Opening Statement by
Ms. Navi Pillay
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Geneva, 7th March 2013
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to open this 5th annual day of discussion on children’s rights, which focuses on the right of every child to the highest attainable standard of health. This topic is indeed of great importance, as the growth and development of children in good physical and emotional health is fundamental to human dignity and human rights.

The right to health is a universal human right, recognized in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Specifically, the right of every child to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health is enshrined in article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in which States also commit to ensuring that no child is deprived of access to health care. The Convention stipulates that States must also take measures to diminish infant and child mortality, as well as to combat disease and malnutrition. Additionally, they must take all appropriate measures to abolish practices that are harmful to children’s health.

The right of the child to health must be interpreted broadly, paying attention to all other rights that might affect its realization. Thus, if a child is sick and does not have access to health care services, he or she may not be able to attend school, adversely impacting the right to education. Equally, when other rights in the Convention — such as the right to be free from violence — are not realized, the impact on the child’s right to health is immediate.

As you know, 6.9 million children around the world die each year before they turn five; over two thirds of them due to diseases that can be prevented and treated. Viewed in aggregate, these figures mask important differences – the risk of a child dying before his or her fifth birthday in low-income countries is 18 times higher than in high-income countries.

Moreover, every hour, 300 children die because of malnutrition, which additionally stunts the development of an estimated 170 million children worldwide. This is unacceptable, and urgent measures must be taken to protect the right of all children to life, survival and development. In addition to the burden of disease and stunting attributable to under-nutrition, obesity in children is becoming an increasingly important concern. In 2010 there were an estimated 42 million children under the age of 5 who were overweight, and this rate continues to rise due to a lack of physical activity and unhealthy diets.

Other areas requiring sustained and immediate attention include violence; injuries and accidents; substance use; and sexual and reproductive health. The sharp increase in mental health problems among adolescents, such as developmental and behavioural disorders, depression, anxiety, psychological trauma, self-harm and suicide is also alarming.

A child rights based approach to health emphasizes the need to eliminate exclusion and reduce social disparities in health between different groups of children. Therefore, in order to achieve the full realization of the right of every child to health, States have an obligation to ensure that children’s health is not undermined by discrimination. Certain groups of children may be disproportionately vulnerable, including children with disabilities and chronic illness; migrant children; children in street situations; children in institutions or without parental support; children who are victims of violence and sexual exploitation; and children living in remote or disadvantaged areas, or in situations of extreme poverty. States must recognize this potential vulnerability and ensure that these children too are protected.

I applaud you for giving children a voice in your discussions at this Council. It is indeed their right: children everywhere must be able to express their views on matters that affect them, and this includes the provision of adequate health care. I would add that the full...
exercise of their rights requires that children have access to the tools and instruments necessary to remedy any violations they may suffer to their rights, including their right to health. I therefore welcome the ratification by Gabon, Thailand and Germany of the third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on a communications procedure, and hope that more countries will join them soon to achieve its earliest possible entry into force.

The issues you will discuss today, pose enormous and complex challenges, requiring joint efforts by a wide range of actors, including States, the international community, civil society, health professionals, families, as well as the private sector. A determined and enduring commitment to promote and protect the rights of all children, including their right to health is required so that all children everywhere grow in the full realization of their rights. I thank you for gathering here today in pursuit of that goal.

Thank you.