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Statement by Mr. Olli Saarela, Minister of Education, Youth
Division, Republic of Finland

11/08/1998

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Mr/Madam President
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finland is a state far up in the north of Europe; it is characterised by an open society, pronounced emphasis on equal opportunities, a multi-party system, extensive public welfare services and an advanced civil society with a great number of civic organisations.

With growing international cooperation, Finland, like so many other countries, is becoming increasingly open to different international trends and influences. Finland has taken initiative for "a northern dimension in the European Union policies". The aim is to promote stability, security, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and welfare. In the youth sector, this means developing human resources.

In Finland, youth work is governed by detailed legislation. The values underpinning the Youth Work Act are equality between generations, the genders and different regions in Finland as well as sustainable development in the exploitation of nature. The Ministry of Education is responsible for coordinating the measures taken by the central government to improve young people's living conditions.

Youth policy is sometimes seen as mere leisure policy. But it is a much larger concept. Youth policy forms part of the larger entity of social policy, which means that authorities in the different sectors must tackle youth policy issues together, at the same table. This was the overriding conclusion we drew from the findings of the review of national youth policy carried out by the Council of Europe.

Another major change is that youth work is now more responsive to young people's own needs and preferences, which are reviewed by means of research and consultations with organisations representing young people.

One objective in our national youth policy is to enable young people to grow up in a safe environment into fully-fledged citizens and to empower them to use their talents and skills to their full potential.

Unfortunately, there are young girls and boys in all societies whose life is marked by an inability to control their lives. Thus one important aim of youth policy is to reach out to those young people who - for one reason or another - find themselves in a particularly difficult life situation.

The reason for such inadequate life management may be, for instance, poverty or lack of safe and solid relationships. It appears that general and equitable measures to improve the living conditions of the young population as a whole are not sufficient to solve these problems. There is a constant need to provide individual survival skills and tools for young people who find themselves in a predicament. In developing such tools, authorities must heed young people's own opinions and ideas. It is equally important to make sure that society has access to relevant information about young people and that this information is also used in

decision-making concerning young people and their lives.

The third important aim in youth policy concerns young people's participation in, and integration into, society. Working in youth organisations, young people acquire vital skills they need to look after their interests in a democratic society. Young people and their organisations are equal partners in the social debate. We have to take care that our own lack of concern does not drive young people to extremist movements which resort to violent means.

We have every reason to be optimistic about our possibilities to improve young people's living conditions, if we are prepared to take determined action. One area where good results can be achieved is young people's health. Young people constitute a key target group in health policy. Health habits formed during childhood and youth are decisive for later life styles. For instance, Finland has good experiences from measures taken to prevent teen pregnancies and abortions. There are many reasons for this positive development. One is that in the 1980s we made a concerted effort to increase human relations education and sex education at school. At the same time we took measures to promote research into young people's sexuality and relevant education and information.

Dear Colleagues,

Integrated and coordinated youth policy has a fair chance of success when people working in different sectors tackle youth policy questions together. There is work waiting to be done. It is waiting for our joint input.

Thank you

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