

Sharing Good Practices on Working with Refugee and Migrant Children
WEBINAR SUMMARY
23 Nov 2016

I. Experts:

Vahida Hujzerović works for the Slovene Philanthropy in Slovenia, coordinating the project of psychosocial assistance to children refugees and their families accommodated in the asylum centers in Slovenia.

Elena Vilarova Velkovska works as a National Officer in Child Protection in Emergency for UNICEF in FYRO Macedonia, contributing to scaling up child protection components of emergency response programs.

Moderator:

Stephanie Delaney is a social worker and service manager, with substantial experience working directly with children and families at risk

II. Content:

Mrs. Velkovska started by presenting some key aspects of UNICEF's work in Macedonia, which focuses mostly on:

1. providing child protection through child friendly spaces and psychological support;
2. ensuring education through education activities;
3. WASH: granting access to water and sanitation in transit centers and distributing public health information;
4. NFI (Non-food Items): distributing season-appropriate supplies, such as blankets, summer and winter clothes, baby clothes;
5. Communication: doing advocacy and awareness raising to ensure that children are seen as children's first and their rights are respected wherever they might be on their way.

At the moment, the expert emphasized, around one fifth of all uprooted children currently live in Europe and many have passed through Macedonia or more broadly the Balkan Route crossing to Western Europe.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses that all children have to be protected. Child protection entails promoting children's wellbeing and ensuring their survival, right to education and socio-economic development. The main aim is to prevent all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect by strengthening governmental commitment and capacity to fulfil children's right to protection.

Children on the move are most at risks from violence and abuse. In the Balkan region, none of the countries were prepared for large scale migration and actors were forced to learn by doing. At the beginning, there was a lack of coordination among actors and of standard operational procedures.

The expert emphasized that, during the highest flow through Balkan route, identification and registration of unaccompanied children was very difficult due to the lack of coordination between the Greek and Macedonian border authorities as well as the absence of appropriate identification documents. As a result, only one third of migrants entering Macedonia were registered in the end.

On July 20, 2015, with the help of UNICEF and UNHCR and other NGOs, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Legal Socialization Program worked together to develop standard operating procedure (SOP) on work with Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UNASC).

At the same time, 12 institutional guardians were established for all children in safe houses as well as transit countries around Macedonia.

The standards have been great and continue to be implemented:

- A. SOP 1: Identification and referral: initial contact with the UNASC and his/her referral, preliminary information gathering, identification of UNASC and appointing a guardian, interviewing a UNASC;
- B. SOP 2: Care and Initial Assistance: initial risk assessment, medical examination, accommodation and needs assessment;
- C. SOP 3: Regulating the stay: notifying the legal counseling on how to regulate their stay;
- D. SOP 4: Family reunification/return: family identification, risk assessment regarding family unification, locating the family and informing them, preparation for family reunification.
- E. SOP 5: Local integration/long-term assistance: long-term assistance plan, guardianship, care and accommodation, healthcare and education;
- F. SOP 6: Criminal Procedure: protecting the UNASC rights if they are a defendant, witness or victim.

UNICEF supported children on the move by providing child friendly spaces in two transit zones, to ensure that children feel safe. When in March 2016, the border was closed, there was a need to adapt the organization's activities toward support in the country and integration.

UNICEF started as good practice the creation of a short curriculum for refugee and migrant children for the pre-integration phase in society, as some of the children had been out of school for more than two years and couldn't even write their names. The organization held a meeting between the Ministry of Labor and Education, in order to adopt the pre-curriculum, which has been a successful program. It has led to changes in the behavior of parents and children. The parents have become involved in the children's school work, while the children already speak Macedonian language, with the next stages being integration.

After re-emphasizing some of Mrs. Velkovska's main points, Mrs. Delaney passed the floor to Mrs. Hujzerović, who works with one of the oldest and most experienced Slovenian nonprofits on migrant and refugee children.

The NGO focuses on promoting volunteering, helping migrants, intergenerational cooperation, promotion of health, international and development cooperation.

The migration program has been implemented since 1992, as a response to the Balkan conflict and refugee and refugee crisis. Since May 2016, the organization has been providing psychosocial assistance to asylum seekers in asylum centered, through a program funded by UNICEF.

Mrs. Hujzerović emphasized that her nonprofit's main responses to the recent refugee wave has been:

- a. volunteer bank development;
- b. call line operating 15h a day, receiving and registering volunteers;
- c. matching volunteers with needs in the field on the border to a human element;
- d. psychosocial activities for children and parents in the transit centers;
- e. public awareness raising to create a more accepting environment for refugees and migrants.

As a result of the nonprofit's work, more than 1500 volunteers have registered in the volunteer bank. Many of them have acquired experience engaging with refugees and continued working with refugees after the influx stopped in March 2016. At the same time, the organization has managed to influence the Administration for Civil Protection and Disaster Relief to more willingly accept collaborating with civil society.

After the borders were closed, the focus of the Slovenian organization shifted toward asylum centers to help through a human rights-based approach refugees settle, improve their wellbeing and integration in society. The



nonprofit provides psychosocial assistance to children in asylum centers and access to health services to adult refugees, while also ensuring awareness raising and advocacy.

The psychosocial services provided are aimed at helping children aged 3-18 and their families as well as unaccompanied minors and separated children. The organization usually helps around 60 children/month, 20 percent of whom are unaccompanied minors, mostly boys from Afghanistan, Algeria, Morocco, Iraq and Iran.

The aim of the program is to bring sense of normality and safety to these families and children, while providing the latter support to better cope and overcome their traumas and helping them develop skills needed for an independent life. They also aim to foster their integration and bring in protective factors in the children's life to break the chain of negative experiences, while ultimately developing a model of services for children and finding long-term solutions in addressing their needs.

In terms of challenges, Mrs. Hujzerović emphasized the fluctuation of migrants, which makes it different when starting new programs. At the same time, the language and translation barriers can impede adequate communication as well as the difficulty to coordinate all stakeholders.

At the end, Mrs. Delaney asked the presenters some questions and comments of her own and some coming from the webinar participants.