

“Report Card 9 - The Children Left Behind” **Strictly Embargoed 00:01GMT 3 December 2010**

Rich countries letting poorest children fall, says new report

Florence-Helsinki-Geneva 3 December 2010 - A landmark report by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre has found that children in many wealthy European nations and the United States suffer greater inequality than children in numerous industrialized nations.

Report Card 9: The Children Left Behind ranks, for the first time, 24 OECD countries in terms of equality in health, education and material well-being for their children. The report looks at a particular aspect of disparity – bottom-end inequality – and asks how far behind are rich nations allowing their most disadvantaged children to fall.

Italy, the United States, Greece, Belgium and the United Kingdom, for example, are seen to be allowing their most vulnerable children to fall much further behind than countries like Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland and the Netherlands. The report argues that the consequences of ‘falling behind’ are enormous for children, as they are for the economy and societies.

“As debates rage on austerity measures and social spending cuts, the report focuses on the hundreds of thousands of children who risk being left behind in the world’s richest countries,” said UNICEF Innocenti’s Director, Mr Gordon Alexander. “This need not happen - the standard set out in this report is not based on some theoretical ideal of greater equality but on what some OECD countries have already achieved for their children.”

The approach of *The Children Left Behind* is to measure the gap between the average child (what a country may consider ‘normal’) and the child near the bottom. As such, the report examines how far children are falling behind in three dimensions of their lives - material well-being, educational achievement and physical health – and means we can measure and compare, for the first time, the differences in performance between countries. (*The full list of countries appears at the end of this press release*)

The report finds that:

1. A small group of countries – Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Switzerland– are leading the way in promoting equality in children’s well-being. Greece, Italy and the United States are, on the other hand, allowing their children to fall furthest behind.
2. Switzerland has the least inequality in material well-being closely followed by Iceland and the Netherlands. The highest relative gaps are reported in Slovakia, the United States and Hungary.
3. Inequality in children’s educational achievement outcomes (in reading, maths and science literacy) is lowest in Finland, followed by Ireland and Canada. It is highest in Belgium, then France and Austria.
4. The lowest levels of inequality for health are registered in the Netherlands, followed by Norway and Portugal, while the widest gaps are found in Hungary, Italy and the United States.

With much of the data in the report pre-financial crisis, *The Children Left Behind* describes its findings as a 'snapshot in good times' and warns that the heaviest consequences of economic downturn tend to fall on the most vulnerable families and their children. "In hard times," says the report, "the poorest children should be the first to be protected, not the last to be considered. A child has only one chance to develop normally in mind and body. And it is a primary responsibility of government to protect that chance - in good times and in bad."

Hundreds of studies in different OECD countries have shown that the costs of children falling too far behind include a greater likelihood of inadequate nutrition, lower educational achievement, chronic stress for the child and impaired development.

"The heaviest costs," says *The Children Left Behind*, "are paid by the individual child. But the long list of problems also translates into significant costs for society as a whole. Unnecessary bottom-end inequality prepares a bill which is quickly presented to taxpayers in the form of increased strain on health and hospital services, on remedial schooling, on welfare...."

The Children Left Behind does however suggest a practical response by showing that some countries are much better at limiting inequality for their children than others. The report notes those countries that have more effectively used family benefits and tax breaks to close the gap on child inequality and poverty - an indication that child inequality is policy susceptible. At the same time, the report shows a number of examples where countries who rank best in median levels of achievement also rank best in reducing inequality. It is, therefore, argued that greater equality can be achieved without sacrificing efficiency and economic performance.

"The 24 OECD countries being compared are all highly developed nations with a similar capacity to limit child poverty," said Mr. Alexander. "The fact that some countries are doing better than others shows that the pattern of inequality can be broken, and that when exclusion is identified early, action can be taken to prevent a deep fall. The variation between countries revealed in the report offers a realistic goal for improvement."

Read the full report www.unicef-irc.org

Watch the video. Three 12-year-old boys, Fabio, Jason, and Marcello (from Italy, the Netherlands, and the USA) describe what it's like to be among the most disadvantaged children in their society www.youtube.com/watch?v=QXEIvhWm-Ho (PART 1) and www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALb7s5rxt0s (PARTS 2 & 3)

Watch an interview with the author of *Report Card 9*, Peter Adamson www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL3n98yvTWA

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Countries measured and compared in *Report Card 9 'The Children Left Behind'*: Austria, Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. *Seven (7) other OECD countries - Australia, Chile, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Republic of Korea and Turkey - are also included in the Report, but are not given a group ranking as they did not have enough data for at least one of the three dimensions measured.*

Note for the Editors

About the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre:

The Innocenti Research Centre works as UNICEF's dedicated, independent research centre. Based in Florence, Italy, Innocenti pursues research in two thematic areas: Social and economic policies and children, and Child protection and implementation of international standards for children.

***** Media Interviews** are available in English, French, Italian and Spanish. The report's author, Peter Adamson, is also available for interview (in English).

For interviews, or to request an interview with the author or an economist at the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, contact:

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