

Opening statement by the First Lady, Mrs. Kovambo Nujoma, to the 2nd National OVC Conference, 25th June 2002, Windhoek.

Director of Ceremonies

Hon. Minister Nandi Ndaitwah

Honourable Members of Cabinet and Parliament

Members of UN Agencies and the Diplomatic Corps.

Distinguished invited guests

Development Partners

Ladies and gentlemen

I am honoured to have been asked to deliver the opening statement to this august gathering, the 2nd National Orphans and other Vulnerable Children's Conference.

I am indeed pleased to perform three main tasks, namely, the opening of this conference, the launching of the recently completed study on orphans and the hosting of the conference reception. Unfortunately, my health does not permit me to be with you today, but I would like to assure you that my heart and soul are with you. I have asked Dr Amathila to deliver the statement on my behalf and also to host the reception.

Last year you came together for the first time to discuss what is now an even bigger problem, Orphans and other Vulnerable Children. From the study on orphans that you have in your packs you will see that at the end of 2001 we had an orphan population of 82,671. This number is representing all orphans who lost one or both parents. Out of that, 40% are estimated to have lost one or both parents due to Aids. These numbers are just too overwhelming. These are not just statistics. These are our children, the children of Namibia, our future.

I am often referred to as the Mother of the Nation but I am sure that you will agree that even as a mother I would not be able to cope with all these children. And that is why you are here and why I am relying on you to help me in this endeavour.

We have made substantial progress during the past year in addressing the issue of orphans and other vulnerable children under the leadership of the National Steering Committee and in partnerships with our development partners and other stakeholders. We, however, can never be complacent and this year's conference will identify challenges that we have to face and update our plans, develop services to ensure the future of our OVC.

I have looked in detail at the issues you will be debating on and I would like to make the following comments:

It is clear to me that we will find wanting if we do not have an OVC Policy to guide us in our work. The policy will highlight all the pertinent issues and be our tool in assisting you in the

development of our plans and services. The policy will guide us to achieve our goals. One of the achievements is this very policy we are launching today.

We will continue to make progress and assist our children to prevent them to turn into street children. We must make sure that our children get education, health care and material and emotional support.

Another issue you are debating is who shall care for our OVC. I know many people believe that putting children in institutions, seems to be the best option. If you consider the numbers I gave you earlier on, you would be convinced that this is not a viable option. There is no better place to bring up children than the home environment. Institutions have and will always have a role to play but they can never be the solution to our problem. There are studies that have shown that some children in institutions have difficulty in making and sustaining relationships and also develop behavioural problems. The costs of running institutions are also extremely high and unsustainable. I believe that we must look for a variety of options for the care of our OVC, for example, encouraging more fostering by families, adoption and the communities to take on responsibility for the care of OVC.

We need to know who are the Orphans and Vulnerable Children and where are they to be found. Through your debate on registration I hope that you will come up with viable options.

In identifying OVC, we will also be identifying a number of needs and it is therefore important that the most appropriate psychosocial support and services are available. One of those basic needs is education and we want to ensure that our OVC have access to quality education. If we have a population that is uneducated, what future will these OVC and our country have?

You have some important tasks ahead of you over the next few days and I wish you well.

With these few remarks, it is now my pleasure to officially declare the 2nd OVC Conference open and simultaneously to launch the orphan study. Finally I invite you to the reception following the end of this ceremony.

I thank you