Ukraine has undergone a period of profound transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Despite a deep recession in the late 1990s, the country’s economic growth between 2001 and 2008 – an average annual 7.5 per cent – was among the highest in Europe. Education and health indicators for children and adolescents continue to be the best in the Central and Eastern Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) region. Literacy is almost universal, and the net secondary enrolment ratio for both girls and boys was almost 85 per cent in 2009. The under-five mortality rate has continued to decline, from 21 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 15 per 1,000 in 2009.

Yet Ukraine remains one of the poorest countries in Eastern Europe and disparities are widening. As in other transition countries, large families, women and children are the most affected by poverty.

An urgent challenge is the continuing spread of the HIV epidemic and the particular vulnerability of adolescents to HIV infection and other risks. Ukraine has the highest HIV infection level in Europe, with an adult prevalence rate of 1.1 per cent. While injecting drug use remains the primary route of HIV transmission, sexual transmission is growing. Children and young people – particularly those living on the street, orphans, those in correctional facilities, and those in families or communities where drug use is common – constitute a group whose risk of contracting HIV is particularly high. A recent study indicates that young people account for a significant number of infections among injecting drug users in Ukraine as well as the CEE/CIS in general. Baseline research conducted among young people by UNICEF and partners shows that almost 15.5 per cent of those surveyed reported injecting drugs; almost three quarters had experienced sexual debut (most prior to age 15); roughly half of females reported receiving money, gifts or a reward for sexual intercourse; and condom use was low. Many Ukrainian adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 live in unsafe environments. Although official figures are lacking, a large number of most-at-risk adolescents live and work on the streets. This puts them in a particularly risky situation, vulnerable to sexual and labour exploitation and violence, as well as to HIV risk behaviour and infection. Additionally, many adolescents on the streets face a high level of exclusion from education, health care and legal and social services.

Addressing the increasing prevalence of the HIV epidemic and protecting adolescents has become a major concern for Ukraine. Collaborative efforts between the Government and partner agencies are under way. For instance, since 2007 UNICEF has provided assistance to the Government in building an evidence base on most-at-risk adolescents, strengthening the capacity of local research institutions and developing national norms and standards and evidence-based programming on HIV prevention for these young people.

The intervention also supported the integration of most-at-risk adolescents into the National AIDS Programme 2009–2013, which set a national coverage target of 60 per cent for at-risk groups (defined as “injecting drug users, orphans, homeless children, detained or incarcerated children, children from families in crisis, sex workers, men who have sex with men, migrants and other similar groups”). The 2006 State Programme on Homelessness and Neglect of Children also lays out the Government’s commitment to protecting children and adolescents and preventing drug abuse among the most-at-risk groups.

Ukraine still has much to do to address the critical needs and concerns of its young population and the HIV epidemic in general. Concerted efforts, including a comprehensive HIV and AIDS information, education and communication strategy at the national and sub-national levels, are needed to safeguard the rights of most-at-risk adolescent girls and boys and provide them with access to essential services and protection from violence, abuse and exploitation.

See References, page 78.