

2021 Annual Session of the UNICEF Executive Board,
1 to 4 June 2021

**Opening statement by the President of the Executive Board
H.E. Mr. Rytis Paulauskas, Permanent Representative of Lithuania to the
United Nations
(1 June 2021)**

Excellencies, Executive Director Fore, fellow Bureau members, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to begin by extending a warm welcome to you all to the annual session 2021 of the Executive Board of UNICEF. I sincerely thank you for joining us today, especially those who are connecting with us outside of working hours.

I would like to thank Executive Director Fore for her active role and stewardship of UNICEF throughout the past year and a half amid the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also thank the four Deputy Executive Directors and the other senior leaders of this important organization, and look forward to benefiting from your expertise during this session. On behalf of the Board, I would also like to acknowledge and commend all of the UNICEF staff around the globe for their heroic efforts and dedication. They sprang into action when the crisis hit, then “stayed and delivered” during these long months – while juggling domestic and professional responsibilities. Their undeniable commitment to the organization’s mandate has enabled UNICEF to continue to strive towards the fulfillment of its mission in the face of enormous odds. The work you do every day for children is extraordinary.

I extend special greetings to my fellow Bureau members – H.E. Mr. Omar Hilale, Permanent Representative of Morocco; H.E. Mr. Craig J. Hawke, Permanent Representative of New Zealand; H.E. Mr. Rodrigo A. Carazo, Permanent Representative of Costa Rica; and H.E. Ms. Hyunjoo Oh, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea – and thank them for their kind welcome. In the short period since I have taken up the presidency, I have already discerned the warm collegiality among the Bureau, and its dedication to making the Executive Board work more strategically and efficiently in support of the work of UNICEF. I would also like to thank my predecessor, Ambassador Ms. Audra Plepytė, for her steady steer of the Board over the past few months, and for facilitating my transition to the presidency.

A special note of appreciation goes to the Secretary of the Executive Board and his team for their very consistent efforts to ensure smooth functioning of the Bureau and the Board and for the running of these sessions. I thank the United Nations Conference Services and the technical teams providing support to this session. I acknowledge, with appreciation, the availability of remote simultaneous interpretation into the six official United Nations languages. This is an important development, and an acknowledgement and reflection of the importance that we, Member States, attach to inclusivity and participation in all of our deliberations and our work.

Ladies and Gentlemen, this year is a milestone for UNICEF. It marks the organization's 75th anniversary, a stocktaking moment that calls for reflection, for adaptation, for renewal. It is also the year in which the organization will finalize its new four-year Strategic Plan, 2022–2025, the first of two Plans that will focus on driving systemic change to make a measurable difference in children's lives throughout the Decade of Action with a view towards achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. But 2021 must also be a year in which the Board supports UNICEF to accelerate the actions required to meet the targets outlined in its current Strategic Plan.

As we have learned, the most harmful effects of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on children in the poorest countries, the most vulnerable communities. Those already disadvantaged – by discrimination, social exclusion, conflict and other crises – have fared the worst.

More needs to be done to ensure equitable access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, in particular, in low- and middle-income countries. No one is safe until all of us are safe, as deadly spikes of the coronavirus in many countries, and its unchecked spread, increase the risk of highly contagious variants emerging. I echo the recent call made by Executive Director Fore for able nations to urgently donate their excess supply of vaccines – through the currently undersupplied COVAX Facility – to those nations that are in need. The Executive Board commends UNICEF for its role in the COVAX Facility and thanks all those who have provided support to the initiative.

Even before the pandemic, some 20 million children were missing out on critical vaccinations, despite the valiant efforts of UNICEF and its partners. Disruptions due to the pandemic have dramatically worsened the situation. A year into the crisis, in the first quarter of 2021, routine immunization services have remained disrupted in 37 per cent of responding countries. UNICEF reports that approximately 80 million children under one year old in at least 68 countries may miss out on vaccines, putting them at risk of serious diseases and death.

The disruptions resulting from COVID-19 extend beyond health care to encompass multiple aspects of children's lives. Projections point to dismal statistics: an estimated 23.8 million children are likely to drop out of school as a result of the pandemic, with girls at higher risk. To date, up to 1.6 billion children and young people have been affected by school closures. More than half of the world's children and young people lack digital connectivity, with approximately 463 million children whose schools were closed left without remote learning opportunities. While UNICEF ramped up its efforts to support learning using innovative means, including through the global online Learning Passport, and through the GIGA Initiative that aims to accelerate connectivity by all schools worldwide, tremendous gaps remain.

Children with disabilities deserve special attention. Prolonged school closures due to COVID-19 put previously enrolled children living with disabilities at greater risk of not returning to school. Not only are they 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 pandemic has not spared those populations who were already experiencing humanitarian crises, conflict and insecurity. In 2020, we witnessed the escalation of violence across most continents and the continuation of protracted crises. At the start of 2021, there were an estimated 51 million internally displaced persons – over half of them children. The number of refugees has doubled over the past decade to 20 million; one half of refugees are children under the age of 18.

The impacts of armed conflict and violence are particularly devastating for children, with interruptions to education and health services and heightened risk of conflict-related sexual violence. Children continue to suffer daily, and the numbers of children killed in conflict are appalling.

I firmly echo calls for an immediate end to the ongoing conflicts, and the upholding of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians, especially children.

Amid all this heartbreaking news, there are also some welcome developments and solid results. For example, in 2020, UNICEF launched its first-ever Innovation Strategy, which will focus on identifying solutions to address priority issues and can be scaled up to accelerate results for children. Nine new frontier technology solutions were

deployed in 14 countries, and included the use of AI [artificial intelligence] for real-time insights to inform policies, and chatbots that can provide information in 100 languages for the COVID-19 response.

UNICEF continued to rely on its strong partnerships with the private sector, and galvanized new businesses to join its mission, providing income, influence, expertise and innovation. The organization reported 108 countries working with 4,337 businesses, reaching an estimated 133 million children in 2020, an almost four-fold increase from the number of children reached in 2019.

Building back better from the pandemic necessarily means building back in a greener and more sustainable manner, and creating the conditions so that children and future generations can breathe fresh air, swim in unpolluted waters, have sufficient and sustainable sources of food, so that they can live in a more stable, viable and vibrant planet. UNICEF met the challenge of COVID-19 by accelerating its climate programming and emphasizing the importance of climate-resilient health; water, sanitation and hygiene; and educational services. Some 46 countries implemented climate-resilient water, sanitation and hygiene solutions through programmes supported by UNICEF, reaching 6 million people. Environmental and social safeguards were applied to 26 projects, including in the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. UNICEF aligned itself with the UN system-wide 2030 carbon reduction target for operations.

UNICEF reported record-breaking income of \$7,548 million in 2020, both from the public and private sector, and mostly earmarked for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the continued decline in the ratio of core resources to other resources can compromise the ability of UNICEF to swiftly react to sudden onset emergencies, and to support the long-term resilience of countries and communities.

While UNICEF continues to pursue new fundraising and advocacy strategies, including digital fundraising, and to explore innovative financial instruments – in close collaboration with this Board – it is critical that the level of flexible regular resources is adequate to meet existing and emerging needs. The importance of flexible resources was brought home as never before by the COVID-19 pandemic. I urge you all to continue to support this great organization’s work for children in advocating for additional flexible resources in your capitals.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I expect that we will cover a lot of ground over the next few days. We will consider the annual report of the Executive Director, which the third year of the current Strategic Plan, taking stock of progress as well as analysing the programmatic and organizational adaptations made in response to COVID-19. In keeping with the ongoing process of consultation and engagement with UNICEF on the new Strategic Plan that will guide its programmes, policies and directions over the next four years, we will review the draft Plan at this session, ahead of adoption of the final Plan in September. I would like to express my appreciation to UNICEF for the hard work

that has gone into development of the new Strategic Plan, and for the broad-based engagement with the Board through the workshops, consultations and briefings it has scheduled. As the President of the Executive Board, I attach great importance to an inclusive and transparent process, and I am happy to note the successful steps taken in this regard.

Other agenda items that will be considered during the session include the annual reports on humanitarian action, and on implementation of the Gender Action Plan; and the annual reports of the independent oversight offices – the Evaluation function; the Ethics Office and the Office of Internal Audit and Investigations.

I look forward to welcoming Dr. Christopher Elias, Chairperson of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative's Polio Oversight Board, who will join us during a special focus session on the Global Polio Eradication Initiative on Wednesday morning. The next day, we will consider the country programme document for Argentina, with two guest panellists – from the UN system and the private sector – joining us to share their perspectives during the discussion. Pursuant to requests from this Board, and in keeping with the UNICEF commitment to keep the Board regularly apprised of its work, we will hear updates on the new World Bank financial instrument; on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 72/279; and on UNICEF work to address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, as well as to combat racism and discrimination.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I look forward to working with you all over the next few days on what promises to be a very engaging and productive annual session. I would encourage you to leverage your positions of authority and influence and to utilize the platform of the Executive Board not only to guide the work of UNICEF, but also to support its efforts and amplify its messages far and wide, so that children are at the centre of the national agenda in countries across the globe. So that every child, everywhere, can achieve their rights.

Please now join with me as we get down to the substantive business on the agenda for the session. I thank you all for your continued support of the important work of UNICEF throughout this critical year of challenges and opportunities.

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