

**2021 First Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board
9-12 February 2021
Opening statement by the President of the Executive Board
H.E. Ms. Audra Plepytė, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the United
Nations
(9 February 2021)**

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. A warm welcome to our first Executive Board session of 2021 to all the Board members and observers. Special greetings to my fellow Bureau members – H.E. Mr. Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative from Morocco, whom you know well from his gracious service to the Board over the past few years; and to our new members, H.E. Mr. Craig John Hawke, Permanent Representative from New Zealand; H.E. Mr. Rodrigo Alberto Carazo Zeledón, Permanent Representative from Costa Rica; and H.E. Ms. Oh Hyunjoo, Deputy Permanent Representative from the Republic of Korea.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of Executive Director Henrietta Fore and express my gratitude for her active role and leadership. Her stewardship of UNICEF through the challenges of the pandemic over the past year has been remarkable. I would also like to welcome the Deputy Executive Directors and other leadership of the Organization – good to have you with us and we are looking forward to benefitting from your valuable insights. Above all, from the bottom of my heart and on behalf of the Board, I want to thank the UNICEF staff members all around the world. The work you do every day for children is extraordinary. Your dedication, your tenacity, your courage as you forge ahead in the face of enormous odds to fulfill UNICEF’s mission for children inspire us all. Last, but not least, I would like to extend our thanks to our Secretariat for their hard work in preparations of this session.

Ladies and Gentlemen, at this time last year, we all had high hopes for 2020. The Decade of Action, announced only a few months earlier by the Secretary-General, reaffirmed our global commitment towards achieving the 2030 agenda. Today, however, instead of the accelerated progress for children that we had hoped for, we are reckoning with the brutal impact of an unprecedented global pandemic: more extreme and widespread poverty and hunger, decreased immunization rates, increasing mental health needs and much more. At its peak, the pandemic shut classroom doors for almost 1.6 billion students. Today, around 800 million students are still facing major interruptions to their schooling. Tens of millions, especially girls, may never return to schools. The shutdowns have also fueled an increase in violence against children.

Unfortunately, as usually happens at a time of crisis – be it conflict, natural disaster or a pandemic – the most vulnerable suffer the most. Although statistically the disease is relatively less dangerous to our young generation, there is no doubt it has negatively affected their lives, increased the risks and hampered their perspectives to thrive.

The pandemic descended most cruelly on populations already struggling with ongoing humanitarian crises: catastrophic hunger; economic devastation; conflict and insecurity; the ravages of climate change. Even before the pandemic, such calamities had worsened existing deprivations for children, threatened their rights and forced millions to flee their homes. Tragically, the pandemic has made it more difficult to reach the children most in need.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated the inequities across the world, including the gaps in education, social security, the deep gender, digital and connectivity divide.

Despite all challenges UNICEF has persisted – I would like to praise quick and effective response by the Organization, the leadership in Headquarters and offices in the field. Swift adaptation to the new reality by UNICEF personnel on the ground allowed alleviating many difficulties faced by so many children and their caregivers. In response to the pandemic, UNICEF has supported access to water, sanitation and hygiene services and provided PPE in more than 100 countries and ensured training for health-care workers in infection prevention and control. It has supported millions of children with remote and home-based learning and reached billions of people with science-based COVID-19-related messaging as we witnessed how crucial fighting misinformation and Infodemia became in the context of the pandemic.

UNICEF has continued to develop innovative partnerships with the private sector to support responses adapted to new context. In Burundi, for example, where soap remains a luxury at a time when handwashing is a lifesaving necessity, UNICEF reached an agreement with Savoror, the country's largest soap manufacturer, to produce an extremely low-cost soap, which reached families across the country through the company's extensive distribution system. With UNICEF's support, Ukraine became one of the first countries to use the global online Learning Passport – the digital learning platform developed in a collaboration with Microsoft and Cambridge University, which enabled children to continue to learn when schools are closed.

While UNICEF has put enormous resources into addressing the humanitarian crisis of the pandemic, it has continued the important work that predated it, whether addressing severe acute malnutrition in millions of young children or reaching caregivers with messages on breastfeeding, or providing access to essential health-care services to children and women. UNICEF worked to reach thousands of children around the world with routine vaccinations against measles, polio and other devastating diseases as global vaccination rates decreased between 20% and 30% during 2020.

And in Côte d'Ivoire, for example, UNICEF has continued to work with partners to provide child-protection centers for children on the move, where they can access education, shelter, meals, clean water and sanitation facilities as well as psychosocial support, and to reunite such children with their families. These are just a few illustrations of numerous activities of UNICEF across the Globe.

UNICEF has demonstrated a commendable agility in facing new challenges and growing risks during first wave of the pandemic, and has further elaborated the long-term response to the new realities. We must commit to mitigating the long lasting negative impacts of the pandemic on the lives of children and their families, while at the same time we must not forget the wider context of the wellbeing and perspectives of children around the world. We must commit to getting back on track to achieving the child-related Sustainable Development Goals. The world's children cannot wait for the end of the pandemic to see that progress. This is an enormous task. It will require much of us, but by putting the needs of children above all other concerns, we will succeed.

Now, with the accelerating development of vaccines, we dare to imagine the pandemic's end. We strongly appreciate and welcome efforts of UNICEF' partnering with the groundbreaking COVAX Facility to enable equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines for 190 countries, and praise all main financial supporters of this initiative. In line with its mission to leave no one behind, UNICEF is the largest single vaccine buyer in the world and contributes its invaluable expertise in procurement, logistics, freight and storage.

We look forward to welcome to our session representatives of the World Health Organization, a key partner in the COVAX initiative — Director-General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus and Executive Director of the Emergency Preparedness Response programme, Dr. Mike Ryan, who will address us during the presentation of the agenda item on the UNICEF response to COVID-19.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of access to quality health systems, as well as of health system resiliency, the theme of this session's country programme document presentation. The 11 CPDs, representing six of the seven regions in which UNICEF works, focus on a wide range of country-specific priorities. But with the global reach of the pandemic, the theme of health unites them all. We look forward to hearing from the panelists, who will provide perspective from four of the countries presenting CPDs: Côte d'Ivoire, North Macedonia, Somalia and Tunisia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I look forward to leading you over this year in supporting and guiding the work of UNICEF. Some areas of work deserve special attention and I hope to keep these in view over this year.

Before the pandemic, we had seen increasing success in getting children into school, and we began to draw more attention to the need of increasing the quality of education. Now, with the months-long closures of schools around the world, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of quality remote education and forward looking solutions aimed at providing all children with digital learning opportunities by 2030. In this regard, initiatives such as Learning Passport and Reimagine Education deserve our praise.

More needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities for learning, as well as for all aspects of growth and development. The Sustainable Development Goals will be achieved only with serious, sustained attention to enabling progress for girls, including access to SRHR, who, we must always remember, represent half the world's children. Inclusiveness must also extend to children with disabilities. Not only they are disproportionately impacted by poverty, discrimination and other societal stressors, but services, when available, are rarely adapted to their needs. Their vulnerability comes to the fore even more during crises.

The move to remote learning has also increased the need for equitable online access and UNICEF has joined forces with ITU to launch Giga, an ambitious global initiative to connect every school and its surrounding community to the internet. We cannot accept a further widening of the digital divide as 2.2 billion – or two thirds of children and young people – today do not have internet access or equipment needed for a remote learning. In addition, as in the near future more children will be online, we must step up our efforts to increase the safety and security in cyberspace by effectively tackling the risks of cyberbullying and other threats.

The wider use of new technologies and scaling up of innovations is crucial to fully use its potential, take advantage of data collection, information sharing, remote education and many others. This would also allow enabling local communities and activists to contribute more for their development, wellbeing, cleaner and safer environment.

Sufficient and flexible financing is crucial for UNICEF to be able to fully implement its mandate. We can gladly note that in 2020 the level of financing has actually increased, but so did the unforeseen expenses due to additional programming, purchase of equipment, disrupted logistics chains and other. In crises like this, the importance of sufficient flexible financing is paramount to allow UNICEF to react. All this will need our support. Member States must come together, in spite of the economic challenges of the past year, to help UNICEF secure the flexible and sustainable resources it will need to succeed. And we must encourage the expansion and retooling of its partnership models, as it aims for new types of cooperation with an ever wider range of partners, both public and private.

Finally, we must emerge from the depths of the COVID-19 crisis stronger and smarter. We should be encouraged by UNICEF's determination to build back better. As we have seen in the briefings and workshops on the new Strategic Plan, which we will hear more about during this session, the pandemic has galvanized UNICEF to rethink the way it operates, to seize the disruptions and hurdles as opportunities for change and experimentation. If we are to see the necessary progress over the next 10 years, we must not only champion innovation. We must recognize the most promising new technologies, the most successful new strategies, and focus on taking them to scale.

Dear Colleagues, this year we have an important task to achieve together. In September this year, we will adopt the new Strategic Plan for 2022 – 2025. This important document will outline priorities and directions of UNICEF for the years ahead. I can assure our UNICEF colleagues that the Executive Board will do its utmost to contribute constructively in its development and implementation. From my part as the President of the Executive Board, I would like to underline the importance of an inclusive and transparent process in close consultation with the Board during the preparation stages up to the adoption and I am happy to note successful first steps in this regard.

We can look to UNICEF's unique dual experience in humanitarian action and development as it positions itself to play a major role in recovery from the pandemic for children and families and in setting the wheels of progress back on their tracks. We can have confidence that, with its pioneering, can-do spirit, UNICEF will find ways to reach those children, those families, leaving no one behind.

Dear Colleagues,

Most of us here today have been fortunate, with advantages that have helped us to keep the pandemic at bay – we have access to healthcare, ability to work remotely and paychecks ensuring food and shelter. While millions of children and youth together with their caregivers around the World are deprived of these guarantees ensuring security and providing conditions for their wellbeing. So many of them are suffering from poverty, staying in refugee camps or feeling insecure due violence or natural disasters. On a top of all these challenges, there are additional dangers due to pandemic.

Fighting back current challenges – and imagining a better world – is what drives UNICEF to press forward in its essential work for children. And it must drive us as well. Please join with me in supporting this important work throughout 2021.
