

**Statement by Grete Faremo,
Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director UNOPS,
Executive Board of UNDP, UNFPA and UNOPS: First regular session 2021
4 February 2021**

Madam President,

Honourable members

Once again, it is a pleasure to engage with you.

And I would like to extend a warm welcome to the new members of the Executive Board.

COVID-19

COVID has been the dominating reality of our lives in 2020.

I want to start by extending my heartfelt condolences to those who have lost friends and family.

At UNOPS, since the last time we spoke we have seen cases rise.

As of today, we have sadly lost eight colleagues to this devastating pandemic:

Four members of UNOPS personnel and four colleagues who worked on behalf of our partners.

I am immensely grateful for the dedication and commitment of colleagues working in extreme and unpredictable situations, as part of UNOPS global response.

We were quick to adjust to this reality, and did so at scale.

Last year, UNOPS COVID response and recovery projects totalled nearly \$900 million dollars.

I already shared numerous examples of this work with you. More recent updates include;

- procuring and delivering medical supplies and equipment in Libya,
- expanding testing capacity and managing medical waste in the Gambia.
- helping pupils and teachers in Myanmar return to schools safely.
- procuring critical medical equipment in Georgia, and;
- supporting the procurement of drugs, medical supplies and equipment in Nicaragua.

This year, the scale and urgency of the task at hand remains unprecedented.

As we speak, immense vaccination exercises are being rolled out. Again we need action, on the ground, where it matters most. As ever, UNOPS stands ready to support.

Strategic plan

Partners have appreciated UNOPS' ability to pivot its operations and approaches, to provide solutions from emergency response to prevention, from logistics to reaching vulnerable communities in fragile settings, especially those in 'hard to reach' areas.

Estimates suggest a total delivery in 2020 of 2.2 billion dollars.

New agreements signed last year with our partners exceed 10 billion dollars.

We are humbled by the increased demand for our services in the coming years.

This represents a step change to our organization.

It demonstrates the continued relevance of our mandate, capacity and business model.

It demonstrates trust in our ability to meet the expectations of our partners.

UNOPS is a demand driven organization.

We are an operational entity, not a programmatic one. We deliver projects for a fee.

We take pride in understanding and responding to our partners' needs.

A significant part of our demand growth relates to support to the Government of Mexico. As shared with the Board in September, UNOPS is procuring medicines and healthcare equipment, to improve public healthcare nationwide. But we see a growing demand across all regions.

As we develop our Strategic Plan for 2022 - 2025, the lessons of 2020 will be paramount.

And based on our experiences and the valued inputs from our partners, we plan to further refine our approach, for the benefit of future generations.

We welcome the engagement to date from honourable members, and engagement to come.

Details of further opportunities to seek your views, advice and guidance, should be with you all.

And today I will outline our strategic vision, our focus areas.

Quality infrastructure

With our central mandate in infrastructure, we have strengthened our capability to champion the cause of quality infrastructure. This is key;

- to address and adapt to climate change,
- to protect society with zero tolerance in health and safety, and
- to deliver infrastructure that serves everyone equally.

We know that infrastructure is key to climate mitigation and adaptation.

In Small Island Developing States, such as Saint Lucia, and in countries such as Ghana and Bangladesh, we are helping governments in this work to improve national infrastructure, building resilience in the face of a changing climate.

With governments, the University of Oxford, UNEP and the Global Commission on Adaptation we are working to create partnerships that bring expertise, cutting edge research, tools and a strong operational backbone to help build sustainable, resilient and inclusive infrastructure.

We intend to expand our ability to support partners in adopting an evidence based approach to infrastructure planning and delivery.

We intend to scale our help to countries to deliver on a vision for their future infrastructure.

This vision is aligned with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement on climate change, which makes better use of limited resources, while providing opportunities to attract new financing.

Public procurement

Now let me turn to procurement.

As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc around the world, threatening lives and livelihoods and causing the deepest global recession since World War II, countries need to do more with less.

Public spending accounts for 15-30 per cent of GDP in many countries. The sheer scale of this purchase power makes it a force for change. Even minimal efficiency gains resulting in savings could contribute significant extra resources to drive sustainable development.

Our support to unlock the potential of public procurement has grown significantly. This work has immense potential; to tackle corruption, ensure fair competition, and build sustainable and resilient supply chains as part of the post pandemic economic recovery.

We remain committed to supporting governments in their journey to become more efficient and transparent, so that public resources go further, public services are dependable, and citizens can reap the benefits. To share three examples;

- In Guatemala, our support in fighting corruption and strengthening procurement capacities has led to estimated savings of \$270 million for the government. It is bringing improved public healthcare to millions of people, reaching those that need it most.
- In Mexico, we supported the government to promote transparency and effective competition in the bidding process for Mexico City's public transport system. The result was a more transparent process, over \$120 million in savings for the government, and a more efficient, environmentally friendly public transport.
- And in Honduras, we have supported the government in procuring essential medicines and vital medical supplies, addressing critical shortages.

By supporting governments to achieve value for money, we can help ensure that more public funding is available to shift to low-carbon economies, implement national development priorities, and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Management focus

Distinguished members

With your guidance, UNOPS has grown and matured in recent years.

Numbers show positive trends. But I would argue that *how* we have grown is more important. Gender equality has been and remains a priority for UNOPS.

As we speak;

- 46 per cent of our workforce are women, up from 33 per cent at the start of our strategic plan.
- 41 per cent of our senior leadership roles are held by women, up from 36 per cent in the last year alone,
- In the coming months, we should reach the first of our gender goals: overall workforce parity.

We aim to reach parity at all senior leadership levels in the next four years, going beyond UN system wide targets, irrespective of personnel categories and contract modalities. And moving forward, we will ensure a broader, more diverse, and more inclusive approach.

On digitization, we continue to be deeply invested in improving our practices and streamlining processes, adopting new technologies and innovative practices in order to improve our operational capabilities.

Our decision to move IT tools to the cloud has decreased cyber security risks and threats. This made us more resilient. When COVID-19 hit, the transition to remote working was smooth. As we move forward, robust and professional management of the data we are entrusted with is key, including security, privacy and the rights and responsibilities of data ownership.

We continue to place great emphasis on managing our assets responsibly.

As we gather today, UNOPS is engaging with independent experts to align our minimum operational reserves to the current risk profile of our organization. Our goal is to be able to present our proposals regarding the reserves, so that the Board will be in a position to consider them in the context of our budget proposals and strategic plan.

Our move to automated and centralized treasury and cash management has been launched successfully. This is enhancing financial planning, and all of these steps are helping to provide

transparency to our operations and manage financial risks more effectively.

As we aim to improve as an organization, to become more efficient, resilient and sustainable, we believe bettering ourselves will ultimately offer better value to our partners.

Operational priorities

Now I will turn to our operations.

Quality has been core to everything we do, and will continue to be central to UNOPS services going forward.

We remain resolute in ensuring gender mainstreaming practices are applied across all relevant projects.

We will ensure that infrastructure considers and responds to women's needs, and that women are involved in infrastructure projects at all levels.

Be they managers, engineers, construction workers or beneficiaries, we know that when women have a say in infrastructure, they help make it more inclusive.

We will ensure that our procurement projects - and those that we advise on - continue to benefit women and other underrepresented groups.

From procuring from women-owned businesses, to working with governments and businesses, we will look to remove barriers to women's participation in the economy.

In addition, our enhanced focus on health and safety, through our "Goal Zero" approach, will also continue. This critical aspect of our work is showing positive results. Despite the challenges of 2020, more than 5,000 health & safety inspections were conducted across projects last year.

Partnerships

Ultimately, by becoming more efficient, we are maintaining low average fees for our partners, which over the last four years have been consistently below five per cent.

We are determined to continue enhancing the quality and depth of our work across the organization, while delivering value to our partners.

The strength of our partnerships translates into how effectively we can respond to needs. Again, our COVID-19 response is a case in point.

We were able to build on our longstanding partnerships, for example with the European Union or the World Bank, to help countries prepare, respond and recover. Again, I can share examples.

- Across eight African countries, we work to mitigate the health and socio-economic impact of COVID-19, among migrants, refugees, internally displaced persons and cross-border communities. Here, our work is funded by the European Union, in support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development.
- In Georgia, with funding from the World Bank, we are procuring a wide range of critical medical equipment and supplies. But our work goes beyond procuring and installing. We strive to also strengthen the capacity of the health system, for example by providing remote training.

Of course, many of the critical projects that predate COVID times, continue.

In Zimbabwe, also funded by the World Bank and working with multiple UN partners, UNOPS has been managing key recovery efforts in the wake of Cyclone Idai. Here, together, we aim to build back better, so that communities are more resilient to future hazards.

Another key element in our strategy to date has been to seek ways to serve as a bridge towards the private sector in order to expand the pool of financial resources beyond traditional ODA.

Following the Secretary General's Financing for Development strategy, we will continue our Sustainable Infrastructure Impact Investments journey, to bring resources and expertise from the private sector to address the immense challenges of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Conclusion

To conclude; across the world, 2020 will forever be a year marked in history.

It has made us rethink.

The way we live our lives, and how we work.

Today, I have shared with you a broad outline of our strategic direction.

The pandemic has taught us valuable lessons that will guide us, as we finalize our strategic plan for the coming years. Once more we stand ready to support our partners, without compromising quality, and in the most difficult situations.

I look forward to hearing your views, before I present this in more detail, alongside our budget estimates at the Second Regular Session in September.

Thank you.