Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Closing of the 2021 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS)

Geneva, 25 June 2021, 15:00-17:00

Statement by Ms. Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Vice-President of the ECOSOC and Chair of the Humanitarian Affairs Segment

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have almost concluded this year’s ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment under the title of “Strengthening humanitarian assistance to face the challenges of 2021 and beyond: mobilizing respect for international humanitarian law, inclusion, gender, innovation and partnerships”.

Throughout the three high-level panels and the side events, we heard from Member States, humanitarian partners, including essential local partners, affected populations and others, on complex and increasing challenges. More importantly, we also heard about the progress, innovation, and how the humanitarian community has adapted and reached for solutions in the face of rising humanitarian needs and constraints on humanitarian operating space.

Undoubtedly, our deliberations came at a key moment in the world’s history. Conflict, climate change and the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic are creating levels of humanitarian suffering and need that are hard to fathom – and frankly are unacceptable.

Over the last year, we have seen enormous and rapid change, and it continues to change rapidly. In fact, as we started this week, there were new projections for food security risks alone. We were reminded during the Transition Event and throughout the Segment that more than half a million people are already in famine and 41 million people are at risk of famine. All told, some 238 million people require humanitarian assistance this year and they need our solidarity, generosity, and importantly political commitment to act now.

Let me thank you all for your valuable contributions to the Humanitarian Affairs Segment (HAS). Allow me to highlight some observations and concrete action-oriented recommendations, drawing from our excellent panel discussions and side events during the course of this week.
A key overarching action point is that in the face of global, interconnected and multiple crises, we must stand and work together to urgently address the immediate humanitarian needs while tackling underlying vulnerabilities to conflict, climate change, inequalities, development disparities, and increasing disease risk. We must be proactive, innovative and agile. Everything short of this unity will lead to more suffering, more lives lost and missed opportunities for a better future for us and the generations that follow us.

First, the ECOSOC Transition Event, co-chaired with Ambassador Kyslytsya of Ukraine, and the HAS took place during a time of great food insecurity in the world. Famines are all but a declared reality for hundreds of thousands of people and a tragic outlook for millions more. Famine is man-made. Which also means they can be “man-unmade”. More than ever, respect for International Humanitarian Law must be guaranteed and upheld. Member States and parties to conflict must take all measures necessary to promote, respect and ensure respect for International Humanitarian Law, international human rights law and international refugee law. Member States and parties to conflict must allow and facilitate the rapid, unimpeded and sustained access of impartial humanitarian assistance. The message was clear: adherence to Security Council resolution 2417 is imperative. And Member States and humanitarian organizations must also place protection at the center of humanitarian action.

We must also invest in early warning and data and acting upon it is urgently needed – backed up by urgent funding to meet not only food needs but also protection, health, water and sanitation, and logistic requirements. We need to also invest in reducing risk, vulnerability and need that is contributing to food insecurity, across humanitarian, development and peace efforts.

Second, during the discussion on “Health care in times of COVID-19” we were reminded that the pandemic is far from being over and its public health and socio-economic effects will continue to be felt in humanitarian settings. The impacts of the pandemic are here to stay for some time.

For the long term, Member States must better prepare for the next major crises – future pandemics or otherwise. Being ready for crises will enable a timely and agile response, a response that deals with problems before they spiral out of control.

For the immediate term, we must use all tools at our disposal to stem the tide of the pandemic. This includes:

- To further scale-up, stay and deliver and reinforce humanitarian delivery systems that engage and reinforce local communities and enable access to and by people in need.
- To provide urgently equitable access to vaccines, particularly through the COVAX facility.
- To fully respect International Humanitarian Law especially where health systems are weakened by years of conflict. International Humanitarian Law must be drawn upon to ensure that specific groups are included in health preparedness and response plans, including people displaced, detained, or living in areas under the control of non-state armed groups.
- Appallingly, humanitarian and health care workers are increasingly a target. We need to do more to address impunity and ensure accountability for serious violations of International Humanitarian Law and explore new ways of promoting such accountability. We must all uphold Security Council resolution 2286.
- And we heard the indispensable role of local actors and communities which we must actively support and enable to be at the center of preparedness and response.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Third, innovation and data are game-changers for the humanitarian sector and have been heavily relied upon in the response to COVID-19. We heard from speakers about ways the international humanitarian system can better include the capacities and capabilities of national and regional actors in mounting responses that reflect more accurately actual needs.
We now need to invest more in bringing together humanitarian organizations, states, civil society, academia and the private sector to collect, analyze, and act on data in our humanitarian response.

The enormous potential of using new tools and techniques must be balanced with measures to prevent their misuse. We must especially ensure that we protect the privacy and data of affected people when deploying technology in humanitarian action.

Fourth, the climate crisis is one of most pressing issues for our generation and we heard that it is an existential threat for small-island developing states. Increasingly frequent and intense disasters will challenge the capacity of the humanitarian system to effectively respond and reach those in need. IFRC has assessed that by 2050 the number of people in need of humanitarian need due to climate-related disasters will double. This is staggering. Climate fuels displacement, food insecurity, water shortages, disease, drought, competition over limited resources, and insecurity. And we heard clearly the call that world leaders must be bolder at COP 26 and take concrete action in line with the Secretary-General's ambition.

Technology and data enable us to better predict disasters, especially climate-related disasters. Innovation allows us to take actions to prevent or mitigate potential disaster impacts before a shock or before acute impacts are felt. This anticipatory approach has been proven to offer a faster, more efficient (cost-effective), and more dignified response.

It is time to move beyond the piloting stage for collective anticipatory action and scale it up, to cover more people, countries and sectors and a wider variety of hazards. To make the best use of the efficiency gains anticipatory action offers, we need the political will and concrete action to increase flexible, coordinated, and predictable ex-ante financing, including through existing humanitarian pooled funds such as CERF. We need to mainstream anticipatory action in national disaster management systems and make pre-agreed financing a default by 2030 so that we leave no one behind.

Fifth, throughout the deliberations this week, including during the high-level event on gender equality, we heard about the leadership demonstrated and the importance of women and women's-led organizations in decision-making, and in designing and executing humanitarian response.

Women and girls are disproportionately and negatively impacted in humanitarian crises. This is true whether we talked about food insecurity or data or gender-based violence. At the same time, women are also often the first responders and leaders in humanitarian response. We heard this very clearly from the voices of affected people just this afternoon. Meaningful consultation and participation of women and girls from affected communities must be embedded in all humanitarian guidance and response.

Furthermore, we heard that we can and must do better for women and girls, especially to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. It’s shocking that when we all know that children and women are particularly affected by the current crises, as of today, we managed to fund only 7.1 percent of gender-based violence requirements. More and better-quality funding is required along with improved support to local actors and women led organizations.

Sixth, throughout the week, we heard that the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that the role of local actors – particularly women’s led organizations – are on the frontlines of humanitarian response and are often delivering in the last mile. We need to step up, provide the necessary predictable and flexible funding, we need to facilitate their central role in decision-making and planning, create partnerships for preparedness and response, and ensure that they are better represented at all stages of the humanitarian program cycle.
Humanitarian and health workers have been killed, attacked, and threatened. The situation grows worse especially for local actors. I call upon international actors – both donors and international humanitarian agencies – to burden share more risks with local actors, including building in funding for their security.

Seventh, never has a call to action for emergency education been so critical than now to avoid a lost generation. Immediate action is needed to prevent millions of children from never returning to school, particularly adolescent girls. We must support gender sensitive strategies to ensure a safe and inclusive return to school for all children, including pregnant girls, girl mothers, and girls who may have been married during the pandemic. And in situations of counter-terrorism operations, children deserve particular attention and must be protected.

Eighth, while we have a very effective humanitarian system and while most donors are increasingly generous, the gap between needs and financing available to meet those needs is growing. We heard steps are needed now for increased flexible and predictable funding and for more countries to step up in providing humanitarian funding.

Finally, I urge you review the conclusions and recommendations that will be shared through the website for all of the side events held this week as they set out clear action points, which amplify many of the elements I have mentioned today, including on protection of displaced children, mental health and psychosocial support, education in emergencies, accountability and sexual exploitation and abuse, access to COVID vaccines, protection for people on the move, young people with disabilities, locally-led gender transformative actions in the face of climate change, protecting children in situations where counter-terrorism approaches are being implemented.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

These recommendations and achievements of this year wouldn’t have been possible without the contribution of all of you and the commitment you give the humanitarian affairs segment of ECOSOC and the importance that it deserves.

I would like to pay a special tribute to the humanitarian community – to all those who are working on the ground to respond in these unprecedented times, and in unprecedented way, in the most difficult of circumstance, and often whose lives are threatened and at risk – I thank you sincerely on behalf of the ECOSOC membership and myself. Your professionalism, and dedication in the most harrowing of circumstances to work with people alongside affected communities deserves the international community’s active support today.

I would like also to express a sincere gratitude to Mr. Ramesh Rajasingham, the Acting Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, our colleagues in OCHA, the Department of General Assembly and Conference Management (DGACM), and the UN Office in Geneva (UNOG). They have done a tremendous job in preparing the program for discussion and enabling us to meet in this hybrid format – a first for ECOSOC HAS.

Our work does not stop here. Echoing the voices of the inspiring speakers today, we need to continue supporting humanitarian workers on the ground and turn our recommendations into action. Thank you.