

PRESS RELEASE

Children have paid a price for freedom

Ten years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall, a UNICEF report assesses a decade of sweeping changes and their impact on children in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union

Berlin, 4 November 1999 – Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) reports that the needs of children in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are being overlooked. "After The Fall", a report from UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, suggests that the welfare of children is too often treated as an "optional extra" amid social and economic upheaval.

The report, launched in Berlin today, reveals that contracting economies, failing social welfare nets, and the spread of armed conflict, have meant a fall in living standards for the majority of the 150 million children living in the region.

Armed conflict, notes the report, has broken out in around one-third of the countries in the region since the late 1980s and the region is struggling to cope with one of the largest groups of refugees and displaced people in the world.

The fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in a decade of momentous change. Seemingly indestructible regimes and ideologies were swept away, often in a space of a few weeks, and eight countries splintered into 27. The human impact of such changes has been immense, according to "After the Fall".

"Those born into authoritarian regimes now have the freedom to elect their representatives, to voice their opinions, to chart the course for their own lives." says the report. "But they find that they must compete for their slice of the pie in the new economic climate. Others have lost their homes, schools, communities and countries as a result of armed conflict." Shrinking economies: What it means for children in the region:

"While there are signs of some economic recovery, the GDP of most countries in the region remains far smaller than in 1989; it is being shared less equally and, what is worse, the slice of the cake for children is in danger

of getting smaller", according to the report, which notes that:

Between 1990 and 1996, the share of national income spent on education fell in eight of the 15 countries where data were available; In Georgia, education as a share of GDP fell from 6 per cent in 1990 to just over 1 per cent in 1996. School enrolment and attendance has fallen in parts of the region. Too often, a child's schooling depends on where they live and the wealth of their family. The impact of war has disrupted the education of hundreds of thousands of children from Kosovo to Tajikistan.

'Poverty diseases' such as diphtheria and tuberculosis have reappeared. The number of HIV infections in the region increased by 900 per cent in just three years, growing from fewer than 30,000 HIV infections in 1995 to an estimated 270,000 infections by the end of 1998. Rates of syphilis infection in parts of the former Soviet Union are more than 100 times higher than in the European Union.

In 10 of the 14 countries in Central and Eastern Europe for which data are available, the rates of infants and toddlers aged 0-3 living in institutions have risen since 1989, by up to 45 per cent in Romania, Russia and Latvia, and by as much as 75 per cent in Estonia.

Positive aspects

The report highlights the positive aspects of the transition and says, "it would be wrong to create a picture of overall regional gloom." It goes on to say that, "New freedoms, coupled with the growth of grassroots activism and civil society, allow the discussion of issues that were once stifled.

"Transition itself has not been solely responsible for the social and economic crises of the last ten years. Many of today's burning issues have their roots very firmly in the old communist regimes and in their authoritarian, anti-democratic mindset. The first signs of a complex social crisis were apparent as early as the mid-1970s as the Soviet system began to collapse under its own internal pressures".

The UNICEF report, published to mark the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, concludes that there must be a new focus on the human aspect of transition, and a rededication to its original goals - a better quality of life for every citizen in a humane and democratic society.

The report argues that these original goals are dependent on the fulfilment of child rights and women's rights. Without this fulfilment, backed by concrete policies and adequate resources, sustainable regional progress is an impossibility.

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Note to Editors:

"After the Fall" has been produced by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre with support from UNICEF's Regional Office for the CEE/CIS and Baltics, based in Geneva. The report draws on information from the Centre's MONEE Project, which has been monitoring the situation in the CEE/CIS and Baltic region since 1992.

The report is available in PDF format from our publications catalogue in English and French.

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