

**OPENING ADDRESS BY MS MARGOT DAVIDS, CHIEF DIRECTOR:  
CHILDREN, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AT THE  
KNOWLEDGE BUILDING SEMINAR,**

**CO-HOSTED BY UNICEF AND THE INTERDEPARTMENTAL  
COMMITTEE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AT ST  
GEORGE'S HOTEL, 58 DOORNKLOOF, GOEDE HOOP AVENUE,  
M57, RIETVLEIDAM, KEMPTON PARK, GAUTENG PROVINCE,**

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**Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen**

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome all the delegates and participants to this highly esteemed Early Childhood Development Knowledge Seminar. The theme for this seminar "*Disabilities in Early Childhood Development*" is very appropriate particularly because of the fact that every year the third of December is *International Day for People with Disabilities*. On this day we are all urged to promote and create awareness of disability issues such as the fundamental rights and integration of persons with disabilities in the mainstream of each aspect of the social, political, economic and cultural status of their communities. This day is a day to remind ourselves of the importance for us all to play our part in ensuring that people living with disabilities attain their full rights to enjoy life in every aspect of their lives. This year the Early Childhood Development Knowledge Building Seminar is playing its role in fulfilling the mandate set for the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December.

People with disabilities remain the most marginalised, discriminated and dehumanised people in every part of the world. Even though Human Rights Frameworks clearly state that disabled people should enjoy rights like everyone else, the daily life experiences still remain evident of unequal and unjust treatment.

“The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the response of the international community to the long history of discrimination, exclusion and dehumanization of persons with disabilities. It is historic and groundbreaking in many ways, being the fastest negotiated human rights treaty ever and the first of the twenty-first century” (United Nations 2007). It is instruments like these that we should all look to and be familiar with as we plan and act on the needs and rights of people with disabilities.

It is to be noted that South Africa was among other state parties to adopt the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on 13 December 2006 by the 61<sup>st</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly as resolution A/RES/61/106. In March 2007, South Africa was counted among the top ten signatories of both the Convention and its Optional Protocol. For South Africa the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities serves as a benchmark for future standards and action.

South Africa has made some progress in the area of disabilities. Firstly a Ministry for Women, Children and Persons with Disabilities is in place to cater for the needs and rights of disabled people. Other departments, such as Education, have the Inclusive Education Section to cater for the needs of children and even educators in schools.

Secondly, in terms of Disability Specific Legislation different acts and policies have been drafted and implemented, such as the Social Assistance Amendment Bill (2010) Employment Equity Act (1998), Integrated Disability Strategy Social Assistance Act (2004), Education White Paper 6 that deals with Special Needs Education (2001). The Department of Social Development has also ensured that the rights and needs of people with disabilities are addressed through the White Paper

for Social Welfare (1997), the Policy on Disability (2009), the National Policy on the Provision of Social Services to Persons with Disabilities (2010), the National Policy Framework for Children (2009) and the Children's Act, Nr 38 of 2005.

Health related Acts and policies also deal with how disabilities should be included in the health system such as the Policy on Transformation of Health Services in South Africa 1997 and the National Health Act (2006).

Thirdly, South Africa also has several structures and organisations that deal with disabilities, some of which are represented here today. Research work in the field of disabilities is also substantial for example in the area of HIV and Aids, and its disability consequences.

However, much still needs to be done. This conference will provide us with access to research information focusing on ECD which is very much required for policy and programme guidance.

By focussing on Disabilities in Early Childhood Development, the 2011 ECD Knowledge Building Seminar has highlighted the importance of recognising and understanding disabilities early in a child's life. It is in the early years that early detection and intervention can make the biggest difference in a person's life even to the extent that a disability can be prevented and the consequences of the disability could be limited.

According to the General Household Survey 2009, there are 1 393 236 – almost 1.4 million children, in the birth to 4 years of age cohort with disabilities

and only about 27% of these children have access to some form of ECD provisioning.

In addition, the majority of young children with disabilities, who are eligible to attend Grade R, don't attend. Some of the causes of young children having lack of access to ECD provisioning, even in non-centre based programmes, are due to attitude and ignorance issues about disabilities in our communities, wrong cultural beliefs, lack of training of teachers, practitioners and care givers in the ECD sector on how to deal with children with disabilities. The other factor is the lack of resources specifically provided to ensure that provisioning for disabilities is catered for in early childhood development provisioning.

This conference is a land mark for the ECD sector on the one hand and the sector dealing with persons with disability on the other hand. It has brought together different groups of people, experts and professionals as well as interest groups to share and deliberate on this crucial issue of disabilities in the early years of a child.

I trust that you will enjoy the presentations, discuss issues and come up with suggestions and ideas on how to deal with the challenges that we have to address to meet the needs and rights of children with disabilities in the country.

I wish you all the best during these two very busy days of deliberations and discussions.

I thank you.

## REFERENCES

United Nations (2007) *Disabilities from Exclusion to Equality*