

THE FIRST STEP IS TO KNOW THEIR RIGHTS

The Association d'Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (AEJT) is a child-led organisation that is working with children from all across Rwanda to improve their knowledge and understanding of Child Rights, and empower them to increase their voice. "Not even adults know the rights of the child", says Anitha, aged 16. But through AEJT, groups of children all over the country get together to study these laws and rights, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); to discuss and internalise, and fully understand what it means practically for their day-to-day lives in Rwanda.

Since dry legal documents are often full of jargon and complex terms, AEJT takes the initiative to jazz them up in order to make them engaging for children, and easy to understand. "They are child-friendly as children ourselves took part in designing them and we were able to come up with drawings to insert", relates Olivier, who is 13 years old. AEJT facilitates workshops for children to design materials for future trainings. They develop posters, handbooks, guides and practical interpretations of child rights. "These are our advocacy tools", he smiles.



Olivier brainstorms with a fellow AEJT member on how to develop child-friendly materials

And so, armed with these tools, along with buckets of enthusiasm and energy, the children of AEJT are starting to see the fruits of their efforts. The selected children are trained on negotiation skills, and plan together on how to approach adults and decision-makers in their communities. Anitha explains that in Rwanda it is not a given that adults will pay attention to children. "In the past culture of our country, listening to children was not common for adults. Children's views were not taken into consideration and children were not always allowed to speak before the adults." But now, she is confident that things are different: "as organized children with knowledge, skills and techniques in whatever we are doing, we have been able to convince the adults that we can do something they never imagined".

Older children in the AEJT groups train, mentor and inspire the younger ones. At 13 years of age, Olivier is among the younger ones, and he feels very positive about how AEJT and children are now regarded in his community. He believes that local leaders really listen to them now. “Sometimes they even call us to go and help them with the problems they have with their children because they know that we bring a big change to other children”, he explains. “Adults call upon us because of how we behave in society as well as our skills in listening, orienting children and supporting them in finding solutions.”

Children’s ability to influence decision-makers can happen beyond small communities, and AEJT members dream of growing bigger and stronger. Children representatives in forums like the ones Anitha and Olivier participate in are currently preparing to participate in the National Annual Summit on Children’s Rights, which will be held in early 2013. Anitha thinks it’s a really positive occasion and hopes that the children representatives will be able to voice her community’s issues. There are nearly 120 children who participate in AEJT groups who have been shortlisted to represent their Districts at the National Summit. AEJT has taught these children to know their rights; and given them the skills, tools and motivation to act upon them, to strive to improve national policy here in Rwanda, and beyond.



Anitha with a group of AEJT children, holding up a child-friendly version of the UNCRC