

TALKING POINTS

Greetings:

- Honourable Minister of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF)
- The UN Resident Coordinator Rwanda
- Government Officials from Eastern and Southern Africa
- Representatives of developmental partners, civil society, funders, academia, media
- My dear colleagues' co-conveners of the meeting – representatives, of UNICEF, WHO, the World Bank, the Early Childhood Development Action Network
- All protocols observed

Introduction

May I begin by joining the Regional Coordinator in appreciating the Government of Rwanda for hosting this meeting. Indeed! Rwanda is known for its investment in young children and we are delighted to be here.

Your excellency, honorable Minister, your leadership, commitment, and keen attention to coordinated action has been a great example of what we can do to improve the lives of the youngest children and their families and harness human capital.

It is my pleasure to provide some opening remarks, in the name of partners that co-organize the meeting, UNICEF, WHO, WB, ECDAN and AfECN. We all share the vision of a world where all young children survive, grow, and develop to their full potential and are delighted that all the plans are coming to fruition.

Our common goal is that all young children, from birth to primary school entry, benefit from policies, programs, and practices that protect, promote, and support child survival and optimal growth and development. This meeting is one of the essential milestones towards achieving this goal.

Evidence is clear – a young child's brain is built over time with the earliest years being the most critical for their developing brains, so what they experience especially in early years will mark the young child for life. Our actions therefore, for specific children, are so very important. It is also very clear that what we collectively do for the whole generation of children will determine the future of the whole society. We know that healthy brains mean healthy societies.

When children are born, one of the most important assets they have is their brains. Sadly, this is the aspect of their development that is often neglected. We are not caring for children's brains the way we care for their bodies, especially in early childhood.

The rapid brain growth that happens during this period of life is astounding, giving shape and depth to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development – influencing their capacity to learn, solve problems, and relate to others. This, in turn,

has a significant impact on their adult lives, affecting their ability to earn a living and contribute to their societies . . . even their future health and happiness.

Despite the evidence, many young children in our region are suffering from multiple deprivations.

In 2020, 2.7 million children in Sub-Saharan Africa died before reaching their fifth birthday – this is 54 percent of all under-five deaths globally.

While stunting in other regions declined, in our region, the number of stunted children rose by 1.4 million.

The COVID-19 Pandemic further aggravated child poverty – with millions of children experiencing multi-dimensional poverty made worse by the climate crisis and insecurity.

In addition to unacceptably low survival rates and high stunting rates, it is disheartening to note that 66% of under-5 children in Sub-Saharan Africa, are at risk of poor developmental outcomes - far too few children are thriving because of poor health, inadequate nutrition, exposure to stress, a lack of love and early stimulation, and limited opportunities for early learning. They are not thriving in the crucial first 1,000 days when the foundations for healthy, lifelong physical growth and mental development are laid.

Sad to say that even though evidence shows that early interventions make a difference especially for the most vulnerable children; for millions of our children, we are missing this window of opportunity due to low investments, weak co-ordination, inadequate human resource that limit access to high quality early childhood services.

The good news is that this situation can change and is changing! When families, communities, governments, and partners join in coordinated efforts, children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. And nations benefit from healthier populations, skilled workforces, economic growth, and greater prosperity.

The goal of making Africa suitable for children by the year 2040, as contained in the *Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children*, is increasingly becoming a reality. The vision for an Africa Fit for Children by 2040 is underpinned by several international and regional instruments like the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) and Agenda 2063 on the Africa We Want.

In our region, we have many opportunities and many good initiatives to build on:

Following the launch of the Nurturing Care Framework, developed by UNICEF, WHO, WB, and partners that guides harmonized approaches to ECD and in supporting progress towards achievement of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2040, the African Union Commission has made significant progress. I will mention three key achievements:

1. Firstly, the AUC in 2018, established and launched the ECDE Cluster as a platform to convene and activate key ECD stakeholders including AU Member States, Civil

Society, Academia, Development Partners around critical issues affecting young children and their families guided by the NCF

2. Secondly, the NCF has been embedded into the Continental Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa that utilizes high level policy dialogue, advocacy and community mobilization to harness political commitment of member states towards improving maternal, child and newborn health (MNCH)
3. Thirdly, an AUC interdepartmental Nurturing Care taskforce has been formed to support coordination of activities across the different AUC department

Further to this, the East Central and Southern Africa Health Community has formed a committee that convenes Ministry of Health technical people around holistic child development. There has also been increased engagement of the AU Regional Economic Communities on improving holistic child development outcomes

At the AU Member State level, we have seen several countries gradually incorporating ECD indicators into household surveys, to ensure proper planning and monitoring of ECD interventions and multisectoral ECD policies and costed action plans have grown in the last couple of years. Effective (and affordable) ECD interventions, such as Care for Child Development, Caring for Caregivers, screening of young children on developmental milestones, and others are being mainstreamed in health, nutrition, and other social services and a number of countries are developing and implementing advocacy and communication strategies to support increased investment and prioritization of the early years and we have seen increased demand for ECD services.

We are making good progress, but much more still needs to be done!

As a way of ensuring that the continent is on track in creating a supportive environment where all children can survive, thrive and achieve their full potential, robust and comprehensive measurement systems to generate relevant data and evidence on the status of key indicators is an imperative. Accurate, contextually relevant and reliable data is foundational to effective policy formulation, programme design and performance measurement.

We are at the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. Let us seize this opportunity to equip ourselves to deliver on the promise of a bright future for all our children.

It all begins with you and I, let us do our honest part.

Thank you very much

