

Putting Children First: Identifying Solutions and Taking Action to Tackle Poverty and Inequality in Africa

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“We Must Act Now: The Children Living In Poverty Cannot Wait”

Keynote Speech

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Hon. Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa

Hon. Regional Director of UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa

Excellencies

Distinguished colleagues, participants and experts

Distinguished Media personalities

Ladies and Gentlemen

I feel highly honoured to be asked to speak at this important conference. May I take the opportunity to congratulate the organizers for the excellent work done over the last year or so to put together such an impressive programme. You have shown great commitment and expended a lot of thought, energy and resources for which we and the children of Africa must thank you.

My simple message this morning is that we must act now because the children of Africa living in poverty cannot wait any longer. And if they wait, they only do so at the peril of the much desired, sustainable social and economic development and transformation of the continent.

We can act now more vigorously because recent positive trends in Africa's development give us the impetus. We must act now because the burden of child poverty is enormous and unacceptable. We can act now more purposefully because the evidence is there from research, policy and practice that success is possible in Africa. Indeed the impressive gathering of researchers, policy-makers, governmental, international and civil society practitioners, NGOs and media from Africa and elsewhere here today tells me that the necessary strong partnership already exists to forge ahead to put children first in the fight to end poverty and inequality in this continent.

Positive developments

There are positive developments in various social and economic sectors that are beneficial to ending child poverty. Africa in general, and most countries in Eastern Africa in particular, are growing fast in economic terms. At 5.3% real GDP growth, East Africa, for example, was the fastest growing sub-region in the continent in 2016. Growth outlook remained positive for much of Africa in 2017 and it is expected to be so in the next year (AfDB, OECD and UNDP 2017). This

has implications in addressing poverty in general and child poverty in particular through financing coordinated as well as tailored programmes targeting the highly vulnerable groups.

There is also increasing commitment of African governments to combating poverty and inequality as demonstrated through the adoption of the **Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want** which provides a common vision and framework for Africa's socio-economic transformation and development. The specific adoption of **Africa's Agenda for Children 2040: Fostering an Africa Fit for Children** is yet another testimony of commitment to promote child wellbeing and ensure that children benefit from the ongoing economic, infrastructure and social development. The African Child Policy Forum's reports, particularly the most recent ones such as the **African Report on Child Wellbeing 2016** and the pan-African reports on violence against children and the state of children with disabilities, show that African governments are investing relatively more in sectors benefiting children and are increasingly becoming child-friendly compared to the situation ten or so years ago.

Even if at a slower pace, Africa is also experiencing improvement in governance that gives room for enhanced public participation and accountability. Despite some setbacks, the 2016 report on African governance by the UNECA shows many examples of smooth transitions of power to elected leaders which set positive precedents for others to emulate and which give confidence in the political process.

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The compound effects of these developments lay a solid foundation and create an enabling environment for social transformation and sustainable development in the region. This has immense implications for children and for combating child poverty and deprivation. The developments have also led to achievements in enhancing the survival of children, improving access to healthcare and education services and reducing vulnerability of poor families and their children. Yes we must celebrate the success.

The heavy burden of child poverty in Africa is enormous and unacceptable

Yet we cannot deny that the burden of poverty and particularly child poverty in Africa is heavy and **unacceptable**. According to the 2017 report of the UN General Secretary on the SDGs, there was a reduction in the global rate of extreme poverty from 28 per cent in 1999 to 11 per cent in 2013 - which is the good news. **The bad news is that half of the world's poor, most of them**

children, live in Africa where 42 per cent of the population subsisted in conditions of extreme poverty. Substandard living conditions and the lack of basic services hit children and youth the hardest, diminishing their prospects for good health and education, creating potentially lifelong consequences for their physical, cognitive and social development as well as their active engagement in the development of their countries as agents of change.

In 2014-2016, Southern Asia and Africa accounted for 63 per cent of undernourished people worldwide. Almost two thirds of people suffering from hunger also live in these two regions. Slums are most pervasive in Africa, where more than half (56 per cent) of urban dwellers live in slum conditions with their children. While the situation is improving globally, Africa still has the highest incidence of child labour involving more than one in five children or 59 million children according to the ILO in 2017.

Africa's Agenda for Children 2040 acknowledges that poverty and violence affect certain categories of children in Africa including children with disabilities, orphans, children without parental or family care, children heading households, children surviving on the streets, children of marginalized or stigmatized ethnic or other minority communities more acutely than other children. These children in very vulnerable situations bear a heavy burden of chronic poverty.

Climate change is also having severe impacts on children. For example, the 2015/16 El Niño phenomenon which led to severe drought across Eastern and Southern Africa affected millions of families and children and strained traditional systems of social support. It affected the hard earned achievements in expanding primary education and forced large numbers of children to drop out of school. **When children drop out of school and receive no help to move forward, they drop into debilitating poverty.**

Child poverty linked to fragility, conflict, instability and insecurity

Children living in countries that are extremely poor, fragile with weak institutions, or in a state of conflict and instability are extremely vulnerable to poverty, and are more likely to experience multiple violations of their human rights. Young children and adolescents are profoundly affected by unstable economies and livelihoods, gaps and disruptions in service delivery and the effects of stress driven by conflict and insecurity. Africa has been, and still continues, experiencing protracted conflicts and crisis situations which have devastating effects on children. According to the most recent study by the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child on the impact of conflict and crises on children, it is estimated that children are twenty-four times more

likely to die during armed conflict due to illness and injury than in peacetime. Conflict in Africa accounts for a 50 per cent increase in infant deaths and a 15 per cent increase in undernutrition. Conflict and crisis situations particularly increase the risk of girls being trafficked and experiencing sexual and gender-based violence.

So are there solutions to Africa's child poverty challenge?

This conference will demonstrate from research and experience that solutions for ending child poverty are available and affordable. We will learn, for example, that child-sensitive approaches to social protection and the equitable provision of basic services to reach every child have now been widely tested and proven by African countries. However, we need to learn more about what works and innovative solutions for children in poverty especially in places where there is instability, conflict and weak institutional capacity to deliver services.

As the African Child Policy Forum advocated in its 6th International Policy Conference on the African Child in 2014, we must strive to expand the scope of social protection beyond protection and relief from deprivation, to a comprehensive agenda that includes transformative change for the beneficiaries and participants. This must be aimed at redressing the social and power inequalities, discrimination and marginalization in African societies which undermine children's rights and their ability to reach their full human potential.

Solutions to ending child poverty must also embrace the voices and views of the children themselves. We need to learn and do more about listening to the perspectives of children.

The necessary mechanisms must be put in place to engage children in order to enhance the effectiveness of the interventions meant to address their needs. This will also demonstrate that the future indeed belongs to children and they can be agents of change in that future.

There is a need for aligning Africa's development agenda with the fulfilment of human rights - including children's rights. Poverty reduction strategies must be realigned more closely with the fulfilment of children's rights to non-discrimination, inclusion, protection from harm and exploitation as well as ensuring their access to basic services. Respect for the social and economic rights of poor children and their families must be strengthened by adopting a rights-based framework for development. Such a framework can help to address the structural causes of poverty and ensure inclusiveness.

The need for enhancing implementation and improving performance

When all the policies, strategies and plans on poverty have been adopted, governments must ensure their effective implementation. Ending child poverty is about unwavering commitment to pursue a coordinated effort to implement all children's rights and the SDGs. It is also about intensifying efforts to improve performance through, among other things, enhancing the capacity of both government and independent institutions responsible for oversight and holding the executive branches of government to account.

We must not only ask for more education and more healthcare for children, critical as they are, but we must also look at the efficiency of how the services are provided and whom they reach. What attitudes and influences affect the delivery of basic services in African countries? If the attitudes are those that look down on the poor, will the services reach children suffering from multiple dimensions of poverty? When health services and school supplies in primary and middle schools are free for children but the delivery system is tainted with **corruption** will the services reach poor children?

Education may be made available but must we not ask what kind and what quality of education? If, for example, whole classes in different schools in different geographic areas of a country such as mine, Ghana, fail all the subjects at national Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) after **nine years** of primary and junior high school education, will most of these children not slip into poverty with all the attendant frustrations that failure brings them and their families? Ghana is not the only country where poor basic services are rather aggravating child poverty. So we must act now and hold the authorities accountable.

I would also suggest that we try to look beyond the child-related social sectors and seek linkages with other sectors for solutions. Child poverty may be greatly reduced by policy reforms in the tax systems, access to credit and improvements in agricultural productivity. Can improvements in agricultural productivity, not just in the cash crop sector of cocoa, coffee, cashews etc., but in the food crops sector dominated by families often living on the verge of poverty help to change their situation and that of their children? The question may also be asked about tackling child poverty by improving conditions in pastoral communities and small scale fishing communities and enhancing the economic value of the millions of women and men selling in the traditional markets usually accompanied by their poor children in the absence of affordable early childhood

development programmes. Can we invest some time and space to look at policy simulations and propose policy actions in different sectors that we know will have positive impacts on children?

The need for political engagement

My last suggestion, Mr. Chairman, is that the Coalition and all the national partners in Africa find the best ways to engage politicians and policy makers on poverty eradication putting children first. With the wonderful research and advocacy going on, can we get politicians and policy makers in general to use the right terminology as this can be a powerful path to change? Politicians and policy makers can use the data and poverty measurements that come out of the research, be more firmly guided by the vision and mission that come out of the children's rights instruments, national, regional and global, and use the impetus of the SDGs and **Africa's Agenda 2063** and **Africa's Agenda for Children 2040** as well as the powerful examples of success to make progress. The fight to end child poverty in Africa must be an ongoing national commitment not subject to partisan campaign interpretations or delivery only in four or five year terms of political office only for the priority to change after the next elections. We need consistent commitment to this priority.

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by reiterating that poverty affects children in lifelong ways, from malnutrition, poor health, lack of success in school, harmful labour and an overall poor quality of life. Not only is this extremely damaging for children and their families, but it has a lasting and detrimental impact on the prosperity and the wellbeing of their countries. **Child poverty is everyone's problem, and national governments should make addressing it their absolute priority.** Given the gravity and intensity of the situation in Africa, the governments are urged to focus and accelerate all efforts, for the children living in poverty cannot wait any longer.

I thank you for your attention.

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