

Statement by the Representative

SECOND SOUTH AFRICAN CHILD HEALTH PRIORITIES CONFERENCE

REMARKS BY Ms AIDA GIRMA

UNICEF SOUTH AFRICA COUNTRY REPRESENTATIVE

December 04, 2008

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to address this august gathering of the cutting edge researchers, competent child and maternal health programme managers and other social, economics and human rights activists in the room.

I would like to thank the Child Health Priorities Association for once more engaging in this partnership with UNICEF in hosting this second Child health priorities Conference. It would appear that at the first child health priorities conference a plea was made for the Department of Health to develop a unified child and maternal survival strategy.

We would like to congratulate the Department of Health for heeding your call by developing the Maternal, neonatal, child, women's health and nutrition strategic plan that is essentially a framework for accelerating child survival and development interventions.

I believe that this **2nd Child Health Priorities Conference** provides an important opportunity for UNICEF, and indeed for all of us:

- to keep the momentum of child health and child survival and to serve as a platform for knowledge sharing amongst child health practitioners and be in a better position to re-prioritise and accelerate our Child Survival and Development interventions.

Statement by the Representative

- To keep track of progress, from a programmatic and evidence-based perspective, towards the attainment of the MDG's, in particular MDG4, 5, and 6.
- To remind us of the over-arching mandate from a human rights perspective to reach those who are the hardest to reach and ensure that we address the development disparities that continue to affect children in this country, and
- To take stock of whether indeed we are managing to close the gap, ensuring we are meeting quality standards in child health, paediatric AIDS and nutrition.

As a relatively new Representative in South Africa, and after reading and attending a few select meetings in the country, it would appear to me that whilst significant gains have been made, there are numerous challenges yet to be met. I know that I am addressing a room full of the best child health practitioners and experts in the country, however I would like to beg for your indulgence as I pose a few questions that I feel need to be addressed to give this country a better chance of achieving our child health and survival goals.

First: How can we help South Africa get the best returns for its high investments in health?

- It is hard to believe that South Africa is one of the 14 countries in Africa where child mortality has been stagnant if not increasing over the last 15 years.
- Yet, South Africa has the highest per capita expenditure on health, the highest technical expertise and the best health infrastructure in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Can this forum of experts tell us where we have collectively gone wrong?

Statement by the Representative

Second: Can South African women and children continue to trust health professionals and health experts?

- Over the last many years, women and children have been coming in large numbers to seek medical services in the hospitals and clinics as evidenced by the high utilization of maternal and child health services in South Africa: 92% antenatal care coverage, 91% deliveries by doctors and nurses, 99% DPT1 coverage at 6 weeks and 84% measles immunization coverage at 9 months.
- Today, we have more knowledge and better solutions than there were 10 years. Why are South African women and children still dying in the hands of the experts in higher numbers and proportions than they did years ago?
- Can this forum tell us why and help us find practical solutions to reverse these upward trends?

Third: How is the quality of care in our health facilities?

- 91% of our babies are born in hospitals and maternity units. The persisting unabated neonatal mortality together with the reported outbreaks of klebsiella in the recent years tells us something about the quality of care in our health facilities.
- More than 40% of maternity hospitals in South Africa are certified baby friendly (BFHI). Yet, rates of exclusive breastfeeding remain among the lowest on the continent (10% at 0-3 months and 8% at 4-6 months).
- Can this forum help us find solutions to improve the quality of child health programmes and services in this country?

Statement by the Representative

Fourth: How can we ensure “the continuum of care”? How can we ensure that the women and children who come to us for care , remain with us until they receive all the needed services –

- One of the main bottlenecks of the health system in South Africa is that we can not track women and children and we can't even follow up those who do not return
- Most of the success observed on child survival even in the poorest African countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique could be attributable greatly to the implementation of effective community-based programmes.
- How best can we utilize these additional resources to fill the gaps of the human resource shortages in the health system particularly for less complex functions such as community mobilization, health promotion and active patient follow up?

Five: What data can we use to measure progress towards MDG 4?

- It is indeed fascinating to observe that at each meeting where statistics on infant and child mortality in South Africa are presented, they are never the same and are a source of much discussion. As child health practitioners I would therefore ask you:
- How can you guide the policy makers in the country to develop a consensus on unified data on child health and mortality?
- How else are we truly ever going to be able to report on progress made towards the MDG's in the country, within provinces and within the 18 priority districts if there is no agreement on baseline mortality data?

I would like to conclude by reassuring all of you that as UNICEF, we have full confidence in all of you – the best minds gathered in this room today, to help this country to find the solutions that are most appropriate to the realities of South Africa. We believe those

Statement by the Representative

solutions should be based on a human-rights approach that ensures that we close the gaps between the *easy-to-reach* and the *hard- to-reach* and reduce the disparities between urban and rural, formal and informal settings.

This conference has provided us with an excellent forum for building strategic and sustainable national partnerships to accelerate child health and child survival and development in the country.

I look forward to the outcomes and take this opportunity to reassure you of UNICEF's full commitment to support your collective efforts to realize the rights to good health, survival and development of the children of South Africa.

I thank you.