action: the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic.”

As schools closed their doors, UNICEF was there to support students.

We found new ways to support remote learning — through learning kits, radio and television broadcasts, and even distance learning over the internet. We cover high-tech, low-tech and no-tech environments.

For example, in Pakistan, we worked with the government to launch Teleschool, an educational TV channel that provided eight hours of education a day for eight million Pakistani children.

In Afghanistan, we joined forces with the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait, the Gates Foundation and ECHO to negotiate and expand Community Based Education to hard-to-reach areas. We are currently reaching 160,000 Afghan children with this model and, this year, hope to reach 140,000 more — including girls. An inspiring example of how we can reimagine education for every child, and do so in an extremely challenging context.

Our Learning Passport initiative with Microsoft and Cambridge University is providing flexible online and offline learning for students in Timor-Leste, Puntland, Somalia, Jordan and elsewhere.

We continue to draw partners and support to our Giga initiative to connect every school in the world to the internet.

And we are looking at this connectivity to also help us scale-up solutions for young people to gain the skills and training — especially digital — they need to enter the workforce, as part of our Generation Unlimited partnership.

As health systems were interrupted, UNICEF was there.

Since the pandemic's start, we have reached almost 75 million children and women with essential health care — from immunization, to antenatal, delivery and postnatal care, to managing COVID-19 cases, to treating 3.7 million children for severe acute malnutrition.

As vaccination campaigns ground to a halt, UNICEF was there to kick-start them back into action, continuing our battle against preventable diseases.

In Syria, for example, we managed to safely immunize over 900,000 children against polio since the pandemic began.

UNICEF was there to expand water, sanitation and hygiene services — which are all critical to fighting COVID-19.

Last year, we reached over 73 million vulnerable people with vital supplies like soap and hygiene kits, and installed handwashing stations and latrines that supported millions of people.

In Egypt, we worked with the Ministry of Health and Population to develop technical guidance on the safe reopening of schools, including the importance of hygiene facilities.

And in Afghanistan, we reached more than 220,000 internally displaced people with new WASH installations and facilities at border crossings, and in health care facilities.

As countries worked to track the spread of the COVID-19 virus and plan accordingly, UNICEF was there to help countries apply innovative data.

For example, we worked with Indonesia's Ministry of Health to design a platform to track gaps in the pandemic response in hospitals across the country.

And in Bangladesh, we helped establish a COVID-19 emergency operations centre to help the government track, in real-time, reporting and data from more than 14,000 public health facilities across the country.

As protection services ground to a halt, UNICEF was there to pick them up.

Since the pandemic's start, UNICEF and our partners have reached almost 75 million children, parents and caregivers with mental health counselling, psychosocial support, and messaging on how to cope during these trying times.

We are supporting hotlines in countries like the Philippines and Somalia.

In Colombia, we helped draft and roll-out new guidance on how authorities can prevent sexual exploitation and abuse during the pandemic.

And in countries around the world, we are using new channels to prevent gender-based violence — including mobile phones, SMS, radio and television.

As the pandemic took its toll on households, UNICEF was there.

More than 150,000 households are now benefitting from cash transfers we provided to help families purchase food and health care, for example.

And we provided both funding and technical assistance to help governments scale-up existing social protection programmes and assistance — programming that supported more than 45 million households last year.

As humanitarian emergencies like conflicts raged on, UNICEF was there. Delivering support. Nutrition. Health care. Vaccinations. Cash transfers. Water and sanitation. Education. All in the face of a pandemic that put the families living through these crises under a crushing double burden.

As funding for our responses was put under intense new pressures, UNICEF redoubled our efforts to spark new partnerships, develop new financing mechanisms, and summon donor funding. Not only to support our immediate response to the pandemic, but also the hard work ahead as we partner with the public and private sectors to reimagine and rebuild the systems upon which children rely.

And now, as the world awaits the delivery of the COVID-19 vaccines, UNICEF is there once again.

Our leadership role in the new COVAX facility to purchase, transport and deliver the vaccine is an inspiring vote of confidence in our expertise and abilities — and the global trust UNICEF has earned over the decades to deliver in times of great need.

We can all take pride in this.

We are aiming for two billion doses by 2021 — which will double UNICEF’s annual delivery of vaccine to more than four billion doses.

To get this historic job done, we’re working with manufacturers on procurement...with transportation, freight and logistics partners on delivery...and with storage partners to keep our cold chains effective and protect these lifesaving vaccines every step of the way.

And our teams are working with countries to help them prepare for this massive undertaking.

We need to make sure that countries have dependable cold chains.

That their health workers are trained and ready to deliver each of the vaccines as they arrive.

That health authorities develop equitable distribution plans, based on need — in what order they need to be delivered.

That health workers are prioritized in the roll-out, so they can get back to supporting children and mothers with the other critical health services they need — from vaccinations, to obstetric care, to preventing malnutrition.

That teachers are prioritized so schools can operate safely.

That communities and individuals alike understand the importance and safety of vaccines — that they accept them.

And that other vital health services continue as the vaccine rollout happens. We cannot risk trading one disease for another.

We will discuss all of these results, and UNICEF's COVID-19 response, in more detail tomorrow with our WHO colleagues.

But it is important to note that none of these results would be possible without the continued support and stewardship of this Board.

We appreciate our ongoing discussions around working methods, evaluation and our financial picture.

We also value your advice and guidance as UNICEF continues to lead on many elements of UN reform. We remain committed to active engagement, particularly on the outstanding reform mandates related to the Regional and Multi-Country Office Reviews and the establishment of a system-wide evaluation function.

We are now in the first half of the important Decade of Action, and we all need to do whatever we can to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review, adopted in December, is a critical part of this. The QCPR gives us in the UN Development System strategic guidance on how to take our SDG implementation efforts forward.

Within UNICEF, we are currently analyzing how to best take forward all relevant QCPR mandates, including in the development of our new Strategic Plan. We are particularly glad to see that the review includes — for the first time — mandates on youth participation and protecting children from violence and discrimination.

And we welcome the review's reference to the Funding Compact, and we encourage Member states to fulfill their commitments around core and flexible funding.

This week, we will also discuss a series of country programme documents, all aligned around the new UN Sustainable Development Co-operation Frameworks. As always, they are grounded in international norms and standards and the Charter of the United Nations. And they are fully derived from our commitment to human rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child — the most widely ratified human rights instrument in the world.

And we will update you on our progress on our new Strategic Plan, which is shaping up well.

Because just as UNICEF has been there for children, we will continue to be there in the years ahead...with even more emphasis on reaching out to girls and young women.

As we discussed at our previous session, the new Strategic Plan is being developed in a very different context.

Following COVID-19, UNICEF placed an urgent focus on four key needs to support children during the pandemic — distance learning to save futures, immunization to save lives, water to save communities and mental health to save families.

In the near-term, we have re-confirmed these priorities, and will continue to pursue them.

This includes reimagining education — including through new digital delivery platforms — to provide every child and young person with the education and skills they need. This work is building momentum around the world, and we are now developing tools to measure and expand progress in this key area.

It includes scaling-up our work to provide water, sanitation and hygiene services for households, schools and healthcare facilities. Pre-COVID estimates found that 2.2 billion people lacked access to safe drinking water...4.2 billion did not have safe sanitation services...and three billion people — 40 per cent of the world's population — did not have a place in their homes to wash with water and soap.

Going forward, we want to reach over 45 million people with WASH supplies and services. And we will work with WHO and others to ensure that WASH becomes a permanent fixture in government plans, programmes and budgets.

We will work with national and international partners to strengthen all of the programmes and systems related to children's health and survival — including immunization, nutrition, early childhood development and mental health.

The pandemic was a harsh reminder of how much work we have to do to strengthen primary health care at the community level. People need ready access to a full suite of health services where they live. From pre and antenatal services, to vaccinations and nutrition, to services that support our commitment to SRHR.

We will continue adapting our child protection programming to meet the unprecedented needs of COVID-19 — in which children are out-of-school, their parents are facing financial hardships, local protection programmes are closed, and they are spending more time than ever online. Online counselling, digital protections, hotlines for support — these are all areas in which UNICEF can lead.

We will expand our work on social policy and protection, to ensure that national budgets prioritize children and support families in new and innovative ways as they cope with the ongoing economic fallout of the pandemic.

Across our programming, we will reflect our commitments on gender, to give every child — girls and boys alike — the support and care they need. Our new Strategic Plan will incorporate the findings of the recent evaluation of our Gender Action Plan, and plant the seeds for the new plan being developed for 2022-2025. This will include a focus on SRHR.

We will advance our programming to help address the climate crisis. Children need clean air to breathe. Clean water to drink. Communities that are prepared for climate shocks. Resilient buildings, schools and hospitals. Without these basic ingredients, children and young people will suffer poor health and development. Their economies will suffer. And their futures will be limited.

It is time to rapidly accelerate our programming around this. We are integrating climate actions into our health and water programming, for example. We are working with the private sector to adapt many of our offices to solar power. And we will continue working with our public and private partners to reduce the carbon footprint of our supply chains for vital goods and services.

And throughout, we will continue to “stay and deliver” within humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian response and emergency programmes will always be a cornerstone of our work to support every child and young person. And help their communities achieve lasting development, and even peace, over the long term.

To fund all of this work, and draw more attention and support for children and young people, we will aggressively pursue new fundraising and advocacy strategies.

For example, as part of our digital fundraising push, we will execute transactional fundraising and two-way social media supporter engagement in line with the growing trends in e-commerce.

This week, we will also be discussing two exciting opportunities to draw more financial support to our work.

The first is the Dynamo Fund — a mechanism to finance fundraising activities, and provide additional and predictable sources of investment for growth in the markets where our country offices are located.

And the second is an innovative financial instrument we are developing with the World Bank to provide a steadily growing fund of resources to dedicate to private-sector fundraising activities. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these initiatives later this week.

As we work with the private sector to summon more funds to our programming, we must also continue tapping into their innovations, products, market reach and expertise.

We will be discussing PFP's workplan this week, as we re-consider our partnerships model and create more space for our private sector partners to help us achieve our mission.

As we pursue more private sector funding, we recognize that it can never replace the critical role of public funding. We deeply appreciate your governments' increased support for our Other Resources and the flexible Regular Resources that have been so important in helping us respond to the pandemic with the agility required. We count on your continued commitment to increasing our level of Regular Resources based on the commitments made in the Funding Compact.

As we have discussed at previous sessions, UNICEF's operations require regular, sustained and flexible resources — now more than ever. The needs are emerging so quickly — our teams must be prepared to act at a moment's notice, especially as we deal with a virus that moves so rapidly through entire communities, countries and regions.

Please help us amplify this message of urgent need in your capitals.

Throughout, we will continue our work to scale-up bold innovations that can transform our programming, and move the needle for children.

Just like the rapid rise of digital technology two decades ago, artificial intelligence is quickly becoming part of our daily lives, in ways large and small. UNICEF must play a role not only in helping children benefit — through education, for example — but to protect them from any potential downfalls, including threats to privacy or identity.

And we will continue our journey towards becoming a “real-time UNICEF,” with programming and operations supported by data of the highest quality. We want to put a new focus on digital solutions as well as social and behavioral sciences that can help us better shape and target our programming and solidify our intellectual leadership on the first two decades of life.

All of these efforts will be supported by our ongoing organizational improvements and streamlining.

We have already seen some excellent ideas and proposals to boost efficiency and save time and resources. We are reducing paperwork. We have consolidated and moved a number of functions to lower-cost locations. We must finish this important work, and give our staff members the modern, agile and efficient systems — and time — they need to continue serving and supporting children.

We are continuing our journey to simplify and reflect on our work modalities, implement long-overdue organizational improvements, and become a more diverse and inclusive UNICEF.

And we will continue improving our human resources system, and put people at the centre of our systems and policies. We must provide the tools, training and career opportunities our staff members deserve.

Throughout, we will match our donors' generosity in these challenging economic times with our commitment to strong financial stewardship and transparency across the organization.

We are very proud that, for the eighth consecutive year, UNICEF has received an unqualified audit opinion from the Board of Auditors on our financial statements.

And we continue to closely monitor our financial estimates, in case further revisions or offsets are needed to address any potential downturn in resources.

In these uncertain economic times, you can count on UNICEF to stay within affordable spending levels, and adjust our budgets accordingly. This is our commitment to you.

Through this challenging period, we will continue adapting and changing to the needs of children.

They are not facing this pandemic, and its associated challenges, alone. We are standing with them together. As a UNICEF family.

As we begin a new year, let us both celebrate and build on UNICEF's 75-year legacy.

And let us set a clear example of how the world can unite behind children and young people in new ways.

How we can serve and support them in every context — including through a historic pandemic.

How we can narrow the gaps of inequality, injustice and income that keep too many from the futures they deserve.

How we can help every child, everywhere, realize their rights.

And how we can support countries as they embark on the long road to lasting recovery and development.

Once again, thank you for standing with UNICEF during this challenging period — and for helping us fulfill our critical mission.
