

REPPER

RESEAU D'ECHANGE DE PROJETS ET DE PROGRAMMES EN FAVEUR DES ENFANTS
DE LA RUE

No.10 March 2000

During the last REPPER meeting, the idea was broached of devoting this issue to the theme: <The farm as a pedagogical and/or therapeutic tool>. The experiences under way, however, were too recent to give us food for thought. We decided, therefore, to talk about children in prison, for many of you are faced with this problem. You will find below two accounts of experiences that may encourage you to let us know yours, both similar and different. Your stories will be published in the next issue of our bulletin. To your pens, therefore! Sincerely,
Martine Berge

The REPPER MULTIMEDIA website on Internet is open for you to make yourself known worldwide. Contact it at Macon:

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Dominique Lemay, who many of you know already, is the creator of the Virlanie Foundation in Manila. During a visit to Paris, he was kind enough to let us know about his activities regarding children in prison. I hope I have forgotten nothing and understood everything, such is the risk of interviews ...

Dominique left for the Philippines in 1987 and, from his very arrival, various circumstances led him to understand the magnitude of the problem of children in prison:

All children were held together, whether street children or those who had committed felonies, whether they were 3 or 18 years old. Up to 50 children were squeezed into a cell 15 metres square without water and with merely a hole in a corner for a toilet. The children could not lie down and there was no medical aid. If any of them became too ill, they were taken to hospital.

After 4 or 5 years in Manila, Dominique was able to suggest to the head of the children's prison that she use a neighbouring building so that children picked up off the streets during police round-ups could be separated from those convicted. The latter share two rooms, girls upstairs, boys downstairs. Street children are now housed in a building opposite, whatever their age.

Together with the friends of Sister Emanuelle, Virlanie has undertaken the necessary annual renovation and maintenance work on the buildings (roofing, painting, etc.), at a cost of about FF 40,000 per annum. They have been able to instal a water conduit and a pump, a WC, and obtained permission for the children to have an hour's exercise daily in the inner courtyard. The children attend school every morning in the cells on the upper floor.

From the legal angle, action has been taken to safeguard the rights of children in prison. Two of Virlanie's social workers visit the children to ascertain, together with the prison social workers, the childrens' situation so as to discover those who are not being given legal aid. In those cases, Virlane pays for the services of a lawyer.

To reduce as far as possible the time children spend on remand, Virlanie suggested that the magistrates increase the number of sessions reserved for children. In addition, Virlanie provided them with red files so that those of the children could be seen clearly in the piles of files.

Following police beatings of children during 'cleaning up' operations, the police and their chiefs were contacted to convince them that street children are entitled to as much respect as are other children.

As regards health, the Government sent a dentist to stay in the prison, but with neither instruments nor medicine! Virlanie managed to send second-hand dentistry equipment, a gift from a French dentist, and the Swiss branch of Médecins sans frontières (Doctors without Borders) undertook to put it in working order. Together with Médecins sans

frontières, Virlanie's health team is authorized to treat children in prison and in the building (RAC) housing the street children. This means that certain epidemics have been eradicated, such as scabies.

In the RAC building, Virlanie has introduced various entertainments, such as circuses, games, lectures, etc. Every Christmas Virlanie organizes a huge party in prison, with clowns, dances, etc.

Finally, with a view to the children's leaving prison, Virlanie's social workers try to find their families and prepare them to take back their children. At the same time, they endeavour to persuade the children to go back to their families.

The task remains onerous, for in spite of the Philippine Government's having ratified the Rights of the Child, three children under 10 years of age are still under sentence of death.

The lycée Sainte Barbe in St Etienne (a professional and technical college run by the Christian Teaching Brothers) created in 1995 an association to support those looking after street children in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Every year, for five years now, 15 young people aged between 17 and 25 spend three weeks in Abidjan helping the children, some of whom are in prison.

Les enfants d'Abidjan, 10 rue Franklin, 42028 ST ETIENNE.

The Abidjan remand home and prison (MACA) was built for 2,000 inmates but contains at present almost 5,000, both children and adults. The observation centre for minors (COM), houses young people awaiting trial, or who have been given a light sentence. Sometimes, they have simply been picked up in a police round-up and await the COM Staff's evaluation of their capacity to be returned to society without sinking back into delinquency. This waiting period is random and unscheduled. The COM detains between 100 and 150 young people in 12 cells, 15 square metres large, with neither water nor electricity and with only one Turkish-style toilet. The COM Staff are too few to deal efficiently with the reinsertion of these young people. A workshop can deal with 4 or 5 at a time, while a hundred others are left to their own devices most of the day. The work carried out is strictly utilitarian and for the warders' benefit. The young people get no financial reward, and there is no training for professional diplomas, although these are obviously paramount for their reinsertion into society.

Since the buildings were so designed as to allow the young people to pass with ease from the COM to the MACA, thus exposing many young people to violence, a separating wall was built. The effects of that separation, however, have proved to be not always beneficial! Previously, when the young people could not find what they needed in COM, which was often, they went to the adults to obtain it (additional food, cigarettes, soap,

clothes, etc.). That no longer being possible, the weakest, those who cannot climb over the wall, became more vulnerable and their health in general suffered.

The young people from St Etienne during their few weeks in Abidjan set up a paint shop in which the COM youth participated eagerly. This mutual work facilitated relations with them and demonstrated that many of them were willing to do other work. Their living conditions would thus be improved and they would find something to occupy them during their long hours of idleness.

The French students created, therefore, a kitchen garden of vegetables that can be eaten raw (tomatoes, carrots), thus easily consumed. After the helpers returned to France, however, the seeds and fertilisers were taken by the warders and the land is again lying fallow.

THE NEXT REPPER MEETING

WILL BE HELD ON SATURDAY,

25 MARCH, from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m.,

at 2 PLACE HENRI FRENAY, 75012 PARIS, FRANCE

**(opposite the Gare de Lyon TVG station
Metro: Gare de Lyon).**

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