



***REGIONAL MEETING ON MEASUREMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT IN EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA***
Remarks by Mr. Ozonnia Ojielo, UN Resident Coordinator
24 October 2023
Ubumwe Grande Hotel, Kigali, Rwanda

Salutations

- Honourable Minister of MIGEPROF (we need a name)
- Government officials from Eastern and Southern Africa
- Oliver Petrovic from UNICEF and other UNICEF representatives from country offices and headquarters
- Janet Kayita from WHO AFRO and other WHO representatives from the regional office, country offices and headquarters
- Lynette Okengo, the representative of the Africa Early Childhood Network
- Shekufeh Zonji, the representative of the Early Childhood Development Action Network
- Diego Luna Bazaldua, the representative of the World Bank, and other World Bank representatives
- the representatives of developmental partners, civil society, funders, academia
- All protocols observed
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Dear Colleagues, Mwaramutse, Good Morning!

1. Firstly, let me begin by extending my profound appreciation to the Government of Rwanda for hosting us, and our distinguished government representatives and non-government partners that have made the time to participate in this important event. Secondly, let me also recognize my UN counterparts, in particular UNICEF and the World Health Organization, and the World Bank, the Africa Early Childhood Network and the Early Childhood Development Action Network for organising this auspicious event.

Honorable Minister, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

2. It is a great honor for me to take part in this workshop on measurement of Early Childhood Development in Eastern and Southern Africa. As we are all aware, today marks a critical milestone in bringing together key players to harness the power of data to accelerate and measure progress in developing the continent's most valuable asset – its youngest children – to accelerate and sustain human capital for sustainable development.

3. With less than 7 years to 2030, there is an urgency to invest our collective resources wisely and strategically to nurture the seeds that will yield the continent's human capital. This therefore requires that we realize the rights of all young children, not just to survive, but to develop their full potential.

Dear Colleagues,

4. The equal and optimal development of all young children is not only a right protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, but also a sustainable development imperative. The evidence is incontrovertible, equalising and optimizing: early development, especially in the first 1000 days, yields unparalleled development returns for children, families, communities, countries, and the region. This is particularly important for those who have been historically marginalized.

5. The Nurturing Care Framework for Early Childhood Development launched in 2018, provides a clear road map for action. The formula is simple: starting from birth, all children must receive nurturing care. This includes good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, safety and security, and early learning opportunities from birth. The primary caregivers of young children are parents, the family and others who provide childcare. However, many families experience social and economic adversities that prevent them from providing quality childcare.

Honorable Minister, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

6. ECD risks and adversities have deepened in the wake of recent humanitarian, security, health, and economic crises. These have left most parents and caregivers poorer, food insecure, unsafe, and unable to provide the care their children need. We know that globally, no country is set to achieve the SDGS. Yet, Africa has been particularly hard hit and previous gains have been lost. Countries across Africa have recognised the transformational importance of ECD and are increasingly investing, especially in early learning. However, the investments have not yet yielded measurable returns.

7. Looking at the data, the World Bank's Human Capital Index which measures the extent to which children's potential develops by the time they are 18 years reports that children in Sub-Saharan Africa will only develop 40% of their potential, compared to a global average of 56%. Development outcomes are deeply unequal. Whilst, across the continent, there is a 10 to 20 percentage point difference in the development prospects of rich and poor children, which if left unaddressed will perpetuate and deepen poverty and patterns of exclusion.

8. So, despite increased health and early education investments and improved child survival, as many as 2/3rds of children under five in sub-Saharan Africa are at risk of poor development,

amounting to more than 100 million in number. Unfortunately, the growing child population set against increasing poverty and the persistently high levels of stunting, a key predictor of poor development, also suggests that this number is set to increase at the expense of Africa's Agenda 2063 aspirations.

Honorable Minister, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

9. What does this all mean going forward? Disrupting intergenerational poverty and inequality is essential. Some considerations that come to mind include:

(i) Countries across Africa move beyond policy commitments to develop, resource, and monitor effective services, that will enable parents and caregivers to provide nurturing care to their children.

(ii) This in turn requires innovation, to provide not only early learning services, but to support families, caregivers, and communities to create the enabling environments that children need to grow and develop.

(iii) To make a difference, countries also need laws and policies.

(iv) Responsive health systems, multi-sectoral collaboration of health, education, child protection and social welfare, to provide the resources and implement the critically important services that young children and their families so sorely need.

10. I am aware that many countries have committed to this very course of action, as will be discussed in this distinguished forum. However, they have been hampered in their implementation efforts by the lack of appropriate measurement tools and data. The lack of adequate population scale information has frustrated implementation. Without knowing who is affected, how large the challenge is, where the families are that need help and what help they need, it is almost impossible to plan, develop responsive programmes and critically allocate the right resources. Our collective challenge – our implementation challenge – is marked by weak policies, programmes that are not rolled out at scale sustainably, and poor quality. At the heart of these systemic issues has been the lack of appropriate data at multiple levels to inform transformational system strengthening.

11. Thanks to the hard work of the Government, non-government partners, our development and research partners as well as the UN family we now are addressing these challenges. The development of the Global Scales for Early Development and the ECD Index 2030 provide the vehicles needed to harness the power of data and drive strategic early investments for continental transformation.

Honorable Minister, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

12. This workshop provides us an important platform and opportunity to not only consolidate our understanding of measurement of Early Childhood Development, but also examine what is needed to build the enabling environments that children need to survive and thrive, monitor implementation, and use data as markers along the way.

13. In closing, I would like to urge you to dialogue openly and robustly as to what it will take to give every child an equal chance in the early years, and to use the power of data to unlock the continent's greatest asset: its human capital.

Thank you for your kind attention. Murakoze cyane.