

# For every child, a second chance

*Ahmed's journey from being incarcerated at 17 to freedom, safety and security through a second chance given to him by the justice system.*

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## CRC Article 40: The right to be treated fairly under the law

Seven years ago, Ahmed stood frozen in a Maldivian courtroom.

“I was given a jail sentence of 16 years and eight months,” Ahmed said. “I was so sad. All I was thinking about was my family and how ashamed they would feel because of me.”

At 17 years of age, Ahmed was facing a jail sentence almost as long as he had been alive. He had been caught with drugs by undercover police. He started using them after he left home, relocating from the island where he lived to Malé, the Maldives’ bustling capital city, to complete his education.

“When I first moved, I was a very good student,” he said. “I was living with my dad’s friend as my parents remained on our island. Within a few months, though, I made friends with people who used drugs.”

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Ahmed’s story mirrors the experience of countless other adolescents in the Maldives, many of whom are forced to relocate to Malé to continue their education because of a lack of tertiary education programmes in their home area. Often without adult supervision and support, they are at

risk of falling into crime, gang violence and drug use, a situation contributing to rising drug offences among minors in the Maldives.

“Eventually, I got addicted to drugs,” Ahmed said. “But I didn’t have money. I started helping some of my friends sell them so I could earn enough to buy more.”

For months, Ahmed struggled to balance the diverging parts of his life: his addiction, his schoolwork, and his family on the island. Though he lived far from his home, he knew there were problems in the family – and he couldn’t stop thinking about how they were struggling. By the time he was sentenced, everything caught up to him in the most jolting, jarring way.

“I was stunned,” Ahmed said. “I couldn’t move a muscle.”

Luckily for Ahmed, however, the court appealed his case. His 16 years and eight months in prison were slashed; as a minor, the court gave him a second chance. He entered the Juvenile Court’s Diversion Programme, which seeks to help children accused of crime rebuild their lives and re-integrate into society.

“If I didn’t get this chance, I still would have remained on the same bad path,” Ahmed said. “I would have been angry. I would have been broken. Instead, I got a chance to change.”



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Immediately, Ahmed refocused. He stopped seeing his friends – the ones who had introduced him to drugs in the first place – and made new ones. He got a new job as a laundry attendant at a resort, a role that gave him security and a sustainable income. He reconnected with his parents. He got married.

Now, at 24, Ahmed is looking toward what's next: making sure his future children never repeat his own mistakes.

“I have such a happy life now,” he said. “My family motivates me to stay on this good path. I’ve changed, and I feel fulfilled as a person again. I’ll do whatever I can to help those who want to change for the better.”

In recent years, the Government of the Maldives has restructured the way it treats juvenile offenders. The new Diversion Programme is one example of how the Maldives is aiming to ensure children accused of breaking the law have access to fair treatment within the legal system. According to the CRC, prison should be the last resort for child offenders – and there should be solutions in place to help children rebuild their lives after a crime, just like for Ahmed.

“I feel like everyone should have the chance to change,” he said. “The government should be there to help people, and to build an environment that helps more and more people re-integrate into their community. People should also look out for children and help those who have gone down the wrong path before it’s too late. I am so thankful to the Juvenile Court, and to all the people who gave me this chance.”

*\*The name of the subject has been changed to protect his identity.*

