Masala Boly’s story

Gitega, Burundi: It was during my experience as a volunteer in a Mexican orphanage that I was motivated to work with UNICEF later. And here I am, a few years later, holding a university degree, being even more inspired as a UN Volunteer who supports UNICEF in Burundi in Eastern Africa - and proud of it!

Since February 2011, I have been supporting UNICEF child protection work and the promotion of children’s rights in Gitega, a small provincial town at the centre of Burundi. After a short period of training conducted by the UNICEF office in the Burundian capital Bujumbura, I found myself immersed in the heart of the country.
I was a little apprehensive, knowing the importance of responsibility entrusted to me from the very beginning and the complex and extensive task at hand. In Burundi, violations of children’s rights are rife and ten per cent of the population are orphans or children considered as vulnerable. However, I found myself adapting quite easily to projects and issues UNICEF worked on with the government and the defence of children’s rights has since become my motto.

I had barely settled down in Gitega, when I was sent on mission with two colleagues to Ngozi and Kayanza in Northern Burundi to monitor the process of harmonizing child protection standards for community-based Child Protection Committees (CPCs). Born out of a local initiative and supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CPCs group community members who ensure the respect of rights for children at the community level. In other words, when a CPC registers a case of rights violation, it takes action to stop the abuse.

In order to value and institutionalize the work of these community-based structures, the Burundian government decided, this year, to harmonize, legalize and support them as part of its National Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children. From now on, CPCs exist from the colline, the lowest level of administrative division in Burundi, to the commune, then from the province to the national level, thus constituting a key building block in Burundi’s nascent child protection system.

It was in this context that I had the opportunity to witness the election of the CPC members at the colline’s level. Keeping in the background as a discreet bystander, with fascination and happiness I observed how women and men from the community discussed, argued and organized what is essentially the lynchpin of the child protection system being built in Burundi. Watching these women and men, mostly farmers, engaging in the meeting and welcoming the new CPC members with cries of joy, I could not help but applaud such devotion to the cause of children’s rights.

This commitment is all the more commendable given that CPC members work on a voluntary basis without payment – the only condition for becoming a member are the morality and dignity of the candidate as well as sensitivity to the cause of children’s rights.

Raring to go after this moving experience and back in Gitega, I sat down to tackle the task of preparing the restructuring process of the existing CPCs in the province with the help of the Centre for Family Development (CFD), a decentralised structure of the Ministry of Solidarity at the provincial level. After identifying partners with the capacity to support us in restructuring the
227 CPCs of Gitega province, we developed a project proposal.

Since September, this project has become a reality. We went to every commune of Gitega province to sensitize the local authorities and communities to the upcoming changes. Now, all we have to do is to organize commune-level meetings and to support the process of harmonization of these community structures.

And what comes next? We leave it up to the community which has all my trust because according to Burundian custom it acts as the first guardian for children after their parents. I strongly believe in the community’s duty of care, as it has already with the support of various actors (local, national and international) secured a protective environment for children at the local level and will continue to do so in the future, now with strengthened procedures and frameworks. Thus, a cornerstone of Burundi’s fledgling child protection system has been laid and a further step, towards an environment in which the violation of children’s rights is no longer tolerated, has been made. Imana ibishatse! (God willing!)