

## **"Human Rights Council listen up!" Parallel Event on Youth Justice**

On Thursday March 19, 2009, a group of five young YMCA campaigners took part in a parallel event to the 10<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland.

Entitled "Education and Psycho-social Support as Tools for the Genuine Reintegration of Children and Youth in Conflict with the Law," the event included panellists Hatem Kotrane, Member of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the CRC Task Force on Juvenile Justice, and Altin Hazizaj, Executive Director, Defence for Children International (DCI) Albania.

Co-organised by the World Alliance of YMCAs, Y Care International and DCI, the event attracted 50 or so attendees including NGO representatives, press and Council delegates from 10 countries. The young campaigners aimed to raise awareness of the injustices faced by children and young people in conflict with the law through personal stories, and to demand greater adhesion of their countries to international standards.

### **Daniella's story**

Daniella Abbate from England, shared her experience of being in the wrong place at the wrong time and the demeaning and aggressive treatment used by the police during her arrest, "We had nothing to do with it, but we still got treated terribly." Daniella recalled the international standards on the treatment of juveniles, which state that detention should only be used as a last resort, "it's being said but most definitely is not being done."

### **Thandanani's story**

Thandanani Ndlovu shared his personal experience with the South African justice system. Thandanani was arrested and charged for armed robbery simply because he knew the culprit. The trial took 15 months to be heard, during which time Thandanani shared a cell with up to eight others. Eventually sentenced to 15 years for the crime, a subsequent appeal reduced the sentence but only after his lawyer pleaded guilty for him. The State placed Thandanani in an adult prison, where he suffered abuse at the hands of older prisoners. Upon his release two years later, no rehabilitation or reintegration schemes were in place, and with the stigma attached to ex-offenders, opportunities remained limited.

Thandanani called for NGOs and governments to work together to support the lives of young people, particularly in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. "I am a proud South African, but I want to be proud of my country for supporting youth. Make it now, not tomorrow," implored Thandanani.

### **Makilawe's story**

Makilawe Kehira from Togo was unable to join the other youth campaigners in Geneva due to visa problems. He was however able to share his story through a statement read by Martin from Ireland.

Arrested without a warrant for theft, Makilwe suffered beatings by the police and was held for 11 days before being transferred to the main prison in the capital, Lomé, where he remained for 12 months before his trial. The judge sentenced him to eight months, shorter than the time Makilawe had already served while in pre-trial detention.

Lomé prison was vastly overcrowded, and most of the time people had to sleep on their sides to squeeze into cells. Prisoners received one meal a day and their only communal area outside the

cells was a courtyard where prisoners washed, slept and fought. At the moment the majority of people in Lomé prison have yet to be sentenced.

"There is no such thing as youth justice in Togo, at least for poor people...It's a corrupt system that ridicules the poorest people, especially young people, who get caught in a vicious cycle," said Makilawe.

### **Hatem Kotrane, Committee on the Rights of the Child**

Mr Kotrane highlighted the need to focus on the underlying factors compounding the problem of juvenile crime, particularly stigmatisation by media and the public, lack of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes, and lack of education on the rights of the child for professionals working with children in conflict with the law.

He also stressed the importance of volunteers in supporting and furthering the work of the State. He called for voluntary organisations to aid in the rehabilitation of juveniles, within in the family if possible.

### **Altin Hazizaj, Executive Director, DCI Albania**

One such voluntary organisation fulfilling this role is DCI Albania. Through a project entitled "The Sky is for All," a successful rehabilitation and reintegration scheme for young people in Albanian Prisons has been in place since 2008.

Through sports activities, discussion, debate and visits from local schools to the prison, young offenders learn are prepared for reintegration into society. A postcard campaign and production of a regular newsletter have also served to heighten public awareness of the situation of former offenders, and a manual for the scheme has been produced to use as a model at a new juvenile prison being opened in April in Albania. So far, the "Sky is For All" has worked with more than 160 juveniles, with only one having re offened, and has provided over 600 hours of educational, sports and leisure activities to young people.

**This unique event, that provided a space for young people themselves to voice their concerns, highlighted the need for long-term commitment from governments, civil society and media in particular to support the genuine reintegration of children and young people.**

**Rebecca Morton,  
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