

LAUNCH OF THE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR THE STUDY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

“A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO IMPROVE CHILD WELLBEING- THE AFRICHILD CENTRE”

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Hon. Minister and Guest of Honour
The Vice Chancellor Makerere University
Your Excellencies Ambassadors and Representatives of Diplomatic Missions
Honourable Members of Parliament
Members of Management and Staff, Makerere University
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

The Guest of Honour Hon. Minister of Gender Labour and Social Development, I join the previous speakers in registering a warm welcome to you and all of you distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen to AfriChild Centre and thank you all for honouring our invitation. It is an honour for me as Chairman of the Centre's Advisory Board to deliver the Key Note Address at this memorable occasion as we launch the Centre of Excellence for the Study of the African Child - codenamed AfriChild. I am delighted to see so many people here who represent the diverse roles and paths to ensuring children's wellbeing in Uganda and throughout Africa.

Guest of Honour I come from a population and international health research background, 15 years of sexual and reproductive health and HIV& AIDS research, with in-country experience of most Anglophone African countries and unfortunately only three Francophone countries. In all these countries that I have worked in, children define almost invariably the African way of life. If you do not have or look after a child, you have a tough time defining yourself as an African. Children touch our hearts, soul and spirit. However, the socio-cultural, almost religious, attachment we have to children is oftentimes not matched with equal research, policy and programmatic rigour for the improvement of their wellbeing. It is against this back that I reflect on the situation of the children in our part of the world, examine some of the overarching challenges and build on these to present to you the opportunity that the Centre for the Study of the African Child (AfriChild Centre) presents to government, academia, civil society and the private sector.

BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN:

Governments, development partners, Civil Society Organisations and many other actors are working tirelessly to improve the well-being of children across the African region. Indeed, there has been laudable progress registered towards enabling children enjoy their rights and attain their full potential. According to the 2007 MDG Progress Report that addressed itself to the situation of children, there were 2.2 million pupils in primary schools in Uganda by the year 2000, but by 2007 the number had risen to 7.5 million. The same Report notes that the infant mortality rate (IMR) declined to 76 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2007 from 122 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1991, while the under-five mortality rate- declined from 167 to 137 deaths per 1,000 live births during the same period. The last six years have registered an increase in the population in Primary School but at the same time seen a marked increase in the drop-out rate - by 2010 statistics show that, more than 30 per cent of primary school students drop out before reaching a final grade in sub-Saharan Africa (UN- DPI/2650 B - 2010).

In the case of Uganda, government must be commended for doing a remarkable job in the area of policy and legislation as relates to children. Uganda has one of the most robust legal and policy frameworks in the region that relate to the well-being of Children. The Child Protection Systems Mapping Exercise undertaken in 2012-2013 notes that there are approximately 18 laws that are linked to child well-being¹. The government, working closely with different partners, has also taken steps in undertaking programs geared towards addressing some of the ongoing child protection concerns in the country. Such efforts include the establishment of the National Child Helpline, the development of the Alternative Care Framework, the development of a National Early Childhood Development Policy, establishing a National Child Protection Working Group, among others. Another example where we are seeing impressive success is the SCORE programme supporting Sustainable, Comprehensive Responses for Vulnerable Children and their Families. Our Promoter TPO Uganda is a part of this programme funded by USAID, which gives beneficiaries little apart from knowledge and basic skills to improve their own well-being. A robust operational research plan within SCORE is already showing that as household vulnerability goes down, so does child vulnerability.

These positive efforts notwithstanding, many children continue to live in conditions characterized by inadequate access to quality health and education services, hunger and malnutrition, biting poverty in homes and on the streets, exploitation, neglect, and violence. Such living conditions for children in Uganda and the region undermine

¹Child Protection Systems Mapping Report 2013.

the four cardinal rights of a child to survival, development, protection and participation.

The above situation clearly indicates that much more needs to be done to improve the lives of the vast majority of our population-the children. Hon. Minister and Guest of Honour, by 2010, Uganda had a population of 33 million people, including about 19 million children (UNICEF Uganda, 2010). Children comprise up to 56% of Uganda's population. They are by far the most vulnerable segment of Ugandan society, yet the most important and decisive element for Uganda's and Africa's sustained growth and prosperity.

Existing Challenges:

One of the key challenges related to child wellbeing is the absence of adequate systematic and coordinated data to inform policy, programming and practise. While, symptoms of the plight of children are visible all around us, the actual magnitude of the problem is unknown. For example, although studies have been done on violence against children in Uganda, there's no substantive national data on the prevalence of violence against children in the country. In situations where data exists, it's either selectively representative or was gathered with limited scientific rigour, making it easily dismissible. By implication, many of the programs and interventions geared towards children are minimally evidence driven.

Another critical deficit is in the area of human resource. There's need for an effective, highly skilled and knowledgeable critical mass of human resource to improve service delivery in the social protection sector. Indeed many people who are part of the social welfare workforce in Uganda lack specialized training in child protection and therefore do not have adequate capacity to perform the duties which they are responsible for. I am sure that Guest of Honour your Ministry, which is charged with child wellbeing policy and programmes feels this need more than most of us in this country.

Global discourse in the last few years has emphasized the need for a strengthened systematic approach in addressing the concerns of children. While child vulnerabilities are clearly multi-dimensional, programs have tended to be fragmented - dividing children into different issue areas based on categories of vulnerability, survival, poverty and child rights. Programs to assist highly vulnerable children are often fragmented by legislation and agency mandates. Separate, vertically organized programs assist children categorized according to the consequence of their vulnerability (e.g., HIV/AIDS-affected, exploited as child labourers, trafficked,

orphaned, disabled, and displaced, including refugees). Interventions targeting vulnerable children are often similar, yet programs tend to focus on addressing the needs of children according to their category of vulnerability rather than building sustainable systems that effectively address the needs of all vulnerable children.

The Centre of Excellence for the Study of the African Child - AfriChild Centre

Formerly established in January 2013, The AfriChild Centre works to improve child protection practice and inform policy through a systematic process of convening scientific research, analysis and knowledge development. Through a multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional approach, the Centre seeks to deepen the quality of evaluative research and effectiveness measurement of child wellbeing interventions, in line with ensuing global discourse among child rights activists and child protection actors.

As has been mentioned before, The AfriChild Centre is a product of academia, government, civil society and international development agencies [i.e. Uganda Program Learning Group of the Child Protection in Crisis (CPC) Network promoted by six partners namely: Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development; UNICEF-Uganda; ChildFund International Uganda Office; Makerere University College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS); TPO Uganda; and Columbia University].

AfriChild fits squarely in the efforts pursued by the Uganda Government, CSOs and development partners in building an effective national response to children in adversity. This response is articulated in the recently developed Uganda National Action Plan for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) –the National Strategic Program Plan of Interventions (NSPPI). The NSPPI underlines the importance of research and equipping the national workforce in the OVC sector with relevant knowledge and skills so as to build an effective and sustainable national response to children in adversity.

The AfriChild Centre is uniquely positioned to address, from a multi-institutional dimension, significant conceptual, methodological, cultural, and logistical gaps in the translation of research to policy and practice in the child protection and care community. Given its positioning in Uganda, and access to a wide range of southern networks alongside northern ones, the Centre provides a huge opportunity to facilitate the transfer of research outputs and effective practices across institutions, regions and sectors. Through its collaborative, cross-cutting partnerships and work, the Centre promises to play a key role in filling the gap in the incorporation and integration of “developmental protections” for children in low - and middle-income countries.

Overall, The AfriChild Centre aims to be a leading multidisciplinary centre that contributes to and convenes knowledge building and skills development; and influences policy, programming and practice concerning the wellbeing of the African child.

STRATEGIC AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT:

Research:to facilitate the rigorous development of evidence base for programming and policy change.

Capacity building:to expand the knowledge and skills of university researchers and academic staff, government technocrats and civil society practitioners to undertake and apply research on child well-being.

Advocacy: to build bridges between policy-makers, researchers and practitioners and forge links between research, theory and practice to benefit programming and advocacy on child well-being in East Africa.

Partnerships: to build strong strategic alliances and networks that advances the cause of evidence-based child protection and care.

Technical backstopping: to support government and civil society actors in improving programming and service delivery for children.

In all these endeavours, raising the African children's voices is paramount and the Centre will underscore the prominence and centrality of children as major players in their own right.

Through the lens of adversity, violence and poverty have emerged as key parameters for research and action in Uganda, and indeed in many countries in Africa. As such, the AfriChild Centre partners, also including the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, developed proposals to improve the study of violence against children in Uganda. This has evolved and for the past year, we have worked with the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the MGLSD, Uganda Bureau of Statistics, UNICEF, Makerere University School of Public Health, TPO Uganda, ChildFund International Uganda, USAID and others to develop a national survey on Child Well-being that will begin in January 2015.

In Conclusion:The AfriChild Centre is not just another research institute or NGO. It has been formed to convene diverse groups and form strong partnerships from the start that ensure we work together effectively to generate high-quality scientific research and

knowledge on children that is then used by decision makers to improve policy and practice impacting children. The Centre is a partnership venture and finds strength in drawing from the collective comparative advantages of its promoters. The diversity of the group in attendance today reflects the diversity of partnership that it takes to make real change for children and that is what AfriChild is all about.

Guest of Honour, the work of the Centre has gotten off the ground successfully through the founding six partners, start-up funders and participation in the Ministry's formulation of the national Child Protection Strategy that cuts across line ministry responsibilities to strengthen formal and informal systems for better prevention and response; and, a strong possibility of leading a longitudinal study of children in diversity. Concerted and increased efforts of additional partners and funders are needed to help The Centre advance its mission and amplify its impact. I look forward to government, the private sector and development partners, both local and international, utilising the Centre as the first point of call with regard to policy and practice evidence base for child wellbeing in Uganda and the continent.

Thank you very much for listening to me, as We Build for the Future. For God and My Country.