

BACKGROUND: UNICEF in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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Eastern Europe and Central Asia: UNICEF IN ACTION Responding to Poverty and Exclusion

All children have the right to freedom from poverty, to survival, to education and health. All children have the right to be protected from harm. UNICEF speaks out for the rights of all children in Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltics.

As this year's *Innocenti Social Monitor* makes clear, rising poverty, unemployment and falling social spending have excluded vast numbers of children in this region from recent economic progress. Millions of families are under pressure: the systems that once guided their lives have vanished and they must find their way in a new and unfamiliar landscape, confronting new dangers such as HIV/AIDS and the trafficking of drugs and human beings.

Exclusion may be the greatest challenge facing this region. The boy growing up in an institution because his parents have no money. The young girl working in the sex trade because she has no other source of income. The children selling newspapers and shining shoes on the streets.

We aim to mobilize the tremendous assets existing in this region that can build a protective environment around each and every child – an environment that would ensure all rights for all children. These assets include the region's people themselves – one of the most literate populations on earth, a population that places tremendous value on education and culture. Its young people, shaking off the legacy of the past, are dynamic and resourceful. It has legions of trained health workers and teachers. It has a growing and increasingly vocal civil society that is gaining strength through the Regional Network for Children. We mobilise these human assets to tackle exclusion and the fallout of poverty.

The protection of children against poverty and its impact is essential for their survival, growth and development. We support programmes to tackle the immediate fallout of poverty. But we go further, working with many different partners to build a protective environment around every child, to shield all children from harm in the same way that good nutrition and health care shield them from disease. UNICEF programmes across the region aim to strengthen different aspects of the protective environment, helping Governments fulfil their obligations.

TACKLING THE FALLOUT OF POVERTY

UNICEF is part of the global war against poverty. We work to ease its immediate impact, while advocating for all rights for all children and full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our programmes focus on the poorest, the most vulnerable and excluded, aiming to ensure their full inclusion in society. We contribute to poverty reduction by improving access to the basic social services that can help to lift people out of that poverty.

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Healthy, well-educated children have a better chance of fulfilling their potential, to become healthy, literate and productive adults. In the Russian Federation, for example, we aim to bolster the main defences against poverty – good health, a decent education and protection against neglect, exploitation, violence and abuse.

We work with families and communities to tackle the fallout of poverty – the institutionalisation of children, the trafficking, and the consequences of alcohol and drug abuse, especially HIV. And we work with governments to push for system change, for policies and legislation to protect children and their rights. All children. All rights. This is the only way in which governments can deliver on the Millennium Development Goal of poverty reduction.

Action on institutionalisation

- More than 700,000 children live in residential institutions across the region. The dominant response to family troubles or juvenile delinquency remains institutionalisation of children, with little preventive help for families in difficulties, such as inclusive education or family-based solutions for children with disabilities.

Keeping mothers and babies together in Ukraine: UNICEF is working with the UK NGO "Hope and Homes for Children" to support a project that aims to prevent child abandonment in the oblast of Kherson. The Mother and Child Centre, opened in September 2003, has prevented almost 50 cases of child abandonment. Staff from the Centre visit new mothers in maternity wards, providing counselling and support to strengthen the bonds between mother and child. Mothers in difficult circumstances can get all kinds of help at the Centre, where they have access to psychological, educational and medical services. The Centre also shelters under-age young mothers, some of whom were abandoned as children themselves. The Centre is now getting financial support from the city administration and is likely to be used as a model for further reform of the State care system.

Action on trafficking

- All figures on this clandestine and criminal activity should be treated with caution. One estimate suggests that around 175,000 people are trafficked from the region each year – one quarter of those trafficked globally. It is thought that around 20% are under the age of 18.

Helping the victims of trafficking in Romania: The *Reaching Out* shelter in Bucharest is a safe haven for trafficked girls who have managed to escape their captors and return home to Romania. Here they find safety, a place where they can heal and recover before going out into the world again. Here they receive advice and regain their self-esteem and confidence. They go to the market, they cook, they learn to sew, to paint, to build a new life. UNICEF sees the Shelter as the best in the country, and is helping the Shelter draw up a business plan.

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Action on HIV/AIDS

- Across the region, young people face poverty and unemployment levels that are three times higher than among adults, trafficking in drugs and humans, economic migration and violence. Youth poverty, unemployment and lack of hope feed the trades in people and drugs that, in turn, fuel the HIV epidemic. More than 80% of those in the region with HIV have not yet turned 30, and there are a growing number of babies born to HIV positive mothers. Children and young people are the solution – not the problem. They are at the heart of the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Family solutions for HIV positive children in Russian Federation: Kaliningrad, Russian Federation, has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in the country. Special Kindergarten N17, opened in 1999, is now home for 25 children abandoned by HIV-positive mothers. While their grandmothers may be willing to take them if they are not infected with HIV, adoption is rare for those who are HIV positive. The Kindergarten is now as the centre of a new initiative to promote foster care for HIV positive children. UNICEF has worked with the Kaliningrad city administration and the Centre for Family and Children Support to introduce a foster family initiative in Kaliningrad that now includes about 160 foster families. The project is still in its infancy, but it is hoped that it will help to break down the stigma that confines so many children of HIV positive mothers to long-term institutional care.

A regional strategy on HIV/AIDS: Our regional HIV/AIDS strategy centres on three key areas: prevention of infection among young people; prevention of mother to child transmission and care; and support and protection for children and parents living with HIV. The strategy aims to move the region towards the goal for 2005: to ensure that at least 90% of those aged 10-18 have access to the information, education and services necessary to develop the life skills required to reduce their vulnerability to HIV infection. UNICEF works with governments, civil society and other partners to ensure that each country has a comprehensive national HIV/AIDS response by 2005, clearly defining the crucial role to be played by all partners, including civil society and young people, in HIV prevention.

Action on the early years

- A good start in life increases a child's chances of a safe and healthy journey to adulthood. A poor start makes that journey much more difficult. The countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia have infant death rates 12 times greater than in western industrialized countries. At least 10% of children in the region have some kind of disability, often caused by poor care and nutrition in their earliest days and the region has the lowest exclusive breastfeeding rates worldwide. Only 14% of infants are exclusively breastfed for the first six months.

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New approaches to early childhood in Belarus. A UNICEF-supported survey in Belarus in 2003 found that more than 60% of parents have problems educating their young children. More than 73% think that corporal punishment is appropriate in some circumstances and over 40% believe that obedience is more important than initiative. UNICEF backs a variety of new approaches in Belarus, including initiatives to help parents raise their children in a nurturing environment that stimulates development. More than 500 pre-school children in Belarus benefited from new-style pre-schools in communities in six areas in 2003. UNICEF supports the open model of pre-school, which aims to establish pre-schools as centres for the entire community, including parents. Studies of the project show positive changes in parenting practices.

Action on Education

- With crumbling schools, deteriorating quality of education and falling enrolment among girls in some areas, education is a top priority for UNICEF in CEE/CIS. Children from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go to school, or complete their education. Education in the poorest countries in the region is undermined by lack of resources for such basics as textbooks, heating and school maintenance and by the exodus of demoralised teachers.

Promoting Child-Friendly schools. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNICEF supports the Child-Friendly Schools Initiative. The country needs quality education to prevent the migration of young families and to help displaced families come home. The project aims to improve the educational quality by focusing on those most vulnerable to school drop-out, changing old-fashioned approaches to teaching, boosting children's capacity to learn and giving families and communities a greater role within schools. The project is based on the reality of children's lives and aims to give an equal chance to all children, including Roma.

Action on health

- There has been great progress in the region, which was certified polio-free in 2002 and reported immunization rates are high relative to other parts of the world. But despite all this progress, some children – the poorest, those in remote areas, minorities and children in conflict areas – do not receive basic vaccination.

Supporting immunization: In 2003, UNICEF shipped vaccines worth US\$3.7 to 14 countries in the region to protect children against disease. The value of the vaccines ranged from just over US\$6,000 in Kazakhstan, to almost US\$700,000 in Uzbekistan. We work with national governments, WHO, NGOs, the World Bank, Gates Foundation, and the vaccine industry to tackle challenges in vaccine research, production, supply, immunization programme funding and delivery. Through the Global Action on Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI) partnership, UNICEF has helped Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan introduce Hepatitis B and Hib vaccines and upgrade their immunization systems. The GAVI partnership is providing support worth more than US\$16 million over five years.

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PUSHING FOR SYSTEM CHANGE

A protective environment is one where all the elements are in place – from legislation at the national level, to empowered families at the local level – and the rights of a child are respected in all spheres, including health, education, social welfare and justice. The protection of children against violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination is a global priority for UNICEF. In every country, our programmes are guided by the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Taking a rights-based approach to child protection means finding answers to basic questions:

- Who and where are the children and families most directly affected by a given issue?
- What are their views on their situation? What do they see as the solution?
- Who is responsible for action on this issue?
- Do they have the necessary capacity and resources to take action?

In Serbia and Montenegro, for example, UNICEF and its partners have supported the inclusion of a human development and a child-rights perspective in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) for each Republic. As part of this process, we have supported the country's first-ever participatory research initiative, conducted with and by poor children and families, allowing the voices of excluded groups to be heard.

In Armenia, we have been active participants in the development and implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and have contributed to the formulation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework in Armenia which addresses the issue of social inequality.

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