

LAUNCH OF SOCIAL MONITOR 2002

EMBARGO: 12:30 EST, Wednesday 18 September 2002

KEY POINTS ON THE “SOCIAL MONITOR”

HIV/AIDS

HIV is spreading faster in parts of the transition region than in any other part of the world. An estimated one million people are infected, and newly-registered cases increased more than five-fold between 1998 and 2001. Around 90% of cases are in Russia and Ukraine but Estonia has the highest rate of new infections. Policies to address HIV in hardest-hit countries are not having enough impact and, without radical change, there is little to stop the epidemic.

HIV/AIDS has a youthful face in the region and most new infections occur among the young. In the CIS, almost 80% of new infections were registered among people under 29 between 1997 and 2000. In Estonia 38% of newly registered infections are among those aged under 20, and 90% are among people under 30 years of age.

In Estonia, more than one in every 1,000 people were infected in 2001 according to official data, almost 20 times the average EU rate in 2000. Russia had the second highest incidence of new infections in the region in 2001, with a registered incidence rate 12 times higher than the EU average. HIV is now spreading rapidly also in Latvia and Kazakhstan, and incidence is up again in Ukraine and Moldova. While official figures suggest little growth in HIV/AIDS in Central and South-Eastern Europe, there is no room for complacency. Recent surveys in Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, for example, show that HIV/AIDS is well established among injecting drug users.

Factors in the spread of the virus: more drug abuse; more young people having sex at an earlier age; growing numbers of sex workers – phenomena often linked to social dislocation and stress. Injecting drug use remains the main factor in most new infections but there is evidence of increasing sexual transmission resulting from risky behaviour and low awareness.

In Belarus, 8% of new cases were attributed to sexual transmission in 1996, rising to 32% by early 2001. More women are infected, though they are less likely to inject drugs. In Ukraine, women were thought to account for 38% of new cases in 2001.

Few countries have effective tracking, and most lack the detailed information needed for effective action. Stigma and discrimination continue to undermine existing efforts.

Awareness about HIV prevention is lower, even in the worst-hit countries, than in Western Europe. A UNICEF opinion poll found that teenagers mention condom use most frequently as a way to avoid being infected by HIV/AIDS. However, awareness about condom use as a means of prevention is significantly lower than in Western European countries. Fewer than 70% in Belarus, Ukraine, or Latvia are aware of condoms as a means of protection, compared to 97% in France or 87% in Germany.

Those at risk are more likely to use services that are run with their participation, confidential, relevant, affordable, comprehensive and staffed by sympathetic workers.

Fast learners: Lithuania, which launched a national action plan in 1995 and has kept infection rates low. Kyrgyzstan, which acted early to revise legislation, introduce free hospital treatment and syringe exchange, and involved sex workers and taxi drivers in the distribution of information on HIV/AIDS prevention.

Success stories: the more than 40 needle exchange programmes in Russia. The needle exchange service in Svetlogorsk, Belarus, which grew from a community initiative. A similar project in Ukraine, with a mobile outreach service. Projects that involve drug users in design and implementation have promoted a more positive attitude towards preventive measures, despite limited resources.

Policy action is needed to raise awareness in a way that includes, as well as informs, to ensure a stronger gender focus, to build accessible and youth-friendly health care and advisory services, to create effective systems to track the epidemic, and to foster more inclusive attitudes towards those infected and those at high risk of infection.

The region can build on its assets: projects that are making a difference; extensive health-care services; a literate population and a vast majority of adolescents in school, where they can be reached by life skills-based prevention education, complemented by peer education.

QUALITY OF LEARNING

New surveys show that high standards in mathematics and science are being maintained in the wealthier countries of Central Europe and in Russia and the Baltics, but there are concerns about standards in Romania, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Moldova. In general, teenagers in the region are less able to apply their knowledge than teens in Western Europe. ‘Factology’ – including learning by rote – still prevails.

But schools face crisis in poorer parts of the region. Schools in Tajikistan, for example, suffer from an exodus of qualified teachers, the destruction of school buildings during the recent civil war and a serious lack of textbooks. In Uzbekistan, three quarters of rural schools lack functioning toilets and teachers are paid the equivalent of \$6 per month. In Moldova, one quarter of schools need refurbishment and repair.

Things would be worse without the efforts of parents and students. Parents are more likely to be involved in school life than parents in EU countries, and more likely to help children with homework. Policy makers should match these efforts by prioritizing education as a safeguard against poverty, ignorance and disease. The report calls for gradual reform of examination systems and teaching practices, coupled with far greater investment. Resources could be freed by greater efficiency, but education in the poorest countries needs substantial additional expenditure. There are great opportunities: growing economies, falling numbers of children and plenty of “cultural capital” – 90% of Russian students say their homes contain classical literature, compared with fewer than 60% in the EU.

OTHER STORIES FROM THE SOCIAL MONITOR:

- Growing national incomes in nearly every country between 1998 and 2001. Unprecedented economic stability, with the region little-affected by the recent global economic downturn. Things should be getting better for families.
- But signs of crisis include the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic, and continuing child poverty, child institutionalization, and the poor state of education.
- A growing debt crisis. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are severely indebted, using over one-third of government revenue to service debt in 2000. Armenia, Georgia and Moldova may face a similar crisis in the near future.
- Mortality on the rise again in Russia. Mortality rates for those aged 20-24 were higher in Russia in 2000 than anywhere else in the region, and higher than at any time since 1989. And male life expectancy is about 59 years – lower than in India.
- Romania has reduced the number of children in institutions, and increased the number cared for by foster parents since 1998, a positive result of child protection reforms.
- The number of young people convicted and sentenced for crimes has increased. In Ukraine, one quarter of those aged 14-17 convicted of crimes in 2000 received custodial sentences. Three quarters of them received more than two years in custody.

HOW THE REPORT WILL BE USED:

The Social Monitor is part of UNICEF's advocacy in the region, drawing the attention of policy-makers to children's issues. It informs the work of international organizations, NGOs, researchers and media in the region and beyond. UNICEF Country Offices in the region are making plans for this year's Report. In Russia, for example, UNICEF will launch the Report in Moscow on 20 September at a press conference with UNICEF Representative Rosemary McCreery and Dr Evgeny Voronin, the Head of the All Russia Hospital for Infectious Diseases, which cares for abandoned HIV-positive children. HIV-positive young people will also take part, and there will be a photo exhibition.

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