

Regional Communication Meeting

Welcoming remarks by Dr. Esther Guluma, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa

Dear All,

- It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Dakar, and to the meetings that are going on this week. I am very glad that all countries are represented and that on the agendas there are some joint sessions. It is always a joy to see our communicators managing to speak to each other! So, on behalf of everyone at the Regional Office a bienvenue.
- I hope that those of you who know me understand that I am a big supporter of both Information and Programme Communication. To me, the one does not stand without the other. To achieve the results we all want to see in this region for children we need to operate at every level. We must use our expertise to work intelligently and strategically to achieve change, traction and movement.
- I also feel we should all be working together. In this region perhaps, more than most, there is sometimes a tendency to think about what makes us different rather than what unites us. Even within offices there can be a tendency to see only ones own section or priorities. Communication people should be helping leaders and communities to see all chances and all options to leverage resources and opinion to help children.
- From the agendas I see that particular work is going on to help build knowledge and capacity to make our efforts stronger. I am particularly glad to see the opportunity on Thursday to share time with people outside the organisation, such as community radio operators and the broadcast NGO TVE, with whom we can work to help distribute our messages and materials.
- You will note that behind me is a bridge. I assume that this is to emphasise how communication is a connector in so many ways- and can also be the link between hoped for outcomes and results. Certainly in WCAR we hope that the new website is something of a bridge to arouse more interest in the region and to be able to take countries to a wired audience. I hope that you all check it out regularly!
- With that thought of greater connectivity in mind I want to address some issues on Programme communication- which will be playing a more central role in West and Central Africa over the next few years. At the All-Africa

Representatives' Meeting in November 2006, participants agreed that it was a key strategy for accelerating child survival in the region.

- To improve child survival rates, programme communication specialists – the people here at this meeting - must accomplish two jobs. First, you must continue to support child health days and immunization plus campaigns. In addition there has to be wide dissemination of information both to explain why the services are important, and to identify and reach marginalized and underserved groups.
- But providing supplies and services is not enough – people must know how to use them and they must also learn how to take better care of their children. And so there is another important job for programme communication specialists: designing and delivering large-scale communication strategies in support of key household behaviours. We know – thanks to research published in the Lancet – that if mothers exclusively breast-feed their babies, if they and their children wash their hands regularly, if they sleep under an insecticide-treated net, and if they treat diarrhoea with oral re-hydration, that child mortality can be reduced by as much as 40 per cent.
- Large-scale communication strategies to promote these behaviours will be a bit different from the ones we use to publicize child health days. The key behaviours, such as washing hands with soap are life-long in nature. This may mean changes in the way people live and perhaps even their cultural beliefs. Washing hands more frequently, for example, means that families must fetch more water from the well. Who will do the extra work? It also means that people must buy more soap. How will they find the money? The answers to these questions can only be determined through community dialogue – and so interpersonal communication, through networks of trusted leaders, will play an important role in the new approach.
- To do this we need to be mobilise resources, financial ones certainly, but also resources of commitment, of energy and innovation.
- This region is the one that faces the most basic core issues that have faced humanitarian workers for too long. We need to combine to banish needless and preventable child deaths- we need to use the strengths of this region to carry our combined messages to all our audiences.
- I look forward to hearing about the progress of this meeting and seeing you at the cocktail on Wednesday evening. For now, many thanks for listening and have a good time!