

**OPENING ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, DR
ZOLA SKWEIYA TO THE CONFERENCE ON ORPHANS AND OTHER
CHILDREN MADE VULNERABLE BY HIV AND AIDS**

**GALLAGHER ESTATE, MIDRAND
12 JULY 2006**

The MECs of Social Development,
Ms Masilo, Chairperson of the Social Services Select
Committee in the NCOP and other members of Parliament
and Provincial Legislatures,
Representatives of donor agencies,
Delegates from sister countries in SADC,
Members of civil society,
Ladies and gentlemen,

We are gathered here today, as representatives of our
respective sectors, to affirm our commitment to the
protection and promotion of the rights of children.

HIV and AIDS is a key challenge of our times, which tests
our capacity to build truly caring communities.

The protection of the rights of orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS and other social ills requires the involvement of government and other sectors, such as faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, business sector, labour, donor and development agencies. We have therefore felt it prudent to convene this dialogue, so that we can gain from the wisdom of other sectors in dealing with this challenge.

We are also pleased to welcome delegates from the SADC sub region. We see this as an opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation in protecting our children, who are the future of this region. Our governments, through the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Programme (RISDP), have adopted a multi-sectoral and integrated approach. This approach will, no doubt, contribute positively to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, in the context of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment.

Indeed, this conference takes place against this international and regional background, and will also be used to consolidate the consultative processes that preceded the development of the Policy Framework and the National Action Plan for orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS.

Our three-day meeting also provides an opportunity to review progress with regards to the implementation of the 2002 conference recommendations, and share experiences or lessons learnt.

A gathering of this nature should come as no surprise, given the impact of HIV and AIDS in our region. In South Africa in particular, the epidemic increases the population of orphans and vulnerable children, while reducing the pool of traditional caregivers and the number of breadwinners. We are now confronted with many households that are being headed by grandparents or by children without adult supervision.

Our challenge is to identify these children so that we have an idea of numbers, in order to plan accordingly. Census 2001 put the numbers of child-headed households then at more than 248 000. More than 300 000 children obtain the foster care grant, and we believe there are many others that we have not yet managed to reach. In this regard, our provincial departments are prioritizing efforts aimed at bringing vulnerable children into the social safety net, in cooperation with the Departments of Justice and Home Affairs.

What makes it imperative for the State and the non-governmental sector to intervene is the pressure on community structures. These structures include the extended family system, which has traditionally acted as a safety net for children and orphans. However, due to the epidemic and poor economic conditions, many extended families are unable to cope.

In most cases, only the grandmother is available to assist, using her meagre pension to raise the children. The conference deliberations on the question of family support in general, and granny-headed households in particular, will be helpful.

Let me also take this opportunity to acknowledge the selfless contribution of many volunteers, especially child and youth workers, who provide support.

HIV and AIDS also affect the psychological and social well being of children. It is now widely accepted that early psychosocial interventions strengthens the potential of a child. Therefore such early interventions should be at the heart of our programmes. This is one of the issues that will also be thoroughly discussed at this conference.

Esteemed delegates, our approach is geared towards keeping children within their families and communities. It is aimed at providing comprehensive care and support which is complemented by proactive action. This includes linking families with poverty alleviation projects and other services in the community, as facilitated for by the establishment of child care forums, which forums will provide material and emotional assistance to families.

Most importantly, ladies and gentlemen, we need to continuously fight discrimination and stigma attached to vulnerable children, so that they can lead lives of dignity and be treated with respect. This should include correcting the terminology and labels that are commonly used, such as “AIDS orphans” which stigmatize and pigeonhole affected children, and lowers their self-esteem. I trust that delegates will raise some of these issues.

Another critical but difficult issue that requires discussion is that of succession planning. Our policies and programmes are designed to improve the health and quality of life of those who live with HIV.

However, experience has deemed it necessary that in mitigating the impact of the epidemic on children, we need to proactively look at the issue of succession planning. Families need to confront this issue, and be assisted with the drawing up of wills and other important documentation and planning. Such action will provide them with opportunity of choosing who will take care of their children, and what will happen to family assets such as the family home. It is indeed a difficult matter, but it requires open discussion and planning.

Ladies and gentlemen, in preparation for the conference, the planning team resolved to bring to the fore the voices of children. This commitment was based on the reality that children have a right to be heard. Children throughout the country are actively involved in projects and activities aimed at improving the wellbeing of others. It is therefore the task of society to provide these children with the space and tools to organise, mobilise and advocate for their own.

It is with this in mind and in order to ensure that children participate in their own development, that we organised a child participation workshop with 90 children from all over the country from 30 June to the 2nd of July in Mogale City. The report and recommendations from the child participation workshop will be tabled at this conference for discussion and adoption.

I had the privilege of interacting with the children yesterday in Pretoria, and we are honoured to have them amongst us here as delegates. I can assure the delegates that they will be as enriched as I was, from hearing the views of the young delegates on this serious issue that affects their lives.

I wish to applaud each and every one of you who joined in this coordinated effort to create an enabling environment for our children.

Esteemed delegates, let me reiterate that the impact of HIV and AIDS on children, families and communities in our country calls for a coordinated response from all sectors, for us to be able to mitigate the impact of the disease.

I therefore thank all of you for attendance, and wish you fruitful deliberations that will contribute to improving the lives of families and children affected by HIV and AIDS.

It is my honour and privilege to declare this conference open.

I thank you.