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*Launch of the Innocenti Digest No. 11: **Ensuring the Rights of Indigenous Children***
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Indigenous Children Face Greater Threats to Survival *Higher Mortality Rates and Lower Rates of School Enrolment Than Other Children*

MADRID, 25 February 2004 – Indigenous children are among the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in the world and global action is urgently needed to protect their survival and their rights, says a new report from UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence.

Improving the lives of indigenous children is crucial not only for their own health and well-being but for the future of indigenous peoples and their unique place in the human family, the report concludes.

“When indigenous children are allowed to live in peace and security and free from discrimination, they have an enormous potential to contribute not only to their own communities but to national and global society,” said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy. “If we are to achieve goals such as poverty reduction, education for all and an end to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, we must put all children – especially the most vulnerable children such as those in indigenous communities – at the centre of our efforts.”

There are an estimated 300 million indigenous persons worldwide. They inhabit every region of the globe, originating in some 70 countries and speaking three quarters of the world’s 6,000 languages. About half of the global indigenous population lives in Asia; the second-largest population lives in Latin America.

Compared to non-indigenous children, indigenous children generally have lower vaccination rates and higher mortality rates; lower rates of school enrolment; higher rates of grade repetition and school drop-out; and inadequate protection in formal justice systems. In income-rich and income-poor countries alike, infant, child and maternal mortality rates are higher among indigenous groups. Birth registration – the first step to a legal identity and the claims of citizenship – is often substantially lower among indigenous children.

The report details how the rights of indigenous children in both rural and urban areas are often compromised or denied. Specific areas of concern include the rights of indigenous children to survival and development; to good health; to education that respects their cultural identity; protection from abuse, violence and exploitation; and participation in decision-making processes relevant to their lives.

The report says that governments must devote resources and enact legislation, policies and services to supporting indigenous families.

Indigenous communities often live under severe cultural and social stress. Lack of opportunity, cultural discrimination, inadequate social support, loss of land or difficulty integrating into the

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dominant culture contribute to low self-esteem and loss of identity that can give rise to depression, alcohol and substance abuse, and suicide. Indigenous children are also at risk for human trafficking, sexual and labour exploitation, and the impact of armed conflict and civil unrest.

The Digest highlights four strategic areas where it has been demonstrated that investment, particularly when it builds on the strengths of indigenous communities, can pay off for indigenous children. Practical initiatives include:

- ✓ **Health and nutrition** – undertake assessment studies of indigenous health practices and the roles of different community members in health care; train indigenous persons as health workers and work with traditional healers and birth attendants; improve access to health services, especially in distant and remote locations.
- ✓ **Education** – develop pre-school education programmes; offer bilingual education programmes; make education relevant by, for example, using elders as resources in schools; make class schedules compatible with the daily and seasonal rhythms of community life.
- ✓ **Protection and support** – build up the capacity of indigenous families, kinship networks and communities; focus on indigenous children and youth in urban and peri-urban situations; ensure the justice system demonstrates cultural awareness and sensitivity.
- ✓ **Participation in decision-making** – take steps to overcome obstacles to birth registration, including issues of awareness, access and opportunity; empower indigenous children to participate in community, national and international discussions.

The *Digest* works with a definition established in 1995 by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations. The criteria describe these defining characteristics:

- ✓ priority in time with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory;
- ✓ voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, which may include language, social organization, religion and spiritual values, modes of production, laws and institutions;
- ✓ self-identification as well as recognition by other groups or by State authorities as a distinct collectivity; and
- ✓ an experience of subjugation, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist.
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The Innocenti Digests are produced by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence to provide clear summaries of current knowledge and debate on specific child rights issues.

Embargoed media materials in English, French, Spanish and Italian and downloadable copies of the report in English French and Spanish are available from the IRC Newsroom:
<http://www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/indexNewsroom.html>