

## **SPEECH**

**BY UNICEF RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE MS. CARRIE AUER**

**AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE CRC**

**LILONGWE**

**25<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2009**

- Your Honour, Mrs. Joyce Banda, Vice-President of the Republic of Malawi, Distinguished Ambassador for Safe Motherhood, and Eminent Advocate on Early Childhood Development;
- The Speaker of the House, Honourable Henry Chimuntu Banda (MP);
- The Minister of Gender, Children and Community Development Honourable Patricia Kaliati (MP);
- Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament;
- Principal Secretaries of various government ministries;
- Your Excellencies and other distinguished members of the Diplomatic Corps;
- The Resident Coordinator and distinguished colleagues from the UN;
- Members of civil society;
- Members of the press;
- Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

This evening, we commemorate a historic milestone in the lives of millions of children worldwide. When world leaders gathered at the United Nations General Assembly on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989 to adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), few would have imagined the phenomenal

impact that the treaty was going to have on the lives of millions of children worldwide.

For, since that historic decision, the CRC has become the most ratified human rights treaty in history. It has become the reference point for how individuals and nations treat children and enabled us to have a common understanding of what children are entitled to. Because of the CRC, millions of children enjoy their right to survive, develop, be protected from abuse and exploitation, and express their views freely on important issues affecting their lives.

The CRC has, in so many ways, changed the way that children are viewed and treated. Children are no longer seen as objects of adult pity and benevolence, occupying the lowest place in society. Rather, through the principle of the “best interests of the child”, we see children being given the primacy in key national plans and programs. And even at community level, we have seen a change in attitudes and a greater willingness by communities to engage in solutions that will uplift the lives of children.

Since 1989, much progress has been made. Worldwide, the number of under-five children dying every year has fallen from 12.5 million in 1990 to less than 9 million in 2008. By 1996, 1.6 billion people globally had gained access to improved water sources. To date, 84 per cent of primary school-age children are attending school, and gender gaps in primary school enrolment have narrowed. The fight against the AIDS pandemic has intensified and yielded some positive results, with steady increases in the number of HIV positive pregnant women receiving services to prevent the virus from being passed on to their babies. Growing numbers of newborns and infants are being tested for HIV and are receiving the full course of medication to protect them from HIV.

In the past two decades, 70 countries have changed their laws to comply with the CRC. We now have a better understanding of the risks children face in terms of early marriage, domestic violence, internal and cross-border trafficking, child labour, and sexual abuse and exploitation. This is in large measure due to numerous surveys and advocacy campaigns undertaken in recent years.

As one of the partners of the Government of Malawi in improving the lives of children, UNICEF is especially pleased by the progress the country has made in the last two decades. Under-five mortality has fallen from 234 deaths for every 1000 live births in 1992 to 120 deaths in 2006. Two months ago, an inter-agency group comprised of UNICEF, WHO, UNFPA, the World Bank and Harvard University, among others, estimated that under-five mortality in Malawi had fallen to 100 per 1,000 in 2009. At this rate, Malawi is on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of reducing under-five deaths by two-thirds by 2015.

Malawi has made similar progress in increasing access to safe water and sanitation, which helps to reduce diarrhoea in young children. Almost three-quarters of the population have access to safe water and 88 per cent to improved sanitation. Back in 1992, less than half the population had access to safe water, and improved sanitation was available to only 72 per cent of the population.

We also have seen an extraordinary rise in school enrolments. We commend the Government's decision to abolish school fees and are

encouraged by ongoing efforts to make primary schooling compulsory. These efforts have and will ensure that every Malawian child is afforded the opportunity to go to school and create a better future for themselves and their families.

Today, we see communities right across Malawi taking greater responsibility in providing care and support for young children. There are more than 6,000 community-based child care centres dotted all over the country, fully staffed by community volunteers who are driven by nothing except the passion to make a difference for community and country. We also have more than 800 volunteer child protection workers providing that critical link between vulnerable and abused children and care and protective services. These protection workers are the gallant foot soldiers in the fight against child rights violations and their efforts will go a long way in making communities safer for children.

Madam Vice-President, lest I be seen as having rose-tinted glasses by focusing only on the positives, let me mention that the agenda for children's

rights in Malawi is far from complete. There are more areas I could highlight that require progress but allow me to focus on only a few key ones:

Firstly, **there is a need for Malawi's laws to be child-friendly.**

Honourable members of parliament were purposely invited to this anniversary to enable them to appreciate the important duty they bear to pass laws that are in the best interest of the Malawian child. I am confident that as fathers and mothers themselves, our MPs do already appreciate the importance of providing the very best legislation for children.

In this regard, allow me, Madam Vice-President, to *congratulate the honourable members for passing the National Registration Bill last week*. We have waited for this occasion for a long time! Once His Excellency the President signs it into law, the bill will ensure the compulsory and universal registration of all births. For us in UNICEF and for all our partners, it will have fulfilled Article 7 of the CRC and Article 6 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which require every child to be registered immediately after birth. Passing this bill into law will not only ensure that Malawi complies with the CRC to which it has willingly and legally acceded; but also ensures

that Malawi joins the league of nations in Africa that already have a compulsory birth registration law and system in place.

We look forward to the enactment of other equally important bills, among them the Child Care, Protection and Justice Bill, the Wills and Inheritance Act, the Trafficking in Persons Bill, and the proposed amendments to the Penal Code, which I am told is on the Order Paper of the current sitting. These amendments will ensure that perpetrators of rape and defilement receive the just penalty their crimes deserve.

Secondly, **the need for a comprehensive Children's Policy and National Action Plan.** In its Concluding Observations to Malawi's Second Periodic Report on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Committee on the Rights of the Child called on Malawi to adopt a comprehensive Children's Policy and National Action Plan for Children that address fully all the rights of the child enshrined in the CRC.

A comprehensive children's policy will provide an overall framework and direction for the work we do for children by bringing into one policy all the

different intentions of the Government for children that, at the moment, are in several different policies.

A comprehensive plan of action will enable us to track budget allocations for children and include a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for regularly assessing progress. There also is a need to establish an inter-ministerial steering committee to oversee implementation.

Thirdly, **the need to ensure that children are placed at the center of the next Malawi Growth and Development Strategy.** Doing so will enable Malawi to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, especially in areas such as maternal and newborn health, malnutrition and education where progress is slow.

Fourthly, I would like to appeal to the civil society organizations present here to consider **establishing an NGO Alliance on Child Rights.** Where these alliances exist, for example in Kenya, they have been useful in spearheading civil society advocacy efforts, coordinating contributions to national reports, and mobilizing communities on behalf of children. Let me

assure you that our doors at UNICEF are open to initiating discussions on such an alliance and we will do our best to support its formation.

Madam Vice-President, let me end by reiterating our commitment to working with your Government to ensure that the rights of all children in Malawi are realized. Children, especially those who come from the ranks of the poor and downtrodden, are rarely heard and their rights are the most violated. These children are often rendered vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Together with our partner agencies in the United Nations, we will continue to support your efforts to ensure that no child is left behind. We share a common obligation and a future that is increasingly becoming one. No child in any country, village or community should have their rights violated simply because of their nationality. Together we can ensure that we deliver on our promises for children. Together, we can fulfil the dreams and aspirations of every Malawian child.

Zikomo!