

2023 first regular session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Opening remarks by the Executive Director

D. Beasley, Executive Director: Mr President, thank you very much and it is really hard to believe this is my 18th Board meeting. I remember my first one. I did not know then how amazing the World Food Programme was and, as many of you know, I had a lot of scepticism about the United Nations. But, as you have come to clearly see, this is one organization that is absolutely magnificent and it is because of the men and women like you in this room.

So, I have got a lot of mixed emotions, but today I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked with each and every one of you. One of the things I have learned after 66 years is that we grow in life and you learn in life. And I have learned that when we look back with gratitude, whether over 60 years since WFP was founded, or six years since I started my role as Executive Director, we can always look forward with hope. Look back with gratitude, look forward with hope.

Thursday I am going to talk about hope but today I want to express my gratitude to all of you for the adventure we have had in the last six years. There is no way to cover everything we have done in six years in the short time I have today but I do want to hit on quite a few of them. Because when you think about where we are – so much war, so much conflict, so much division, so much resentment, so much anger, so much corruption in the world – but not in this room.

Not in this room. This is a room where leaders, men and women, come together, sovereignties of nations around the world, ambassadors, our DEDs, our regional directors, our country directors, our specialists, our educators, our scientists, our economists, all of us coming together, in what I do believe is the greatest group of humanitarians on the planet, at the World Food Programme. Humanity gave us a task, feeding hundreds of millions of hungry people, and we have not failed them.

A writer that I like once said, “The meaning of life comes when your deepest gladness meets the world’s deepest hunger.” We have enjoyed the privilege and gladness of the most meaningful six years together. Remember at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, when I spoke on your behalf, what I said?

“Please imagine, if you would, that standing with me on this platform are 20,000 peacemakers of the World Food Programme who lay down their lives every day for this mission. We remember in our hearts at this moment all those who have died for the mission of making peace with food. On behalf of all of us and all of our United Nations partners, thank you, Norwegian Nobel Committee, for this great honour. Together we believe food is the pathway to peace.”

So, if you will now indulge me, I would like to recall some of the facts of what we have been able to achieve together in the past six years. As you remember, when I joined the World Food Programme in April 2017, we had a new President in the United States who was going to zero out the international foreign aid budget, including the World Food Programme. We were facing four famines at the time. Now, who would want that job?

Well, we were able to reverse the thinking of the White House. We were able to bring together Democrats and Republicans at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, as we have been able to bring together different party leaders within your countries together – because food security, for some reason it brings out the best of humanity. It is that spirit of loving our neighbour, that spirit of how we help the poor, the most vulnerable, the least of these that brings us, in my opinion, to the best of humanity.



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When I arrived, to many of you who were here, I said I want to put the World Food Programme out of business. Because our goal was to achieve zero hunger by 2030. We only had 80 million people in IPC 3, 4, 5 then. The chronic hunger rate was dropping dramatically from over a billion down to 600 and something million. Now it is gone back up. So, from 80 million it was really achievable. But then, as you well know, the chronic hunger rate went from 80 million back up to 135 million before COVID. Why? Man-made conflict and climate shocks.

Then COVID comes along and I was jumping up and down then, if you remember, saying we are going to have problems all over the world because of the economic disruption, and the supply chain systems abruptly brought to halt in countries around the world. And the number jumped again, from 135 to 276 million people not knowing where their next meal is coming from.

And then, when you think it cannot get any worse, you have Ethiopia, Afghanistan on top of Yemen and I could go on with a couple of dozen areas of war and conflict. And then the breadbasket of the world, Ukraine, devastated in conflict. A tremendous and damaging impact.

The number of hungry people went up again from 276 to 350 million people around the world. But those are not just numbers, those are real people with real names and real lives. And within this group are 50 million knocking at famine's door. And so a daunting task. You think it just cannot get any worse.

I also think about the L2s and L3s. I think when I arrived there were 13 L2s and L3s and now, at the end of 2022, there are 24 L2s and L3s. When I arrived my greatest concern was can we handle any more. We are stretched so thin. All the fire trucks are out. How can we do more? What are we going to do?

And you responded then, giving us greater flexibility to make certain that we did not take our eye off the ball of emergency operations, being strategic in all the things that we did. I am grateful to you. When we were at USD 5.7 billion when I arrived and instead of it going down, we were able to reverse the thinking of certain individual leaders around the world, so now we are at USD 14.4 billion.

When I arrived, we were raising almost USD 16 million per day on a seven-day work week, 365 days a year. USD 16 million a day. My goal was to raise – and I did not tell anybody this – USD 24 million a day, USD 1 million per hour. Well, we are now at USD 39 million per day.

But that is what it has taken to achieve what we know to be necessary to avert mass destabilization and mass migration and starvation and famine. You stepped up. You heard the call. I am so grateful, and I know the team at the World Food Programme is so grateful, because you heard the call. You understand the consequences when people cannot get the food that they need, they cannot get the assistance that they need, wherever they may be.

And not only did you as nations step up, but the IFIs also stepped up – we went from USD 9.5 million from IFIs, like the World Bank and others, to USD 1 billion today. And 2023 will be even stronger. The private sector, from USD 78 million to USD 540 million, and that will even get better.

The beneficiaries that we reach has increased from 82 million to 160 million. We were able to reach these 160 million people to avert the famines, the destabilization, the mass migration because you stepped up, and as a result we have helped bring stability and peace around the world.

You have given us the flexibility to do more instead of just bringing in-kind food from the outside. What we have done on local procurement is tremendous – the grains that we are now purchasing inside countries, it was USD 500 million in local procurement when I arrived, now it is USD 1.6 billion. And that does not include the cash-based transfers that have taken place as well.



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The number of smallholder farmers we are reaching now has risen from 690,000 to 1.4 million, and that does not even include the food for assets programs where we are working with 10 million beneficiaries on any given day, week or month. We know when shocks occur, if we have been able to come in and help build resilience, it costs a whole lot less than if we had not. And we have got the numbers to back that up.

You have heard me talk about resilience, rehabilitating land. If you want an organization that has the greatest impact on global adaptation for climate, there is no one even close to the World Food Programme. No organization close.

Our beneficiaries rehabilitated around 4 million acres of land in the last six, seven years or so. That is land that is now growing food. That is land that is being productive again, which means we need to give less food in those places. 85,000 kilometres of roads built. Not 85 – 85,000 kilometres. Think about that.

2.7 thousand bridges built. 111,000 ponds and holding reservoirs and wells. 28,000 kilometres of irrigation canals. 380,000 community gardens. And I like to visit those gardens. Because why? Oh, my goodness, the before and after. I can tell you stories like in Chad, where I have made videos to highlight the transformation.

That is another thing. I think we have helped improve the United Nations in terms of messaging, that is for sure. I know I have my own style and you know I got fussed at my first six months about how I talk. I do not think they meant my southern dialect but the way I say things. But, like in Chad, for example, a village of 350 people. We would spend USD 50,000 a year feeding the people in this village. For how long? 20 years at USD 50,000 a year? But with USD 37,000 we can come in, put down a water well, irrigation system and guess what? We do not need to put down USD 50,000 a year for 20 years.

That is just being efficient, effective, strategic and, quite frankly, helping people become self-sufficient in such a way that they experience freedom and liberty. And when you go back to those villages and you stand with so much pride with these women, you do not have to go to Harvard Business School to see the entrepreneurial spirit that exists among them. You just need to go to a village where you give a woman the tools that she needs. And it is remarkable to see what happens. And I can go over story after story like this.

But the World Food Programme, as we move forward on climate, we have got solutions while the world addresses the issues of mitigation, we have got to make certain that we provide the tools for adaptation, otherwise there will be destabilization beyond anything we have seen, and mass migration. But when we are there, on the ground with the people, giving them the tools, it is a win-win for everybody.

Looking back over the last six years when I think about Yemen, I remember that was one of my first biggest controversies, when the coalition had a blockade, and I went pretty hard on the coalition. Nobody would be seen standing around me at the United Nations for about a couple of weeks. The United States and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the coalition, obviously were concerned but when I sat down with each of the leaders of those nations and explained what was at stake and what we were talking about, they got it.

The power of sitting down and reasoning, elaborating and discussing. We opened Al Hodeidah port and food began to flow again, saving Yemen from an absolute catastrophe because at the World Food Programme, we are willing to take risks because lives are at stake.



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Sudan, the access issues that we have fought in Sudan. Ethiopia, the access issues that we fought in Ethiopia. Afghanistan, as we continue to struggle with the issues in Afghanistan. But we were always on the ground, bringing it to the attention of the world and sitting down with the leaders on all sides of the conflict, expressing our concern for people, given our neutrality, that we are there to bring hope to people.

And then places like Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The Sahel and other places, if it were not for the fact that we were on the ground, imagine what would have been faced. Similar circumstances, like we saw at the beginning of the Syrian war.

And then we get into issues like artificial intelligence and blockchain technologies and digitization and all those changes that we have made in the past five or six years in those areas.

Then we get into Black Sea Grain Initiative. No small task. Everybody was focused on the east side of Ukraine when this conflict, this war, began. Well, we immediately went down to Odesa and said, this port must be open because this nation is the breadbasket of the world. It had to be, given what we were already facing around the world because of COVID, because of conflict, because of fuel pricing, and I could go on and on - the poorest of the poor were already struggling and suffering.

And so we knew that we had to get the Black Sea Grain Initiative into gear, and we did. It is an ongoing struggle but we are continuing to work together to do what we can, and I am grateful for that. Many of you in this room made phone calls to all sides to help us bring forth that solution at the time.

COVID: when the airline industry was shutting down around the world, well, who did not shut down? WFP. Because we had to transport humanitarian workers, healthcare workers, scientists, doctors and COVID supplies to 173 nations. We provided COVID supplies, PPE, testing equipment, ventilators, masks, you name it. Like most times with a natural disaster or a major disease outbreak, most people are running for the hills and going into their buildings while the World Food Programme, we are going to rescue people and do what we do best.

And then we had the Ethiopia crash. Heart-breaking, what took place. But it just reflects the men and women in the humanitarian sphere that put their lives on the line every single day around the world. I could talk all day about our achievements and what we have done, but I want to move over from the things that we have done, those facts, and I want to talk about some of the values that we deploy every day at the World Food Programme. Because these are the values of the pathway to peace.

These are the values that are based upon loving our neighbour. And so to achieve the values for the organization that you desired, we put in place a Workforce Culture AED to lead efforts to ensure we live up to our values - integrity, collaboration, commitment, humanity, and inclusion.

We were 7,000 employees in the year 2000. We were 15,000 employees when I arrived. We are now 23,000. Well, when you are growing that fast and that much change is taking place structurally, inside and out, well, it creates some pressure. Almost all of our people are good but there are some people out there, not so good.

When you are an organization of 23,000 people, like any government or any institution, you have got to make certain you are taking care of your employees so that they can be most strategic, most efficient, most effective and ensure you empower them and protect them. So, we have put the Workforce Culture AED in place because, as you heard me say before, all of us in leadership, are concerned about upholding our values and respecting our employees.



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When you walk into the building at the World Food Programme here in Rome at 7:30 in the morning, you are dealing with this crisis in Syria. At 8:30 you are dealing with one in Yemen and 10:30 you are dealing with one in Sudan and at 12 o'clock you have got a catastrophe in Central America and then about an hour later you have got a problem over here and a problem over there, and by six o'clock it is hard to sit down and start thinking about inside operations, because your work is so hard, to save lives.

So, we had a dedicated team that would make certain that we provided the protection and instilled the values that would allow our employees to be the best of the best. And so, just for example, gender - that was one of the issues that, quite frankly, I was really surprised about when I joined the World Food Programme, or, more importantly, the United Nations. I thought gender parity would have been a thing that would have been achieved at the United Nations 30 years ago.

In one of my first meetings, and I do not remember if it was in New York or Geneva, they were talking about gender parity and I am sitting there thinking, how long have you been talking about this? 30 years? 40 years? Why do you not just do it? Set goals, set objectives and measurables and then execute a plan. Well, at the World Food Programme we have gone - and you have heard me talk about this - from 30 to 39 percent of women just among national employees. And this is in places like Afghanistan. These are places like Yemen and Syria. Tough places.

Our proportion of international women employees went from 42 to 48 percent. Among the overall global workforce it went from 34 to 42 percent. We have hired 4,471 more women. When I arrived we had one woman out of five AEDs, today three out of five AEDs - or DEDs as they are now called - are women.

And look at the breadth of talent we now have in the organization at every level. If you want to diversify properly, you cannot just start at the top. You have got to do it at the bottom, the middle and the top. That way, in five years from now, when an opening comes where there is a P4 or a P3, then you have got experienced women apply and compete. And when you look at the numbers we are achieving now, it is remarkable. We have still got work to do but, wow, how much progress we have made.

And we have also increased diversity in terms of our African employees, for example. I was just looking at this number the other day. We have increased the number of African employees among our international workforce by 850 people, taking the proportion from 24 percent to 29 percent.

Fixed-term contracts. I was shocked at how many people were on these short-term contracts and consultancies. We have already moved 2,000 more national employees from temporary to fixed terms under the contract conversion exercise, which has helped take the overall proportion from 39 to 50 percent now of staff on long-term contracts. There is more work to be done but how much progress has been made, because we are respecting the people that work in our operations and we are making certain that they get the tools they need for their job.

And when I think about sexual abuse, harassment and abuse of authority and discrimination, well, you know my view. If you love your neighbour as your equal, well... When you see your neighbour, the person beside you, as an equal, it eliminates discrimination. But some people do not think like that. When I've spoken to all the country teams, I have been pretty tough on the guys out there. There are those that you need to pat on the back, they are doing a good job, and respecting others, and there are those who say stupid things from time to time. Give them a chance to correct. If they do not, let me know. And then there are those that just need to be out of the organization. We hired more investigators, put more money in, to improve our workplace for everyone.



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The value of school meals and children, what we have done with school meals and the School Meals Coalition, this is one of those issues, quite frankly, that I do not know how we do not do school meals in every country around the world. It will add a 10 percent increase in GDP of any and every nation that puts their schoolchildren into a school meals programme. At a cost of just 25 cents a child per day in the lowest-income countries.

Take, for example, the Sahel. Imagine you have a school meals programme and if it is a home-grown school meals programme running along with our other programmes, holy mackerel - teen pregnancy, child marriages, the rates drop off the chart. The recruitment by ISIS and Al Qaeda drops off the chart. The school dropout for boys - and especially girls - drops off the chart. Conflict, malnutrition, all those things drop dramatically. Migration drops off the chart.

Did you get all that? For 25 cents per child. What am I missing here? It is not that complicated. I do not need a big old study to tell me that. I am sure we have got more studies. That is one of the problems. We have got all the studies but nobody is executing them. Which brings up another question. A lot of the beneficiary nations, they need to take greater ownership of these issues. It cannot just be the outside world. And I have confidence in this, we have had that discussion and that is concerning resilience programmes.

Another thing that bugs me is that - and I appreciate that we need the military - but the world's military spending in 2021, I do not have the new numbers for 2022 but you can be assured it is a lot higher than it was in 2021, was USD 2.1 trillion dollars. Trillion dollars. Humanitarian spending was USD 30 billion.

I could go on and on. I will have more to say on Thursday but not this long, that is for sure. Let me close my last Board meeting with this brief remark, this thought. It was at the end of World War II and Winston Churchill had drawn a lot of attention, as you can imagine, for the role he had played and he turned it all aside with this line: "It was the people who had the courage of a lion. I simply had the luck to give the roar."

Thank you for the courage, thank you for the integrity and the genius and the drive and the creativity and, yes, the love in this room. And thank you for the luck, the honour you have given me to roar on your behalf.

Thank you, Mr. President.

