basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**Opening Address at the SAALED/UNESCO Conference**

***"Dismantling Exclusion: Enabling Inclusion"***

by

**Mr Enver Surty, Deputy Minister of Basic Education**
**4 July 2013**

Hon Minister of Education of Malawi, Ms Eunice Kazembe
Hon Minister of Education of Zimbabwe, Senator David Coltart
Hon Deputy Minister of Education of Mozambique, Mr Francisco Itai Meque
Secretaries of Education and Heads of Inclusive Education
Representatives of the Secretariat of the African Decade for Persons with Disabilities
International speakers, researchers and lecturers
Education officials, school principals, teachers and parents
Representatives of inclusive education stakeholders & organisations
Distinguished guests,

On behalf of South Africa's Ministry and Department of Basic Education, I would like once more to welcome most heartily all delegates to this important event that does much to advance the noble goal of creating inclusive societies in Southern Africa, in Africa and the world.

It was the American educator who has done pioneering work in the field of inclusive education, Prof Douglas Biklen, who said in 1989 that: "*Inclusion is a moral issue, a goal, indeed a value we decide to pursue or reject on the basis of what we want our society to look like*."

His ultimate goal was to live in a world in which "*the question is no longer who can be included or who can learn, but how can we achieve inclusive education*" (Interview, 24/02/2012.www.Unesco.org)

It is in this spirit that we warmly thank and congratulate all persons who have organised and contributed to the success of this crucial week-long conference, that is, the Southern African Association of Learning and Educational Differences (SAALED), the Wits School of Education, the Secretariat of the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities and the Open Society Initiative of Southern Africa.

The SAALED/UNESCO conference that you have ably put together affords all of us a valuable opportunity to share international expertise and best practice as we enrich our approaches to and our implementation of inclusive education for the betterment of our communities and all our people.

As South Africans we would like to say 'thank you' for your work and for having this event on our shores.

As education systems internationally strive to improve access to quality education for all, amidst growing concerns about drop-out rates and youth unemployment, inclusive education is increasingly seen as one of critical mechanisms to achieve real positive change.

We believe that as governments in the SADC region and internationally we have a duty, morally and otherwise, to see to it that the diverse needs of all learners in our countries are effectively met, including the needs of learners with disabilities, learners from rural communities, learners from the poorest of the poor and from the toiling working classes.

Working together we can do more to ensure that all persons strive for and achieve their full potential in schools that are themselves welcoming, enabling and geared to combat all forms of exclusion.

We are assembled at a time when it is even more pressing to deliver on our educational commitments with the 2015 target of the Millennium Development Goals ticking much closer and more louder.

As a region we are increasingly becoming aware of the fact that there is still a significant percentage of vulnerable children, in particular children with disabilities who continue to be excluded from the benefits of basic education in our respective schooling systems in spite of the Africa Regional Inclusive Education Strategy that had cautioned that:

"*The challenges which children with disabilities, especially in developing contexts face in accessing education, have a profound effect on the rest of their lives*."

To deny people of their human rights in this way, as former President Nelson Mandela had said in 2004, is to challenge their very humanity.

Like other SADC countries, South Africa has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities thereby committing to the implementation of inclusive education also in our schooling systems.

The failure by commission or omission to presume all individuals to be capable and willing to learn and assert themselves in the world (Biklen, Interview, 2012) restricts adversely their ability to participate equitably within their societies.

Failure to provide for all individuals to learn and grow in environments that are conducive to quality learning renders the affected vulnerable to economic and social exclusion.

This we cannot afford particularly when our societies, given the legacy of colonial pillage, are still faced with the triple challenge of inequality, poverty and unemployment.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The goal of dismantling exclusion and enabling inclusion can be achieved if we all set our minds to change the world as this conference seeks to do.

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa which celebrates 20 years of freedom in 2014 has made progress in this respect.

In 2001 it introduced a progressive national policy on inclusive education – Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System.

This policy outlines the government's strategy to transform the current education system to make it more efficient, more equitable and more just, recognising the right of all learners to attend their local neighbourhood schools and to receive the necessary support.

The policy embodies the principles of Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as it sees inclusive education as a means by which society can be transformed to promote tolerance and respect for diversity and the human rights of all people, not only of persons with disabilities although they have been and still are the most marginalised and excluded groups.

Over the past 12 years many steps have been taken to establish the basic institutional and systemic framework for an inclusive education and training system. Milestones include the following:

- There was an increase in the enrolment of 7 to 15 year-old children with disabilities who attended an educational institution in 2010 to 94%, against 73% in 2002.
- The General Household Survey data for 2010 estimates that 85% of five-year-olds with disabilities attended an educational institution. Attention is currently being given to building the capacity of ECD practitioners to introduce early identification and early intervention programmes in ECD centres.
- Substantial funds have been spent across provinces for the strengthening of 295 special schools in an effort to ensure that all special schools would become centres of excellence so as to fulfill their eventual role as resource centres.
- More learners with disabilities are enrolled in ordinary schools than in special schools.

A screening, identification and assessment system is also being implemented to ensure that learners are not unnecessarily referred to segregated settings but that all schools will have systems in place to provide school-based support.

- The expansion of inclusion was recognized by the SA Cabinet as a national priority since 2007 and increasingly funds are being channeled towards strengthening mainstream schools to become inclusive, starting with a cohort of 554 flagship full-service or inclusive schools across all 82 education districts.

- Inclusivity has consistently been emphasized as a core principle of the National Curriculum Statement and more than 10 000 subject advisors have been trained over the past three years on the basics of curriculum differentiation through the introduction of the Guidelines for Responding to Diversity in the Classroom. This training is being extended to 2014.

- The programme for the strengthening of special schools includes training in Braille and South African Sign Language. A major achievement has been the development of a Curriculum for South African Sign Language for introduction in 2014.

As the Ministry of Basic Education, we have declared 2013 the year of Inclusive Education to ensure that we do not lose sight of the imperative to scale up inclusive education. This has ushered in a new chapter for inclusion in its history of implementation. This has engendered an integrated approach in the development of an inclusive system with each programme having to identify its niche in the policy implementation.

For us this conference is of paramount importance also for the reason that it takes place in the year of Inclusive Education in SA.

Contribution made towards expanding and sharing knowledge of best practice cannot be emphasized sufficiently enough with words.

We encourage all delegates to take home what they would have learnt from this interaction for the benefit of contexts within which they work.

Programme Director,

We welcome this conference also for the reason that we find it to be extremely important to finalise the Africa Regional Inclusive Education Strategy.

Delegates are aware that this conference has devoted ample time to roundtable discussions by SADC Ministries of Education with a view to finalise a Regional Inclusive Education Strategy which we hope will be presented at the SADC Ministers of Education Meeting in September 2013.

The key objectives of the strategy under discussion are:

- To ensure the *availability of reliable and accurate data* and that it is utilised in the planning, monitoring, evaluation and resourcing of inclusive education in Southern Africa,
- To develop a common understanding of inclusive education and its usefulness in achieving quality education for all in Southern Africa,
- To ensure pre and in-service training of teachers embedded in training curriculum and practice in the SADC region, and
- To strengthen the capacity of community organisations and a broad range of role-players in the inclusive education arena.

We must acknowledge that developing an inclusive system will not happen overnight.

The most serious obstacle to overcome seems to be that of prejudice and unfair treatment of children who are perceived to be differently abled and the inability to deal with diversity in the classroom.

If we could collectively find the key that would unlock a culture of teaching based on care and support and the combatting of exclusion in the myriad of forms that it takes every day in our schooling systems we would achieve vastly improved education systems for our countries, region and continent.

I wish you well in your deliberations and hope that all will derive from this conference renewed strength and inspiration for the tasks ahead.

I trust that this conference will be guided by the wisdom of former President Mandela who said in 2004 that:

"*We cannot claim to have reached anywhere near to where a society should be in terms of practical equality of the disabled. We continue to try. We realise that legislation and regulations are not sufficient or the end of the long walk to equality and non-discrimination.*

*Education, raising of awareness, conscientisation, eradication of stigmatisation: these are key elements in achieving nondiscrimination against the disabled in practice and in their everyday lives*."

With these words allow me to declare the SAALED/UNESCO Conference officially opened.