

## **UNICEF salutes Armenia's accession to new UN Treaty on Persons with Disabilities**

YEREVAN, 6 April 2007 – UNICEF today hailed the Government of Armenia for its signing of a new United Nations treaty, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, that protects and promotes the rights of the estimated 650 million persons in the world with disabilities. While there is no reliable data on the number of children with disabilities globally, estimates put their number at 150 million worldwide.

“This Convention is the first treaty focusing exclusively on disability rights to be adopted by the UN General Assembly,” UNICEF Representative Sheldon Yett said at a roundtable hosted by the Ministry of Labor and Social Issues of Armenia to mark the country’s signing of the disability convention, and to congratulate two young Armenian advocates for the treaty who traveled to New York for the signing ceremony at the UN General Assembly on 30 March 2007.

The adoption of the Convention is a crucial step in ensuring equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities, including children. Countries that ratify the Treaty agree to enact laws and other measures to improve disability rights and to abolish legislation and practices that discriminate against people with disabilities.

“Children with disabilities are among the most marginalized and excluded of all the world’s children. Often they are marginalized in society and sometimes in their own communities or even their own families,” the UNICEF Representative emphasized, adding that the Armenian Government’s database currently includes over 8,000 children with disabilities but only a fraction of these children are mainstreamed into inclusive schools.

There are problems that are common to all people with disabilities independently of their age and gender. Those problems include accessibility of public buildings and public facilities. “Unfortunately, many schools, hospitals and polyclinics are not equipped with ramps and other facilities that would help a person with disability, be it a child or an elderly woman, to enter buildings easily,” Sheldon Yett said.

### **Further steps**

The Convention lays a solid basis for further strengthening and improvement of domestic legislations and development of effective implementation mechanisms.

“Our country has made tangible progress in ensuring that the rights of persons with disabilities are respected and that the environment conducive to their full integration into the society is created,” Minister of Labor and Social Issues Aghvan Vardanyan said, emphasizing that it is much more important to focus attention on implementation of existing laws, rather than develop new ones.

The Ministry and UNICEF have been working closely to address problems of people with disabilities, particularly those faced by children with disabilities through improving services, assisting in mainstreaming children with disabilities into inclusive schools and raising public awareness to promote their full integration into the society.

“Yet the new Convention sets new standards for us, and the Government, NGOs and international organizations will have to work hard to ensure that the provisions of the Convention are translated into real action, adequate financial resources are allocated from the state budget and human resources are provided to meet needs of the persons with disabilities,” the Minister said.

### **Young Advocates Call for More Action, More Attention**

It is important to involve persons with disabilities, including children and young people, in discussions of policies that affect their lives, a young advocate for the rights of children with disabilities. Ani Hovhannisyan, 18, who participated in the Convention signing ceremony at the UN General Assembly stressed.

“We are often referred to as “invisible” people, but it is not true. As young journalist who develops stories for the “Sunflower” magazine published by “Bridge of Hope” NGO in Armenia I am trying to make voices of my peers heard, because I believe that we can be the real agents of change,” Ani said.

Pointing out to concerns of children and young people with disabilities related to education and employment, Ani voiced hope that the new Convention will create broader opportunities for persons with disabilities to exercise their right to quality education, services and access to other services.

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### **About UNICEF:**

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 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.

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