

## **SPEECH**

**BY THE UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE, MS CARRIE AUER  
at the launch of the  
National Strategic Plan on Early Childhood and Development,  
2009-2014**

**11<sup>th</sup> September 2009  
Capital Hotel, Lilongwe**

The Minister of Gender, Children & Community Development, Honourable  
Patricia Kaliyati, MP

The Minister of Finance, Honourable Ken Kandodo, MP

The Deputy Minister of Gender, Children & Community Development,  
Honourable Catherine Gotani Hara, MP

The Principal Secretary for Gender, Children and Community Development, Olive  
Chikankheni

Representatives of the Civil Society

Members of the Private Sector

All government officials present

UN Colleagues

Members of the Press

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here this morning to participate in the launch of the National Strategic Plan for Early Childhood Development for the period 2009 to 2014. As some of you will remember, it was only last Friday that Her Honour the Vice-President launched a national advocacy and communication campaign to promote ECD in Malawi. That launch, coupled with the launch of the Strategic Plan this morning, marks the first steps of the long journey we must all undertake to make early childhood development a cornerstone of Malawi's development agenda.

The Strategic Plan, which UNICEF is proud to be associated with, will guide the implementation of the ECD national policy in the next five years. The Plan gives us a framework for coordination of early childhood programmes and targets for our resource mobilization efforts.

Honourable Minister, ladies and gentlemen, the development of the Plan is a major step forward in the evolution of ECD in Malawi. I would therefore like to congratulate you Honourable Minister for coming up with this master plan. I would also like to assure you of UNICEF's unflinching commitment to working with you and your Ministry to realize the goals set out in the Plan.

Honourable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, the task of providing every Malawian child with early learning opportunities does not begin and end with launches. While these launches are important in and of themselves, we are challenged by the enormity of the task that lies ahead of us. Up to 70 per cent of

young children in Malawi are missing out on an early childhood education. Of the 30 per cent lucky enough to benefit from ECD services, the quality of services they receive leaves a lot to be desired.

Many of Malawi's 8,000 ECD centres are in a poor state. Some do not have toilets and running water and many children lack play and learning materials. Care is largely provided by volunteers, almost all of whom are inadequately trained for the job. While we cannot question the commitment and passion of these volunteers, many of whom toil under difficult circumstances at great personal expense, it is high time we looked into how best to attract and retain highly qualified caregivers. From our perspective, we are willing to work with you Honourable Minister to see how best this can be done. From a human rights perspective, we owe it to Malawi's children to give them the best possible care we can provide.

In spite of these challenges, we should gain encouragement from knowing that we are simply building upon the important foundation that already exists. Malawi today boasts of a network of 6,000 community-based child care centres which reach more than 400,000 children with ECD services. These centres are owned and managed by the community and provide much-needed play, recreation and nutrition to mostly under-privileged and rural children.

An ECD policy is already in place that spells out the roles and responsibilities of all the players. A national ECD Network acts as a forum for networking,

collaboration and strengthening partnerships and steers the development of ECD in Malawi.

In enhancing capacity, we now have a team of core trainers helping to train others at district level as well as conduct national-level supervision. We are also seeing the gradual development of ECD as a profession in Malawi. The ECD Virtual University based in Canada has so far graduated 12 students with certificates, diplomas and degrees in early childhood development. The graduates, some of whom are here with us this morning, are making a valuable contribution to ECD programs in Malawi.

Opportunities also exist to integrate ECD more closely with other interventions. For example, ECD is integrated with child survival interventions such as nutrition, immunization and growth monitoring but we would like to see more of this happening in all ECD centres.

In the education sector, the Child-Friendly approach already encourages stronger links between schools and communities. We would like to see stronger links forged between schools and child care centres in order to facilitate a smooth transition of children from pre-school to primary school.

Honourable Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, this Strategic Plan is a key tool for us to use in addressing the challenges confronting Early Childhood Development in Malawi. For our part, we will continue to support the Government to increase

access by scaling up ECD services in the country. Through the Plan, we will work together with you to increase public visibility and advocate for more resources to be allocated to ECD programs in the country. We will continue to support the Government to develop the capacity of personnel involved in ECD at both national and community levels.

Lastly, I am pleased to assure you honourable Minister of UNICEF's continuous support towards early childhood development in Malawi.

I thank you for your attention.