

Press release

POVERTY AND EXCLUSION AMONG URBAN CHILDREN

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MILLIONS OF URBAN CHILDREN LIVE IN EXTREME POVERTY AND LIFE-THREATENING ENVIRONMENTS, SAYS UNICEF REPORT

Florence, 7 February. Asserting that tens of millions of urban children around the world are living in poverty and life-threatening environments, UNICEF said today that municipal authorities need to place the best interest of the child at the forefront of their decision-making.

At the launch of the report, "Poverty and Exclusion among Urban Children", released today by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre (IRC), UNICEF Deputy Director Kul Gautam stated "The tens of millions of urban children who are denied basic social services – such as education and health care—are living proof that the world has systematically failed to protect them. These children deserve to live in a protective environment – one that safeguards them from abuse and exploitation. This was the commitment reaffirmed by Heads of State and Government in 2002, at the Special Session on Children and we need to take it seriously and translate it into action".

The report's release coincides with a conference in Florence on the subject of the rights of urban children. It is being attended by the Mayor of Florence, the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the right to education, Italian government officials, local authorities, urban planners, and young citizens.

"At a time when the HIV/AIDS pandemic is rising, millions of children orphaned by AIDS are drawn to the city in search of a livelihood. These children are vulnerable to all

types of exploitation – including child labour and trafficking”, said Marta Santos Pais – the Director of the IRC.

Many urban children live in chronic poverty and are marginalized; many spend their days digging in rubbish tips desperately searching for something they can sell, and their nights on the streets, where they risk violence and exploitation, says the report.

“They lack a secure home, cannot afford access to health or education, and there is nowhere safe for them to play”, said Santos Pais.

The UNICEF report says that during the 20th century, the world’s urban population grew more than tenfold and the average size of the 100 largest cities increased more than eightfold. The proportion of people living in urban areas grew from less than 15 per cent in 1900 to an estimated 48 per cent in 2002. This rise has been fuelled by the expansion in the world’s economy, most of which has taken place in industrial and services enterprises located in urban areas. This trend is likely to continue, says the report, and in 2002, an estimated one billion children lived in urban areas – close to half the world’s children. Over 80 per cent of these children live in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and their numbers are growing fast.

While urban children are generally considered to be better off than rural children, healthier, better housed, better educated and with access to a wider range of services and opportunities, the reality is that hundreds of millions of urban children live in deep poverty, squalor and misery, says the report. Basic infrastructures and services are often lacking in the poorest quarters of the world's cities, depriving children of their right to live in a healthy environment, according to the report.

Many low income countries still have urban child mortality rates as high as 100 to 200 per 1000 live births, with high percentages of poor urban children only partially vaccinated, or not vaccinated at all, and with high levels of anaemia and a high proportion of severely undernourished children.

While the UNICEF report paints a grim picture of the lives of millions of urban children around the world, it also says that there is room for optimism and offers many examples of cities and towns where municipal authorities “have grasped the opportunity to help children living in poverty, to ensure respect for their human rights and to involve them as partners in urban decision-making; in brief, to institutionalise a system of local governance for children’s rights.”

The report cites seven key elements for a city to be “child-friendly”:

- Local authorities ensure that policies, resource allocation and actions are guided by the best interests of the children;
- Equity and non-discrimination are promoted to favour the social inclusion of children and avoid their marginalisation
- Special attention is given to most disadvantaged children, including those

- who are living or working on the streets, victims of economic or sexual exploitation, living in extreme poverty, or without adequate family support;
- Effective access is ensured by all children to affordable, quality basic health and education services, clean water, adequate sanitation and solid waste removal;
 - Children and young people participate in decisions that affect their lives and are offered opportunities to express their opinions, including through their involvement in city councils;
 - Safe environments with opportunities for learning, social interaction, cultural expression and recreation;
 - Effective protection from the effects of environmental hazards and natural disasters.

NOTE TO EDITORS:

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre is also the home of the “International Secretariat of the Child Friendly Cities” (CFC) project. Details of this innovative programme, which guides and collects information on thousands of CFC initiatives from cities around the world, can be found on the CFC website: www.childfriendlycities.org

Embargoed media materials and downloadable copies of the report are available for accredited journalists from the IRC Newsroom two weeks before the launch date:
<http://www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>

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