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Youth Participation from The Hague to Mexico City – A Youth campaign against violence affecting children and youth

Violence against children and youth is a global issue that cuts across societies, cultures and countries. The United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children released in 2006 was a global effort to describe the nature, extent and causes of violence against children and youth, and to propose clear recommendations for action. Professor Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, the independent expert appointed to lead the study, presented the report to the UN General Assembly in New York in October 2006. According to the study, violence against children happens in all cultures and societies within a diverse range of situations and settings with detrimental effects on the lives of children and youth.

Rather than waiting for adults and politicians to implement the recommendations identified in the study, a few youth organizations decided to take up the challenge and to push for a change in their local societies. The campaign, Stop Violence against Children and Youth, was initiated by the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY) and four member organisations took the lead in this campaign. The four organisations are: GZO Peace Institute (Philippines), International Palestinian Youth League (Palestine), Peacelinks (Sierra Leone) and Dinamismo Juvenil AC (Mexico). This article will focus in particular on the activities of latter, but more information about the campaign and the members can be obtained by contacting the authors.

▶ United Network of Young Peacebuilders

UNOY Peacebuilders is a global network of young people and youth organisations active in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. UNOY Peacebuilders was founded in 1989 and the international secretariat, which is run entirely by youth, is based in The Hague, The Netherlands. Currently, there are 34 members in more than 20 countries. The main areas of action are networking, capacity building, campaigning and advocacy. UNOY Peacebuilders has been promoting the Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence in the World and working

within the All Different All Equal campaign of the Council of Europe.

UNOY Peacebuilders has been working with a number of other NGOs on the issue of violence against children and youth in the build-up towards and during the launch of the study. UNOY Peacebuilders participated in a study visit to the Philippines, lobbied Dutch Members of Parliament, visited the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and held meetings with UN agencies and NGOs in New York, Geneva and Brussels. Following up on the above-mentioned activities and achievements, UNOY Peacebuilders wanted to work closely together with some member organisations in advocating and campaigning for the implementation of the study recommendations by governments and other relevant institutions at local, national and regional level. Four member organisations were eager to become part of this campaign, which is funded by PLAN Netherlands.

UNOY Peacebuilders has formulated several recommendations, which include: Prioritise prevention; promoting non-violent values and awareness-raising; encouraging participation of children and youth; and building capacities of youth organisations. The role of the international secretariat is to coordinate the campaign, which includes sharing information, identifying opportunities and building the capacities of the members. In order to facilitate sharing and dissemination there is an extensive use of the

• Good practice in Participation



internet as a tool of communication through the use of emails, social networking group, online forum and an online petition. Throughout the year, various campaigns and awareness-raising activities are organised, including the celebration of the International Day of Peace.

The members are responsible for their own fundraising and formulate their own goals and strategies to deal with their local and regional challenges as they know which issues are most pertinent in their own community. They are responsible for developing their own projects, but UNOY Peacebuilders assists upon request with the development of project proposals, policy papers and gives advice.

► **Dinamismo Juvenil**

Dinamismo Juvenil is a Mexican non-profit organisation established in 1999 and has six young and two adult staff member and 20 volunteers. The mission is to promote and create spaces for children and youth and to transform their communities. The topics include violence prevention, conflict resolution, culture of peace and promotion of economic and social youth initiatives. The general objectives of the organisation are to promote youth leadership in actions which construct community values and to train young people as peace educators. The organisation has developed an attention model for children, adolescents and young people and a training school on violence prevention in families, schools and communities.

The organisation is working mainly in poor communities in Mexico City, which face many and diverse problems that affect the development of the community and the inhabitants. The children, adolescents and young people the organisation works with come from poor families. Many of them encounter violence, sexual abuse, addictions, delinquency, family issues and other situations that generate emotional and psychological alterations. The established social roles cause a high lack of equity, social mobility and opportunities. A quarter of the population is young and many live in poverty and have limited prospects of improving their living conditions. A high number of youth drop out of school and join the labour market instead.



However, reducing «youth» to unemployment rates, drug addiction or crime generates generational divisions and misunderstandings that depict youth as the stereotypical rebel without a cause. Youth are a highly diverse group. Youth connected to each other create unique identities, forms of behaviour, language and thoughts depending on the context in which they develop, a process that does not necessarily have to be negative. Dinamismo Juvenil recognises the skills and potential of youth. The organisation seeks to analyse the interests of young people by opening spaces where youth can engage in and share what they like to do and have a healthy coexistence. These are spaces where youth can experience a sense of belonging and inclusion, based on teamwork and actions, while at the same time helping transform their community. The organisation creates a collective leadership group which works directly addressing children, families and peers to initiate an educative process. Youth are trained as leaders and concrete initiatives are put into practice in the community, schools or families. At the same time, the youth learn self-recognition, enhance their socialisation and cognitive skills while learning to handle emotions. They learn to live in harmony and to be aware of what is happening in the community, reaching and transforming towards a culture of peace.

With these activities, besides succeeding in channelling the energy of youth, the organisation helps to develop the skills of children, showing that they are cognitive and intelligent beings, with their own points of view. When adults realise how well young people work with children, they no longer see youth as a source of danger but as an important didactic and productive part of society, by closing the circle of violence in a positive way.

► **Advocacy and campaigning**

The campaign members planned a number of events throughout the campaign period. Simultaneous activities were organised on the International Day of Peace on 21 September and on the World Day for the Prevention of Child Abuse on 19 November 2008 to raise awareness both in the Netherlands and Mexico. Both organisations produced campaign materials, for instance posters, flyers and postcards, which were handed out during the campaigns.

On the International Day of Peace 2008, UNOY Peacebuilders organised a street campaign in the Netherlands to raise awareness of the issue of violence. Various information materials were disseminated and children were encouraged to leave handprints for peace on canvases, which were displayed in a public location. While children were leaving handprints, adults were informed about violence issues. Similar campaigns were also organised on other occasions, for instance on the Dutch national day.

Dinamismo Juvenil also organised an event to celebrate the International Day of Peace 2008. The event began with a reflection week with children in communal activities, in schools and with families, on violence against children and youth in every day situations. This week ended with a peace fair together with



activities. The governor's office asked Dinamismo Juvenil to lead city government initiatives in favour of youth and to make an action plan to coordinate actions to achieve even better results.

▶ Global campaign – local action

20 other organisations, 30 educational institutions and the local government in Mexico City. There were educative workshops for children about their rights and workshops for youth as well as cultural and artistic shows. By organising these events, youth are given an alternative to violence and are trained in non-violence and peace.

The UN study recommendations are addressed to all nations in the world, but it includes also specific recommendations to non-governmental organisations. By linking up, UNOY members are taking steps to address these issues. The study identified that violence against children is a global issue with need for global action. However, local action is also needed to address the various issues efficiently. This is why the campaign is very much local in terms of outreach and target group. Campaigns are organised in Palestine, the Philippines, Mexico, Sierra Leone and the Netherlands. In addition, advocacy is done at local, regional and international level.

The campaigns are also complemented and followed-up by advocacy and lobby work to ensure that policy makers follow-up on the UN study recommendations and uphold their promises to reduce violence committed against children and youth. One crucial recommendation asserts that states should ensure participation of children and actively engage with children and that children's organisations and initiatives addressing violence should be supported and encouraged. Also, through their action and campaigns the members make policy makers aware that youth can make a positive contribution to society.

Another purpose of the campaign is to help youth organisations worldwide feel part of a larger initiative and to create a sense of belonging. Participation in the campaign was a very important experience for Dinamismo Juvenil because it created an awareness of what other organisations are doing in very different realities. It was important to establish links of cooperation and collaboration between groups who work with and for youth with the same subject in different countries and realities and the campaign is a pilot project for closer cooperation among UNOY Peacebuilders' members.

As a global network, UNOY Peacebuilders is also trying to advocate for youth participation in general and that youth are taken seriously and included in decision-making processes that relate to and concern them. Children and youth were part of the consultation process leading up to the UN Study and should subsequently be part of the implementation and follow-up of the study.

In addition to tackling the important issue that an uncounted number of children face violence on a daily basis, the campaign also breaks the stereotype that youth are only a problem that needs to be solved. In fact, youth are taking issues into their own hands and trying to create a better society and culture of peace. ■

UNOY Peacebuilders is also participating in regional and international conferences and public hearings related to this issue, and has also held meetings with organisations working in the same field. UNOY Peacebuilders participated in a debate during an international conference on this issue, speaking up and sharing youth perspectives. The International Secretariat has, together with a group of other Dutch NGOs, discussed with the Dutch Minister of Development the need to improve the cooperation between youth groups, civil society organisations, local and national governments and Dutch Embassies worldwide. UNOY Peacebuilders finds it crucial that governments and embassies build their capacity to learn to listen to youth and cooperate productively. During these meetings, examples and experiences of the members were presented to the Dutch Minister of Development so that these can be incorporated in future policy development of the Ministry. This is an example of local actions being fed back into the system of national governments to create policy change, which in turn will benefit the local community where development policies are being implemented. Together with the informal coalition of NGOs, the international secretariat is trying to push for a child-friendly check-list in Dutch development aid, to mention a concrete example. This toolkit has been developed by a youth delegation and will hopefully be included into the Dutch developmental aid policy as a means to ensure that aid is more child and youth-friendly

Dinamismo Juvenil has also lobbied locally and met with the Mexico City governor's office to introduce the organisation and

References and further reading: ✕

- To read more about UNOY Peacebuilders, please visit the following website: www.unoy.org.
- To read more about Dinamismo Juvenil AC, please visit the following website: <http://www.dinamismojuvenil.org.mx/>
- The full UN Study on Violence against Children can be accessed here: <http://www.violencestudy.org/>

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