Overview:

UNICEF organized the side event “Water under Fire in Central Sahel: Protecting Access to Basic Services” on the margins of the Ministerial Roundtable on Central Sahel, co-chaired by Denmark, Germany, the European Union, and the United Nations. The event gathered leading voices from affected communities and key WASH actors to explore ways of improving our ability to predict and prepare for water-related crises. It built upon the thematic tracks of basic services and protection, featuring case studies of humanitarian and development action that is agile, conflict-sensitive and risk-informed. This holistic approach – saving lives and alleviating suffering, while strengthening local capacity to be more resilient and better prepared – enables durable solutions and can support peacebuilding efforts.

Panelists included:

- Government representative, Mali: Dr. Faneke Dembele, Secretariat Permanent du Cadre Politique de Gestion de Crises
- Youth representative, Niger: Ms. Abdoulaye Idani Kadiatou
- International NGO, Burkina Faso: Mr. Gustave Yamossou, Emergency Coordinator, Oxfam
- Local NGO, Burkina Faso: Mr. Assane Bokoum, WASH Coordinator, AGED

The panel was moderated by Mr. Allassane Traore, Solidarités International. Ms. Christelle Hure, Action contre la Faim, moderated the Q & A discussion. Mr. Manuel Fontaine, Director, UNICEF Office of Emergency Programmes, provided the opening framing presentation (see Annex 1) and closing remarks.

Context:

The Central Sahel is a region of tremendous potential and opportunity, where important progress has been made in reaching those in need and building resilience. Yet significant challenges remain. Today in the Central Sahel, 27 million people lack access to safe drinking water, 50 million are without access to adequate sanitation, and 18 million lack access to hand hygiene facilities at home. There are 6.7 million people, or 1 in 10, in need of urgent humanitarian WASH assistance. Weak sector governance and inadequate investment has led to inequities and poor-quality services, while population growth and rapid urbanization increase pressure on already limited WASH services. The Central Sahel is also among the most vulnerable places in the world to the effects of climate change, diminishing the availability of water resources amid increasing demand.

At the same time, the Central Sahel is experiencing an unprecedented upsurge in armed violence, driving the fastest growing displacement crisis in the world and rapidly escalating humanitarian needs. The inflow of displaced persons into host communities places even greater strain on already fragile WASH systems. In this context, access to safe and sustainable water is critical to deliver results across sectors, including food security, nutrition, health, education and protection.
Key themes:

In the face of the pressing challenges in the Central Sahel, the side event offered a poignant call to action to 1) put an end to attacks against water and sanitation points and the people providing these services, 2) strengthen the WASH sector so that it is able to provide quality and sustainable services in times of humanitarian crises; and 3) enhance the link between humanitarian and development action for increased investment in sustainable WASH systems that can contribute to addressing the root causes of the current crisis. The following themes emerged from the discussions:

**Water can serve as a catalyst for peace and sustainability for the Central Sahel.** The lack of access to basic services has been a major driver of the current crisis in the Central Sahel, creating a vacuum for armed groups to exploit. As we seek to operationalize the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, WASH services offer an important platform to strengthen social cohesion through a greater focus on equity and reaching the most marginalized. Ensuring durable solutions that meet emergency needs while supporting sustainable service provision through long-term investment in water resource management is a vital part of this process. However, WASH is among the most chronically underfunded sectors in the three Central Sahel countries and more resources are urgently needed to boost WASH capacity on the ground to make this a reality.

**Water is under fire, as provision and access to basic services is constrained amid rapidly increasing violence across the Central Sahel.** The surge in violence by non-state armed groups has meant that existing WASH infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and become unfunctional due to lack of maintenance, disruption of essential supplies (including fuel and necessary parts), and the displacement of technical staff fleeing the conflict. Attacks on water and sanitation infrastructure and on the people who deliver these vital services have also not received the same visibility as attacks on schools and health centres but represent serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL). In the context of unprecedented needs, the spreading violence makes it increasingly difficult to reach those in need, resulting in a devastating impact on communities and children across the Central Sahel.

**Localization can transform humanitarian action in the WASH sector.** By recommitting to strengthening local capacity, including at community level, and listening to local actors, we help ensure timely assistance to those affected by the crisis and contribute to durable solutions to the challenges in the Central Sahel. This is particularly true of young people, who are eager to be agents of change and understand the needs of their communities better than anyone. The large young populations of the Central Sahel are a tremendous asset, and we have the opportunity to mobilize and empower young people to engage at all levels, cementing their place at the forefront of durable, locally led solutions in the Central Sahel.

**We must invest in making the WASH sector more resilient and better able to act on early warning signs.** The Global WASH Cluster and UNICEF, in partnership with REACH, are spearheading an effort to develop a WASH Severity Classification Tool. This approach, which is being piloted in Burkina Faso, will enable a clearer understanding of the severity of WASH needs, will allow for early warning, and better prepares us to adapt our response in evolving contexts. It is an operational tool that uses a five-phase approach to quantify the number of people in need and classify the severity and drivers of WASH needs and vulnerabilities. Strengthening the resilience of the sector supports prepared and risk-informed WASH service delivery to ensure that we do not risk falling back on the hard-won gains and progress made on the ground.
Greater sustainability and affordability of WASH interventions requires a holistic approach, with greater linkages with interventions in other sectors. By expanding cash and social protection programming to better encompass and support WASH services, for example, both interventions can become mutually reinforcing, contributing to resilient, durable solutions that reach the most marginalized and enhance social cohesion.

The link between development and humanitarian action must be strengthened, including through greater mobilization of resources (both funding and human resources). Currently, humanitarians are asked to compensate for a lack of sustainable development that is a driving force being the crisis in the Central Sahel. For a safe, sustainable and peaceful future for the Central Sahel, development actors must intervene as early as possible — before, during and after a crisis — and humanitarians must commit to saving lives without endangering the systems in place, and rather strengthening them. In the WASH sector, documenting the negative impact of water scarcity on children and their families and on social cohesion more broadly can encourage more proactive, innovative, and flexible funding for the nexus in the Central Sahel. In the longer term, such support will help us continue our work to build stronger more equitable and resilient systems that can address the inequities and exclusions driving conflicts, and that support children and their families for the future — through and beyond the current crisis.