**UNICEF joined Human Rights Defender of Armenia in a field visit to Syunik marz, marking five years of productive cooperation**

**YEREVAN, 25 February 2022** – On February 17-18 Representative in Armenia Christine Weigand and UNICEF team joined the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, Arman Tatoyan, and HRDO team in a visit to Syunik marz to examine the situation of children and women.

“For the past five years, UNICEF has closely cooperated with the Human Rights Defender’s Office (HRDO) on children’s rights. This has included important achievements such as the establishment of a specialized child rights unit in 2017 and the start of continued monitoring of child rights across the country. HRDO also became a full member of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children. Together we have developed a number of tools and capacity building interventions that enabled HRDO to work in full capacity in the direction of child rights protection in the country. Over these few years, children also started to directly apply to the HRDO, which is an important achievement in terms of ensuring equitable access to justice for all children. I am happy to join Mr Tatoyan on this mission to examine the situation of children in Syunik,” said Ms Weigand.

Ms Weigand and Mr Tatoyan visited the special school for children with disabilities in Kapan. They had a meeting with the director, examined the services for children, and met with students. “This school has significantly improved the quality of work with caregivers, which resulted in a reduction in the number of students residing at the school,” noted Ms Weigand. “In the long term, the technical experience that institutions such as this one has accumulated throughout the years is essential to the process of deinstitutionalization in Armenia. We also discussed with the director the need for continuous technical support for mainstream schools in work with children with disabilities. UNICEF already cooperates in this direction with the Republican Psychological- Pedagogical Center.”

During the field trip, Ms Weigand and Mr Tatoyan also visited two centers providing support to vulnerable children and their families, one directly supported by the municipality, and another one supported by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Both centers provide day-care services to children in difficult life circumstances from Syunik and from Nagorno-Karabakh, ranging from mental health and psychological support for children victims of violence, as well as legal and administrative support to families facing extreme poverty or difficult living conditions and specialized services for children with disabilities.

In the center supported by the municipality, some of the needs identified included the need for continuous capacity building for the staff, regular refurbishment of the center and provision of specialized equipment and furniture. UNICEF and HRDO also heard about the challenges related to effectively promoting inclusive education and the related need for additional awareness raising work with parents of children with and without disabilities.

The Child and Family Support Center under the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is a former boarding institution that was transformed into a community-based day-care center with UNICEF support within the deinstitutionalization reform. In 2021, the center was tasked with functions of a crisis center to provide care for children and families in difficult situations, including from Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition to day-care services, it currently provides shelter to 10 children whom Mr Tatoyan and Ms Weigand met with.

UNICEF and HRDO noted the potential of the center to expand services, including in emergency situations. In 2021, UNICEF supported the refurbishment of three rooms within the centre and will provide additional support in 2022, including capacity building for the staff and further adaptation of the center to the needs of children and their families.

“This joint visit provided an opportunity to assess some of the challenges faced by children and their families in Syunik, who have been affected both by the impact of the pandemic and the conflict,” said Ms Weigand. “Both the pandemic and the conflict have left a negative impact on the mental health of children and caregivers, and the current situation in some of the border areas in Syunik is of concern to all and further exacerbates the wellbeing of children and their access to essential services.”

UNICEF remains committed to support the Government of Armenia in the ongoing reform processes in the fields of child protection and social protection to ensure all children, including the most vulnerable, can access quality services in a timely way. We are looking forward to continue working with all stakeholders, including civil society and diaspora organizations, as well as the private sector to further develop the network of community-based services across Armenia.

UNICEF also looks forward to continuing cooperation with the Human Rights Defender’s Office in Armenia to further develop the child friendly complaint mechanism and raise awareness around and knowledge of child rights in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.