

PRESS RELEASE

THE VOICE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Participation of children and youth in democratic processes

Belgrade, 27th October 2009 – As part of the activities organized to mark the UN Week in Serbia and the twentieth anniversary of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, children and youth from five municipalities, peer teams members of the Local Plans of Action for Children and the “School without Violence” programme, visited the National Assembly and its Parliamentary Working Group on the Rights of the Child.

The United Nations have, over the years, developed a strong cooperation with the National Assembly. UNDP supports the work of a number of poverty reduction-related standing committees with the aim of strengthening the legislative and oversight functions, while UNICEF supports the work of the Assembly so that it makes a quality contribution to the achievement of the rights the child.

An open dialogue between children and youth from Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Pirot, Prokuplje and Becej, and the national deputies was chaired by the Parliament Speaker and Chairwoman of the Parliamentary Working Group on the Rights of the Child, Mrs. Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic. UNICEF’s Area Representative, Mrs. Judita Reichenberg, played an active role in this dialogue where children were given the opportunity to highlight what they perceived as the most important issues related to the achievement of their rights.

“The Parliamentary Working Group on the Rights of the Child is, just like you, a part of a team that is advocating and actively working on creating in each town and each municipality a non-violent and encouraging environment – an environment fit for each child and each young person – in which everybody, without any difference and exceptions will be able to exercise their rights. This is one of the reasons why this Working Group must be institutionalized and thus regulated by the upcoming Law on the National Assembly and the new parliamentary Rules of Procedure,” said Parliamentary Speaker, Djukic-Dejanovic while addressing the children.

During this open dialogue between the children and the deputies, it was pointed out that active participation of children and youth in all segments of decision-making that impact on their lives is of essential importance for the further shaping of our democratic culture in a way that responds to children’s wellbeing.

“The right of each child to be listened to and taken seriously represents one of the strategic principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. It is essentially linked with democratic values – the democratic concept of family, school, local community and the society at large. By fighting for more space for children, adults themselves learns to accept children as full-fledged partners in the building of a democratic community,” UNICEF Area Representative Judita Reichenberg pointed out.

“This is my place – my place is here” is the name of the advocacy action implemented by the youth and children from the Prokuplje Local Plan of Action team: “While we were advocating for children and youth to have their space for play and sports, we managed to raise the awareness of youth that they can make change, particularly when cooperating with adults. This is why we are not asking for your assistance here today, but for your cooperation,” Aleksandra Djordjevic from Prokuplje said to the deputies.

The meeting resulted in a joint position that capabilities and experiences of children, including those from excluded groups such as children with disabilities, from poor backgrounds or from ethnic minorities, are frequently under-estimated. It is of essential importance that the attitudes of adults change, that they learn

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to listen, learn to respect children's opinions and to give them true space for participation. The Parliamentary Working Group on the Rights of the Child has undertaken to engage more actively in experience-exchange and dialogue with children and youth so as to secure that the voice of children is heard in this highest decision-making body in Serbia.

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