

## GIVING CHILDREN THEIR RIGHT TO DREAM



Since I was young I have always dreamed that what I wanted to do, when I would be an adult, was to work with something that would have contributed to make this world a better place.

Most of the children in Mozambique may have the same dream but unfortunately do not have the same chances to achieve their dreams because there are things that they must do which are more important than 'just' following up on a dream: finding a way to eat or bringing food home; finding a way to get to school which is more often than not hours away from their houses, avoid tearing their own clothes while playing because they will not get new ones as easily, stay away from trouble... and when you are a kid left alone all day long these are not easy tasks. Indeed, it may be that parents have to stay out of the house all day long to work and crianças (children) have to be responsible for carrying out a proper healthy life full of dreams.

The Mozambique population is composed of more than 21 million people of whom over 44% are under the age of 15 while the median age of population is little over 17 years. Almost 70% of the total population live below the poverty line. In 2003 Mozambique ranked 170th out of 175 on the Human Development Index: although in the past years the growing rate has risen in absolute terms reflecting the improved growth performance of the economy, the development performance continues to be highly skewed. The country is currently facing the phenomena of child abandonment and minor deviancy which are also a "collateral effect" of the rapid social changes.

The growing mobility of the rural population, the increasing circulation of money and goods in the main cities are opening new opportunities for surviving in the urban area. The erosion of the traditional family structure,

previously undermined by the urbanization process, is today further worsened by the HIV-AIDS plague which is partly responsible for the high number of orphans (in 2001 Mozambique ranked as one of the ten most highly affected countries in the world with 500 people infected per day). While in 2007 the number of orphans was estimated to be more than 300,000, the Ministry of Health of Mozambique estimated an escalation of over 900,000 by the end of 2010.

The poverty, in which more than two thirds of the Mozambican population lives, may lead many families to abandon their children because they can not nourish them or give them proper health cure. As a consequence, many minors are forced to take care of their own parents or to contribute to the meagre family income. Unfortunately in order to do this, minors occur in performing informal working activities on the streets when lucky (such as sell eggs, snacks and candy), but not infrequently they fall into some form of exploitation, such as prostitution.

The result is a rise in the number of vulnerable children who live in difficult conditions and are at risk. They need special measures of protection and assistance. It is extremely important to prevent victims of abuses become themselves, for reaction or necessity, subjects at the edge of legality. The protection of minors is, along with crime prevention, an essential element in a system of "juvenile justice" aimed at assisting the minor to achieve a better future.

Protection and prevention have been the two pillars of the project that UNICRI began in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice of Mozambique and other relevant institutions in the country, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' General Directorate for Development Cooperation. The programme was developed in response to the concern expressed by Mozambican authorities regarding the phenomenon of abandonment and juvenile delinquency. By establishing inter-institutional coordination mechanisms and by involving civil society organizations, the initiative was proposed to protect the rights of minors in conflict with the law by offering them a legal and social path aimed towards their recovery and reintegration.

More specifically, some of the major activities implemented to strengthen the juvenile justice system in Mozambique included: the rehabilitation and equipment of the Tribunal for Minors of Maputo; the identification, rehabilitation and equipment of the first Observation Centre (pre-sentence) and the first Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre (post-sentence) inaugurated in the Country; the establishment of the First Forum on juvenile justice that is now, totally managed by the Ministry of Justice; the creation of a prevention network through reception of minors, their support and listening , as well as the training of justice personnel among which policemen, judges and social operators.

With the implementation of the project 'Strengthening Juvenile Justice in Mozambique' two centres where opened in two different neighbourhoods: Hulene and the Baixa. Taking as example the one in Hulene, the Information Point in Baixa was set up to:

- provide information about principles, rules and current procedures related to minors in conflict with the law in coordination with the other institutions (representatives of the Minister of Women and Social Affairs, police officers, judges of the Communities Courts, secretaries of the neighbourhoods etc.)
- gather news and complaints, respond to aid's request from who faces problems related to minors in conflict with the law, and support the relevant structures with respect to singular cases' specificity.



These services were provided both at the Information Point and through door to door mobilization in order to inform and involve communities to be part of the change of mindset and put minors and juveniles at the centre of all the activities of the project: their lives, their stories, their well-being, supporting their development into respectful citizens, and informing them on their rights, especially given that the Ministry of Justice has passed a new legislative framework on juvenile justice (which still keep the criminal liability to individuals over 16 years of age).

The Information Point started out as a place where families would go for advice but then turned into an important reference point able to mobilize communities and assist them in resolving conflicts by supporting and training personnel for community courts, collecting data and liaising with community leaders, police and heads of the neighborhoods; providing information about principles, rules and current procedures related to minors in conflict with the law through the distribution of information and in coordination with the other institutions (representatives of the Minister of Women and Social Affairs, police officers, judges of the Communities Courts, secretaries of the neighborhoods etc.).

The Information Point worked 5 days per week and the local team carried out hearings together with the support of psychologists and legal aid when necessary.

In Hulene the rehabilitation process consists not only in the support to the family and the child but also in educational, social, training and vocational activity so that the minor will be effectively reinserted back into the community. Since the Information Point worked during week days it was planned also an emergency service which consisted in watch services in order to respond to situations which demand prompt intervention.

It is important to review the figures on the minors that have attended the Information Point.

In 2008-2009, 187 minors went to the Information Point of Hulene: 164 were between 8-10 years old and 23 were between 11-14 years old. Males were in the majority, at 175, compared to 12 females. The majority were males for a total of 175 and 12 females. Minors in conflict with the law were 125, while minors at risk 62. It is important to note that minors in conflict with the law were the vast majority. Main offences committed included moral offences, alcohol and drugs consumption, property damages and vandalism.

In relation to minors in conflict with the law, 97 of them were between 8-10 years old and 28 were between 11-14; there was a majority of males for a total of 88 while females were 37. In relation to minors at risk 33 of them were between 8-10 years old and 29 were between 11-14 for a total of 56 males and 6 females.

By the end of 2009, there were 104 minors that were being supported and that were actively involved in the programme activities. Many of them participated in the daily activities at the Information Point by taking part in the information and social activities, and in the vocational training on offer. It was not always possible to establish permanent contact between the Information Point and the minors. The Information Point was not intended to be coercive.

Many of the minors who reach the Information Point feel that they have been abandoned. They feel lonely,

isolated, and different and for them it is very difficult to communicate their anguish and discomfort. After the first hearing the local team which received them, begins a cycle of rehabilitation. It appears that minors' deviance is mostly due to a request of a more humane response to their difficult situations. Situations which make them feel oppressed and that depend on the political, economic and social context which ultimately undermine minors' life conditions. In order to overcome this day-to-day uncertainty of the minors' future UNICRI decided to try to invest in education and training activities which can give minors an opportunity for social inclusion (for those who were 15 years and older). The training activities are not compulsory since such activities represent a vehicle to stimulate interests as well as an instrument to support minors' growth and better life expectations. In this respect, training activities are elaborated in partnership with the direct beneficiaries by analyzing their profiles and listening to their expectations and needs in order to avoid the risk of making these activities unsustainable from the consensus perspective.



With the beginning of the new project 'Strengthening Juvenile Justice in Mozambique – Consolidation Phase' (funded by Belgium and Denmark) all the work that has been carried out in the communities following the setting up of Information Points, will be strengthened and expanded to other communities strongly affected by the problem of minors in conflict with the law or at risk of coming into conflict with the law. UNICRI hopes to achieve the same results that were accomplished during the first project.

Indeed, among the social, educational and training activities, UNICRI with the support of the local NGO Cooperativa Social Tsembeka (of Maputo) provided also internships and job placements.

Of the pilot group of 28 minors (15 years old and older) who were professionally trained, 24 of them have been successfully integrated into the formal market and continue to study while having better life expectations thanks to the training, internship and job placement received. With the new project, specific education modules will be distributed to teachers so that they can conduct prevention activities as part of the lessons and in the context of special events in schools. Indeed, the field work has demonstrated the importance of school support and this is the reason why, besides intensifying vocational training together with social and other educational activities (painting, dancing, music classes, games, drama, inter-exchanges, workshops, sports, cultural activities, recreation, and visits to historical sites), UNICRI will continue to support minors in conflict with the law or at risk by involving selected schools in Maputo. The educational and training activities are opportunities for human enhancement and empowerment. They change the way justice is perceived especially if we consider that the concept of justice is still confused with vengeance in many communities.

The objective is to offer a space where children can regain their right to dream, as all children in any other part of the world should.

Andrea Rachele Fiore – Programme Coordinator of the Project 'Strengthening Juvenile Justice in Mozambique – Consolidation Phase'.