

PRESS RELEASE

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Unicef report looks at the “transition generation” – the 65 million young people of Eastern and Central Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States who have grown up during the period of transition from communist to market economies.

Opportunities have increased for youth but so have disease, school drop-out and unemployment, says the report.

Geneva – 8 November 2000 – The transition from communist systems to market economies has opened up social and economic opportunities for young people living in the CEE/CIS region but disease, school drop-out, and unemployment are on the rise, according to a report issued today by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

The report, “**Young People in Changing Societies**”, published by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy, looks for the first time at the situation of youth in the 27 countries of the CEE/CIS region. It examines what has happened to the 65 million 15 to 24-year-olds who are now putting the reforms of the last decade to the test as the first generation to complete their education, look for jobs, marry and have families, since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The annual UNICEF report monitoring the impact of transition in the CEE/CIS region, breaks new ground this year by including the voices of young people, gathered during group discussions in six transition countries. Their views are included on issues such as education, politics, health, work and leisure. A comprehensive picture of the youth group discussions can be found on the Innocenti website - www.unicef-icdc.org.

The Report finds that those countries that have progressed further in the transition agenda offer young people greater opportunities in education, business, and politics. But it warns that new freedoms have meant new risks including hazards almost unknown to earlier generations: unemployment, drugs and other substance abuse, and HIV infection.

“This generation is often portrayed as the natural winners of the transition, and they are,” said Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director. “But we are concerned for the thousands of young people who are falling through the cracks: the drug addicts, street

children, young prostitutes, long-term unemployed, and those who are HIV-positive. Their numbers are growing”.

The UNICEF report warns of a generation whose health is under threat and of an impending HIV/AIDS crisis in a region which was one of the least affected parts of the world just a few years ago. In most Central and Eastern European countries the number of new cases registered each year is low but rising. But, in some CIS countries, particularly Ukraine and Russia, infections are skyrocketing. There were an estimated 360,000 cases in the region at the end of 1999.

“Half of these people are under 24 years old,” said Bellamy. “There is no sign that the case load is levelling off; we fear the worst is still to come.”

Alcohol, drug and tobacco use are also on the rise in many countries in the region as is the suicide rate, says the report.

In 16 countries youth mortality rates stood at lower levels in 1998 than in 1989, including the Baltic States and all countries of Central Europe. In 11 countries, youth mortality rates were higher than a decade ago, largely in CIS countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

“Young people in Changing Societies” also examines:

EMPLOYMENT

The ‘transition generation’ faces a phenomenon unknown to their parents’ generation: unemployment. In 1998 the average rate for 15 – 24 year olds stood at 30 per cent in the 18 transition countries for which data are available – twice as high as the overall unemployment rate. Many of these unemployed youth, over 40 per cent, had been without a job for more than a year. There exist wide extremes throughout the region with around 7 per cent of young people unemployed in the Czech Republic, rising to 70 per cent in FYR Macedonia. Striking a positive note, the Report finds that one-third of the region’s young people are employed, and that the changing make-up of the job market may work in their favour.

EDUCATION

The report finds a mixed picture of education across the region, with greater opportunities accompanied by greater inequality and exclusion. The good news is that young people are placing increasing value on education, that tertiary enrolment is generally rising across the region as is the share of women in higher education. The bad news is falling enrolment in upper secondary education. The number of young people aged 15-18 opting out of school rose by three million between 1989 and 1998, from six to nine million – more than a third of that age group. The Report finds that the countries with lower enrolment rates are those lagging behind economic recovery and reform. It also calls for more “youth-friendly” schools in terms of teaching

methods, curricula and school environments.

CRIME

The upheavals of the last decade have been accompanied by a general increase in crime and violence in the region. Among the 27 million youth aged 14 to 17, there are about 500,000 new cases of adolescents in conflict with the law every year, a figure almost double that in 1989. The Report finds other disturbing trends: the growing numbers of young people who re-offend, relatively high numbers of offenders under the age of 14, increasing numbers of girls charged with offences, and the emergence of new types of offences, such as drug-related crimes. The Report notes the frequent use of long pre-trial detentions especially involving juveniles and calls on governments to bring their justice systems in line with international standards and conventions.

YOUNG CITIZENS

There is an increasing presence of young adults in government posts across the region, says the UNICEF report. Young people are more supportive of the democratic reforms than their elders but tend to vote less and are often critical, even sceptical, of the work of the new democratic institutions, it says. The Report finds that fewer young people participate in youth organizations or leisure and sport activities than 10 years ago.

UNICEF, which has offices in all 27 countries of the region, has been monitoring the impact of economic and social transition on children (and women) in the region on a regular basis since 1992. This latest report, “**Young people in Changing Societies**”, calls for measures to improve the situation of young people across the region, including:

- broader and more equitable education opportunities
- greater use of active labour market measures for youth
- greater care related to reproductive and sexual health
- prevention related to substance abuse, including tobacco, alcohol and drugs
- implementation of international standards in the treatment of youth in conflict with the law
- promotion of youth participation in civil society.

The UNICEF report urges governments to see young people an enormous asset to the region, as part of the solution to economic and social ills, and not as part of the problem, to be ignored, criminalized, or exploited.

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