

Success Story: Portugal 2011

Igniting transformative youth-led community action



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Introduction

The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children (DPAC), celebrated annually on 20 November, is an opportunity for all sectors of society - governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and religious communities - to work together to end violence against children. World Day events take many forms, including mobilization and media campaigns, workshops, religious services and vigils, and common action to protect children from violence.

DPAC was launched in 2008 at the Third Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) in Hiroshima. The initiative unites secular and religious organizations and harnesses their collective power in support of children. In 2011, more than 200,000 people in 72 countries participated in the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children. This Success Stories series tells the inspiring stories of 2011 and 2012 DPAC actions in selected countries and provides resources and recommendations for organizing similar actions. This story highlights actions in Portugal.

The 2011 World Day actions in Portugal exemplify the power of youth-led, community-level efforts to address violence against children. The national network of the Apostolic Catholic Youth Movement (MAAC) has been supporting community celebrations of DPAC since 2009. In 2011, MAAC's national network served as a catalyst to initiate the youth-driven actions in nine cities across Portugal.

Reaching communities through a national network

MAAC's national structure offered an excellent vehicle for sharing information about DPAC, as it reaches communities all over the country. At the community level, *facilitators* work directly with children and youth between 6 and 16 years old, with the sole purpose of ensuring their meaningful and effective participation. *Regional coordinators* oversee the work taking place in each region, and together form a *national team* which reviews and approves activities at the national level.

Resources for organizing actions with children and youth

- Access the DPAC [Strategy on Child and Youth Participation](#).
- Access child-friendly resources on the issue of violence against children in the [children's corner](#) of the website of the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children.
- UNICEF's [Voices of Youth website](#) highlights current information about the issue of violence against children.

The planning for 2011 DPAC actions began in September, with the submission of a proposal to the national team. The thematic emphasis evolved from ongoing work with young people. The theme of bullying was designated as the focus for the activities because bullying in schools had been a major concern of the MAAC youth groups that year. Following approval by the national team, the regional coordinators disseminated information about the World Day to those working directly with children and youth throughout their regions. In October, the DPAC proposal was shared with the MAAC youth groups.

Tips:

- Begin planning early.
- Select a theme that is important and relevant to the young people engaged in the DPAC actions.

Empowering young people to take action

Once the proposal was presented to the MAAC youth groups, they took full responsibility for organizing the DPAC celebrations in their own communities. They met to discuss the design of the celebrations, assigned responsibilities among themselves and made all the arrangements. The children decided on the locations for the

celebrations and secured permission to use the spaces. They invited their local priests to participate in the celebrations and their families to attend. They even took charge of photographing the actions.

Believe that children and youth are capable to organize, prepare and put in practice what they promise/commit to. We just need to trust them!

-Vera Leal, GNRC Coordinator, Portugal

The young people also raised most of the financial and material support for the celebrations through their MAAC groups' ongoing small-scale fundraising activities and assistance from their families. The GNRC Europe provided some funds for printing information sheets on violence against children and creating candles with the DPAC logo. These materials were provided for the celebrations throughout the country.

The MAAC Methodology for working with young people

MAAC employs an innovative four-stage approach to working with groups of children and adolescents.

1. **Seeing** - the group examines and shares aspirations and experiences.
2. **Judging** - the group reflects on human and Christian values and members express their feelings about the reflection.
3. **Acting** - the group intervenes to transform the situation.
4. **Assessing/Celebrating** - the group reviews its work and celebrates its contributions to the transformation of the world.

Source: www.ecclesia.pt/maac/

The children participated in a review of the actions following their World Day activities. This was a time to share their feelings about the celebrations. The facilitators took their feedback to the regional coordinators who conveyed the input to the national team in order to make improvements the following year.

Because the actions were fully owned by the young people, they took different forms. Some celebrations were integrated into Sunday Mass, others took place at community centers. All of the actions brought together communities around the issue of violence against children.

Tips:

- Develop and share general guidance and resources so different groups can adapt activities to fit their unique community contexts.
- Give children and youth responsibility for making decisions and carrying out the work.
- Provide space for group evaluation after the World Day celebrations have occurred.

Communities listening to young people

While each of the celebrations was unique, they all created a space for young people to speak to adults about their own perspectives and experiences. A common thread throughout was the use of songs, poetry, and other artistic expressions to convey messages about ending bullying and violence against children. Parents, religious leaders, and community members listened to the young presenters. The celebrations impacted participants on a deeply personal level.

Leaving a lasting message about ending violence against children

A noteworthy approach to marking the World Day occurred in Setúbal, a community near Lisbon that concluded the World Day celebration with a creative action to deliver a lasting message about ending violence against children. The MAAC group came up with the idea of painting messages on a wall next to the church to create kind of graffiti. The children obtained prior authorization from the priest to paint the wall. The painting took place following the DPAC celebration which was integrated into the Mass. The facilitator for the group reported that the priest was very pleased with the result.



MAAC group members paint messages on a wall next to the church in Setúbal, Portugal.

The following example of a celebration integrated into a Mass conveys how the World Day provided an opening for the community to reflect on the issue of bullying. At the beginning of the Mass, the children accompanied the priest into the church, each one carrying a candle with the DPAC logo. They stood before the congregation and sang. The priest gave an introduction about the World Day of

Prayer and Action for Children. The children were active participants throughout the Mass, performing readings, singing songs and reciting a poem. Parents were particularly moved by one child's words about personal experiences with bullying in daily life. The testimony demonstrated that this is an issue affecting their community. The celebration set the stage for powerful encounters between children and parents. Following the service, the parents and young people gathered outside the church and engaged in thoughtful conversations about the topic.

I was surprised and touched by the poem read during the ceremony. It made me think that I must be more aware and hear my son more carefully.

– A parent participant in a DPAC celebration



Children carry candles during a World Day celebration in Portugal.

Lessons Learned

- Do not underestimate what children are capable of accomplishing.
- Provide as many opportunities as possible for young people to design and carry out their own actions.
- Adults can learn a great deal from children.
- Creating a space where the voices and perspectives of young people can truly be heard by adults can have a powerful impact on communities.