Children in drought affected areas have a “You just get on with it” attitude, when the reality is their need for psychological support increases by the day

SYDNEY, 19 February 2019:— Children and young people in drought ravaged New South Wales have told UNICEF Australia that the natural disaster has meant they have had to prematurely “grow up”, facing difficulty in balancing increased farm work with their education, as well as experiencing escalating levels of stress and other adverse psychological outcomes.

“While we have seen devastating flooding in north and north western Queensland, and terrible fires in Tasmania, it is easy to overlook the fact that vast swathes of inland Australia, and the people who live there, are still suffering through devastating prolonged drought,” said UNICEF Australia Senior Policy Advisor, Oliver White. “And while many initiatives have been implemented over time to assist these communities and the adults who run the farms, little is known about the impacts the drought is having on the children and young people.”

UNICEF Australia sought the expert advice of organisations in regional NSW that have long been working with drought-affected communities, before visiting Gunnedah, Narrabri, Walgett and Tamworth to conduct consultations with children from rural and farming families. The resulting report, ‘In their own words: the devastating impact of prolonged drought on children and young people’, was released today.

During the consultations, children and young people explained the impacts of prolonged and intense drought upon their parents – the effect it has on their parents’ ability to provide them with the best homelife and education possible, while trying to manage their farms in disastrous conditions. They discussed their own personal sense of responsibility to “step up” and assist their parents and families, as well as the associated workload which correlated with steadily increasing levels of adversity and stress.

“These young people and children talked about, for example, not only having to cope with euthanising extremely sick and distressed farm animals, but in some cases of having to do it before school, then having to come home and bury them afterwards,” Mr White said. “They talked about the way rest, health, recreation and socialising begins to take a back seat to getting the farm through the drought – as well as the way every aspect of the drought so often impacts negatively upon their ability to successfully pursue their education.”

Mr White said UNICEF Australia’s conversations with these children and young people – excerpted throughout the report - revealed a deep sense of community responsibility and an evident need for dedicated psycho-social support, coupled with a heartfelt desire to be included in solutions.

“These young people care deeply about and are abundantly aware of the trauma their parents are going through, while at the same time, are operating with the over-arching attitude that they shouldn’t talk about their own psychological reactions and concerns because ‘it is always worse for someone else’,” he said. “We found that they have been put in the position of having to make very adult decisions about their lives, their parents’ lives, their family’s farms and businesses – these decisions, their insights and solutions are based upon real, lived experience, have clarity and offer valuable contributions.”

UNICEF also spoke to a cross-section of community members, finding that concerns for the wellbeing of children and young people in the drought was strong – some saying they had lost their childhoods.

The ‘In their own words’ report makes nine recommendations to federal, state and territory governments about strengthening the coping skills and resilience of children and young people, supporting parents and families, and about improving the focus on children and youth in the design and delivery of government drought responses and services.

“UNICEF Australia initiated this important project as part of our mandate to be a voice for children,” said Tony Stuart, CEO of UNICEF Australia. “As part of our ongoing work consulting with children around Australia, it forms part of UNICEF Australia’s efforts to ensure a fair chance for every child.”

###
**About UNICEF**

UNICEF’s objective is a fair chance for every child – in Australia and around the world. To achieve this, 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.

For more information about UNICEF Australia and its work for children, visit [www.unicef.org.au](http://www.unicef.org.au/)

Follow UNICEF on [Twitter](https://twitter.com) and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com)

**For more information, please contact:**

Brinsley Marlay, UNICEF Australia, 0403 604 182, [bmarlay@unicef.org.au](mailto:bmarlay@unicef.org.au)