

2023 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Opening remarks by the Executive Director

Ms C. McCain, Executive Director: Thank you, Mr President, and it is so nice to see so many old friends in the auditorium and so many new friends as well.

Excellencies, good morning and a very warm welcome to this annual session of the Executive Board. I would also like to welcome all of you who have travelled from your capitals and, of course, our special guest, Her Majesty Queen Máxima of the Netherlands, who will join us for a special address later on.

It is an honour and a privilege to be sitting in this chair as Executive Director. I want to start by expressing my gratitude for the support and encouragement I have received over the past 11 weeks. It has been truly humbling and I thank each and every one of you from the bottom of my heart. The collaboration and partnership you have offered have never been more important because the challenges we face together have never been so great.

The number of hungry people in the world is soaring, but the resources we need to assist them are running dangerously low. This is despite the generosity of our donors and the exceptional levels of funding WFP has received in recent years. The gap between funding and humanitarian needs has widened, swelled by new conflicts, such as those in Ukraine and Sudan, COVID-19's aftershocks, economic turmoil and the climate crisis.

WFP's current operational requirement for 2023 has risen to USD 25.1 billion, which will allow us to reach over 170 million people with rations for the rest of the year. But our donor contributions are falling from USD 14 billion in 2022 to the current forecast of USD 10 billion in 2023. And let me be frank, it may sink even further to USD 9 billion or less. The funding landscape for 2024 looks even more bleak.

This unprecedented funding crunch is happening right across the United Nations and the wider humanitarian system. Every agency is being squeezed and having to prioritize like never before to meet rising needs.

Excellencies, we are facing a moment of truth, with untold consequences for the world if we do not come together to confront the crisis head on. Now is not the time for business as usual. The latest global operational response plan, being presented later today, lays out what is at stake if we fail to mobilize more resources.

Globally, there are 345 million acutely food-insecure people, with millions more who could soon join their ranks. An estimated 40 million people are severely food insecure and in grave danger of plunging into famine. The number of children caught in the grip of starvation is overwhelming. A staggering 45 million under the age of five are now estimated to have acute malnutrition. Worst of all, nearly 130,000 people across Burkina Faso, Mali, Somalia and South Sudan are believed to be living in what are effectively famine conditions.

I went to Somalia last month and I was horrified and heartbroken by what I found. Violence, fear and starvation are the daily reality there. I spoke with mothers in a camp for internally displaced people in Dolo. One woman I met, Halima, told me that she had fled 200 kilometres from her home with her family of ten to protect her young sons. She said armed groups had been taking boys from their families by force to join their ranks and killing anybody who refused.

Every day is a fight for survival. Halima and her family and the countless thousands like her urgently need help and hope. Yet WFP has already been forced to take food rations and cash payments away from millions of our beneficiaries around the world, and cuts for millions more are imminent because of the gaping hole in our budget.



2023 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

It does not have to be this way. WFP has shown time and time again that we can stave off famine, negotiate access to vulnerable, cut-off communities and help the wider humanitarian community deliver critical aid. We can do it again if we collaborate to raise the resources we so desperately need.

But if these cuts do go ahead, the global hunger numbers I have just outlined will scale frightening new heights. In Afghanistan, nearly 20 million people do not know when, or if, they will eat again. But a severe funding crisis means we have had to cut 8 million highly vulnerable people from our emergency programme in recent months.

In Yemen, WFP is targeting 15 million people with emergency food assistance, but we have had to cut rations to just 60 percent of the standard basket. Without an urgent cash injection we will have to remove half of our beneficiaries. That is 7.5 million people cut from our distribution lists entirely.

In Syria, 98 percent of our beneficiaries currently received a reduced food ration. From July onwards we will be forced to end support to 2.5 million of the 5.5 million people we feed each month. These are just three examples.

We are also looking at cutting rations and removing people from distribution lists in Bangladesh, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Palestine and too many other countries to name. Meanwhile, new crises continue to emerge while others grow worse. Already since April I have declared two corporate scale-up emergencies, in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Looking around the world today, it is easy to feel despair at the sheer scale of human suffering. But we must not give in to defeatism. The costs of inaction are far higher than the costs of responding to the global hunger crises. If we deny rations or cash payments to millions of people who have nothing else to rely on, we are not just taking their food for the day, we are creating fertile ground for instability, extremism and armed conflict to flourish.

When communities break down, families are forced to make an impossible choice – stay where they are and starve, or migrate in desperate search of food and safety. WFP has anecdotal evidence from the Sahel region of West Africa that hunger is a factor driving recruitment to extremist groups.

Our people there have heard stories of men signing up, not because of ideology but because they are desperate to feed their families, and these groups can provide them with food. We must not give up or give in.

Instead, we need to come together to implement a three-pronged action plan to close the current funding gap, which reflects the priorities I set out on my first day on the job.

First, we must expand WFP's resources base. Second, we must sharpen our focus - rigorously prioritizing programmes and initiatives and boosting efficiency and effectiveness. And, third, we must scale up partnerships to deliver solutions, tackling the root causes of hunger. WFP's leaders are determined to work even harder to identify and mobilize every potential new source of funding. We will tap into and capitalize on growth areas, such as finance for climate change, which I know is a key concern for many Board members.

We are prioritizing our relationships with the international and regional financial institutions, which have steadily grown in recent years. But there is a great deal more we can do together and we are working hard to unlock new resources as a go-to delivery partner for national programmes.

I have also been clear that I want to be much more ambitious in expanding and ramping up WFP's partnerships with the private sector, attracting new capital to help fund our programmes.



2023 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

But today I also ask all of WFP's government donors to step up and do more. We need to work together to raise awareness and resources to address this global hunger crisis. In the short term there is no other way. We need your support to reverse the ration cuts we have already implemented and avoid those we are fast approaching.

In return you can be sure that under my watch WFP, has an absolute commitment to ensuring every donor dollar works as hard as possible to tackle hunger. And transparency and accountability will be the bedrock of our future partnership.

This is why the second part of WFP's action plan is to sharpen our focus, rigorously prioritizing programmes and initiatives and boosting efficiency and effectiveness. We have to adapt to the new reality of doing more with less, directing and prioritizing resources where they can have the greatest impact. And that is not here in headquarters, it is out in the field, supporting our frontline teams and our beneficiaries.

WFP does incredible life-saving work every single day, and that is thanks to our incredible global team. I have been so impressed by what I have seen since I have been here, especially out in the field. Our country teams are inspirational and we need to set them up for success.

When I visited our team in Somalia, I saw how they were working around the clock to avoid famine. While in Eastern Africa I met with team members from the Sudan who were forced to leave by surging violence there. Three of our team members tragically lost their lives and I want to express, once again, my deepest sympathies to the families of the loved ones of Osman, Yousif and Siddig. We will not forget them.

Just last week I was in Haiti and the Dominican Republic and saw everything our teams are doing to bring new hope and turn lives around. Our people are determined to serve our beneficiaries and in return I am determined to give them the resources they need to hold back the rising tide of hunger.

The field must always come first. This means sharpening our focus as an organization, being more efficient and, to be frank, tightening our belts.

Today, I can announce that we intend to bring forward a zero-growth programme support and administrative budget for 2024, keeping it at the 2023 level of USD 576 million. Our country offices are already feeling the impact of the funding crunch. So, the key objective of this year's budget process is to redirect resources to the front line, cushioning the impact and reducing the operational funding gap as much as possible. Rest assured we will implement our budget commitment in a careful and controlled manner and, if necessary, we will come back to the Board with more detailed plans.

As part of these efforts to enhance efficiency, I am rearranging the senior management structure. I want more coherence, integration and accountability in the organization. I am establishing a clear chain of command which started with the appointment of Carl Skau as Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer.

Vacancy announcements for four Assistant Executive Director positions were issued last week. The recruitment process will be open and fully transparent. A mix of continuity and new perspectives as well as diversity of geography, gender and experience will be key considerations as we build the leadership team.

Alongside our commitment to greater efficiency, we will also focus our resources more effectively. We have to do more to ensure every food ration or cash payment reaches our intended beneficiaries and those in greatest need. Recent events in Ethiopia have shown that we must do better.



2023 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

As you know, WFP has temporarily paused food distributions across the country following evidence of food diversions. Let me say clearly that we acknowledge that weaknesses in WFP's monitoring and oversight prevented us from detecting these problems earlier.

Our decision was not taken lightly, given the dire humanitarian situation in Ethiopia. The millions of people who urgently need our support are our primary concern. WFP is implementing a robust plan to improve safeguards and controls, including enhancing the selection of beneficiaries, monitoring and commodity tracking. Chris Nikoi, our Regional Director in Western Africa, is leading this work on the ground while our teams in Rome and Nairobi are providing all the extra support needed.

We expect to be able to resume distributions, with confidence, in Tigray and in refugee camps in July, and in other regions as soon as possible afterwards. We are also working closely with the Government of Ethiopia, United Nations and NGO partners, and all of our donors to share the information and implement the reforms needed. We will keep you informed in real time.

A global review of WFP's operations is now under way to ensure that we have the strongest possible safeguards and support systems for all of our country offices. This must include clear mechanisms to escalate issues of concern and a direct line of accountability, including full transparency with you, our Board members. These measures are being rolled out, first, for WFP's high-risk operations, and this critical corporate initiative is the priority in the forthcoming 2024 management plan.

WFP relies on your trust and confidence to do our work. So, you have my word we will do whatever it takes to fix the issues that have come to light.

Excellencies, effective management of our resources is critical, and none more than managing and supporting WFP's most precious resource, our people. So, workplace culture is another key priority, for the organization and for me personally. With the challenges we face, it is vital we harness and develop the skills, talents and the ideas of every single employee. We are all one team, no matter where in the world we work, and everyone is welcome at WFP.

The organization has made good progress in gender parity, although the work continues, but we have more to do on anti-racism, disability inclusion and LGBTIQ+ issues. And it is not just a job for the Diversity and Inclusion Unit. Leaders throughout WFP must demonstrate our commitment to equality through our own behaviour. Donors rightly expect WFP to be an effective, high-performing organization which requires us to harness all the resources, both human and financial, we have at our disposal. Under my leadership, we will.

A commitment to collaboration also underpins the third part of our action plan. Scaling up partnerships to deliver solutions that tackle the root causes of hunger. If we can address the drivers of current humanitarian needs and invest in the solutions to stave off future crises, it will help narrow the funding gap and reduce demand over the long term.

This is vital in an era of strained budgets and economic turbulence. In many regions of the world the climate crisis is fuelling hunger as extreme weather becomes more frequent. So, it is critical we build support for adaptation and resilience programmes, enabling vulnerable communities to withstand floods, droughts and storms when they strike.

But we also need to scale up early warning systems and solutions to help us get ahead of the curve. We must also have better and more comprehensive systems for climate prediction, protection and resilience.



2023 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

These will help communities prepare and protect themselves ahead of time, when the threats are looming on the horizon. It will require expertise that goes way beyond WFP. So, forging newer and deeper partnerships across sectors and industries has to be the way forward. There is much more WFP could be doing with the private sector in terms of innovation, science and technology. We have to be a lot more ambitious and partner with cutting-edge companies that can help us develop the smart innovations that will help build resilience and reduce hunger.

Closer collaboration with our existing partners, especially our Rome-based agencies, and across the wider United Nations system is also vital. WFP can offer its global field presence and operational expertise to help other agencies deliver on their mandates. We will achieve far more together than we ever will working alone in silos.

So, it is time for all of us to pull together as one united team. We also need to be clear about what WFP does and does not do. We must maintain our excellence in emergencies and avoid spreading ourselves too thin. More effective collaboration with our humanitarian and development partners will help ensure we are working and contributing where we deliver the greatest impact and enable us to use our limited resources as efficiently and effectively as possible.

As I said earlier, the entire humanitarian system faces the same unprecedented challenge, how to meet the soaring needs with dwindling financial resources. We are all in this together and we must work together to find creative solutions to the global hunger crisis.

Excellencies, I want our time together this week to mark the start of a new dialogue between WFP leaders and the Executive Board, one based on a spirit of genuine partnership and collaboration where we join forces to achieve our common goals: sharing the credit for our many successes, and sharing the responsibility when there are solutions to find and obstacles to overcome.

This is what I offer you today, and you have my personal commitment to openness and honesty and the highest standards of transparency and accountability as I lead WFP forward. I am confident that together we can and we will succeed in transforming the lives of millions of the world's most vulnerable people, not just giving them food for today but hope and opportunity for a better tomorrow.

I look forward to working with all of you to achieve your shared ambition and to spending time with all of you over the next five days. Thank you and have a pleasant day.

