

**Address by Ms Aida Girma, UNICEF Country Representative, at  
the Eastern Cape Provincial Seminar on Early Childhood  
Development Programmes as Resources for the Care and  
Support of Poor and Vulnerable Children**

**1 June 2009**

**Port Alfred, Republic of South Africa**

Honorable Members of the Eastern Cape Executive Council  
Distinguished guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

UNICEF South Africa supports an integrated approach to early childhood development and believes that every child has the right to the best possible start in life and that early childhood represents the most critical phase in the life cycle of human beings. It provides a window of opportunity that, if capitalized on, will result in many positive benefits for the future of individual children, families and society as a whole. Research has proven that appropriate investment of nurturance and care” in the early years, especially in the age group birth to 3, ensures that children are more likely to survive, to grow in a healthy way, have less disease and develop their thinking, language, and emotional skills fully.

There are ample evidence world wide on the how quality early childhood development services makes a difference in the child’s life, but also in society as a whole. Early childhood development is more than a service; it is a very important investment.

South Africa distinguished itself as a country that keeps up with global trends and this is in particular true when we talk about early childhood development. The South African Government has set early childhood development as a national apex priority since 2008, which shows the high regard that the government has sound investment from the start.

Experts who have studied high-quality early childhood development (ECD) programmes, which include leading economist such as James Heckman, have common agreement that quality integrated early childhood development programmes have substantial payoffs for the child and society as a whole. These early childhood development programmes may vary in whom they serve and in the services they provide, but most effective ECD programmes offer wide-ranging education services as well as health services (such as immunizations and health screenings) and nutrition services, typically for children younger than six. The majority also provide adult education and parenting classes for the parents of young children.

Even economists who are particularly skeptical about government programmes make an exception for high quality ECD programmes. Follow-up studies of poor children who have participated in these programmes have found solid evidence of markedly better academic performance, decreased rates of criminal conduct, and higher adult earnings than among their non-participating peers. James J. Heckman, PhD, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences in 2000 states "The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: **Invest in the Very Young**" as his work and researched proved sufficient proof and receive a Nobel prize on this that investment in the very young has not only an impact on the outcomes for the child, but facilitates societal change and economic growth.

Why is the early childhood years opportune for investment with long term returns:

- Brain cells are formed during the first two years. Stimulation of a child's senses affects the structure and organization of neural pathways in the brain during the formative period. By age 6, most of these connections are made (or not, as the case may be). Thus, providing opportunities for complex perceptual and motor experiences at an early age favorably affects various learning abilities in later life and can even compensate, at least partly, for deficits associated with early malnutrition. Children whose caregivers interact with them in consistent, caring ways will be better nourished and less apt to be sick than children not so attended
- Establishing a loving relationship in the early months of life has been shown to affect the ability later in life of a person to love and to establish permanent relationships.
- Longitudinal studies demonstrate long-term effects with a variety of intervention programmes. These effects go beyond the learning of basic abilities to include: improved school attendance and performance, reduced repetition, increased employment and reduced delinquency during the teenage years and reduced teenage pregnancy  
Early studies showed that children in high-quality ECD programmes performed significantly better on IQ tests in the first few years after program participation than did comparable children who did not participate in the programmes

Comparative research has shown that investment in integrated early childhood development has a between 5 to 9 fold (average 7) return on investment over the long terms. It was found that investment in early childhood (young children) in high risk communities through quality programmes has a 5 fold return on investment

Economic returns can be high. Improving a young child's health and nutrition, and providing opportunities for stimulating interaction and early education can bring a high economic return to society as well as to the individual. Without looking at research, common sense suggests that a person who is well-developed physically, mentally, socially and emotionally will be in a better position to contribute economically to family, community and country than a person who is not. Economic returns take several forms:

- The productivity of adults who have participated as children in integrated quality early childhood development programmes, increased in the job market
  - Greater success at school, including higher graduation rates. It reduces school drop-out rates, repetition rates and need for remedial programmes.
  - Higher levels of verbal, mathematical, and intellectual achievement;
- It reduces health costs later in life.  
Greater government revenues and lower government expenditures.  
It reduces cost on the social security system  
Investment in early development can help to reduce economic and social inequities.  
Lower rates of crime; and
- It has multiplier effects. Especially in the case of programmes of parental education, the immediate effects on one child will carry over to the raising of additional children.

*The Lancet*, the world's leading independent medical journal, published a series of papers on early childhood development in developing countries in January 2007. Based on existing studies from sub-Saharan Africa, including South Africa, South Asia and Latin America and hard evidence from programmes that successfully promote child development, the findings are nothing short of sobering and present a wake-up call to the world to take action. Most critical is the indication that more than **200 million children under the age of five** – over a third of all children – in developing countries are not developing to their full potential, compromising their readiness for school and their future as productive members of society. This can only be addressed adequately when we start with innovative quality programmes for young children at a local level – where the children.

South Africa's progress in terms of early childhood development shows a positive step towards addressing the rights of young children. I wish to share with you few examples.

- Access, nationally, to early childhood development centres increased from 16% in 2000 to 22% in 2007.

The budget allocation for ECD by the Department of Social Development increased from ZAR334,967,000 in 2003/04 to ZAR766,022,000 in 2007/08. More than doubled in 5 years. In the Eastern Cape the budget for ECD also nearly doubled in this period from ZAR69,582,000 to ZAR131,622,000.

More than 700,000 children age 5 are accessing Grade R. This shows a rapid progress towards the 2010 goal of universal access as stipulated in Education White Paper 5.

The Immunization coverage has steadily increased over the last years. The proportion of fully immunized children under one year increased from 66% in 2000 to 88% in 2008.

The National Integrated Plan for Early Childhood Development is a good example of bringing together the variety of national legislative and policy frameworks for early childhood development in one integrated plan working towards achieving important outcomes for young children. And as such, early childhood development is part of the

Government's Programme of Action and participating in the Expanded Public Works Programme, where more than 18,000 ECD practitioners were trained by June 2008. The Children's Act, 2005, as amended, provides in Chapter 6 for expansion of early childhood development programmes beyond the traditional mono focus on ECD centre, to include a wide range of differentiated programmes, custom to the needs of communities and young children and their parents.

Noting that the largest part of the SA child population is in the age cohort 0-4 (26%) it is of the utmost importance that South Africa build on the significant progress that has been made the past few years. There is still a lot to be done to ensure provisioning and most importantly to be sure that young children are exposed to quality early childhood development programmes.

UNICEF has a longstanding partnership with the Eastern Cape Province on ECD and through this partnership, in particular with the Department of Social Development, the Eastern Cape was the first province to train officials on the national parenting programme. Further more, the Eastern Cape Department of Social Development embraced the notion of Early Childhood Development programmes as resources for the care and support of poor and vulnerable young children and their families and has identified this as innovative approach to early childhood development programmes. Thus, in 2008 UNICEF and the Eastern Cape Department of Social Development jointly identified Inkwanca Home Based Care Programme in Molteno and Raglan Road Multi Purpose Centre in Grahamstown as examples of such programmes and reviewed their programmatic approach, as to provide evidence and guidance to the Department of Social Development on how to scale-up such innovative approaches to early childhood development that will reach more young children than the traditional mode of operation. This research has been completed and we are here today to learn more about these programmes in particular. In this the Eastern Cape Province is taking a lead towards a more broad based approach to reach young children and their families.

We are standing today at the first step towards a new era in early childhood development in the country and most certainly in the Eastern Cape Province, and I am glad that UNICEF is a partner to the Government in this new exciting era for early childhood development programmes in South Africa.

And as a final reminder, let us work in the way that promotes the fact that our investments in ECD programmes pay for themselves over time by generating very high rates of return for participants, the public, and the government.

End

