



**Statement by**  
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**First Regular Session of the Executive Board of**  
**UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS**

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Good morning. We've prepared a video clip featuring UNFPA Goodwill Ambassador Ashley Judd highlighting UNFPA's humanitarian work. I invite you to watch. [video plays].

Mr. President,  
Distinguished Members of the Executive Board,  
Dear colleagues, dear friends,

Happy new year! May 2024 be filled with health, hope, and, above all, peace – peace in our homes, in our communities, and in our world.

Congratulations, Ambassador Muhith of Bangladesh, on your election as President of the Executive Board. I extend a warm welcome to Ambassadors Leonor Zalabata Torres of Colombia, Cornel Feruță of Romania, Tesfaye Yilma Sabo of Ethiopia and Thomas Zahneisen of Germany. We at UNFPA very much look forward to working closely with you.

I give profound thanks to Ambassador Martin Kimani and the outgoing Bureau for their leadership and very active and constructive engagement over the last year.

I am pleased to welcome Mr. Andrew Saberton to his first Board meeting since his appointment as UNFPA Deputy Executive Director (Management). In Andrew's nearly 15 years with UNFPA, most recently as Director of the Division of Management Services, he has played a key role in management, operations and financial oversight. I know that Andrew will continue to make important contributions in his new role.

Allow me also to welcome as my Chief of Staff someone who is no stranger to the Board – Mr. Sam Choritz, previously Chief of the Executive Board Branch. Sam hit the ground running in taking up his new position in October, and I am confident he will continue to be a tremendous asset to the Executive Office and the organization as a whole.

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Executive Board,

Last November, travelling through Chad, I bore witness to the impact of a climate crisis the country did little to create, and to the effects of conflicts in neighbouring countries that have sent more than a million refugees across borders.

The fragile situation there is emblematic of the constellation of challenges that threaten many countries' aspirations for sustainable development and illustrate how interwoven are peace, development and human rights – the pillars of the United Nations.

How do we advance sustainable development in a world at war, grappling with climate change and other complex crises that vie for attention – a world where human rights are increasingly under threat? That's the question for our unprecedented times.

A good place to start – look to women and girls. Because it's clear: We cannot accelerate progress for all by leaving half the world's population behind. Gender equality is the cornerstone of sustainable development. Peace will be hastened when women and girls have a voice and a choice, when they can fully and freely exercise their human rights.

Mr. President,

In Chad, women leaders deeply committed to strengthening participation of women in promoting peace and prosperity told me they want to leave a path for their daughters to follow.

They said: “Woman is the thread. Woman is the needle. She is the weaver of society.”

This is a truth the world acknowledged 30 years ago in adopting the Programme of Action of the groundbreaking International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD).

At ICPD in Cairo in 1994, 179 Member States, representing all regions and diverse cultures, agreed that reproductive health, women’s empowerment and gender equality are foundation stones of sustainable development.

Even before this era of Agenda 2030, ICPD set the standard for people-centred development.

In the three decades since, UNFPA, as custodian of this vital, evergreen mandate, has worked with partners under the guidance of this Board to deliver on that vision for a more just, prosperous and peaceful world that puts human rights, including the right to plan one’s own family, at the centre of development.

How gratifying then to note the marked progress over the past 30 years, which has been life-changing for millions upon millions.

- In the two decades between 2000 and 2020, maternal mortality declined by fully 34 per cent.
- In the three decades from 1990 to 2021, the number of women using modern contraception doubled.
- Births among girls 15 to 19 years old fell by around a third since the year 2000.
- Today, at least 162 countries have passed laws to address domestic violence – up from just 45 in the year 2000.

Still, let's admit we have much unfinished business.

- Maternal mortality remains a global crisis, and it highlights stark disparities in healthcare access. Every two minutes, a woman dies from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. That's nearly 300,000 women who die each year, devastating families and communities.
- More than 250 million women who want to avoid pregnancy don't use modern contraception.
- Lamentably, nearly 1 woman in 3 will experience violence during her lifetime.

We must move faster and include everyone, with 2030 just around the corner.

As we mark ICPD30 this year, we celebrate the hard-won gains since the conference in Cairo. More important, it's an opportunity to rally diverse new allies and new ICPD champions, and together, push for greater action at country, regional and global levels to make the promise of Cairo real for the millions of women and girls who are still waiting.

The ICPD30 review is in full swing. The outcomes of last year's five regional population conferences will be used to guide discussions at the 57th Commission on Population and Development in April. These outcomes and the regional reports will also feed into UNFPA's Global ICPD30 Report, to be distributed to all Member States.

UNFPA looks forward to a successful and consensual high-level Commission on Population and Development in this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, with an outcome that weaves a connective thread to the Summit of the Future, hosted by the Secretary-General in September.

Other events this year include three global dialogues – one on youth in April; another on demographic diversity and sustainable development in May; and the third on technology and innovation in June.

UNFPA's work with young people, grounded in our My Body My Life My World strategy, prepares young people to stay in school, respect others and understand their own roles in preventing gender-based violence and as powerful agents for peace. This provides a powerful message of hope, as young people try to make sense of a turbulent world.

Sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights are of great import to younger generations, as well as a pre-cursor to healthy longevity. We hope to see sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights and other ICPD issues reflected prominently in the Summit of the Future outcomes, including the Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact, and the Declaration on Future Generations.

As the world goes through unprecedented change – economic, social, geopolitical, demographic, environmental – how we deal with such change will come to define our common future.

With shifts in global population, anxieties arise – about high population growth in some countries and ageing and low fertility in others. We know from experience that concerns about whether we are too many people or too few can lead to responses that risk undermining women’s reproductive rights.

UNFPA advocates facing up to these issues as we galvanize global momentum to complete the unfinished ICPD agenda. At the same time, UNFPA is looking inward, boldly instituting the organizational changes we need to assure that the UNFPA of the future delivers more and better for those we serve.

As we prepare for the mid-term review of the Strategic Plan and Integrated Budget, to be presented at the Board’s Annual Session in June, we are identifying implementation gaps or bottlenecks and making plans to course correct, if needed.

As always, we look forward to your support and guidance.

We are also strengthening our capacity for future-casting to identify emerging trends and threats, and to plan and adapt accordingly. This includes my leadership role as co-chair of the Lancet Commission on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Threats to Global Health.

And UNFPA continues to blaze new trails:

- real progress towards sustainable financing for family planning;
- leading in the movement to end technology-facilitated gender-based violence;
- advocating for gender equity in science and technology – through the Equity 2030 Alliance, launched at the World Economic Forum in Davos;
- calling on companies – small, medium and large – to enhance women’s health on the job. With the consulting firm Accenture, UNFPA developed a scorecard for businesses to measure how they’re doing in meeting employee sexual and reproductive health needs, including offering parental leave.

UNFPA also persists in:

- sounding the alarm on the disproportionate price women and girls pay in the face of climate change, as we did most recently at COP28;
- shining a spotlight on the global emergency of violence against women and girls and acting in concert with allies to end it;
- responding to the desperate needs of women and girls caught up in crisis and conflict; and
- working with partners on quality data and research so we see the unseen and prioritize anyone furthest behind, such as people of African descent, refugees, LGBTQI+ people, anyone with a disability and often-marginalized groups.

Mr. President,

As our Board-approved Strategic Plan 2022-2025 stresses, transforming the world also requires reinvigorating and transforming UNFPA, in line with United Nations reform.

Our operational landscape is changing rapidly, including after Covid. UNFPA has a choice: be swept along by the change happening all around us, or become the drivers of our future.

To make UNFPA future-fit, it's supremely advantageous to be closer to the communities we serve, and to deliver in a more integrated way.



As we have earlier informed the Board and discussed during recent informals, UNFPA will prioritize optimization of our headquarters mainly through two organizational changes:

- First, by integrating the complementary functions performed by the current Policy and Strategy Division and the Technical Division, which will unite as a new Division later this year; and
- Second, relocation of this new Division and the UNFPA independent Evaluation Office to Nairobi, Kenya, in the coming years.

The transfer of approximately one quarter of our current headquarters staff to Nairobi will position UNFPA expertise closer to where we need to be to support governments and partners all around the world, and especially the people that we serve, more effectively and efficiently.

These upcoming changes are part and parcel of UNFPA's continuing transformation journey. We have realigned our Division of Human Resources, created the Supply Chain Management Unit in Copenhagen, and established of our Humanitarian Response Division in Geneva.

We expect the new Nairobi-based Programme and Technical Division and the independent Evaluation Office will be more optimally positioned, in terms of time-zone and geographic proximity, to interact with and support all of UNFPA's six regional and 130 country offices. The relocation will also create greater opportunities for worldwide knowledge sharing, capacity building, visibility and South-South and Triangular partnerships.

Furthermore, I note that Africa is home to nine out of ten countries with the highest maternal mortality, and UNFPA expends more than half of total resources on that continent.

UNFPA will, of course, continue to prioritize our normative role. The optimization plan assures a robust presence of UNFPA in New York to engage effectively with our Member States.

UNFPA selected Nairobi following in-depth worldwide consultative reviews, and we have already secured suitable premises in the United Nations Office compound, in further demonstration of our commitment to the principle of “One UN” in action.

Cost reduction was not the primary driver of these organizational changes. Yet, the relocation is also financially prudent, in line with expectations from our Board. I expect it will ultimately translate into savings from compensation, office space rental and travel, and contribute to reducing our carbon footprint. The calculation is to recoup the one-time cost expenditure well within three years.

While change may not be easy and while it can be difficult to embrace new ways of working, my leadership team and I are confident that this is the right timing. These important changes will keep UNFPA agile and forward-looking. The vision for the next strategic plan is to be uniquely positioned to deliver better, more integrated family planning, maternal health and gender-based violence services to the last mile for communities who need our expertise most.

We will continue to consult with the Board as the process advances, including through the mid-term review of the Integrated Budget.

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Board,

As we strive to achieve the objectives of the current strategic plan, evaluation provides the evidence to determine whether decisions and actions work well and under which conditions.

Therefore, I welcome the new 2024 evaluation policy and look forward to its endorsement. The policy is the result of an extensive, transparent consultative process, informed by an independent peer review. It considers the current and future evidence and learning needs at UNFPA, and we have committed to providing the resources needed to support the policy's implementation.

The Office is rebranding as the Independent Evaluation Office – an important step in strengthening the positioning and credibility of the evaluation function at UNFPA.

We also welcome the multi-year costed evaluation plan for 2024-2027, which includes a strong focus on humanitarian performance.

2023: a multitude of crises. Events in the Middle East and Sudan are just the latest examples of how fragile the peace can be, how easily it can be shattered and how destructive this is for women and girls.

How tragic that by mid-2023, a record 114 million people were forcibly displaced, with women and girls making up half and, in some cases, as much as 90% of displaced populations. In these precarious settings, life goes on. Women continue to give birth.

They require sexual and reproductive health services, and everywhere they seek safety from gender-based violence in their homes and communities.

Whether in response to recent crises in the Occupied Palestinian Territory or Sudan, or the war in Ukraine soon to enter its third year, or the persisting crises in Afghanistan, Haiti, Yemen, Myanmar, Syria, the Sahel and too many other places, UNFPA humanitarian staff hold fast to our responsibilities and commitment that no woman should die while giving life, or live in fear of gender-based violence. Every woman has the right to receive dignified assistance in humanitarian crises, and to avail herself of contraception if she wishes to avoid pregnancy under such dire conditions.

These principles underpin everything UNFPA does, everywhere we work. No matter how desperate the circumstance, UNFPA teams on the ground persevere; they stay; they deliver. And I believe we owe them a debt of gratitude.

Last year, UNFPA served over 10 million people in 50 countries facing humanitarian crises, supporting more than 3,600 health facilities to provide lifesaving care. Another 4.2 million people were provided safety and protection from gender-based violence; 1,700 safe spaces offered them physical and emotional refuge.

Amidst the rapidly escalating catastrophe in Gaza, with famine looming and the health system on life support, 180 women give birth every day, often forced to deliver under appalling conditions in unclean, overcrowded shelters without access to basic hygiene and medical support. UNFPA staff, including our displaced midwives, strive to do everything possible to render support. We are also gravely concerned about the 690,000 women and adolescent girls in Gaza who have extremely limited access to water, sanitation and menstrual hygiene products. Since hostilities began, UNFPA has distributed thousands of dignity kits and menstrual hygiene kits. Much more of a response is needed considering the ocean of need.

UNFPA again denounces the brutal attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup> in Israel. The horrific accounts of sexual violence must be investigated and prosecuted. UNFPA also echoes the Secretary-General's call for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages. Gaza's healthcare system desperately needs more support, aid must be allowed in at a far greater pace and scale, and peace and humanity must prevail.

Mr. President,

Every day, UNFPA continues our political advocacy for gender-based violence prevention and response, especially in emergencies.

UNFPA is fulfilling its commitment to increase direct humanitarian funding to local actors to at least 43%. Currently, already 40% of our humanitarian funding goes to local partners. UNFPA is prominent in leading the humanitarian Gender-based Violence Area of Responsibility, which comprises over 2,100 members. A third of the members are local partners and nearly 20% are women led.

We thank the Board for your political support and advocacy to prioritize funding for gender-based violence and response programmes for women and girls.

I also thank the Member States and partners who participated in the launch of the UNFPA Humanitarian Action Overview in December. We are appealing for \$1.2 billion in 2024 to provide sexual and reproductive health services and run gender-based violence programmes to reach 48 million women, girls, and young people in 58 countries.

Despite the increasing humanitarian need, this amount stayed level since our 2023 appeal was unfortunately only 50% funded.

Turning to UNFPA overall funding, while our books for 2023 are not yet closed, preliminary data shows that UNFPA performed very well. This despite the challenges of increasing pressure on core funding and the complex, growing humanitarian demands.

For the seventh year in a row, UNFPA surpassed the \$1 billion mark, with total funding estimated at over \$1.4 billion for 2023. We are proud of this collective achievement and thank all our partners for your support.

That said, core funding appears to have declined from 2022. Our ratio of core to non-core slipped to 27% – a reminder of the importance of core to our normative mandate and to be able to pivot and adapt. The stakes are high to get it right. Time and again, studies show that every dollar invested in girls' education, in family planning, in preventing gender-based violence decisively improves lives; and beyond that, yields significant economic returns.

A plus, as UNFPA diversifies our funding sources and explores innovative financing, is that funding from International Financial Institutions, IFIs, rose in 2023.

Overall, while we hope for stability in 2024, we cannot foresee growth. Any reduction from a major donor or from exchange rate volatility could well result in failure to meet core targets.

We will need a pronounced change in financing to accelerate progress to reach those three zeros – zero unmet need for family planning, zero preventable maternal deaths, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices, including female genital

mutilation and child marriage. A reminder that at the beginning of this decade, UNFPA and academic partners estimated that new investment of \$222 billion is required to make our three zeros a reality – achievable investment to come from domestic government spending, additional development assistance, the private sector, civil society and generous individuals.

These three transformative results require robust disaggregated data and are woven into the fabric of Agenda 2030.

Mr. President, Distinguished Board Members,

In our 30<sup>th</sup> ICPD celebration year, UNFPA can claim success in creating a more diverse, inclusive and respectful workplace. The UNFPA Disability Diversity Space was just launched as an online platform and community for persons with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, and allies. It joins other staff-led groups, including Pride@UNFPA, the youth-led Tangerines, Women@UNFPA, and others that reflect our commitment to building a big, welcoming and ever-broadening UNFPA tent.

The safety, security and wellbeing of UNFPA personnel – notably our valiant frontline humanitarian colleagues – remains a top priority. We count on your vigorous support in making sure that the duty of care remains a priority for the Executive Board as well.

UNFPA accords utmost importance to transparency, accountability and oversight. We reinforce measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment, and prioritize investment in our oversight offices.

Last year, the Office of Audit and Investigation Services (OAIS) invested heavily in a survivor-centered approach to its investigations and its digital forensic capability. It expanded its investigative expertise. As a result, in 2023, OAIS closed a record 156 cases.

We are strengthening our speak-up culture of reporting, and managing risk wisely as custodians of public resources.

I'm pleased that once again, UNFPA received an unqualified audit opinion from the United Nations Board of Auditors, which highlighted strong financial health owing to the continued support of donors and sound financial management practices.

In December, Quantum Plus – the latest phase of our enterprise resource planning, or ERP, system – was rolled out and is already showing benefits with easier workflows and approvals and more flexible reporting tools.

Mr. President,

Again and again, around the world, women and girls with the least resources suffer most from problems not of their making. Wherever they may be, UNFPA aims to stand by their side.

Recently on mission, I spoke with a 13-year-old girl who told me about her harrowing experience of sexual assault at the hands of a neighbour. Fortunately, with the support of her parents, she is receiving the care she needs to begin to heal at a UNFPA-run 'one-stop' centre. Despite her ordeal, she wants to complete her education. She wants a



better future. Her eyes lit up when she spoke about returning to school – a reminder that even during the darkest hours it is possible to find signs of hope.

Women are weavers. For me, hope resides in the thousands of local and women-led organizations working side by side with UNFPA to deliver a better future for every girl. Together, stitch by stitch.

May I appeal to you to do everything in your power to help UNFPA weave a more equitable, prosperous and sustainable future for women, for girls, for people everywhere.

Thank you.

Mr. President,

In keeping with our practice of bringing voices from the field directly to the Executive Board here in New York, I now turn the floor over to Pio Smith, Regional Director for Asia and the Pacific, who will provide a brief update on some of UNFPA's activities in the region.

*[Pio speaks for 4 minutes]*

Thank you, Pio.

Mr. President,

In sum, in today's world of vast inequality and big demographic shifts, the ICPD Programme of Action is still of highest relevance. The rights and choices of women are, unfairly, increasingly under threat, and we all need to do much more.

Again, I thank you, Mr. President, Distinguished Members of the Board, for your support and engagement. I look forward to our discussion.