

ADDRESS AT CED CONFERENCE

Committee For Economic Development
A Conference on Building Engagement in Education Policy
Session on Early Childhood Development – A Foundation For Education

Remarks by Aida Girma, UNICEF Representative in South Africa

The organizers of the Conference;

- Distinguished participants and panel members;
- Ladies and gentlemen

It is a pleasure for me to be here today to present to you my thoughts on the importance of early childhood development not only as a programmatic intervention, but also as a key strategy for addressing the many challenges that we face in this region and the world.

Early childhood development impacts the course of a child's later development. The early childhood period is considered to be the most important developmental phase throughout an every human being's lifespan. When well-nurtured and cared for in their earliest years, especially in the first eight years of life, children are healthier and better able to fully develop their thinking, language, emotional and social skills; they perform better in school; and they have a greater chance of becoming creative and productive members of society.

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There is ample evidence that the first years of life are crucial years for children for the development of the cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills they need to reach their full potential and succeed in school and life. Studies have shown that investments in early childhood education yield a return that far exceeds the return on most other public investments. **For every dollar spent on early childhood care there is at least a seven dollar return through cost savings.** This figure is derived from studies showing that children who participate in pre-school are less likely to suffer illnesses, repeat grades, drop out of school, or require remedial services later in life. Dr. James J. Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences in 2000 argues that **investment in the very young has not only an impact on the outcomes for the child, but facilitates societal change and economic growth.**

Despite the many proven benefits of early child development, millions of children in developing countries have limited opportunities to access quality ECD programmes, reducing their ability to develop their full potential and compromising their readiness for school and their future as productive members of society. ECD is important in all countries – resource-rich and poor alike – but **special attention needs to be paid to the potential benefits to resource poor settings**, where children are likely to suffer from malnutrition and die before age five and where they are at high risk of never attending or completing schools.

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In South Africa, attendance of early childhood development (ECD) programmes is low. Widespread child poverty, HIV and AIDS, disability are some of the obstacles to the fulfillment of children's rights to holistic and well structured ECD programmes. Due to limited infrastructure and lack of fees which many parents are required to pay, only 22 percent of young children attend organized early learning programmes. This means that one in five children is enrolling in primary school at a disadvantage.

In response, UNICEF is working closely with the Government of South Africa to promote cost effective forms of ECD, with emphasis on community-based integrated ECD programmes, with special attention to the most disadvantaged communities. The models of community based ECD programmes established in partnership with NGO and academic institutions show that community-based ECD centres can be effectively used as nodes of care and support not only for vulnerable children, but also for their caregivers and communities. Equally important, they can provide practical information on parenting to caregivers, educators and other professionals working with young children. They also serve as a nucleus for a wide range of community-based HIV and AIDS prevention, care and support interventions.

With technical support from UNICEF, the strategy to use ECD programmes as resources of care and support for orphans and other vulnerable children (OVC) in disadvantaged communities, was incorporated in the five-year National Integrated Plan for Early Childhood Development. The Eastern Cape Department of Social Development has taken the lead in developing and

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implementing a provincial model this year and currently three other provinces have also begun to develop their models.

Setting ambitious early childhood development standards for learning and care, and investing state and community resources to ensure that these standards are met, have enormous potential to boost educational achievement, promote social inclusion and promote good citizenship.

Giving children the best start in life, is one of the best investments we can make.