

Protecting children in Montenegro's justice system

Children who come into contact with the law have the right to treatment that respects their dignity and takes account of their age. The EU is funding a project in Montenegro to make the justice system responsive to the special needs of young people.

RESPECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

As part of the project, UNICEF experts are working with Montenegrin officials. They are helping to bring courts and detention centres into line with the commitments towards children's rights that Montenegro has taken on board under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. As part of the project, judges, police officers and social services are receiving specialised training to work with children who are in conflict with the law, or who have been victims or witnesses to crimes.

Montenegro has recognised that conventional judicial proceedings and incarceration can do more harm than good in keeping young offenders from repeating their mistakes. This is why it has adopted a new law on the Treatment of Juveniles in Criminal Proceedings. "This act represents a significant step forwards in the field of juvenile justice," said Duško Marković, the Minister of Justice of Montenegro.

REHABILITATE RATHER THAN INCARCERATE

encouraged to rehabilitate young offenders rather than punish them, because jail results in social exclusion that can mark young offenders for life. The majority of crimes committed by children tend to be minor infractions such as theft or robbery. So instead, the project proposes alternative sentences which sensitise children to the consequences of their actions,

and processes geared towards reconciliation. This can be in the shape of informal settlements through which offenders provide restitution to victims, compensation via voluntary work, or even a simple apology.

Child-friendly hearings and special units of judges that deal with juvenile justice have also been set up. And child-friendly interview facilities are being provided for victims and witnesses, to spare innocent children the trauma of traditional justice procedures.

REACHING OUT TO CHILDREN AT RISK

There is a strong preventive element too. Justice professionals are being trained to extend their duties beyond the court room and communicate more constructively with young offenders. Social services are being trained to help children at risk before they turn to crime or acts of violence. This often involves better outreach to minority communities – in particular, Roma children growing up on the margins of society. Deterrence from a life cycle of crime also takes the form of attacking the underlying causes of crime, in terms of socio-economic conditions, and also in boosting the skill sets of young people accustomed only to think short term. The overall objective is to integrate offenders and victims of juvenile offences back into a cohesive society, and to create an environment that reduces juvenile crime.





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According to UNICEF, juvenile crime rates are falling, and fewer children are coming into conflict with the law.

When all fails, imprisonment remains the solution of last resort. But even then, Justice for Children is working on measures for incarcerated children to be rehabilitated faster on their release. The programme is teaching prison facilities to run mandatory education,

and helping establish bail programmes in which children can erase the harmful consequences of their crime, attend school and work in the outside world. For UNICEF and the national government, keeping kids locked away is simply not a solution. Predrag Bošković, Minister of Labour and Social Welfare, sees young offenders as one of the most vulnerable elements in Montenegrin society. "Their protection is a priority," he says.

PROJECT DETAILS – Justice for Children

Partners:

UNICEF Montenegro
Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Montenegro

Total cost in €:

500,000

EU Contribution in €:

100%

Start date:

July 2012

End date:

July 2014

Results:

More sensitive and respectful handling of children by law officers; lower juvenile crime rates

Techniques:

Training; court infrastructure improvements

