

2025 annual session of the Executive Board

Hybrid session

Special address by Tom Fletcher, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator

T. Fletcher, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: Thank you so much. I am thrilled and grateful to be here. To the question from the President, I can give you the short version on constructive engagement, and it is a full A++ for WFP. We could not hope for stronger allies, more vision, creativity, determination to lead this sector through this tough moment we find ourselves in. But I will give you the longer version of that as well. It is lovely to see you all.

Cindy, it is the first day of my visit to DRC. This is a country that you know better than any of us and where more than any other United Nations leader, you have championed the cause of the people of DRC over many years now and really ensure that we maintain this focus and attention on the needs. It is a great pleasure to be here and to be supporting WFP's work in country, but also I hope, through this session, to be supporting WFP's work at the global level.

Now, as I am sure you have been discussing, this is a very tough time to be doing our work. It is a tough time to be a humanitarian. We can all see what is happening around us, but it is the invisible crisis which is not being seen by the world right now, the fact that the number of people in need is increasing, more people facing hunger, more conflicts, and of course a hotter planet than ever before.

And all of that before the events of the last few days, which I am sure have been on your minds in this conversation. The Middle East teetering on the brink of a wider war, people in Gaza starving, girls in Afghanistan banned from school, women in Sudan experiencing horrific violence, their bodies turned into battlegrounds by weak, insecure, cowardly men, and their suffering met with indifference and impunity.

Those are the twin themes, really, that I have experienced in these last six, seven months globally, indifference and impunity. All of us are determined that they will not be how this age is remembered. Of course, you will have also thought about the many other crises in which WFP is leading the effort – Haiti, Yemen, Sahel and many, many more.

If all of that was not enough, humans are, of course, right now at war with the planet as well. In moments of idealism, I dream about the peace processes of the future, peace with our ancestors, which will be about healing the wounds of history and inherited conflict, as Carl just touched on, and these conflicts which really drive the needs that we face.

Peace with our descendants, which means handing on the skills and values to deal with the challenges around us. Peace with technology, but also peace with our planet, perhaps the greatest peace process of all.

Bringing it back to the immediate, of course, we are overstretched, we are under-resourced, as we all know painfully well at the moment, and we are literally under attack. I really do want to pay tribute to your colleagues who, I cannot say more than anyone in the United Nations system, because someone will write that down and I will get into trouble with the different agencies, but as much as anyone in the system are out there facing that danger every day, hitting those checkpoints.

Every meeting we have where we talk about the risks, it is Cindy McCain who says we are ready to roll, who says we are going to get those trucks moving, we are determined to run those risks and get that support through. I think all of us recognize the sacrifices that that entails, and the courage of the leadership as well as the courage of the people on the front lines.



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I am conscious that WFP has again been literally in the firing line in Sudan earlier this month in that deadly attack in El Fasher, and yet continues to think, well, how do we get the next convoy through? That is the spirit that we need across the humanitarian system right now.

Let me finish up on the context and then talk a little bit about WFP's role in, as Cindy described, the humanitarian reset, and then briefly the asks that I think we all have of Member States.

The reset right now is in response to the most brutal cuts that the sector has experienced in generations. Now, I think it is important to recognize that American funding has saved hundreds of millions of lives over the years, and that the US has really led the world in its humanitarian response. I think it is important that we acknowledge that before jumping straight to the implications of funding cuts, but also that we recognize that it is not just the US right now which is pulling back from much of that humanitarian leadership. And WFP, as you all have been discussing, is profoundly affected by these cuts, and millions now at risk of not receiving your vital food assistance this year.

What we are doing across the sector, across the IASC, which brings together the United Nations family and our humanitarian partners, international NGOs, local NGOs, are four things which I remember as four Ds. The first is to define even more clearly why we are here, and define even more clearly the lives that we could save this year. And so we have hyper-prioritized the global humanitarian overview.

Down from 310 million people who still are in dire need, to the 190 million that we prioritized back in December, and now looking at the 114 million that are in most urgent need of our support in the coming year. Now, we do not do that with any relish, and we do not do that because the needs have gone away, but we do that because we are trying to save as many lives as we can with the money that we have.

And that hyper-prioritization also means a more ruthless, and I choose that word carefully because these are brutal choices, but a more ruthless approach then to the work that we can carry out. And it will not surprise you to hear that WFP's work is absolutely at the heart of that life-saving component of what we do, and will remain at the heart of that prioritization.

The second D is about delivery. It is about delivering more efficiently, more effectively, taking the layers out of our system. It is not a perfect system, but it is doing extraordinary things and, in the sector and the leadership of the United Nations agencies, we want to reform ourselves because we care about the work we do. We want to be as effective, as efficient as possible, to bring innovation into the heart of what we do, to constantly look at how we can ensure more resources are reaching the communities we serve. So, that is the delivery bit.

The third aspect is devolve. It is not such a great word, but it begins with D, so it goes in there as well. And here we are looking at how we can really build up our humanitarian country teams. I have just come from a meeting with the humanitarian country team here in Kinshasa, who are doing great work together to respond to the very specific challenges here in DRC. We want to make sure that as we reset the system, that a lot of that leadership is being driven in response to local context, that we are not imposing some great one-size-fits-all system on the different places we work, and that we are really listening to our local representatives.

In every HCT that I have visited – and I have been now in seven months, everywhere from Darfur to Damascus to Gaza to Kunduz, Kandahar, Kabul, Myanmar after the earthquake and across Ukraine, as Cindy has just been, on all those night trains – WFP's voice is absolutely crucial. It is often a loud voice, I say that as a compliment. It is a really influential voice in those boards, and will remain so.



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The other part of devolve is about pushing more power in the system towards community actors, towards local actors, trying to make sure that more of our resources is supporting those organizations, and that their voice is heard loudly in the allocation of resources.

Then the final D, to come back to something that Cindy and Carl both touched on, is about defend. How do we defend our humanitarian principles and values? In normal times we say those words and they probably sound like platitudes or like clichés. Of course, we want to defend our humanitarian values. But right now, this is not a drill. It is not just the finances that are under attack. It is these values.

So, whether we are talking about the rival ideas, places like Gaza and Sudan, or the direct attack on our values at the Security Council and in the field, it is more important than ever that collectively we are standing up for those values. And I would include in that the vital work that we are all doing and must preserve to protect the space for women and girls in the humanitarian sector.

I have touched a bit on where WFP is so crucial to that effort. The most important point I would like to underline is the leadership that actually Cindy and Carl and others at the top of the organization bring to those conversations. That powerful voice at the heart of the reform programme, but also constantly reminding us about why we are here and the importance of placing those we serve at the centre, the heart of all we do.

While we are all retaining in this process our very distinct brands, and there is no brand more powerful than WFP's in that conversation, we are also looking to see where we can do more behind the scenes to reduce duplication and to work together.

WFP is not just doing that through the IASC but also through the UN80 process, where we are part of a quint, I think we are calling it, but five agencies that are working particularly closely on UN80, the Secretary-General's reform programme, to see where we can pull together on shared supply chains, shared planning, shared premises, to make the sum greater than the parts.

Second, of course, a crucial area, is that no one can do what you do. No one else can deliver with the scale, speed and power that WFP does in so many parts of the world. That will not change. And I have seen it, as I say, in so many of these crises that I have visited, including here in DRC.

You have, of course, been recognized for that, quite rightly. My brief here says to mention the Nobel Prize in 2020, but I imagine you have probably mentioned that a couple of times already in the meeting, but we should mention it again.

I think it is also really important to note the work that WFP does in building that longer-term resilience community. I think as humanitarians, we are even more conscious now of the limits of what we can do, and the need to ensure that particularly in these areas where we are having to pull back from doing everything that we were doing because of funding cuts, that we end those programmes well, but that also we hand on to local actors, local government players, and leave that resilient system in place. WFP has been a real thought leader in that space about how best we do it, so huge thanks for that as well.

Then I think I would also like to note the work WFP does around innovation, and here in particular I am becoming more convinced that while we do not know what the sector will look like in four or five years, that a bigger component will be about multi-purpose cash and the way in which cash can give dignity and greater agency to communities. Again, WFP has been a real innovator in that space, as in so many others.

And then a final area I will just mention, specifically on WFP, is that as we think about the UN80 process, the logistics powerhouse that you represent becomes even more important, and we are



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looking for big ideas right now for the sector. We are all conscious of the need for radical reform across the United Nations and, personally, it seems to me that WFP will play an even more important role in underpinning the rest of the sector as it responds to the humanitarian challenges out there, thinking about the supply chains, the logistics, the UNHAS flights, and so on.

I have been determined, in my conversations with donors, to talk about those enablers and WFP's crucial role in delivering that space for the rest of us. No one else can come close to doing that work. And in a world where we should all be doing the things we do uniquely well, WFP has a strong flag in that space.

I will close there, except just to underline, and I think these will track with the closing comments Carl just made, some of our asks of Member States.

One, please continue to back us up on these humanitarian principles, and not just to do it in abstract terms, at the theoretical level, but to pick up the phone and call the countries who are killing our workers, who are denying us access, who are preventing us from delivering for the communities we serve. Call them up, call them out in public, and pick up the phone to them as well. Be direct.

Do please continue to hold us to account and join us in this effort to avoid the militarization of aid. I worry that if we concede space in one crisis area, then we concede it everywhere on the militarization of aid, and we will see the undermining of the principles around what we do and the protection of civilians.

Do please continue to champion protection of our aid workers. Do please continue to be vigilant about the operating environment in which we are working, disinformation, misinformation, the way that artificial intelligence does not just change the craft of what we do, but the operating environment in which we work.

Please, of course, continue to give us political support when we come under political attack as well as physical attack. Member States have been superb on this front at the Security Council and elsewhere in recent months.

And, finally, and I think this is probably the one point you could have anticipated me raising, please continue to provide generous, multi-year, flexible funding for WFP and the other humanitarian agencies and our humanitarian partners as we respond to these huge needs out there and as we continue to deliver on your behalf.

So, a huge thank you for this chance.

