

Press Release

## Network of European Ombudspersons, child rights experts and NGOs call for action to include excluded refugee and migrant children

Athens, 15 November 2017 – European Governments need to take concrete steps to protect children uprooted from violence and exclusion, according to representatives of 23 Independent Children’s Rights Institutions from Council of Europe Member States, who met in Athens, Greece, to review progress and identify challenges for protecting refugee and migrant children across Europe.

Concern was raised at the two-day meeting of international child rights experts, governments and international civil societies that key obstacles – such as legal barriers, access to education and accommodation – stand in the way of integrating refugee and migrant children into society and ultimately lead to their marginalization and neglect. The joint recommendations from the meeting entitled *“Safeguarding and protecting the rights of children on the move: The challenge of social inclusion”* co-hosted by the Greek Ombudsman, the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) and UNICEF, stated: “European States have a key duty to ensure and protect the rights of all children in their respective jurisdiction, regardless of their legal status. Children on the Move should benefit from comprehensive efforts to ensure the protection and enjoyment of their rights and social inclusion, across Europe.”

“For children who travel unaccompanied or separated from their families, violence infuses daily life,” stated Marta Santos Pais, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, who was one of the keynote speakers. “It is urgent to transform this vicious cycle of abuse and exploitation into a virtuous cycle of protecting children’s rights.” Ms. Santos Pais underlined the central role of independent child rights institutions in this effort: “Ombudspersons for Children play a critical role in safeguarding children’s best interests at all times. They help states promote policy decisions that are informed by children’s voices and experiences, and monitor progress in children’s safety and wellbeing.”

“If all the different bodies involved could work as one unit for the common cause of children uprooted and their needs, existing gaps in the system can be better identified, solutions can be found and best practices can be more effectively shared. This in turn can benefit the well-being of all children, not just refugee and migrant children.” noted Mr. Georgos Moschos, the Greek Deputy Ombudsman for the Rights of the Child. Mr. Moschos added that positive efforts at social inclusion in Greece, such as the enrollment of refugee children in formal education, should be redoubled urgently by all authorities.

“Beyond immediate reception, legal reforms allowing refugee and migrant children to effectively access social services and promote their integration need to be ramped up,” underlined Laurent Chapuis, Country Coordinator of UNICEF’s Refugee and Migrant Response in Greece. “The role of the Ombudspersons in holding duty bearers accountable to implement children’s rights to protection, health and education in particular, is pivotal and that is why UNICEF has a strong partnership with the Greek Ombudsman.”

In her statement, Margaret Tuite, the European Commission Coordinator of the Rights of the Child highlighted that integration is a long-term process which could lead to stigma if not done correctly or could benefit the society if done right. That is why “we all instinctively recognize the value of inclusive

education in this regard.” Ms. Tuite also expressed her gratitude towards the Ombudspersons and ENOC for maintaining a focus on children on the move and for providing a concrete child rights-based overview of the situation on the ground

*The regional meeting was supported by UNICEF through funding from the European Commission’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme as part of a broader partnership between UNICEF and the Greek Deputy Ombudsman for Children to strengthen child rights monitoring and evidence-based advocacy for children on the move in Greece. For the full recommendations and the background report of the meeting, please go to: <http://bit.ly/ENOCRegionalMeetingRecommendations>*

*Note to editors:* UNICEF continues to call on governments to adopt its six-point agenda for action to protect migrant and refugee children and ensure their wellbeing:

1. Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence;
2. End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating, by introducing a range of practical alternatives;
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.

#### About UNICEF

UNICEF works in some of the world’s toughest places, to reach the world’s most disadvantaged children. Across 190 countries and territories, we work for every child, everywhere, to build a better world for everyone.

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For more information, please contact:

Olga Siokou –Siova, UNICEF Refugee and Migrant Response in Greece, +30 211 2340 297, [osiokou-siova@unicef.org](mailto:osiokou-siova@unicef.org)

Sarah Crowe, UNICEF Geneva, +41 79 543 80 29 [scrowe@unicef.org](mailto:scrowe@unicef.org)

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