

# **HOLD MY HAND: VULNERABLE YOUTHS BECOME AGENTS FOR CHANGE IN TUNISIA**

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## **Abstract**

As part of the programme to support penal reform, “Appui à la Réforme de la Justice (PARJ)”, a communication strategy for social and behavioural changes for the prevention of youth delinquency and the promotion of alternative measures to detention was implemented from September 2016 to March 2017 in the cities of Gabès and Manouba (Tunisia). The objective of this communication strategy was to enable parents, professionals, and children themselves to become agents of change and active participants in the fight against juvenile delinquency and in the promotion of alternative measures to detention. The strategy implemented followed a participatory process of communication for development (C4D) and carried out several steps: a baseline evaluation followed by partner’s mobilisations. In a second step, a youth mobilisation programme was implemented through a series of dialogues with children in conflict with the law, with children at risk, and with their families. The youths participated in participatory video, rap, graffitists, and social theatre in a transformative storytelling approach. The last step of the strategy was a face-to-face communication campaign using local youth and cultural centres but also involving local institutions where the media products created by the vulnerable youth were presented. The programme showed some very positive results such as improved self-esteem, improved resistance to delinquency, and improved dialogue capacity in the vulnerable children. Despite the short duration of the project, the programme worked with the different targets, and the engagement of the children was overwhelming. Educators in both towns expressed the importance of continuing the project.

## **Introduction**

Tunisia’s youth penal system has considerable need for improvement. As a result of the gap between the law and its implementation, limited access to mediation or other educational measures, or substitute options to the deprivation of freedom are not available. This explains the high rate of recidivism amongst the children in conflict with the law, estimated at 27% by UNICEF.

As part of the programme to support penal reform (“Appui à la Réforme de la Justice (PARJ)”), a communication strategy for social and behavioural changes

for the prevention of youth delinquency and the promotion of alternative measures to detention was implemented from September 2016 to March 2017 in the cities of Gabès and Manouba (Tunisia), financed by UNICEF and the European Union. The objective of this communication strategy was to make parents, professionals, and children themselves become active participants in the fight against juvenile delinquency and the promotion of alternative measures to detention.

The strategy implemented followed a participatory process of communication for development (C4D). It used various mechanisms aiming to facilitate the participation of individuals from diverse groups and thus at all steps of the process: analysis, planning, implementation, follow up, and evaluation. Its mechanisms favour the implementation of dialogues within the community, by the community members, social workers and the authorities – allowing all participants to share their expectations and worries, and to participate in decisions that directly impact their lives.

The chosen communication strategy was carried out several steps. A baseline evaluation took place through individual interviews and focus groups – followed by partners' mobilisations. In a second step, a youth mobilisation programme was implemented through a series of homogenous and heterogeneous dialogues with children in conflict with the law, with children at risk, and with their families. The youth themselves then chose to use participatory video, rap, *graffiti's* and social theatre in a transformative storytelling approach. They chose the Arab slogan "ذوخ يديب" which means "Hold my hand".

The strategy was implemented in Manouba and Gabes, regions known to be some of the most underprivileged in Tunisia. The project was developed with Manouba Social Defense and Integration Center (*CDIS* – "Centre de défense et d'intégration sociale"). This institution works primarily with children and teenagers (ages 8 to 18). In Gabes, the dialogue and participatory video and theatre approach was implemented with children from the Children Center (*Complexe de l'enfance*) and the Gabes' *CDIS*.

The last step of the strategy was a face-to-face communication campaign using local youth and cultural centres and also involving local institutions (police force, judge, religious authority). A best practice manual was created and finally an evaluation/appreciation was produced.

## **Two Qualitative Studies**

Two studies (baseline and final evaluation) were developed with qualitative methods of focus group and individual meetings. They focused on the children, their families, and actors of the institutions in both cities of Manouba and Gabes.

The baseline represented the starting point of all the actions that were put in place later on. It was an extremely important part of the process as it gave an assessment of the children and of the different actors in both regions. A behavioural analysis

was realised with the identification of the participants at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and the actors at the “meso and macro” levels. The participants at the primary level represent the level of individual behavioural change; they are the actors in whom we will see if a behavioural change occurred. The participants at the secondary level are the individuals who have a direct influence on the decision of the primary participants. The tertiary participants are the actors who are influential in the community (i.e. associations, organisations, religious authorities, opinion leaders). These three levels are what is called “micro level”. Then there is the “meso level” where one can find partners and institutions who are implementing an action plan.

The baseline offered a diagnostic plan allowing identification of the practices and measures that will be implemented. It identified which practices could be done with the primary participants in order to reach the objective of change. The baseline revealed key information in regard to knowledge, attitudes, social norms, practices, obstacles, advantages, facilitating factors, accessibility to information, and the communications tools used by the institutions responsible for the implementation of the communication. The baseline served first as a database to start the communication process, but also as a reference to observe the evolutions brought by the various communications activities (workshops, communication campaign, etc.). The baseline showed that most of the obstacles to change were due to a lack of training, financial constraints within the CDIS, and the lack of cooperation by government departments at regional level (regional directorates of women affairs, justice, education, police, health) regarding the issue of delinquency and the strategies that needed to be put in place. The evaluation also revealed strong expectations from both children at risk and children in conflict with the law regarding social welfare. Families and the educative system structure also raised the need for a better effort in terms of socialisation and integration of vulnerable children.

At the end of the project, a final evaluation was conducted. It analysed the outputs (dialogues, training workshops, theatre and video products, communication campaigns), as well as the changes reached on the target groups. It showed which initial objectives were reached with the professionals in charge of the children, as well as with the children themselves. The final evaluation was based on the ‘most significant change (“MSC”) methodology. This method is based on the gathering of personal stories. This qualitative and participative method was developed by Rick Davies in the 90s and is supported by a guide (Rick Davies et Jess Dart, 2005).

## **The Dialogues, a Necessary Step to Start the Conversation**

The objective of the dialogues with children at risk, children in conflicts with the law, and with their families was to allow children and their families to discuss causes and consequences of delinquency, to discuss detention or alternative measures to

detention, and to develop argumentation and an action plan to communicate on these topics with their peers, institutions, and the media.

The objectives were:

- Children (including teenagers) protect themselves from the risk of becoming in conflict with the law. The children in conflict with the law develop their ability to protect themselves from recidivism. Both groups become agents of change with their peers, parents and the institutions.
- Vulnerable children understand the causes, risks and consequences of conflicting with the law.
- Children in conflict with the law understand and realised the cause of delinquency and the gravity of their actions, as well as the risks and consequences of recidivism.

Following the dialogues, and based on the preferences expressed by the children, workshops and training programmes in participatory video, social theatre, *graffities* and rap were realised. The products created by the children were then used during the face-to-face communication campaign.

Although implementing the dialogues was a challenge, this was a necessary step for the rest of the communication process. The dialogues allowed the children to question themselves, question the situation they were facing, and question their own lives. The discussions from the dialogues were the starting point in the development of the scenario they wrote.

## **Creating a Safe Space and Developing Trust during the Dialogue in Manouba**

In Manouba, a series of 13 homogenous and heterogeneous dialogues with children at risk, children in conflict with the law and with their families took place. The first step was to gain the trust of the children and their families, and to engage them in the process. Through games and drawings, the animators slowly developed a relation of trust with the children. The children revealed themselves, shared some aspects of their private life, and gave their opinion freely on prevention, delinquency, and alternative measures to detention. Simultaneously, they aimed at bringing the conversation on the topics of violence, prevention, detention, and alternative measures to detention. This step also brought the participants to discuss their interest in making creative products to tell their stories. Last but not least, it aimed at putting the seeds in the mind of the children to help them realise that by participating in this programme, they were educating others. Showing them that by sharing their ideas and stories, they were bringing change around them, they were revealing to others a reality those others did not necessarily understand.

During heterogeneous dialogues, children at risk, children in conflict with the law and with parents came up with different slogans and mini-scenarios on the topic. During the dialogues, the children also chose the stories they wanted to tell and the stories they wanted to share.

Throughout the process, the children were given a sense of control in the telling of the story in which they initially had no or little control over. In telling their stories, the children re-enacted their everyday life. One of the participants said, “We chose this story because it is the closest one to our reality, and the one that makes everyone understand better our message”.

## **A Strong Engagement from the Children in Participatory Video in Manouba**

By the end of the dialogue a core group of six to eight children had constituted itself. They were dedicated to the project from the video training to its realisation. However, 15 children took an active part in the three-week training. Trainings and workshops on theatre, singing, decoration, drawing, rap and *graffities* and video were offered, and the children chose what they wanted to participate in. The children developed the skeleton of the movie and worked on each of the scenarios. The educators were happily surprised by the involvement of the children in this programme. They were expecting a higher rate of absenteeism and thought that many of these young people would abandon the project. This assiduity to the programme can be explained by the interest in the activities offered, but also by the fact that for many, the *CDIS* was a second home, one of the rare places where they could be away from the weight of their difficult familial or social realities. The children wrote a short story video, one song (rap), and drew two *graffities*.

One very important point, made by the psychologist of the *CDIS*, was that what mattered was not that the products were perfect but that they were “an artistic work made and produced by the youths themselves”. It was their product, their message. The participatory video was the activity favoured by most.

Many of the children who chose not to participate in the programme expressed interest in participating in the future if the programme was offered a second time. A visible envy and desire to be part of that group showed itself or at least an interest in that recent activity. Many children in the *CDIS*, whether they were part of the project or not, were curious and were looking forward to discovering the video.

Following the realisation of the video, a communication campaign was implemented in which the children were invited to present their works to their peers, to children from other associations, and to other institutional actors.

## **A Smooth Transition into the Dialogue in Gabes**

In Gabes, 20 dialogues with children at risk, children in conflict with the law and with the families were implemented. The children were from the *CDIS* of Gabes and *Le complexe de l'enfance*. Here the educators were very involved in the process, and they often played the role of facilitators. Therefore the children opened up faster

during the dialogues. Several gatherings were implemented with the youths and their families in which the children animated the debate on topics such as how to improve the education system or how to lighten the condemnation for young people. The children expressed an interest in art (painting and theatre). One of the educators admitted that she was “impressed and did not expect the children to be able to express their ideas on those complex topics”.

## **Participatory Video and Theatre, a Positive Experience for the Children**

Ten children from *Le complexe de l'enfance* and eight children from the *CDIS* took an active part in the making of the play and the participatory video. However a larger number participated in the workshops and trainings. The children constructed the dialogues and they showed clearly their enthusiasm and desire to be part to this project. An educator explained that this was a positive experience for the children. This allowed them to be engaged and disciplined. These attitudes responded to a new need for these young people, the beginning of a new balance in their lives.

The theatre teacher explained that it was initially difficult to work with these children who were suffering from low self-esteem. The psychologist of the *CDIS* was also pleased with the activities; he felt that even the children with weak theatrical competences participated and felt proud of themselves. The children then presented their work on several occasions during open houses at the *CDIS* and au *complexe de l'enfance*. It allowed the children from these two worlds (*Complexe de l'Enfance* hosts children from vulnerable families, but they are not necessarily in conflict with the law or vulnerable themselves, whereas the *CDIS* host vulnerable children and children in conflict with the law) to realise that they were in fact not that different.

Following the success of this activity, the *CDIS* of Gabes was able to continue a watered-down version of participatory theatre. The theatre instructor, with the help of several other educators, decided to create a theatre club within the *CDIS* to keep the children involved.

## **Impact of the Participatory Approach on the Children**

In both regions, it was very interesting to notice that the children spontaneously and rapidly showed an interest in the project. They were excited to discuss something that concerned them. Overall, the participants gained a different perspective of the experience, allowing them to explore how to represent themselves in media. Viewing their stories and films was often revelatory and moving. The children who participated in the programme were all very satisfied by the end product and very proud of having participated in such a project.

The children really did most of the work while being guided by professionals. They chose the medium they wanted to work on (video, theatre, drawing, and singing), they developed the scenarios and the screenplay, they chose the roles and the actors, and they even participated in the editing. They truly invested themselves into the project. The psychologist from the *CDIS* of Gabes admitted that he did not anticipate the impact of the play and the video on all the children of the centre. “We need to give a chance to all the children to participate in this programme” he commented.

Because of dialogues, participatory theatre and video, educators in both regions, did notice the beginning of behavioural change within the youths. It seems that the participants started to show signs of self-appreciation, higher self-esteem, a better ability to speak about themselves, and their lives.

## **The Face-to-face Communication Campaign – “Hold My Hand”**

The idea behind this face-to-face communication was to help the children in conflict with the law, the children at risk, and the vulnerable children to change their behaviours and perspectives on the prevention and the fight against juvenile delinquency by becoming ambassadors on these issues towards their peers and institutions within the community. To do so, the campaign used dialogues, meetings, education by their peers, and individual counselling by professionals, all supported by videos, posters, and other media.

This campaign consisted of dialogues with their peers (children from other associations, sport activity, open houses), their parents, as well as dialogues with the institutions (police, judges, religious authorities). The children who participated in the video and theatre programme became the ambassadors. They showed their movies or acted their play. Their work became the starting point to the dialogues that followed. The campaign allowed the children from the various institutions (such as *CDIS*, *Le complexe de l'enfance*, schools, houses of culture) to meet each other and discuss these difficult topics. This allowed all to forget the stigma associated with one group or another.

Through the products created by the children, they themselves realised the role played by the institutions. It allowed them to realise that these institutions were supposed to work for them, with them, and not against them.

Thanks to several open houses, the parents saw the work done by their children and the families were proud of their children and started looking at their children differently. However, the parents of children at risk were more receptive than the parents of children in conflict with the law.

## **Positive Results and Impacts on the Targeted Groups**

In both regions, the children’s participation, the first signs of change in the behaviour, and the first steps toward their “ambassadors” role, was overwhelming.



However, the lack of time, and the lack of durability of the project did not allow testing of the full impact of this approach.

The final evaluation showed that several objectives of the project were reached. The project had a positive impact on the targeted groups and clear progresses were noticeable.

One of the most important impacts of the project was that the children at risk were able to express themselves and talk about their reality during the dialogues. They learned to verbalise their frustration and to express themselves in a group. This behaviour continued during the video and theatre training. The children communicated even more at this stage. Moreover, the children really played their role of ambassadors with a strong message they wanted to share with the world. They did become agents of change by presenting their work to their peers, engaging in conversation with them, engaging the institutions, and delivering a message that made all who saw it question themselves and their attitudes toward delinquency, its causes and its consequences. Overall the educators and psychologists who were part of the programme did notice the improved self-esteem among the children who participated in the project. They noticed an improved resistance to delinquency and an improved dialogue capacity.

The changes in the behaviour of the children can be easily noticed, a few examples:

- In Manouba, three children who participated in the project went to their educators and asked for help in receiving a detox programme.
- One of the rare children in conflict with the law who participated in the entire programme was visibly happier and calmer.

Most importantly, the children showed a better understanding of the external factors that impacted and affected their lives.

Regarding the parents, they saw their children under a different light, a positive angle. It enabled better conversation between parents and children, as the parents did brag a little about the work of their children with neighbours and other family members. It allowed them to have something positive to say about their children. Many parents were visibly proud of their children when they saw their play or videos. Several children later told their educators that their parents had complimented them on their work or talked about it to other family members.

The institutional actors who participated in this project welcomed the approach. They saw the therapeutic effect the project had on the children. They were also enlightened by the problems through the eyes of the children. It forced them to rethink their approach. Finally, the cooperation between the different actors developed throughout the project catalysed a change in dynamism among professionals.

The face-to-face campaign revealed the beginning of change. Thus, the police officers involved in the face-to-face campaign recognised and understood that they had a bad image and reputation. They became aware that they needed to better their image to improve and better their relationship with the youths. Moreover,



they understood the necessity of encouraging more face-to-face engagements, meetings with the parents and children in the difficult neighbourhoods, to work together, and discuss how each group could help with the prevention of juvenile delinquency.

Concrete changes at the institutional levels cannot be estimated. However, all who work with the children (educator, psychologist, director of the various children institutions involved) recognised that the project brought a new dynamic and a great mobilisation of the different actors. But they also recognised the need of a follow-up and of support for it to fully develop its potential.

The presentations of the media products during the communication campaign were very well received in both towns. They were great facilitating tools and introductory tools to discuss the topics of alternative measures to detention and prevention to juvenile delinquency. The various meetings (meetings with peers, with judges at the courthouse, with members of different associations) were also very well received by the children. It opened their eyes and helped them understand better the system that was around them. It also “normalised” their relationship with their peers who did not belong to their institutions or organisations.

The message “hold my hands” (short video from one of the participatory video programme and meaning of the graffiti that was done by the children as part of the project) was extremely well received by the target groups (institutions and families). “The movie showed us that changes need to start by the institutions not by the children. We need to put in place a group of well trained professionals who have experience and know how to deal with children in this type of sensitive situation” said one educator. The movie also shows the responsibility of the parents who are too busy and preoccupied by their everyday lives and do not spend the time to really listen to their children. It shows the children’s needs to share and communicate with their parents.

In both regions, the parents reacted positively to the work produced by their children. The parents witnessed the new independence developed by their children, a new self-esteem. In conclusion, the communication campaign went in the right direction, and the beginning of a change in several targeted group was visible.

## **Some Limitations and Recommendations**

A stark contrast was obvious during the process between the participation of children at risk and children in conflict with the law. In both regions, this difference revealed itself. Many of the children in conflict with the law were older; many of them had other obligations (usually linked to working outside of the institution). It was also noticeable that it was harder for the children in conflict with the law to communicate with the others. They were in conflict in general, and with everyone. The number of children in conflict with the law in the participation

of this activity was smaller than the children at risk, and many of them gave up in the middle of the programme; the few who attended until the end were absent quite often.

Many of the children in conflict with the law had a tough time to find an interest in the project; they were not ready to be ambassadors and to share their stories. They had a harder time to speak in front of their families. It was also interesting to notice that the parents of this older group were less engaged. They were interested in hearing about options for the future of their children; they were interested in hearing about ways to help them to find a job, becoming an apprentice, something that would help their teenager secure some type of financial security or support for the future. They were less concerned and less supportive of theatrical, video or musical activities. To reach this population more successfully, more preparatory work should have been done ahead of the project such as presenting the projects to the families and discussing them with all the children. It is therefore crucial to work on diverse ways to bring more children who are in conflict with the law into this process. A suggestion would be to involve former children in conflict with the law who successfully re-integrated into the society, who could share their paths and experiences and participate in the project in a “big brother” format. This would be in total adherence to the behavioural and social change component of the project. The one whose behaviour has changed is promoting the change; the former children in conflict with the law could become true agents of change.

Another limitation is that despite a will to have a fully participatory video approach, the local capabilities did not permit the children to fully participate in the production of the movie. They were not in charge of sound, filming and editing (post-production). They did however write the scenarios and played in the movie. It is the key to develop the right capabilities to allow this experience to be fully participatory and have the children involved at all levels.

Finally, due to financial limitation, the short duration of the project was an obstacle; it did not allow the project to be sustainable. The replicability of the project was discussed in both pilot regions. Not only the project works with the different targets, but the engagement of the children was overwhelming. Educators in both towns expressed the importance of continuing the project. Children, parents and institutions were receptive to it despite its short implementation. The director of *Le complexe de l'enfance* summarised well the situation: “It was a very short project and it did not give enough time to the various organisations involved to put together a proper structure. We were able to accomplish remarkable things thanks to the individual involvement and dedication of several participants to the project. We now wish to continue and to properly prepare and plan a great programme with organised and structured action plans. Now that everyone knows each other, the biggest hurdle is passed but we need to build on it”.

One of the key factors of success is the sustainability of the project via a training process. This innovative approach and programme showed to the different partners what could be done. However, they are missing the tools and an in-depth knowledge

to continue. The establishment of dialogues, training in media production, and face-to-face campaigns all necessitate a real training. A train-the-trainer approach would allow the system to sustain itself and to be replicable.

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