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**From Oppression to Empowerment: the Youth of Ukraine Taking the
Lead in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals**

Dear Colleagues,

Today I would like to share with you Ukraine's experience in our journey from oppression to empowerment. Ukraine gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the years of the Soviet rule important features of our lives that defined us as Ukrainians were suppressed. The general thinking pattern was that of looking up to authority and never daring to make our own decisions for ourselves before the Big Brother approved of them. It is with sadness that we have observed the preservation of this pattern in many spheres of life, most sadly in education. Young people are afraid to be different, to be proactive, to initiate change.

The United Nations in Ukraine, where I work as the Focal Point for Youth, has always been involving young people into its programs. In the Chernobyl Development Program youth centers were created, where young people created small business initiatives and social mobilization campaigns. UNHCR concentrated on the education of youth refugees in its work with refugees.

Many other programs involved youth, and as a result we decided to hold a massive event bringing youth leaders of all kinds together: youth leaders of international youth NGOs, youth leaders of minority groups, youth refugee leaders, leaders of visually impaired young people and many others. The Millennium Development Goals were chosen as the theme for the Summit, where young people were asked to create their recommendations to the Government of Ukraine as to how the MDGs can best be achieved in Ukraine. This Summit was held in October 2002. The Summit was a major success. It gave the young people a feeling of being a part of Ukrainian society, a feeling of being listened to and being heard. It also gave them the feeling of being a part of international community, and made them feel the ownership of the MDGs. After the Summit the young people went back to their hometowns and villages and presented their recommendations to their

local governments. Some mayors were so impressed that they invited the young people to form a Youth advisory board in their city. Also, an All-Ukrainian MDG-network was created in order for the young people to jointly plan and implement projects aimed at achieving the MDGs. Some examples of the ripple-effect are that a school in Ivano-Frankivsk region did not get closed because its students, participants of the Summit, wrote a joint massive petition to the Oblast (regional) administration, and the fact that they were a member of a UN youth network convinced the authorities that they should not close the school. Young people were realizing the power they had, the power they had as young people, the power they had when they voiced their opinion, the power they had when they joined hands and acted together. This was becoming a major shift in the thinking paradigm.

This year the 2nd All-Ukrainian UN Youth Summit took place. However, this year the young people did not write their recommendations to the government, but rather decided to create their own Action plans – real projects they committed to implementing. Based on last year's experience, young people understood that, if they want to see change the soonest possible, they should rely only on themselves. Some of the projects involve a Music-studio for visually impaired youth, introducing a children's rights course in middle-schools of Rivne, conducting Sexual health HIV/AIDS awareness workshops among the students or the minors' shelters and many others.

It is interesting to mention that Ukraine's Youth Initiative on achieving the Goals caused an international wave of youth MDG initiatives – Swedish and Norwegian participants of Ukrainian Youth Summits initiated similar Summits in Sweden and Norway. The Swedish Summit took place this August, the Norwegian one will take place in January 2004.

This is the change from oppression to empowerment we are seeing in Ukraine. How 16th century Ukrainian philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda used to say "To each city – its own rights, to each person – his/her own choice". This expression, which might seem so natural to many people in many countries, is regaining meaning in Ukraine after many years of oppression. And it is with pleasure that I would like to stress that the United Nations in Ukraine and the youth of Ukraine make up the driving force of this journey from oppression to empowerment.