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We begin this new year buoyed...lifted...by two significant diplomatic successes — the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the COP21 agreement on climate change. Never before have so many governments, so many groups, and so many people come together to demand action on creating a better, more sustainable future for us all.

Action. Because articulating our ambitions was an important first step. But what we do next is crucial, as we have discussed at our most recent meetings.

Last June, we discussed how the SDGs cannot be achieved without reversing the vicious cycle of inequity in which millions of children are trapped — an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage, poverty, poor health and lack of education. And in September, we discussed the importance of breaking down the arbitrary boxes separating our “humanitarian” efforts and our “development” efforts...and how we cannot reach ambitious development goals without addressing the children caught in humanitarian emergencies, whether conflicts, natural disasters, or both.

Today, I’d like to discuss with you adding a third imperative to building a more sustainable future — addressing climate change. An imperative we must intertwine with our action on the SDGs and on humanitarian responses. Because without concrete and greatly enhanced action on climate change, last year’s diplomatic triumphs risk becoming a practical tragedy for people around the world — and personal tragedies for the world’s youngest citizens.

Why the youngest? Because they are disproportionately affected by climate change. Over half a billion children live in extremely high flood-risk zones...nearly 160 million live in high or extremely high drought-risk zones...half of the world's children live in urban areas, where air pollution is at its worst...and the regions with the highest number of children, Africa and Asia, also bear the greatest brunt of the impacts of climate change.

Children are also most at risk simply because they are children. They eat more per unit of body weight than adults — so they suffer the most from hunger and malnourishment during floods and droughts. They breathe at twice the rate of adults — so they're most at risk of respiratory disease as air pollution worsens. They already shoulder the bulk of diseases like malaria, dengue fever, diarrhoea and pneumonia — so they're most at risk of the poor cognitive and physical development that these diseases can cause.

And children are, of course, the most vulnerable during any humanitarian crisis, facing the greatest risks of violence, exploitation and abuse in all its forms.

It is not only “the children.” It is especially the most vulnerable children who are the most imperilled. Climate change is very much an “equity” issue. A poor child and a wealthy child do not stand nearly the same chances when faced with a flood, drought, severe weather or conflict.

Survival depends on access to medicines, clean water and safe housing. But the most vulnerable children live in areas already grappling with poverty and poor access to these essentials.

And more. They tend to live in those agricultural areas that are especially vulnerable to climate change. They live on marginal land in urban areas often highly exposed to floods and storms. They are part of indigenous communities dependent on vulnerable forest and marine ecosystems. They often live in areas lacking basic infrastructure — making development, let alone post-disaster recovery, extraordinarily difficult. And increasingly, they will live in Africa — a region highly exposed to climate change, and which will be home to more than one in every three children by mid-century.

As the impacts of climate change are felt most keenly — and most unfairly — by the poorest and most vulnerable, so too do these impacts worsen the vicious intergenerational cycle of poverty and poor health in which millions are trapped. The cycle that must be broken if we are to reach the SDGs and promote sustainable development after 2030.

For example, about 300 million children live in flood-prone zones in countries where more than half of the population lives in poverty. Imagine handling the shocks of disaster after disaster. Imagine having repeatedly to re-build housing, schools, waters systems and hospitals. Imagine climate-change disasters sweeping away, in mere moments, development gains built over decades.

Climate change also drives displacement. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the likelihood of displacement due to climate change is 60 per cent higher than it was four years ago — deepening disadvantages and vulnerabilities for those on the move.

Consider, for example, the plight of those living in some small island developing states whose very existence is at risk due to climate change. The children living there grow up with enormous uncertainty, as their parents face hard choices about leaving their homelands in search of a better future for their families — or staying and hoping for the best.

Or consider Lake Chad — once one of the largest bodies of water in Africa, supplying freshwater and supporting livestock and fisheries for generations. Thanks in part to climate change, since the 1960s, the lake's water level and size have shrunk by 90 per cent — leaving the people living there with dwindling access to resources and livelihoods.

And climate-related disasters like droughts, floods and severe weather can spark more competition — and thus, more conflicts — over access to a smaller share of natural resources.

So climate change disproportionately affects the world's most vulnerable people — and the most vulnerable of all people, children. It exacerbates poverty and inequities. It makes it harder to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. It slows, and even reverses, development progress. It drives displacement, competition, and even conflicts.

Therefore, just as we must integrate our work in emergencies and longer-term development, so must we intertwine with them a focus on climate change, in our pursuit of the SDGs. While we welcome SDG 13 to take urgent action to combat climate change, the effects of climate change will be felt throughout the SDG agenda.

Consider the effect on our efforts to reach SDG 1 and end extreme poverty, as more people lose their livelihoods and while inequalities broaden. Or our work to end hunger — SDG 2 — as droughts erase crop production and deny nutrition to millions. Or as we strive to secure water for those living in areas where water supplies and infrastructure are wiped out in disaster after disaster.

And this is especially true because, by even the most ambitious estimates, climate change will inhibit development for decades to come.

COP21 was indeed an important milestone — bringing the world together to commit to holding the average rise to no more than two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Nearly all countries made commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and pursue low-carbon development, embodied by each country's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions — or INDCs.

But as we celebrate this milestone, we must also be clear-eyed. Even if all the INDCs are met in full, the result would still be a warming of some three degrees Celsius. That's one full degree above the goal set in Paris. And two degrees above our current state.



Last year marked the first time in modern history that the world reached a more than one-degree rise in global temperatures compared with pre-industrial average temperatures. Even this one-degree rise has exacerbated floods, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires — is melting ice caps and glaciers — and is contributing to the dramatic El Niño we've been facing.

The trend of recent history is undeniable: climate-related risks are sharply increasing. The average number of disasters recorded each year has doubled — from 200 just 20 years ago...to 400 over the last decade. Of these 400 disasters, an estimated three quarters are climate-related.

Given these stark realities, we must urge countries not only to meet their INDCs — but exceed them. For the sake of the planet, we all must do better.

That, of course, includes UNICEF. Unfortunately, I must say to you what we are saying to ourselves: our organization has been slow to address this issue and to give it the priority it deserves.

And so we've identified four areas of priority for further efforts — advocacy and accountability, climate-change adaptation through resilient development, climate-change mitigation, and greening UNICEF.

First — advocacy and accountability. That means using UNICEF's global presence — and our data collection — to join national and community-level movements to support governments' efforts to reach their commitments, to hold them accountable for doing so, and to call for still more ambitious programmes that protect children from the impacts of climate change.

Second — climate-change adaptation through resilient development. Just as our humanitarian assistance must support both immediate relief and long-term development, so both must be strengthened by systems that can anticipate, as well as absorb shocks in the event of climate-related disasters, in order to reduce the toll they take on communities through smart disaster-risk reduction.

This will require, for all of us, more investment. The High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing found that, for every \$US100 spent on development projects, just 40 cents has gone towards disaster-risk reduction and preparedness. I repeat — 40 cents — or 0.04 cents of every dollar spent.

The upcoming World Humanitarian Summit is an opportunity to discuss ideas like better integrating appeals for specific crises — including climate-related disasters — for both immediate humanitarian and long-term development needs, and developing donor incentives to do so. To consider ideas like flexible financing opportunities...early-warning systems...and an enhanced ability to direct development assistance where it's needed most.

Some of our country programmes are showing what can be done. One of our WASH programmes is a good example. In Bangladesh, a managed aquifer-recharge system captures water during the monsoon season, purifies it and stores it underground. Nearly 20,000 children now have access to climate and disaster-resilient sources of water.

In Madagascar, UNICEF is helping local authorities make classrooms for 80,000 children cyclone and flood-proof, and with access to disaster-resilient sources of water.

Across 16 of the drought-prone atolls of Kiribati, new rainwater-harvesting and storage facilities are improving communities' access to safe drinking water.

And our efforts to support countries like Ethiopia and Niger as they invest in decentralized, community-based health and nutrition programmes have saved lives by bringing services closer to those who will most need them in future climate-related disasters.

To build support for more programmes like these, our country offices will be carrying out climate-change risk assessments to inform our work with partners on the ground.

To take a longer view, at the heart of resilient development should be children and young people who, with a better understanding of the challenge of climate change, will carry our efforts into the future.

I'm thinking of the schoolchildren I met in Aceh who attend a re-built, earthquake-proof school, and eagerly participate in regular evacuation drills in case of a future emergency.

Or the young people I met in Rio de Janeiro, mapping out areas of environmental risk in their neighbourhood — using cameras attached to kites.

Or the students in Onagawa — survivors of the 2011 tsunami — showing me the stone markers they've placed that indicate high-water levels, prompting people to safety if another tsunami strikes.

Or the children I visited at last year's Sendai Conference who had learned so much while creating models of green, low-carbon villages. These villages will never be built — but these children are on their way to becoming tomorrow's advocates in our common cause.

Adapting to climate change is not our generation's responsibility alone — it will, unfortunately and by any estimate, belong to future generations, as well.

Beyond our advocacy and adaptation efforts, our third priority is to step up UNICEF's work to mitigate climate change — to help reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases through new technologies, renewable energies and smarter management practices. An area, by the way, which offers the private sector great investment opportunities, especially when working with government incentives.

As we advocate for stronger commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we should also support communities as they make the transition to low-carbon development. From our colleagues in Burundi helping rural households use safer lighting, reducing costs and air pollution...to our Bangladesh office supporting 40,000 households with fuel-efficient cook stoves...to our work with the Mongolian government to support efforts to reduce air pollution and switch to clean energy.

To reinforce all these priorities, we will reflect them in the Mid-Term Review of our Strategic Plan. And by 2020, our goal is to have all country programme documents include a climate-change component.

Our fourth priority is greening UNICEF. UNICEF is committed to “walking the talk” not only in our programmes, but throughout our operations.

We’ve purchased carbon credits via the UNFCCC to offset our emissions — meaning that UNICEF was officially, at least, “climate neutral” in 2014.

Some of our offices have started to invest in real emission reductions — including by installing solar panels and energy-efficient lighting, as I just saw with admiration in Kathmandu. These investments are not only good for the environment, they’re good for our budget, helping us save on fuel and electricity costs.

And we've instituted a levy on all organizational travel. The levies collected will go to initiatives to "green" UNICEF's operations, and towards making our offices accessible to those living with disabilities.

We're taking these steps because we believe we must all contribute to the battle against climate change. We must all lend our voices and support to growing movements of citizens, communities, governments, and non-governmental organizations to advocate for and effect real change.

And we must all lend our hands to prepare tomorrow's generation — today's children — to continue fighting this battle. Because as our children inherit this planet, they will inherit the results of our ambition.

The future of our children's generation depends, overwhelmingly, on what our generation does today. On how promptly, forcefully and collectively countries work to live up to — and exceed — their commitments. On how we all raise our ambitions.



Last year was indeed a significant one — one that clearly demonstrated global resolve to build a more sustainable future.

Our collective voice must now insist on doing all we can to preserve this planet we all love. For the sake of the children we all love, as well.

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