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Children Out of Sight, Out of Mind, Out of Reach: UNICEF calls on partners to strengthen service delivery for all children

Cape Town, 6 February 2006 – Hundreds of millions of children are invisible to the world and are excluded from social services, birth registries, statistics and news as well as from child development programmes. This makes them much more vulnerable to suffering from neglect, severe abuse and exploitation.

UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2006 Report – launched to South African parliamentarians, non-governmental partners, media and the public today – argues that once children become invisible to families, communities, governments, social institutions and to other children, they are deprived of educational, healthcare and other vital services they need to grow and thrive.

Speaking at the launch of the report in Cape Town, Mr Macharia Kamau, Country Representative of UNICEF South Africa said that invisibility perpetuate the issue: it further excludes already vulnerable children, such as street children, child prostitutes or underage workers, from social life and adversely affects both their own wellbeing and when multiplied by thousands and millions, the long-term development of nations.

The UNICEF report calls for urgent national and cross-border measures to address the plight of children who are at risk due to being orphaned, poverty, HIV and AIDS, trafficking and discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity or disability. In many countries, both at national and provincial levels weak governance is also a key obstacle.

Said Kamau: "The 2006 report recommends key areas for action that will help us make children visible and involved. These are about building and sustaining the institutions and government structures that reach all children and provide the services they need. The key areas are: research, monitoring and reporting; legislation; financing and capacity building; and strengthening specific

MEDIA RELEASE

programmes that assist vulnerable children to access essential services – such as birth registration, child grants or educational subsidies.”

Significantly, the more the children participate in daily activities designed for them, the more they are protected from becoming invisible and being excluded.

In relation to South Africa, UNICEF recognises significant gains made during the last decade in building and providing protective environments for children. “In particular, legislative measures and educational, birth registration and social security interventions for children are helping to widen the safety net,” says Kamau.

According to President Thabo Mbeki’s State of the Nation address on 3 February 2006, 7 million South African children now receive child support grants, and the country’s Comprehensive HIV and AIDS Prevention, Treatment and Care Programme is one of the largest such programmes in the world.

However, poor service delivery, poverty and diseases including HIV and AIDS in particular continue to pose risks for the survival and wellbeing of South African children. In addition, lack of parental care and being forced into adult roles, including prostitution and other crime-related activities threaten the lives of many South African children.

The report sites examples of other issues that affect southern African children and youth: birth registration rates are clearly higher in urban areas. Conversely, child marriage rates (among women younger than 18 years) are higher in rural areas.

Some of these issues are identified by the South African children themselves. Prior to today’s launch, children’s support and advocacy organisation in Cape Town, Molosongololo, gathered a group of twenty teenage children (14-17 years old) and facilitated consultative meetings for them.

MEDIA RELEASE

The children identified issues that most affected them and their peers, including a marked increase in child abuse, exposure to inappropriate media content, child labour, lack of respect for children's rights and lack of child-friendly places, including health services.

"More and more of our friends are involved in gangsterism – young people rob older people in order to survive. They are also affected by the drug lords, who influence children's future and alter their view of life. They see it more and more as a money-making business," said the children during their presentation at the launch.

The report outlines concrete actions that can be taken by civil society, the private sector, donors and the media to help prevent children from falling between the cracks. These and other efforts by people and organisations at all levels of society help to build a protective environment for children – one that shelters children from abuse in the same way that immunisation and adequate nutrition protect them from disease.

Governments, families and communities must do more to prevent abuse and exploitation from happening in the first place and to protect children who fall victim to abuse. Laws that hold perpetrators of crimes against children accountable must be implemented and vigorously enforced; attitudes, traditions and practices that are harmful to children must be challenged; and children themselves must get the information and life skills they need to protect themselves.

"It is important that we improve the position of all children in society and particularly those children who are most vulnerable," urges Kamau. "There are measurable benefits to investing in care and services specifically designed for the most vulnerable children. If we fail children, society fails. UNICEF calls on all partners to act together to realise a more enabling and beautiful world for our most valuable and vulnerable citizens. By acting in partnership, South Africa will be recommitting itself to putting the liberty and development of the South African child first," said Kamau.

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MEDIA RELEASE

Notes for editors:

UNICEF's annual State of the World's Children report assists governments, educators and civil society institutions in introducing and strengthening policies aimed at the protection of children's rights and healthy development for children across the globe.

This year, the launch of the State of the World's Children report kicks off UNICEF's 60th anniversary. Visit www.unicef.org for full coverage of global launch activities and report text, broadcast video and audio and additional features.

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