**Chief Executives Board
for Coordination**

First regular session of 2021
New York (online), 4 May 2021

Summary of deliberations

I. Introduction

1.   The first regular session of 2021 of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) was held on 4 May 2021. Owing to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the session could not be held in person. It was instead held entirely as a videoconference and scaled down from one and a half days to four hours, with the Secretary-General chairing from New York.

2.   The session consisted of two segments, on the following themes: (a) the state of the world; and (b) addressing root causes of conflict. In the present summary, the main points of the session's deliberations are highlighted.

II. Segment 1 – state of the world

3.   The Secretary-General presented his analysis of the current state of the world. He expressed concern about the multilateral system's vulnerabilities in the face of formidable and interlinked challenges, in particular the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, cybersecurity and risks related to emerging technologies, nuclear proliferation, conflict, terrorism and organized crime. He identified a strengthened multilateral system and effective cooperation among global powers as prerequisites for addressing those enormous challenges.

4.   In that context, the Secretary-General warned that the pandemic recovery was accentuating the gap between rich and poor countries. Underscoring that growing inequalities could compromise trust among and within countries, which constituted the foundation of a constructive and functional system of international cooperation, he noted the role of the United Nations system in providing a platform for Member States to create the conditions for rebuilding a relationship of trust among global powers.

5.   In the subsequent discussion, the Board reflected on global economic trends, including international trade and debt, the impact of COVID-19 recovery efforts and the long-term implications of the pandemic. Principals reflected on rising inequalities stemming from the pandemic and from the divergence of available resources to assist

in the recovery from the pandemic. They also reflected on the risk that the pandemic posed to hard-won development progress and longer-term growth.

6. The Board echoed the Secretary-General's appeal to work together towards re-establishing trust among and within Member States and emphasized the linkages between the development and climate change agendas. The Board received updates from the Chairs of the CEB subsidiary mechanisms (the High-level Committee on Management (HLCM) and the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP)) on the Committees' coordination efforts in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

III. Segment 2 – addressing root causes of conflict

7. Over the past two decades, violent conflict has surged globally, while also becoming increasingly complex and protracted, threatening global peace and stability and sustainable development. In addition to the immediate harm caused, the resulting intensified fragility and overall human suffering, conflict and violence have been major obstacles to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. In recognition of the increasing complexity of conflicts and their inextricable link to development, the Board held a discussion on current and emerging root causes of conflict and the opportunities for and challenges to action to reverse the intersecting negative trends in support of conflict prevention, as well as the overall role of the United Nations system in the changing global landscape.

8. The Secretary-General recognized that a narrow approach to conflict resolution, focused only on the peace and security dimensions, was no longer appropriate. Rather, factors such as inequality and marginalization, including gender inequality and gender-based violence, fragilities arising from poverty and food insecurity and grievances over land and resources were often critical factors driving the onset and perpetuation of violent conflict. Megatrends such as demographic change, urbanization and digitalization were compounding existing vulnerabilities. Moreover, terrorism, human rights violations and sectarian and ethnic tensions were increasing, while climate change was a crisis multiplier in many conflicts.

9. The Secretary-General noted that international conflict management mechanisms were stretched, while geopolitical divides were making conflict resolution more difficult. Among citizens, trust was declining and anger was rising, resulting from a widening disconnect between States and their populations. The Secretary-General expressed concern that some countries were in a vicious cycle in which conflict bred poverty and fragility, which in turn decreased the resilience of their societies and the prospects for peace. He stressed that the prevention agenda needed to go beyond diplomatic and security matters and incorporate sustainable development, humanitarian action and human rights. It should also be integrated into United Nations decision-making in an interconnected manner to address the sources of instability and conflict.

10. Presentations were given by the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, and writer, political analyst and activist Nanjala Nyabola. The Deputy Secretary-General highlighted, as an example, the complexity of the situation in the Sahel.

11. In the ensuing discussion, CEB members underscored the increased complexity of conflicts, noting that fragmentation at the local level and lack of agreement between influential powers constrained the space for action by the United Nations system. Conflicts were increasingly affected by regional dimensions, as the number of parties to a conflict grew, with risks spilling across borders; therefore, it was important to provide early warning and support to neighbouring countries. Conflicts

were also more protracted, with some consisting of a vicious cycle of violence and violation of basic norms, signalling a breakdown of trust among belligerents and between populations and their Governments, leading to significant protection challenges. Those developments tested the basic concept of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian actions as they became obstacles to access to populations.

12.   At the same time, there was concern that humanitarian actors, including United Nations system entities, were increasingly becoming targets in conflicts, including when providing basic services, which raised difficult questions about how to engage with actors in conflict situations. The point was stressed that, in many cases, optimal solutions could not be achieved; however, suboptimal solutions could translate into real improvements to the lives of affected populations.

13.   CEB members were concerned that risks were exacerbated by illicit economic activities and terrorism, which filled vacuums where the State was fragile. In some circumstances, there had been inappropriate use of military force, which was counterproductive and did not resolve conflict, but instead inflamed it.

14.   The Board recognized the interconnectedness of peace and security, sustainable development, human rights and humanitarian action, and that addressing root causes of conflict required working together across pillars to address the complex realities on the ground. Humanitarian actors needed to connect with development and peace actors meaningfully and collaborate on interventions in key areas including resilience-building, public health and infrastructure. Conflict prevention and resolution required new forms of humanitarian cooperation in financing, risk management and operational modalities across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus to prevent conflict and to build pathways out of violence. It was noted that, for affected populations, it did not matter whether support was labelled humanitarian or development assistance: it was more important to deliver employment opportunities and ensure livelihoods, quality education and physical and psychological well-being. CEB members reiterated the need for a holistic approach to supporting sustainable development and for the promotion of networked, inclusive and effective multilateralism as part of prevention efforts.

15.   While prevention of conflict was recognized as critical, the complex nature of present-day conflicts did not fit easily into traditional analytical categories. Therefore, members called for further analysis of emerging and changing risks and for deeper understanding of the needs of affected populations. It was also recognized by many that resident coordinators and United Nations country teams could be a resource for enhancing on-the-ground analysis.

16.   It was stressed repeatedly that the COVID-19 pandemic and climate and inequality crises had significantly compounded both existing conflicts and the potential for new conflicts. The Board recognized that interlinkages between economic, social and environmental factors, such as inequality and poverty, increasing debt burdens, competition for natural resources, loss of biodiversity and climate change, were all contributing to greater fragility. The COVID-19 pandemic had further accelerated and deepened fragilities and the Board recognized a strong need to address the health crisis through providing access to COVID-19 vaccines as swiftly and broadly as possible, avoiding protracted disruptions to schooling and preserving fiscal space to promote an inclusive recovery. The need to improve the ability to anticipate, prevent and prepare for major risks as illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic was also raised.

17.   It was noted that three broad transitions were affecting the operations of the United Nations system across all pillars: (a) a generational transition; (b) a technological transition; and (c) a geopolitical transition. Those transitions were seen as forces that required the United Nations system to work and think differently.

Members shared the need to engage youth, use innovative tools, address the risks of technologies and reinvigorate international cooperation within the United Nations system, with other multilateral institutions and with Member States.

18. It was observed that the scale and magnitude of humanity's ability to have an impact on its environment had changed significantly over the previous few decades, resulting in planetary, intergenerational and existential concerns. Human societies were struggling to respond to those systemic impacts, which could exacerbate the root causes of conflict.

19. CEB members reiterated their support for a strong prevention approach that could address root causes of conflict, alleviate pressures in other areas, such as migration, and address the triple crises of COVID-19, climate change and inequalities. They also stressed the need for additional political and financial backing to support such an approach. It was noted that political support for prevention was necessary and that prevention did not mean intervention in internal affairs.

20. The Board emphasized that the United Nations system could address those interrelated issues through the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Recalling the Secretary-General's vision for a new social contract, members stressed the necessity of addressing inequalities, protecting economic security, developing social protection systems, enabling access to basic services such as food, water, education and digital connectivity at the local level and exploring opportunities to protect global commons and the provision of global public goods such as vaccines and public health, technology and financial stability. CEB members welcomed momentum in exploring the role of taxation and international tax cooperation to support recovery, provide public services and reduce inequalities. It was also noted that opportunities existed to catalyse private sector investments through leveraging actions on the ground.

21. Trust emerged as a common thematic issue throughout the discussion. Understanding the causes of the erosion of trust and building trust between different armed actors, between Governments and populations and between Member States were seen as critical to address root causes of conflict. Three elements of building trust were underscored: (a) "showing up" by delivering needed services and by defending populations; (b) being consistent in the application of rules and principles; and (c) being transparent in actions and decision-making. Those elements were considered especially important in an era in which the volume and velocity of information had drastically increased, changing the nature of the social contract.

22. CEB members acknowledged that there had been a rising sense of powerlessness, unfairness and injustice felt by citizens, as well as decreased trust in institutions, including the State, which could result in some citizens choosing to withdraw from institutions, protest, migrate or engage in conflict. In some instances, people felt left behind by the State, did not trust the State to deliver for them or felt that they were not included, did not have control over their own lives or that feedback mechanisms with Governments were broken. The concern was also raised of "elite capture" of resources and peacebuilding processes, which was not consistent with the expectations and demands of the majority of the population. Building trust and fostering inclusive governance to resolve and prevent conflict should, therefore, be at the heart of the prevention agenda. A strategic discussion on trust-building in international relations and with institutions was suggested to better understand ways to bridge the present trust gap. There was also a need to build bridges to peacebuilding actors and to encourage the alignment of armed actors' behaviours with international normative standards.

23. The Board deliberated on various ideas to build trust and enhance governance to address root causes of conflict, including supporting free and fair elections and

multi-stakeholder engagement, exploring "multi-stakeholderism" as a concept, promoting and respecting human rights and protecting human rights defenders, promoting and further enabling the inclusion of women and youth in governance, supporting peacebuilding in communities and engaging beyond the elites for broader community stabilization efforts, stopping gender-based violence and protecting women's and girls' rights and autonomy, building the capacity of State institutions to better deliver for their citizens, including through innovation, and encouraging increased transparency of contracts and procurement, for example with regard to COVID-19 vaccines, climate change, debt financing and the trade in arms.

24. The theme of trust also featured prominently in relation to technology. CEB members emphasized the importance of addressing trust in the information ecosystem, especially online, with regard to misinformation and disinformation, which were undermining truth and trust, affecting social cohesion and leading to more polarized societies, which were more at risk of conflict. The absence of meaningful norms and standards in cyberspace was seen as an opportunity for the further development of binding and non-binding norms and standards. It was also noted that the Internet itself was distinct from Internet companies as providers of access to services on the Internet.

25. Making trustworthy public information available, simple and transparent was considered important in the information era in which citizens had changed the way they behaved and interacted. The collection of information, which powered artificial intelligence and digital services, should be representative of the population and avoid biases or further entrenching inequalities. Information collection – although important – should not outpace or displace other priorities such as service delivery, identity protection and privacy.

26. Many members expressed concern that new technologies could be disruptive or drive conflict if not properly governed in the context of norms. There was also apprehension that new technologies were increasingly being used for terrorist purposes. It was felt that normative frameworks, such as those relating to ethics, human rights and international humanitarian law, could be improved with respect to new technologies, including artificial intelligence, and that protection of critical infrastructure and concerns over cybersecurity should be further addressed. Providing infrastructure to bridge the digital divide was also noted as crucial to provide opportunities to those already left behind by technology.

27. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated biorisks as another area in which the United Nations system had a role to strengthen norms and build capacity to prevent future threats. Although a strong norm against the intentional use of biological weapons was reflected in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction, there were concerns around institutional capacity. It was observed that recent biotechnology advances operated with few established norms. Outer space was identified as another domain in which technological development was occurring rapidly while many gaps remained with respect to relevant international norms and principles. There was, therefore, also a need for the further development of binding and non-binding norms to prevent hostilities in space.

28. Concern was expressed regarding the protection of water systems and biodiversity given conflict over natural resources. It was noted that the governance systems of those resources needed to evolve so that the protection of them would depend less on the goodwill of Member States and better reflect their status as common public goods.

29. In addition to developing new norms, the process of international law-making and compliance, including behavioural change, was seen as an area where further

strategic thought would be welcomed. The United Nations system was considered a key enabler of the development of international law globally, as well as at the regional level. Evidence-based research, including behavioural insights, could complement efforts to promote compliance with international norms. Multi-stakeholder approaches were suggested as essential to achieve networked, inclusive and effective multilateralism and to give voice to various parts of society, particularly when addressing the root causes of conflict.

30. Within the United Nations system, the Board saw the need for increased collaboration across pillars and entities. Members recognized that no single entity could address the interlinked challenges of root causes of conflict and that the United Nations system needed to work in a more joined-up manner, in closer cooperation with international financial institutions and humanitarian organizations and in partnership with other stakeholders.

31. Examples were provided of effective cross-pillar action, such as coordination with United Nations entities in the Sahel, including in the use of predictive analytics, led by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in consultation with 22 United Nations entities as a pilot of HLCP. The pilot leveraged data to anticipate the interconnected impacts of migration, climate change, food insecurity, violence and socioeconomic factors in the Sahel region, and could have applications in other regions. Another example of cross-system collaboration was an initiative across 19 organizations to engage with resident coordinators to address structural causes of migration in Central America using a rights-based approach. It was also acknowledged that many entities across the United Nations system had worked together to support the health, humanitarian and socioeconomic response to COVID-19 during the pandemic.

32. CEB members acknowledged that further opportunities existed for collaboration across the United Nations system and called for the consideration of a few flagship initiatives around which members could come together and that showed engagement with different stakeholders, demonstrated agility and addressed root causes of conflict. The notion of strengthening solidarity within the United Nations system was also raised.

33. In conclusion, the Secretary-General acknowledged the enriching discussion, which would inform the common agenda report to the General Assembly, as requested in the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations. The insights and ideas on addressing root causes of conflict presented at the meeting were to be further reflected upon. He emphasized the need to deepen coordination and the common actions of CEB and to maintain outreach with various partners.

IV. Other matters

A. Tribute to Board members

34. The Secretary-General welcomed the Director General of the World Trade Organization, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and the acting Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Isabelle Durant, who were attending a CEB session for the first time in their current roles.

35. The Secretary-General paid tribute to the Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the Secretary-General of the International Civil Aviation Organization, Fang Liu, the Secretary-General of UNCTAD, Mukhisa Kituyi, and the

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Mark Lowcock, who were attending a CEB session for the last time in their current roles.

B.   Endorsement of documents

36.   The reports of HLCP (CEB/2021/4) and of HLCM (CEB/2021/3) at their forty-first sessions were endorsed electronically outside of the CEB session, as was the common approach to integrating biodiversity and nature-based solutions for sustainable development into United Nations policy and programme planning and delivery (CEB/2021/1/Add.1).

C.   Date and venue of the forthcoming session

37.   The Board members were reminded of the confirmed dates of the CEB second regular session of 2021, 18 and 19 November, which was tentatively scheduled to be held in person in New York.

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