

Open Letter to Governments

We write to you as representatives of more than 1,800 civil society organizations in 27 countries of the CEE/CIS and Baltic States who are committed to protecting and promoting the rights of children.

In the 2001-2002 “Say Yes for Children” campaign, 26 million people in our region voted, with ‘Leave No Child Out’ chosen as the top priority. And yet millions of children are still excluded because of their poverty, ethnicity or gender; their traditions; their disability or HIV status; or because they live in an institution. Many children face violence and abuse. As the Regional Network for Children, we have just launched the Leave No Child Out campaign, with support from UNICEF and the European Commission, to fight for **all** children to enjoy their fundamental rights. We need you as active partners in this drive.

Genuinely inclusive societies don’t stop at efforts to prevent harm. They take concrete actions to empower the young, enable their full participation in creating a world fit for them, and practice tolerance and inclusion in all of their actions. We must engage all the institutions – including the media, schools, business -- to support humanistic values and the rights of children.

In our region:

- More than 18 million children live in poverty in households surviving on less than \$2.15 per person per day.
- About 1 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, and the region has the fastest growing epidemic in the world.
- Conflicts in one third of our countries have left around 2 million people internally displaced and 1 million refugees -- a large proportion of them children.
- About 1 million children are living in institutions.
- Roma children and those of other minorities face discrimination on a daily basis.
- More than 10 million children face exclusion from services and opportunities because of a disability.
- Historical gains for women and girls have eroded.
- Most of our countries lack adequate juvenile justice systems, and increasing numbers of children are being incarcerated.

Each government is legally bound by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and has made additional concrete commitments to children: at the UN Special Session on Children (New York, May 2002), the First Intergovernmental Conference on Children in Europe and Central Asia (Berlin, May 2001) and the Millennium Summit (New York, September 2000). But progress in meeting these pledges has been unacceptably slow. We urge governments, in partnership with civil society to:

- complete a national action plan by the end of 2003 to achieve the goals of A World Fit for Children in the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
- allocate adequate resources to carry out these plans
- establish transparent monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability
- ensure that all government policies and programmes redress historical disadvantage, are non-discriminatory and promote social inclusion.
- In all actions, include children in decision-making and promote their participation

The main responsibility for fulfilling these goals lies with governments. But success depends on strategic partnerships and the full involvement of civil society. The Regional Network for Children is committed to working with you in each of our countries, in the Sarajevo meeting in May 2004 and beyond, to create A World Fit for Children.