Launch of an assessment of mental health care for unaccompanied refugee children in Greece

UNICEF holds a discussion around the main findings of an assessment on the mental health, psychosocial needs and services for unaccompanied refugee children in Greece

ATHENS, 19 October 2017 – UNICEF, in partnership with the Institute of Child Health and supported by the European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme, launched today a Rapid Assessment of Mental Health and Psychosocial Needs and Services for unaccompanied children (UACs) in Greece. Conducted between April and July 2017, the research aims at identifying gaps in the response, documenting good practices and generating recommendations.

"Unaccompanied refugee children are particularly vulnerable in this crisis. Their experience of violence in conflict affected countries, during their journey, combined with an uncertain future in Greece, can impact their mental health. Measures to improve their access to mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services are critical to help them recover from their ordeal," said Laurent Chapuis, UNICEF Country Coordinator for the Refugee and Migrant Response.

The findings reveal that in terms of strictly defined and severe psychiatric disorders, cases among unaccompanied children in Greece were relatively low. Those affected by mental health issues suffered primarily from mild to moderate conditions. However there is a vast variety of psychosocial issues reported often related with the current state of conditions for unaccompanied children, which in several occasions led to challenging behaviours. Moreover, there was considerable reporting of worrying early psychopathological signs of unaccompanied children which in due course might give rise to more severe mental health issues, particularly in this vulnerable child population. The assessment also found that the majority of mental health services for children and adolescents in Greece (not exclusively for UAC) is concentrated in Athens and Thessaloniki. UAC outside these areas, namely the Northern Aegean islands, Crete, and border areas, have very limited access to specialized services.

“It is evident that greater investment must be made in primary, secondary and tertiary prevention including early detection, treatment and follow-up of mental health and psychosocial symptoms in order to prevent longer term effects.” stressed George Nikolaidis, Director of the Institute of Health.

The main recommendations of the report include the following: establish community-based care options; raise awareness of mental health issues with UAC; promote early detection and identification; strengthen trust between UAC and caregivers; address key triggers; and improve opportunities for structured learning and social inclusion. The development of a standardized and comprehensive referral system was also highlighted as a necessary step for tackling mental health or behavioral issues.

UNICEF promotes the rights and wellbeing of every child, in everything we do. Together with our partners, we work in 190 countries and territories to translate that commitment into practical action, focusing special effort on reaching the most vulnerable and excluded children, to the benefit of all children, everywhere.

For more information about UNICEF and its work for children visit www.unicef.org.
"Protecting the most vulnerable children such as those with mental health problems is a priority for our targeted actions and partnerships with key actors," stressed the President of the Hellenic National Committee for UNICEF, Sofia Tzitzikou.

Lastly, the research emphasizes the importance of delivering mental health services for UAC, as part of a comprehensive response that addresses all children’s needs, potential, rights and wishes, recognizing the important contribution of their own participation.

The assessment was carried out in the framework of the project "Support for Child Protection System Strengthening in Greece 2016/17 - Increased Availability and Accessibility of Data on the Realisation of Rights of Refugee and Migrant Children And Robust Accountability Mechanisms for Child Protection" co-financed by the European Union. The main objective of the project is to narrow the gap in research, statistics and data through targeted data collection and research efforts, aiming to understand risks faced by children in a situation of migration or seeking international protection including undocumented or stateless children, children in detention and unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) - towards evidence-informed decision-making and advocacy in support of protection of and quality inclusive services for Refugee and Migrant Children.

Note to Editors:

UNICEF’s GLOBAL POLICY ASKS FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

1. Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence
2. End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating
3. Keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status
4. Keep all refugee and migrant children learning and give them access to health and other quality services
5. Press for action on the underlying causes of large scale movements of refugees and migrants
6. Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination

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