



May 2011

UNACCOMPANIED PROJECT All Our Children

General information

Unaccompanied project was a three years project that was carried out by a Finnish child welfare organization All Our Children (Yhteiset Lapsemme ry) during the years 2008–2011.

The main objectives of the project were 1) develop tools to promote the assessment of the best interests of the child in the Finnish asylum procedure, and 2) improve the assessment of the psychosocial situation and wellbeing of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers during the asylum procedure. The project was carried out in cooperation with the Finnish Immigration Service (Maahanmuuttovirasto), the reception center for minor asylum seekers in Espoo (Espoon ryhmä- ja perheryhmäkoti) and the Federation of Special Welfare Organisations (EHJÄ ry) and it was funded by Finland's Slot Machine Association.

Background

The best interests of the child is a widely known and accepted principle that is included in several international treaties, recommendations and in the Finnish legislation. Aforementioned norms obligate that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning a child.

According to the Finnish Aliens act (301/2004) in all decisions concerning a child special attention must be paid to the best interests of the child, as well as to the child's age, maturity and health related issues. According to the Administrative Committee Report 4/2004 related to the Aliens Act, consideration should be given to the best interests as a whole, taking into account individual needs, wishes and opinions of the child. The best interests is always individual and linked to the child's life situation at any given time.

Even though the principle is widely promoted, there is limited guidance on how to apply it in practice. Regarding unaccompanied asylum seeking minors, the assessment of the best interests of the child is especially challenging since information received on the child's experiences and living environments is very limited, and in most cases can only be obtained from the child himself/herself.

One of the aims of the Unaccompanied project was to identify which are the elements that need to be taken into account when assessing the best interests of the child. The most important elements were seen to be *safety, family and other important relationships, wellbeing, developmental needs and identity needs as well as views of the child*. The analysis was based among other things on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNHCR Guidelines on Determining the Best Interests of the Child (2008) and the Finnish Child Welfare Act 417/2007. The analysis was used in all project activities as a framework.

Project activities

Cooperation with social workers

One of the main activities of the project was to develop working methods and tools for social workers working in the reception centers of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. In Finland, social workers are invited to participate in the asylum interviews of the minors or alternatively requested to write a statement to the Finnish Immigration Service on what they consider to be the best interests of their client. Because of this practice, social workers have a crucial role in assessing child's situation. To promote the work done by social workers, a comprehensive interviewing model was developed. The aim was to offer social workers a harmonized and practical tool to assess the psychosocial situation and wellbeing of unaccompanied minors and to evaluate the best interests of the child.

The Psychosocial interviewing model has several parts. The aim of the model is to collect and analyze comprehensive information on the child's background, experiences and wellbeing. The information is used to plan the services needed as well as to assess the best interests of the child when writing a statement about the child's case. The model has two main parts; initial stage mapping and in-depth interview. The initial stage mapping is done as soon as possible after the child has arrived in the reception center. The mapping includes questions on the child's experiences in the country of origin, reasons for leaving, experiences during the flight as well as child's needs and views of his/her situation at the moment. In order to get a general picture of the child's mental condition and needs, the initial stage mapping also includes several questions on the child's wellbeing. In later stages social workers make another interview with the child. The aim of the in-depth interview is to deepen the information received in the initial stage mapping. In order to identify possible victims of human trafficking, the model also includes a checklist of human trafficking indicators and advice on how to proceed if human trafficking is suspected. In addition, an outline for the statement, example questions for the interviews and a guideline on how to use the forms are included.

The Psychosocial interviewing model was developed in close cooperation with social workers working in the reception centers. The initial versions of the tools were developed with social workers from few reception centers and pre-tested. During the years 2010–2011 we organized three trainings for all social workers of the reception centers in Finland where the tools were presented and given to the field for testing and commenting. The trainings also included capacity building components on traumatization and human trafficking. Final versions of the tools were developed based on the comments received from social workers. The model is now used in all reception centers accommodating unaccompanied minors. The Finnish Immigration Service which is responsible for the coordination of the reception of asylum seekers has taken responsibility of the guidance related to the model and if needed, will also develop it further.

Cooperation with the Finnish Immigration Service

During the project many activities were organized with the Finnish Immigration Service. In years 2008–2009 the Finnish Immigration Service recruited several new immigration officers due to the increased number of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors. The project took

part in the trainings organized for the personnel. The trainings discussed among other things techniques of interviewing children and ways to encounter traumatized people.

In addition, a consultation model was developed in cooperation with the Finnish Immigration Service. The aim of the model was to support the assessment of the best interests of the child in the decision making process while assessing grounds for asylum. Consultation worked on a case to case basis and it was requested in cases which were deemed to be especially challenging in relation to the best interests determination. The consultations were provided by three psychologists with experience on refugee children, child development and child protection. The idea of the consultation was based on a multi-disciplinary and multi-professional approach. The consultants familiarized themselves with the child's case before the consultation. The consultations were participated by the consultants and the officers responsible of the child's case. Other persons with crucial information on the child, e.g. the child's social worker or the guardian, could also be called to take part in the consultations. The practical collaboration was done with the Asylum Unit of the Finnish Immigration Service in Helsinki. During the project 12 consultations were held and due to the positive results gained, the Immigration Service has committed itself to continue the consultations after the project.

Brochure on the asylum procedure

During the project a brochure on the Finnish asylum procedure of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors was developed. The brochure is aimed at unaccompanied minors and it includes basic information on the asylum procedure, the actors involved and their roles. The brochure promotes the realization of the best interests of the child by providing children with information on their rights and the procedure. The brochure can be used as a tool while working with asylum seekers. Each language version of the brochure includes texts in two languages; in Finnish and in another language. The brochure has been translated into Finnish-Somali, Finnish-Dari, Finnish-Kurdish(Sorani) and Finnish-English.

Trainings and publication

The project activities included also trainings. Trainings were aimed at the actors working with unaccompanied asylum seekers, e.g. the police, immigration officers, personnel of the reception centers, guardians of the unaccompanied minors and legal advisors. The trainings discussed traumatic experiences and wellbeing of the children, child trafficking as well as how to identify the best interests of the child.

In addition, a final publication was produced. The publication has three parts. The first part is written by the project personnel, and it describes the project work and gives recommendations. The second part includes articles on the best interests of the child, traumatic experiences and their influences on child's development, child trafficking and ways to support the wellbeing of the unaccompanied asylum seekers. Third part gives the floor to the actors on the field by including commentaries on the situation of unaccompanied asylum seekers and on the ways to go forward.

For more information on the project and for the final products (in Finnish) please visit: www.yhteisetlapsemme.fi or send email to toimisto@yhteisetlapsemme.fi.