

SPEECH

**BY THE UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE, MS. CARRIE AUER AT THE
OFFICIAL OPENING OF A MEDIA TRAINING WORKSHOP ON CHILD**

RIGHTS

MANGOCHI,

21ST JUNE 2010

The Executive Director of the Media Council of Malawi Mr. Baldwin
Chiyamwaka,

Dear colleagues from the media

Let me begin my brief remarks by emphasizing how important we in UNICEF view this training to be. It is one of several initiatives we are supporting to ensure that children occupy the center stage in Malawi's development agenda.

In December last year, we supported a child rights training workshop for Directors of Planning from all the 28 districts of Malawi. A similar workshop

was held in Blantyre in April this year bringing together District Commissioners from all over Malawi. The objective of these two workshops was to equip key district-level planners and decision-makers with a greater understanding of child rights and to ensure that they include a minimum package of interventions for children in district development and implementation plans.

At the same time, we are working closely with our government counterparts in the Ministry of Gender, Child Development and Community Services and the Ministry of Development Planning and Cooperation to come up with a minimum package of services for children that can be included in the next Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (MGDS). We are also working hard to ensure that the next MGDS includes a specific chapter on children that brings together all of the government's plans and intentions for children for the period 2012 to 2016 .

We feel that having children at the center of the MGDS will set the stage for a conducive policy environment for children. At the commemoration of the Day of the African Child on Wednesday last week, I reminded the President of the recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

to Malawi to come up with a **comprehensive Children's Policy and National Plan of Action for Children.**

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. An inter-ministerial steering committee would also need to be established to oversee implementation.

Children in this country are looking to us to fulfill our duties and the promises we have made to them through various commitments. But why, you may ask, should children be at the center of the development agenda when there are other equally pressing national priorities to attend to?

Let me advance a few reasons why child rights are central to everything we do. You have probably heard it said that the best way to assess a nation's or community's health is to look at the nutritional status of its children. No

nation, village or family can claim to be healthy if its children are malnourished and starving. In the same vein, no nation can claim to be healthy if the rights of its most vulnerable citizens, including children, are not met. Children are a mirror of how well or poorly we are doing.

Secondly, children are the most vulnerable segment of our society. Unlike other categories of the population, children cannot organize themselves into a political or social force that will bring about change in their favour. The well-being of children depends on duty-bearers such as parents, guardians, journalists, community, district and national leaders fulfilling their obligations to children. When duty-bearers fail, the greatest amount of suffering is felt by children.

Thirdly, children are a nation's greatest resource because they guarantee its future. What a nation will become in future is dependent on how much it invests in its young citizens in the present. We need only to look at the Asian economies that have become what they are today because they invested massively in education and technology in the past. According to the World Bank, between 1960 and 1990, increasing levels of education contributed to

more than one third of GDP growth in the highest performing Asian economies between 1960 and 1990.

Dear colleagues, there is no reason why Malawi cannot make similar gains for itself. This is why we are here this morning. The next few days are an opportunity for you as the Fourth Estate to understand how you can contribute to making Malawi a better place for children. It is my hope that you will leave this place having gained a better understanding of child rights and how they fit into the work you do.

More particularly, we are keen to see you intensify your role as watchdogs of society by ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard. The voices of children who go to bed hungry, children who endure physical and sexual abuse in silence, children who are forced to abandon school for marriage, often to a man three or four times older than them, and children who grow up alone having lost both parents to AIDS. We want to see stories that analyze how decisions made in Lilongwe will impact the lives of children in Chitipa and Nsanje. For example, we would like to see the media dissect the national budget from a child rights perspectives. What do children and young

people think of the budget? Does it address their need for more teachers, classrooms, clinics, doctors and nurses? Does it aim to provide safe water and sanitation so that children girls don't have to walk long distances to draw water and so that babies don't have to continue dying from diarrhoea? The journalist that raises these kinds of issues is a journalist that not only fulfils his or her professional role as a mouthpiece of the poor and downtrodden but is also one that ultimately cares for the future of his or her country.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me end by reiterating UNICEF's continued commitment to working with the media profession to ensuring that the rights of all children in Malawi are realized. This workshop is the second of three workshops we have sponsored through the Media Council of Malawi to train journalists in child rights. This year, we have the added bonus of sponsoring awards for excellence in reporting from the group that attended last year's training.

We have also reached out to the Media Studies Department at the University of Malawi Polytechnic to see how child rights can be integrated into their journalism curriculum. Those efforts are continuing and they are aimed at

encouraging prospective journalists to have a better understanding of child rights and how to ethically report stories on children.

We are also mindful of the fact that the legal environment for children is changing rather quickly in Malawi and unless journalists are kept up-to-date with these developments, they risk being left behind. For example, since November last year when Parliament passed the National Registration of Persons Bill, birth registration in Malawi has now become compulsory. This means not registering a child at birth has become an offence.

We also expect the Child Care, Protection and Justice Bill to be tabled before the current sitting of Parliament. This is a comprehensive Bill that covers children in need of special care and protection, guardianship, foster care, child abduction, child trafficking, harmful cultural practices, forced marriage, pledging a child as security and how to treat a child suspected of committing an offence. If passed, it means within a space of seven months, Malawi will have enacted two key pieces of legislation that will transform the child protection environment forever. It is important that journalists keep

abreast of all these developments and that is why we think a workshop like today's is necessary.

I wish you all the best in your deliberations and I look forward to receiving a copy of the workshop report.

Zikomo kwambiri.