



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, DR
REGINAH MHAULE, MP, AT THE LAUNCH OF THE EDUCATION *PLUS* INITIATIVE**

31 March 2022

Programme Director

Ms Christine Muhigana representing the United Nations Resident Coordinator

Esteemed Representatives from United Nations Agencies in South Africa:

- **UNAIDS**
- **UNESCO**
- **UNFPA**
- **UNICEF**
- **UN-Women**

SANAC Co-Chair, Ms Steve Letsike

SANAC CEO, Dr Thembi Xulu

**Mrs Palesa Tyobeka – Chairperson of the Education Sector Committee in the
UNESCO National Commission**

Dr Thato Chidarikire of the Department of Health

Ms Ruth Poe of the Department of Social Development

Dr Granville Whittle, Deputy Director-General at DBE

Senior Government Officials

Representatives of Civil Society, Stakeholders and Partners

Teachers, Learners, Young People

Sanibonani

It's a pleasure be afforded the opportunity to address this one-of-a-kind launch, co-led with the *five UN Agencies*: UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women. It is interesting to note that all 5 of these agencies are led by women, working with the Ministry of Basic Education that is also led by women, the Minister and myself as the Deputy Minister. The UN Family is clearly sharing with the Department's gender transformational agenda. The work that we do together intends to respond to the needs of adolescent girls and young women to enjoy the full benefit of education as the key for unlocking the potential emancipation from structural drivers of HIV infection; early and unintended pregnancy; and gender-based violence and femicide. Whilst all young people are deemed vulnerable, the prevailing gender inequality in our society places adolescent girls and young women at greater risk of HIV and GBVF. The circumstantial challenges to girls impede on their school completion, which often extends to the school-to-work transition.

You would have noted in the invitations to this occasion that the 'Education Plus' Initiative is regarded as a high-profile, high-level political advocacy drive to accelerate actions and investments to prevent HIV. It is centred on the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women, and the achievement of gender equality in sub-Saharan Africa — with secondary education as the strategic entry point.

It responds to the urgency required to effectively address the alarming numbers of adolescent girls and young women heavily affected by HIV infection, early unintended pregnancy and gender-based violence and femicide, which affect their survival, well-being, human rights and fundamental freedoms.

This multi-sectoral initiative represents a rights-based, gender-responsive action agenda for adolescent girls and young women to lead healthy, secure and fulfilling lives while paving their way to vibrant futures. The rewards will be far-reaching into the longer-term, with inter-generational effects. This work is premised on the belief that empowered girls are the empowered women of the future. Within the South African context, we have been very clear with our stakeholders and partners that whilst the focus is predominantly for the adolescent girls and young women, we do not leave the boy child behind, as well as our children of diverse sexual and gender identities. If we want to level the playing field for gender equality to flourish, we have to implement deliberate interventions to impact the entire gender spectrum.

As the government, we are fully aware that the Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan depends on a healthy adult population, flourishing learners in proper schools and the vulnerable being cushioned from the ravages of poverty and neglect. And so, to ensure economic transformation, a systems approach is required where no child is left behind. The National Strategic Plan on HIV, TB and STIs highlights the importance of focused interventions directed at young people, especially adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24.

The inclination towards young women and girls is adopted in response to the fact that women and girls are biologically more susceptible to HIV than men and boys. More so, unequal gender power dynamics and harmful gender norms, compounded by the intersecting forms of discrimination, are mostly felt by women, girls and children of diverse sexual and gender identities.

Programme Director, another endemic of concern is the relentless gender-based violence that disproportionately affects women and girl children. Despite the concerted efforts in addressing gender-based violence in the country, this problem is tough to address, especially in schools, because the root causes are rooted in households and communities. Ongoing instances of femicide have been reported, with some deaths committed in the most heinous manner imaginable.

The perpetrators are mostly men and boys who have suffered the most traumatic experiences of boyhood and manhood that have completely shifted their humanity for the worst. So, we need to be intentional in our efforts to work with our partners in conceptualizing and nurturing programmes that help us impact on the boy child from an early age. This will help us ensure that “*re e koba e sa le metsi*” (*we bend the reed while it is still wet*).

It is no coincidence, colleagues; that in South Africa, we are launching this Initiative within the month of March. A month embodied with two key celebrations: the *International Women’s Day* and *Human Rights Day*; both symbolic to our cause. More interestingly, our Sister Department of Home Affairs is celebrating this day as the Transgender Day of Visibility towards creating a safe and inclusive space for transgender people to enjoy their constitutionally given rights. So as we close off the month with all these significant days, we are also opening with our UN Family a new chapter of *intent*:

- intent to ensure that we unite the comparative advantages and contributions of the UN agencies and their vast network of partners, joined up around one shared vision and ambitious objective for high impact advocacy and mobilization;

- intent to ensure that primary schooling is accessible and welcoming to all children, irrespective of sexual and gender identity, circumstances, character and background so that our schools become socially cohesive and inclusive in preparation for a seamless transition to secondary education; and
- intent to ensure that this launch helps us to reach the desires and objectives for the rights, dignity, realisation and completion of secondary schooling for all children, especially adolescent girls and young women.

Esteemed Guest, as government, we do not need any policy harmonization or shift. We are one of SADC member states using the operational framework of *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL)*; which allows us to mainstream care and support in the different key priority areas. As such, within this framework, the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP), implemented with the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development, allows us an opportunity with our social partners to use schools as vehicles for promoting access to a range of public services in areas such as health, poverty alleviation, psychosocial support, sport and culture. Whilst health screening is essential for learners' health and well-being, linking them to services to address the identified health barriers is even more important.

On the 17th of February, we launched the progressive Policy for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy; another enabling policy that allows us to work towards creating an inclusive and supportive schooling environment that is capable, proactive, preventative, caring and supportive to young girls and mothers.

The Learner Pregnancy Policy Launch came at a critical time as the country reported over a hundred and thirty-two thousand (132 000) pregnancies amongst 10 – 19 year olds in the 2020 – 2021 financial year.

This statistic is most alarming because research indicates that one in three pregnant girls will not return to school. To tip the scales further, girl children who do not return to school, may fall victim of more subsequent pregnancies. In reality, we know that 2020 was the time when COVID-19 hit our shores with strict control measures set in place to reduce the spread of the pandemic.

Yet, researchers and monitors reported that children and families experienced the most sexual abuse, gender-based violence, domestic violence and other forms of violence and discrimination. It was a terrible way to assert with members of the public that in actual fact children are better off in schools, in a controlled environment. Our big task is to ensure that while they are in that school catchment, we intensify provision of essential services, in and through schools. Our policy framework supports holistic development of children whilst they are in school; not only in literacy and numeracy but also, socially and among their peers; to empower them to make informed decisions about their sexuality, their lives, their health and wellbeing.

Dr Wanda Draper, in her seminal work, *Your Child is Smarter than You Think*, explains the approach to holistic development of children and says:

“You can’t send the head to school and leave the body at home—the whole child goes to school, the whole child lives at home, and the whole child participates in the world.”

This means that their schools must better prepare them to read, write, count, and think critically, including; identifying any health barriers that could potentially impede their chances to attend school, remain in school and finish school to the best of their ability. I look forward to the message and responses from the Youth Representative of SANAC and the responses that the learners will give today. It is clear that our future is in safe hands and that our education system is indeed, developing a whole child, a young person fit to compete with the best in the world. Yes, we know that the core mandate of the Department of Basic Education is the delivery of *Curriculum...* but imagine a school with no health support – no access to the health screening for TB, HIV and sexual reproductive health, for instance.

Imagine a school full of hungry children without nutritional support for those learners who display the intersecting vulnerabilities, including poverty. A school with no school sport, arts and cultural activities. Imagine, Colleagues, a school in a democratic State like South Africa, but which does not advocate for social inclusion and cohesion, with no care for the often marginalised and vulnerable key populations.

The work that we are about to embark on with the UN Agencies is regarded as work of soft issues, but it has the potential of altering a child's life. We should not trivialise or take this work for granted.

So I hope that what emerges from this Launch will strengthen and support the already-existing programmes within the sector and nurture those that require improvement of efficiencies. We should pay particular emphasis to evidence-based programmes that were crippled by COVID-19.

In conclusion, I wish to call upon all other stakeholders to join this initiative and in our collective efforts; and make this ambitious initiative a reality. On behalf of the Department of Basic Education, I wish to accept the support we are receiving from the UN Agencies and further declare our commitment to collaborate and cooperate with you for the greater benefit of the child.

Ngiyabonga.