**FROM INDIVIDUAL CASES TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN BURUNDI JUVENILE SYSTEM**

In Burundi, the new Code of Criminal Procedure brought important judicial innovations, raising the age of criminal responsibility from 13 to 15 years and establishing an alternative to incarceration. The code also made legal representation mandatory for children under 18. Despite this significant legislative progress, it is clear that these innovations remain textual, as many children continue to face prosecution without legal representation.

In order to bridge this gap between law and practice, International Bridges to Justice has provided support for 8 young children since April 2014. Among these cases, four juvenile defendants were prosecuted for rape, an offense that is severely punishable by law. Those cases are pending before Bujumbura Mairie courts where IBJ lawyers actively work to ensure fair trials to these children.

One of the defense lawyers’ strategies is to get judges to refer to the new Penal Code, which states that for an offense wherein the accused is punishable by life imprisonment, a child is sentenced to five to 10 years of imprisonment. And for an imprisonment limited in time, the conviction, in practice, should not exceed four years. Lawyers also emphasized that sentences often reflect only the seriousness of the offense regardless of the offender's age. This strategy is beginning to bear fruit to the extent that a 16-year-old juvenile defendant, who was charged with robbery (who faced a sentence of five to 15 years if convicted), was sentenced to only eight months of imprisonment, which was the time the juvenile had already spent in jail awaiting trial.

 At the conclusion of the requests, the prosecution petitioned for a criminal sentence of one year, but the judge agreed with the IBJ lawyer’s request for a sentence of eight months. IBJ notes with satisfaction that even in difficult jurisdiction tangible changes can be made to influence the justice system positively.

This position reflects the active role that IBJ lawyers play to encourage judges to make decisions that are in the spirit of the legislation when laws were enacted.

Upon release, the young defendant called the IBJ lawyer who defended him, trembling with joy. He says he hopes to enroll in professional training courses, and hopes to earn a living to meet his needs and those of his family. IBJ believes that such approaches need to be replicated in other regions of the country in order to positively affect the lives of juveniles accused of crimes who are not lucky enough to have a lawyer. IBJ in Burundi is determined to continue such work, not only to bring joy to families of young children, but also to influence systemic change in the functionings of the juvenile justice system.