

REMARKS OF THE

MINISTER OF HEALTH

HONOURABLE DR HETHERWICK NTABA

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

VSO MALAWI VIDEO LAUNCHING CEREMONY

LILONGWE, 11TH NOVEMBER, 2005

Since I am among friends and colleagues, I will dispense with formalities and simply say good evening and thank you for inviting me as your guest of honour. It is indeed an honour.

While, as you all already know, it is somewhat of an occupational hazard to invite a politician to say a few words, I feel obliged nevertheless to do so precisely that. And I say this for two reasons. One, is that it would be wrong to assume that we all know what is happening in the Ministry and two and more importantly, I have a story of hope and success that needs to be shared.

Ladies and gentlemen, I say what we all know and see on a daily basis, Malawi is shouldering a truly enormous disease burden. Just to mention one simple fact that gives you a glimpse at the magnitude of the problem, did you know that we have to cope with around 8 million episodes of malaria a year.

When one looks at this disease burden we find that the bulk is due to diseases or conditions that can be fairly easily treated and/or prevented. Over the last years we have put together something called an Essential Health Package that targets those eleven most common diseases/conditions. We feel that if we can make this package available at all times in all health centres we will in fact break the back of this massive problem.

Of course to do this a number of key essential inputs are required, and of all of these the single most important one is human resources. Of all sectors in the human development process, there is none that is as labour intensive as health. Without the right numbers of the right people in the right place at the right time we cannot win.

And this is my second point. The Ministry has put together one of the most unique programmes of its kind anywhere in the developing world to deal with this problem of human resources. We have identified 8 different yet inter-related components that we are addressing simultaneously. The cost of implementing this six-year programme was estimated at US\$278 million.

We submitted this programme to DFID in May 2004. On December 7th, 2004 Government signed an Agreement with DFID for \$100 million for this programme. An absolute record turn-around. And the news gets even better. We have recently received news from the Global Fund that our request for a matching US\$100 million has been approved. Again, we make history. Malawi is the only country in the World where Global Fund monies have been given for human resources development.

The Director of the Global Fund in an interview with the NY Times said that while Malawi may be a flagship for everything that ails Africa in terms of human resources it

has also emerged as the flagship as to how to fix the problem. You will agree with me this is high praise.

But along with this high praise comes even higher expectations. We must succeed in implementing this most pressing, most urgent and most necessary of programmes.

One of the partners that has responded in a most generous, competent and timely manner to this crisis is VSO, an organization that has proved itself time and again as a tried and trusted friend of the health sector over the years.

In the early stages of the negotiations with Jill Healey and the Ministry, we had put conditions on recruitment that would effectively cut VSO out of the picture. But we were to find out that this soft-spoken, gentle lady carried lead dust in her silk gloves. We listened to her advice, heeded it, and as the saying goes, the rest is history. Today, VSO is playing a vital role in the national effort. It has already brought in 9 medical doctors, 10 nurse tutors, lectures at the MCHS, and more on the way.

Distinguished guests, Jill, my few words have been longer than I anticipated, so I will say thank you and all your VSO staff for your dedication and effort. Please convey my personal appreciation to your headquarters. Above all else continue to stand side-by-side with us in this most pressing and worthwhile of battles. It is one we must win for those who have placed their trust and their lives in our hands.

Thank you and may God bless us with that most precious gift we so often take for granted – good health.