

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

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Independent States (CEE/CIS)  
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**Early Childhood Development and Primary Schooling:  
Strengthening Partnerships to Achieve Results**

10 October 2008  
Budapest, Hungary

**Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished colleagues and friends...**

I would like to warmly thank our host – the **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)**

-- for inviting me to this important gathering. All of you are “movers and shakers” who are helping to revolutionize the field of early childhood development and education. On your agenda are critically important issues for ensuring that all children can claim their rights to high quality care and education and grow up to be informed, productive and active citizens. I am delighted that Education and Early Childhood Development Officers from the majority of UNICEF’s 22 country offices in the CEE/CIS region are also here today.

I would like to start by congratulating ISSA for its extraordinary contributions to creating open societies that put children first. ISSA has distinguished itself by supporting innovative, child-centred teaching and learning methodologies and by bringing cutting-edge technical expertise into the region. Its vision and many successes are truly commendable.

UNICEF has long held that investments in young children's care and education are the most powerful a country can make. For society as a whole, the returns on these investments are among the very highest, and they have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable. Small wonder then that in November 2007, all the Ministers of Education of the member countries of the Organization of American States (OAS) made a "hemispheric commitment" to invest in the comprehensive development of children from birth to eight years of age; or that, just a few weeks before that, nine top professors in economics, including a Nobel Laureate and the Chilean Finance Minister, sat down to jointly assess the biggest challenges facing Latin America and identified early childhood development as *the top ranking solution* to improve public spending and policies.

The question for us, then, is: *when will this region make a similar commitment to its youngest citizens?*

I am acutely aware that I am speaking to an expert audience; I do not wish to preach to the converted. But I do want to stress that we have two of the most powerful arguments for advancing the early childhood agenda: **science and the normative framework of children's rights.**

**First, the argument from science.** Everyone here today is cognizant of the huge advances made in the science of child development. We now have robust evidence from research in neurobiology as well as the medical, behavioural and social sciences, that early experiences and the interaction of genetics and environment have a *fundamental influence* on the development of the brain and that human relationships – starting from birth -- are *central* to the child's health, growth and all-around development. I have been particularly struck by the research of the distinguished American paediatrician, Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, who has convincingly described how supporting parents to develop confidence and competence in care-giving skills is critical to not only children's psycho-emotional development, but also for their protection from neglect and abuse. We now know beyond a doubt that many problems that unfold later in life – developmental delays and disabilities, physical and psychological problems, and predisposition to violence, are associated with deprivation, neglect and abuse in the early years. Early experiences set children on developmental trajectories that become progressively more difficult and more expensive to modify as they get older. While most children are highly resilient and able to cope amidst difficult circumstances, we also know that children who start behind, are likely to stay behind.

**These findings could not be more relevant to this region.** We must take them fully on board and disseminate them widely. We must ensure that they inform not only ECD programmes, but also social protection, social inclusion and poverty reduction policies – and budgets at all levels of government.

**The second argument** at our disposal is to be found in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, that great philosophical, ethical and normative breakthrough for the world's children that was approved by the UN General Assembly almost two decades ago. The Convention recognizes that *all* children – of *all* ages – have inalienable rights. Rights that families and caregivers, and ultimately the State, are obligated to promote and protect. Every government in this region has ratified it and reports regularly on compliance. It is our compass, our guide, the normative framework for all our work. In 2005, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child gave us yet another, even more specific tool: a position paper – formally called General Comment 7 – recognizing early childhood as a **particularly critical period for the realization of child rights**. It identifies parents and caregivers as principal actors in the construction of identity and the development of skills, knowledge and behaviours, and as duty-bearers in the realization of the young child's rights. And it reminds States of their obligation to support these care-giving environments.

Here, again, a question: *how can we better deploy the arguments of science and children's rights in this region?*

Ladies and Gentlemen, we work in a very complex and challenging region. While there has been much progress, the transition from the old order to market economies and democratic institutions has often been accompanied by neglect of social sector reforms and dramatic decreases and deterioration in services for children. Recent economic growth in nearly all countries has not been matched by corresponding advances in social development, resulting in sharpened disparities and increased marginalisation of vulnerable groups. Family breakdown, child abandonment, a rise in criminality and xenophobia can still be found in many countries. Reduced public investment in children, especially young children... decentralisation without adequate local capacity... and widening inequalities, all have long-term negative implications for child development, school completion, poverty reduction, social stability and national development overall.

Children from birth to eight years of age number well over 40 million in this region. There have been reductions in poverty levels in many countries, but child poverty remains a problem across the region -- in some countries, nearly four out of every five young children are poor. The rate of chronic malnutrition, as measured by stunting among under-fives, can be as high as 27 per cent. Micronutrient deficiencies, especially those of iodine and iron, are endemic. As the recent and very influential **Lancet** series of articles on child development pointed out, these risk factors – poverty, malnutrition, and micronutrient insufficiency, together with poor cognitive stimulation – can permanently stymie children's developmental potential.

Since the collapse of the centralized kindergarten system, access to early childhood education has remained low; on average only about 40 per cent of children are enrolled in pre-school and in some countries enrolment is as low as six per cent. With a few laudable exceptions, primary

health care and social protection services remain quite weak and do not have the capacity to reach and support vulnerable families with young children. Given all of this, it is no wonder that babies are still being abandoned and institutionalized. Or that children from ethnic minorities, including the Roma, are often the most excluded, affected by both poverty and discrimination.

If these problems have persisted during the past half decade or more of robust economic growth in almost all countries, they are even more worrisome now, as the shockwaves from the US financial meltdown begin to be felt in this region. All of the problems I have just outlined may be exacerbated if there is a serious economic downturn. After all, day care centres and parenting programmes tend to be the first to be cut when budgets are tight. We must join forces and make the case – the scientific, normative and indeed, the *economic* case -- for preserving and advancing early childhood programmes and education, in both good times and bad. Together, we can help our government partners to find urgent, innovative solutions through coordinated efforts -- not only by the social sector ministries but also by ministries of finance, by top political authorities at all levels, parliaments, the private sector and civil society. Engagement with communities and ordinary citizens is vitally important. The challenges we face are daunting – but not insurmountable.

*Looking ahead, how do we see UNICEF's role?*

Briefly, in the area of **early childhood development**, UNICEF will continue to work with national governments and civil society actors such as ISSA to support a comprehensive approach to young children's rights and to improve their developmental readiness for schooling. Readiness for schooling, we all know, among other things represents cost savings for the education sector because of children's improved learning achievement and retention in school, as well as indirect savings for health and social protection sectors. We will continue to support the reform of health, education and social welfare services for children, sharing evidence and helping to build the capacity of providers. The active involvement of families and communities will continue to be a priority. And we will push the envelope with respect to less explored areas, such as early detection and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities.

In **primary education**, UNICEF's strategy complements ISSA's vision of empowering children to become active participants in their own learning and active citizens. We will continue to support child-centred and active learning projects in many of the countries of Eastern Europe and Central Asia through technical assistance and model programs.

The **inclusion of Roma children** will continue to be a key part of our work. UNICEF is a new member of the *Decade for Roma Inclusion*, and in that framework, we will work closely with partners such as the Open Society Institute, ISSA and Step by Step NGOs, and the Roma Education Fund. Indeed, we view early childhood care and education as the entry point to supporting Roma children and breaking the cycle of historical disadvantage that sets them back from the first day of primary school. We strongly advocate for quality education and inclusion of Roma children in the mainstream school system as essential to eliminating social exclusion and discrimination. A recent *Mapping of Roma Education Initiatives* that we commissioned, highlighting good practices, will be useful in this regard -- I understand that its findings will be presented at this Conference. Another study, due to commence very shortly through cooperation with the Open Society Institute and the Roma Education Fund, will examine policy and service provision for young Roma children.

Dear colleagues and friends: in all of our efforts, we draw inspiration from communities – often the poorest communities – that find solutions and innovate, performing “miracles” for their children with scant resources. And we are keenly aware that no single organization working on its own can bring about lasting change. Partnerships are central to UNICEF’s efforts – indeed, they are the *only way* we work. That is why I am happy to say we are privileged to have ISSA and its member NGOs as partners.

At the **regional** level, ISSA and UNICEF have been involved in several joint activities. Recently our two organizations, together with OSI, conducted a very successful series of study tours for multi-sectoral country teams from the region. The teams were guided by University of London experts with the goal of learning about the substantive, evidence-based underpinnings of high quality early childhood services in England.

At the **country** level, there are several successful examples of our cooperation with Step by Step NGOs, perhaps best exemplified by the ongoing work in Moldova. With great foresight (and some encouragement from our agencies!), the Government of Moldova decided to invest the funds it received under the Education for All - Fast Track Initiative in early childhood development. It is indeed a source of great satisfaction for all of us that our joint efforts – Government, UNESCO, UNICEF and Step by Step -- have resulted in enrolment increases of children in the 3-6 age group from 49 per cent to 53 per cent and for children in the 6-7 age group from 75 per cent to 85 per cent. Moldova's exemplary results are being tracked closely by international education experts; good practices and lessons learned are already being shared with other countries. *What better proof that when we work together we can bring about tangible and sustainable change.*

UNICEF's mission in ECD and education closely complements the expertise of ISSA – with its experience in teacher education and child-centred classroom practice – and that of other partners here today. Let us reaffirm our common purpose today by committing to further reinforce our existing cooperation.

*I would like to make **three proposals** in this regard:*

First, we must focus on **identifying, generating and disseminating knowledge about validated good practices**. This will enable partners to become more knowledgeable about teaching, learning and programming strategies that really work. It will also provide the much needed evidence base required for effective advocacy, improved policy and better decisions in favour of children. UNICEF will play its part by continuing to compile and disseminate information on progress and good practices, as we did in our study *Education for Some More Than Others?* and the *Roma Education Mapping*. We will also help bring partners together at regional and national level. We look to ISSA and other partners to complement these efforts by bringing to the table examples of good practice and by working with us to ensure that this knowledge travels far and wide – from Presidents and Prime Ministers to parents and pedagogues.

Second, we must better **align and amplify our advocacy efforts**. Advocacy for the rights of young children is needed among schools, communities, service providers, national and local governments and the international community. We need to coordinate our voices and our efforts to ensure that we send the same -- and much stronger -- messages to help bring about positive, measurable changes in policies, laws, regulations, budgets, programs, capacities and mindsets.

Third and lastly, a **concrete proposal**: establishment of an extended regional network of early childhood and education organizations, professionals and practitioners, as a joint effort of ISSA and UNICEF. We have been in preliminary discussions with ISSA and feel confident that together we will be able to consolidate a vibrant and multifaceted network by early-2009. Such a network will facilitate better communication and cooperation between partners, call greater attention to the unique challenges we face, but also to the many successes and innovations of organizations working in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It will provide a forum for discussion and exchange, and a strong platform for advocacy to attract support and investments.

There is every reason for us to believe that through our joint efforts, early childhood development and education could become – *why not?* -- the **priority of priorities** in the CEE/CIS region. I look forward to the day when politicians, professionals and practitioners in this part of the world come together to make a sincere public commitment to significantly improve young children's opportunities to grow and develop to their full potential. **With our dedication and perseverance, we can make such a day happen – and we can make it happen very soon.** *Thank you!*