

UNICEF COVID-19 pandemic response (Item 7)

Remarks by Ms. Hannan Sulieman, Deputy Executive Director – Management

Madam President, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen — it is my pleasure to deliver this statement on behalf of UNICEF Management.

Since my last update to the Executive Board in June, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to present a major global health crisis. New virus mutations seem to be more transmissible, intensifying both the crisis and the challenges.

My remarks today will focus on what actions have been taken from the management side to sustainably deliver essential programmes and services. I will also touch upon the impact of COVID-19 on our finances.

Since the onset of COVID-19, we recognized the criticality of adapting flexibly to changing circumstances, balancing business needs with providing support to all personnel.

With respect to **People Management**, we support our managers through learning programs, regular experience sharing and updated toolkits as they further develop their skills in remote people management, including on how to onboard staff and strengthen teamwork entirely remotely, how to balance workload, avoid burnout and maintain morale and engagement, how to assess performance based on outcomes and how to deal effectively with the most challenging situations such as managing conflict, performance shortcomings and disciplinary, as well as complex personal and humanitarian, cases at the workplace. Now, more than ever, all of this work is anchored in our core values: care, respect, integrity, trust, and accountability.

We continue to invest in our staff and have adapted our **Learning and Development** curriculum to this new virtual reality and have even been able to successfully launch new development programs for our National and General Service staff, responding to feedback received through our Global Staff Survey and the ITF report from 2019 which stressed the need for more professional growth opportunities for national staff in particular.

Offices that had to close due to national health requirements have been able to gradually reopen in some parts of the world and we have become familiar with new, 'hybrid' **Working Modalities** whereby some staff return to the office part or full time while others continue to work entirely remotely. All offices have in place protocols to ensure that our staff travel safely and return to a safe workplace. Adjustments to our office space to ensure appropriate physical distancing, ventilation and disinfection have been made and we have provided colleagues with appropriate personal safety equipment.

Our **Staff Well-being** team has continued to expand the offering of mental health services, for individual staff members, offices and staff at large. As the pandemic persists, we have sadly lost staff and dependents to COVID-19, and our staff counselors have been invaluable in helping us cope and building resilience. In several locations, UNICEF staff have joined up with other UN agencies for UN-wide counselling services and support; this has been more effective in terms of time and costs.

Throughout the pandemic, UNICEF has been working closely with the wider UN Multilateral system:

- Through the HR network, a number of policy changes have been enacted, such as allowing for increased carry over of annual and home leave and extending uncertified sick leave. This support was complemented by adjustments to our health insurance plans to include telehealth options for all time-zones and for all categories of staff.
- The UN-wide COVID-19 medevac mechanism was a major breakthrough which, combined with humanitarian corridors, allowed us to continue working seamlessly in all locations of the globe while maintaining critical duty of care. Efforts are currently underway to strengthen locally available health services ("first line of defense") wherever feasible to ensure medevac cases can be minimized.
- We have also been working intensively within the High-Level Committee on Management Task Force on the Future of Work to ensure a more UN system-wide approach on these issues.

Specifically, UNICEF has contributed to drafting a model policy on Flexible Work Arrangements for the entire UN system and a set of Senior Leadership Commitments to enshrine a new approach to leadership across the UN system. Both of these are now going through consultations, and we expect them to be adopted later this year.

- And with the UNSDG, by the end of this first quarter of 2021, we will be undertaking an assessment on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the space needs and the physical footprint of UN offices and facilities services. The COVID-19 pandemic has created different patterns of staff presence in offices and post COVID-19 space planning and space needs will differ from today's requirements and will impact the required footprint to accommodate UN offices. This assessment will be useful and timely, as we move forward with the Secretary-General's UN Reform agenda, particularly as it relates to Common Premises.

In terms of the funding impact on UNICEF, COVID-19 has presented both financial resources challenges and opportunities.

UNICEF presented income estimates for the period 2020–2023 to the Executive Board in September 2020 based on a conservative approach which projected a 1 per cent decrease in 2020 compared with actual income for 2019. However, the preliminary actuals for 2020 shows an improvement over the projections presented.

The growth in the 2020 income is largely driven by increased Other Resources (OR) funding for COVID-19 related programmes. UNICEF applauds the continued commitment by our donors to UNICEF and the greater UN multilateral system to respond to COVID-19. In 2020, this commitment was translated into concrete support for children and families impacted by this global crisis. In fact, UNICEF mobilized \$1.66 billion – 86 per cent of total \$1.93 billion COVID-19 revised HAC requirements with significant portion already received and remainder in firm pledges from public and private sector partners (as of 27 December 2020). We have worked across the organization to enhance our systems to better track COVID-19 funding, including utilization, for improved reporting to and advocacy with donors.

The need for more flexible funding and multi-year commitments is becoming even more urgent. The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically increased children's vulnerabilities and hence increased their needs. COVID-19 demonstrates just how critical flexible resources are to UNICEF's ability to mount an efficient, swift and agile response to sudden-onset emergencies and providing countries and communities with effective support that builds their long-term resilience.

While we have been challenged by this pandemic to an unprecedented extent, we have also learned a great deal and have taken the opportunity to act on this learning by designing and now implementing several important organisational improvements. For example

- by leveraging technology, we have become adept at collaborating virtually and have developed a much more entrepreneurial spirit.
- we have innovated and prioritized, focusing on outcomes and most critical delivery while streamlining and simplifying our processes and policies to save significant time and resources which is being redirected from transactions to strengthening programme quality.
- we have been reimagining our operating models and hope to introduce some game changers that will transform how we work and enable us to more efficiently and effectively deliver results for children.
- we have identified several shifts in our partnership approach that will ensure we are fit for purpose across our fundraising, advocacy and communication work.
- Last but not least, we continue our efforts to become a more values-based and people-centric organization. Through our most recent Global Staff Survey, we received feedback from staff on our performance as an employer during COVID-19 (very positive – 88 per cent of staff felt their managers demonstrated empathy and understanding during COVID-19) and on how diverse and inclusive UNICEF was as a workplace (65 per cent positive).

As we develop our new strategic plan, we will ensure that all these experiences and insights will inform how and where we can do our work more efficiently and effectively going forward, in a workplace that is respectful and inclusive of all our personnel.

Thank you, Madam President.
