

**Address by the Minister of Social Development, Ms Bathabile Dlamini, on the occasion of the Gala Dinner and Opening Session of the African Union (AU) Expert Consultation Meeting on Children and Social Protection Systems in Africa, Cape Town – South Africa**

28 April 2014

Programme Directors, Mr Vusi Madonsela and Ms Makhosi Khoza,

Deputy Minister of Social Development, Ms Bongsi Maria Ntuli, Commissioner, Department of Social Affairs of the African Union Commission, His Excellency Mustapha Kaloko,

Director for Division of Policy and Strategy at UNICEF, Mr Jeffrey O'Malley,

Members of the diplomatic corps and representatives of our development partners here present,

Delegates from African Union Member states,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Members of the Media,

Fellow Africans,

It is my great pleasure and privilege on behalf of the people and the Government of the Republic of South Africa to welcome you to our beloved and beautiful country. From the onset, I would like to warmly welcome you, His Excellency Mustapha Kaloko for gracing this auspicious occasion.

Today marks yet another proud day for our country, as we come together with our African brothers and sisters to host the first ever African Union (AU) expert consultation meeting on children and social protection systems in Africa under the theme: ***“Children and Social Protection Systems: Building the African Agenda”***.

It is also important to mention that yesterday marked the 20years of freedom and democracy in South Africa. We remain grateful to our brothers and sisters who stood side to side with us during the liberation struggle are here with us today.

This consultation meeting is a precursor to the Fourth AU Conference of Ministers of Social Development which will be held from 26-30 May in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. We therefore approach this meeting with a sense of hope that it will lay a solid foundation for the deliberations of the upcoming conference.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, the very essence of the existence of the AU from its inception 51 years ago is to promote the African Agenda on matters that affect our continent. Protecting and promoting the rights of our people, particularly the most vulnerable, is a collective responsibility. Our presence here today attests to our joint commitment to

work together in securing a better future for African children and our people in general.

As we approach the year 2015 which marks the deadline to the globally agreed Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), we take pride in the fact that many African countries have made impressive progress towards achieving the MDG targets. This progress, no matter how small it may seem, must spur us on to consolidate our collective achievements, particularly in key developmental areas including poverty reduction, education and health.

In spite of the progress we have registered, it is worth mentioning that the continent still has considerable challenges to overcome. For the past decade, the African continent experienced a robust growth with developmental progress, but the global financial and economic shocks over the past years interrupted advancement towards achieving these goals.

We acknowledge that we can draw many lessons from our predecessors and the time has arrived for the continent to take up the challenge for developing local measures to support and embrace our own values of social solidarity in the African context.

It is important to strengthen families as the first line of response as espoused in African values. I hope that the deliberations will take into consideration the fact that African countries are not the same and the one size fits all approach does not work for all.

Our duty is to construct an African approach which is founded and built upon our own vision for a shared future. Let us use this meeting to share ideas and promote regional cooperation as we rise to the challenge of becoming the architects of our own solutions.

I hope we are all aware of the scale of the developmental challenges that confront our African continent. To invent solutions to these challenges, we must work as a collective and utilise this meeting to discuss what we need to improve on in relation to social protection, a key instrument in Africa's long standing challenges of underdevelopment, poverty and inequality.

Over the past few years, we have all witnessed how social protection programmes in Ethiopia, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana and South Africa have improved the lives of the African child. We have all seen how Early Childhood Development (ECD) and other child-centred services are crucial for the development

of our children. It is therefore important that we discuss how to broaden these measures and improve their impact to ensure that no African child falls out of the safety net. The ANC-led Government has adopted the United Nations initiative of the first 1000 days of a child's life. In addition to that we have also declared that two years afterwards are very important. We have introduced the Isibindi Model which specifically target children from poor households and we are beginning to focus on the issue of children with disabilities.

In accepting to host this expert consultation meeting, we look forward to enhanced opportunities to sharpen our understanding of our unique issues as a region. I am confident that as a continent we have much to learn from each other as we embark on the mission of building a united and prosperous Africa.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

To date, many countries have not yet rigorously evaluated the social and economic impact of their social protection programmes. Evidence from those that have been evaluated provides evidence and strengthens the case for scaling up the social protection systems in Africa. For example, the Productive Safety Net Programme of Ethiopia which reaches over 7 million

show significant impact in terms of poverty reduction, reducing inequality; promotion of human capital investment in nutrition, education and health.

Our own social assistance programme, which to date reaches over 16 million from a low base of 2.6 million in 1994 and 11 million of the social grant beneficiaries are children. In terms of value, 16 million is equivalent to 15 US billion dollars. It is our endeavour to enhance the future of our social grant system. We have a responsibility as countries to ensure that the money budgeted for social protection system is used for its purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Livingstone Call to Action recognises that social protection is a basic human right that directly tackles poverty and contributes to economic growth. The specific standards of the human right to social protection are codified in international instruments which many AU Member States have ratified, hence the need to strengthen and scale up social protection systems in Africa. Every AU Member State has good reasons to provide social assistance to vulnerable groups which include people with disabilities, children and people experiencing undue hardships.

There is an urgent need to increase comprehensive social assistance despite socio-economic challenges such as the

global economic crisis. It is also critical for African countries to develop mechanisms for harnessing the continent's lessons and experience in order to build more appropriate social protection systems. An appropriate social system can be realised through accurate and credible impact assessments which remain vital tools for mobilising the evidence required to motivate and sustain the necessary political will.

It is in this context that we call upon all stakeholders to commit themselves towards comprehensive, multi-lateral and multi-sectoral collaboration and action in addressing the challenges faced by the African child. Together, we can make a difference.

Fellow Africans

We look forward to continually work together within the context of the AU Social Policy Framework and our development partners to find sustainable solutions to development challenges confronting Africa and the world.

In our endeavour to enhance our social protection systems for the future of many African generations to come, we must be guided by the fact that social protection is a human right and a key tool in tackling poverty and multiple deprivations.

As I conclude, allow me to paraphrase the words of the first President of Ghana, honourable Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghananians to independence. He said and I quote, ***“I am not African because I was born in Africa but because Africa was born in me.”***

We look forward to the fruitful deliberations and outcomes of this meeting as we prepare for the upcoming conference of Ministers of Social Development.

I thank you