
Building our Future with Children and Youth on the Move in Greece

Recommendations from participants in the expert convening in Athens, 8 March 2019



On 8 March 2019, key actors from 36 different Greek civil society organisations (CSOs), youth advocates, Greek government agencies and private foundations came together in Athens for the expert convening: **“Building our Future with Children and Youth on the Move in Greece”**, organised by the [European Programme for Integration and Migration \(EPIM\)](#). The convening aimed to explore the continued needs and opportunities for migrant children and youth to establish a future in Greece, and to share good practices and recommendations regarding their protection, identification and inclusion.

Throughout the day, the discussions among the 50 participants touched on a range of issues. **Those highlighted in this report constitute the cross-cutting reflections, key messages and recommendations that participants shared during the convening**, which they directed to practitioners, advocates, government agencies and private funders with the aim to ensure a future for children and youth on the move in Greece.

In summary, these recommendations are:

- i. **Invest in the quality of long-term care schemes**, mainly by developing and financially sustaining alternative care schemes, which include foster family care for younger children, and implementing semi-independent living schemes for youth.
- ii. Ensure the **timely implementation of the new guardianship law** which addresses the know-how and lessons learned from CSOs currently running guardianship programmes.
- iii. Adopt an inclusive **gender-sensitive approach** to care and establish legal pathways that protect those who report violent incidents.
- iv. Support youth in the **transition to adulthood** by including this group in continued care projects and facilitating pathways to education, training and employment after 18.
- v. **Provide mental health support integrated in all levels of services** for children, youth as well as guardians, social workers, interpreters, and all actors working with children.
- vi. Strengthen **collaborative networks between civil society, advocates and government actors** to address cross-cutting challenges and share information on latest developments.

I. Strengthening a high-quality standard across various models of care

EKKA¹ reported that **of 3,773 identified unaccompanied and separated children, 620 are reported homeless**. An ongoing point of concern is the number of children in detention (so-called “protective custody”) which remains high. Additionally, 718 children are residing in reception and identification centres, including many that are in poor condition on the hotspots in Samos and Lesvos. Many others live in temporary accommodation in safe zones or hotels² which participants note can be highly problematic for the safety of children and youth.

In this context, the need to strengthen quality long-term accommodation and alternative care options which are individualised, community-based, holistic, safe and empowering for children is highlighted by participants, including **expanding foster family care and semi-independent living (SIL) schemes**. Within care institutions, participants mention that the quality should be improved while acknowledging that **institutional care is always harmful**³ and cannot replace individualised quality alternative care. Within the context of larger care settings, practitioners identify the good practice of creating smaller groups of children who are attached to one care giver, to ensure some form of individualised approach. Overall, there is a need to ensure a **relationship of trust** wherein caretakers and children and youth are equally involved in decisions.

Participants strongly recommend to fellow practitioners to pursue a focus on strengthening foster family care and semi-independent living schemes, based on recent legislative developments⁴:

- Practitioners support placing **young children in foster family care** which they note are very therapeutic for this age group and encourages bonding between the child and the foster family, while also noticing the risk of dropout of families linked to burnout and to the uncertainty of the length of stay of the child in Greece. Since foster care is not yet well-known in Greece compared to other countries, there is a need for general awareness-raising on the issue. At the moment there are 30 places in a [foster care scheme run by METAdrasi](#).
- The [semi-independent living scheme](#) (SIL) was started 1.5 years ago as a pilot project by METAdrasi with the support of UNICEF and Developmental Agency of Heraklion with the support of UNHCR and currently has 20 places. Praxis has recently created 2 SIL apartments for 6 children. The learnings from the implementation of this scheme indicate that the model is especially suitable for **youth in the transition to autonomy and adulthood** with some level of independence, starting from around 17 years old, who may adjust better to semi-independent living accommodation. Learnings also suggest that **the model operates better in larger cities** and requires training of practitioners and a comprehensive identification system.

Participants highly recommend to authorities to improve the policy and practice of age assessment which currently threatens the adequate protection in care of children and youth given the number of incorrect assessments made.⁵ Participants pointed to **favouring a non-intrusive psychosocial assessment**, rather than medical tests.

¹ EKKA, the National Centre for Social Solidarity, is the competent authority for the protection and support of vulnerable individuals, including for migrant children and youth travelling without a guardian. For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/knowledge4policy/organisation/ekka-national-center-social-solidarity_en

² [Defined by EKKA](#), “Safe Zones are designated supervised spaces within accommodation sites which provide UAC with 24/7 emergency protection and care. They should be used as short term (maximum 3 months) measures to care for UAC in light of the insufficient number of available shelter places. Safe Zone priority is given to UAC in detention as well as other vulnerable children, in line with their best interests” and “Hotels are emergency accommodation spaces being used as a measure to care for UAC in light of the insufficient number of available shelter places. Priority is given to UAC in Reception and Identification Centres.”

³ See for example: <https://www.openingdoors.eu/institutional-care-in-europe/damaging-to-children-damaging-to-society/>

⁴ Including the laws on foster care and on guardianship, for which ministerial decisions still need to be approved to activate their implementation.

In order to ensure quality alternative care, **participants recommend to government officials the following:** adopt policies on common criteria and **standard operating procedures (SOPs)** and guidelines to ensure safety, quality of care and a common protection system with same objectives and criteria across various forms of care, as well as the creation of a **monitoring authority**. These SOPs should be developed in close collaboration with advocates, practitioners and children.

Moreover, in order to strengthen quality alternative care across various forms of care, **participants emphasise the role of private and state funding**. Participants note a trend in pushing for institutions for large numbers of children but highlight that this trend is **not compatible with ensuring quality care**. It is necessary to debunk the notion that the urgency for more accommodation spaces requires big accommodation institutions. Sustainable and cost-effective scale can be reached through offering a variety of community-based care arrangements, which has been demonstrated in pilot projects.

II. Implementing recommendations & lessons-learned from CSOs in the new guardianship scheme

Guardianship is a core component of the protection and inclusion of children and youth on the move, particularly in the guardian's role as a reference point for all different actors involved in the child care system. While there have been significant steps forward with new legislation and an existing **CSO-led guardian scheme** across most of the Greek territory, more attention is needed on the quality and implementation of this scheme in the run-up to the transfer to the Greek authorities.

Within this framework, the **new law on guardianship**⁶ approved by the Greek government in July 2018 is viewed as a positive and much-needed development to ensure that all children and youth under the age of 18 who arrive to Greece alone are appointed a guardian in a more structured and sustainable manner. According to the new law, the guardian would be an advocate for the rights of the child most notably in terms of ensuring proper accommodation and services, among other responsibilities of protection and overall support.⁷

Participants recommend towards authorities and policy makers to implement stronger protective frameworks for a national child protection system in Greece and give a number of **recommendations regarding the upcoming implementation** of the new law on guardianship. The ratio of children per guardian is yet to be defined, but CSOs express it should be **at a lower ratio than 20 children per guardian** in order to allow for individual assessment of needs. The recruitment, training and monitoring of the guardians is a point of attention as well, as there should be an assessment of candidates for specific qualifications required, as well as **ensuring the impartiality and independency of the guardians**, as they will be public servants under EKKA.

Participants hope for a **coherent transfer of know-how** that CSOs already collected through pilot projects and distributed to relevant agencies. The current pilot tripartite agreement between METAdrasi, EKKA and UNHCR (planned to end in September 2019) with the aim to transfer the know-how from METAdrasi's Guardianship Network for Unaccompanied Minors to EKKA, should continue under the implementation of the new law to continue bridging between the former and the new system. As the transitional period for the guardianship scheme

⁵ The Greek Refugee Council noted in the 2018 updated AIDA Greece country report that age assessment remains problematic in several locations. For more information on age assessment, see pages 91 to 94: http://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_gr_2018update.pdf

⁶ For more information on the new law, see <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/greek-law-no-4554-of-18-july-2018-on-the-regulatory-framework-for-the-guardianship-of-unaccompanied-minors>

⁷ Other **responsibilities include**, representation in legal and administrative proceedings, accompaniment for medical visits, verifying the quality and effectiveness of interpretation, ensuring access to education, psychological support and ensuring the rights and dignity of the child are respected.

will come to a close at the end of August 2019 when EKKA will assume responsibility, participants express **concerns about the timeline of the implementation of the new law** and urged for the current deadlines to be met.

III. Adopting a gender-sensitive approach to care

Disclosure of gender-based violence incidents (GBV) continues to be low among children and youth accommodated in shelters. According to participants, the **low rate of disclosure is presumably related to the absence of a supportive and trustful environment** that would encourage such a type of reporting or prevent in a proactive manner the occurrence of GBV incidents. Additionally, the small number of disclosures, in particular among boys and young men could be related to a need for gender mainstreaming approach in shelters. There is also a need to **support specialised and individualised care** for survivors of sexual or gender-based violence. The [Centre for Research on Women's Issues \(CRWI\) DIOTIMA](#) conducted a wide-field research⁸ on this issue.

For practitioners, participants recommend the following: create **safe spaces** that build trust and allow for self-referral; offer **individualised care** based on individual needs (e.g. encourage incidents disclosure among young men by creating dedicated spaces); adopt a **community-based approach** by not only valuing the competences of external experts but also the experience of individuals who may have gone through similar experiences; **empower individuals by enabling self-referral and capacity for mutual support** through dedicated human rights trainings (i.e. women who have benefited from support will bring someone else they know who has experienced GBV); and **enhance coordination** among relevant state and non-state services. Participants emphasise the need for a **holistic approach through the joint design and implementation of integration programmes** by state and non-state actors to support GBV survivors which could include language courses, job searching skills, soft skills development, livelihood and empowerment programmes. Finally, participants highlight the need to adapt best practices due to the cyclical nature of supporting SGBV survivors, i.e. a trauma that may start in the country of origin which does not heal through the migration journey and dealing with protection and prospects to heal and move forward.

For government officials and policy makers, participants note a need to improve children's safeguarding regarding a **protective framework of referral** for children who want to report an incident. Participants recommend the establishment of **legally binding regulations for child safeguarding** to be followed by all services hosting children, and provision of **emergency accommodation** for children GBV survivors as a short-term solution, in parallel to strengthening and specialising for GBV survivors the existing, yet still very marginal (see section I.), foster care programmes.

Future funding is necessary for **specialised trainings on child protection and GBV** to all staff working in Reception and Identification Centres as well as in shelters, and to volunteers who may be involved in initiatives that have progressively become safe spaces for GBV children survivors (e.g. skateboarding activities). Additionally, funding **qualitative research and data collection on the impact of practices** addressing this issue is much needed. Participants also emphasise the need to support **coordinated advocacy actions and coalition-building** among stakeholders involved in this area to push for a protective framework and promote concrete cases and good practices.

⁸ "Accessibility and barriers to GBV services for refugee and migrant men, women, girls and boys in Greece" will be published at the end of May on [their website](#).

IV. Supporting youth reaching and over 18 years-old in the transition to adulthood

Transition to adulthood brings particular challenges and issues as turning 18 often means losing a number of rights, more limited access to services and a period of uncertainty. Participants describe an overall need to reinforce the **support for young adults reaching and over 18** primarily regarding inclusion, educational and work opportunities, as well as transition to autonomy.

Participants highlight a number of gaps, including the need to build **vocational training opportunities**, create pathways to **access to tertiary education** (e.g. the latter is conditioned to a national examination), and provide resources to access **employment opportunities**. At a macro level, participants emphasise the **need for coordination between different levels of governance** on this matter. Additionally, the difficulties posed by placement in specific locations far from services (e.g. limited public transport options) are potential factors that hinder young people's transition to adulthood.

In order to overcome current challenges, **participants recommend to practitioners** to implement **holistic approaches** and to establish **closer links with local stakeholders** including public authorities and other stakeholders such as universities who are in touch with young people.

Participants recommend to public officials at both the Greek and EU level to ensure a more streamlined approach to the "European Qualifications Passport for Refugees"⁹ in **documenting and verifying past education**, coordinating between EU and national ministries of education. They also suggest further coordination particularly between CSOs and the Ministry of Education in order to map referral pathways and relevant stakeholders.

Participants emphasise the importance of **continuing individualised care after 18** and the need to open **additional quality care models (such as SIL) to facilitate the autonomy and inclusion of people who reach 18** which are adequately resourced and located in proximity to networks of support (e.g. in Athens so that young people can easily access adequate services), as well as ensure that young people have a stable **focal point** they can rely upon and who can be a link to other relevant organisations and services. **Future funding could support** the above as well as **coordinated advocacy actions** on this topic, including initiatives with **children as advocates** and the promotion of community-based support to young people's transition to autonomy.

V. Ensuring mental health support for children, youth and their caretakers

Safeguarding mental health still remains a point of concern that requires additional support. It is common for children and youth on the move to have **suffered trauma in their country of origin as well as incurred additional trauma** in their journey and since arriving in Greece. **External stressors** since arrival include insecure accommodation, street life, addiction and prostitution; legal procedures contribute as well, relating to awaiting family reunification, intrusive age assessment or having a limited understanding of or lack information regarding asylum. **Internal challenges to mental health** also stem from social interactions in a new country, feelings of isolation, uncertainty and emotional distress.¹⁰ **Stressors tied to family relations** include witnessing their parents struggling making a living in the new country or even facing abuse.

⁹ For more information, see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications>

¹⁰ For more information, see the preliminary findings from the ChildMove research project on the mental wellbeing of children and youth on the move, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/events/childmove-discussion-project-following-unaccompanied-young-refugees-across-europe>

To address the external stressors, it is essential for children and youth to be aware of and have **access to information about their rights**, as well as be surrounded by a network of care and services to empower their decision making. Participants highlight **mental health implications of the long waiting periods** related to status acquisition, relocation, placement and family reunification processes. It is strongly **recommended to government officials** to ensure that **the time limit for these procedures that is expressed in the law is maintained** for this group so that children and youth are not left in a prolonged state of limbo.

Investment in mental health and psycho-social support for this group is vital as capacities and resources are very stretched, particularly in **supporting children, youth and those over 18 who are faced with drug addiction, prostitution and street life**. Additionally, to ensure quality of mental health support, it is recommended to officials to **adapt a standard in service provision of mental health services** that considers the group of children and youth in migration specifically. Small pilot projects have been supported, for example by [EPAPSY](#). These are, however, still only run on a small scale and with short-term funding so that only the most severe cases can be treated.

On how to best address the wellbeing of children and youth on the move related to these stressors, **participants recommend to practitioners** to advocate for **psychologists to speak the child's first language themselves**, rather than speaking Greek or requiring an interpreter. Interactions without a third party would help to ensure that crucial information and sensitivities are not lost in translation. If this is not possible, it is vital to train interpreters on mental health to ensure that red flags are not lost in interpretation.

Practitioners working with this target group should have adequate supervision and the topic of burnout needs to be addressed preventatively. Limited capacity and resources also take a toll on service providers and **can lead to burnout and subsequently, secondary trauma which is then harmful for children and youth** exposed to these professionals. Furthermore, appropriate **education and training related to children in trauma** needs to be available and encouraged for all actors working with children and youth on the move. Also, mental health support needs to be available to other family members as well, particularly parents.

VI. **Strengthening collaborative networks and sharing of information between actors to address cross-cutting challenges**

Civil society organisations, advocates and government actors highlight the need to **expand their collaborative networks**, particularly between those who do similar or related areas of work. Areas of collaboration include sharing best practices, trainings and expertise, such as medical, mental health or intercultural training. Additionally, participants encourage collaboration related to information **sharing on the latest news** relevant to children and youth on the move in the Greek and larger European context.

Participants advocate for practitioners to continue sharing their best practices and establish methods to map networks and referral pathways in order to facilitate collaboration and avoid parallel projects. For example, participants encourage establishing **shared trainings for topic-focused issues** such as gender-mainstreaming and mental health for frontline professionals working with children on the move (e.g. training professionals working in care on trauma, attachment and communication skills through loss) and capacity building of all actors in contact with children. This could for instance be achieved through collaboration with medical organisations to increase the capacity of non-medical actors to address **medical issues and intercultural awareness**.

Participants highlight the importance of **mapping referral pathways** to relevant stakeholders regarding access to education, and employment paths and suggest creating a network of organisations working towards the goal of labour integration to share relevant challenges and ways to overcome them. Additionally, projects to support young adults in the transition to adulthood should be expanded in coordination between CSOs as well as **with the close participation of youth** and with the support of authorities.

When considering funding projects, investments should support social workers through **monitoring schemes, supervisor and a network of professional support** in order to avoid burnout and the repercussions thereof. Additionally, as part of that support network, interpreters and intercultural mediators should be available at every step of the way, trained as appropriate for the topics and issues that they may be called upon to intervene. Investment should also strengthen existing practices and **build a sustainable framework for protection and inclusion** of children and youth. Along with building the capacity of actors to support children and youth, long-term investment will ensure the sustainability of quality care and support.

As the context in Greece is fast-paced in terms of legal and policy changes, participants discussed the need to share information on such changes facilitated through the **creation of a network of experts, between practitioners and government actors** that keep in constant communication and share updates on the latest news.

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