Dushanbe, Tajikistan: As a UN Volunteer Social Work Specialist, I started to work for UNICEF in Tajikistan a year ago. Even before that, for a year I was a volunteer with VSO (Volunteer Service Overseas) in the South of Tajikistan.

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), together with the Government of Tajikistan, has put in place an effective system of alternatives to imprisonment for children who are in
conflict with the law. My role has been to support law enforcement bodies, actors of the judicial system and the Government at both national and sub-national level through a non-residential, community-based rehabilitation service for children in conflict with the law.

My focus has been on building the capacity of the psycho-social support mechanism within the Juvenile Justice System: an improved capacity means an improved referral system, that is, one that is friendlier to the child.

Although the process of change is slow, work in this field is highly rewarding. The vast majority of young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system are from marginalized families and impoverished backgrounds. A community-based service can be effective in rehabilitating those youth who are in conflict with the law. Using punishment only, without any support or care, will actually increase the risk of re-offending. Young people at risk have better chances in life when they receive psycho-social support instead of punishment.

Over the past few months, I helped build the capacity of staff in various ways. During one of the sessions, I showed them how to effectively use the ‘Life Skills Game’ which I specifically developed to use here in Tajikistan. The game helps social workers to talk with children about daily situations in a non-threatening way. I also worked on revising the juvenile justice guidelines for the staff of the community-based rehabilitation service and the referring bodies.

Community-based services are embedded in the centres for additional education. This is why we also worked with the Ministry of Education and Science on the revision of the rules and regulations of the centres.

Once a week, I focus on building staff capacity at the Girl Support Centre, which is the only state-run organisation in Tajikistan providing care and assistance to girls exposed to or at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse.

Encouraging young Tajiks to volunteer for their communities was another part of my work as a UN Volunteer. It was quite challenging to do so in this specific professional field, as there is always the issue of “confidentiality” on personal privacy. But with creativity there are always good opportunities. I was able to find volunteers who would translate for me from time to time. These young people showed passion for vulnerable girls and boys and demonstrated a real interest in improving the services; some of them even expressed their ambition to do so on a professional level.

**BIO:** Margje Talen, from the Netherlands, is an experienced UN Volunteer assigned to UNICEF as a Social Work Specialist. She developed her career as a social therapist, life skills trainer and legal social worker. She loves to work with young people and for children.
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