

STATEMENT

Launch of the South African Child Gauge 2013 Cape Town, 10 October 2013

Remarks by UNICEF Representative, Aida Girma

- Honourable Minister of Social Development Bathabile Dlamini
- Director of the Children's Institute Shanaaz Mathews
- Executive Director of Elma Philanthropic Services Bernadette Moffat
- Colleagues from the Children's Institute
- Ladies and gentlemen

It's truly an honor to join you in the launch of the *2013 South African Child Gauge*.

Every year, the Gauge brings together the best and the brightest of South Africa's experts, practitioners, academics and policy makers... all of whom share a passion for children's rights. UNICEF is honored to join such a distinguished group of policy makers and experts in the launch of this year's Child Gauge.

The South Africa Child Gauge not only tracks progress in the realization of child rights, it influences policy development and resource allocation by providing decision-makers with reliable data on the well-being of children and the quality of their developmental contexts.

This year, the Gauge focuses on essential services and support for young children and illustrates how these can serve as a great equalizer by breaking inter-generational cycle of poverty.

We now have ample evidence that the first years of life, especially the first 1000 days of lay are crucial for laying the foundation for good health, social, emotional and intellectual development.

Early Childhood Development is seen as one of the most cost efficient investments in human capital which leads to a country's sustainable development. There is now ample evidence that investing in the earliest years leads to some of the highest rates of return to families, societies and countries.

The investment case is not only made with respect to returns but also with respect to the cost of inaction. Science has demonstrated that early childhood interventions, early in life are important because they help mitigate the impact of adverse early experiences which if not addressed lead to poor health (e.g., non-communicable diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes), poor educational attainment, economic dependency, increased violence and crime, greater substance abuse and depression – all of which add to the cost and burden in society.

Yet over 200 million children under five years of age worldwide do not receive the appropriate care and support to become physically healthy, mentally alert and emotionally secure. Because of poor health, under nutrition and poor learning environments that fail to provide stimulation and nurturance, too many children around the world are not achieving their full developmental potential. And the ramifications of inadequate access to quality ECD services stretch into adulthood, resulting in economic, educational and social inequality.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly highlights the importance of early child development, saying that a child has a right to develop to "the maximum extent possible."

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This is why ensuring good health and nutrition and cognitive, social and emotional development of young children merits the highest priority of every government, community, and family.

South Africa has recognized this, and has placed early childhood development as a national priority but challenges remain.

UNICEF has been working closely with the Government of South Africa over the years not only in the development of policies and guidelines on ECD but also in the promotion of on community-based integrated ECD programmes, with emphasis on home-based parenting programmes which include breastfeeding, parent-to-child stimulation, maternal nutrition and support visits to caregivers linked to the health system have proved particularly successful.

These models show that community-based ECD centres can be effectively used as nodes of care and support not only for vulnerable children, but also for their caregivers and communities. Equally important, they can provide practical information on parenting to caregivers, educators and other professionals working with young children.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the Minister for ensuring that early childhood development remains high on the government agenda – and for the progress that has been made.

I would also like to thank Dr. Shanaaz Mathews and her team at the Children's Institute for this excellent and timely report. UNICEF values the partnership we have with the Institute.

On behalf of UNICEF, I would like to reiterate our support to ensuring that every child in South Africa reaches his or her full potential.

Thank you!

References: <http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood>