

Young, but capable: youth lead the struggle against violence in Mali

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In Africa, and particularly Mali, children are exposed to the worst kinds of violence, in many different forms: physical, emotional and spiritual. This violence takes place in all kinds of places – within the family, on the streets, at school, in detention centres and in work. The causes behind this violence are varied. They range from poverty and social inequality to harmful beliefs and traditions, and the ignorance and impunity of the perpetrators.

In schools, violence is sadly often used as an educational ‘tool’ or method. In 2010 Plan Mali partnered with Save the Children to conduct a study on violence against children in schools. The study found that 83.5% of adults and 82.5% of children cited corporal punishment as one of the main forms of violence perpetrated in schools (Antonowicz, 2010).

As part of the ongoing struggle to end violence against children, a regional project was launched in 2008 across West Africa

by Plan in partnership with Save the Children. The project is guided by the recommendations set out by the United Nations in its 2001 study on violence against children in Africa. The main objective is to strengthen the capacity of child and youth organisations so that they can tackle violence by disseminating information, raising awareness, and advocating to duty bearers.¹² The children’s parliament in Mali is a key partner.

This article will concentrate on the work that members of the child parliament are doing to advocate to duty bearers for better child protection. It aims to support children and young people to enable them to mobilise and engage with duty bearers and government. But has it increased their protection from violence?

How did the project come about?

The first phase of the project (2008–2010) was implemented in seven countries

¹ Children are individuals aged under 18 years and young people from 18 to 25 years. Where there is overlap (ages 15–18) they are still children but known as young people.

² For a definition of duty bearers, see the glossary, this issue.

Box 1: What is the children's parliament?

The children's parliament is a platform for youth participation and freedom of expression which is open to all Malian children. Its aim is to support the authorities in upholding the four main child rights: children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation in decisions that affect them. Its role is to support the Malian government to implement national policies or initiatives which promote and uphold children's rights. It consists of 41 children aged 12 to 17 years old, with 21 girls and 20 boys.

Plan Mali was instrumental in implementing the children's parliament as a way of providing policy support to the government with regards to child protection and participation. It has signed an agreement with the ministry for the promotion of women, children and the family to this effect. The agreement sets out a series of activities which promote women's and children's rights. It gives particular emphasis to children's participation as agents of change, which the children's parliament is designed to facilitate.

including Mali. The second phase (2011–2013), which has just begun, has widened the project's reach to include three further countries. The project provides support to children and young people's organisations and builds their advocacy capacities. The other stakeholders include teaching professionals, parents, community-based organisations and decision makers at local, national and regional levels.

Ending violence against children was already an area that the children's parliament in Mali was working on, as explained here by Boncana, president of the children's parliament:

The struggle to end violence against children is one of the principal concerns of the Mali children's parliament. We have created a group especially to address this issue. I'd like to invite the people and the

authorities to work hand in hand to put a stop to this practice.

As well as the children's parliament, various youth groups and structures are participating in the project. These include the Association for the Promotion of Youth and Child Communication (APJEC) and school councils.³

There are child parliaments in each of the country's eight regional capitals. The national children's parliament consists of children from the different regions and the capital Bamako. It is housed at the centre

Box 2: Project activities and impacts**What activities were carried out?**

- Conferences and debates held in four primary schools and four community discussion centres in Bamako.
- Awareness-raising and advocacy tour of Koulikoro.⁴
- A concert in Bamako with the theme 'Children have the right to participate'.⁵
- Televised debates in Bamako, shown on national television.
- Radio shows produced in eight primary schools in the towns of Kati, Kangaba, Kita and Baroueli.
- Advocacy awareness-raising in all of the eight regional capitals.
- Radio programmes broadcast on 12 local radio stations and the national radio station.

What were the results?

- Children and young people's capacities to implement child protection as a dimension of good governance have been strengthened.
- Violence against children is becoming less taboo: children are now aware of violence as a phenomenon and starting to break the silence surrounding it.
- Duty bearers are now willing to discuss questions of violence with children.
- Corporal punishment in schools (one of the most prevalent forms of violence against children) is decreasing.

³ Association pour la Promotion des Jeunes et Enfants Communicateurs (APJEC) is an association of former members of the children's parliament. It promotes the rights of the child, primarily through their newspaper *Regards des Enfants* (Children's views).

⁴ Koulikoro is a city in Mali, about 40 miles from Bamako. Koulikoro is the regional capital of the Koulikoro Region.

⁵ Organised by Plan and regional rap network United Artists for African Rap (AURA). Young rappers portrayed children living in difficult circumstances in their rap opera *Poto Poto*. Children and youth also debated issues that affect them. Other events showcased young people's own initiatives to improve youth participation and informed adults and peers about their rights.

Photo: Plan Mali



Participant Balkissa draws a cartoon depicting scenarios of violence against children.

of a ‘children’s city’ in Bamako. It is equipped and supervised by the ministry for the promotion of women, children and the family. Plan has signed a collaboration protocol with this ministry and provides support to the national and regional children’s parliaments on this basis.

The children’s parliament has a change of office every two years. The last change of office was in 2010. Every child who presents her/himself as a candidate has to put forward a programme of activities to convince their peers of their suitability, and to prove their communication and leadership skills. Children attending school and those out of school can elect members of parliament. Following the last elections, 41 members (boys and girls) aged from 12 to 17 years took up positions. The president of the national children’s

parliament is elected from amongst the candidates based in Bamako, for reasons of practicality. This is one of the weaknesses of the system because it effectively discriminates against children from the regions.

Each new mandate begins with a child rights assessment from which the parliamentary members create an action plan. They implement, monitor and evaluate their action plan with support from the government and partners. The children’s parliament organises awareness-raising and advocacy sessions with duty bearers at regional and national levels. This includes discussions with members of the adult parliament (MPs). These discussions allow them to share their concerns with MPs who then present them in parliamentary sessions.



Photo: Plan Mali

During training participant Allassane learns how to use a computer.

What approaches did the children and young people use?

Tackling violence against children is complex as the root causes are very deep. Wherever one encounters children, there is also abuse. Because of this complexity, the project focused on building the capacity of children and young people and working in a collaborative, participatory way. The children and young people identified what they wanted to learn which then formed the basis of a series of training workshops (see Box 3).

As a result of the training sessions, children and young people have become aware of the phenomenon of violence. Previously, they might have played dangerous games or bullied each other, not realising that this constituted abuse. Such behaviour had gone on for many years. The children have also learnt new advocacy strategies. Balkhissa, a child participant, tells us more:

I am very upset by the fact that young children are victims of violence all over the world. The only contribution I can make is to raise people's awareness of this through the cartoons we have created during this workshop. I hope that they will give people

Box 3: What training was provided?

Four training sessions were organised between July 2009 and September 2010, with around 20–25 children and young people taking part in each. The participants chose which sessions they wanted to attend according to their different training needs.

- The first training session, on advocacy and violence against children in the school environment, took place in July 2009. Participants discussed the different forms of violence against children and were introduced to the UN study on violence against children and its recommendations. They also learnt about advocacy and how to campaign.
- Social media and new technology formed the basis of the second training session in July 2010 which involved a group of 20 children. They learnt about SMS text messages, blogging, the Internet and Skype. This training was intended to support children to develop the skills required to network with each other at local, national and regional levels.
- The third session, also in July 2010, taught children how to draw and use cartoons to raise awareness about the types of violence most commonly experienced by children (e.g. bullying, corporal punishment, female genital mutilation/cutting, child labour and sexual harassment).
- The final training session, in September 2010, looked at gender-based violence. It raised awareness amongst children about the difference between sex and gender, as well as examining gender stereotypes, gender-based discrimination, and how to bring a gender-equality lens to their work.

Photo: Plan Mali



Youth Caravan on violence against children.

a wake-up call and they will pass the message on.

However, this training omitted one important aspect: training duty bearers. Although it was not part of this project, this could be included in similar projects, such as the Learn Without Fear project launched in 2008.⁶ Children have encountered a certain amount of resistance from decision makers which could have perhaps been avoided if they too had received training. The results achieved could have been even more conclusive and far-reaching. However, this should not detract from what the children themselves have so far achieved.

What have the children achieved?

The silence which has always surrounded violence, partly out of fear and partly because of harmful beliefs and traditions, is now being broken through the young people's awareness-raising and advocacy efforts. These efforts are directed both at decision makers and the general population. Stories denouncing violence have been published by APJEC in their newspaper. For example, when APJEC learnt that a girl had been raped and the rapist was known but had not been reported, they immediately published an article about the case. Diaffra, age 22, explains:

We arranged for all the people working on this area of child protection to have a copy of the newspaper. Our work bore fruit... and today, the perpetrator is in prison.

Nowadays, more decision makers are discussing violence with children. This is not an inconsiderable achievement. Although children may not yet receive their desired level of protection, they do benefit from this favourable environment. The relationship between the children's parliament and the ministry gives the child parliamentarians a way of facilitating contact with the highest levels of authority, such as the national assembly. This means that they have been able to make themselves heard and contribute to decisions.

Corporal punishment in schools is decreasing. School rules are now made available in schools and everyone is aware of them. The whip is not used as frequently, and teachers say that they have stopped hitting children. According to a teacher from the Bankoumana Primary School, in a village 60km west of Bamako:

Because of the awareness raising done by children, we understand the consequences of corporal punishment for children. I used to do it, but as of today, I'll never use the whip

⁶ Learn Without Fear is organised by Plan Mali in partnership with Save the Children, and supported by the ministry for basic education.



A group of children learning how to use a computer.



During group work, the child participants use participatory tools to record their discussion on gender inequalities.



A girl participant is fascinated by what she has learnt through the Internet.

again. I would describe the whip (fouet in French) in the following way: 'fou' (makes children mad), 'e' for 'étourdir' (stuns children) and 't' for 'lui traumatiser' (traumatizes them).

Children themselves agree that corporal punishment has declined in some schools, as Ibrahim, 13, testifies:

The teachers used to hit us a lot, but now they no longer do... because we went round

all the classrooms... to say that it's not good to hit the pupils.

However, just because pupils at Ibrahim's school were able to educate their teachers on why they should not use violence does not mean that this is possible in every school. The teachers who are willing to discuss the issue with children and young people may change their behaviour, but there are many more reticent teachers who will never accept it.

Photo: Plan Mali



At the end of the computer training course, the children express their enthusiasm for what they have learnt.

What obstacles have been overcome and what lessons can we learn?

When we analyse these results, it becomes apparent that two main strategies allowed us to achieve them. The first was to build the capacity of children and young people to campaign for their own protection. The second was the creation of a network of children and young people which gave them more power when facing duty bearers, because *‘L’union fait la force’* or ‘there’s strength in numbers’. The project has meant that children and young people can get to know each other and share their experiences of tackling violence.

However, we must recognise that there are still some obstacles to be overcome. Despite the amount of advocacy work carried out with decision makers, there has been very little progress in terms of better governance. There is still no adequate legal protection for children against, for example, female genital mutilation (FGM). This is despite multiple advocacy campaigns by different parties. The prejudices and stereotypes that contribute to this type of violence are so well rooted that any steps taken are fragile. As a result, children and young

people continue to struggle to ensure their protection.

Another obstacle is the fact the children’s parliament is under the supervision of the ministry for the promotion of women, children and the family. This is not a bad thing in itself. It means that the ministry can provide the necessary framework for the children’s parliament to carry out its advocacy work. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that in order to effectively participate in decision-making, children and young people must have a certain amount of independence vis-à-vis the State and other authorities such as their parents.

This initiative is certainly good, but it could be improved if certain limitations were removed. Practically speaking, the main limitation was the lack of foresight with regards to the need to strengthen the duty bearers’ capacities at the same time as the children’s. It is by no means clear that the duty bearers have the necessary knowledge of child protection, child rights, good governance principles or, above all, understanding of their roles and responsibilities as guarantors of children’s rights.

Next steps

The children and young people have certainly led the struggle against violence themselves, and have proved their capability. However, their engagement must be analysed. For the next phase of the project, which has just begun, we need to further develop the two strategies highlighted above and to complement them with others, such as informing, training and building the capacity of the duty bearers as well as the children and young people.

A further possible complement would be to extend the reach of the children's parliament beyond the regional level to the commune level. It is at the commune level that children's rights tend to be least

respected, due to poverty and illiteracy. If the authorities were able to create a children's parliament in every commune in the country, more children could be involved in advocacy for good governance, and the concerns of those most in need could be analysed and brought to the attention of the national assembly via the national children's parliament.

In taking these steps we hope to consolidate and strengthen the results that children and young people are achieving through their advocacy. As explained by Sidy, aged 14:

...I will never again stand by without intervening when a child falls victim to violence.

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