

**EMBARGO UNTIL Monday, 18 June 2001
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Generation in jeopardy

A crisis of major dimensions threatens the future of countries in transition

Stockholm, 18 June -- Nearly 60 million children living in poverty... 1.5 million children languishing in institutions... over 700,000 HIV/AIDS cases, most of them affecting youth... over 18 million young people out of school and without jobs... millions of children displaced or turned into refugees due to armed conflicts... trafficking, sexual exploitation, violence, crime, emigration, suicide, accidents, alcohol and drug abuse all on the rise...

This is not the better future promised when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. It is a children's crisis of major dimensions that threatens the many opportunities and freedoms opened by the transition from communist to democratic societies.

Today the 3-day "Generation in Jeopardy" conference opened in Stockholm to address this crisis. Prominent members of parliament, business leaders, representatives of civil society, academia and the media – and young people themselves -- from 27 countries have gathered to discuss the situation of children and youth in the region and help build a social movement to improve their lives.

Kent Härstedt, Swedish Parliamentarian and Chairperson of the Swedish Committee for UNICEF, described the gathering as an opportunity to build sustainable and responsible networks to promote the rights and welfare of children in the post-communist countries.

"It is very important to create a forum for discussion about the social side of transition in the region since the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is simply not acceptable that children and youth have worse conditions now than before 1989," he said, adding: "Everyone should take responsibility. We need to benefit from our different experiences and create synergy thorough our combined efforts and networks."

150 million children live in the 27 countries in transition. It is a region stretching from Zagreb to Vladivostok, from the Baltic Sea to the Bering Straits and from the Artic Circle to the Pamir Mountain Range. These are the children of the post-perestrojka era in the republics of the former Soviet Union... the children of the "velvet" revolution in former Czechoslovakia... the children of the "singing" revolution in the Baltic countries... children in the newly independent states of Central Asia... children who have witnessed war, violence and atrocities in Kosovo and elsewhere... children suffering from economic free-fall.

Growing poverty and inequality, cuts in social spending, the collapse or weakening of social safety nets and rising unemployment have put huge pressures on millions of families, compromising their ability to adequately care for their children. After a decade of transition it is clear that the State alone cannot ensure the rights of all children. The crisis must be faced

squarely by Governments, families, civil society organizations, the corporate sector, academia and the media – all working together to change the region for, and with, children.

The Stockholm conference is the latest in a series of regional consultations aimed at building such a movement. It seeks to add the voice of new sectors and personalities to an emerging consensus that children's rights must be at the centre of policy reform in the transition countries.

Addressing the opening session of the conference, Swedish Minister for Development Cooperation, Maj Inger Klingvall, said that Western Europe and the rest of the international community must pay greater attention to the situation of children in the transition countries. She emphasized that children's rights have been high on the agenda of Sweden's EU presidency and overseas development programmes, including assistance to the countries in transition.

Corporate social responsibility toward children is one of the key themes of the conference. Speaking during the opening session, Marianne Barner, the Swedish multi-national IKEA's Chief of Information stated:

"IKEA, which has been collaborating with UNICEF in India and Kosovo for several years, is participating in this conference to give an example of social responsibility going hand in hand with good business. Beyond providing financial help for specific projects, corporations can contribute to changing attitudes and thus have an impact on the lives of children."

Another keynoter, former World Chess Champion Anatoly Karpov -- now Regional Ambassador for UNICEF – commented that the transition from a centrally planned system to a market economy has proved more difficult than expected.

"Children have paid a terribly high price," he said, adding that he has personally undertaken a crusade on behalf of the unintended victims of transition. "If children were put at the centre of the political agenda, our economies would prosper and our democracies would be consolidated more quickly," he stressed.

The Generation in Jeopardy Conference follows on the heels of the 52-government Conference on Children in Europe and Central Asia, held in Berlin 16-18 May. The outcomes of these and other regional events will influence the UN Special Session on Children that will take place in New York in September. It is also part of the Global Movement for Children to promote the realisation of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The commitments undertaken by the conference's nearly 200 participants will be reflected in the "Stockholm Manifesto" to be issued on Wednesday, 20 June.

For further information, please contact

Ingeborg Ekblom, Swedish Committee for UNICEF, at 0709-95 59 16 /08-692 25 00 or Robert Cohen, UNICEF Regional Office for the CEE/CIS and the Baltic States, at 41-79-431-1537.

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