



# Achieving justice

## The issue

Ensuring justice for children in conflict and in contact with the law in Sierra Leone is an every-day challenge, as an outdated and inadequate legal framework fails to provide necessary safeguards.

**9 out of 10** alleged child offenders are held in pre-trial detention in police cells that lack separate facilities for children or in court-ordered Remand Homes in Bo and Freetown where conditions are simply horrendous.

Lengthy investigation and court proceedings only add up to the regular unavailability of effective legal aid and representation for children. And with only one juvenile court in Freetown and a clear lack of specialized justice professionals, children's needs and due process rights are rarely met. Sentenced children are sent to the only juvenile detention facility in the country, the overcrowded Approved School (AS) of Wellington where no effective rehabilitation and reintegration measures are in place. By focusing on punishment, the juvenile justice system simply fails to give diversion, alternatives to detention and restorative justice the necessary space. When it comes to other children in contact with law, particularly survivors of abuse, violence and exploitation, stronger legal provisions simply fail to translate into practical realities. For example, victims of sexual violence are often asked to pay to receive legally free-of-charge medical treatment and report. In addition, the inadequate and insufficient access to and provision of socio-legal services do little to prioritize the specific needs of children in contact with the law, particularly in a justice system where off-court arrangements and systematic unsuccessful prosecutions continue to fuel a culture of impunity.

## Lamin's Story

When police officers came to Lamin's house and arrested him for allegedly sexually abusing an 8-year old girl, both he and his family were shocked. After spending nine months in pre-trial detention, Lamin was found not guilty but was placed in detention at the Approved School in Wellington to "protect" him from reprisals in the community. After becoming aware of the case, DCI-SL promptly intervened by providing psychological counselling and educational support to Lamin, and engaged with the AS authorities for his release. After 2 months of support and lobby, Lamin was finally freed and DCI-SL provided him with temporary shelter and support before proceeding the reintegration process in his community. Today, Lamin has emerged as a role model for children and an advocate for change in Sierra Leone. He is currently in the Republic of Mauritius pursuing a Bachelor of Science (BSC) degree in Electrical Engineering.

\* Replacement to protect the child's identity

DCI-Sierra Leone is an independent child rights non-governmental organization. We consult with children and youths, communities, and other key stakeholders to design our programmes and bring the most appropriate and sustainable solutions at all levels.



**Defence for  
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Sierra Leone**

## Our approach

At DCI-SL, we recognize that achieving justice for children requires a holistic, multi-level approach that addresses the many challenges of the justice system and improves its efficiency and responsiveness, but also considers the crucial importance of a stronger national child protection system to reduce the interactions of children with the justice system.

## How do we bring change?

While we respond to the immediate specific needs of children in conflict and in contact with the law, we aim to stimulate innovative and transformative actions both at policy and practice level through strategic work with government, communities, partner organisations and other key stakeholders.

## Our strategies

lead

We bolster accountability by leading strategic, evidence-based advocacy initiatives aimed at strengthening the national legal and policy framework and ensuring its effective and efficient implementation. We also actively engage with regional and international human rights mechanisms to increase accountability and ensure the State's compliance with international standards.

stimulate

We stimulate practice change by strengthening the capacities of key actors (actions?), especially in security, justice and social sectors.

engage

We engage with communities and local stakeholders to establish strong child protection systems, not only to prevent children from entering in conflict or in contact with the law but also to better respond to the needs and facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of all children that go through the justice system.

respond

We respond to rights' violations by providing socio-legal services, such as legal information, aid and representation, psychosocial counselling, mediation, and family tracing and reunification, to children in contact and in conflict with the law. Effective case management, regular monitoring of places where children are deprived of liberty and situational analyses enable us to identify trends, threats and opportunities to feed into our strategic advocacy initiatives.

## Achievements

Over the years, we have sparked change at both in policy and in practice, and have particularly achieved the following:

### Led or contributed to the development of over a dozen legislations and policy documents,

including the Child Rights Act and its training manual, the Age Verification Guidelines, the Legal Aid Act, the Child Justice Strategy 2014-18 and the National Framework for the Diversion of Children in Conflict with the Law.

### Helped the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs establish a national case management system

to register and monitor the situation of all children that come in contact or in conflict with the law. Established in 2014, the national database rapidly expanded from its original structure to register and monitor children that were affected by the Ebola crisis.

### Over 1,200 children in conflict and in contact receive direct socio-legal support annually.

Our interventions make a real difference: in 2016 alone, **95%** of the children in conflict with the law that we assisted and represented were discharged, acquitted or received a non-custodial sentence, while **67%** avoided pre-trial detention.



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