

Opening Remarks by Geeta Rao Gupta, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director

Global Newborn Health Conference, Johannesburg, 15th April 2013

Good morning. It is my great privilege to welcome everyone here this morning. UNICEF couldn't be more pleased to be a co-organizer of the Global Newborn Health conference 2013.

I want to thank the Government of South Africa for welcoming us so graciously to this beautiful country. I can think of few settings more appropriate for launching a global plan for action and advocacy. If South Africa has taught us anything, it is that advocates can be heard worldwide when they speak with one passionate voice...that collective action makes a difference when it intervenes on the side of justice...and that we can change the status quo, when we work together. This is why we are here.

I want to thank too the partners that helped make this conference a reality – especially WHO, USAID and MCHIP, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Save the Children and Saving Newborn Lives.

We can see the impact that we, as a global community of governments, UN agencies, civil society, and private sector partners, are making on the child survival landscape. The past twenty years saw unprecedented declines in under-five mortality, with the number of under five deaths falling from nearly 12 million in 1990 to approximately 6.9 million in 2011. As impressive as these gains are, they are insufficient...insufficient to keep every child from dying from causes that are so easily prevented with simple, cost-effective interventions...insufficient to give every mother the best possible care during pregnancy and childbirth...insufficient to meet MDGs 4 and 5 by 2015.

As the Honourable Minister of Health said last night, however, we have time to close the gap -- 1,000 days.

We are here this week because we have a tremendous opportunity to accelerate declines in child mortality by focussing on one major area where progress has been weakest. The data show that the rate of neonatal mortality -- newborn deaths in the first month of postnatal life -- is reducing at half the speed of maternal mortality and one third slower than child deaths that occur after the first month of life. Newborn deaths represent a growing percentage of child deaths – 43 per cent in 2011 – up from 36 per cent in 1990. In 2011, nearly 6.9 million children died before the age of five years; neonatal deaths accounted for three million of these deaths worldwide. Most of these deaths are caused by preterm birth complications and complications during birth, which account for 35 per cent and 23 per cent of all neonatal deaths respectively, and inadequate maternal health care during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum.

The development of the Global Newborn Action Plan, which UNICEF is pleased to be a part of, will create opportunities for all of us to work together to address the full spectrum of care for mothers and newborns. To make the most of these opportunities, we must direct our efforts and our resources toward those places where the rates of neonatal mortality are highest. The heaviest burden of neonatal deaths falls on South

Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Across the two regions, 60 million women give birth outside of a health facility, usually at home; 52 million women give birth without the aid of a skilled birth attendant.

Across all regions, the burden of neonatal mortality falls disproportionately on the poorest families – those who are least able to access the resources needed to keep their women and child alive throughout pregnancy and childbirth.

The experience of UNICEF shows that we can achieve the biggest results by focusing on the poorest and most disadvantaged communities. We know what needs to be done. We have the high impact interventions needed to prevent the senseless deaths of newborns, sparing mothers and fathers the agonizing loss of a newborn daughter or son. Many of these interventions are simple, scalable and affordable.

Over the past year, more than 170 countries have pledged to redouble efforts to end preventable child deaths. Under the banner of A Promise Renewed, governments and partners are scaling-up the high impact strategies needed to achieve the goals of the Secretary-General's Every Woman Every Child strategy. What differentiates A Promise Renewed from previous global attempts to ramp up action on child survival is that governments are fuelling the momentum. In the past few months of 2013, we've seen Ethiopia, India, and just last week, Zambia, mobilize their line ministries, development partners, and citizens around a common agenda to save the lives of their nations' children and mothers. What's more, these governments are emphasizing the crucial importance of public accountability for progress against national targets.

No one government, development agency or civil society organization can meet these targets alone. We need to work together, across technical sectors and political constituencies, and with the active engagement of individual citizens. We need to leverage every available strategy to target the proximate and underlying causes of maternal, newborn and child mortality. This includes initiatives such as the UN Commission for Life-saving Commodities for Women and Children, the secretariat for which is co-hosted by UNFPA and UNICEF, and many, many others from the sectors of health, nutrition, WASH, education, and HIV/AIDS.

By focusing attention on the neonatal period, the Global Newborn Action Plan will add a critical dimension to the global road map for maternal and child survival. By working together to support the plan, we can bend the curve on newborn deaths, and give every child the best possible start in life. Today is the first step - - an opportunity to sit together, share experiences and lessons learned, and most importantly, to identify the priority actions that we need to take as we embark upon the global roadmap for the future.

As last night's impromptu dancing showed so vividly, we are a vibrant community that can make amazing things happen at the spur of the moment. Imagine what we could do if we applied that same spirit to our planning over the next few days – go for it! Let's get the job done!