

Thank you to the Child Rights Network of Southern Africa, and Coordinator **Felistus Motimedi**, for the opportunity to meet CSOs advocating for the rights and welfare of children across Africa, child rights activists and African Union (AU) representatives - all of you — virtually — today.

Thank you to Dr. **Lynette Okengo**, Executive Director, The Africa Early Childhood Network, for inviting me to this webinar series during the 17th CSO Forum.

Merci, Obrigado, Thank you, CSO representatives, and all members CSO Forum for your commitment to, and vision for, children.

Two years ago, we would probably have all met in-person.

But COVID-19 changed that — and much, much more. And this why we are here together – virtually connected.

COVID-19 represents a true children’s crisis, in every sense of term.

The pandemic is placing at risk all of the systems upon which children rely.

This pandemic is disrupting systems. Health systems. Immunization campaigns. Water, sanitation and hygiene systems to prevent infection. Economic safeguards for their families. Counselling and mental health systems. Access to learning.

COVID-19 has disrupted play-based learning continuity, school feeding, nutrition support, safe hygiene practices and responsive care for children of pre-school age.

In some countries, Early childhood is the missing link of COVID response plans.

And we all know, leaving Pre-school behind is leaving education behind.

Colleagues, this comes at an obvious cost to children’s futures.

While saying so, we may remind ourselves that children between the ages of 3 and 6 might seem like they are only just beginning life’s journey. But in fact, more than 85 per cent of their brain development is already nearly in place.

These early years provide a critical window of opportunity for girls and boys to build the foundations of learning and develop skills that can help them succeed in school and over the course of their lives.

In our region and due to the COVID pandemic, we have witnessed closure of ECD programmes, which inadvertently created environments that limit opportunities

for play. We have also seen rising cases of domestic violence and leading to numerous incidences of stress experienced by parents and other family members.

I appreciate this webinar as an opportunity to deep dive on the costs of the pandemic for children that have negative effects on child development. Which brings me to the cost of inaction on Early Childhood Education.

By depriving tens of millions of children of access to pre-primary education, the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures or delays in reopening are making a bad situation worse.

In low-income countries, eight out of 10 children are missing out on ECE opportunities. The most vulnerable children – those who would most benefit from ECE – are the least likely to be enrolled.

These failures limit children's futures, by denying them opportunities to reach their full potential. It also limits their societies' futures, robbing our countries of the human capital that every society needs.

Colleagues, the true spirit of this Webinar is to challenge ourselves.

All of us, we can ask ourselves: What if?

What if we do not take appropriate action.

I believe, answer is clear: if unaddressed, negative effects of the pandemic on children may persist throughout their lives.

As the problem is known by most of us, one of the UNICEF-supported solutions is also known by most of us.

Recent findings on the benefits of pre-primary education underscore the importance of increased investment.

Now the question is: In Eastern and Southern Africa, are we on the right track?

As we discuss, our progress is, admittedly, uneven across countries.

Luckily, we all recognize that these challenges must not detract from the importance of continuing our vital work.

We can collectively do better.

Investing in ECE and strengthening pre-primary education systems is needed to achieve progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, bearing in mind that the SDGs, and target 4.2 specifically, convey a clear objective that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

As part of this, expanding access to pre-primary education is a highly cost-effective investment decision for developing countries.

And there are at least three vital reasons that support such an advocacy statement;

1. Quality pre-primary education sets a strong foundation for learning;
2. Universal pre-primary education helps make education systems more effective and efficient;
3. Equitable pre-primary education is an effective strategy for promoting economic growth.

Yet, we know that every dollar (US\$) spent on pre-primary education results in US\$9 of benefits to society.

In other words, every dollar invested in quality pre-primary education and related services for disadvantaged children could bring an additional return of up to 10 cents every year throughout that child's lifetime.

This is the reason why we are calling for high-level political commitment to making pre-primary education a priority and establishing policies for universal pre-primary education that prioritize the poorest and hardest to reach.

To our Member States, it is now more critical that ECE be prioritized by increasing domestic budgets and improving the efficiency with which ECE programmes are delivered.

To our traditional donors: a mere 0.7 per cent of total international spending on education goes to pre-primary education. More than ever, international partners are key to supporting ECE and contributing to cost-effective investments in pre-primary education.

We are calling upon development agencies to lead by example and allocate at least 10 per cent of their education investments to pre-primary education, including in emergency contexts.

The time for action is now.

At UNICEF, we believe that as countries look to recover from this Covid-19 pandemic and pursue sustainable economic growth, they have an historic opportunity to close the gaps in educational equality once and for all, and re-imagine how a generation of children grow, learn and gain skills.

Colleagues, before I conclude and on a personal note, few days ago on November 19, I was so delighted to hear that my fellow country man from Senegal - Sadio Mane, renowned Liverpool football player, has joined the international NGO **Right To Play** as its newest Global Ambassador therefore lending his voice and support to protect, educate, and empower children around the globe through the power of play.

Yes, every child has a right to play. Article 12 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child calls upon States Parties to recognize, respect and promote the right of the child to engage in play.

And we count on the continued stewardship of the Child Rights Network of Southern Africa.

We can make it our mission to act upon this big idea — our “moonshot.”

Play can be a social equalizer, allowing children of diverse backgrounds to focus on what makes them similar, rather than different.

Play create a fun and comfortable environment to start learning acceptance.

Sadio Mane is showing us – reminding us - that we do not achieve these results alone. Through our partnerships with UN agencies, governments, civil society, and the private sector, we can contribute to *Stories of hope and resilience in the face of COVID-19 Pandemic* to quote the title of the blog series created by the Africa Early Childhood Network.

This is our contribution for the young lives we are called upon to serve, save and support. Their journeys are inseparable from ours. Let us walk with them, stand

beside them, and always, fight for their rights, including the right to play and provide children with a safe and happy childhood.

For a better future, children's voices must be heard.

Thank you! I look forward to a productive Webinar today.