

Check against delivery

Opening Remarks
2021 First Regular Session of the UNICEF Executive Board
9–12 February 2021
(10 February 2021)

[Director-General introduced by UNICEF Executive Director, Henrietta Fore]

Thank you so much, my sister Henrietta, and thank you for your leadership and partnership during this extraordinary time, including through the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board.

Excellencies, distinguished members of the Executive Board, dear colleagues and friends,

Thank you so much for the opportunity to address you today.

WHO and UNICEF have a long, deep and very special relationship. Neither of us could do what we do without the other.

UNICEF's success is WHO's success, and we are proud to be your partner on so many issues: Ebola, polio, maternal health, nutrition, infection prevention and control, primary health care – the list is long.

Never has our partnership been more important than it is now.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our world in ways we could never have imagined when it started just over a year ago.

It's sobering to think that on this day 12 months ago, more than 3000 new cases of COVID-19 were reported to WHO. Yesterday, 3000 cases were reported every 15 minutes.

The pandemic has held a mirror up to our world. It has shown humanity at its best and worst.

It has exposed and exploited the fault lines, inequalities, injustices and contradictions of our world, within and between countries.

The pandemic has also become a child emergency, with children bearing both its direct and indirect consequences.

Children may be at lower risk of severe disease and death from COVID-19, but they have suffered many of the most severe social and economic consequences, and will bear a large burden of the long-term fallout.

Many children have missed out on months of schooling, and have been exposed to a greater risk of violence.

Girls are especially at risk in places where they may never go back to school, as they approach the age when they will go to work or be married.

Since the beginning, UNICEF has been, and will continue to be, an indispensable partner in ensuring that children are a primary consideration in the global response to COVID-19.

Together, we have engaged, empowered and communicated with communities about the risks of COVID-19 and how to stay safe;

We have developed joint guidance for the prevention and control of COVID-19 in schools;

We've supported health workers with improved infection prevention and control, and we've supported them to deliver better care and psycho-social support for patients, their families and communities;

We've procured and delivered essential supplies;

We've provided the joint analytics that are key to an effective pandemic response;

We've supported countries to maintain essential health services, including in humanitarian settings;

And through the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator and COVAX, we are poised for the largest vaccination campaign in history.

Vaccines are the shot in the arm we all need, literally and metaphorically.

But we must also remember that vaccines will complement, not replace, the proven public health measures that countries around the world have used successfully to prevent and contain widespread transmission.

As governments, institutions and individuals, we all have a role to play in stopping this pandemic with the tools we have.

The pandemic will subside, but the inequalities that preceded it will still be there.

There's no vaccine for climate change, poverty or malnutrition.

None of these challenges can be met by a single agency.

Let me outline three areas in which the partnership between WHO and UNICEF, bilaterally and through the Global Action Plan on Health and Well-Being for All, must become even deeper and stronger as we work together to support countries to **respond, recover and rebuild**.

First, as we support countries to **respond** to the pandemic, we must ensure that all people and communities enjoy equitable access to life-saving vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics – rich and poor, urban and rural, citizen and refugee.

A year ago we were defenceless against this virus. Now we can detect it with rapid diagnostic tests, we can treat it with dexamethasone and oxygen, and we can prevent it with vaccines.

The urgency, ambition and resources with which vaccines have been developed must be matched by the same urgency, ambition and resources to distribute them fairly.

UNICEF has played a vital role in procuring vaccines and preparing countries to deploy them rapidly once they receive them.

Together, we have supported 124 countries to perform readiness assessments for vaccination.

But we face significant challenges.

More than 130 million doses of vaccine have now been deployed globally, but 75% of them have been in only ten countries that account for 60% of global GDP.

Meanwhile, almost 130 countries, with 2.5 billion people, have yet to administer a single dose.

Many of these countries are also struggling to secure the resources for testing, personal protective equipment, oxygen, and medicines.

I have issued a call to action to ensure that by World Health Day on the 7th of April, vaccination of health workers is underway in all countries.

UNICEF can play a key role in meeting that challenge. As a trusted advocate, you can use your voice and experience in communities to build acceptance of vaccines;

You can deploy your unparalleled logistics and supply capacities to deliver vaccines to the last mile;

You can negotiate the best deals for the communities you serve;

And you can mobilize your networks of National Committees to resource this historic effort to save lives and livelihoods.

Second, as we support countries to **recover** from the pandemic, we must support them to maintain essential health services, including routine immunization for children.

The pandemic has shown that we can only meet the major crises of our time with a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach.

In the same way, the challenges of child development can only be met with a multi-sectoral approach that addresses their access to services, their mental health and well-being, their nutrition, their risk factors for developing NCDs later in life, their educational outcomes, their chances on employment, and their need to be protected from violence.

And third, as we support countries to **rebuild** from the pandemic, we must invest in primary health care.

The pandemic has given us a brutal reminder of the importance of primary health care, as the eyes and ears of every health system, and the foundation of universal health coverage.

Ultimately, our fight is not against a single virus. Our fight is against the inequalities that leave children in some countries exposed to deadly diseases that are easily prevented in others;

Our fight is against the inequalities that mean women and their babies die during childbirth in some countries because of complications that are easily prevented in others;

And our fight is to ensure that health is no longer a commodity or a luxury item, but a fundamental human right, and the foundation of the safer, fairer and more sustainable world we all want.

History will not judge us solely by how we ended the COVID-19 pandemic, but what we learned, what we changed, and the future we left our children.

I thank you.
