

SPEECH

**BY UNICEF ACTING DEPUTY REPRESENTATIVE, MR. BRUCE
GRANT AT THE INAUGURATION OF THE FIRST LADY,
MADAM CALLISTA MUTHARIKA AS EMINENT ADVOCATE
FOR CHILDREN**

8 February, 2011

Mlare, Karonga

The First Lady of the Republic of Malawi, Madame Callista Mutharika
The Minister for Gender, Children and Community Development,
Hon. Theresa Mwale, MP

All cabinet ministers present

The Deputy Minister for Gender, Children and Community
Development Ms. Catherine Gotani Hara

The Principal Secretary in the Ministry of Gender, Children and
Community Development Mr. Eric Ning'ang'a

Members of parliament

Traditional and religious leaders

All government officials present

Development partners in attendance

Members of the Press

Our dear children

Ladies and Gentleman

On behalf of the UNICEF Representative, Ms. Carrie Auer who could not join us today because she is due to travel outside the country, I would like to most sincerely thank your Excellency Madame Mutharika for accepting this very noble role.

Your appointment as an Eminent advocate for children gives hope not only to the development partners who are working hand in hand with your government to improve the lives and well-being of children in Malawi but it is also an inspiration to the children themselves. For the first time in Malawi, children will be represented by a very strong voice. In you, they will have a strong advocate who will speak on their behalf.

In particular, we are delighted that you will devote your attention to the needs of very young children. There is enough evidence that the experiences of children between 0 to 8 years have

a powerful, lifelong influence on the rest of their lives. Research shows that when children receive love, nurture and intellectual stimulation when they are young, these children are more likely to survive and develop into healthy and productive adults. They develop better thinking, language, and social skills and are generally better prepared for school. Children who receive early childhood care tend to perform well at school and are less likely to drop out. Early childhood development therefore is the bedrock of human and economic development.

This is why in UNICEF, we have attached great importance to supporting the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programme in Malawi. We have spared no effort in assisting the government to formulate a national policy on ECD and a five-year strategic plan to guide implementation of ECD activities in Malawi. Equally important, we continue to support 3,000 of the estimated 6,000 community-based child care centres in Malawi which today provide ECD services to more than 400,000 children. These centres, situated mostly in rural areas, are an important ECD intervention for these children.

We are especially pleased that they are wholly set up, led and resourced primarily by communities themselves with support from

the government and ourselves. This model will ensure that Malawi's ECD programme remains sustainable for many years to come.

Your Excellency, today's event is a clear demonstration of your commitment and dedication to improving the lives of children in Malawi. We are delighted that you will be able to motivate communities to create more ECD centers and to remind everyone that children are our most valuable resource and that we all have a responsibility to nurture their upbringing.

Your Excellency, we would like to appeal to you personally to take up the issue of low funding to ECD in Malawi. We are happy that the government has increased the budgetary allocation to ECD from K800,000 in 2009 to K25 million in 2010. We are hopeful that this increase signals the government's intention to provide more financial resources to the ECD programme. Currently, only 30 per cent of children are benefitting from ECD services and our goal is to ensure that 100 per cent of all children benefit. Achieving this goal requires more resources and we hope that your influence, Madam First Lady, will result in the ECD programme receiving more funding from the treasury.

Your Excellency, UNICEF remains committed to supporting the Government of Malawi in its efforts to shape a prosperous future for its children. As Malawi pursues this goal, greater attention needs to be given to providing appropriate and safe infrastructure, adequate materials for all children, and preparing an adequate and well trained cadre of committed caregivers. It is also important that Malawi evolves a truly multi-sectoral mechanism for coordinating ECD activities.

Your Excellency, I would like to end by thanking the Honourable Minister for Gender, Children and Community Development for making today's event possible. Her leadership and the tireless efforts of her staff have ensured that children continue to receive the attention they deserve. Honourable Minister, zikomo!

In conclusion, I would like to assure Your Excellency of UNICEF's commitment to working closely with you, through our government partners, to ensure that the ideals and dreams of every Malawian child are realized.

Zikomo!