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**MAKING CHILD RIGHTS A REALITY FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN
CEE and CIS Regional Parliamentary Conference
14-16 June 2011, Yerevan, Armenia**

**ОБЕСПЕЧИМ ПРАВА НАИБОЛЕЕ УЯЗВИМЫХ ДЕТЕЙ
Региональная парламентская конференция стран ЦВЕ и СНГ
14-16 июня 2011, Ереван, Армения**

OUTCOME DOCUMENT

Rapporteur: Ms Lilit Galstian (MP, Armenia)

We, members of parliament from 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEECIS), gathered at a regional conference in Yerevan, Armenia, from 14 to 16 June, 2011, to discuss how parliaments can contribute to making child rights a reality for all children, in particular the most vulnerable.

Our debates focused on four main themes: (1) parliament's capacity to ensure respect for child rights; (2) early childhood development and the importance of preventing the institutionalization of young children (0-3 years); (3) violence against children and early childhood development; and (4) enforcement of international and regional instruments on children's rights.

1. Parliament's capacity to ensure respect for child rights

The cross-cutting theme of our conference was how to strengthen parliament's capacity to better respond to the needs and rights of children. This discussion falls within the framework of building the capacity of parliaments in general to fulfil their basic functions of legislating, overseeing the executive, passing the budget and representing their constituents. We all acknowledged that we face various challenges in fulfilling our mandates and that they need to be addressed. Having said that, we focused our attention on key areas and initiatives that can help us defend children's rights. We underscored in particular the need to develop our oversight capacity and develop mechanisms to achieve this objective.

Parliamentary structures on child rights

We discussed the importance of parliaments having specific mechanisms and structures to address child rights issues. Some parliaments have specific committees or sub-committees on children. These are mechanisms that serve to generate regular parliamentary debate, pay systematic attention to child rights issues, and provide effective oversight and concerted action.

Cross-party caucuses and children's rights working groups were also discussed. Such mechanisms can ensure broad support across the spectrum of political parties represented in Parliament; they can be formal or informal, although to ensure sustainability and support, formal structures are preferred.

More generally, we stressed that efforts are needed to place children's rights at the centre of all parliamentary work. If no specific structure exists, child rights concerns should be addressed by all committees. Efforts should also be made to mainstream children's rights into the budget process.



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NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA**



Ombudspersons

Parliaments can play a key role in setting up independent institutions, such as ombudspersons for children, to protect and promote children's rights. This is an important institution for children and parents insofar as it can be resorted to in order to ensure respect for children's rights. Furthermore, this office safeguards the best interests of the child and provides information to parliament – by way of reports and testimony - that is essential to monitor the implementation of adopted legislation. The independent annual reports produced by the ombudsperson are useful for parliament, as they include specific cases of child rights violations in the country, recommendations, and follow-up of recommendations made by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Partnerships

Respect for children's rights requires the involvement of all stakeholders. Partnerships and cooperation are essential for progress and serve to create a critical mass of actors who can demand improvements for the most vulnerable children and make their voices heard. There must be cooperation among parliamentarians and with governments, international organizations, law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, civil society, the media, families and children.

Regional and bilateral cooperation must also be encouraged. Furthermore, attention should be given to strengthening partnerships with sub-national and local government agencies.

It is necessary for parliamentarians to learn from each other, share experiences and best practices, coordinate efforts and support one another at the regional and international levels. Initiatives such as this conference serve as a useful vehicle. Other initiatives such as bilateral meetings, regular exchanges, virtual resources centres and access to comparative data should also be considered.

Child Participation

Child participation was highlighted as key to strengthening the work of parliament and defending children's rights. Parliaments need to be more proactive in terms of reaching out to children, listening to them and involving them in consultations in the context of parliamentary hearings, constituency visits and on-site enquiries.

Data

A lack of reliable, disaggregated, qualitative and quantitative data and information persists. Evidence is essential to argue for legislative, budgetary and other changes needed to improve the lot of children. To support our work as legislators, we must have access to comprehensive and up-to-date information.

2. Early childhood development and institutionalized children

Discussions focused on the critical importance of early childhood development policies, services and programmes.

Early childhood is the most important developmental phase in life. In particular, the period from preconception to eight years of age; the period birth to three years is the critically important for brain development. It is a period of immense vulnerability and opportunity, with the highest impact on a child's future. When children are healthy, well-nourished and cared for, when they have opportunities to develop their cognitive and language skills at an early age, and when they grow up in a protective environment, they are more likely to fulfil their potential and become active and productive members of society. Investment and intervention in the early years significantly mitigates the risks faced by poor and vulnerable children.

If children receive a good start in life, they are likely to:

- grow up to be healthy,
- build positive relationships,
- develop strong language and learning skills,
- go to and succeed in school, and
- lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Investment in early childhood development across the sectors, along with comprehensive policies that address parenting skills, health and nutrition services, community-based pre-school services, and family support services, yield both economic and social gains. Particularly in times of economic crisis, we affirm the need to shield early childhood development policies and programmes from budget cuts. Indeed, the return on every dollar invested is several-fold. Comprehensive policies that promote multi-sectoral collaboration and holistic services are needed to support young children and their families, especially those who are the most marginalized and vulnerable.

We also discussed the situation of institutionalized children and the need for urgent action in a region that has the highest rate in the world of children growing up in institutional settings. The total number of children in institutional care in the 22 countries or entities that make up CEE-CIS exceeds 626,000. The rate of children in institutional care in the CEE-CIS has, on average, been almost stagnant since 2000. But in 12 countries, this rate has *increased* between 2000 and 2007. This means that despite ongoing reforms, institutional care is becoming more frequent in more than half the countries in this region.

We noted that young children placed in residential care institutions get a very poor start in life in view of the damaging effect of such an environment on their health and psycho-social development. The negative impact on their physical and cognitive development, emotional security and attachment, cultural and personal identity and ability to develop skills can prove irreversible. Indeed, children who start behind stay behind.

The institutionalization of children under-three years of age should be prevented. It was agreed that efforts should focus on developing good quality and sustainable alternatives to institutional care, which will require a shift in government policies, budgets and legislation away from institutions towards in-home, family-like alternatives, including foster care and adoption, together with community support services.

In order to address the regional challenges and help create a protective and nurturing environment for all children, our discussions centred on a number of interventions that we as parliamentarians should pursue. They include:

- Legislative changes to avoid or turn to as a last resort under strict conditions the placement into institutional care of children under three years of age;
- Allocation of resources that give priority to the development of appropriate local services that provide alternative solutions for children in institutional care, with special attention given to the needs of children with disabilities;
- Adequate budget allocations for supporting vulnerable families through the development of appropriate family-based responses and services; and
- Ensuring that children with disabilities are integrated into society, particularly in schools.

In addition, we recognized that strategies linked to de-institutionalization should target health workers.

3. Violence against children and early childhood development

Neglect, abuse and violence in the early years can negatively affect childhood development and have life-long consequences. Children can be victims of violence as infants and of harsh physical discipline as toddlers. Research shows that violent discipline of children is highly prevalent in our region. We need to commit to ending these practices and attitudes.

Child protection interventions and parenting education and counselling can lead to a culture and mindset that values and invests in the early years, has zero tolerance for violence or the institutionalization of young children, and establishes norms that protect and promote children's rights not only in the early years but throughout the life cycle.

Ending violence against children and violence among children requires strong legislation and the development of prevention and response programmes and policies as well as the allocation of adequate resources.

We discussed the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. This Convention is a comprehensive treaty that contains a vast array of measures required to prevent sexual violence, protect children and end the impunity of perpetrators. We need to discuss this Convention in our parliaments with a view to ratification. We also heard about the Council of Europe ONE in FIVE Campaign to stop sexual violence against children and should consider contributing actively to this initiative.

4. International and regional standards

There are a number of legal instruments and human rights mechanisms that help provide a protective environment for children, notably the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption. As members of parliament, we need to make sure that our country is party to the main international and regional instruments on the protection of children's rights.

We should also verify the status and quality of country reports submitted to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, provide input to these reports through public hearings, parliamentary debates and other parliamentary mechanisms, take part in the constructive dialogue with the Committee and discuss follow-up of the concluding observations and hold our governments to account.

Conclusion

The following recommendations came out of the debates which we pledge to follow up as a priority:

1. Strengthen or develop specific parliamentary mechanisms to address children's rights and ensure their sustainability, and support the establishment and functioning of an ombudsperson for children;
2. Invest in early childhood development as a priority, prevent the institutionalization of children between birth and 3 years and invest in quality alternative care and support;
3. Scale up action to put an end to violence against children and violence among children, paying particular attention to violence against young children;
4. Enhance parliaments' involvement in the implementation of international child rights instruments and UN treaty reporting processes; and
5. Champion children's rights throughout legislative work and build partnerships, including with children, to make child rights a reality for all.

In conclusion, we reiterate our commitment to advance the rights of the child, in particular, making child rights a reality for the most vulnerable.