

**Speech by the Minister of Health Dr. Manto Tshabalala-Msimang
at the meeting of the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional
Management Team of UNICEF**

21 March 2006

Greetings

It is a pleasure for me to address this meeting on this important day in the history of our country, the National Human Rights Day. On this day, we remember our heroes and heroines who fell in our victorious struggle for human rights. It relates particularly to the massacre of peaceful protestors at Sharpsville in 1960.

Programme director, I would like to thank Unicef for inviting me to address this meeting of your representatives from east and southern Africa.

It is critical that there is regular interaction between governments and representatives of United Nations agencies in order to ensure that there is mutual understanding of the challenges facing various countries and how these should be tackled. As the Ministry of Health in South Africa, we have made effort to facilitate this interaction and build the relationship which we believe is critical in addressing the health and social challenges facing Africa.

This meeting comes at a right time as we are involved in global discussion on increasing access to HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment and care. We are very impressed by the progress that have been made at various consultations as we build up to the UN General Assembly at the end of May. The world is finally coming to realise that unless we address the challenges of poverty and underdevelopment, hunger, illiteracy and gender inequality, we will not make an impact in curbing the spread of HIV infection and reducing the impact of AIDS.

South Africa has made an effort to ensure that we broaden the understanding of global objective of Universal Access. In terms of our Constitution as a country, Universal Access means that we progressively make quality services available in an equitable manner to ensure that all South Africans who choose to utilise any of these services can have a reasonable access to them.

As part of this progressive realisation of the right of access, we believe we need pool together our efforts as government, UN agencies and other collaborating partners. We need to complement each other in order to achieve universal access to prevention, care and treatment programmes.

Programme Director, the last World Health Day had a theme: make every mother and child count. We observed this day with a community in Limpopo. We highlighted the need to change today's world reality where many women die during pregnancy or as a result of delivery each year and where millions of children die before celebrating their fifth birthday.

Through our healthy lifestyle programme, we want to ensure that every pregnancy and delivery is a safe experience. We are emphasising the need to care for the health of babies before and after birth to ensure that they have a healthy start to life.

The health of women and children is an important indicator in the world's effort to meet the Millennium Development Goals relating to health. These goals include addressing the challenges of hunger and lack of access to safe water, reducing maternal and child mortality and begin to reverse the incidence of infectious diseases like HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria by 2015.

As a country we conducted the second South African Demographic and Health Survey in 2003 and we are preparing to release this report which evaluates, to a certain extent, the progress we are making with regard particularly to maternal and child health.

There are positive indications with regard to infant mortality and mortality of children under five years. The proportion of births that were attended to by either a nurse or doctor has increased from 84% in 1998 to 92% in 2003. This can be attributed to the increased access to health services both in terms of availability of health facilities in various communities and free health services for pregnant and lactating women as well as children under the age of six years.

The positive developments around maternal and child health indicates that we are on the correct path and we need to sustain our efforts to further improve the lives of women and children.

We are intensifying the implementation of the School Health Policy to ensure that we cater for the health needs of learners in particular. We are also strengthening the cold chain to ensure sustainable and safe supply of vaccines and intensify our Expanded Programme on Immunisation with campaigns aimed at increasing immunisation coverage amongst our communities.

South Africa has been selected to present country documentation on Polio Eradication at the African Region Certification Commission (ARCC) in October this year. We will use this opportunity to share our experiences with regard to the joint efforts we have had with Lesotho

and Swaziland on the polio eradication including the work of our Inter-country Certification Committee.

We appreciate UNICEF's support in the implementation of several child survival strategies such as the Growth Monitoring and Promotion (GMP), Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI), Micronutrient Deficiency Control and Food Fortification and implementation of the WHO Ten Steps to manage severe malnutrition. The ten steps to managing severe malnutrition is being implemented in three province with intention of covering other provinces during the course of the year.

Close to 180 health facilities have been declared baby friendly in the country and Vitamin A coverage rates for children 6-11 months is above 85% nationally. A survey to establish the impact of our national food fortification programme has been completed and the outcomes will indicate if we are making any difference in improving the nutritional status of our people.

More than 77% of our health facilities were providing services to reduce the risk of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV by the end of last year and these services are being expanded to other facilities.

We are concerned about the major challenge posed by the consumption of alcohol on the health of women and children particularly with regard to number of children affected by foetal alcohol syndrome. For the sake

of the health of women and children, we are moving ahead with the efforts to put warning labels on the containers of alcohol products. These warnings are aimed at raising public awareness about negative health and social effects of alcohol including the risk of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

While we continue to make these interventions as a country, we are convinced that the health of our population can only be made better if we improve the socio-economic conditions of SADC and the rest of the African continent. Hence, we firmly believe in the implementation of the Nepad and critical role of the African Union.

We have to strengthen our health systems and improve access to affordable health care in the region. We have to ensure that interventions made against specific health conditions are integrated into the overall healthcare delivery system and assist in improving the health systems in the region.

I hope you have fruitful deliberations.

Thank you

