

**UNICEF (UN Children's Fund)**  
**Media Release – For Immediate Release**

**Tsunami toll on Samoan pre-school children the ‘forgotten chapter’**

Apia, 25 October 2009. – The UN Children's Fund is urgently supporting the return of tsunami-affected children to pre-school in what may be a forgotten chapter of Samoa's recent disaster.

The devastating tsunami that struck Samoa on 29 September damaged or destroyed as many as 16 pre-school's, leaving young children with few options for their continued early childhood education.

UNICEF is providing technical and logistics support to the National Council on Early Childhood Education in Samoa (NCECES) – a non-governmental organisation with membership of groups and organisations such as church groups and private charities who run pre-schools – to undertake a rapid needs assessment. The assessment will determine the level of destruction to pre-schools and what assistance is required to get affected children back to pre-schools as quickly as possible.

UNICEF Emergency Education Specialist, Phuong T. Nguyen, says that preliminary results from the assessment indicate the tsunami completely destroyed 11 pre-schools and badly damaged a further five. An estimated 600 children are directly affected.

“The destruction of pre-school infrastructure that I have seen is heartbreaking,” says Ms Nguyen.

“In some cases the classrooms and other facilities have been totally washed away, leaving just the crumbled concrete foundation behind. At other times buildings are so damaged as to be completely unusable.

“The typical preschool in Samoa has one classroom, with a water tank and toilet facility, with two teachers serving 35-40 children aged two-and-a-half to 5 years-of-age.

“One school I visited had just installed playground equipment three months before the tsunami, but all of this is now gone. Picture books and art work crafted by young children lay amidst the rubble of their former classroom.”

Ms. Nguyen says the tsunami not only destroyed classrooms and other facilities, but also took away the right of hundreds of young children to an early childhood education.

“Early childhood education is vital for young children. It supports the overall development and well-being of children so they can fully develop their thinking, language, motor, emotional and social skills. Children deserve the chance to get the best start in life and to develop to their full potential.”

“It is well established that children who have successfully participated in early childhood education are able to transition well into primary school, where they are better adjusted, attend school regularly and do not repeat grades.

“The effects of not being able to go to pre-school reach far beyond the individual lives of children and affect families, communities and the development of the country as a whole.”

Ms. Nguyen says that in the face of the overwhelming needs such as shelter, water and sanitation generated by the tsunami, early childhood education needs were given a lower priority. However, this should not be the case. Similar to the importance of education for older children in the aftermath of a disaster, early childhood education provides young children with a sense of normalcy, psychosocial support and protection against harm. Education, be it for older or younger children should be an integral part of any humanitarian response.

“But now that the emergency response is starting to move into the early recovery phase, it is essential that the needs of young children for education and development do not continue to be overlooked.”

Ms. Nguyen says the pre-school assessment report is expected early this week, after which UNICEF will work with partner agencies to mobilise the resources needed to begin the urgent work required to get young children back in school, where they may again be supported with their social, cognitive, emotionally and physical development.

In the longer term, UNICEF will advocate for the Samoan authorities to take a more active leadership role in early childhood education. Preschools are currently run at the community level, often in conjunction with communities, churches and other charitable organisations.

**More information**

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