



•ZAMBIA is committed to ensuring that every child has access to good health, nutrition, education in a supportive and protective environment.

Importance of Early Childhood Education

By JACKSON SITENGU

THE past week has been a busy one for Zambia, and Lusaka in particular.

Apart from hosting the Summit for Democracy and United States vice president Kamala Harris at Mulungushi International Conference Centre, the country also played host to delegates from at least nine African countries to discuss a very important subject.

The subject was early childhood development and how it holds the key to Africa's long-term development goals.

Gathered in Lusaka, the delegates to the three-day Southern Africa Regional Conference on Early Childhood Development (ECD) deliberated and shared experiences on the gains, challenges and future prospects of ECD in the region and the rest of the continent.

Casting the spotlight on the formative years or early childhood, beginning from conception to about eight years, the conference identified it as the most important phase in human development requiring a multi-sectorial approach from stakeholders.

Opening the conference, President Hakainde Hichilema reiterated the importance of ECD and outlined the gains Zambia had made in that area.

"The potential to actualise Africa's development agenda depends on the investment that are made now in children during their early and formative years.

Zambia is committed to ensure that every child has access to good health, nutrition, education in a supportive and protective environment," said Mr Hichilema in a speech read for him by Education Minister Douglas Siakalima.

He further revealed that the Zambian government was working to reduce stunting levels which were currently at 35 per cent for children below five years.

Mr Hichilema further revealed that with the free education policy, the government had increased the budgetary allocation to early childhood education programmes with the bulk going to the construction of early childhood education centres.

Also speaking during

the official opening of the conference, Community Development and Social Services Minister Doreen Mwamba said the Government's vision was to have a conducive and enabling society in which children survived, thrived and reached their full potential.

She said the Government was committed to formulating policies that have a direct bearing on child development and that recently the Government had enacted the children's code Act which she said codified all laws on child development.

In closing the meeting, Health Permanent Secretary Lackson Kasonka said it was important to implement ECD interventions for them to attain full development potential.

"We need to reach out to all our children without leaving anyone behind. Remember the children you neglect today may be a burden to you tomorrow," Professor Kasonka said.

He said no parent wanted their child to grow with a low intelligence quotient and fail to excel both in school and in their life.

The conference sort to dispel long-held cultural beliefs and stereotypes that men, especially in home settings, were generally not involved in ECD.

"I'm so happy to see so many males engaged in the conference.

There is this misconception that males are not involved in the lives of young children, but at this conference I'm glad to have noted a large representation of males," Dr Patrick Makokoro, regional advisor for the Southern Africa Network for Early Childhood Development said.

He said it showed that men, not only in Zambia but in the entire southern Africa, were now beginning to play a central role in the lives of young children.

"This is all in the background of advocacy efforts.

Policy advocacy efforts that have happened across the entire SADC region and obviously beyond the African continent and so males are a central figure.

I know we've had challenges around culture,

where culture speaks of one thing.

But with science and evidence coming from the field, we are beginning to note the importance of males when it comes to early childhood development," he said.

Dr Makokoro, who echoed other participants' sentiments that partnerships from across many sectors were important to early childhood education and development, hailed regional governments for their commitments to ECD.

"We are happy to see governments recognise the importance of early childhood education and development as a foundation for a life full of possibilities for young children," Dr Makokoro said.

The implementation of ECD programmes has not been without challenges.

Africa Early Childhood Network's (AFCEN) Given Daka noted that not all children were accessing quality ECD services.

Some of the challenges are in relation to access, not enough services, particularly in the rural areas – there are geographical disparities, regional disparities in terms of the provision of early childhood development services," she observed.

At the end of the meeting, Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) executive director George Hamusunga, spelt out the reasons behind the conference and the resolutions adopted by the delegates in a communique.

Mr Hamusunga indicated that the goal of achieving an Africa fit for children by the year 2040 and the recognition of the importance of early childhood, especially the first 1,000 days of a child's life being a critical period for rapid brain development and foundational to a person's later life were among the reasons that inspired the conference.

He said the evidence-based arguments advanced in favour of investing in the early years, including returns on investment, the cost of inaction and the significant contributions to productivity through promotion of enhanced labour force were among the motivating factors to advance the ECD agenda.

Advocating for enhanced allocation of

resources by governments committed to ECD to a minimum of 10 per cent of the education budget from the current average of less than two per cent; deepening the need to think of and see ECD as system; intensifying advocacy for the prioritisation of the early years including the implementation of at least one year of quality pre-primary education within the education sector and embedding responsive caregiving within the health systems were some of the 10 resolutions.

Supporting enhanced investment in community-level initiatives including parental support for beneficial childcare practices, food security, cash transfers, women empowerment programmes including village banking and developing infrastructure for ECD hubs, and childcare centres; enhancing the capacity of parents, caregivers, communities and networks of ECD to work with the government to create a demand for ECD services thereby promoting uptake were listed among the resolutions.

More resolutions listed include advocating for enhanced quality of the ECD workforce including making the sector attractive to potential ECD workers; training, retention, professionalisation and dignification of childcare work; and promotion of the welfare of childcare workers.

The promotion of partnerships and collaborations, encouraging the design and implementation of inclusive ECD programmes; deliberately creating coalitions with other stakeholders to expand the reach of ECD services; advocating for the full implementation of international childcare instruments that have been ratified by governments in Southern Africa; and promoting the availability of quality ECD data and improving translation and utilisation of existing research evidence to improve the quality of services were among the other resolutions.

As the conference came to a close, there was an air of optimism that the plans, recommendations and resolutions made will not just end up on paper but will be fulfilled through various programmes by stakeholders.



•EDUCATION Minister Douglas Siakalima delivers President Hakainde Hichilema's key note address during the Southern Africa Regional Conference on Early Childhood Education in Lusaka.

'The potential to actualise Africa's development agenda depends on the investment that are made now in children during their early and formative years'