

UNICEF: Press Release

Many children with disabilities still “written off”

GENEVA/FLORENCE, 5 October 2005 - A UNICEF report launched today finds that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the numbers of children with disabilities in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) have dramatically increased.

According to the UNICEF Innocenti Insight, *Children and Disability in Transition in CEE/CIS*, the total number of children registered as disabled across the region's 27 countries has tripled from about 500,000 in 1990 to 1.5 million in 2000. An additional one million children are thought to go unregistered. Most of these children continue to face their lives in segregated institutions, suffering from stigma and discrimination.

For decades, vast numbers of children with disabilities have been placed in institutions and this practice has continued during the post-Soviet transition period. By 2002, some 317,000 children with disabilities were living in residential institutions. Cut off from their families and community from an early age, often segregated in large facilities and special schools, the prospect for these children is to graduate to an institution for adults and to face a pattern of denial of human rights.

“Although children with disabilities have become more visible since the beginning of transition and attitudes towards them and their families are changing, many of them remain simply ‘written off’ from society “ said Marta Santos Pais, Director of UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (IRC). “ Yet, as called for by UNICEF, every child has the right to grow up in a family environment and in conditions that ensure respect for their dignity, promote self-reliance and active participation in social life.”

The report finds that poverty and disability go hand in hand, each fuelling the other. Families with children with disabilities tend to be poorer than other families. Disability continues to be poorly diagnosed and often goes untreated. It becomes a life sentence of lasting disadvantage. Lacking proper support from the State and with limited access to quality basic social services for treatment and care of their children, parents see institutionalisation as the only viable alternative.

“Deep poverty and a chronic lack of alternatives combine with outdated medical approaches neglecting the child's best interests and explain high rates of child abandonment and placement in institutions” added Marta Santos Pais. “The reality is many parents feel they have no choice but to give up their children. What these families need is strong social and economic support.”

The report calls for an immediate end to the common practice of placing children with disabilities in institutions and segregated schools. This will require:

- changes in public attitudes;
- measures to boost family income so children can stay together with their families and develop to their full potential;
- greater participation of parents in decisions affecting their children;
- resources for families and the community;

- changes to the physical environments that exacerbate the impact of disability.

“Giving parents and communities the power to make their own decisions is, in itself, a valuable contribution to consolidate democracy in this region,” said Maria Calivis, Regional Director for UNICEF CEE/CIS. “It means giving a voice to those most directly affected, backed by the necessary decentralised, local resources.”

The report acknowledges that the region has made some progress on protecting the rights of children with disabilities. There are signs that attitudes towards disability are changing - most countries now have legislation to address the reality of these children and more children are being integrated into society. But, according to UNICEF, there is still a long way to go.

“Nations can be judged by the way in which they treat the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged,” Maria Calivis continued . “While it may be hard to undo the damage already done to children with disabilities, nations could and should move faster to stop discrimination and stigma blighting the lives of these children and their families. As this report underscores, it is time to transform the care and treatment of children with disabilities from being a source of public shame to being a measure of human progress.”