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Statement of the Children's Rights Alliance on *Beyond the Pale: Asylum-Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*

The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes the Irish Refugee Council's report *Beyond the Pale* which documents the lives of dispersed asylum-seeking children living under the government's 'direct provision' policy.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that all children have a range of basic rights, including the right "to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" and access "to appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim." The Convention also provides that refugee and asylum-seeking children are entitled to receive "appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance" from the government of the country in which they reside.

In contrast with these rights and obligations are the circumstances and conditions of life actually experienced by asylum-seeking children in Ireland. *Beyond the Pale* examines in detail the present system of 'direct provision'. The report identifies a wide range of inadequacies and calls for a series of reforms to be undertaken.

In light of the report's findings and recommendations, the Children's Rights Alliance urges immediate action be taken to correct these rights violations by ending material deprivation and social exclusion among asylum-seeking children and by ensuring that their basic rights be respected and realised.

According to the report, the integration, social and educational development of asylum-seeking children has been hindered by the lack of access to affordable pre-school education, language classes and after-school clubs and activities. Their sense of social isolation has been compounded by experiences of racism and policies which provide for their being housed "apart from the majority community without the social and material support structures to interact with the native population".

The long term housing of children in hostels represents a form of extreme deprivation. *Beyond the Pale* documents how living in overcrowded and confined space with little or no access to play and recreational facilities has had a negative impact on the well-being of asylum-seeking children. The right of all children to play and recreational facilities, guaranteed under the UN Convention, has been identified as a priority issue by the National Children's Strategy. The Children's Rights Alliance urges that attention be paid to the specific needs of asylum-seeking children in the development of the National Play and Recreation Policy.

The report includes information drawn from interviews with asylum seekers which suggests that the lack of control in relation to diet under the 'direct provision' policy has adversely affected the health of asylum-seeking children. Interviewees said that inadequate and inappropriate diet coupled with the lack of resources to supplement this diet has led to weight loss among children and ill health among babies; and that pregnant women have suffered from malnutrition and adults have experienced hunger as a result of 'within household rationing' in an effort to provide for the needs of children and babies. These findings are particularly worrying when seen in light of a recent study which found significantly higher mortality rates for newborn babies of asylum-seeking and refugee mothers than among infants born to Irish mothers (Lalchandani et al. (2001)).

Beyond the Pale details the discrimination in welfare assistance inherent in the 'direct provision' policy. The Children's Rights Alliance urges the government to ensure that asylum-seeking children enjoy the same basic rights as other children living in Ireland, in line with the principle of non-discrimination outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of 67 non-governmental organisations concerned with meeting the needs and safeguarding the rights of children in Ireland. The Alliance works to secure the full implementation in Ireland of the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

References:

Fanning, B., Veale, A. and O'Connor, D. (2001) *Beyond the Pale: Asylum-Seeking Children and Social Exclusion in Ireland*, Irish Refugee Council: Dublin.

Lalchandani S., MacQuillar K. and Sheil, O. (2001) 'Obstetric profiles and pregnancy outcomes of immigrant women with refugee status' in *Irish Medical Journal*, Vol. 94, No. 3.