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PRESS RELEASE

Why are there no chances for Latvians with intellectual disabilities to lead an independent life?

Riga and Budapest – 13 December 2005 – Latvian legislation, policy and practice still offer too few chances to people with intellectual disabilities (whose learning ability is significantly lower than average) to access education and employment. Although the numbers of children with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream schools are rising, the vast majority still attend special schools. Due to the complete lack of suitable, targeted employment programmes or initiatives, practically all people with intellectual disabilities have no work. They therefore have no chance of leading an independent life and are forced to rely on State benefits.

These are the main findings of the monitoring report *Rights of people with intellectual disabilities: access to education and employment in Latvia* released today. The report, produced by the Open Society Institute in cooperation with the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, calls upon the Latvian Government to take steps to ensure that the situation of people with intellectual disabilities in Latvia improves, not only in law but also in practice. The report includes 27 concrete recommendations to policy makers.

To date, the Government has not addressed the specific needs of people with intellectual disabilities in the labour market and, as a result, almost none can find employment. In Latvia, there is no quota system for people with disabilities and no government incentives to encourage the employment of people with – specifically – intellectual disabilities.

The most important way in which unemployed people with disabilities gain access to employment in Latvia is through active employment measures provided by the State Employment Agency (SEA) – in particular subsidised employment programmes. However, few people with intellectual disabilities have the necessary training or professional education required for eligibility for such programmes. In addition, contrary to international best practice, most are still being assessed by the State Medical Commission as having *no* working capacity. This means that they cannot register as unemployed and gain access to the SEA employment services.

Supported employment is internationally recognised as the most important way in which people with intellectual disabilities can access employment. It offers them the opportunity to work on the open market with the help of day-to-day support and coaching. However, in Latvia, there is no legal framework for supported employment. Since 2000, the NGO Rupju Berns operating in Riga and Tukums has provided the only supported employment programme in Latvia for people with intellectual disabilities. By 2003, a total of 28 people with intellectual disabilities were employed in supported workplaces through this programme. One of the main employers involved in this project, McDonalds in Latvia, has reported a positive experience in employing people with intellectual disabilities.

The OSI reports calls on the government, as a priority, to define supported employment in law and put in place all necessary legislation to promote supported employment programmes throughout the country. It also calls on the government to provide adequate funding to employment agencies providing supported employment services, and to also ensure that EU structural funds are also used for this purpose.

By contrast with the discouraging employment situation of people with intellectual disabilities in Latvia, there are signs of some improvements with respect to the access to education of children and young people with intellectual disabilities. However, despite this tendency, far too few children with intellectual disabilities in Latvia are able to receive education in an integrated environment. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, in 2004-2005 there were only 360 children with intellectual disabilities attending mainstream schools, as opposed to 5,574 children with intellectual disabilities attending a special school.

There are many instances of good practices in Latvia, where schools have successfully integrated children with intellectual disabilities. But these examples must now be replicated more widely, on the national level, if real progress is to be made. Main barriers include inadequate funding for special classes in mainstream schools and lack of adequate support services, in particular support teachers and classroom assistants.

The OSI report urges the Government to develop a clear policy on improving access to inclusive education for children with intellectual disabilities, and to provide dedicated funding in support of this policy. It also calls for additional funding to be provided to support teachers in mainstream schools teaching children with intellectual disabilities. To adequately prepare young children with intellectual disabilities for enrolment in a mainstream school, the report also calls for early intervention services to be made available across the country.

Finally, in Latvia a relatively high number of children with intellectual disabilities still remain outside the educational system. In 2002–2003, over 1,400 children received home schooling, but there is no official data on the number of children with intellectual disabilities included in this total. The OSI report urges the Ministry of Education and Science to regularly collect data on home-schooled children, to ensure that children with intellectual disabilities – particularly those in rural areas – are not losing out on their chance for receiving an education alongside their peers.

Note to editors

This report is part of a series of 14 country monitoring reports monitoring “Access to Education and Employment for People with Intellectual Disabilities” throughout Europe. The reports were prepared by EUMAP, the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program of the Open Society Institute, in cooperation with the Open Society Mental Health Initiative. All reports are available online at <http://www.eumap.org>. More information on the Open Society Institute is available at <http://www.soros.org>.

The Latvia report was prepared in cooperation with the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies (LCHRES). LCHRES is an NGO that has been operating since 1993 with a view to promoting human rights and tolerance in Latvia through monitoring, research, advocacy, legal assistance and training activities. Since 1998, LCHRES has been a member of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. More information about the LCHRES is available at <http://www.humanrights.org.lv>.