

Speech delivered by Dr Jama Gulaid, UNICEF Swaziland Country Representative, at the launch of “Children’s Month” at Mountain Inn, Mbabane - 1 July 2007

Your Excellency Rt. Hon. Prime Minister
Hon. Minister of Health and Social Welfare
Senior Government Officials
Representatives of the Civil Society
Friends of Children
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today is a special day for children in Africa. In every country, there are observances, celebrations of the achievements and reflections on what more could be done to improve the situation of children. We in Swaziland are gathered here to do the same. Unlike other countries, Swaziland has an ambitious agenda in June to hold observances of this special day at national level and in every region.

As we gather to launch June as Children's Month, it is fitting that we create awareness on child trafficking but also take stock of the state of Swazi children today. We as a country must evaluate the programmes and interventions we institute on behalf of children. We must take a critical look at our work and issue our own “report card” on the health, education and welfare of the Swazi child.

First of all, let me mention several positive developments. Children in Swaziland enjoy peace and stability. Peace and stability are priceless gifts to any nation and especially vulnerable populations such as children, women and poor households. The National Plan of Action for Orphans and Vulnerable Children launched by the Hon. Prime Minister in early 2006 spells out four rights of children: the right to education, the right to food, the right to health and the right to protection. The plan also covers monitoring and partnerships.

Children have improved access to schools. More than 60,000 children benefited from this initiative thanks to the Government grants. Needy children have received food at school and at NCPs although lately many NCPs have run out of food.

To improve coverage of health services, the MOHSW conducted child health days and with the support of the Ministry of Education, successfully implemented the school deworming campaign.

Children are increasingly getting birth registration a simple but vital step toward the enjoyment of their right to an identity. Thanks again to the government for the birth registration drive. Without birth registration, children are more likely to be trafficked.

On PMTCT, a panel of experts representing WHO, UNICEF and USG, in collaboration with a team from MOHW, has just completed a review of the PMTCT programme. The team noted significant progress in this field and pointed out areas for future action to protect more infants, children and mothers.

Now, let me mention some of the challenges. Yes, there are substantial challenges facing children in Swaziland. But before all else, the most critical one is survival the right to life. If we cannot keep children alive, all other interventions are futile.

You heard some of the statistics in the health presentation but they are worth repeating.

The mortality rate for children under five years old is 156 deaths per 1,000 live births.

The most tragic thing about these numbers is that they are on the rise. Child survival is in more danger each and every year. Between 1995 and 1997, the under five mortality rate increased by 10%. Between 1997 and 2005, the rate increased by 70%. The rate in 2005 is nearly 90% more than the rate in 1995.

This is an alarming situation. Yet, the budget of the MOHSW the lead agency on health-related matters is very low, 8% instead of the 15% of the budget allocation recommended at Abuja.

The good news is that we know what kills children and how to prevent them. Nearly one half of children less than five years old die from HIV/AIDS. Other preventable causes of death are pneumonia and diarrhea. Malnutrition is also a major contributing factor to child mortality.

Mortality indicators hide pain, suffering, and handicap. In the interest of time, I could not discuss the morbidity picture or the relationship between vulnerability and child trafficking. I would say that violence against children and women mars the climate of peace and stability which exists in the country.

We have much work to do because children's survival is at stake. UNICEF remains committed to working with government and partners. We should set priorities for 2007 and systematically monitor progress. In the words of his Majesty the King, let's make this year a "year of meaningful action".

I thank you, Honourable Prime Minister for your leadership, your attention and your support to children. I also thank all participants of this launch for being friends of children in your different capacities.