

Child well-being - progress in danger?

FLORENCE/BRUSSELS/DUBLIN 10 April 2013 – A timely study on child well-being in rich countries, launched today by UNICEF's Office of Research, finds that the Netherlands and four Nordic countries – Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – again sit at the top of a child well-being table; whilst four southern European countries – Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain – are placed in the bottom half of the table.

Report Card 11, from UNICEF's Office of Research examines the state of children across the industrialized world. As debates continue to generate strongly opposed views on the pros and cons of austerity measures and social spending cuts, *Report Card 11* charts the achievements of 29 of the world's advanced economies in ensuring the well-being of their children during the first decade of this century. This international comparison, says the report, proves that child poverty in these countries is not inevitable, but policy susceptible – and that some countries are doing much better than others at protecting their most vulnerable children. [See attached key findings document]

"Whether in today's time of economic crisis, or in better financial periods, UNICEF urges governments and social partners to place children and young people at the heart of their decision-making processes," said the Director of UNICEF's Office of Research, Gordon Alexander. "For every new policy measure considered or introduced, governments explicitly have to explore the impact and effects on children, families with children, adolescents and young adults. These groups do not have a voice in the political processes or their voices are too seldom heard."

Report Card 11: Child well-being in rich countries measures development according to five dimensions of children's lives – material well-being, health and safety, education, behaviour and risks, and housing and environment.

The study does not find a strong relationship between per capita GDP and overall child well-being. For instance, Slovenia ranks higher than Canada, the Czech Republic higher than Austria, and Portugal higher than the United States.

The report also finds that countries of Central and Eastern Europe are beginning to close the gap with more established industrial economies.

Despite setbacks in some countries on specific indicators, the overall story of the 2000s is one of steady improvement in various fields of child well-being in the industrialized world. Every country for which data are available saw reductions in infant mortality and 'low family affluence', while the rate of further education enrolment increased.

However, given the continued absence of up-to-date internationally comparative data on children's lives (most data in the report is from 2010, the latest comparative information available), *Report Card 11* reflects the outcome of government decisions in the period

before the crisis. The report states that the three years of economic hardship since then do not bode well for the present or near future.

Nonetheless, for the most part, these data track long-term trends and reflect the results of long-term investments in children's lives. Average levels of school achievement, or immunization rates, or the prevalence of risk behaviours, for example, are not likely to be significantly changed in the short term by the recessions of the last three years. And, when looking at the 'behaviours and risks' dimension of child well-being, there is good news across the board. For instance: among 11-15 year-olds in the 29 countries under review: only eight per cent say they smoke cigarettes at least once a week; just 15 per cent report having been drunk at least twice in their life; 99 per cent of girls do not get pregnant whilst still a teenager; and about two-thirds are neither bullied nor involved in fighting. However, exercise levels are low, with the United States and Ireland the only countries in which more than 25% of children report exercising for at least an hour a day.

Report Card 11 also includes the views of the children themselves on their own life satisfaction. These findings – reflected in the children's life satisfaction league table – are broadly in line with the data-based measurement of child well-being, with some notable exceptions: children in Estonia, Greece and Spain gave their countries a much higher ranking, while Germany, Luxembourg and Poland rank lower.

"We need to know more about how children see and evaluate their own lives," said UNICEF's Gordon Alexander, "about what matters to them, and do this in a more systematic way. Children's voices, even at a very young age, are vital. They reiterate the message of this and past *Report Cards*: that governments need to guide policies in a way that will safeguard the long-term futures of their children and economies. This has never been more urgent than in today's climate."

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To download the full report <http://www.unicef-irc.org>

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About UNICEF

UNICEF works in more than 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments. For more information about UNICEF and its work visit: <http://www.unicef.org>