



Guidance Note: Technical Approach and Operational Implementation

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

A pathway to strengthen children and young people's access to their rights and build inclusive and peaceful societies

Edition 2026



Terre des hommes

Helping children worldwide.



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About Tdh

The Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation (Tdh) is Switzerland's largest organization dedicated to defending children's rights. Since 1960, Tdh has been working to build a better future for children and their communities by offering innovative and sustainable solutions. Present in more than 30 countries, the organization works closely with local and international partners to improve the daily lives of millions of children and young people through programs in health, access to justice, and migration. Our work is made possible by the generosity of individuals and institutions, while keeping administrative costs to a strict minimum.

Impressum

Responsible for publication: Laura JACQUES (lead author), Marta GIL GONZALEZ (lead technical contributor), Yann COLLIQU, and Sophie BARBEY. Tdh Programs and Expertise Team.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Strengthening social cohesion

On a global scale, the tensions and pressures threatening social cohesion are now more palpable than ever. Growing economic inequality, identity fragmentation, and the rise of hate speech are fueling a climate of mistrust and polarization. This erosion of social bonds feeds the emergence of and commitment to radical discourse and groups. In turn, these dynamics further weaken social cohesion, exacerbating divisions and making societies more vulnerable to a spiral of violence and instability. This self-perpetuating vicious circle poses a major challenge to the stability and resilience of contemporary societies.

Social cohesion is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development and the building of peaceful and inclusive societies. By strengthening solidarity, mutual respect, and equitable access to fundamental rights, it ensures a more stable and protective environment, particularly for children and young people (CYP).

In a cohesive society, children and young people grow up in an environment that is more conducive to their development, with equitable access to education, socio-economic opportunities, and the protection of their rights. They also have more opportunities to express themselves and actively participate in decisions that affect them.

A stable and inclusive environment strengthens their trust in institutions and their ability to combat exclusion. By promoting dialogue and social justice, social cohesion contributes to the development of conflict management and restorative justice skills, thereby encouraging more peaceful interactions.

Ultimately, social cohesion is a powerful lever for ensuring equal rights and providing every child and young person with the tools they need to build societies that are more just, supportive, and harmonious for all.

Terre des hommes Lausanne (Tdh) and its partners are committed to promoting more peaceful and inclusive societies, in line with the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goal 16. Through its Access to Justice (A2J) Program, deployed in more than 30 countries, Tdh works to promote access to justice focused on children and young people. Convinced that social cohesion is essential to this mission, the organization has integrated it as a central pillar of its Theory of Change.

Tdh defines social cohesion as the quality of relationships within a society, based on the reduction of inequalities, respect for diversity, and mutual trust between social groups and towards public authorities. It relies on society's ability to manage conflicts peacefully, the establishment of representative institutions, and the will to build an inclusive and peaceful society, with a particular focus on having a positive impact on children's and young people's rights.

Tdh implements numerous projects to strengthen social cohesion, particularly in post-conflict countries and contexts of increasing violence. The organization focuses its work and interventions on strengthening social cohesion through three main levers of action:

- 1. Preventing violence among children and young people, including the prevention of violent extremism**
- 2. Strengthening the participation of children and young people in local governance, civic engagement, and conflict management mechanisms**
- 3. Ensuring effective access to local justice and strengthening legal empowerment of children, young people, and their communities**

Through these interventions, Tdh aims to create an environment where children and young people can flourish, fully enjoy their rights, and actively contribute to building peaceful and inclusive societies.

1.2. Scope and objectives

The **Guidance Note on Strengthening Social Cohesion** defines a clear conceptual framework for social cohesion and specifies Tdh's strategic and programmatic framework for strengthening social cohesion. It also aims to help Tdh teams and their partners define and measure social cohesion, identify pressures and divisive factors, and design interventions and projects based on these elements. In addition, it provides guidance for rigorous monitoring of their impact, thus ensuring more effective and sustainable actions.

This Guidance Note is accompanied by **three Programmatic Guides**, which serve as a reference for Tdh's interventions in favor of social cohesion. Based on good practices in the field and evidence, these guides provide a detailed programmatic framework for each area of action, approaches, practical advice, and concrete recommendations that can be adapted to the specificities of each country and target community. In addition, they identify good practices observed in the field and direct readers to additional resources.

Designed to accompany all phases of the programming cycle, this Note and its Guides provide practical advice applicable to both stand-alone projects and integrated initiatives.

It is essential that the interventions developed by Tdh staff align with this framework while remaining flexible. It must be used with discernment and creativity, drawing on a variety of experiences. It is not a rigid document, but a guide intended to ensure overall consistency while leaving room for adaptation and innovation in the approaches implemented.

How to navigate this guidance note?

Chapter 1 introduces this guidance note on strengthening social cohesion by clarifying the scope and objectives of this programmatic guidance.

Chapter 2 highlights the importance of social cohesion for the emergence of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, as well as for ensuring that children and young people (CYP) have access to their rights. It analyzes definitions of social cohesion, identifies the components of a cohesive society, and presents a conceptual framework, while recognizing that this concept is dynamic and that its interpretation varies according to context and societal dynamics.

Chapter 3 highlights the central role of strengthening social cohesion in Tdh's mission and programmatic strategy (Theory of Change). It specifies the main levers for action and the trajectory of change on which Tdh relies to strengthen social cohesion, while emphasizing its essential commitment to placing children and young people at the heart of its interventions to promote sustainable social cohesion.

Chapter 4 proposes an evaluation framework offering guidance on how to measure social cohesion in concrete terms and assess the impact of projects in this area. It introduces the Social Cohesion Index (SCI), an index developed by Tdh to analyze social cohesion within a given group and assess the impact of its projects to strengthen social cohesion.

2. UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINING SOCIAL COHESION



2.1. The importance of social cohesion

Why is it important to strengthen social cohesion? Why is social cohesion a prerequisite for creating peaceful, fair, and inclusive societies, and crucial for strengthening children's and young people's effective access to their rights? Despite the conceptual complexity of social cohesion, researchers and practitioners agree on its fundamental role in the development of our societies and the well-being of their members. It promotes trust, reduces inequalities, and enables everyone to fully integrate into an inclusive and supportive society. A cohesive society benefits both individuals and the community as a whole, thereby strengthening peace and sustainable development.

2.1.1. Social cohesion: a driver of peaceful and inclusive societies

Research in sociology, social psychology, and economics shows that cohesive societies benefit from better governance¹, greater economic prosperity, and greater resilience to conflict and crisis.²

A strong sense of belonging: Citizens of cohesive societies share common norms and values, which strengthen trust, solidarity, and collective security.³

Promotion of diversity and inclusion: A cohesive society promotes tolerance, diversity, and recognition of everyone's contributions, including those of minority groups, allowing members of society to flourish both as individuals and as part of the community.⁴

Strengthening democratic and participatory institutions: By reducing inequalities and promoting citizen participation, social cohesion supports stronger and more inclusive institutions. This fosters the emergence of stronger norms of citizenship and higher levels of institutionalized governance and encourages greater civic and political engagement.⁵ Social cohesion provides a foundation for the emergence of democratic nations and participatory citizenship.⁶

Reduced tensions and conflicts: Cohesive societies have also demonstrated a greater ability to manage their conflicts, combat crime, and avoid escalations of violence.⁷ Through accessible and equitable justice, effective remedies, and alternative (inclusive) dispute resolution mechanisms (ADR), cohesive societies favor the peaceful resolution of their differences.⁸

Restorative justice: a lever for social cohesion

A cohesive society relies in particular on the implementation of restorative justice, which aims to repair the harm caused, restore social ties, and reintegrate offenders into society. Unlike purely punitive justice, this approach involves all parties concerned (victims, perpetrators, and the community), offering victims a space to express their suffering and , and offenders the opportunity to become aware of their actions and reintegrate into

¹ UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs*, 2020; Lefko-Everett, *Towards a Measurement of Social Cohesion for Africa*, UNDP, 2016; Jenson and Beauvais, *Social Cohesion: Updating the State of the Research*.

² Jenson and Beauvais, *Social Cohesion: Updating the State of the Research*, 2002; Jenson, *Defining and Measuring Social Cohesion*, Commonwealth Secretariat and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2010; Economic Commission for Africa, *Social Cohesion in East Africa*, 2016; Burns, J., G. Hull, K. Lefko-Everett, and L. Njizela, "Defining Social Cohesion," *AFD Research Papers Series*, No. 2018-72; Lefko-Everett, *Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa*, UNDP, 2016; Knack and Keefer, *Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 112, No. 4, 1997; Chan, Joseph, Ho-pong To, Elaine Chan, 2006, *Reconsidering social cohesion: developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research*, Springer; Berkman, Lisa F., Ichiro, Kawachi and M. Maria Glymour, 2014, *Social Epidemiology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 174-190; World Bank, 1998, *The initiative on defining, monitoring and measuring social capital- overview and program*

description; UNDP, *Strengthening social cohesion- Conceptual framework and implications for programs*, 2020.

³ UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs*, 2020; UNDP, *Community Security and Social Cohesion, Towards a UNDP Approach*, 2009.

⁴ Lefko-Everett, *Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa*, UNDP, 2016; Burns; Hull; Lefko-Everett and Njizela, "Defining Social Cohesion", *AFD Research Papers Series*, No. 2018-72, 2018.

⁵ UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs*, 2020; Lefko-Everett, *Towards a Measurement of Social Cohesion for Africa*, UNDP, 2016; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Social Cohesion and Democracy*, 2009.

⁶ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Social Cohesion and Democracy*, 2009.

⁷ World Bank, *Pathways for Peace Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict*, 2018.

⁸ Hudson, Maria et al. (2007). *Social Cohesion in Diverse Communities*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation; UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs*, 2020.

the community. This approach reduces recidivism and promotes the restoration of social harmony.⁹

¹⁰Resilience and economic growth: By ensuring equitable access to resources, public services, robust social support networks, and opportunities, cohesive societies reduce income disparities, boost productivity, and promote sustained growth while being more resilient to crises.¹¹

Trust and dialogue: By promoting mutual respect, interdependence between different social groups, and reducing identity-based divisions (ethnic, religious, etc.), social cohesion weakens hate speech and extremist rhetoric.¹² When societies are more cohesive and channels for dialogue, cooperation, and interaction are multiple and multi-level, polarizing and identity-based rhetoric is more likely to fail.¹³

Social cohesion is at the heart of peace-building strategies

Over the past decade, improving social cohesion has become central to violence prevention and peacebuilding programs, particularly in fragile and post-conflict contexts. These initiatives are characterized by:

- A multisectoral and multidimensional approach that addresses a wide range of socioeconomic and political issues, beyond the immediate resolution of conflicts;
- Inclusive participation, ensuring that no one is left behind; and
- The restoration of a strong social contract between the state and the population, which is essential for peace and sustainable development.

⁹ Fitzduff, Mari, 2007, *Measuring Social Inclusion and Cohesion. The Challenges*, Brandeis University; Search for Common Ground, 2015, *Social Cohesion Framework, Social Cohesion for Stronger Communities*; World Bank, 2000, *The Nexus Between Violent Conflict, Social Capital and Social Cohesion: Case Studies from Cambodia and Rwanda*; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2009, *Community Security and Social Cohesion Towards a UNDP Approach*; UNDP and the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2015, *Predicting Peace - The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index as a Tool for Conflict Transformation*.

¹⁰ Lefko-Everett, *Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa*, UNDP, 2016; Economic Commission for Africa, *Social Cohesion in East Africa*, 2016; Manole, Alina Magdalena, 2012, *Social cohesion – a post-crisis analysis*, *Theoretical and Applied Economics*, vol. XVIII(2012), issue 11(576).

¹¹ Casey, Gregory, and Ann Owen (2014). *Inequality and fractionalization*. *World Development*, vol. 56 Jenson, *Defining and Measuring Social*

These considerations have led international organizations such as the UNDP, the World Bank, and the OECD to adopt strategies focused on social ties to address the root causes of conflict. As a result, social cohesion is now seen as an essential lever for building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

May 16, International Day of Living Together in Peace

May 16 marks the International Day of Living Together in Peace, established by the UN in 2017. It aims to mobilize States and the international community to promote peace, tolerance, and solidarity. It is an opportunity to affirm the desire to live together in diversity. States are encouraged to work towards reconciliation and sustainable development by collaborating with communities and religious leaders, adopting solidarity-based actions, and promoting forgiveness and compassion.¹⁴

2.1.2. Strengthening social cohesion: a lever for children and young people's access to their rights

The benefits of social cohesion extend beyond these collective dimensions. It promotes effective access to fundamental rights by strengthening equity, solidarity, security, and justice. A cohesive environment allows everyone, especially children and young people, to enjoy their fundamental rights and to grow up in conditions conducive to their personal and civic development, regardless of their origin, gender, economic status, or beliefs.

Growing up in a safe and nurturing environment: To ensure their physical, mental, and emotional development, children and young people need to grow up in a safe and caring environment.¹⁵ Mutual trust and harmonious relations between members of

Cohesion, Commonwealth Secretariat and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2010.

¹² UNDP, *Forging Resilient Social Contracts: A Pathway to Preventing Violent Conflict and Sustaining Peace*, 2018.

¹³ UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs*, 2020.

¹⁴ United Nations, *International Day of Living Together in Peace*, May 16, <https://www.un.org/fr/observances/living-in-peace-day>

¹⁵ Tdh, *Towards Psychosocial Resilience and Well-being, Operational Guide*, 2017; Tdh, *Working with Children and Their Environment*, 2012; UNDP, *Strengthening Social Cohesion - an Opportunity for Mental Health and Human Development? The Druk Journal, International Perspectives volume 9, Issue 1.*, 2019;

society reduce tensions and conflicts, creating a climate conducive to the exercise of their rights. In such an environment, institutions are perceived as protective and accessible, and children and young people know who to turn to in cases of violations of their rights or situations of violence.¹⁶

Knowing and asserting one's rights: In a cohesive society, solidarity and inclusion facilitate the protection and exercise of the rights of the youngest members. Legal education plays a central role in raising awareness among children and young people about their rights and responsibilities, particularly with regard to civic participation. Better informed, they are more likely to engage with norms and decision-making processes and to contribute actively to the development and governance of their community.¹⁷

Cultivating coexistence and learning peaceful conflict management: Social cohesion encourages the harmonious coexistence of diverse social groups and teaches children the importance of dialogue, tolerance, and peaceful conflict management mechanisms. Growing up in such an environment, they acquire essential skills that help them resolve disputes constructively and peacefully. This social resilience enables them to cope with life's challenges and avoid spirals of violence.

Encouraging youth participation in society: Inclusion promotes the active participation of CYP in social, economic, and political life. When they feel listened to and valued, they become more involved in community and political initiatives. This active role enables them to ensure that their rights are taken into account and that public policies respond to their needs and aspirations.

Valuing diversity and strengthening the sense of belonging: A cohesive social environment recognizes diversity and promotes inclusion. CYP learn to respect differences, fight against inequalities, and help the most vulnerable. This strengthens their sense of belonging and dignity,

which are essential to their identity building and personal development. Conversely, a climate of exclusion increases the risk of marginalization and violence, particularly through phenomena such as gang violence and gender discrimination.¹⁸

'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) in Bhutan: a model of social cohesion

Bhutan illustrates the positive impact of social cohesion on the education and well-being of young people. Based on values of peace, harmony, and coexistence, Bhutanese society integrates social skills into education, including peaceful conflict management and dispute resolution through dialogue.¹⁹ The concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH) prioritizes collective well-being over economic growth alone, emphasizing the preservation of cultural and environmental values. From an early age, children are encouraged to cultivate emotional intelligence and compassion, fostering a climate of trust and solidarity.²⁰

¹⁶ Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J. and Boehnke, K. (2013b). Social Cohesion Radar Measuring Common Ground: An International Comparison of Social Cohesion Codebook. Bertelsmann Stiftung; Pervaiz, Z., Chaudhary, A. R. and van Staveren, I. (2013). Diversity, Inclusiveness and Social Cohesion. Institute of Social Studies, Working Paper No 2013-1.

¹⁷ International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Social cohesion and Democracy, 2009.

¹⁸ Terre des hommes, Wana Institute, Rethinking the Motivations Leading to Violent Extremism: A Program for the Resilience of Children and Youth, 2018.

¹⁹ Maria Carasco Rey, Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Framework implements a holistic approach to progress and well-being, Pathfinders, 2023; Matthew J. Schuelka, T.W. Maxwell, Education in Bhutan, Culture, Schooling, and Gross National Happiness, Springer, 2016.

²⁰ George W. Burns, Gross National Happiness: a gift from Bhutan to the world, Springer, 2010.

2.2. Definitions and conceptual framework

2.2.1. Definitions and components of social cohesion

A multidimensional and evolving concept, social cohesion varies according to context and terminology (living together²¹, Ubuntu²², social capital²³). Although it has been studied since the 19th century by thinkers such as Durkheim and Tönnies, no universal definition exists.²⁴ In its early days, social cohesion was defined as "the way in which members of a society are connected and the strength of the bonds that unite them."²⁵

Since the 1990s, social cohesion has become a central issue in public policy and a macro-objective of peace and development programs. Several institutions have attempted to define it:

- **UNICEF:** The quality of coexistence between groups in a society, measured by mutual trust, shared values, and social justice.²⁶
- **UNDP:** A state of convergence in a society where citizens interact around common institutions, with trust in the state and a willingness to build lasting peace.²⁷
- **Council of Europe:** The capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all, reduce inequalities, and promote a supportive community.²⁸
- **World Bank:** Absence of latent conflicts and presence of strong social ties, supported by solid institutions and democratic governance.²⁹

Although social cohesion is studied from different perspectives, there is a certain consensus that social cohesion includes the following fundamental elements³⁰:

- **Diversity management and harmonious coexistence:** Social cohesion involves a society's ability to promote the acceptance and integration of its different social groups (cultural, ethnic, religious) and to ensure harmonious and peaceful coexistence by encouraging dialogue and avoiding discrimination.
- **Quality of relationships, interaction, and trust:** Social cohesion is based on strong interpersonal and intergroup relationships, characterized by a high level of trust and cooperation. The stronger these bonds are, the more resilient society is in the face of tensions.
- **Sense of belonging and shared values:** Adherence to common norms, a collective identity, and a shared vision strengthen solidarity and citizen participation. A strong sense of belonging contributes to social stability and respect for institutions.
- **Trust in institutions:** A cohesive society is characterized by citizens' trust in authorities and state structures. This trust is based on the transparency, fairness, representativeness, and legitimacy of institutions.

²¹ In French-speaking countries in Western Europe and West Africa, the term "living together" is frequently used in everyday language as an equivalent and interchangeable expression for "social cohesion." The Permanent Commission on Living Together of the International Association of Francophone Mayors defines living together as "a dynamic process that all actors implement to promote inclusion and a sense of belonging at different levels. Promoting living together means recognizing all forms of diversity, combating discrimination, and facilitating harmonious coexistence. The various actors in the field work together to facilitate the emergence of common values that contribute to social cohesion," AIMF.

²² For many African philosophers and sociologists, there are parallels between social cohesion and Ubuntu—a concept shared by many cultural groups and with variations in several languages that means "the importance of community, altruism, solidarity, sharing, and benevolence." Lefko-Everett, Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa, UNDP, 2016.

²³ In the North American approach, the concept of social cohesion is reflected in the notion of social capital. Social capital is generally understood as the accumulation of trust and willingness to cooperate in a society, based on experiences gained from interactions, networks, and cooperative ties, and mutually beneficial economic exchanges.

²⁴ Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021; Burns; Hull; Lefko-Everett and Njuzela, "Defining Social Cohesion," AFD Research Papers Series, No. 2018-72, 2018. Bruhn, J. G. (2009). The Group Effect: Social Cohesion and Health Outcomes. London and New York: Springer; Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., and Boehnke, K. (2013a). Social Cohesion Radar Measuring Common Ground: An International Comparison of Social Cohesion. Bertelsmann Stiftung.

²⁵ Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, 1983; Dragolov, G., Ignácz, Z., Lorenz, J., Delhey, J., and Boehnke, K. (2013a). Social Cohesion Radar Measuring Common Ground: An International Comparison of Social Cohesion. Bertelsmann Stiftung.

²⁶ UNICEF, Key Peacebuilding Concepts for the Peacebuilding, Education, and Advocacy (PBEA) program.

²⁷ UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020.

²⁸ Council of Europe, Revised Social Cohesion Strategy of the Council of Europe, 2010.

²⁹ The World Bank, Violent Conflict and the Transformation of Social Capital, 2000.

³⁰ Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

- **Perception of economic and social inclusion:** The perception of a fair distribution of resources and opportunities reduces inequalities and promotes the active participation of all in economic and social life. Access to essential services (education, health, employment) is a key factor in cohesion.
- **Conflict management mechanisms:** A cohesive society has accessible and fair mechanisms for resolving conflicts. The presence of reliable judicial institutions, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms,

and effective remedies helps prevent conflicts from escalating and preserve social peace.

- **Security and stability:** The absence of violence, conflict, or crime strengthens the sense of individual and collective protection. Social cohesion relies on an environment where everyone feels safe.

These elements interact and evolve depending on the context, making social cohesion a dynamic concept rather than a fixed state.

2.2.2. Social cohesion according to Terre des hommes

Based on its research and practice, Tdh defines social cohesion as:

"The quality of relations within a society, based on reducing inequalities, respect for diversity, and mutual trust between social groups and public authorities. It relies on society's ability to manage conflicts peacefully, the establishment of representative institutions, and the desire to build an inclusive and peaceful society, with a particular focus on having a positive impact on children's and young people's rights."

It is characterized by six main components:

1. **Social relations** encompass inter-group and inter-individual (horizontal) trust in diversity, mutual respect, and solidarity.
2. **Belonging** is based on shared values, a sense of belonging, and a shared vision and identity.
3. **Inclusion** refers to the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and the active participation of all in economic and social life.

4. **Legitimacy** is reflected in trust in institutions (vertical) and inclusive and representative governance.
5. **Conflict management** is based on access to justice and peaceful resolution mechanisms.
6. **Security and peace** refer to the absence of escalating violence and crime, a sense of personal and collective security, and the perception of lasting peace.³¹

Horizontal and vertical dimensions

Social cohesion has two dimensions. The **horizontal dimension** concerns the relationships and interactions between individuals and social groups, reflecting their interdependence and solidarity.³² The **vertical dimension** refers to the relationship between citizens and institutions, embodying trust in the state³³ and its role in governance, justice, and public services.³⁴

In short, strong social cohesion is based on bonds of trust and solidarity both between individuals and with institutions, ensuring fair and sustainable relationships.³⁵

³¹ Terre des hommes, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

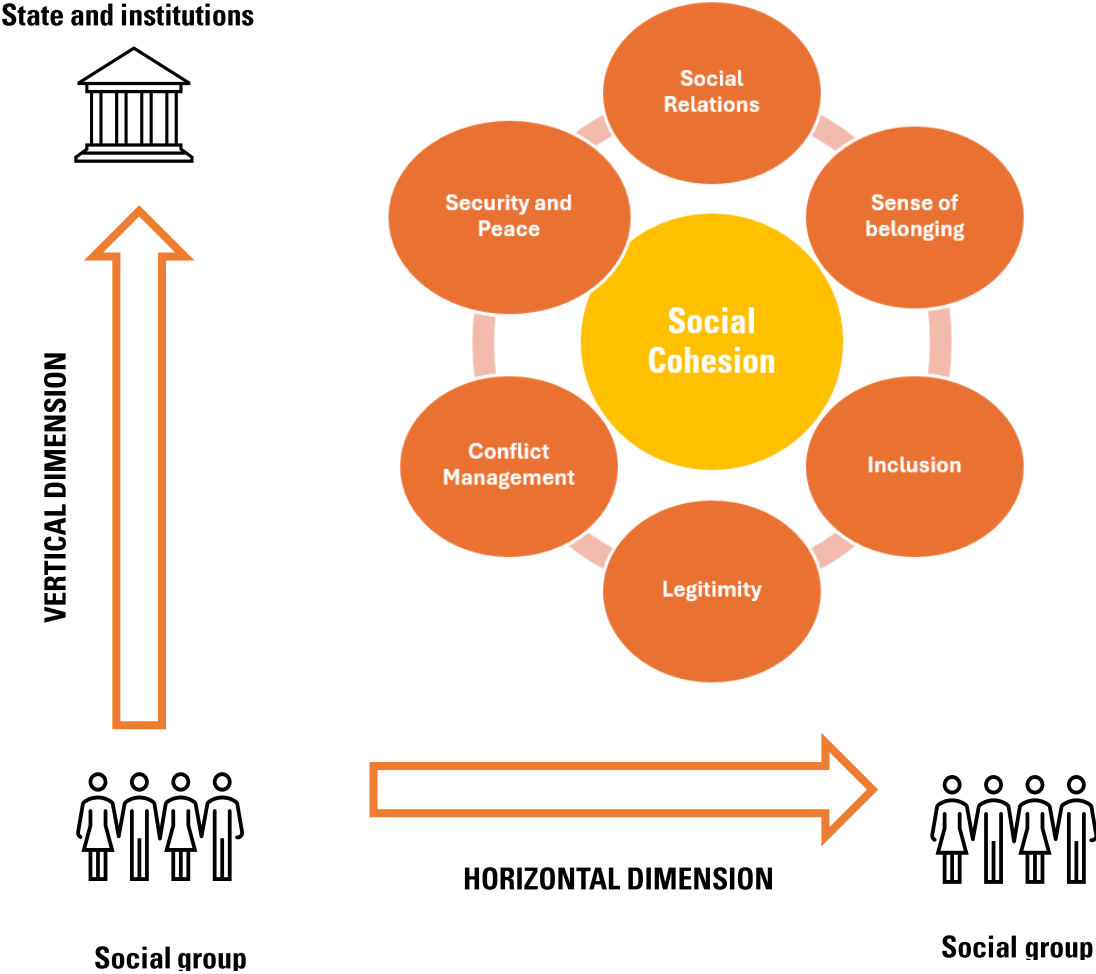
³² Hooghe, Marc, 2011, The Development of a Comprehensive Social Cohesion Indicator for Belgian Communities. Data Reduction Techniques for Community Level Data, 2011.

³³ United Nations Development Programme. Predicting Peace: The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index as a Tool for Conflict Transformation. 2015: 70.

³⁴ Larsen and Boehnke, Measuring Social Cohesion in the Kyrgyz Republic The Social Cohesion Index, 2016; UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020; Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and Developing a Measure of Social Cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

³⁵ Catholic Relief Services, The Mini-Barometer of Social Cohesion: A Tool for Assessing and Strengthening Social Cohesion in Divided Communities, 2020.

Figure 1. Tdh's conceptual framework for social cohesion



2.4. Understanding and conceptualizing social cohesion: an essential prerequisite for the programming work (conceptualization and implementation)

Tdh considers social cohesion to be a dynamic state, influenced by events, relationships, and attitudes.³⁶ It evolves on different scales, whether geographical (village, municipality, region, nation) or demographic (micro, meso, and macro). It manifests itself between individuals within the same group, between distinct groups (religious or linguistic communities), or between a group and the state.³⁷

Although its components remain broadly similar, the factors that strengthen or weaken it vary according to context, history, and social and political dynamics. An in-depth analysis of local and national factors is therefore essential before any intervention. Understanding power relations, tensions, and forces of unity makes it possible to tailor actions to the realities of each society.

Tdh therefore advocates a contextualization process involving local authorities and actors to define social cohesion according to their vision and frame of reference. The intervention is based on this shared definition, ensuring a relevant approach that is rooted in the society concerned.³⁸

Towards a shared vision of social cohesion in Burkina Faso: a collective approach for tailored interventions

Since 2020, Terre des hommes (Tdh) has been running a Social Cohesion Strengthening Program in Burkina Faso, funded by the European Union. Before any intervention, Tdh organized consultation frameworks bringing together experts and national actors to define a common vision of social cohesion in Burkina Faso. Thanks to this collective national definition process, the discussions made it possible to identify

unifying values that transcend divisions and to analyze the social dynamics that influence cohesion, both positively and negatively. By incorporating Tdh's research on the political, sociocultural, and economic context, these exchanges resulted in interventions tailored to the realities of the country. The appropriation of this definition by national actors is essential to ensure its acceptance and promotion.³⁹

Additional resources:

- Tdh, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.
- Tdh, Study on Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Areas Hosting Internally Displaced Populations in Burkina Faso, HiIL and UNHCR, 2022.
- Tdh, Analysis of Social Cohesion in the Intervention Areas of the Emergency Development Program (PDU), 2024.

³⁶ UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020; Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and Developing a Measure of Social Cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

³⁷ Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

³⁸ Terre des hommes Lausanne, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

³⁹ Terre des hommes, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.



3. STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

3.1. A core objective of Tdh's strategy and interventions

Tdh works in more than 30 countries with children and young people, their families, local communities, and state institutions to significantly improve and promote safe, restorative, and inclusive access to justice for children and young people, where their rights are respected.⁴⁰ Through its Access to Justice program, Tdh and its partners participate in global efforts to prevent conflict, ensure access to justice for all, and build peaceful and inclusive societies through humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development programs (*nexus*).

In recent years, Tdh's portfolio of projects on conflict prevention and management, participation in governance, prevention of violence and delinquency, and access to local justice has contributed to a common goal: strengthening social cohesion. Tdh works at various levels to address the root causes of conflicts that lead to violence and hinder the exercise of children's and young people's rights, as well as their access to effective justice institutions.

In 2023, when revising the strategy for its Access to Justice Program (*A2J Theory of Change*), Tdh placed social cohesion at the heart of its strategy, making the strengthening of social cohesion one of the four themes of intervention in its program and an objective of its theory of change. Strengthening social cohesion is therefore a strategic programmatic objective for Tdh and a common objective of its interventions.

Tdh's work and interventions to strengthen social cohesion are part of its overall efforts to contribute to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No. 16 (SDG16), which aims to promote more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. Strengthening social cohesion between citizens and the state, as well as between individuals and social groups, is a central element of SDG16 and a prerequisite for sustainable development and peaceful societies. This goal, which aims to establish responsive and open institutions and representative decision-making, directly addresses the need to strengthen social cohesion⁴¹.

3.2. Why is it necessary to strengthen social cohesion?

Tensions and pressures threatening social cohesion

Social cohesion is based on structural and circumstantial factors that unify society. However, various elements can weaken it, with the risk of generating conflict and violence.

Active in different contexts, Tdh has analyzed these divisive factors and their consequences on E&J. Although the drivers of division are contextual, certain dynamics particularly affect the social fabric.

Narratives of belonging, identity ideologies, and violent extremism

Identity narratives reinforce social divisions and undermine the social contract by exploiting discrimination, inequalities, and poor governance. In multi-ethnic societies, national identity can be inclusive or, conversely, based on ethnic, racial, or

religious criteria.⁴² Certain nationalist discourses exacerbate fears and insecurities, making citizens vulnerable to radical ideologies and violence.

Violent extremism often reveals a lack of social cohesion, exposing deep internal divisions even in societies that appear resilient on the surface. It is not limited to disrupting peace and security but has lasting social, cultural, and psychological consequences on young people and their communities. A study by Tdh and the Wanna Institute (2018) identified several motivations for extremist recruitment:

- **Structural motivations:** repression, corruption, unemployment, inequality, discrimination, intergroup tensions.

⁴⁰ Terre des hommes, Theory of Change for the Access to Justice Program, <https://www.tdh.org/fr/mediatheque/documents/theorie-du-changement-programme-acces-a-la-justice-a2>

⁴¹ UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020.

⁴² UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020.

- **Individual motivations:** sense of belonging, status, search for adventure or material rewards.
- **Attraction factors:** influence of mentors, access to extremist networks, Manichean ideologies.⁴³

The study reveals that individuals join extremist groups mainly because they reject a given situation or for personal reasons influenced by contextual conditions. Faced with this reality, the study criticizes repressive measures and so-called "soft" strategies for preventing radicalization and proposes positive and attractive alternatives for young people. It is crucial to offer them varied opportunities and skills that promote resilience, critical thinking, conflict management, and participation in building a peaceful future.

"When you have a friend and then they realize you're out of place, they stop being your friend."

"We are called terrorists almost every day."

"Children from other communities don't really like us playing with them."

Testimonials from internally displaced children in northern Burkina Faso

A study conducted in 2022 by Tdh and The Hague Institute for Innovation of Law explores perceptions of social cohesion among displaced E&J in northern Burkina Faso, a region heavily affected by violent extremism.⁴⁴ Children and young people have not escaped the consequences of a fragmented society marked by ethnic discrimination, feelings of exclusion, and inter-community mistrust. Stigmatized, attacked, and excluded from children's spaces by some members of the host community, the internally displaced children aged 12 to 15 interviewed by Tdh could not hide their distress at

⁴³ Tdh and Wanna Institute, Rethinking the Motivations Leading to Violent Extremism: A Program for the Resilience of Children and Youth, 2019.

⁴⁴ Tdh, Study on the needs and satisfaction of children in terms of justice in areas hosting internally displaced populations in Burkina Faso, Hill and UNHCR, 2022.

⁴⁵ Tdh, Study on the needs and satisfaction of children in terms of justice in areas hosting internally displaced populations in Burkina Faso, Hill and UNHCR, 2022.

the insults, racial profiling, and violence they regularly face.⁴⁵

Legal exclusion and political marginalization

Political representation, institutional legitimacy, and citizen participation in public decision-making are important attributes of social cohesion in a society. When certain groups, particularly women, LGBTQIA+ people, and young people, are excluded from decision-making, it leads to frustration and mistrust of the state. An environment conducive to citizen participation and civil society action strengthens the social contract. Conversely, restricting civic space limits interactions, weakens vertical trust, and increases exclusion.

"The biggest challenge I face is not being taken seriously. When I talk to policy makers, all they see is a little kid making noise. All they see is someone who hasn't lived long enough to know what they're talking about."

Young person, 17 years old, Kenya

The criminalization of youth movements, the lack of representation of young women in institutions, and political discrimination weaken the bond between the state and its citizens. Yet laws and public policies directly shape and influence intergroup relations.⁴⁶

Lack of inclusive justice and conflict management mechanisms

Justice is an essential catalyst for social cohesion. In a society with a fair legal system, access to justice guarantees respect for rights, strengthens trust in institutions, and promotes community life based on common standards. Inclusive justice, ensuring impartial and non-discriminatory access to conflict resolution through negotiation, mediation, or third-party decision-making, strengthens social cohesion by protecting individual rights and building trust in the judicial system. Fair and prompt access to justice prevents conflicts from escalating, promotes mutual understanding, and maintains harmonious relations.⁴⁷ Conversely, the absence of inclusive

⁴⁶ UNDP, Strengthening Social Cohesion, Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020.

⁴⁷ Tdh, Study on the needs and satisfaction of children in terms of justice in areas hosting internally displaced populations in Burkina Faso, Hill and UNHCR, 2022.

justice or fair conflict management mechanisms increases the risk of violence and crime and weakens social cohesion. In 2019, a Tdh study examined Syrian E&J's access to informal justice in Lebanon.⁴⁸ It revealed the marginalization, harassment, and exploitation of young Syrians by host communities, particularly through forced labor and gender-based violence. Arrested for lack of legal residence status, they suffer discriminatory practices by judicial and security institutions. The lack of legal recourse to state justice and community justice mechanisms exacerbates social tensions and divisions, weakening cohesion between Syrian and Lebanese communities.⁴⁹

Strengthening social cohesion: inclusion, justice, and citizen participation

Identity tensions, political exclusion, and lack of access to fair justice undermine social cohesion. The lack of positive alternatives for young people and the restriction of civic space fuel violent extremism and marginalization. To strengthen social cohesion, it is essential to promote inclusion, justice, and citizen participation. A more united and resilient society is based on equal opportunities for all and accessible and fair mechanisms for dialogue and conflict resolution.

⁴⁸ Tdh, *Informal Justice for Children in Syrian Settlements in Lebanon*, 2019.

⁴⁹ Tdh, *Informal Justice for Children in Syrian Settlements in Lebanon*, 2019.

3.3. How does Tdh strengthen social cohesion?

3.3.1. Three priority areas for action

Tdh focuses its efforts and interventions to strengthen social cohesion on three main levers for action:

- 1. Preventing violence among children and young people, including the prevention of violent extremism**
- 2. Strengthening the participation of children and young people in local governance, civic engagement, and conflict management**
- 3. Ensuring effective access to local justice and strengthening legal empowerment**

Based on evidence and its expertise in the field, Tdh believes that focusing its interventions in these areas of action will reduce divisions and factors of conflict and promote a cohesive and inclusive environment (*intermediate effects- medium-term changes*). In the long term, they contribute to building more cohesive and peaceful societies where children and young people can fully exercise their rights (*impact - sustainable and systemic change*).

Tdh only intervenes in contexts where its expertise and levers for action can bring significant added value. A preliminary analysis of social cohesion is essential to assess the causes and factors of division and determine whether they can be addressed by its areas of action (*see Chapter 4. Measuring and evaluating social cohesion*).

The **trajectory of change** towards strengthening social cohesion that we follow (*see Figure 3 below*) provides an overview of our levers for action, as well as the transformations and results expected in the short and long term to achieve sustainable social cohesion. Interventions are designed to act effectively at the community and institutional levels, placing Y&A at the center of social change.

In addition to this Guidance Note, three **Program Guides** serve as a reference framework for programming in these areas of action. They specify our commitment, detail our approaches, and propose concrete guidelines for the implementation of our interventions.

3.3.2. The central role of young people: drivers and actors of social cohesion

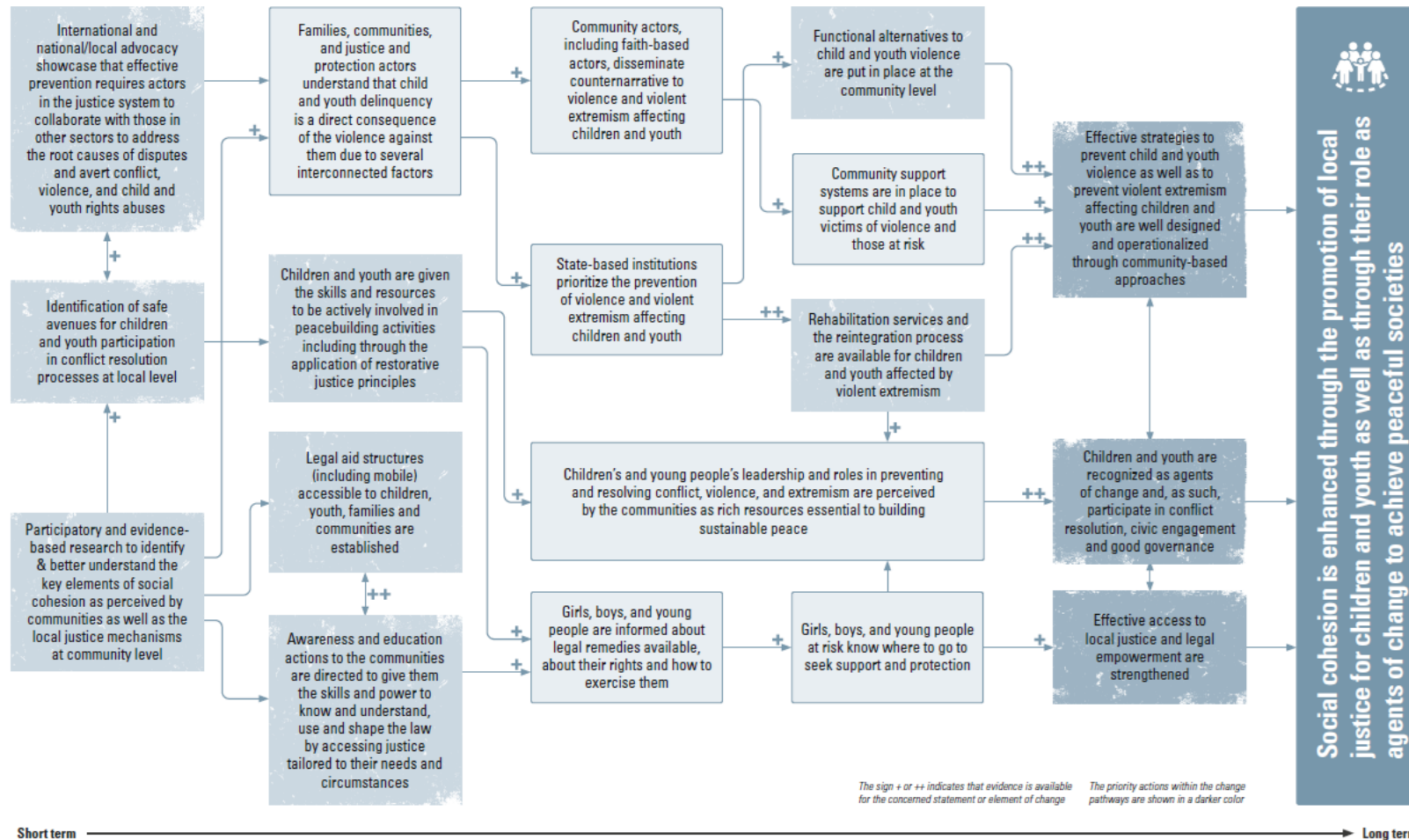
Beyond being the target of our interventions to strengthen social cohesion, young people are, above all, the main drivers of our actions. They play a central role in building the social fabric through the transmission of values, intergenerational interactions, and the promotion of diversity and tolerance.

Aware of their rights and trained in peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms, they actively contribute to easing community tensions and promoting peaceful messages and inclusive social dynamics. Furthermore, their civic engagement and ability to propose innovative solutions make them key actors of social change. By participating in governance processes, they bring new ideas and ensure effective representation of young people's interests, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and transparency of institutions.

By transcending differences and committing themselves to equality and inclusive justice, they foster a harmonious environment. Tdh therefore places their voices, ideas, and expertise at the heart of its intervention strategies, recognizing their potential as agents of positive social change.

Figure 2. Tdh's trajectory of change to strengthen social cohesion

Theory of change A2J Programme – Social cohesion





4. MEASURING AND EVALUATING SOCIAL COHESION

4.1. Measuring social cohesion

In addition to its definition, a recent debate on social cohesion concerns its measurement and evaluation. How can we know whether a society is becoming more divided or more united without measurement tools? Without appropriate tools, it is difficult to monitor the progress and impact of social cohesion programs. These assessment tools, integrated into public policies and development programs, are essential for identifying dynamics and priority actions, measuring progress, and evaluating impact.⁵⁰

Some states and international organizations have developed evaluation methodologies, mainly indices, in Europe, North America, and Africa. Some indices measure cohesion at the national level⁵¹, while others allow for continental comparisons, such as the Social Cohesion Radar in Southeast Asia and the Social Cohesion Measure for Africa.⁵² In the peacebuilding sector, several organizations have developed assessment tools, such as the UNDP's SCORE index⁵³, which measures social cohesion in post-conflict societies, and Tdh's Social Cohesion Index (SCI), designed to measure a society's social cohesion and monitor the impact of strengthening programs.⁵⁴

The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index (SCORE)

Developed by the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development (SeeD) and the UNDP, the SCORE index was initially designed in Cyprus before being applied in Bosnia, Liberia, and Nepal. It is recognized as a tool for assessing social cohesion and reconciliation, two indicators that are essential to peace in multi-ethnic societies. The SCORE Index collects individual data on social cohesion, reconciliation, and demographic characteristics. It is based on eight key dimensions: trust in institutions, institutional representation, human security, civic and

personal satisfaction, absence of corruption, ethnic identification, and citizen participation.⁵⁵

4.2. The Social Cohesion Index (SCI)

4.2.1. Background

The Social Cohesion Index (SCI) was initially designed by Terre des hommes (Tdh) and the Research and Applied Analysis for Development Group (GRAAD) as part of the evaluation of a Social Cohesion Strengthening Program funded by the European Union. It also aims to monitor the progress of Burkina Faso's National Social Cohesion Strategy 2021-2025. In light of the results obtained, Tdh, the European Union, and other partners decided to adopt the ICS as a key tool for the design, monitoring, and evaluation of social cohesion strengthening projects. Integrated into the project cycle, this measurement and analysis tool makes it possible to establish a baseline, guide the design of interventions, monitor their progress, and evaluate their impact on social cohesion.

4.2.2. Methodology and dimensions

The ICS is an index measure of social cohesion that can be used to measure the social cohesion of a society or group and how it is changing. It analyzes several socio-demographic dimensions and variations and can be applied at different levels: national, community, or regional. It is based on six main dimensions:

- Social relations
- Sense of belonging
- Inclusion
- Legitimacy
- Conflict management

⁵⁰ UNDP, 2020, Strengthening Social Cohesion - Conceptual Framework and Implications for Programs, 2020; Burns, J., G. Hull, K. Lefko-Everett, and L. Njuzela, 2018, "From definition to measurement: constructing a social cohesion index for South Africa," AFD Research Papers.

⁵¹ UNDP, 2016, Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa.

⁵² S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Southeast Asian Social Cohesion Radar, 2022; UNDP, 2016, Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa.

⁵³ UNDP and the Center for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2015, Predicting Peace - The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index as a Tool for Conflict Transformation.

⁵⁴ Catholic Relief Services, The Mini-Barometer of Social Cohesion: A Tool for Assessing and Strengthening Social Cohesion in Divided Communities, 2020; Search for Common Ground, Building Social Cohesion in the Midst of Conflict: Identifying Challenges, Measuring Progress, & Maximizing Results, 2020; UNDP and the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2015, Predicting Peace - The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index as a Tool for Conflict Transformation.

⁵⁵ UNDP and the Centre for Sustainable Peace and Democratic Development, 2015, Predicting Peace - The Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Index as a Tool for Conflict Transformation.

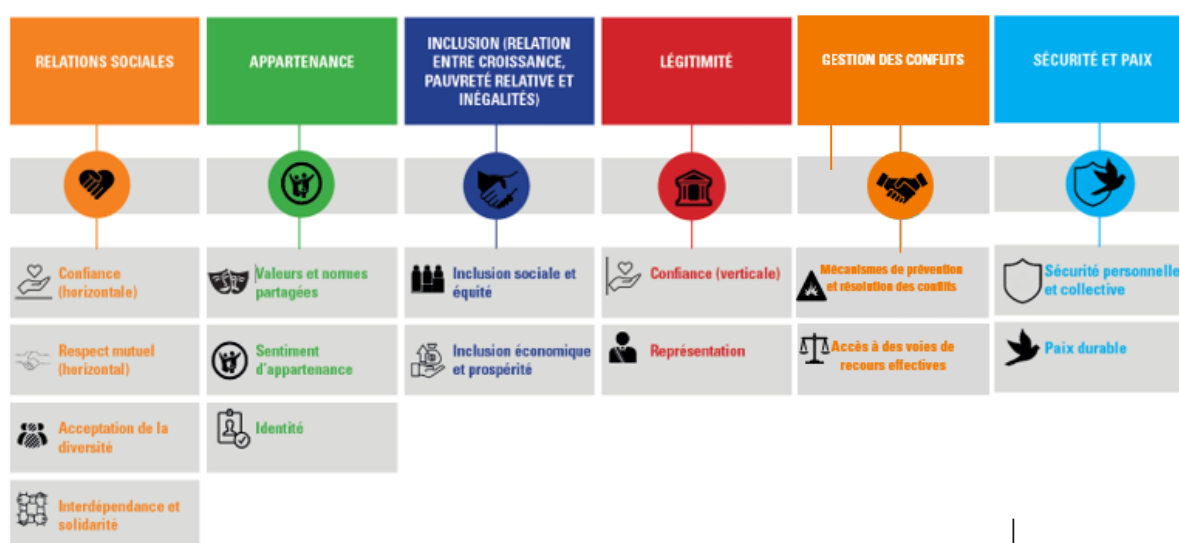
- Security and peace

These dimensions are broken down into sub-dimensions and subjective and objective indicators, adapted to specific national circumstances. For example, in Burkina Faso, the ICS comprises 13 sub-dimensions and 189 indicators. Data collection is based on a questionnaire administered during individual interviews.

4.2.3. Adaptation to national specificities

As social cohesion is a concept that varies from one society to another, Tdh adapts the ICS to national contexts through a consultative process involving local stakeholders. This process allows the sub-dimensions and indicators to be adjusted. In Burkina Faso, local actors contributed to the development of the Burkinabe ICS, ensuring its contextual relevance.

Figure 3. Dimensions and sub-dimensions of the ICS



4.2.4. Advantages and limitations

The ICS allows for a multi-scale measurement of social cohesion and provides detailed data on socio-demographic and spatial variations. It incorporates information on diversity, age, religion, and gender, offering a detailed analysis of intergroup dynamics.⁵⁶

The ICS methodological approach, based on primary data collection and open-ended surveys, enriches the analysis but presents challenges related to resources, sampling, and data management.⁵⁷ In addition, the current ICS is designed for adults and young adults, limiting the assessment of children's perceptions. To overcome this limitation, Tdh plans to adapt the ICS to include the perceptions of children and young people, allowing for a more representative

approach and promoting the development of appropriate strategies.

Social Cohesion Index in Burkina Faso

First deployed in 2021 in several Burkinabe municipalities, the ICS identified weaknesses and pressures on social cohesion and guided development actors.⁵⁸ Three years later, it assessed the impact of interventions, highlighting positive effects on communities and the best approaches for strengthening them.

The ICS revealed low levels of trust between citizens and between social groups. It also showed that civil servants express less trust in the state than other

⁵⁶ Tdh, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.

⁵⁷ Lefko-Everett, Towards a measurement of social cohesion for Africa, UNDP, 2016

⁵⁸ Tdh, Operationalizing the Burkina Faso Social Cohesion Index, 2021.

citizens, and that young people aged 18 to 35 feel less social cohesion than their elders. In addition, internally displaced persons have significantly lower levels of social cohesion than local residents.

The evaluation of interventions using the ICS highlighted progress in social inclusion, security, and sense of identity. Since then, the ICS has been integrated as a monitoring tool for the 2021-2025 National Social Cohesion Strategy and used in various development and peacebuilding programs.

Additional resources:

- Tdh, Designing and developing a measure of social cohesion for Burkina Faso, 2021.
- Tdh, Operationalizing the Burkina Faso Social Cohesion Index, 2021.
- Tdh, Study on Justice Needs and Satisfaction in Areas Hosting Internally Displaced Populations in Burkina Faso, HiiL and UNHCR, 2022.
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Every child in the world has the right to be
a child, quite simply.



Siège | Hauptsitz | Sede | Headquarters
Route des Plaines-du-Loup 55, 1018 Lausanne
T +41 58 611 06 11, donorcare@tdh.org
www.tdh.org, CH41 0900 0000 1001 1504 8

www.tdh.org
www.linkedin.com/company/tdh-org
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Preventing violence among children and young people, including the prevention of violent extremism

AREA OF ACTION 1

GUIDANCE NOTE - STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

A pathway to promoting the rights of children and young people, resolving conflicts, and building peaceful societies

2026 Edition

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PROGRAMMATIC FRAMEWORK

Tdh's Guidance Note: Technical Approach and Operational Implementation of Strengthening Social Cohesion is accompanied by three programmatic guides. Each guide details the operational implementation of projects and interventions in the field, offering a concrete programmatic framework for each area of action, approaches, practical advice, and concrete recommendations that can be adapted to the specificities of each country and

target community. These guides also identify best practices observed in the field and direct readers to additional resources. Designed to accompany all phases of the programming cycle, these three guides offer practical advice applicable to both stand-alone projects and integrated initiatives. This program guide No. 1 focuses on "Prevention of violence among children and young people, including the prevention of violent extremism."



PREVENTING VIOLENCE AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH, INCLUDING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

In societies with weak cohesion, identity narratives and nationalist rhetoric infiltrate spaces where the social contract between the state and its citizens is fragile. They erode trust, shared values, and existing bonds between social groups and increase insecurity and fear, leaving citizens extremely vulnerable to radical ideologies and rising violence. Violent extremist groups, gangs, and certain armed groups are particularly fervent proponents of this type of polarizing discourse. By drawing on the inequalities claimed by minority groups and emphasizing differences between ethnic, religious, and socio-professional groups, they fuel and reinforce existing divisions and animosities between communities and between citizens and the state. Hate speech against "the other" is a powerful weapon for eroding social cohesion and triggering the process of engagement in violence. These factors of attraction, combined with individual motivations and structural factors such as lack of confidence in the state's capabilities, lack of socioeconomic inclusion, and repression, can lead certain socially marginalized groups of CYP to turn to them and take the path of violence.¹ Due to their young age and psychological malleability, youth are valuable assets to these armed and violent groups. More easily coerced, controlled, and indoctrinated, they are also

less likely than adults to fully understand the consequences of risky behavior or to rebel.² During adolescence, young people search for who they are, what they believe in, and where they belong. In their search for answers to questions about identity, some young people may be particularly vulnerable to the answers offered by these groups and the sense of belonging they promise.

Our action

Child and youth delinquency is a direct consequence of the violence they experience due to several interconnected factors. Within societies and communities, it is therefore necessary to implement strategies and measures aimed at reducing the risk of violence and crime, and reducing their potentially harmful effects on children and young people, as well as on other individuals and society.

To strengthen efforts to prevent violence against young offenders and to encourage those who have fallen into crime to disengage and reintegrate into society, Tdh's intervention is part of a continuum of prevention, addressing all children and young people in general (*primary prevention*), focusing on those at risk (*secondary prevention*), and providing support to

¹ Tdh and Wanna Institute, Rethinking the motivations leading to violent extremism: a program for the resilience of children and young people, 2018.

² UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice

System (2018); Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Children and Justice during and after Armed Conflict (2011).

children who are involved or about to become involved in violence (*tertiary prevention*).³

Based on a socio-ecological approach to prevention, Tdh's intervention involves supporting and strengthening the capacities of children and young people, their families, communities, judicial actors, and other state actors to design and implement crime prevention strategies at every level.⁴ Through its operational guidance and technical assistance, Tdh supports frontline workers in analyzing risk and resilience factors (individual, family, community, state) and developing effective violence prevention strategies tailored to the different situations encountered. Effective prevention requires strong commitment from local, regional, and international actors in the judicial system, in close coordination with other sectors working with children.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY PREVENTION IN BURKINA FASO

In Burkina Faso, Tdh has set up a working group on the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). This group brings together civil society actors, researchers, and local authorities to share knowledge and experiences on primary and secondary prevention strategies aimed at combating the recruitment of CYP. By promoting peer learning, they have studied the drivers of engagement and recruitment strategies of extremist groups.

The group has identified effective primary prevention initiatives involving young people as agents of change, such as youth clubs, film discussions, and socio-educational programs that have helped CYP strengthen their resilience and critical thinking skills to counter hate speech and deconstruct conflict-prone mindsets.

For secondary prevention, members shared community monitoring system practices for identifying at-risk youth. These community

mechanisms, involving various local leaders, make it possible to quickly detect signs of vulnerability in young people and put support systems in place to reduce their risk of recruitment by violent extremist groups.

For children who find themselves in conflict with the law because they have committed an act of violence or simply because they belong to a violent and/or criminal group, Tdh focuses its tertiary prevention strategies on disengagement from violence⁵ and the application of restorative justice focused on repairing social ties and the reintegration of children in conflict with the law.⁶

Building on its expertise in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and West Africa in the prevention of violent extremism, Tdh places particular emphasis on CYP who are victims of organized crime, recruited and exploited by armed forces or armed groups (EAFGA), as well as children of foreign fighters, who are most often victims of forms of violent extremism and at risk of repeating this violence.⁷

However, the prevention of violent extremism requires a differentiated approach due to its specific characteristics.⁸ It is now widely recognized that security-based responses aimed at deterring vulnerable individuals from joining armed and violent groups are not sufficient. Based on research on child development, Tdh proposes an alternative framework for preventing violent extremism by promoting a more inclusive and resilient environment. This framework offers attractive alternatives to young people while providing them with the skills they need to reject violent extremist groups.

Tdh's interventions in the prevention of violent extremism focus on three main aspects: the environment, alternatives, and the skills young people need to build resilience, reduce risks, and, in

³ Tdh, Guide - Initiatives for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso, 2021; ERYICA (European Youth Information and Counseling Agency), Handbook for the Prevention of Violent Extremism through Youth Information, 2017.

⁴ Tdh, Strengthening Child Protection Systems, 2011; Tdh, Model of Action Reintegrative Case Management for Children and Young People in Conflict with the Law, 2024.

⁵ Tdh, Summary of the study: Impact of activities organized in detention centers for young people in conflict with the law in Burundi: CAP Desistance, 2020; Tdh, Impact of activities

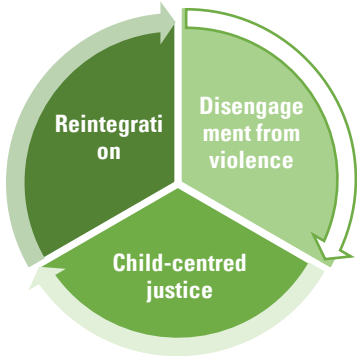
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⁶ Tdh, Model of Action Reintegrative Case Management for Children and Young People in Conflict with the Law, 2024.

⁷ International Juvenile Justice Observatory, Prevention of Juvenile Radicalization, Manual for Professionals, 2020.

⁸ Tdh and Wanna Institute, Rethinking the motivations leading to violent extremism: a program for the resilience of children and young people, 2018; Tdh, Access to Justice for Children and Youth in the context of counter-terrorism, 2020.

some cases, disengage from violence.⁹Through its research and field experience, Tdh has identified several areas of youth engagement, including sports¹⁰ and extracurricular activities, alternative avenues for "potential" combatants and radical ideologies to address their concerns in a constructive and non-violent manner, as well as creative messages that reinforce young people's critical thinking while respecting their free will.¹¹



SECONDARY PREVENTION IN ALBANIA

In Albania, Tdh supports the government in the management and reintegration of women and children repatriated from Syria and Iraq, where young people have joined violent extremist groups. Through the project "Strengthening Civil Society to Build Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism," Tdh studied the causes of violent extremism in four Albanian municipalities, identifying factors such as low levels of education, poverty, unemployment, and a lack of social activities. The study highlights the importance of prevention strategies combining education, employment, sports, and interfaith dialogue to strengthen young people's resilience.¹²

Tdh then helped the Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) develop effective, evidence-based responses. Tdh implements prevention activities in at-risk

municipalities, aiming to strengthen the resilience and risk management of local authorities and frontline service providers. Approaches include SMSPS, systems strengthening, and a socio-ecological model for young people, their families, the community, and society. Multifunctional community centers (MFCCs) support resilient and protective environments against violence.

Tdh also used its YouCreate methodology, which enables young people to create artistic, sports, and recreational projects addressing issues such as discrimination, violence, gender equality, and human rights. These autonomous activities improve young people's well-being and resilience, actively engaging them in project planning and implementation.¹³

⁹ Tdh, Summary of the study: Impact of activities organized in detention centers for young people in contact with the law in Burundi: CAP Désistance, 2020; Tdh, Impact of activities organized in detention centers for young people in conflict with the law in Burundi, 2020.

¹⁰ Tdh, UNHCR, IOC, Sport for Protection Toolkit, Programming with Young People in Forced Displacement Settings, 2021.

¹¹ Tdh and Wanna Institute, Rethinking the motivations leading to violent extremism: a program for the resilience of children and young people, 2018; Tdh, Access to Justice for Children and Youth in the context of counter-terrorism, 2020.

¹² Tdh, Strengthening Civil Society to Build Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism, 2017.

¹³ Tdh, Harve – Prevention and Safe Reintegration: Holistic Approach and Resilience to Violent Extremism, <https://tdh-albania.org/>

Tdh also attaches great importance to support structures and mechanisms that provide information, advice, and support to those at risk of joining an armed and violent group or who wish to disengage from one. It is essential to align legal frameworks with minimum rights standards and to develop diversion and rehabilitation structures for children. Children recruited and exploited by violent armed groups, gangs, and criminal groups must first and foremost be considered victims of crime.¹⁴ However, in several countries, these children are often prosecuted, sometimes outside the scope of child law and justice. Regardless of the nature or severity of the offense, Tdh advocates for a juvenile justice system focused on reintegration, protection, and reparation, considering the needs and vulnerabilities of the child.¹⁵

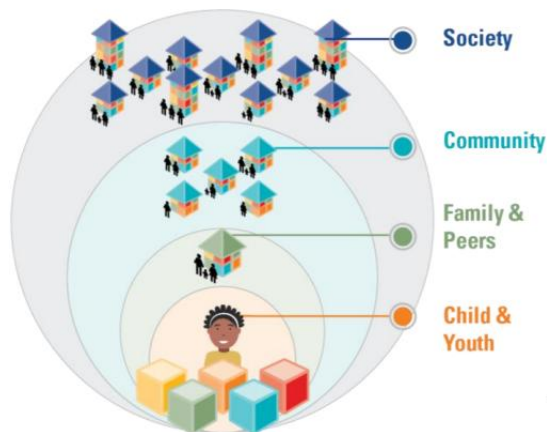
TERTIARY PREVENTION IN IRAQ

In Baghdad, Tdh organizes various psychosocial activities for juveniles detained for terrorism-related offenses. These activities include mentoring systems and peer support groups, film screenings promoting peace, sports activities with coaches to develop team spirit and self-esteem, and artistic activities to express emotions. Tdh also offers peace education training, reading clubs, literacy classes to develop critical thinking, and sessions on positive masculinity to discuss the role of men in society. These activities aim to promote critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, communication, and emotion management, helping young people regain confidence in themselves and others.¹⁶



Our approaches to violence prevention

- **A socio-ecological approach to prevention:** Tdh applies a socio-ecological approach to prevention (individual, family, community, society), examining the various risk factors for violence and protection at different levels and responding with holistic prevention strategies. Through this approach, young people and their environment are supported at all levels to strengthen their resilience to stress and traumatic events, rebuild broken relationships, and transform hatred and violence into strengths and commitments to build a peaceful and united future.



- **Prevention tailored to age, gender, and other intersectional factors:** While risk and protective factors and recruitment strategies are highly dependent on the local context, they also differ according to age, gender, and other intersectional factors (social class, ethnic group, disability, etc.). This is why a differentiated and tailored approach, considering the intersectional discrimination faced by target groups, must be considered from the analysis of the context to the implementation of the prevention strategy.
- **Participation of CYP in the design and implementation of prevention strategies:** Young people can play a key role in disengaging their peers and reintegrating them. Thanks to their presence on the ground and their better understanding of local needs and realities in

terms of youth disengagement, they can serve as a bridge between demobilized youth and the community. Their involvement will also ensure that young people's perspectives and needs are taken into account. The value of this work lies largely in the ability of young people to reach and mobilize young people whom governments and international organizations often fail to reach. Young people are also often best placed to identify risk and protective factors, intervene, and take effective action tailored to the situation in which their peers live and interact.

- **Prevention focused on restorative justice and reintegration:** Ensuring a prevention approach focused on restorative justice, reintegration begins with changing the way society and the justice system perceive and treat young offenders. Rather than focusing solely on punishment, restorative justice emphasizes repairing the harm caused and reconciliation between the victim and the offender. This involves mediation programs where young offenders are encouraged to understand the impact of their actions and actively participate in repairing the damage. This approach encourages young people to take responsibility for their actions while providing victims with a sense of justice and closure. For this approach to be effective, it is crucial to create integrated reintegration programs. These programs should include appropriate education, vocational training, and psychological support to help young people reintegrate into society. Reintegration initiatives should also include life skills workshops, group and individual therapy sessions, and personal development activities. By providing these resources, young people have a better chance of developing prosocial behaviors and avoiding a return to crime. Ongoing support and mentoring are also

essential to ensure that young people stay on track after their reintegration.¹⁷

- **A locally-based approach:** Tdh prioritizes the involvement of community actors and local services in designing locally-based prevention strategies. They are familiar with the local context and resources and play an important role in shaping young people's identities and attitudes. This is why prevention and early detection are most effective at the community level. Furthermore, it is always preferable to build on existing safe and successful practices that have been established locally, rather than creating and imposing new ideas from outside.¹⁸
- **A multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach focused on reintegration and**

restorative justice: a multitude of factors call for an integrated, multi-sectoral approach. While contextual and individual factors can help explain why children are attracted to and encouraged to join armed and violent groups, neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral science can also provide relevant insights. Each practitioner has added value: a mentor can build a relationship of trust with the child in question; a social worker can provide a listening ear and psychological support; a teacher has the power to strengthen their socio-professional integration skills; and a legal professional can inform them about the law and their rights, train them to use dialogue and mediation to manage disputes, or advocate for the application of restorative justice focused on reintegration.¹⁹

¹⁷ Tdh, Model of Action Reintegrative Case Management for Children and Youth in Conflict with the Law, 2024; Tdh, Restorative Juvenile Justice, 2014; Tdh, Give me a chance, but a real one, How to improve the Reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law An analysis of the concept, key standards and practices in the MENA region, 2020.

¹⁸ The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Toolkit for the Development of EAFGA Programs.

¹⁹ UNODC, Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System (2018); Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, Toolkit for the Development of EAFGA Programs.

Programmatic guidelines: an action strategy by level of prevention²⁰

PRIMARY PREVENTION

Primary prevention is aimed at all young offenders

Primary prevention is a process that seeks to target, at an early stage, the causes and risk factors (individual, family, community, societal) that are at the root of dynamics leading to violence. The basis of this type of prevention is therefore to promote collective resilience, disregarding individual risks.

These actions aim to:

- Prevent the emergence of antisocial behavior and violence among young people through general prevention activities.

Examples:

- Legal education activities that teach conflict resolution, emotion management, and respect for human rights.
- Create safe spaces where children can express themselves freely, debate, and develop their critical thinking skills.
- Support alternatives to violence through community initiatives led by children and young people, including sports, extracurricular, and artistic activities (*Sport for Protection*).²¹
- Strengthen young people's interpersonal skills, their ability to make sound moral judgments, and their empathy for different opinions and points of view.

SECONDARY PREVENTION

Secondary prevention aims to support vulnerable children and young people identified as "at risk" of being recruited and/or turning to violence.

Secondary prevention is the process of reducing vulnerabilities and risk factors in groups or environments identified as being at risk of turning to violence. It is a set of coordinated multisectoral actions aimed at strengthening the resilience of vulnerable young people.

These actions aim to:

- Identify and intervene with at-risk youth before violence occurs.
- Offer attractive alternatives to those offered by armed and violent groups and equip young people with the life skills they need to strengthen their resilience and reduce vulnerability factors.

Examples:

- Mediation and dialogue programs to strengthen the capacity of young people to resolve conflicts, such as active listening, rephrasing, managing emotions, and finding mutually acceptable solutions.²²
- Support groups for young people exposed to violence or living in high-risk environments.
- Support groups for young people exposed to violence or living in high-risk environments.

TERTIARY PREVENTION

Tertiary prevention targets young people who are about to engage in violence or are already engaged in violence.

Tertiary prevention seeks to encourage young people to disengage from violence or distance themselves from violent or hateful rhetoric through programs focused on social reintegration, whether or not they are involved in legal proceedings.

These actions aim to:

- Conduct an individual assessment of risk and protective factors, networks, and the situation in which the child turned to violence.
- Promote disengagement from violence and the application of restorative justice tailored to juveniles, focused on reintegration.

Examples:

- Produce evidence-based knowledge on successful and sustainable paths to reintegration for children and adolescents who are victims of violent extremism.
- Support young people in developing an individual plan for disengagement from violence and social reintegration that emphasizes the acquisition of new life skills and the strengthening of resilience factors.
- Promote restorative justice by addressing community concerns to prevent stigmatization and foster reconciliation.

²⁰ The prevention actions listed in the following table are provided for illustrative purposes. These actions focus on the socio-ecological level of the child, but it is recommended that interventions develop actions at different levels.

²¹ Tdh, UNHCR, IOC, Sport for Protection Toolkit, Programming with Young People in Forced Displacement Settings, 2021.

²² Tdh, Guide to Initiatives for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso, 2021.

Additional resources:

- Tdh, Policy Restorative Juvenile Justice, 2014.
- Tdh, Strengthening Civil Society to Build Youth Resilience to Violent Extremism, 2017.
- Tdh and Wana Institute, Reconceptualizing the drivers of violent extremism: an agenda for child & youth resilience, 2018.
- Tdh, Tdh Framework for Supporting Well-being, The Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Framework, 2018.
- Tdh, Towards psychosocial resilience and well-being: operational guide, 2018.
- Tdh, Study summary: Impact of activities organized in detention centers for young people in contact with the law in Burundi: CAP Desistance, 2020.
- Tdh, UNHCR, IOC, Sport for Protection Toolkit, Programming with Young People in Forced Displacement Settings, 2021.
- Tdh and Westminster Foundation for Democracy, Access to Justice for Children and Youth in Counter-Terrorism Contexts, 2020.
- Tdh, Give me a chance, but a real one, How to improve the Reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law
- An analysis of the concept, key standards, and practices in the MENA region, 2020.
- Tdh, Documentary, 'Recoudre la calebasse - Agir pour la cohésion sociale au Burkina Faso', 2021.
- Tdh, Guide - Initiatives to Prevent Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso, 2021.
- Tdh, Model of Action Reintegrative Case management for Children and Young People in Conflict with the Law, 2024.





Children and youth participation in conflict management, local governance, and civic engagement

AREA OF ACTION 2

GUIDANCE NOTE - STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

A pathway to promoting the rights of children and young people, resolving conflicts, and building peaceful societies

2026 Edition

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PROGRAMMATIC FRAMEWORK

Tdh's Guidance Note: Technical Approach and Operational Implementation of Strengthening Social Cohesion is accompanied by three programmatic guides. Each guide details the operational implementation of projects and interventions in the field, offering a concrete programmatic framework for each area of action, approaches, practical advice, and concrete recommendations that can be adapted to the specificities of each country and

target community. These guides also identify best practices observed in the field and direct readers to additional resources. Designed to accompany all phases of the programming cycle, these three guides offer practical advice applicable to both stand-alone projects and integrated initiatives. This program guide No. 2 focuses on "the participation of children and young people in conflict management, local governance, and civic engagement."



CHILD AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT, GOVERNANCE, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

To promote peaceful coexistence and contribute to the development of cohesive societies, states must support open and inclusive decision-making processes and civic spaces, ensuring the active participation of young people in governance, conflict resolution, and civic life. Historically, children and young people (CYP) have played a crucial role in powerful social movements that have transformed the course of history.¹ Yet they remain marginalized or excluded from decision-making processes and bodies. Their contributions to governance and conflict resolution receive little attention or support.²

Many young people feel that their voices are not heard, that they are excluded from decision-making

processes, and that they have very little involvement in governance, even on issues that directly affect them.³ Youth participation in formal political processes is declining, and growing mistrust of public institutions is accompanied by a decline in their political and civic engagement in their local communities.⁴ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, few children and young people were consulted by policymakers on the policies, health measures, and protective measures that affected them.⁵

"Children were not consulted on what they need for their safety, on how they can achieve safety?"

Young global researcher #CovidUnder19

¹ Young people have played an important role in all progressive social movements, including the LGBTQIA+ movement, successive waves of feminism, environmentalism and environmental justice, anti-war movements, and many others.

² Anna Luhrmann, Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle, Good Practice Guide, 2012; BRYAN, Shari, 2010. "The Youth Bulge in Africa— Opportunities for Constructive Engagement in the Political Process," NDI Vice President's Essay; YNOE, Jessica, 2008. Confronting the glass ceiling of youth engagement, Academy of Educational Development.

³ Lee, L.; Wright, L.H.V.; Shields, S.; Karadzhev, D.; Davidson, J.; Hope-Burchill, K.; Singh, P.; Machado, C.; and Niyogi, O. (May, 2022). 'Children's Participation (in partnership with #COVIDUnder19): Adults' Perceptions of Child Participation and Young People's Views on Responses during COVID-19. Findings from the International COVID 4P Log Project and the #CovidUnder19 Initiative.' Inspiring Children's Futures Learning Report Series 8/2022.

⁴ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Wenger, D., Rand, A. and M. Slade. 2020. "Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the

Democratic Disconnect?" Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy; Neha Dubhashi, Declining Civic Engagement and its Impacts, Pathway Foundation, 2020 ; Tomaž DEŽELAN, Youth Participation in European Democratic Processes: How to Improve and Facilitate Youth Participation, European Parliament, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2023; López Pintor, R., Gratschew, M., and al-Dīn Adīmī, J., Voter turnout since 1945: a global report, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, Sweden, 2002m

⁵ Lee, L.; Wright, L.H.V.; Shields, S.; Kardashev, D.; Davidson, J.; Hope-Burchill, K.; Singh, P.; Machado, C.; and Niyogi, O. (May, 2022). 'Children's Participation (in partnership with #COVIDUnder19): Adults' Perceptions of Child Participation and Young People's Views on Responses during COVID-19. Findings from the International COVID 4P Log Project and the #CovidUnder19 Initiative.' Inspiring Children's Futures Learning Report Series 8/2022.

The appropriate platforms and resources to make their voices heard and implement their ideas are often lacking. Meanwhile, in civic affairs, young people are getting involved and taking the lead in social movements, but are struggling to be taken seriously by decision-makers. In some regions, the shrinking of civic space and the creation of a political and social environment hostile to civil society even tend to discourage young people from getting involved. Repression, threats, and intimidation are realities for many young activists, limiting their ability to participate safely and effectively. Although young people are the most affected by conflict and violence in various ways, the conclusion is the same: young people's voices are not heard in peace processes, and conflict resolution mechanisms often fail to include young people. According to a study by the University of Glasgow, only 12 percent of peace agreements between 1990 and 2022 mentioned youth or young people.⁶

The lack of youth participation also echoes a global observation in the countries where we work to strengthen children's rights and justice systems. Although children and young people are the first to be affected by their rights and the justice systems for children, it is rare to see them participate in the formulation of laws and judicial reforms. Despite the trend for justice systems and conflict resolution processes to specialize and adapt to the needs of children, placing them at the center of proceedings, it is also rare for children and young people in contact with these systems to have the opportunity to express their views and perspectives and participate in reforms of these judicial systems.

Yet young people are valuable innovators and agents of change. Their leadership and role in promoting conflict resolution and peace processes are essential to building peaceful and sustainable nations. Thanks to their understanding of local dynamics, creativity, and adaptability, they offer effective and sustainable solutions. Their direct involvement in peace processes helps prevent violence and fosters a culture of dialogue and mutual

understanding. Furthermore, youth participation in public life and decision-making processes promotes trust and transparency between generations and between citizens and their government. It enriches the lives of young people, is socially beneficial to the community, and predicts future political engagement. By shaping the norms and values of their society, young people feel a greater sense of belonging and find it easier to find their place. Their inclusion in representative bodies improves their understanding of democratic processes and enhances accountability and transparency.⁷

The participation of young people benefits society as a whole, as well as the policies and laws established by the authorities. Their active involvement provides valuable information to decision-makers, enabling informed decisions on legislation, policies, budgets, and services. This empowers the authorities, improves the quality of public services, and makes governance more transparent and open. The involvement of young people legitimizes the decision-making process in the eyes of the community and facilitates the implementation and monitoring of decisions. By encouraging them to express themselves and participate in the development of laws, these laws appear fairer to them, thereby increasing their compliance.⁸

Their contributions must therefore be actively supported, solicited, and considered an integral part of building cohesive communities and supporting good governance. It is crucial that governments make lasting commitments to restore young people's trust, that they are taken seriously in the development of public policy, and that their needs are effectively taken into account by policymakers. It is also essential to create spaces where young people can freely express their voices and debate, not only with their peers but also with policymakers, in order to reflect on and influence the behaviors, policies, and decisions that affect them.

⁶ Ozcelik, A. and Shaw, D. (2023), A Dataset of References to Youth in Peace Agreements (YPAD), 1990-2022.

⁷ UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level,

A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

⁸ Observatory for Children, Youth and Youth Assistance of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Children's participation in public decision-making, Why and how to involve children?, 2014.

Our action

The participation of young people in decision-making processes, whether at the local, regional, national, or international level, is not a new concept. It is part of a broader vision aimed at promoting active citizenship and participatory governance by involving citizens in decision-making processes and the management of public life, which also includes the opinions of children and young people.⁹ As a significant part of the population, they should be taken into account and integrated into current processes, giving them the necessary capacity for action and influence.

Before exploring the approaches that Tdh uses to strengthen the participation of children and young people in governance, civic engagement, and conflict resolution, it is important to clarify these different concepts:

Participation in governance: the active participation of CYP in decision-making processes and direct interaction with formal political and administrative structures.

This aims to ensure that the contributions of CYP are taken into account in decisions, particularly in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of laws and policies that affect them. There are various degrees and forms of political participation, such as youth involvement in political structures (city councils, governments, and other decision-making bodies), their involvement in the management of public services and community resources, their contribution to the development, monitoring, and evaluation of laws and policies, and their participation in citizen engagement initiatives (e.g., consultations organized by parliament or government to gather the opinions of young people on a specific topic).

YOUTH MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

In 2021, Tdh and its partners, in collaboration with nine municipalities in Burkina Faso, trained and supported youth associations and youth movements to form municipal youth councils. Their members,

aged 15 to 35, elected or volunteers, promote youth participation in decision-making and represent the interests of young people at the municipal level. They participate in projects of general interest and can be involved in decisions and actions taken by the community that affect them. Through these municipal councils, young people learn to interact with local elected officials, to assert their interests in the development of local development plans and policies, to understand how their institutions work, and to understand the issues and decisions that their elected officials must make to manage local affairs and public life.

Participation in civic engagement: the active participation of young people, either individually or through social movements, in civic affairs (social, political, environmental) and contributing to the improvement of public services and programs, the promotion of human rights, and the coexistence of a community or society.

This encompasses a wide range of activities and can be achieved through various forms of participation, such as activism, civic education, citizen and community participation, and volunteering.

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

In the Middle East and the Sahel, Tdh supports movements led by girls and young women in their various civic actions aimed at strengthening women's leadership, the participation of girls and women in decision-making processes, and increasing their political representation. As part of the She Leads program, these movements have organized debates, radio broadcasts, and community discussions with young people and traditional authorities. These initiatives have established the principle of women's and girls' participation in public affairs, thereby strengthening their role at the local level.

Participation in conflict resolution: the active participation of CYP in mechanisms, decision-making

⁹ Observatory for Children, Youth and Youth Assistance of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Children's participation in public decision-making: Why and how to involve children?, 2014.

processes, and efforts to prevent, resolve conflicts, and build peace.

First, CYP can be instrumental in developing and implementing prevention actions by addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting social cohesion and tolerance. Their unique ability to mobilize communities and create positive change is a major asset.

Second, CYP play a vital role in shaping the norms, principles, and practices of conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms. It is crucial that their needs and perspectives are integrated from the outset in the design of these norms and practices to ensure that conflict resolution mechanisms effectively address their realities and concerns.

Third, trained as peace agents, CYP can become mediators and facilitators of conflicts or actively participate in decision-making in peacebuilding and dispute resolution processes. By involving them in decision-making processes, governments and other stakeholders can leverage their energy and creativity to develop solutions aimed at preventing conflict and promoting peace.

HANDBOOK ON CAPACITY BUILDING FOR YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS ON CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

In Iraq, Tdh, in partnership with the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and the Women Empowerment Organization (WEO), has implemented a project to strengthen the participation of young people and women in community activism and democratic dialogue for conflict transformation. To develop the skills of young women and girls and enable them to play a decisive role in conflict transformation and the promotion of peaceful and democratic dialogue, Tdh has developed a unique training manual on conflict transformation and social cohesion processes. This program highlights the importance of integrating gender analysis into conflict scans and the crucial role of female leadership in facilitating community dialogues. At the end of this training, the women engaged with local authorities, including local representatives,

Mukhtars, and community leaders, to promote peaceful conflict resolution.¹⁰

Our approaches to participation

A rights-based approach to participation

The participation of children and young people has been widely recognized as one of the most important dimensions of children's rights over the past 30 years. Participation is not only one of the rights enshrined in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), but also one of its four fundamental pillars: *"Children have the right to have their voices heard, to be taken seriously, and to influence decisions that affect them."*

The participation of children and young people in local governance is closely linked to the affirmation of the fundamental right of children to be heard and to freely express their views on all matters affecting them, and to have those views given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (Article 12 of the CRC).¹¹ While children's participation is a right in itself, it also leads to the realization of other rights. For example, ensuring children's participation in decision-making and governance processes also stems from the civil and political rights of children guaranteed by the CRC, in particular the rights to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly. General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the implementation of children's rights during adolescence also calls on States parties to ensure that adolescents are involved in the development, implementation, and monitoring of all relevant laws, policies, services, and programs affecting their lives, including at the local level. This underscores the importance of a child rights-based approach that recognizes and respects the dignity and agency of children and young people, including their empowerment, citizenship, and active participation in their own lives. Other international and regional conventions on children's rights and instruments such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) and the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights (1996) recognize the

¹⁰ Tdh, Just: A capacity-building technical curriculum for girls and female youth leading conflict transformation and social cohesion processes in the Middle East & North Africa, 2022.

¹¹ Save the Children, The right of children to participate in public decision-making processes, 2020.

right and fundamental principle of children's participation.¹²

Participation based on intergenerational partnership

Intergenerational partnership between children and young people (CYP) and adult decision-makers is an innovative and essential approach to developing inclusive governance processes and participatory conflict management mechanisms.¹³ This approach is based on mutual recognition of the unique capacities and perspectives that each group can bring. Children and young people must be considered equal partners in the decision-making process, not merely beneficiaries of policies and programs. To this end, participation requires information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and demands that children's opinions be fully taken into account, given their age and maturity. It also involves a transfer of power from adults to children, transforming children's status from passive recipients to active agents who are informed and able to influence decisions affecting their lives. The establishment of platforms for dialogue and collaboration where children and young people can interact directly with adult decision-makers is essential. These platforms must be accessible, welcoming, and designed to encourage the active participation of all members.

Projects developed in partnership between CYP and adults must be co-constructed, incorporating the ideas and perspectives of each group from the outset. This ensures that initiatives meet the needs and aspirations of young people while benefiting from the experience and expertise of adults. Evaluation processes must also be inclusive and participatory. CYP must have the opportunity to share their feedback and perceptions on the impact of projects and policies.

¹² Save the Children, The right of children to participate in public decision-making processes, 2020

¹³ Tdh, New Partnerships to Achieve Justice for Children An Intergenerational Resource Guide and Toolkit for Leaders and Changemakers, 2024.

¹⁴ Rowlands, J. (2020). "Finding the right power tool(s) for the job: Making the invisible visible." In: McGee, R. and Pettit, J. (Eds.) Power, Empowerment and Social Change. Abingdon: Routledge, 152-166 (Rowlands, 152-166).

ANALYZING POWER DYNAMICS: JOHN GAVENTA'S POWER CUBE¹⁴

This is one of the most widely applied tools for analyzing power, used to give a topographical sense of how power operates and where it operates. By examining the multiple forms, levels, and spaces of power and their interactions, the power cube shows that power is fundamentally multilayered, allowing for the development of strategies that challenge all forms of inequitable power. It is clear that transformative change can only happen if development actors work across all areas of the cube, making coalitions and networks even more essential. For a more in-depth look at how the power cube has been applied in practice, this resource offers particularly insightful insights.¹⁵

A local approach to participation

While it is important for children to interact with adults who are part of national power structures, participation at the local level is considered essential to ensuring the sustainability of children's participation.¹⁶ Local decision-making processes and structures close to where they live have the advantage of reaching a large number of CYP and are particularly important in supporting their participation in issues that affect their daily lives. Furthermore, by promoting the representation of CYP in local decision-making bodies, CYP are more likely to accelerate the transformation of governance dynamics and structures, and the resulting outcomes are more likely to respond to the immediate needs and priorities of CYP than at the national level. In addition, by being rooted in local public life, participating children and youth are also more likely to legitimately represent the interests of their peers than those who engage exclusively in national processes, which may have little connection to local issues.¹⁷

¹⁵ Tdh, Bringing power back: Towards a framework for the empowerment of children and young people, 2024.

¹⁶ White, Sarah C., and Shyamol A. Choudhury, 'The Politics of Child Participation in International Development: The Dilemma of Agency', European Journal of Development Research, vol. 19, no. 4, December 2007, p. 529-550

¹⁷ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; Save the Children, The right of children to participate in public decision-making processes, p. 4.

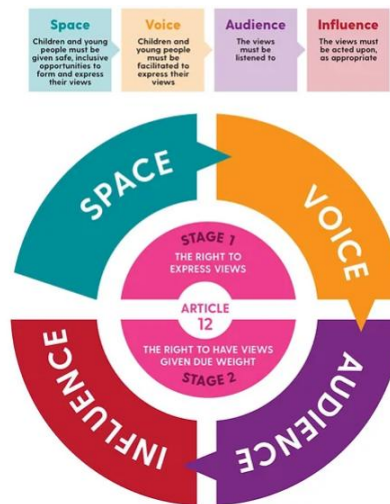
Meaningful and inclusive participation of children and young people

To strengthen the participation of children and young people in local governance processes, Tdh ensures that children's participation in these spheres is meaningful and not merely symbolic.

This means that stakeholders must not only ensure that CYP are heard, but that their opinions are also duly taken into account, with feedback on the results and decisions that follow. The topics should not be limited to cultural and sporting events or issues relating to neighborhood sports facilities. Policy makers must think outside the box and consider the potential implications of their decisions on children's lives.¹⁸ This also determines the need to view the participation of children and youth as a circular process rather than a one-off activity.¹⁹

Participation is a process that must also enable children and young people from all different communities to be represented and heard, and ensure that the spaces created for participation are inclusive and adapted to the needs and capacities of different groups of children.²⁰ To facilitate the expression of their views, children must have access to the necessary information and support, as well as time and a safe space. Children must also have access to those who are able to influence decisions that affect them. To ensure effective participation of children and young people, Tdh uses Laura Lundy's model of child and youth participation, which requires that children and young people have access to space, voice, audience, and influence for their participation to be effective, meaningful, and in line with children's rights.²¹

Figure 4. Lundy's model of child and youth participation



The right to participate extends to all children and young people. Tdh recognizes that children are a diverse group and ensures that these participation strategies take into account the differences that exist between children, give a voice to those who face different forms of marginalization, and avoid recreating existing patterns of discrimination and power structures. Creating inclusive participation requires commitment to extensive communication with harder-to-reach groups of children and ensuring that, within the participation mechanism, all children receive support to participate on an equal footing. In its interventions, Tdh also ensures that the participatory environment is gender- and culturally-sensitive and takes proactive measures to include children from different communities and backgrounds and children of different ages and abilities.²²

Placing the participation of CYP at the center of programming

In all programs run by Tdh and its partners that involve children, the principle of child participation must be applied so that children are informed and involved in

¹⁸ Observatoire de l'Enfance, de la Jeunesse et de l'Aide à la Jeunesse de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Children's participation in public decision-making: Why and how to involve children?, 2014.

¹⁹ Recommendation on participation and United Nations General Comment No. 12

²⁰ Save the Children, The right of children to participate in public decision-making processes, 2020.

²¹ Laura Lundy (2007) - 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualizing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child, British Educational Research Journal, 33:6, 927-942, DOI: 10.1080/01411920701657033 (last accessed on 20.02.2023); Conceptual Framework for Measuring Outcomes of Adolescent Participation', UNICEF, 2019; CoE, Let's decide together! Guide to meaningful and effective engagement of children in decision-making processes, 2023.

²² CoE, Let's decide together! Guide to meaningful and effective engagement of children in decision-making processes, 2023.

every stage of the program/project cycle, including: situation analysis, strategic planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and learning. Children's participation is most meaningful when girls and boys are involved from the earliest stages of the program and when they have access to information that is appropriate to their age, abilities, and local language. Opportunities for children to participate in research, advocacy, and campaigns also promote long-term positive change for children. In addition, in some contexts, children may be interested in participating in communication and/or fundraising activities to raise funds for their own initiatives and share messages with others.²³

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SITUATION ANALYSIS

Before any intervention, Tdh conducts in-depth research with and among children and young people in order to understand the challenges they face in terms of participation. This step is crucial for developing actions tailored to the real and specific needs of these young people, ensuring that our interventions are both relevant and effective. Tools adapted to children and young people can be used to enable girls and boys of different ages and backgrounds to explore the immediate and underlying causes of the issues affecting them, and to reflect on different experiences and perspectives based on gender, age, ethnicity, disability, or other factors.

By involving children and young people from the assessment phase onwards, Tdh ensures that it collects authentic and relevant data on the barriers to their participation. Here is a non-exhaustive list of challenges identified by CYP:

Lack of platforms: One of the main challenges is often the lack of formal platforms or mechanisms for young people to express themselves and contribute to decision-making processes. Many governments and organizations do not take young people's perspectives seriously, and their voices are often ignored.

Cultural and social barriers: Cultural and social norms can limit the involvement of young people, especially girls and young women, in decision-making processes and civic action. Many young people face the challenge of stereotypes and negative perceptions. Some perceive young people as apathetic, disinterested, or even incapable. These stereotypes can prevent young people from being taken seriously in their actions and compromise their potential to contribute.

Lack of skills and knowledge: Many young people lack the skills and knowledge necessary to make their voices heard and participate effectively in discussions about policies and community initiatives.

Lack of resources and support: Another challenge is the lack of access to resources and funding for youth-led initiatives. Many youth-led initiatives that promote civic participation and prevent conflict often lack the resources to effectively implement their programs. However, they receive little overall support from international actors because they are not formally structured.

Programmatic guidelines: six action strategies to strengthen the participation of young people in local governance

To create participatory environments and ensure the participation of young people in local governance, Tdh has developed an approach based on six interdependent and mutually reinforcing action strategies. This strategic approach provides a general framework, but it needs to be adapted to local specificities. That is why, before any intervention, Tdh conducts a participatory situation analysis to assess the participatory environment, existing processes and mechanisms for participation in local governance, and the capacities of CYP to participate effectively in these processes and mechanisms, to identify good practices and areas for improvement. This assessment is carried out with CYP and local governance actors.

1. Support a legislative and policy framework and budgetary resources that institutionalize the participation of CYP in local governance:

- Advocating and encouraging governments to adopt a participatory legislative and policy framework is essential to establish recognition of the right of CYP to participate in decision-making, including in local governance processes.
- Support national and/or local governments in adopting regulations that provide specific guidance on the format, structure, functioning, and evaluation of the participation processes and mechanisms put in place.
- Encourage local authorities to apply national standards, adopt complementary local policies, and allocate sufficient budgetary resources to implement sustainable and effective local participation mechanisms. Many governments, for example, have introduced laws requiring each local authority (e.g., municipality, commune) to establish a children and youth council that can participate in the adoption of all local policies, regulations, and decisions on matters that concern them.²⁴

PARTICIPATION IN JUDICIAL REFORMS

With its expertise in promoting justice systems for children and its partnerships with judicial authorities, Tdh has for many years supported the participation of children and young people in national legislative reforms of justice systems. Thanks to these interventions, decision-makers benefit from the perspectives and suggestions of children and young people, enabling the effective adoption and implementation of standards and practices that truly respond to children's rights and needs. Consultations are held with children and young people to gather their experiences, concerns, and suggestions regarding the justice system. These consultations take place through focus groups and participatory workshops. The children and young people then formulate concrete recommendations that are taken into account when drafting new laws and

²⁴ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National

regulations. For example, they may propose measures to improve children's rights and protection in legal proceedings or to make the system more accessible and understandable to young people.

2. Identify socio-cultural norms that hinder participation and reinforce positive attitudes: The social, cultural, and political context can affect perceptions of youth participation in local governance. In some contexts, particularly in the Middle East and West Africa, resistance still exists among adults, especially regarding the participation of girls, limiting their right to be heard and to participate in private and public decision-making processes (family, community, government). These patriarchal and discriminatory socio-cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices exclude CYP from decision-making processes. To counter this, Tdh is taking action to ensure the meaningful and inclusive participation of all children:

- Awareness-raising activities and intergenerational dialogues within families and communities, promoting recognition of the rights and capacity of CYP of all genders and ages to participate in decisions and issues that affect them
- Actions aimed at deconstructing stereotypes and social norms (gender) and promoting positive attitudes and an environment more conducive to the participation of these marginalized children and young people
- Actions to mobilize influential actors such as religious and traditional leaders, teachers, and other influential actors to publicly support positive norms that promote the participation of children and youth and to explain the benefits of taking children and youth's perspectives into account in governance processes.
- Actions that highlight champion CYP and recognize the beneficial role they play as active citizens and agents of social change in the public life of their communities can increase positive social attitudes toward CYP participation in governance.²⁵

Committee countries, 2022; CoE, Let's decide together! Guide to meaningful and effective engagement of children in decision-making processes, 2023.

²⁵ UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020.

- Actions to inform the general public about the role and successes of youth councils, highlighting the positive contribution that young people can make to their local communities.²⁶

3. Build political will and engage local decision-makers to create a participatory environment and strengthen their capacity to interact with CYP:

- Build commitment and political will among local authorities around the participation of young people in local governance and identify influential actors committed to the cause who can convince their peers.
- Raise awareness and advocate among local elected officials and decision-makers about the importance of promoting inclusive and participatory governance, developing local policies and public services based on the needs and priorities of CYP, and draw their attention to the benefits of such participation.
- Equip decision-makers with the knowledge and skills they need to interact with children and young people in a respectful, participatory, and inclusive manner and to consider them as partners in local governance, including knowledge of children's rights, child development, participation, and skills in communication, active listening, and respectful and non-discriminatory attitudes.²⁷

A GENDER+ LABEL FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

In Mali, Tdh, in partnership with the Malian Association of Young People for Active Citizenship and Democracy (AJCAD), is implementing a national project as part of the global She Leads program. This project aims to increase the sustainable influence of girls and young women on decision-making and to transform gender norms in society, as well as in formal and informal institutions. With the aim of promoting a gender-sensitive approach and taking into account the perspectives of women and girls in the formulation and implementation of local public policies, Tdh and AJCAD have decided to launch a

gender labeling program for local authorities. The "Gender+" label will aim to recognize local authorities that implement policies and practices that promote women's participation and empowerment. The "Gender+" label will be awarded to local authorities that meet specific criteria, demonstrating their commitment to a gender-sensitive approach and respecting four key principles:

1. Promotion and protection of women's/girls' rights
2. Strengthening the commitment of local authorities
3. Raising awareness and mobilizing action
4. Sharing good practices

It contributes to promoting gender equality, strengthening community engagement, raising awareness and mobilizing civil society, and sharing good practices to create more inclusive and equitable communities.

4. Building the capacity and confidence of young people:

- Provide them with information about their right to express themselves freely and to have their opinions duly taken into consideration. Make them aware of the impact they can have by participating in local governance, being consulted and involved in local decision-making processes, and who will make the final decision.²⁸
- Equip CYP with the knowledge and skills necessary for their full participation and strengthen their confidence and leadership to claim and exercise their right to participate in local governance processes. The level of knowledge and skills of CYP on participation and local governance depends heavily on the context and the groups of CYP concerned. This is why there is no "one size fits all" training and why each training program is developed based on the priorities and key skills that the CYP themselves wish to strengthen, with an emphasis on including CYP who are particularly excluded from these spheres of participation.
- Supporting young people in identifying the objectives and results they want to achieve

²⁶ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

²⁷ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017.

²⁸ Observatoire de l'Enfance, de la Jeunesse et de l'Aide à la Jeunesse de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Children's participation in public decision-making, Why and how to involve children?, 2014.

through their participation and in reflecting on the participation mechanisms that would be most appropriate and suited to their specific needs.

A TRAINING CURRICULUM ON PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN BURKINA FASO

In 2022, Tdh organized a consultation with youth movements and associations in the Kossi and Tapoa provinces of Burkina Faso to strengthen their involvement in public affairs. The results showed that young people and local decision-makers interacted informally and that young people lacked knowledge of governance and communication resources, limiting their ability to represent their peers and participate in decision-making. In response, Tdh Burkina Faso and its partners developed a capacity-building program for young people on eight themes: citizenship, local governance, participatory democracy, decentralization, transformational leadership, negotiation and political advocacy, public speaking, and citizen oversight. The program uses a variety of teaching methods, such as role-playing and debates with local decision-makers, to develop young people's knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and critical thinking, in order to empower them and enable them to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes and public life in their communities. The program has not only developed their knowledge and skills, but also their values, attitudes, and critical thinking skills, empowering them to become autonomous actors capable of participating meaningfully in decision-making processes and public life in their communities.

5. Support dialogue between young people and local authorities and assist them in establishing inclusive participation processes and mechanisms:

- Support young people in identifying topics (employment, education, climate, housing, culture, sports, etc.), municipal/local

government actions and projects, and decision-making processes (drafting of local laws and regulations, local development plans and policies, monitoring of local public services, budget evaluation, etc.) in which they would like to participate in order to ensure that their rights, needs, and priorities are clearly reflected in local decisions and policies and that public services are more focused on their needs.²⁹

- Support the organization of working groups in which youth-led organizations and local decision-makers reflect on the participation mechanisms, systems, and processes they want to put in place to ensure meaningful, effective, and inclusive participation of local youth. Practical aspects such as the frequency, timing, and location of children's participation are also important design elements. There is a wide range of participation mechanisms, from structural participation instruments (such as local and regional CYP councils) to regular or *ad hoc* direct consultation processes related to a specific issue.³⁰
- When designing the participation mechanism, provide for different communication approaches and adapt the participation process according to the age, gender, potential disabilities, and abilities of the children. The issue of power differentials should also be explicitly considered and addressed in the design of the participation mechanism.³¹ Particular attention should be paid to how best to engage children so that participation does not recreate existing power structures, but gives a voice to those who face different forms of marginalization. For example, developing participation forums specifically for vulnerable children, adolescent girls, or children with disabilities can enable children who might otherwise be overlooked to connect and influence decision-making on issues that

²⁹ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

³⁰ Observatory for Children, Youth, and Youth Assistance of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Children's Participation in Public Decision-Making: Why and How to Involve Children? 2014.

³¹ UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

particularly affect them.³² If there is a limit to the number of children who can participate, it is recommended that the children themselves choose who will represent them in a democratic and inclusive manner. Another possibility is to provide for different levels of participation, for example, a broad consultation with a questionnaire and a focus group with a smaller number of children.³³

CHILDREN'S ADVISORY COUNCILS

Tdh has developed a Toolkit for setting up Children's Advisory Councils within the Barnahus model in Sweden. Children's advisory councils are one of the mechanisms used to promote the participation of children as a group. These councils are designed to provide safe spaces for children to express their views on issues that affect them, their lives, or those of their peers, to increase their knowledge and skills, and to contribute meaningfully to decision-making processes within projects or initiatives at different levels.³⁴

6. Financial and technical support for local initiatives led by CYP:

- Supporting youth and young adult organizations and associations in their civic and political engagement activities aimed at promoting inclusive and participatory governance and active citizenship within their local communities.
- Provide technical and financial support for innovative initiatives and actions developed and led by young people to improve the functioning of their public authorities and democratic life within their localities.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION INITIATIVES AND OPENING UP CIVIC AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Between 2022 and 2024, Tdh supported and funded 36 innovative initiatives and micro-projects in the Sahel through a call for grants. Led by movements of young

activists and human rights defenders, these initiatives aim to improve the legislative and political environment for civil society. Through this experience, young people have strengthened their organizational and financial management skills. They have also gained a better understanding of national legislative processes and learned to analyze and evaluate their laws and public policies in light of regional and international instruments relating to civic space. In addition, thanks to the grant, they have developed advocacy actions with their authorities and created innovative civic technologies, thereby contributing to the development of a culture of citizen participation and the protection of open civic and democratic space.

³² UNICEF, Child Participation in local governance, A UNICEF Guidance Note, 2017; UNICEF, Engaged and heard, Guidelines on Adolescent Participation and Civic Engagement, 2020; UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

³³ UNICEF, Effective, representative, and inclusive child participation at the local level, A study on child and youth councils in UNICEF National Committee countries, 2022.

³⁴ Tdh, Step by Step Journey of Children and Youth Participation: A methodological toolbox for establishing, supporting and developing Children & Youth Advisory Boards in the context of Barnahus, (Save the Children Sweden, Tusla, 2024).

Additional resources:

- Tdh, YouCreate toolkit - Participatory action research for young change makers, 2019.
- Tdh, Just: A capacity-building technical curriculum for girls and female youth leading conflict transformation and social cohesion processes in the Middle East & North Africa, 2022.
- Tdh, Training program: Youth, local governance & citizen participation, 2022.
- Tdh, Policy paper: Climate injustice for children: How climate crisis affects access to justice and children's rights, 2023
- Tdh, Bringing power back: Towards a framework for the empowerment of children and young people, 2024.
- Tdh, Gender+ Labeling Program Manual, 2024.
- Tdh, New Partnerships to Achieve Justice for Children: An Intergenerational Resource Guide and Toolkit for Leaders and Changemakers, 2024.





Effective access to local justice and legal empowerment

AREA OF ACTION 3

GUIDANCE NOTE - STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION

A pathway to promoting the rights of children and young people, resolving conflicts, and building peaceful societies

2026 Edition



FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PROGRAMMATIC FRAMEWORK

Tdh's Guidance Note: Technical Approach and Operational Implementation of Strengthening Social Cohesion is accompanied by three programmatic guides. Each guide details the operational implementation of projects and interventions in the field, offering a concrete programmatic framework for each area of action, approaches, practical advice, and concrete recommendations that can be adapted to the specificities of each country and

target community. These guides also identify best practices observed in the field and direct readers to additional resources. Designed to accompany all phases of the programming cycle, these three guides offer practical advice applicable to both stand-alone projects and integrated initiatives. This program guide No. 3 focuses on "effective access to local justice and legal empowerment."



EFFECTIVE ACCESS TO LOCAL JUSTICE AND LEGAL EMPOWERMENT

As the backbone of the rule of law, access to rights and justice is a fundamental guarantee that the state must provide to its citizens. There can be no democracy without respect for the rule of law, and there can be no true respect for the law without a legal system that guarantees that all citizens can protect their rights, seek redress for wrongs or damages, and resort to different peaceful means of resolution based on the principles of fair, independent, and effective justice.

Access to justice is also one of the pillars of social cohesion and a guarantor of peace. Linked to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 "Peace, justice, and strong institutions" (target 16.3)¹. Access to justice guarantees citizens the means to resolve their interpersonal differences peacefully, in a timely and equitable manner, whether through negotiation, mediation, or third-party decision-making. Furthermore, access to the law, by enabling individuals and communities to learn about their rights and the norms that regulate society, increases their autonomy, their sense of belonging, trust (in other citizens and the state), and security. Conversely, when access to justice is not guaranteed, when it fails to play its role as a regulator of social relations, or when it takes the side of one force over another, it jeopardizes social peace among citizens. It is precisely in these repeated situations of lack of recourse to judicial or alternative

means of resolving individual disputes that we see communities resorting to popular justice or rushing headlong into violent collective conflicts. The key to social cohesion lies in ensuring that there are fair, equal, effective, and accessible mechanisms in place to transform disputes into equitable outcomes when individual or collective conflicts arise.

Equal and effective access to justice requires affordable, available, and easy-to-understand justice, as well as a number of procedural guarantees such as the right to appeal, access to legal counsel, and a legal aid system for the most disadvantaged citizens. One of the main challenges of access to justice lies in the degree of accessibility of justice (physical, geographical, and financial accessibility; the prevalence of cultural and social barriers that hinder access; the perception of a justice system that is controlled by political powers or corrupt; access to gender- and child-justice). However, in many countries, the justice system does not fulfill its role for the vast majority of the population. It is slow, expensive, complex, geographically inaccessible, sometimes corrupt, and often unsuited to the socio-cultural environment. The right to legal assistance is meaningless if the services of a lawyer cost on average 350,000–1 million CFA francs, and the average salary is 425,000 CFA francs per year.² Due process is of dubious value when you are illiterate or unable to understand the

¹ SDG 16: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

² Data collected during interviews with lawyers in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

proceedings. The courts are virtually useless for those who live 85 km away or cannot afford the bus fare to get there.

According to the World Justice Project (WJP) report *Measuring the Justice Gap*, 1.5 billion people face multiple challenges in accessing justice. Approximately 40% of them are CYP, who are doubly affected by barriers to justice. On the one hand, children and young people face the same problems as anyone else in their quest for justice, including a lack of information about their rights and existing remedies, procedural costs, a lack of trust in the system, and fear of stigmatization.³ On the other hand, they also face obstacles related to their age and status. From a legal perspective, one of the main obstacles to children's access to justice stems from their specific status, as minors are generally considered legally incompetent.⁴ Due to their dependence, children often have to rely on adults who have the power to decide whether or not to act in their best interests. Furthermore, in some countries, social or cultural barriers prevent children from taking legal action, which is perceived as unacceptable by their elders, exposing them to the risk of reprisals.⁵ In addition, children face the complexity of justice systems, a lack of information about their rights, and a lack of appropriate support to help them in their efforts. However, the lack of rights education has a significant impact on children's access to fair and appropriate justice. For example, in West Africa and the Middle East, few children are aware of or informed about their rights to be assisted by a lawyer and to have access to free or low-cost legal aid, even when legal aid services are available. Furthermore, when rights education is available, it is often not tailored to the age or gender of the participants, and is very rarely adapted to children with little or no formal education.

Our Action

Because of these multiple barriers that children and young people face in accessing justice, justice can

be perceived as an abstract concept, sometimes even as a threat, rather than as a right or a public service that enables them to exercise their fundamental rights and resolve their legal problems.

Strengthening effective access to local justice and legal empowerment means reversing this trend: it means equipping children and young people, as well as their families and communities, with the skills and power to know and understand their rights, to exercise them, and to claim them within justice systems that are accessible, adapted, and available to their needs and circumstances.

"The future of a child-friendly system is a justice system where children are informed of their rights and know what to expect. A system in which adults genuinely want to involve children in decision-making and related processes."

Anonymous child, Serbia

To strengthen access to local justice and the legal empowerment of children and young people, Tdh pursues a child-centered approach to justice, which it implements through three priorities for action:

- Rights awareness and legal education for children in conflict with the law
- Access to legal assistance services tailored to children and young people
- Strengthening local justice is accessible to children in conflict with the law

Rights awareness and legal education for children in contact with the law

Rights awareness and legal education refer to the principles of legal capacity and legal *empowerment*. Legal empowerment involves equipping young people in contact with the law, as well as their families and communities, with the legal knowledge and skills they need to understand, exercise, and claim their rights, use legal remedies to resolve their legal problems, navigate the justice system, and participate in the development of standards that affect them.⁶ It is about ensuring that the law, rights,

³ Laurène Graziani, Access to justice for children, *Journal du droit des jeunes* 2014/5 (No. 335), pages 22 to 24.

⁴ Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 5, 2003.

⁵ Laurène Graziani, Access to justice for children, *Journal du droit des jeunes* 2014/5 (No. 335), pages 22 to 24.

⁶ A person with legal "capability" is someone who knows how to recognize that a problem has a legal dimension, knows how (and where) to seek help, understands that it is best to resolve legal problems as early as possible in order to achieve the best possible results, and has confidence in their ability to participate in the legal process and the justice system.

and justice are not confined to books or courtrooms, but are accessible and practiced by all.⁷ Legal education is essential for citizens, and particularly for children and young people, so that they know their rights, can claim them, and use legal remedies and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Legal education contributes to the prevention of disputes and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

To this end, Tdh implements rights awareness and legal education activities that enable children and young people to:

- Become aware of the omnipresence of the law in our daily lives;
- Develop knowledge about their rights and how their legal system works;
- Develop the skills to recognize a legal issue or problem;
- Find and understand the necessary legal information;
- Act in an informed manner and manage the legal aspects of everyday problems; Know and use judicial services and legal remedies;
- To assert their rights, initiate legal proceedings (with or without legal representation, depending on the laws of the country), and participate in legal proceedings and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

From an early age, children are in contact with the law. They often ask to understand "why" certain rules exist and feel deeply concerned when they perceive injustice. By understanding the origin of rules, children and young people will be able to better understand that the limits and prohibitions in their daily lives are accompanied by rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. We believe that the earlier an individual becomes aware of the presence of law in their life and the role they can play in its development, the more positive and participatory their relationship with the law will be. Moreover, we see that young people are engaged and active when a cause affects them more directly, for example, with climate activism.⁸ It is important for young people to

be aware of the legal framework within which they have the right to act and make their concerns known.⁹

THE RIGHT TO BRING LEGAL ACTION

In South Africa, children have the right to initiate legal proceedings themselves.¹⁰ In the Philippines, children have successfully brought environmental lawsuits within the judicial system, exploiting the country's robust laws to enforce measures to protect the environment.¹¹

Through simplified legal content delivered in the form of educational and fun activities and the organization of discussion sessions with legal professionals, Tdh develops the "legal capability" of young people in conflict with the law—knowledge, skills, and self-confidence and confidence in the justice system—which leads to legal empowerment. Our legal education programs give juveniles in conflict with the law the opportunity to meet with justice sector professionals and have open and frank conversations about the difficulties they experience in accessing inclusive, non-discriminatory justice that is adapted to their needs, age, gender, and other vulnerabilities. These interactions allow young people to be heard, to have terms and processes explained to them in a relaxed environment, and to develop their confidence in themselves and in the justice system. In addition, by sharing their experiences and stories, they encourage justice professionals to question their own positions and the functioning of the justice system, and to reflect on possible improvements.

LEGAL EDUCATION GUIDE ON CHILDREN'S RIGHTS¹²

Tdh has developed a Legal Education Guide on Children's Rights for professionals working with children in Africa. This guide offers activities that enable African children and young people to learn about, understand, and assert their rights in a constructive and fun way. It aims to inform children

⁷ Open Society Justice Initiative, Legal Empowerment: An integrated approach to justice and development, 2012.

⁸ Tdh, Climate in-justice for children: How climate crisis affects access to justice and children's rights, 2023.

⁹ Educaloï, Legal education as an essential part of Quebec schools, 2020.

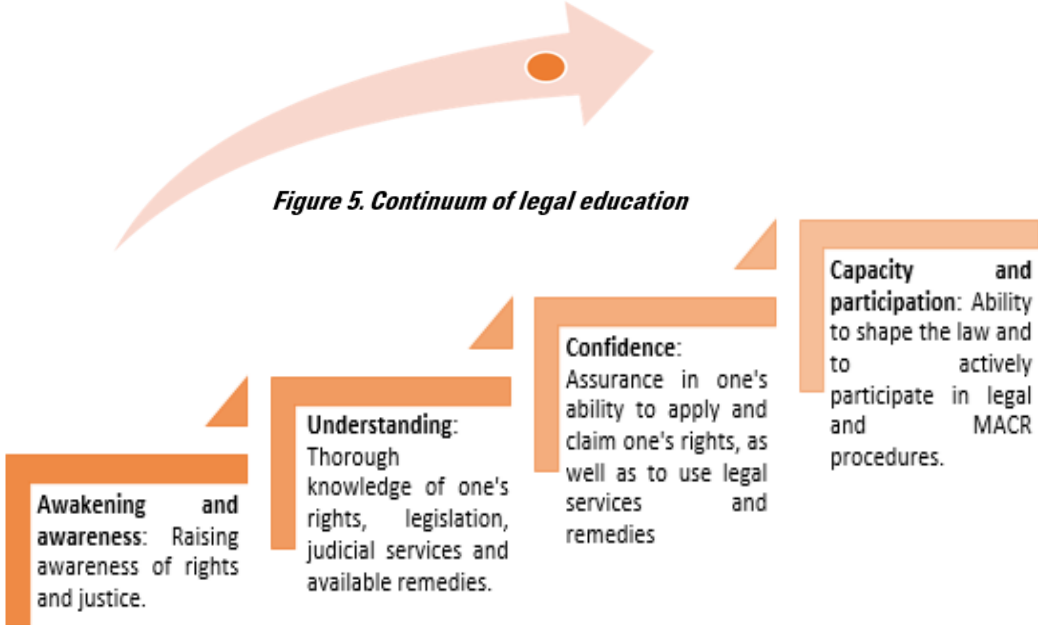
¹⁰ Section 14 of the Children's Act; Boezaart, 2009: 22–23 (with reference to the common law starting point that an infant has no capacity to litigate: 22) and 34–35).

¹¹ CRIN, Children's Access to Justice for Environmental Rights; Philippines, 2022.

¹² Tdh, Children's Rights, Guide to Legal Education and Access to Rights, 2024.

and young people about their rights, as well as the regional and international instruments that protect them, and the obligations of states, organizations, and individuals to realize and respect children's rights.

Through these activities, children discover the importance of their rights, how to put them into practice, and who to claim them from through peaceful means of communication. Recreational activities are offered to engage and involve children, using educational games and exercises.¹³



¹³ Tdh, Children's Rights, Guide to Legal Education and Access to Rights, 2024.

Access to child-friendly legal assistance

Access to a specialized and trusted legal aid provider is an essential element of a child-friendly justice system. These practitioners can make a huge difference to a child or young person's experience within the justice system and to the outcome of the case and, consequently, to that person's life. Access to appropriate services and prompt and effective legal assistance is a fundamental right to which children in conflict with the law are entitled. As a lever for the realization of other rights¹⁴. The right to legal counsel is also an essential prerequisite for ensuring effective access and full participation of children in conflict with the law in the justice system. Juveniles who come into contact with the justice system often need legal advice, information, representation, and support to navigate the administrative and legal requirements of the proceedings. In criminal cases, support is essential to ensure defense and respect for the guarantees and rights of the child throughout the proceedings. Access to specialized legal advice in juvenile justice is crucial at all stages of the proceedings, particularly to ensure a defense tailored to the needs and interests of the child and to promote child-centered and child-appropriate justice procedures and approaches, such as diversion, alternatives to deprivation of liberty, and restorative justice measures. Thus, if the right to legal assistance is not provided in an appropriate manner, it is questionable whether the presumption of innocence, a fair trial, or a trial proportionate to the sentence has been applied.¹⁵

"The ideal lawyer for me is someone who explains everything to me patiently, until I understand what I need to know."

Member of the Children's Advisory Council of Hungary

To improve access to legal assistance for children and young people, their families, and their communities, Tdh supports various models of legal aid (state, non-state, private, hybrid) and legal assistance mechanisms (legal clinics, one-stop legal services, pro bono programs, online legal aid,

paralegal programs, integrated victim care models such as SVBG One Stop Centers, the Barnahus model) in partnership with governments, local and international civil society organizations, bar associations, and universities.

Tdh also provides several capacity-building opportunities for legal aid providers (group training, individual training, mentoring, coaching). Regardless of their status (lawyer, paralegal, or other) or basic training, Tdh trains provides various guidance and resources to child advocates on the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to acquire in order to deliver high-quality, appropriate, and child-sensitive legal aid. It ensures that child advocates ensure the full participation of children and young people throughout the proceedings, enabling them to express their views, opinions, and concerns on all matters affecting them, regardless of their age and maturity.

CHILD-LEX, A DATABASE ON CHILD-FRIENDLY JUSTICE¹⁶

Tdh and its partners in the Clear Rights project have created CHILD-Lex, a database on child-friendly justice. This database provides professionals with detailed information on the rights of children in contact with the justice system. It contains legal fact sheets detailing their rights under international, European, and national legislation. These fact sheets cover the key rights and principles of child-friendly justice, such as fair trial guarantees, juvenile justice systems, children's rights to legal assistance, and diversion from formal judicial proceedings.¹⁷

Tdh also supports bar associations, legal aid services, and other legal assistance organizations in adopting codes of conduct and professional standards and integrating standards and norms specifically related to the provision of child-friendly legal assistance services. These include accreditation requirements for children's lawyers and professional and ethical standards that specifically define the roles and duties that lawyers and non-lawyers must fulfill in their work with

¹⁴ In particular, the principle of equal access to justice, the right to a fair trial, the principle of equality of arms, and the rights of the defense.

¹⁵ Tdh, Understanding the legal pathways for children in contact with the law within the Iraqi Criminal Justice System, 2022.

¹⁶ Child-Lex Database on child-friendly justice, <https://www.child-lex.cfjnetwork.eu/>

¹⁷ International Juvenile Justice Observatory, The CLEAR-Rights Project publishes a database about child-friendly justice, 2022.

children. To ensure that the assistance provided to children is tailored to the wishes of children and young people and is of high quality, legal aid organizations are also supported in developing satisfaction mechanisms for their young clients and in setting up systems to supervise and evaluate the quality of their service providers' performance.

LEGAL SUPPORT, A MECHANISM FOR SATISFACTION AND QUALITY SUPPORT¹⁸

As part of the CLEAR-Rights project led by Tdh in Europe, the "My Legal Support" app was co-designed with children from the project's Child Advisory Boards and in close collaboration with our partner Mind of My Own. It is intended for use by children, whether or not they have experience with free legal aid. This tool allows children to instantly and conveniently express their opinions, wishes, and feelings about the legal aid services they have received. In addition, it enables legal aid providers (whether state-funded legal aid or pro bono services) to improve the quality of their work. Between September and December 2022, this app was tested in France, Hungary, and Romania. It was presented to children in child protection services, detention centers, probation services, schools, and partner organizations.¹⁹

Furthermore, as there are not enough children's lawyers to provide the legal assistance services that children and young people need, Tdh advocates for and supports the diversification of legal assistance providers. It is now widely recognized that one way to provide effective legal assistance to as many people as possible is to rely on non-lawyers, including law students, legal assistants, and paralegals. In areas far from urban centers, paralegals are essential providers of legal support to communities.²⁰ They can bridge the informal/formal divide, understand the local context, be cost-effective, and ensure that legal aid programs are designed to effectively address the legal issues faced by these remote communities. Finally, through its legal education and empowerment activities, Tdh

¹⁸ Tdh, My Legal Support - results of the CLEAR-Rights application, 2020.

¹⁹ Tdh, My Legal Support - results of the CLEAR-Rights application, 2020.

²⁰ Lilongwe Declaration on Access to Legal Aid in the Criminal Justice System in Africa, Conference on Legal Aid in the Criminal

strengthens CYP access to legal aid and assistance services.

LEGAL CLINICS, A LEGAL AID SYSTEM TAILORED TO YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN LIVING IN RURAL AREAS

In certain rural areas of Burkina Faso, children and young people have neither knowledge of nor access to legal aid services and providers. Marginalized, this population is relatively distrustful of judicial institutions, which are perceived as being extremely distant in cultural, linguistic, geographical, and financial terms. With a view to providing appropriate legal assistance to children and young people and bringing these remote populations closer to justice, in 2021, Tdh created two legal clinics where qualified paralegals offer free legal information and advice, referrals to children's lawyers and appropriate remedies (legal proceedings, customary mechanisms, and MADR), and support in initiating proceedings. To make services accessible to children in conflict with the law, paralegals also organize consultations in schools, youth movements, displacement camps, and juvenile detention centers. These clinics also facilitate their access to civil documentation. In collaboration with judicial actors, paralegals organize mobile court hearings to issue civil status documents to children in conflict with the law or their parents. With their birth certificates and identity cards, juveniles can exercise their fundamental rights and access public services (education, health, protection, justice). Since 2020, the clinics have conducted more than 24,000 consultations and issued 15,065 civil status documents.²¹

Strengthening local justice accessible to children and young people

Strengthening local justice accessible to CYP refers to the principle of having justice that is close to the citizen-litigant, from a human, cultural, financial, spatial, and temporal point of view. The aim is to

Justice System: The Role of Lawyers, Non-Lawyers and Other Legal Aid Actors in Africa, Lilongwe, Malawi, 2004.

²¹ Tdh, Legal clinics, a legal aid mechanism tailored to children and young people living in rural areas, 2023.

reduce the multidimensional barriers to access to justice faced by children and young people, their families, and their communities, and to promote a justice system that is attentive to their legal problems, respectful of local cultural codes, capable of understanding the interests at stake, while taking into account the specific needs of children and young people and each particular situation.

In many developing countries where Tdh operates, research shows that the majority of citizens resolve their problems outside the courts, with more than 80% of disputes being brought before community-level justice actors.²² Perceived by local populations as legitimate actors for resolving certain disputes, in many parts of the world, they are the only recourse available to the population for resolving their legal problems.²³ Contemporary approaches to children and justice emphasize the need to engage with customary justice systems. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the juvenile justice system, recognized the need to take the customary justice system into account in justice reform, emphasizing that the restorative approaches practiced in customary justice systems could well offer opportunities for the formal juvenile justice system. It should be noted that with the population growth expected in the coming years, judicial systems will be unable to adequately cope with a substantial increase in the number of cases without the development of new, innovative, and restorative justice practices.²⁴

Given this context and advocating for an approach to access to justice that is rooted in the reality of the populations and promotes social cohesion, for many years, Tdh recognizes that the state is not the only provider of justice and works with all justice systems that people use at the local level, whether they are state, customary, religious, community, formal, informal, or even hybrid.²⁵

²² Danish Institute for Human Rights, *Informal Justice Systems: Charting a Course for Human Rights-based Engagement* (Copenhagen, 2012), 7.

²³ Tdh Seminal Report, *Fostering New Child Rights Constituencies: Leveraging Knowledge on Customary Justice Systems*, 2024.

²⁴ Tdh Seminal Report, *Fostering New Child Rights Constituencies: Leveraging Knowledge on Customary Justice Systems*, 2024.

²⁵ Tdh, *Children in contact with the law and customary justice in Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine*, 2020.

Strengthening local justice accessible to young offenders with community actors

Rooted in local socio-cultural values and codes, less expensive and more available, these justice actors offer more accessible justice to populations. Based on negotiated solutions aimed above all at restoring community harmony, they also emphasize the promotion of restorative justice and the maintenance of peaceful coexistence between communities.

Although undeniably closer from a geographical, human, financial, and cultural point of view, they are nevertheless not always able to deliver justice that is appropriate for young offenders and perceived as psychologically accessible by them. As customary and religious justice procedures are rarely written down but passed down from one generation to the next, the majority of customary justice actors do not have formal qualifications in juvenile justice and do not follow procedures that are appropriate to the age and needs of children. As a result, they are more prone to abuse, discriminatory, and harmful practices.²⁶ This is why Tdh focuses on strengthening knowledge and capacities in its collaboration with these actors. Tdh offers them comprehensive training courses on children's rights and juvenile justice and works with them to eliminate harmful traditional practices. Once trained, these actors are then supported in applying their new knowledge and adjusting their approach and language in their practice of resolving conflicts involving children and young people.²⁷

HARNESSING KNOWLEDGE AND STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITIES OF CUSTOMARY JUSTICE SYSTEMS THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH AND TRAINING

Over the past ten years, Tdh has undertaken various research projects in the Middle East and West Africa on the role of customary justice actors in resolving individual and community disputes involving children, whether civil, criminal, or family-related.

²⁶ Harper, E., and Colliou, Y. "Re-Imagining Customary Justice Systems: Interrogating Past Assumptions and Entertaining New Ones," *Hague J Rule Law* 15, (2022): 75–94.

²⁷ Tdh, *Guide to Criminal Mediation for Children in Burkina Faso*, 2019; Tdh *Promoting and Accelerating Safe, Restorative, and Inclusive Access to Justice for Children & Youth*, project script, The Light Foundation, 2022.

The results of this research reveal that customary justice mechanisms are a fundamental aspect of access to justice for many children in Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Mali, and Burkina Faso. However, these studies also highlight these actors' lack of knowledge about children's rights and child-friendly justice standards and procedures. They also emphasize the absence of children's right to be heard in decisions affecting them and the failure of these actors to take their opinions into account.

Adopting a research-action approach, Tdh launched a comprehensive program in 2018 to build the capacity of community justice actors in several of these countries of intervention, to promote children's access to local justice that is adapted and sensitive to their needs. After studying informal justice systems in the Middle East and West Africa, Tdh trained and supported the actors concerned with children's rights, standards, guarantees, and procedures for justice that are adapted and sensitive to children. This program also includes promoting children's participation in alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. Through this initiative, Tdh aims to transform customary justice practices, ensuring that children's rights are not only protected but also heard and respected in decisions that affect their lives.

In many cases, these systems prioritize "collective harmony or peace" over individual rights. Children and young people are generally given low priority. Furthermore, they rarely place the participation of children and consideration of their voices and opinions at the center of their procedures. This is why Tdh supports them in integrating processes and standards that respond to the rights of children and young people and promote their participation. In order to guarantee processes that are responsible and accountable to children and young people, Tdh also supports its actors in setting up judicial accountability mechanisms.

Furthermore, as interaction and synergy between the different justice systems are crucial to providing a coherent, inclusive, and effective solution to legal

problems, Tdh supports the establishment of effective bridges and modes of collaboration between justice systems.²⁸

TOWARDS A HYBRID JUSTICE SYSTEM ADAPTED TO CHILDREN

In 2017, Tdh initiated a joint approach with the Palestinian Authority's Public Prosecutor's Office and customary justice actors, whose role and importance remain crucial in society and, consequently, in the administration of justice for children and young people. This initiative culminated in 2019 with the adoption of the first decree on juvenile criminal mediation in Palestine, approved by Parliament. This decree established a system of community mediators working jointly with prosecutors in the context of mediation. Criminal mediation has thus become the primary measure for diverting children and young people from the criminal justice system. Statistics for 2020 and 2021 show an unprecedented impact: the prison population of children has been reduced by 40%, 1,624 cases of children and young people in contact with the law have benefited from mediation, and recidivism among children has fallen by 51%.²⁹

In Burkina Faso, since 2017, Tdh has been working with the authorities and customary actors to adopt a decree promoting the use of criminal mediation for minors, integrating customary justice actors as mediators. In partnership with prosecutors, Tdh has trained more than 60 customary actors as criminal mediators for children. Since the institutionalization of the criminal mediation process, the population of incarcerated children has decreased by 60% in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. This process has also given rise to an innovative hybrid system where actors from the formal justice systems and customary mediators for children work together within the same mechanism, thus promoting child-friendly justice.³⁰

Through these initiatives, Tdh aims to transform customary and formal justice practices, ensuring

²⁸ Tdh, Theory of Change Access to Justice, 2021-2024.

²⁹ Tdh, Children in contact with the law and customary justice in Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine, 2020.

³⁰ Tdh, Final Report on the Experimentation of Criminal Mediation Conducted by Community Actors under the Auspices of the Public

Prosecutor's Office in Burkina Faso, 2019; Tdh, Practical Guide to Criminal Mediation for Minors, Burkina Faso, 2019.

that children not only receive protection but also fair justice tailored to their specific needs.

Finally, as each customary justice system is rooted in a specific socio-cultural context and has its own particularities, Tdh produces numerous studies on customary justice systems with the aim of better guiding its interventions and co-creating feasible and context-specific responses that are capable of delivering justice to children in a manner that respects their rights.³¹

Strengthening local justice accessible to children and young people with judicial institutions

In addition to its collaboration with community justice actors, Tdh also strives to bring state judicial institutions closer to children, young people, and communities. To reduce the physical, psychological, socio-cultural, and financial distances that citizens face in accessing state justice, Tdh collaborates with governments and judicial institutions to develop and implement community justice mechanisms.

Community-based justice mechanisms refer to all mechanisms, procedures, and structures designed to bring justice closer to litigants and citizens, facilitate their access to justice, make justice more responsive to citizens' needs, encourage amicable conflict resolution mechanisms, relieve congestion in the judicial system, restore a link between offenders and their victims, provide answers to everyday legal questions, and ensure faster judicial processing of small claims between individuals. Community-based justice mechanisms can act on three dimensions of proximity:

- **Spatial proximity** consists of bringing justice geographically closer to citizens by relocating courts and judicial staff or creating local and

accessible structures so that citizens do not have to travel long distances to access justice.³²

- **Human** or emotional **proximity** addresses the psychological and socio-cultural barriers to justice, helping to break down the widespread image of justice as inaccessible, opaque, and complex. Thus, "human justice" means creating relationships of trust between citizens and judicial institutions and a justice system that listens to citizens and respects local cultural codes. Unlike legal technicians who address users in incomprehensible legal jargon and enforce the rule of law, human-centered justice pays attention to the particularities of each situation and uses language and communication that is intended to be understood by all.³³ Furthermore, these actors do not seek to determine a winner at all costs, but rather to restore social peace. Less punitive and more understanding, this justice system simplifies legal proceedings and adapts its services to meet the specific needs of citizens, particularly those of young people. It promotes dialogue and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) methods over cumbersome and complex legal proceedings.³⁴
- **Temporal proximity** consists of speeding up the processing time of cases to adapt as much as possible to citizen demand, because the time of justice is not the time of society. The aim is therefore to relieve the burden on the courts of first instance, particularly for mass civil litigation, and to bring a breath of fresh air and efficiency to the judicial system, whose current slow and complex procedures are no longer suited to citizens' needs for justice.³⁵

³¹ Tdh, *Informal Justice for Children in Syrian Settlements in Lebanon*, 2019; Tdh, *Final Report on the Experimentation of Criminal Mediation Conducted by Community Actors under the Auspices of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Burkina Faso*, 2019; Tdh, *Children in Contact with the Law and Customary Justice in Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine*, 2020; Tdh, *Mapping & Analysis of Informal Child Protection and Child Justice Systems in Lebanon 2020*; Tdh *Seminal Report, Fostering New Child Rights Constituencies: Leveraging Knowledge on Customary Justice Systems*, 2024.

³² Anne Wyvekens, "La justice de proximité en France" (Community justice in France), in Wyvekens A., Faget J. (eds.), *La justice de proximité en Europe. Pratiques et enjeux* (Community justice in Europe: Practices and challenges), Toulouse, Érès, 2001.

³³ Anne Wyvekens, "La justice de proximité : rapprocher la justice des citoyens ?", *Les Cahiers français: documents d'actualité*, 2006; Stéphane Bernatchez, Suzanne Comtois, Véronique Fortin, Guillaume Rousseau, and Marie-Claude Desjardins, *Community Justice: Transformations in Access to Justice from a Governance Perspective*, *Les cahiers de droit*, 2021.

³⁴ Anne Weakens, *Community justice and proximity to justice. Justice and law centers*, In: *Law and Society*, No. 33, 1996. *Les professionnels du divorce*. pp. 363-388; Benoit Bastard and Pierre Guibentif, *Community Justice: The Right Distance, a Judicial Policy Issue*, *Droit et société* 2007/2 (No. 66), pages 267 to 539.

³⁵ Suzanne Comtois, Véronique Fortin, Guillaume Rousseau, and Marie-Claude Desjardins, *Community Justice: Changes in Access*

By drawing on consultations with young offenders and encouraging their active participation in the design of community justice systems, Tdh ensures that their needs and priorities in terms of justice are fully taken into account. More specifically, Tdh supports governments in developing structures that:

1. Create a safe environment where children and young people can interact with justice actors.
2. Take into account the specific access difficulties and intersectional discrimination that children face due to various factors (age, race, gender, disability).
3. Include procedures, safeguards, and justice services that are adapted and sensitive to the needs of children in conflict with the law.
4. Focus on reparation and amicable dispute resolution.

Developed in North America and Europe in the 1990s, the concept of community justice has now spread to all regions of the world. Among the best-known initiatives are the Maisons de Justice (Houses of Justice) in Belgium³⁶, France³⁷, Senegal³⁸, Togo³⁹, and Quebec⁴⁰. Each of these houses is designed to bring justice closer to citizens and address the main challenges of access to justice. Although they share common characteristics, they also have specific features tailored to each context, responding to the justice needs of local populations and the judicial organization of each country.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF JUSTICE CENTERS: THE EXPERIENCE OF SENEGAL AND TOGO

As part of the Project to Support the Strengthening of the Rule of Law (PARED), the European Union and the Senegalese Ministry of Justice have set up twelve justice centers in areas with high demographic and urban growth. These justice centers, based on the

to Justice from a Governance Perspective, Les cahiers de droit, 2021; Ansou Sané, Community Justice in the Justice Sector Program, Senegal, Republic of Senegal, What is Community Justice, <https://justicedeproximite.sn/>

³⁶ Wallonia-Brussels Federation, Justice Centers Portal, <https://www.maisonsdejustice.be/>

³⁷ Ministry of Justice, Justice and Law Centers in 2022, <https://www.justice.gouv.fr/>

³⁸ Suzanne Comtois, Véronique Fortin, Guillaume Rousseau, and Marie-Claude Desjardins, Community Justice: Transformations in Access to Justice from a Governance Perspective, Les cahiers de droit, 2021.

³⁹ Ansou Sané, Community Justice in the Justice Sector Program, Senegal, Republic of Senegal, What is Community Justice,

principles of simplicity, speed, and free access, aim to popularize the law and regulate neighborhood conflicts, family disputes, and small claims through alternative dispute resolution methods. Created to bring justice closer to those seeking it and to relieve congestion in the courts, since 2006 they have welcomed approximately 945,000 users and handled more than 175,000 mediation cases, with a success rate of 75%.⁴¹

Inspired by this model, the Republic of Togo established Maisons de Justice (Houses of Justice) by decree in 2018 as a means of accessing law and justice, and has since opened nine Maisons de Justice throughout the country. These structures provide equitable and rapid access to justice while promoting social cohesion through peaceful and inclusive means.⁴²

Our approaches to strengthening access to justice for young people

In its efforts to strengthen access to local justice and legal empowerment for children and young people, Tdh uses and applies the following approaches:

- **Specialized justice systems:** this refers to the establishment of specialized courts, trained judicial actors, and the creation of simplified procedures or processes that are understandable and adapted to the needs of children. The aim is to promote judicial and social responses that favor rehabilitation, social reintegration, and the protection of children's rights, while minimizing the long-term negative effects of the judicial system on their personal development.

- **A child-centered approach to justice:** The child-centered approach to justice

<https://justicedeproximite.sn/>; Moussa Samb, Access to Justice for Litigants in Senegal. Towards community justice? Afrique contemporaine 2014/2 (no. 250), pages 82 to 83.

⁴⁰ Republic of Togo, Decree No. 2018-034/PR establishing justice centers.

⁴¹ Ansou Sané Community Justice in the Justice Sector Program, Senegal, Republic of Senegal, What is Community Justice, <https://justicedeproximite.sn/>; Moussa Samb, Access to Justice for Litigants in Senegal. Towards community justice? Afrique contemporaine 2014/2 (No. 250), pages 82 to 83.

⁴² Republic of Togo, Decree No. 2018-034/PR establishing justice centers.

emphasizes the needs, rights, and well-being of children at every stage of the judicial process. It aims to ensure that children receive fair, respectful treatment that is appropriate to their age and development. This includes recognizing their right to be heard, to actively participate in decisions that affect them, and to receive appropriate support, such as counseling services and specific protections. This approach also emphasizes prevention and rehabilitation over punishment, favoring solutions that promote social reintegration and redress for harm caused, while ensuring adequate protection from abuse and trauma.

- **The approach of adapted, inclusive, and non-discriminatory justice:** aims to ensure that judicial procedures and justice processes at all levels are adapted to the age and specific circumstances of children and take specific account of the intersectional discrimination they face. This involves recognizing and understanding how multiple identities (such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, migration status, and others) can influence the experience and risks of discrimination faced by children in conflict with the law in the justice system. This approach promotes practices that aim to eliminate bias and provide fair and equitable treatment to all CYP, particularly CYP who are victims/survivors of any kind of gender-based violence, as well as responding appropriately to the specific needs of those who face multiple and interconnected forms of discrimination.⁴³

- **Restorative justice focused on reintegration:** focuses on resolving conflicts and offenses by promoting reparation for harm caused and the reintegration of perpetrators, rather than simply punishing them. This enables juveniles to better understand and take responsibility for their actions. By actively involving juveniles, their families, and the community in finding solutions, this approach

promotes the repair of damaged relationships, responds to the needs of victims, and restores trust in community relationships. Reducing stigma and offering opportunities for positive social reintegration, it helps prevent recidivism and supports the personal development of the young people involved, thereby promoting a more promising future for them in society.⁴⁴

- **Justice that takes into account child development, including neurological development:**

The ability of juveniles to understand what is at stake and interact with those assisting them depends on their physical, cognitive, and emotional development, and on the ability of professionals to communicate with children in an age-appropriate manner. The last part of the brain to reach full maturity is the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for planning, reasoning, and self-control. Therefore, juvenile behavior perceived as premeditated criminal behavior may in fact be an impulsive manifestation of poor judgment based on immature thinking.⁴⁵ Understanding brain development, as well as the range of social factors influencing child development, is crucial to understanding the child's situation, communicating with them, and providing them with access to justice that is appropriate and sensitive to their needs and interests.⁴⁶

⁴³ Tdh, Inclusive and gender- and diversity-sensitive justice for children: turning challenges into progress, 2023; Tdh Gender Justice - Procedural Guidelines of Access to Justice Standards for Cases of Violence Against Women and Girls in Formal and Customary/Community-based Justice Systems in Palestine, 2021

⁴⁴ Tdh, Model of Action: Case management focused on the reintegration of children and young people in conflict with the law, 2024; Tdh, Restorative Juvenile Justice, 2014; Tdh, Give me a

chance, but a real one, How to improve the Reintegration of Children in Conflict with the Law An analysis of the concept, key standards and practices in the MENA region, 2020.

⁴⁵ UNDP/UNICEF/UNODC, [Child-Friendly Legal Aid in Africa](#), 2011 CF_Legal_Aid_EN_version.pdf

⁴⁶ Justice with Children, Policy Paper: [Brain Science and How It Affects Children Accused Of Crimes](#), 2021.

Programmatic guidelines: three strategies for action to strengthen CYP access to local justice and legal empowerment

Rights awareness and legal education

Rights awareness and legal education involve ing children and young people, as well as their families and communities, with the legal knowledge and skills they need to understand, exercise, and claim their rights, use remedies to access justice, navigate the justice system, and participate in the development of standards that affect them.⁴⁷

Examples of activities:

- Conducting a critical and in-depth, knowledge-based analysis of all the problems encountered by young people in accessing their rights.
- Informing youth organizations and youth workers about the rights that young people should enjoy and the existing local remedies and procedures (both formal and informal) in case of violation of these rights.
- Organize educational activities to raise awareness of children's rights and human rights.
- Organize meetings with magistrates specializing in juvenile justice, a visit to judicial institutions, and a presentation on the different forms of child participation in legal proceedings.

Access to appropriate legal assistance

Legal assistance includes information, advice, guidance, support, and representation in proceedings. Appropriate legal assistance for children and young people consists of providing legal assistance services that are accessible, multidisciplinary, effective, and tailored to their age and the range of legal and social needs they face. To this end, Tdh promotes the diversification of legal assistance providers and supports the establishment of local structures that provide information and legal assistance services tailored to children and young people, as well as their families and communities.

Examples of activities:

- Supporting the establishment of legal information and assistance structures (legal information offices, legal clinics, including mobile ones) and mobile legal consultations.
- Supporting the diversification of legal aid providers at the local level (community paralegals, *pro bono* lawyer networks, etc.).
- Organizing legal hotlines in schools, youth associations and movements, and rehabilitation centers.
- Support/set up a toll-free telephone line for legal advice and consultation.

Strengthening accessible local justice

Effective access to local justice involves supporting the various actors in the justice system to ensure that children and young people have access to accessible, appropriate, and locally based remedies to address their justice issues. On the one hand, this involves raising awareness among community justice actors about children's rights and supporting them in integrating procedures adapted to young offenders into their dispute resolution methods and applying the principles of juvenile justice. On the other hand, it involves supporting judicial actors in bringing justice closer to those subject to it through the establishment of local justice mechanisms that reduce physical, psychological, socio-cultural, and financial distances and strengthen trust between those subject to justice and judicial actors.

Examples of activities:

- Supporting the establishment of community justice centers, justice houses, legal help desks, reception and guidance offices, and mediation centers.
- Strengthen the capacity of community justice actors to guarantee access to mechanisms for resolving disputes that are independent and respectful of children's rights.
- Strengthen synergy and collaboration between multiple justice systems.

⁴⁷ A person with legal "capability" is someone who knows how to recognize that a problem has a legal dimension, knows how (and

where) to seek help, understands that it is best to resolve legal problems as early as possible in order to achieve the best possible

outcomes, and has confidence in their ability to participate in the legal process and the justice system.

Additional resources:

- Tdh, Informal Justice for Children in Syrian Settlements in Lebanon, 2019.
- Tdh, Final Report on the Experimentation of Criminal Mediation Conducted by Community Actors under the Auspices of the Public Prosecutor's Office in Burkina Faso, 2019.
- Tdh, Practical Guide to Criminal Mediation for Minors, Burkina Faso, 2019.
- Tdh, Mapping & Analysis of Informal Child Protection and Child Justice Systems in Lebanon, 2020.
- Tdh, Children in contact with the law and customary justice in Afghanistan, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine, 2020.
- Tdh, Mapping & Analysis of Informal Child Protection and Child Justice Systems in Lebanon, 2020.
- Tdh Seminal Report, Fostering New Child Rights Constituencies: Leveraging Knowledge on Customary Justice Systems, 2024.
- Tdh, Guide to Legal Education and Access to Rights, Children's Rights, 2024.

