Excellencies, ladies, gentlemen and colleagues,

I have long held a deep conviction that, to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King, the arc of human history bends towards progress.

I am an optimist by nature, and by profession.

Health care, education, poverty, hunger and violence. Humanity has made tremendous gains in all these areas.

But my conviction in the inevitability of human progress has been shaken. The global megacrisis we face today are growing at a speed and scale that threatens to undo decades of hard-won progress.

We are seeing a surge in human suffering almost everywhere.

The number of people who need humanitarian assistance, we estimate over 300 million, of them, has never been higher.

Hunger and food insecurity are at unprecedented levels.

Already hundreds of thousands of people are on the verge of famine in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

The number of displaced people and refugees has just topped 100 million.

And women and girls are experiencing a shadow pandemic of violence and a rollback of their rights.

The rapidly escalating climate and ecological crisis is pouring more fuel on the flames, worsening hunger, poverty and inequality as it erodes humanity’s only life-support system.

And now the war in Ukraine has led us to a cost-of-living crisis, driving up the prices of fuel, fertilizer and food.

Combined, these factors are pushing millions more people into critical need.
The humanitarian system that should be ready to help, is already under immense strain.

But if my conviction in progress has been rattled, my faith in humanity’s ability to address even the most pernicious problems has not.

I have seen humanitarians pull off the near-impossible in the harshest conditions. I have seen peace suddenly flourish in the most intractable crises. And in recent years, collective action has prevented famine in South Sudan, Yemen and Somalia against the steepest of odds. Our help is reaching millions today and every day of the year.

But the scale of today’s megacrisis requires a new approach.

Humanitarian appeals currently total $46 billion. We usually receive just over half of that. Demands keep growing, aid budgets won’t. Clearly, we can’t go on like this, getting trapped in this cycle, year after year.

We urgently need to shift our tactics.

First, we need to see a free flow of food across the planet by making surplus stocks available and removing any blockages of trade in food and fertilizers.

Second, I feel very strongly that we need to be more accountable to the people we serve, to put their needs and priorities at the heart of everything we do. We must genuinely listen and change course, based on what affected people say.

Third, we must reject any artificial barriers that stop us finding solutions, and building resilience: the humanitarian, development and peace-making communities must work together and not let institutional distinctions get in the way.

Fourth, we need to work harder on humanitarian negotiations and access – Ethiopia, Central Sahel, Ukraine, Yemen. Access is not an on-off switch, it’s a continuous conversation. Our community is full of activists and leaders, capable of doing the hard work of negotiating and relationship-building that will ensure we reach the people most in need.

Fifth, the humanitarian sector must be as anticipatory as possible. Preparedness and early action not only protect lives and preserve people’s options but also reduce the financial cost of humanitarian action.

Last, I think it’s beyond time to allow a bigger role for local NGOs and aid agencies. They are the ones on the ground. Day in, day out, they are the ones confronting the extreme deprivations endured by millions upon millions of people. They stare suffering in the face every single day and they know what’s needed to make a real difference. We have spent years saying this. Now is the time to act, to build a new generation of humanitarian agencies that can help shoulder the burden of the world’s escalating crises.
Unless we act, and do so today, then I will be back here next year, clutching an even larger humanitarian bill, describing how the arc of history continues to bend in the wrong direction.

The hard-won gains of the last century hang in the balance. Human progress is no longer guaranteed. The priorities I’ve outlined here today have the power to change this, to reduce suffering and increase protection as we work together to address the root causes of today’s crises.

We know we can deliver a better future for all. Never has the need been greater.

Thank you.