Keynote address of Mr Alhaji Bah – Officer-in-Charge,
UNICEF Representative to Ethiopia
on International Day of Midwives
Harmony Hotel, Addis Ababa
13 May 2016
08:30 am to 09:00 am

Excellency Woizero Roman Tesfaye – First Lady of Ethiopia
Excellency Dr Kesetebirhan Admassu – Minister of Health, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Dr Paul Maniuka – Acting Representative, WHO
Dr Faustin Fao – Representative, UNFPA
Dr Anneka Knutsson – Head of Development Cooperation Section, Embassy of Sweden
Sr Yezabnesh Kibe – President, Ethiopian Midwives Association
Ato Dawit Hailu – Acting Executive Director, Ethiopian Midwives Association
Miss Hannah Gibson – Country Director, Jhpiego Ethiopia

Esteemed Members of the Midwifery Profession in Ethiopia

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here with you to celebrate the 24th International Day of Midwives.

It is with great pleasure to address you here today because the midwifery profession is very close to my heart since midwives are the first to welcome children into this world.
Throughout the history of human kind, midwives have provided comfort and care to families and empowered communities and continue to play a critical role in ensuring the survival and well-being of newborns and mothers.

The Government of Ethiopia’s unparalleled commitment to maternal and child health and the engagement of all partners, including the Ethiopian Midwives Association, in scaling up high impact interventions has led to real results for mothers and children.

The remarkable expansion in the number of trained midwives in Ethiopia from just one thousand to more than seven thousand within a few years indicates the priority given to the role of midwives in creating a world where pregnancies are no longer putting the lives of mothers and children at risk.

Midwives are at the forefront of improving maternal and child health, and Ethiopian midwives have played a lead role in achieving real progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 4 and 3 respectively on child and maternal health – and will be instrumental in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Indeed, achieving the 2030 SDGs of ending preventable maternal and newborn deaths, will depend on the continued commitment of each and every midwife in Ethiopia under the guidance and support of the Ethiopian Midwives Association.

However, while Ethiopia has achieved the MDG 4 targets on reducing child mortality three years ahead of time, reductions in maternal mortality were much slower and maternal mortality needs to be a top priority for the post-2015 Development Agenda and the new Health Sector Transformation Plan. I am grateful to the Ethiopian Midwives Association for organizing this critical annual event and to remind us that much needs to be done to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity in Ethiopia.
Ladies and gentlemen,

**A key goal in the coming years is to focus on narrowing disparities to end preventable maternal, new-born and child deaths in Ethiopia.** As more and more progress is made at the national level, the disparities become more pronounced and evident. For instance, a child born in Addis Ababa is two to three times more likely to reach its 5th birthday than a baby born in Benishangul-Gumuz, Afar or Gambella. At the same time, a child born in a rural area has a higher risk of death compared to a child born in an urban area.

The Federal Ministry of Health has made equitable and universal access to quality maternal, newborn and child health services a top priority for the national health agenda and we at UNICEF are committed to supporting the Government in its tireless efforts to close the gap and decrease disparities.

**Access to and availability of medical care are both necessary but not sufficient factors to improve maternal and newborn health.** In fact, they do not guarantee increased utilization of services or improved client satisfaction. Improving health systems’ capacity to offer quality care that meets women’s needs is imperative for increasing demand for maternal health services and, ultimately, for better health outcomes.

We recognize that a strong, competent, ethical and compassionate midwifery profession is one of the key corner stones of an effective and quality national maternal, newborn and child health care system.

Recognizing the Ministry of Health’s commitment to develop the midwifery profession in the country, UNICEF has partnered with the Federal Ministry of Health, the Ethiopian Midwives Association and other key partners supporting midwifery profession, including JHPIEGO, to raise the level of competency and skills of practicing midwives within the Ethiopian health system since 2010.
For instance, UNICEF provides support to strengthening Basic Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care through competency based training, supportive supervision and provision of essential supplies and equipment to health centres across the country.

To date, close to 4,000 health centres across the country have received basic emergency obstetric and newborn care support and 19 national training sites have been successfully established.

The support has also enabled substantial capacity building for the Ethiopian Midwives Association so that the association now has a presence in the regions which enables midwives to offer high quality services to mothers and babies across the country and where it matters most.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As we celebrate the 24th International Day of Midwives, it is with full confidence that I look at the Ethiopian Midwifery Association’s ability to mobilize all of its members and combined strength – in terms of advocacy, high quality care, and training – to support the Federal Ministry of Health in its commitment to end preventable maternal, newborn and child deaths in Ethiopia.

With this year’s theme – *Women and Newborns, The Heart of Midwifery* – the professional association demonstrates its strong and continued commitment to play a key role in this national effort. UNICEF remains committed to support the midwifery profession as they continue to ensure that mothers are safe and children have a healthy start in life.

Ameseginalehu, Thank you.