

2022 first regular session of the Executive Board

Virtual session

Opening remarks by the Executive Director

D. Beasley, Executive Director: Thank you, Mr President. I have been predicting for the last year that things are really going to get worse and, just when we thought it could not get worse than our forecasts, we have a situation like Afghanistan and now Ukraine. The challenges we face are getting more complex than ever and we are facing uncertainty beyond anything I think any of us have seen in our lifetimes.

Let me touch first on Ukraine. We have got teams on the ground, as we speak, in Ukraine and Kyiv. We are moving them out of harm's way right now. But we also have teams on the ground in Poland and we are setting up teams in all the border countries. We have convoys moving in now toward the border areas. We are preparing to step up in a very significant way inside Ukraine as well as in the border areas, working with our many different partners.

We also are in the process of discussing with all parties concerned inside Ukraine to deconflict wherever possible to minimize the risk of harm to our people as they work to reach as many people as possible. This is going to be an expensive operation, as you can imagine. If the numbers scale up, as we are preparing for in several different ways - whether it is a million people or three million or five million - we have the capacity to do this.

We work in conflict areas. We know how to scale up, we know how to do it safely and we know how to reach people. In fact, we reached a million people in Ukraine itself just a few years ago, as many of you on this Board are familiar with.

Beyond the situation inside Ukraine, I have also got some grave concerns about how this will impact our global supply as well as our global operations. For example, 80 percent of all sunflower oil is exported from the Ukraine/Russia region. 20 percent of all maize is exported from that region. 30 percent of all wheat is exported from that region. Just over 50 percent of all WFP wheat grain comes from Ukraine. But 85 percent of all of Ukraine's exports go through the Black Sea - so instability in the region could have a hugely damaging impact.

We do not expect there to be a supply problem, we expect there to be a significant cost problem. Already, pre-Ukraine, we were looking at additional operational costs - because of COVID's ripple effects - of USD 42 million to USD 50 million per month, due to increased shipping costs, increased commodity costs, fuel costs, etc., etc.

Now with the Ukraine conflict - we are doing the analysis - but it could be anywhere from an additional USD 100 million to USD 500 million in increased costs of operation. The very difficult problem with that is that we are already USD 9 billion short for 2022 in terms of funding to reach all the people that we feel we need to reach.

You have heard me use these numbers before: we had 80 million people marching towards starvation five years ago when I arrived. Then right before COVID, that number had gone from 80 million to 135 million, because of man-made conflict and climate change, the two most dominant factors. Now, after two years of COVID and its damaging economic effects, that number has risen to 276 million people, as we speak, in IPC phases 3, 4, 5. Out of that, 44 million and 38 countries are, in fact, at IPC phase 4, which means they are knocking on famine's door and, as I had said over a year ago, if we do not reach these people, we will see famine, destabilization and mass migration.

We have been able to avert famine because many of you have stepped up in ways you have never stepped up before. But, at the same time, we were not able to reach everyone that needed assistance. Now, look what has happened in the Sahel. There has been destabilization in Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali and hunger rates are soaring. This is just a sign of things to come if we do not receive the funds that we need.



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Now, 50 percent of Lebanon's wheat comes from Ukraine. 42 percent of Tunisia's grain/wheat comes from Ukraine. And I could go on and on. So, you see, there is going to be an immediate ripple effect and a consequential indirect effect felt by many nations. This will also impact commodity prices and food prices for the average consumer in many countries around the world. We were already experiencing empty shelves and problems in many countries prior to the Ukraine development and we are only going to see it exacerbated.

I am just praying to God that we do not have another catastrophe, whether it is an earthquake or a massive volcano eruption when our people are already spread so thin around the world. If you have never believed in praying, it might be a good time to start.

Also, as countries consider sanctions, I would ask you to please consider unintended consequences to minimize the potential impact on humanitarian operations. I have got my Deputy Chief of Staff and Chief of Staff, they are now working on the border areas of Ukraine. Corinne Fleischer, who is our Regional Director for the whole Middle East area, she will assume corporate responsibility for Ukraine. Jakob Kern, who has extensive experience in emergency operations, he will be our emergency leader on the ground. We have got an excellent team in place that I have no doubt will make certain that we achieve everything we can and to minimize obstacles in the way.

Everybody loves the World Food Programme because we get it done. Now, when you get it done, sometimes you step on toes because we do not tolerate obstacles getting in the way of saving the lives of people. So, please, work with us and help us be as strategic as we can and help us raise the monies that we need. Because just to feed 3.1 million people over the next six months will cost over USD 450 million, and that number is going to be a variable. That is just our plan of work inside Ukraine itself - there are going to be a lot of variables over the next few months. Who knows how this is going to unfold even over the next few days?

Last year we reached about 128 million people. This year we want to scale that up even more, of course, because of the global crisis that we are facing due to the perfect storm of conflict, climate, COVID and now costs increasing even further with Ukraine. But you can imagine the scale of the challenges we are facing. For example, in Yemen, right now we have a significant funding gap, an 81 percent funding gap. We have been feeding 13 million people. As of now we have cut 8 million people down to half rations. They will be cut to zero rations in about two weeks without substantial new funding.

In Afghanistan we have a 65 percent funding gap. In South Sudan, we have an 80 percent funding gap, and we expect to cut 6 million people to half rations across the country unless we can raise more funds. Ethiopia, a 90 percent funding gap. Syria, a 64 percent funding gap. In Chad alone, we are only reaching 50 percent of the people we need to reach and that 50 percent is getting half rations. In Niger, half rations. So, you can see why we are concerned.

What I hope we do not do, to keep all those in IPC phase 4 alive, is take from the hungry to give to the starving. That means that those in IPC phase 3 will then begin to move into IPC phase 4. That is my gravest concern at this stage, given what we are facing.

We all know what happens when we do not act in advance. I know the Ambassador from Germany heard me talk about this the other day. Germany did a study that showed 1 million refugees from the Syrian conflict cost Germany the equivalent of USD 125 billion over five years. That is about 70 euros per day per beneficiary versus that same Syrian who, if we were reaching them inside Syria, could be supported for 50 cents a day. And we know from the fact that we feed between 120 and 130 million people on any given day, week or month, and speak to them all the time - we know that they do not want to leave home if they have any degree of food security and peace.

So, it is a lot cheaper to reach people at home than it is to wait for it to be too late. And then you end up with the possibility of famine, destabilization as well as mass migration. Dealing with these crises costs a thousand times more than reaching people before they leave home.



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I will be going, by the way, to the Ukraine/Poland border Thursday. I will be leaving here because I think it is so critical that we get the visibility we need to give assurances to the donors that we are prepared and ready to do everything we possibly can.

Now, just in the last week, I was in Chad, Niger, Ethiopia and Benin. And one of the things I have observed, when you give us the flexibility with your funding, is that we can do so much more than just a general food distribution. In many places, when we do general food distributions, we can be doing them for the next 50 years versus if we have the flexibility to invest in resilience programmes.

I will give you an example from Chad. In a little village outside Boli, there were 300 people WFP was supporting there on an everyday basis for about USD 50,000 for the year. We brought together 30 women who put together a cooperative. We put down a water well system, giving them the irrigation and all the things they needed to produce their own food for about USD 37,000 on a one-time basis, versus USD 50,000 a year. These women are now not just feeding their families, feeding the entire village, but also selling into the marketplace, and their families are able to buy medicine and clothing. That is what we should be doing to end hunger in places like Chad.

Same thing in Niger. I was at a place very vulnerable to ISIS and Al Qaeda, who were only 10, 15 miles away. And you have heard me talk about this before. When vulnerable communities do not have the food they need because of a variety of reasons, here because of climate change especially - well, these extremist non-state actors use food or medicines as a method or a weapon of recruitment. And I have had so many mothers tell me - my husband, my son, did not want to join but we had not fed our little girl in two weeks, so what were we to do?

And so in Niger we had put down, in this particular place where we feed about 1,000 people, a well and irrigation system, for about USD 70,000 - versus USD 100,000 a year to feed that village. That's USD 70,000 on a one-time basis versus USD 100,000 per year every year.

So, we have got solutions - if we can get the funds to implement them. In the Sahel region, just in Niger, for example, over the last seven or eight years, we have rehabilitated over 190,000 hectares of land. Across the Sahel, 270,000 hectares in the last three years. Now, the reason I mention it is, if we continue to rehabilitate land, then by 2030, the government in Niger will have reached 60 percent of their carbon or greenhouse gas emissions reduction target. Just by what we are doing with our beneficiaries. Absolutely amazing.

If we rehabilitate these acres of land that we are talking about, it is remarkable - greening the country up, providing greater sustainability and resilience. And if you come in on top of that with a school meals programme, and on top of that with healthcare and nutrition services, they can start taking care of themselves. There is no organization doing more to green up the planet than the World Food Programme.

Our beneficiaries - who are paying the price for what we are facing in climate change - the poorest of the poor, they are the ones doing the most to green up earth again. Just in the past few years, we have rehabilitated over three million acres around the world, put in 107,000 water ponds, built 81,000 kilometres of feeder roads, 26,000 kilometres of irrigation canals. It's an incredible success story and we want to do a lot more of this.

Now, let me move on from our saving lives, changing lives agenda to touch on a couple of internal issues real quick. When I arrived here five years ago, some of the priorities I identified included the expansion of cash programmes, speeding up digitization and increasing gender parity.

On cash transfers, just in the past five years we have gone from distributing USD 800 million a year to USD 2.3 billion. That provides liquidity in local economies, helping the smallholder farmers in the region, giving greater borrowing power and independence - particularly to women, who are the ones most empowered by these opportunities.



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Digitization was another priority because we all want to make certain that we can assure our donors that the dollars, the vouchers, the commodities are going to the people that are the intended beneficiaries. We have gone from 9 million identities registered in WFP's SCOPE database to over 83 million in just the past five years.

Gender parity. I have heard people talk about gender parity around the world for the last 20 years and it just shocks me how people talk about it and talk about it and talk about it, but do not do anything about it. So, when I arrived at the World Food Programme, I was determined to take action – even though we operate in some of the most challenging countries in the world where women do not have sufficient rights.

Well, let me give you an exciting number amidst all the bad news today. We have hired, and put on our payroll, an additional 3,390 women. In the global WFP workforce we have gone from 34 percent women employees to 42 percent, in just the past four years. Now, that is real action. That is the World Food Programme. We set goals, objectives, benchmarks, measurables and we execute and deliver. So, I am very proud of our teams around the world. We still have more work to do but, imagine, with 3,390 additional women, in the next five to ten years the experience they get, which means when a job opening comes up at any level, we have got an extensive pool of talented women and men with the experience required to apply.

We have gone from USD 5.8 billion in funding when I arrived to USD 9.8 billion in terms of monies being raised. That is great news, but the sad news is that because of the perfect storm I have described to you today, we are still far short of what we need.

Finally, I want to say thank you to the Board for your support. Our team is here to work with you. As I have said before, if you have a problem with anything we are doing, we will either explain it or we will correct it. That is simple. But, folks, 2022 is going to be a very difficult year.

I ask you to go back to your capitals to beg for more money. I will be working with you in that regard. And please give us more flexibility because the World Food Programme, in my opinion, is doing more to keep peace on the earth and to green up the earth than any organization that I know. And we could not do it, and would not have done it, had it not been for your tremendous support, your holding us accountable and also inspiring us as we move forward. So, Mr President, thank you.

