



**Report of the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP
29 May 2020**

**United Nations Development System Reform in the Context of the COVID-19
Pandemic**

The President of the Executive Board of UN-Women opened the virtual joint meeting of the Executive Boards (JMB) on 29 May 2020, welcoming fellow Board Presidents; guest speaker, the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations; members and observers of the Executive Boards of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP; and the principals/representative of the six participating United Nations (UN) entities. He noted that this was a defining moment for the UN development system. Given the global COVID-19 pandemic, the UN would be expected to be functioning at its best – with effective and efficient coordination, void of overlap among entities. Underscoring the need to focus on already marginalized groups, the President of the UN-Women Executive Board cautioned that the pandemic was likely to also have an impact on public finances around the world, and thus the entire direction of the UN reforms would be all the more important.

In her opening address, the Deputy Secretary-General thanked the Executive Boards for their leadership and colleagues particularly at the country level, for their commitment in transforming the UN system. She alluded to the recently concluded ECOSOC Operational Activities Segment, stating that this JMB was an opportunity to ensure that the system-wide guidance of Member States would be effectively taken on board by each governing body. She spoke of the leadership and ownership across governing bodies collectively as being one of the significant features of the UN reform process, that would remain key for success, not only in moving ahead globally on the road to recovery from COVID-19, but also upon progressing through the Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Expressing appreciation to all the Principals for their hard work, the Deputy Secretary-General mentioned that the entire UN Sustainable Development Group stepped up to assist in co-creating

new mechanisms, guiding and supporting for a new generation of UN country teams. This was implemented, for example, through its leadership in the realignment of internal policies and tools to reflect the new structures and levels of accountability, as well as its financial contributions to the Resident Coordinator system.

While acknowledging that the COVID-19 pandemic presented additional challenges, she emphasized that the UN system was obliged to continue to run at full capacity. She called on participants to use this joint meeting as an accelerator for reforms, channeling attention to five specific areas where the leadership of agencies together with their respective governing bodies, would be critical: 1) *Consolidating the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework* – effort was still required to ensure this was established as the main planning instrument for UN country teams; 2) *Aligning results reporting and harmonizing reporting indicators across entities* -- it was critical to build on work already done, without necessarily need for the creation of new/additional indicators; 3) *Anchoring the new Resident Coordinator system on a strong and sustainable foundation* -- including through a sustainable funding base for the very critical coordination function. The Deputy Secretary-General took the opportunity to thank Member States for their contributions and for enabling cost-sharing contributions by all entities in the Executive Boards. She urged all Member States that had not yet done so, to consider a contribution to the Special Purpose Trust Fund for the Resident Coordinator system; 4) *Implementing the Management Accountability Framework* -- while progress was made to date, some provisions were still needed, notably the agreement for stronger coordination of fundraising efforts on the ground; and 5) *Realizing mutual commitments of the Funding Compact* -- although off to a good start with the majority of indicators on track, the Deputy Secretary-General expressed concern about the steady decrease in the share of core budgets of entities of the UN development system -- a trend that could seriously affect the quality of support to the 2030 Agenda. The Deputy Secretary-General assured participants of the commitment and readiness of the UN system to work with the governing bodies on seeking and creating solutions.

Highlighting the central role of gender equality within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN-Women Executive Director cited examples of coordinated response at global, regional and country levels that facilitated the identification of best practices. This included for instance, UN-Women's partnership with UNDP and the UN country teams in conducting rapid assessments of COVID-19's socio-economic impact in over 30 countries, encompassing all regions. Together with sister entities, UN-Women joined the Assistant Secretary-General (ASG)-level task force to develop the COVID-19 socio-economic response framework, which profiled pervasive gender inequality, with gender equality in all contexts. Noting the significant spike in gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, she mentioned that the EU-UN Spotlight initiative, with UNFPA, UNDP and UN-Women as lead entities, had identified important ways of using existing resources to address this surge. She underscored the importance of supporting frontline gender-based violence service providers and developing innovative technological solutions that have

helped urgent response to the needs of survivors seeking safety and support. She urged countries that had not yet begun to treat domestic violence services as essential services, to do so.

The UN-Women Executive Director looked forward to continuing to collaborate on “building better” –a term she opined meant to “hardwire women’s economic empowerment, climate-smart agriculture, ending racism and homophobia, and addressing infrastructure deprivation... with gender equality at the heart of our collective response.”

The UNICEF Executive Director mentioned that agencies came together from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to support children and families, building on some joint initiatives undertaken over the last year to save costs and staff time, while achieving efficiencies. One such example was UNICEF’s work with WFP to simplify and co-ordinate the procurement, delivery and distribution of food to prevent and treat malnutrition. Joint work that could save up to 30 per cent in health care training costs and up to \$12.5 million (or 10 per cent), in procurement costs in the medium-term. While joint efforts were being made to scale up for immediate response, focus was being maintained on the long-term needs of communities. She emphasized the significance of flexible funding and prioritizing investment for the future, highlighting areas such as digital connectivity for every school and community, mental health, ending violence, girls’ education and water for all. The UNICEF Executive Director cited her organization’s work with agency partners on the Joint SDG Fund and the Secretary General’s Multi-Partner Trust Fund for COVID-19. For the future, this represented an important opportunity to strengthen systems, including social protection systems.

The UNOPS Executive Director noted the unique nature of the UNOPS business model which allowed for rapid and effective response to requests from governments, international financial institutions, private partners, and UN sister agencies. She spoke of close coordination with UN agencies at country level and existing and expanding partnerships with international financial institutions to jointly support governments in the context of the COVID-19 response, which centered around three main areas: helping countries prepare; respond; and recover. For example, in partnership with international financial institutions, UNOPS worked to assist governments in establishing and strengthening their national social protection systems, to protect the most vulnerable. The UNOPS Sustainable Infrastructure Impact Investments (S3I) initiative helped mobilize private investments in countries where UNOPS operated, while ensuring contributions were making a positive social, environmental, and economic impact. Building capacity of the small and mid-sized enterprises to facilitate access to global markets was another area of work highlighted, since strengthening the private sector was key for economic recovery, social stability, and community resilience.

The UNFPA Executive Director reiterated that vulnerable and marginalized populations were struck the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore put to the test the organization’s

commitment to ‘leave no one behind’. UNFPA estimated that the pandemic could result in millions more cases of gender-based violence, child marriage, female genital mutilation, and unintended pregnancies. She emphasized that ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights was therefore lifesaving. She assured that the UNFPA global response to COVID-19 fully aligned with the three pillars of the UN, framed by Agenda 2030. Citing specific country examples of collaboration, she mentioned that along with WHO, UNFPA co-led the drafting of the health pillar of the UN socio-economic response framework. Together with partners and the UN Secretary-General’s office, UNFPA was working on reporting the impact of COVID-19 on issues such as gender, human rights, children, and older persons. As alluded to by the other agency Heads, under the leadership of Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators, UN country teams were repurposing activities to quickly respond to requests for assistance related to the pandemic. UNFPA was engaged in rapid socio-economic impact assessments, working jointly with partners to ensure that surveillance and response systems included disaggregated health data; along with UNICEF and WHO, UNFPA were jointly mobilizing resources to strengthen health system resilience to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; and continuing to coordinate joint action on prevention and treatment of gender-based violence in humanitarian settings all over the world.

The UNDP Administrator mentioned in his remarks that flexibility, speed, agility and a networked approach have redefined how principals lead their respective entities in assisting countries’ response to the COVID-19 pandemic, that started as a health crisis and quickly simultaneously became a social, economic and political crisis. With respect to UN system reform, he opined that it was encouraging to witness the UN converge and respond particularly at the country level with a high degree of flexibility. He noted that countries with good quality common country assessments already reflected the ability of the UN system to operate more readily and rapidly, which were critical indicators. These were clear signals of leadership and accountability. As the UN Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General underscored, the responsibility and accountability for a coordinated system-wide response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the country level resided with the Resident Coordinators. With respect to UNDP’s role specifically, (with focus on both resident and non-resident UN country teams), since the end of January 2020, the organization took important steps to refocus its own capacity to respond. Immediate priorities and needs were considered, embedded within the overall UN system approach, for a health, humanitarian and socio-economic response that guided all the entities in their collaborative work. He alluded to the sobering revelation in the latest assessment undertaken by the Human Development Report Office of UNDP on the likely impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human development in countries across the globe. It found that for the first time in thirty years there would be a reversal in the human development index. Underscoring specific risk to the sustainability of societies, the UNDP Administrator opined that it was the responsibility of the UN system as a whole to work together towards not only helping countries manage the crisis, but also

using the opportunity to leverage investment in the kind of economies and societies for which countries were striving, while ensuring a path towards sustainable development.

The Assistant Executive Director of WFP, on behalf of the Executive Director, expressed concern that the implications of the socio-economic fallout could be even more devastating. Estimates indicated that the number of acutely hungry people was likely to double this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic to 260 million. She highlighted the commonalities across the health, human and development systems while speaking of the organization's focus on key areas such as the logistics and supply chain. Alluding to the restrictions on global movement as a result of the pandemic, she outlined WFP's role in this case, to provide logistics services with respect to related response efforts, such as moving equipment, cargo and workers to the frontlines. She opined that the UN's collective role was key in addressing hunger and its socio-economic impact.

WFP worked alongside UNICEF in crafting contributions to the UN Secretary-General's socio-economic framework on social protection and basic services in order to address growing and emerging needs in the areas of nutrition as well as building resilience to the COVID-19 virus. The WFP Assistant Executive Director, called attention to the more than 300 million children missing out on school meals as a result of pandemic; and the need to ensure that cash-based safety nets continued to be facilitated. She emphasized the significance of food systems to prevent the pandemic from translating into a hunger catastrophe. This was an opportunity to engage and support small farmers in restoring and maintaining their operations – all areas of work which required very strong partnerships across the UN system. The WFP Assistant Executive Director concluded that national response is essential to COVID-19 response and recovery and that the role of the UN was to support national response and to incorporate real-time learning in the process.

The President of the UNICEF Executive Board noted that the emergency had shown that much could be achieved through closer inter-agency collaboration, building on collective strengths of the system. The response to the pandemic could further drive efforts towards further UN system reform and innovative partnerships, evidence of which was highlighted by the Principals. She underlined the impact of the pandemic on children, their families and caregivers, that often made them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, such as trafficking, cybercrimes, particularly among girls, migrants and disadvantaged children. She concurred with the UNICEF Executive Director and called for prioritization in investment in all the critical sectors to ensure strong societies, to avoid a generational crisis and noted that this was a testing time for the efficacy of the ongoing reform process, particularly in supporting the most vulnerable countries and populations. She underscored the need for the UN system's efforts to complement those of national governments, in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and to support their socio-economic recovery. The UNICEF Executive Board President welcomed that the agencies' response to the pandemic at the mid-point of their strategic plans, would shape programming for the remainder of the planned periods while preserving the gains made towards the SDGs. She reiterated the call for

flexible funding to ensure the UN system's rapid and innovative action, with respect to ongoing needs in response to the pandemic, while being mindful that essential ongoing programmes are not jeopardized.

The President of the WFP Executive Board commended the redoubling of efforts of the UN system to work jointly considering the pandemic. Sharing his perspective under the theme of the UN system's continued integrated support, he highlighted three main points, firstly on analysis, referring to the UN framework for immediate socio-economic response to the pandemic. He viewed this as a welcome comprehensive approach and commended the strong focus on food security, the food systemic risks of COVID-19, as well as the right to food -- noting that it would be an important guidance tool among others also in the discussions of the "Rome-based Membership informal Group of Friends for the Food Systems Summit 2021" in preparation for the Summit. He noted however, that the framework lacked clear conceptual connection/complementarity with the other components of the UN system response to COVID-19, particularly with respect to the humanitarian crisis response. Secondly, regarding interagency coordination mechanisms, he proposed further streamlining of the existing interagency coordination mechanisms at headquarters and regional levels, along with eliminating silos, with an even more integrated approach --through stronger linkage with the Development Coordination Office (DCO) and OCHA. Thirdly, on partnerships, the President of the WFP Executive Board further suggested the need to look beyond the UN and the UN development system as a whole, towards for example, including systematically, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in a closer interlinked UN inter-agency coordination of DCO and OCHA.

The President of the UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS Executive Board stated that the challenges of COVID-19 presented an opportunity to test how the reform was working and in a very practical way, to assess the progress and success of some of that work, including the new Resident Coordinator system. The Latin American and Caribbean region witnessed the usefulness of the reform, as well as areas that could be improved and where there was need to strengthen collaboration. He aligned with the WFP Executive Board President on the advantages of widening the scope of collaboration, which he stated should not cease once the pandemic was over, but rather be strengthened to the point where the UN system and its partners were equipped to respond to crises of any kind. Referring to the need to revisit structural arrangements, he expressed this was the moment to assess whether the UN system was currently equipped to respond quickly. In this regard, he noted that there remained room for improvement in response to health crises with respect to how UN aid was moved to affected populations, such as in certain parts of the Latin American and Caribbean region that were still awaiting much needed medical supplies. This was an opportunity to revamp, rethink and rebuild new appropriate systems, he stated --a time to revisit current practice, analyze accordingly and to evaluate the operations of agencies.

Member States thanked the UN Deputy Secretary-General, the Principals, Executive Board Members, and the entire UN workforce for coming together and providing updates on their respective work, that continued uninterrupted through the current unprecedented crisis. They acknowledged particularly those working on the frontlines of the pandemic.

Delegations generally agreed that focus should be placed on long-term investment and recovery. All joint efforts were now more important than ever in addressing the multi-dimensional and complex challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic posed. A speaker noted that while the crisis put the spotlight on structural inadequacies and gaps, it was an opportunity to capture and make use of lessons learned and for Executive Board members to use their role in a more strategic manner.

Some speakers took the opportunity to pledge their continued support to the UN Funds and Programmes and for their efforts to respond to the pandemic. They opined that agency Heads had clearly demonstrated that implementation of the joint reform agenda had paved the way for enhanced positioning of the UN to assist Member States in their response to the complex impacts of the pandemic, with greater coherence, collaboration, coordination and efficiency. These efforts were undoubtedly saving millions of lives, especially in countries that already faced other humanitarian crises and development challenges and evidently threatening their achievement of the SDGs.

It was noted that in operationalizing the UN framework for immediate socioeconomic response to the pandemic, partnership should be considered as a standard operating principle, in terms of analysis and planning, as well as in how the UN Development System delivered its response. Member States appreciated that work was anchored on comparative advantage of the agencies/funds/programmes/entity, as well as with civil society, host governments, south-south cooperation, the private sector and international financial institutions. One speaker felt there was room to enhance collaboration between international financial institutions and Agencies, Funds and Programmes, stating that a global consensus needed to be reached with international financial institutions to increase resources to alleviate the payment of debt of emerging countries and contribute to their development.

Another speaker recalled the sobering assessment of the impact of the pandemic on human development, including the significant level of resources needed and advised on tapping into private finances and capacities of all actors at the global and local levels, in order to reach scale. Feedback was sought from the Principals on how Member States could further support integrated programming, policy advice and coordinated resource mobilization at the Executive Boards, and at the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of UN system operational activities (QCPR) in the Fall of 2020 — maintaining focus on partnership; the most vulnerable; the next generation; and collective effort in building back better for more inclusive, resilient sustainable and healthy communities. A delegation reiterated the central role of gender equality in building resilience

within societies, commending the active engagement of UN-Women in alleviating the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, including its efforts in addressing gender-based violence and collection of gender disaggregated data among other areas. It was highlighted that the Commission on the Status of Women was the first intergovernmental body to be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, that necessitated the scaling down of its activities. It was therefore important to reiterate the urgent need for accelerating the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, including the recent commitment in the form of the Political Declaration adopted on 9 March 2020 on the anniversary of the 25th anniversary of the 4th World Conference on Women.

The African Group members of the Executive Board of UNICEFS in a joint statement, emphasized the pandemic's disproportionate and concrete impact on children, as for example not only were hundreds of millions of children out of school facing a number of threats to their safety and well-being, but also family incomes were under severe threat or loss – situations whereby children often bear the consequences. Member States cautioned that if the impact of COVID-19 on children was not immediately addressed, global efforts and positive results so far since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, could be severely impacted. They called for redoubling of collective efforts for children not only for them to survive but also to reach their full potential. It was stated that more financial and human resources should be mobilized bearing in mind that this was the last Decade of Action of the SDGs.

Speaking as a donor, the European Union (EU) outlined the various impacts of the pandemic on societies around the world that threatened the hard-won progress towards the achievement of the SDGs and commended the UN Secretary-General's leadership throughout the pandemic. It was stated that the EU's efforts resonated well with the UN Secretary General's call to "Recover better" by building more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable societies. Their overall impression based on presentations to date was that COVID-19 for all the threat that it represented to the international community's common goals, served as an accelerator in bringing the agencies and the UN country teams closer together, fostering enhanced cooperation. The need to maintain this momentum was underscored so that the reformed UN Development System emerge stronger from the current crisis. The delegation expressed willingness to strengthen cooperation with the UN at all levels, notably with the UN Resident Coordinators and its country teams in the field. Highlighting major interventions, the delegation spoke of the "Team Europe" Global Response to COVID-19 to the tune of currently EUR 23 billion, that supported partner countries in addressing urgent needs. It was emphasized that there was need to ensure that women were actively involved in the COVID-19 response, as well as long-term recovery, in order to prevent progress made on gender equality from being reversed by the crisis. Increasing the cross-pillar coherence of the UN's work, as well as advancing on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, would therefore be of critical importance to address the multiple situations of fragility and significant humanitarian situations that were further exacerbated by the pandemic.

Acknowledging the value of the active support of the UN at the national level, delegations spoke of their own efforts to prevent and mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. A delegation spoke of the implementation of immigration policies and other related experiences, in addition to data gathered during the outbreak assuring that they would be continuously shared with the international community. Another speaker mentioned its efforts to simultaneously take all possible measures to stimulate economic growth by investing a portion of its GDP to this cause. National authorities recognized the importance of acting with a sense of urgency, considering the best practices around the world. Participants were reminded that every effort should be made to ensure that even during this urgent time of crisis, other areas of cooperation, such as education, income generation, inequalities, and more importantly climate change, should not be neglected.

Reiterating the pivotal role of the Resident Coordinator in delivering robust and coherent UN support at a national level, it was also emphasized that this role included ensuring that agencies did not compete for limited resources. It was also important to ensure complementarity within the various funding channels responding to COVID-19, while maintaining efforts to incentivize private sector partnerships, as well as inter-agency collaboration and coherence. The heads of agencies also encouraged delegations to embrace the challenge posed by the pandemic to make the new normal better and focus on support for young people.

The UN-Women Executive Board President in his closing remarks, emphasized the unprecedented nature of the current global crisis and significance of the reaching global scale in the UN's collective response, working 'as one' but not alone. Solidarity was truly needed, especially in relation to the successful implementation of the UN development system reform. He thanked the Deputy Secretary-General, UN entities and Member States for their interactive discussion and invaluable inputs, as well as the Board Secretariat for organizing and ensuring smooth running of this virtual joint session.