

# Conference on Child Protection Systems Strengthening in Sub-Saharan Africa

Promising Practices, Lessons Learned and the Way Forward Dakar, Senegal • 7-9 May 2012

## Key Note Address

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**“The Shift towards Systems Strengthening in Sub-Saharan  
Africa and Where We are Now”**

## Excellencies

Distinguished Delegates, Dear Children and Young People, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to stand before such an esteemed group of delegates on a subject that is close to my heart. I also bring you warm greetings and support from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The turnout of this Conference is clear evidence that we are building momentum to transform the landscape of child protection, and I embrace your participation. Many of you are front line practitioners who bear witness to both the strengths and weaknesses of our efforts. You bring the knowledge that will make this Conference a success, and you will carry forward our shared commitment to make the world a better place for each and every child.

In 2011, a National Survey on Violence against Children in Tanzania found that one in three girls, and one out of every seven boys, experience some form of sexual violence. Most of these sexual assaults occur in a home or school, or going to or from school, and children often know their sexual attacker. In the same schools, some 78 per cent of girls and 67 per cent of boys have been abused by teachers through punching, kicking and whipping – in unacceptable corporal punishment.. Most of these children do not report their experience, only a small number seek services and even when they do seek support, very few actually receive any care or treatment. Ongoing work in many other countries and the review of implementation of the CRC by the Committee show that this situation is not unique to Tanzania.

In addition to these grave violations, many children in sub-Saharan Africa are raised in an environment of high HIV rates, often resulting in a life without parents and extreme poverty. This is compounded all too often by war, conflict and natural emergencies. The Institute of Security Studies in Pretoria argues that these young people are disenchanted, have limited or no family and social networks, and are ripe for recruitment into a range of illegal activities.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen what good are the signatures and ratifications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols if they don't translate into basic acts of humanity, respect for the dignity of the child, and acknowledgement of others? How useful are conventions that are not implemented to support and protect those who are most in need? Truly, the conventions and protocols are only as useful as nations, communities and families, and global actors make them.

As a citizen of this continent I find myself confounded by so many contradictions. Today, I am the proud citizen of the third fastest growing region in the world. On this continent, where we proudly stand as Africans, the ICT infrastructure is expected to total more than US\$23 billion annually over the next few years. The 10,000 kilometers South Atlantic Express cable connecting South Africa and Brazil has revolutionized our access to the internet. We have gold in Ghana and Mali, oil in Angola and Nigeria, liquid gas in Mozambique, uranium in

Namibia, copper in Congo and Zambia, diamonds in Sierra Leone and South Africa - we wait to hear if there is oil in Comoros, Kenya and others.

And yet, the gains from the activities are not equitably distributed, and growth in GDP throughout Sub-Saharan Africa has served to only slightly improve the lives of children – children who are more than 50% of the population. Countries are pressing ahead to strengthen democracy, supported by AU, ECOWAS, SADC, etc, but this democracy often seems to apply to only adults. It is said that Africans love children and this is true. But how do we treat them, especially the less fortunate ones?

We have spent too long arguing that child protection is a simple matter of rights. We know that there can be no successful escape from poverty if children are not provided with a protective and nurturing environment from the very earliest age, and given access to an affordable and high quality education, decent health care and nutrition, and basic infrastructure. We also know that there are very large numbers of children who, through abuse, violence, abandonment, exploitation, or neglect, have little hope of reaching their full human, cognitive, emotional and social development potential. It is high time that we drew an explicit and clear link between poverty alleviation and the protection and welfare of the child.

It is within this perplexing, contradictory and opportunity-filled environment that we, the Child Protection stakeholders, have been advocating and implementing a fundamental re-examination of our approach to programming. Decades of development programming and related aid interventions have done little to decrease the substantial levels of violence, abuse, exploitation, and abandonment of children. Minimally effective child protection systems in some countries only exacerbate children's vulnerabilities. We have seen how stand-alone projects have limited sustainability after funding ceased, including numerous 'pilot projects' resulting in little or no replication or impact. The development of capacity in child protection—basing our efforts on a system approach that is holistic, comprehensive and multi-sectoral is a pressing priority..

The human, organizational and financial resources mobilized to address child protection demands are falling short of what is required. Public sector capacity is challenged by minimal investment – no country spends anywhere near to even one percent of its budget on the protection of children, despite the pressing needs for human resources, training, information systems, infrastructure and equipment. Distinguished delegates, with these financial resources, how can we bring promising initiatives to scale or enhance the sustainability of current efforts? While funding isn't the only issue, there is an effort amongst governments, donors, UN agencies, and child protection experts – all represented in this Conference - to redirect efforts and resources to improving the quality, access and sustainability of child protection services. Ultimately, governments must take responsibility for 'standing on their own two feet' for supporting, and financing, the child protection agenda in their countries.

**So what is this system?** Broadly speaking, a child protection system consists of the legal and policy framework, structures, functions and capacities, services, data and information, and resource flows. The approach is holistic, multi-sectoral and focuses on prevention and results with the goal of better outcomes for children. It also seeks to clarify and highlight the specific protection risks children face. In light of the post 2015 discussions – a system approach must treat child protection as one of the core human development sectors to be addressed in programming, complementing and leveraging the work of other social sectors. *This is my dream for Africa!*

While I proclaim Africa, I am cognisant of the diverse geographic, political, institutional and historical situations of each of our countries. The principles set here can only serve as a guideline for deeper country-specific analysis and response to opportunities and challenges. We in Africa are a proudly diverse people! In no manner will the system in South Africa match the system in Mali nor do we expect the system in Lagos (a metropolitan city) to match that of Messina (a border town between South Africa and Zimbabwe). What joins us is a dream for Africa's children to survive, to grow and to thrive in a protected environment contextually adapted to local needs. What inspires us are positive African values and the universal principles and provisions of the CRC and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

This dream has already started to become a reality.

1. In Burundi and our host country, Senegal, a National Child Protection Strategy has been drafted and is under dialogue;
2. In Kenya, a National Framework has been adopted identifying roles and responsibilities for key stakeholders;
3. In Tanzania, the system consisting of a diverse group of partners in being piloted in 4 districts;
4. In Malawi, the Government approved USD500,000 to upgrade its College of Social Work to run diploma and degree courses in social welfare;
5. In Somaliland, a stakeholder task force has developed a multi-year framework and prioritized action plan to support child protection;
6. More than half of the countries in West and Central Africa have analysed and are strengthening national child protection systems, including coordination mechanisms at national and district levels (Cameroon, Benin, Sao Tome, Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, DRC).
7. Cote d'Ivoire and Niger are developing appropriate child and family welfare service models that strengthen links with traditional community protection actors
8. DRC, Niger and Sierra Leone are among the countries developing effective community-based child protection mechanisms
9. Benin is one of the first countries in West and Central Africa to have developed a national information management system for child protection

With this change comes an appreciation and strengthening of existing child protection mechanisms, noting the work already done and fully acknowledging the immense agenda ahead.

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen, we have a choice in front of us. How do we all see children in Africa? Do we see them as a wonderful asset of society and the world? Do we see them as healthy and educated? Free from fear, free from violence, free from discrimination, free to express themselves and be taken seriously? Do we see them growing up to be an empowered citizen who can contribute to the progress of our countries and fulfil their aspirations? Or do we still see children as objects of care and charity, left to their own fate, vulnerable to the injustices we see around?

I am confident that we will see all children as young citizens, subjects of rights and responsibilities, the stewards of our collective future and of our world. But to do this we must invest. We are gathered here because we have a responsibility – we believe we can change things. Based on that collective premise, I would like to suggest three key strategies that can improve the lives of these children.

**First is to invest in prevention and early intervention programs** – There is a growing body of evidence on the cost effectiveness of prevention and/or early intervention. Designing a system that makes a shift in the balance of expenditure from treatment to prevention generates efficiency gains. Victims of violence—and notably girls-- exhibit long-term health and psychological effects, including chronic-pain syndromes, drug and alcohol abuse, unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy complications, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), increased rates of morbidity and mortality, mental health problems, gynecological problems, and decreased functioning. Social and economic effects are reflected in increased absenteeism, decreased labor force participation, and reduced productivity. These outcomes lower girls' ability to earn in ways commensurate with their skills and to take physical control of earnings. A recent review in Swaziland, impressive in the depth and breadth of its inquiry, concluded that the short-term and long-term effects were so devastating that the priority must simply be prevention.

**Second, promote partnerships and coordination** – While our collective and large membership represented here today is impressive it also brings concerns. How many approaches to child protection systems work exist amongst us? We must not make the mistake of other sectors and dilute our focus but rather from the start—here and now—commit to coordination that reflects a single framework, with gold standards for protection that becomes our end goal. It is important to partner between the formal and informal sectors, it is important to partner across the formal sectors (e.g. with health, education, employment and justice), it is important to partner with the Regional Economic Communities and African regional institutions (public and private), and it is important to partner with children and families. Most of all it is important to ensure that partnerships contribute to national priorities, to the best results for children without causing any harm and to have a multiplier effect of integrating child protection across sectors. Building a single framework—and importantly common ground—is one of the key objectives of this conference.

**Third, do not be afraid to innovate** – Innovation should spur us forward to find ways to get the child protection system to deliver better or comparable results with fewer resources. We are fortunate to be in the company of Uganda and South Africa today. Through a joint partnership, these innovators have developed the ‘*Digital Drum*’, a homegrown information and communication technology bringing children and youth together into information hubs, so powerful that it was recognized in *Time Magazine’s* list of the top 50 inventions in the world for 2011. In Kenya, the ‘*Ushahidi Platform*’ also homegrown is a website that was initially developed to map reports of violence submitted via the web and mobile phones in Kenya after the post-election fallout at the beginning of 2008. The platform has since been expanded to report violence in South Africa and Eastern Congo. The Platform was voted one of the 50 most innovative companies in the world alongside Facebook, Google and Twitter by MIT’s Technology Review. We are gathered here to support these initiatives and push forward for more.

**In conclusion**, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Children:

Collectively we must recognize the long road ahead of us in ensuring that all children of this continent will have equal opportunities to become healthy and vital citizens of tomorrow. While some deep-rooted practices, attitudes, beliefs may appear resistant to change, while resource allocation discussions that are child-centred are difficult, while enforcing laws and bringing justice for children often seems impossible we can still move ahead. We have seen progress in the most remote and neglected parts of Tanzania and in Niger. We have proof, as many of you do, that our vision can become reality. Let us together ensure that our young constituent citizens have a fair chance to learn, to be safe and to ultimately contribute to society.

I look forward to working with you across organizations, countries, and the continent to ensure that our passion, energy, and commitment to this cause is sustained, deepened, recognized, and resourced, with the hope that millions of children ultimately feel the positive results of efforts.

Thank you for your kind attention.