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Accra (Ghana) 21 November - 3 December 1960

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Statement by the Tunisian representative to the  
regional Workshop on Extension of Family  
and Child Welfare Services within Community  
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Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I, on behalf of the Republic of Tunisia, which I have the signal honour to represent at this conference in the dual capacity of Child Welfare Commissioner at the Directorate of Youth and Sport and delegate of the great Tunisian charitable organization Assistance à l'Enfance, express my thanks to Mr. Mekki Abbas, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, for inviting us to participate in this regional Workshop on the Extension of Family and Child Welfare Services within Community Development Programmes. It is likewise my pleasant duty to pay a tribute to our Ghanaian friends for their excellent arrangements, their traditional hospitality and all the sacrifices they have so readily made to ensure us a pleasant stay.

Origin of Children's Villages

The economic and social situation in rural Tunisia before the country gained its independence was such as to drive the peasantry, and particularly the young, into the towns in search of work. Gangs of children of all ages had invaded the capital to engage in petty trading, such as the sale of cigarettes and tram tickets, or to work as bootblacks or market porters. They were exposed to all sorts of bad influences, and they took all kinds of liberties. For such young, hardened and energetic adventurers street life has many attractions. Their motto was "might is right". Gradually they developed a degree of scepticism, losing hope in a society in which their only defences were violence and crime.

### Winter of 1956

A cold wave swept the whole of Tunisia in 1956; for the first time in over ten years, snow mantled the countryside. On the morning of 5 February 1956 two urchins were found frozen to death in the snow. The public suddenly awoke to the serious situation of these gangs of little underfed wretches who were the defenceless victims of the weather. All national organizations, like the Destourian Party, the General Union of Tunisian Workers, the Women's National Union of Tunisia and the Tunisian Scouts, set about picking these children off the streets. Gifts of all kinds flowed in from all quarters. The children were temporarily accommodated in the great Tunis Fair-ground, in tents lent by the National Youth Training Centre at Bir El Bey and by the Army. They were quickly given a shower, warm clothing and their fill to eat. More than 2,000 children who were formerly waifs and strays immediately found themselves the cynosure of all eyes and the object of attentions from everyone.

### National Child Welfare Fund

On 23 March 1956, three days after Tunisia gained its independence, our beloved President Habib Bourguiba paid a long visit to these children and said to them: "Though you have lost your parents, children, no longer think of yourselves as orphans. The nation, aware of its dignity and responsibilities, will not fail to do its duty by you, and will take the place of the parents and protectors you have missed. That is your right". Thus a glimmer of hope was lit in their innocent little hearts, from which a feeling of security and trust began to efface the vestiges of fear, cynicism and evil. In this way the Government of Free Tunisia demonstrated, despite lack of funds and the many and varied problems it had to face, its deep interest in social questions and its faith in that invaluable capital for Tunisian rebirth: the children of today who will be the men of tomorrow.

A decree was promulgated to initiate a "National Child Welfare Fund" by means of a 10% on civil Servants' salaries and a reduction in family allowances, which were out of keeping with the economic situation of the

average inhabitant. From now on the young Tunisian State accepts responsibility for the future of these children, entrusting them to the care of the Under-Secretary of State for Youth and Sport.

#### Assistance à l'Enfance

The "Assistance à l'Enfance" Association, which was found in 1958 and whose present chairman is our Director of Youth and Sport, a man distinguished by his boundless energy and high sense of responsibility, numbers private benefactors among its members. It is represented by a local branch in every Village, in which the Village-Director and Treasurer collaborate with local personalities. These branches administer the budget of the Children's Villages under the supervision of Association headquarters, thus simplifying administrative contacts. It may be added that the 1,000 million francs in the Child Welfare Fund, although a fine effort for a young State like Tunisia, falls far short of the children's needs. Having been made into an Association, the Assistance à l'Enfance can receive financial assistance from the public. However, the financial, technical and administrative support of the central organization is necessarily given in close contact with and dependence upon the Directorate in Tunis, which is directly responsible for teaching and other staff, the admission and expulsion of children, programmes of work and all projects or expenses outwith the ordinary budget.

The aim of this Association is stated in its Statutes as follows: to assist children who are deprived, abandoned or in moral danger. The "assistance given may take a variety of forms, such as sheltering the children, clothing them, arranging for their education, or placing them in families or apprenticeships."

Its board of governors consists of a chairman, a vice-chairman, an auditor and a secretary.

#### Children's Villages

As the makeshift quarters in the Tunis Fair hutments could not be used too long, alternative accommodations had to be found for all these children.

Some French army barracks, barrage workers' buildings and disused miners' hutments were utilized. We had to make do with what we found and make the best of the available resources.

The first Village was opened in mid-July 1956, with 860 children, at Ben Métir. As that soon became congested, a second was created at Oued Mellègue, which now has 320 children. Next came the Village at El Oudiane with 600 children, and later those at Dhouil with 224, Smindja with 183, Le Kef with 195, Sfax with 354, Zaghouan with 301 and Haffouz with 265 children.

Parallel to the Villages for boys, Centres were opened for girls. The first of these was the Rue d'Arles Centre, which has about 100 girls. The Hamman-Lif Centre in the southern suburbs of the capital has about the same number. And this year another Centre was opened at Monastir in the Tunisian Sahel.

#### Special functions of the Villages

In order to ease the instructors' work and to make the best use of available equipment and staff, the Villages have been assigned functions as follows:

- (1) Primary education Villages: Here children between 6 and 15 years of age receive primary education, following programmes that are generally the same as in the Republic's other primary schools.
- (2) Vocational training Villages: Here children between 12 and 16 years of age whose educational standard and physical aptitudes permit of practical training are introduced to carpentry, metal-working, bricklaying and engineering. After a successful 3-years' course they are certificated to exercise a trade for which they have been efficiently trained.
- (3) Farm training Villages: Here the young people are generally over 16 years of age and have the necessary abilities to go in for farming. Within two years the first successful candidates will be eligible for admission to one of the modern farming "cells" now being set up more or less all over the Republic by

the Department of Agriculture.

Mellègue, Le Kef, Sfax, Ben Métir, El Oudiane and the girls' Centres at Rue d'Arles, Hammam-Lif and Monastir are primary education Villages. Vocational training is given in the Villages at Smindja and Zaghouan, and sections of Ben Métir and El Oudiane. The two far training Villages are those at Haffouz and Oum Dhoul.

#### Administration

Each Village is manned by:

- (a) A Director, who is generally in charge of the Village and is responsible for training, equipment and administration;
- (b) a Treasurer, who is answerable to the Director and deals in particular with financial questions (food, clothing, maintenance etc.);
- (c) teachers or instructors, who are responsible for the children's training and everything concerning their lives outside school (organization of leisure, participation in the routine life of the Village etc.);
- (d) tutors, assigned and supervised by the Ministry of Education for the primary and vocational sides, and by the Department of Agriculture for the farming side.

A headmaster for the school is generally appointed alongside the Director of the Village: but both pledge themselves to put the interests of the children before their own personal interests and prerogatives.

#### Education of the children

Our idea is that it is not enough to shelter and feed these children of the streets. That may be a praiseworthy activity; but it is inadequate. Our merit lies in making the children emotionally balanced again and restoring them as useful human beings to society, which needs their hands and brains to win the battle against under-development.

To that end, we attach great importance to anything that can help to bridge the gap in their schooling. Courses for late beginners are held

outside the usual class hours. The subjects taught are taken in; our youngsters are keen on learning and study. Scholarships are awarded to those who pass the entrance examinations for college or secondary school. The first group of children from the Villages who qualified for secondary education - 6 in all - received these scholarships last year.

The education given in the Villages contributes towards the social training of future citizens aware of the part they have to play in a society to which they are proud to belong. Each Village comprises about ten "troops" or "houses", each made up of 4 "patrols" or "families" of 6 - 8 children. Each "family" elects its chief, who is entitled to sit on the "house" council composed of the instructor and the four "family" heads. All the programmes are worked out in these councils. The instructor is responsible for seeing that the council's decisions are observed. His duty is to give fraternal assistance rather than to direct, to inspire a love of order, cleanliness and punctuality, to inculcate in each child a taste for work, desire for progress, self-confidence, thoughtfulness and respect for any decision taken. Municipal elections are a matter on which the children are instructed for days. Candidates are invited to stand for elections by means of press articles, posters and advertisements in the Village newspaper. The polling station is arranged exactly like the real thing; the elector goes through a real booth, where he scores out the names of the candidates to whom he is opposed on the list of names adopted by the Director's Office. The 18 successful candidates choose their officers. It is noteworthy that the chairman they appoint is always a boy who is popular with everyone, both adults and children, because of his personal and human qualities. The "municipal councillors" are convened at their request by their chairman. From time to time they invite their leaders to attend meetings, when they feel unable to settle certain questions by themselves. The "municipal council" has a police force selected by written examination. Of course, those chosen and recognized as physically fit perform their duties outside class hours in a uniform which is no whit inferior to that worn by the national police force.

"Judges" selected by the Village organizers try of fenders and carry

out preliminary investigations into offences.

Note, too, that the villages have libraries, all of which are well patronized and perfectly run with their card-indees, magazines, and technical or light literature in both Arabic and French kept by a librarian selected from among the children.

These organs of social life adapted to the needs of children are something like an educational game which insinuates ideas into their mental world and trains them in reflexes that will bear fruit later. A civic conscience emerges and grows in the minds of the children.

#### Employment and observation centre

After contacts with employers, managers and master tradesmen, the Director of the Tunis Employment Centre is responsible for finding for those who have completed their training in the Villages jobs in which they can honourably exercise their trades. An inspector regularly visits employers and apprentices, and looks into the quality of the work done, difficulties encountered, discipline and perseverance.

Recruits are taken on after inquiry by a team of welfare workers organized by the Director of the Employment Centre, who has each applicant write a short account reflecting his economic and social conditions. Priority is given to orphans and waifs.

#### Staffing problem

Finding the right kind of teacher is still a thorny problem for us. Our instructors, who are recruited among youth leaders, lack the technical and higher education required for the successful performance of the task falling to them. They nevertheless try to give of their best in a proper spirit of devotion and sacrifice. In order to help them to perfect themselves, the Directorate of Youth and Sport has arranged a condensed course for them at the National Youth Training Centre in Bir El Bey. They have been instructed in a number of subjects, such as manual work, music, singing, games, nature and environment studies. This year a refresher course was arranged for them, at which the 200 instructors from the Villages had a series of lectures on child psychology and teaching practice. On the same



occasion they were also given some rudiments of hygiene, law and sociology. We think that we still have a long way to go in the training of a body of teachers aware of the nobility of their vocation. With a view to raising the technical standards of our staffs, one-day courses have been arranged at Director level. Inter-Village visits have been organized. Another course was held to enable our Treasurers to clarify their systems and improve their methods.

### Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Child welfare is for us a vital problem. More than half of our population of four millions are under twenty years of age. The latest statistics have shown that a Tunisian rural family of about seven persons does not earn more than 40 dinars per year, which gives some idea of the difficulties involved in bringing up the children. We are making a tremendous effort to assist these families and the children. We hope, with help from other countries, to assist them all. Our problems, which seem to be common to all developing countries, may be summarized under the following heads:

- (1) Training staff at all levels;
- (2) Finding jobs for young people who have completed their training;
- (3) Creating a fund to assist deprived children (with food, clothing, medicaments, educational material etc.); and
- (4) Sending specialists to help in the training of these children.

Once these problems are solved, I think that our aid to deprived children may become most effective and our contribution to the building of a better world will be on an impressive scale.