

**Statement by Grete Faremo,
Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director UNOPS,
Executive Board of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS: Second regular session 2020
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Mr President, honourable representatives

It is a pleasure to speak with you, in this virtual format that we are now all too familiar with.

COVID-19

COVID-19 has become an undeniable reality of our lives and work.

It has come at a tremendous cost. And it is still accelerating around the world. From the loss of lives and livelihoods, to the continued strain on public health systems and economies. We will be dealing with the pandemic's consequences for a very long time.

I want to start by conveying my condolences to everyone who has been affected.

Particularly the families, friends and colleagues of all of those who have passed.

I am sure there are many of you here today.

At UNOPS, we have sadly lost two colleagues. They will forever remain in our memories.

In these unprecedented times, I am also immensely proud of the dedication and commitment of UNOPS personnel, especially those working in extreme and unpredictable situations, to assist nations in their response and recovery projects.

In total, UNOPS have agreed to deliver over \$400 million dollars worth of projects addressing the pandemic. These are on behalf of more than 38 partners, in over 50 countries.

They range from emergency response activities — procuring medical supplies, setting up temporary health infrastructure — to longer-term support strengthening national health systems, and mitigating negative socio-economic impacts.

To provide just two examples of support to governments in recent weeks:

In Ethiopia, with funding from the World Bank, we are helping to establish satellite connectivity for close to 1,500 schools across the country. This will allow students to resume learning, and to sit their national exams online.

And in Serbia, with funding from the European Union, we will issue more than a million euros-worth of grants to public healthcare institutions across the country, to cover salaries for medical and support workers in COVID-19 hotspots.

Midterm review

I will now turn to the focus of this session, UNOPS midterm review.

Over the first two years of our strategic plan, we have worked continuously to better understand the needs of our partners.

We redesigned our annual partner survey. It is now being carried out online by PWC, an independent, world-class service provider.

With your guidance we have also established a client board, made up of UN and external partners, to provide us with feedback on operational matters, as well as build on opportunities to grow our strategic partnerships.

In two years we have demonstrated our potential as an organization. Our delivery has reached record numbers and continues to grow. At the same time, through increased efficiencies, we have reduced our average fees, providing greater value for our partners. We are delivering more for less. And we are in demand.

As we reach the midpoint of our strategic plan, our review exercise has reconfirmed the strategic direction set by the Executive Board, that has been the foundation for these achievements. It has also demonstrated the viability of our demand-driven, self-financed business model.

An upcoming strategic milestone is the launch of our new treasury management system. Thanks to this system, the vast majority of our payments will now be managed from our Shared Service Centre in Bangkok.

This will enhance the transparency of our financial planning, increase accountability, and reduce transaction costs as well as the potential for errors and fraud. With fewer manual financial transactions in our country offices, our colleagues on the ground have more time to focus on serving our partners better.

Partnerships

Our efficient COVID-19 response is reflective of UNOPS becoming more professional and strategic in our support to existing partners.

Expanding partnerships with the World Bank and the European Union, for example, have allowed us to provide more effective responses to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, and support national recovery plans.

And we are diversifying, developing new partnerships to benefit more people in need.

For example, just a few weeks ago in Cameroon, we agreed a new partnership with the Islamic Development Bank, the government, UNDP and UNICEF, to help fast track the purchasing of emergency medical supplies.

Across Africa, with EU funding, we now also support the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. We will procure medical supplies and help build quarantine and isolation centres in refugee camps and migration response centres, in order to help alleviate the health and

socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

The principle is straightforward. We only act in partnerships. Together, we can do more. And we remain committed to building a better future on behalf of our partners across the full spectrum of sectors.

S3I

Now I will turn to the topic of our Sustainable Infrastructure Impact Investments (S3I) initiative.

We know that our world's development needs are huge. Public resources available to the SDGs fall far short of what is needed. The pandemic — as we all know — will severely exacerbate challenges. Countries also risk reversing much of the progress made so far.

Against this background, it is even more important than ever to bring together all the resources we can mobilize, and to create partnerships between the public and private sectors, to deliver on the SDGs.

Socio-economic recovery will require action at scale. Our S3I initiative does just that, by creating a space where public and private sector partners can work together on investor-ready infrastructure projects. We focus on affordable housing, renewable energy and health infrastructure.

Since my last S3I update to the Board, we have made more progress in this work.

Our affordable housing programme now covers a wide range of countries across the world: Antigua and Barbuda, Ghana, Guinea, India, Kenya, Nigeria and Pakistan.

In total, we have so far committed to help build more than 1.3 million affordable homes globally.

We have also made progress in our new base in Helsinki: We have completed our first round of recruitments for the team there, and the S3I office will be up and running before the end of 2020.

Of course, as you are aware, COVID-19 has disproportionately challenged infrastructure projects: Lockdowns have slowed our progress this year.

But we know that infrastructure is key to post-COVID economic recovery and job creation. And we are more committed than ever to our S3I initiative.

I hope you will all join me in backing this work and wishing this immense initiative every success.

Public procurement

Honourable members,

I also want to highlight UNOPS work supporting public procurement.

Public procurement accounts for 15-30 per cent of GDP in most countries. Its sheer scale means it can be a powerful force for change. What and how governments spend money on has a huge potential to create jobs, drive gender equality and reduce carbon emissions.

In many nations, we are helping governments to ensure that public procurement is more efficient, effective, and frees up resources for other national development needs. Importantly, we aim to build the capacity of public procurement institutions, so that countries continue to reap the benefits in the longer term.

To that end, in Mexico, for example, we have just set out on a ground-breaking partnership with the government and WHO to support the national procurement of medicines.

This is UNOPS biggest public procurement project to date – we are talking of billions of dollars worth of medicines and medical supplies. Its scale speaks to our commitment to helping governments reap the benefits and realise the potential that can be achieved through public procurement.

This will be a game-changer in Mexico's efforts to improve transparency and value for money.

UN procurement

Today I will also share updates on broader trends in UN procurement.

As you may know, on behalf of the UN system, UNOPS compiles an annual report of all procurement across the UN – the Annual Statistical Report.

The headline findings are this;

- Last year, the UN spent almost \$20 billion dollars on goods and services.
- More than 60 per cent of this figure — an all-time high of \$12.3 billion dollars — came from developing countries, countries with economies in transition, and least developed countries.
- Of this amount, \$3.9 billion were procured from least developed countries – an 11.4 per cent increase compared to the previous year.

Many more details are available in the report, freely accessible from our website. I encourage all Member States to read the report.

Quality infrastructure

Looking back on the past six months, the pandemic has shown us how fundamentally unequipped our world's infrastructure is to deal with a crisis of this magnitude. As we emerge, it is clear that we need to build infrastructure that can adapt and scale for changing contexts, from pandemics to the impact of a changing climate.

We continue our support to governments, to create resilient national infrastructure systems that are fit for an uncertain future.

In Ghana, together with our partners, the Global Center on Adaptation, UN Environment Programme and the University of Oxford, we are supporting the government to identify areas where infrastructure needs to adapt and to create a roadmap for change.

And we continue to push for infrastructure that serves gender equality. Infrastructure that considers and responds to the needs of women. Together with UN Women, we have published

new guidance on how to incorporate gender considerations into all aspects of infrastructure projects, so that we are one step closer to infrastructure that works for all.

Gender

Distinguished Board members,

As you are well aware, gender parity remains a key priority for UNOPS. As we speak, women represent 45 per cent of UNOPS personnel. In the first seven months of 2020, 56 per cent of our senior appointments have been women.

Our 2020 targets aim for women to make up 47 per cent of our personnel, which would place UNOPS within the fringes of gender parity.

However, over the recent months, the pandemic has reduced recruitment levels.

As of today, we expect this to be a challenging target to meet by the end of the year. We are currently about one per cent behind our target. But we will not lower our ambitions. As ever, I will continue my regular updates to the Board on this topic of critical importance.

UN reform

Gender equality is, of course, a fundamental pillar of UN reform.

UNOPS fully supports the reform process. We are active members of UN Country Teams.

Yet the reform process has not been without its challenges.

We have been clear in communicating our position on the funding compact. Our unique business model requires clarity for audit purposes. We also do not receive core funding, and we live off the fees we charge for our services, so we have to manage costs carefully.

We have now called for clearer guidelines on the coordination levy.

I will soon formally communicate the outcome of discussions on this to Member States.

UNOPS will temporarily facilitate levy payments, where it is applicable, according to Resolution 72/279. This is pending a needed adjustment to the UN Guidance Note, which provided the basis for the UNOPS position on the levy in the past. We look forward to DCO's leadership in this process of necessary change in 2021.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the past year has been truly extraordinary, in so many ways.

But as we mark the 75th anniversary of the UN, I want to end my speech by reminding us all why we are here: Because we are united by a vision for a better future.

And as we weather this storm, respond and recover, we should not lose sight of the future we want to build: a world that is equal, sustainable and resilient.

75 years ago, we knew that we could only build a better future if we work together. And that has not changed.

UNOPS stands ready — more determined and stronger than ever before — to support that vision. Together with our partners, for a better world for all.

Thank you.