

**Expert Consultation Meeting on Children and Social Protection
Systems in Africa**

Cape Town, South Africa

Statement by Jeffrey O'Malley,

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Opening Session & Gala Dinner, 28 April, 18:00-20:00

**Your Excellency, Minister for Social Development of the Republic of
South Africa,**

**Your Excellency, the Commissioner for Social Affairs of the African
Union Commission,**

Your Excellencies, Delegates from AU Member States,

Representatives of United Nations and International Organizations,

Representatives of Civil Society Organizations,

Distinguished Guests, Invited Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased and honored to help open this important African Union event, hosted by the Government of the Republic of South Africa. On behalf of UNICEF, I would like to express our thanks to our hosts and to the African Union Commission, and to welcome all of you.

To open our evening, I would like to remind us all of three key reasons why we are here together for these few days.

First, we are here because of the vision and leadership of the African governments that you represent, and in particular your commitment to overcoming poverty by investing in the well-being and development of children.

Africa is a young continent, with over fifty percent of its population under 18¹. The children of Africa represent the future of Africa: potentially, a future of growing prosperity, innovation and justice, with marginalization and exclusion a thing of the past. To deepen and widen prosperity tomorrow, Africa must tackle deprivation today – especially amongst children, far too many of whom still live in extreme poverty, facing multiple obstacles to realizing their full potential.

Africa's leaders have recognized that Africa's children have a right to social protection². The progressive realization of the right to social protection plays a critical role in supporting families and communities to protect and invest in their children's future – in purchasing enough food, overcoming financial and social barriers to health and education, in avoiding harmful practices such as sending children to dangerous work. The right to social protection helps to ensure that children living in poverty today don't continue to live in poverty as adults tomorrow.

¹ Based on data from State of the World's Children 2014.

² The Right to Social Protection has been recognized by a number of African and international conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25) and the International Covenant on Economic and Social Cultural Rights (Article 9 and 10) to which most AU Member States are signatories. In addition, the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) also recognizes that children have the right to social security, including social insurance. Social protection contributes to the realization of specific social security rights, as well as to other rights such a right to education and survival (Articles 26 and 27).

Social protection for children is not just a right – it is also an economic development strategy. Africa’s leaders increasingly recognize that effective social protection is critical to accelerating and sustaining Africa’s growth, while ensuring that such growth is inclusive, underpinned by greater social cohesion. It allows people to make their farms a bit more productive, to look for and get better jobs. It allows them to buy more of their neighbour’s produce or from their local store, stimulating economies locally and nationally. Effectively designed and delivered social protection systems are affordable – in some cases they can save governments money even in the short term, by replacing fractured, ineffective and redundant schemes. More importantly, they save and generate resources for the long-term, for development and for inclusive growth.

The governments of Africa are committed to strengthening social protection because it matters to poor children, because it is a human right, and because it contributes to inclusive economic growth. But the second reason we are here today is because governments across Africa aren’t just committed to social protection – they are translating their commitments to into growing action, learning key lessons along the way.

This has not happened by chance. It has happened due to the clear vision of leaders within member states of the important role of social protection in economic and social development, translation of this vision into commitment to progressive expansion and improvement of social protection provision, and hard work in its implementation.

An impressive breadth of experience and evidence will be shared over the next two days. Since the adoption of the Social Policy Framework for Africa in 2008, countries from Algeria in the north to South Africa in the south, Senegal in the west to Kenya in the east have begun, expanded, reformed or increased financing for social protection programmes. A number of countries have reached a critical threshold in terms of social protection coverage and capacity. This two day conference is not enough time to represent the richness and diversity of what is happening across the continent, but we will hear of many key examples.

It also important to recognize that African states have lead the way in developing ‘home-grown’ models of social protection, that are best suited to their contexts. Although drawing on best practice from outside the continent, social protection programmes in Africa have developed to respond to specific vulnerabilities and social and political realities.

Some examples of these innovations include (a) the strong role of community-based structures and community participation in implementation of social protection programmes and (b) a focus not only economic poverty but also other types of vulnerability and social exclusion. These ‘home-grown’ models are now not only being used to help strengthen learning within Africa, but also enabling African governments to share their lessons with others outside the region.

UNICEF has been, and continues to be, a supportive partner to many African governments in this process. We support you in your efforts to realize the rights of children, particularly the most disadvantaged and

excluded. We share your vision of the importance of social protection systems in increasing the resilience of children and families, and supporting them to create a better future. We also understand the importance of social protection's broader social and economic benefits.

We have worked closely with a large number of national governments at all levels - from supporting the development of national policy frameworks, to working side by side at district and community level to get programme implementation right.

I spoke first of your leadership and commitment and second of your success in translating these commitments into action. **As a third and final point, let me emphasize that we are here because Africa has been leading the way in producing new evidence to better understand why and how social protection programmes achieve positive outcomes.** Indeed, Africa is at the forefront of generating the 'next generation' of impact evidence so that social protection programmes can be as effective as possible at challenging multi-dimensional poverty.

The evidence confirms, despite some early scepticism, that African programmes can achieve important impacts – not just reducing income poverty but contributing to positive outcomes in education, health, food security, nutrition, and helping adolescents' to make healthier transitions to adulthood.

Thanks to experiences in Malawi, Kenya and South Africa we know that unconditional cash transfers can make important contributions to reducing HIV-related risk for adolescent girls: this is a huge step forward after earlier Latin American experience with its emphasis on conditionality.

Africa is also showing that social protection is not just for upper middle income countries. Thanks to countries like Lesotho, Ghana and Zimbabwe, we know that systematizing and expanding the reach of previously fragmented social protection schemes can help keep the poorest girls and boys in school longer than before.

And African countries like Zambia are generating the evidence that allows us to know that social protection generates economic and productive impacts, even among the poorest of the poor, which in turn generate multiplier effects in the local economy.

More evidence of the impact of social protection in Africa will be shared this week here in Cape Town and it is important not just for Africa: UNICEF is committed to making sure that these innovations are being shared in other regions of the world as well.

Conclusion

As I've just outlined, the next two days will give us an opportunity to acknowledge first, the many achievements thus far in deepening commitment to realize rights and to fight poverty through social protection; second, the experience in expanding and strengthening social protection systems; and third, the progress in generating evidence about how to maximize benefits from social protection.

But we are also here to work together to identify where to consolidate gains and how to address remaining challenges. The collective wisdom on social protection in the countries of Africa must be harnessed to propel us forward.

The time to move forward is now. Many countries in Africa have witnessed high growth rates over the past decade. Natural resource booms or the phasing out of harmful subsidies offer new potential for fiscal space in some countries. In others, appetite for progress in human rights, greater social inclusion and more equitable policies has created new political opportunities.

We should not take these gains for granted. Too many children and families who need and are entitled to social protection remain without access. There is still a distance to travel.

Each national context and its solutions are different. But we make the road by walking – the way forward is to continue making progress and learning from each other as we go. This meeting is as an opportunity to exchange and reflect on what’s worked in different countries; to agree on a common agenda; and to develop mechanisms for mutual support and accountability.

As the countries of Africa work to meet these challenges, and as the continent as a whole moves forward, development partners remain ready to work with you: not only UNICEF but many of our sister UN agencies, multilateral banks, civil society groups and key bilaterals. This is not the beginning of the road. Nor is it the end. We pause to appreciate how far we’ve come. And to gather our strength to make the road ahead.

I extend our thanks again to the African Union Commission and the Government of the Republic of South Africa for organizing and hosting this meeting, and to all the participants in advance for your contribution over the next two days. I look forward to the outcomes of this meeting being presented at the forthcoming Fourth Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers of Social Development and later to the African Union Heads of State and Government Summit. I extend our gratitude to the Commissioner for Social Affairs of the Africa Union Commission for carrying this process forward. UNICEF will offer its full and unequivocal support along this important journey for the sake of the children in Africa.

I wish you all fruitful discussion. I thank you.