



Save the Children

The Municipal Investment in Children in Nicaragua 2005-2014

Documentation of the Experience



August 2015



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FOREWORD

“Children and adolescents account for over half of the population in the municipalities. Investing in them represents both a way of implementing their rights and a development strategy for the municipality.” This quote from 2005 by the Network of Child-Friendly Municipal Governments sums up the motivation of many people, institutions and organizations that for two decades have helped to place municipal investment in children on the agenda of municipal governments in Nicaragua and in some extent also in the Central American region.

The aim of this report is to document that experience, stressing—although not exclusively limited to—the period 2005-2014. The results have grown out of a long-term strategy that has had its ups and downs and successes and failures, as well as providing lessons to improve actions aimed at favouring child rights. This document presents the key aspects of the experience and the factors that made it possible to achieve its results.

Most countries have municipalities or equivalent administrative units whose territories inevitably include children who live and dream there. When complemented by investment in children, the municipality is a key factor when it comes to building an infrastructure that favours child rights.

The idea behind presenting and disseminating this experience is to be able to learn from it and share it with others.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of children's human rights implies a set of responsibilities that are shared but differentiated among State institutions, communities, families and the children themselves.

The legislative bodies are responsible for ratifying international treaties and passing national laws that recognise children's rights, as well as assigning economic resources in the national budget to ensure their fulfilment. The central government is called upon to guide the work of the bodies under it in order to turn the formally-recognised rights into reality for children.

Meanwhile, the municipal governments must incorporate the promotion and implementation of child rights into the exercising of their functions, assigning as many economic resources as possible for their fulfilment.

Nicaragua's central government bodies and municipalities have made important advances in terms of creating a legal framework (passing of laws, ordinances, national and municipal public policies) and institutional environment (ministries, commissions, offices) to guarantee the rights of children. However, they still face the challenge of increasing the amount of economic resources they invest in the both the implementation of the rights recognised in the laws and the functioning of the duty-bearers.

The ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990 encouraged the Nicaraguan municipalities to start seeing themselves as co-responsible for the fulfilment of child rights, developing a movement of local authorities favouring child rights. Over time, they recognised the importance of assigning economic resources for the implementation of those rights, including funds obtained through taxation and the provision of services at the local level and the transfers from the country's national budget.¹

The arguments underpinning the municipal responsibility for investing in children are diverse and complementary. From a legal perspective, the municipal functions are related to the wellbeing of its population, with children and adolescents representing almost half of that population. In fact, some of the municipality's functions are directly related to the implementation of their rights, such as ensuring a healthy environment and creating the right conditions for recreation and sports. Functionally speaking, municipal autonomy implies that the municipalities have the capacity to manage their resources and institutions in such a way as to guide them towards ensuring children's wellbeing.

¹ Article 5 of the Law of Budgetary Transfers to the Municipalities of Nicaragua (Law No. 466, approved in 2003) stipulates that 10% of tax income must be distributed among the municipalities, with a greater proportion going to those with a lower capacity to collect their own income.



Aware that the fulfilment of child rights is mediated by municipal investment and in conjunction with the Network of Child-Friendly Municipal Governments (RGM), the municipal commissions on child and adolescent affairs (CMNAs) and other organisations, Save the Children has promoted the issue with the aim of strengthening the child-rights municipalisation process, raising the awareness of the municipal authorities to encourage them to take on their responsibilities and implement children's rights, particularly through the allocation of economic resources.

Save the Children's experience in promoting municipal investment has brought together various initiatives whose common denominator is linking municipal functions to child rights, including support for the RGM in highlighting the municipalities' responsibility to invest in children, strengthening the CMNAs as meeting and coordination bodies for local stakeholders, and support for the Coalition of NGOs working with children (CODENI) in its advocacy work aimed at the national budget allocating the necessary resources to ensure child rights.

Save the Children also formed part of the Alliance Group for Investment in Children, a valuable collaborative experience for advocacy on the fulfilment of children's rights, and is currently coordinating the Working Group on Investments of the Nicaraguan Chapter of the Global Movement for Children. In addition, it played a key role in the establishment of the Central American Learning Circle on Child Rights and Local Development (CCA), an arena that promotes municipal investment in the region's municipalities.

This report describes the methodological paths that have guided Save the Children and its partner organisations, particularly the RGM, in their experiences related to municipal investment in children, while at the same time identifying the results, good practices, deficiencies and challenges.

The first chapter describes the general context of the experience, the objectives of the documentation process, the methodological route and the techniques used in the information gathering process, while the second explains the conditions in the environment and positive factors that encouraged and influenced the development of the experience.

The third concerns itself with reconstructing the experience of municipal investment in children from its beginnings up to the present day, presenting a chronological run-through that reveals both its stages of development and milestones. The fourth chapter then presents the main results generated.

The fifth chapter contains the good practices identified by the stakeholders that have participated in the experience, describing those actions or initiatives that have helped the municipalities invest more in the implementation of child rights.



The sixth chapter explores the experience's deficiencies and challenges, assuming that it is still under development and that despite the advances there are still certain aspects that need to be addressed. Finally, the seventh chapter presents the outlook for the experience.

I.1 Objective

Document the experience of municipal investment in children in Nicaragua during the period 2005-2014, with the aim of sharing its rationale and methodological processes, learning from its practices and improving the work approaches involved.

I.2 Methodology

The documentation employed the participatory action research methodology, turning those who participated at different moments of the municipal child investment experience into key knowledge production stakeholders. It is qualitative in nature, while its scope is descriptive, retrospective and cross-cutting with analytical elements.

Different research techniques were applied, including:

I.2.1 Review of secondary information

This consisted of a review of the bibliographical production on municipal investment in children, including conceptual reference points, manuals, didactic guides, reports on the state of municipal investment, systematisations and written accounts.

Also analysed were national laws and international treaties ratified by the State that establish the municipalities' responsibilities in relation to child rights.

I.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were held with key stakeholders that have participated in developing the experience over the last decade, including Save the Children staff members, mayors and deputy-mayors that have held coordination posts in the RGM, and former leaders of the National CMNA Movement. Interviews were also held with mayors and deputy-mayors elected for the period 2013-2017 and with municipal officials that are participating in processes promoted by the RGM and Save the Children.



1.2.3 Focus group with children and young people

A focus group was held with children and young people from five municipalities that are members of participation bodies (child councils/governments) through which they have presented their investment demands to the municipal authorities. The focus group also included young people who were members of the child participation bodies in their municipalities during their childhood.



Children and young people who participated in the focus group. Source: RGM



II. FACTORS THAT MOTIVATED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS EXPERIENCE

Save the Children's experience with municipal investment in children was influenced by conditions in the socioeconomic, legal, institutional and political environment, and by certain factors that made it possible for the experience to emerge.

2.1 Conditions in the environment

The fragile socioeconomic situation resulting from the civil war

The signing of the CRC in 1989 and its ratification in 1990 coincided with the end of the civil war in Nicaragua that marked the 1980s and a profound political shift resulting from a change in national authorities. In a post-war context, the State and Nicaraguan society faced a number of tension-generating situations that were described by the State in its first report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child:

Post-war, with all of its consequences: soaring inflation, the world's biggest foreign debt, disarmament, high fiscal debt, the insertion of demobilised fighters into production, obsolete machinery for industrial production, the property problem, citizens' security, political polarisation [...]. (Government of Nicaragua, 1992, p.5)

In the same report, the government recognised that "all of this difficult panorama affects children," particularly because the country did not have the resources to invest in the fulfilment of the recognised child rights and also because the model of development promoted tended towards the privatisation of services.

Limited investment in children

Although the State made progress in the creation of child-rights duty-bearer institutions, there was not enough public investment to ensure their implementation and the levels of investment even tended to drop. This was the result of economic structural adjustment programmes that limited the capacity of the public institutions to meet the demands of the population, particularly in health and education.

The State frequently passed its duty-bearing responsibility on to the families, which had to pay for the public services, and to non-profit civil organisations that used funding from international cooperation to implement projects that to some extent addressed the shortfalls of a State that was limiting its commitment to children to a declarative level. This situation was mentioned by CODENI in its first alternative report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (1992, p.2),



calling on that body to recommend that the State “allocate more line items in the budget aimed at improving the scope and quality of the services for children” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1995, p.6).

The State also lacked public policies for child-related development, so the actions undertaken for their wellbeing had a distinctly “assistentialist” logic.

The municipalities were not highlighting their responsibility in relation to child rights

Despite being the institutional space closest to the children, the municipalities had not highlighted their responsibilities sufficiently in relation to fulfilment of child rights. Many municipal governments did not conceive of themselves as child-rights duty bearers.

Many of the actions the municipalities carried out for the wellbeing of children conformed to a logic of assistentialism and immediacy and depended on the changing will of the municipal authorities, which had no long-term vision for children’s development. This situation was recognised by mayors and deputy-mayors who participated in the RGM during different periods:

There was no defined budget for children. We proposed working for their wellbeing through attention to schools, parks, child development centres and kindergartens, but we did not have a budget designed to ensure compliance with the municipality’s responsibilities with respect to fulfilling their rights. -Erwin de Castilla, mayor of Juigalpa and deputy-coordinator of the RGM during the period 2001-2004.

The municipal governments have so many problems to attend to that perhaps children were forgotten about. -Isaac Travers, Deputy-mayor of Chinandega and deputy-Coordinator of the RGM during the period 2005-2008.

Although aware of their commitments to child rights, the municipal authorities lacked a methodology to allow them to best organise their capacities and resources around contributing to their implementation. Most of the municipalities did not know the concept of direct municipal investment in children and as a result the budgets did not provide any disaggregated information on the resources assigned for achieving child rights.



Decentralisation of functions without allotment of resources and the privatisation of public services

In the framework of the institutional transformation undertaken in the first half of the 1990s, decentralisation² was an essential element of state modernisation.

However, decentralisation was frequently used as a strategy to free the central government from its responsibilities as a child-rights duty bearer, transferring to the municipalities functions they were not prepared to assume, while at the same time failing to provide them with additional resources to fulfil those rights.

This situation was further aggravated because a policy was being applied at the central government level for state reduction and the privatisation of public services.

The process of reduction and modernisation of the State in general and the ministries of health and education and the Nicaraguan Social Security and Welfare Institute in particular is having a negative impact on society and the costs are being assumed by children and the family, who cannot respond to the privatisation of services with the level of impoverishment they suffer every day. (CODENI, 1992, p.23)

Limited municipal responsibilities in relation to child rights

The law that regulates municipal autonomy and responsibilities (the Municipalities Law and reforms of August 1997) grants limited responsibilities to municipal governments in relation to the implementation of child rights. Certain child-related responsibilities are specified, such as: communal hygiene (article 7, section 1); the construction and maintenance of parks and amusement and recreation areas (section 4); the establishment of libraries, museums, municipal bands, zoological gardens; and all types of activities that promote education, culture, sports and tourism (section 13). It also establishes “Promoting respect for human rights and particularly the rights of women and children” as a responsibility (article 7, section 10).

The subsequent regulation of the above law (Sept. 1997) says that “The promotion of all those programmes aimed at guaranteeing the enjoyment of human rights, particularly of the most vulnerable sectors of the community, such as children, women, young people and people of the third age, corresponds to the municipal government.” (article 13)

Given the limited municipal responsibilities and lack of knowledge of their role in relation to investment for compliance with child rights, the work focused on awareness building and advocacy with municipal governments.

²The transfer of determined functions, resources and authority or power from the central state bodies to the municipalities.



2.2 Positive factors that favoured the experience

A number of factors contributed to the development of the experience of municipal investment in children, including:

- **Municipal decentralisation:** When accompanied by economic resources and the building of local capacities, the transfer of certain functions from the central government to the municipalities helped make some public services more efficient, while at the same time affirming that the municipalities are co-responsible for the implementation of children's rights. Decentralisation also helped highlight the municipalities as spaces that could be influenced to increase investments in child rights.
- **The forming of a national child rights movement:** The first half of the 1990s saw a process of social mobilisation led by civil organisations in favour of the rights of children. It promoted the approval of a national law in line with the principles of the CRC, the strengthening of the duty-bearer institutions and, particularly, demanded greater public investment for the implementation of children's rights.
- **Existence of a governmental body providing technical support to the municipalities:** The Nicaraguan Institute of Municipal Development (INIFOM) was created in 1990 as a body to provide technical support to municipalities for the strengthening of public administration, decentralisation and local development. Its role allowed INIFOM to position itself as a reference point for the municipalities, a situation that was bolstered to incorporate the local development agenda, the municipalisation of child rights and to bring the municipal authorities together around the issue.
- **Sharing experiences with other Central American stakeholders:** In addition to sharing a geographic area, the Central American countries have been through similar experiences in relation to the recognition and implementation of child rights: they ratified the CRC at almost the same time; undertook regulatory adaptation and institutional transformation processes with different levels of development and approaches; and promoted the municipalisation of child rights.

Aware of the need to share the experiences of and lessons learned by municipal authorities in Central America in relation to municipal investment in children, since the end of 1999 Save the Children has been an enthusiastic promoter of the Central American Learning Circle on Child Rights and Local Development as a meeting, experience-sharing and communication space. In this arena, the region's municipal authorities have shared initiatives with a view to positioning children as subjects of local development and highlighting the importance of municipal investment in children. This exchange and mutual-learning dynamic has helped strengthen the efforts made by Nicaraguan municipalities in relation to municipal investment in children.

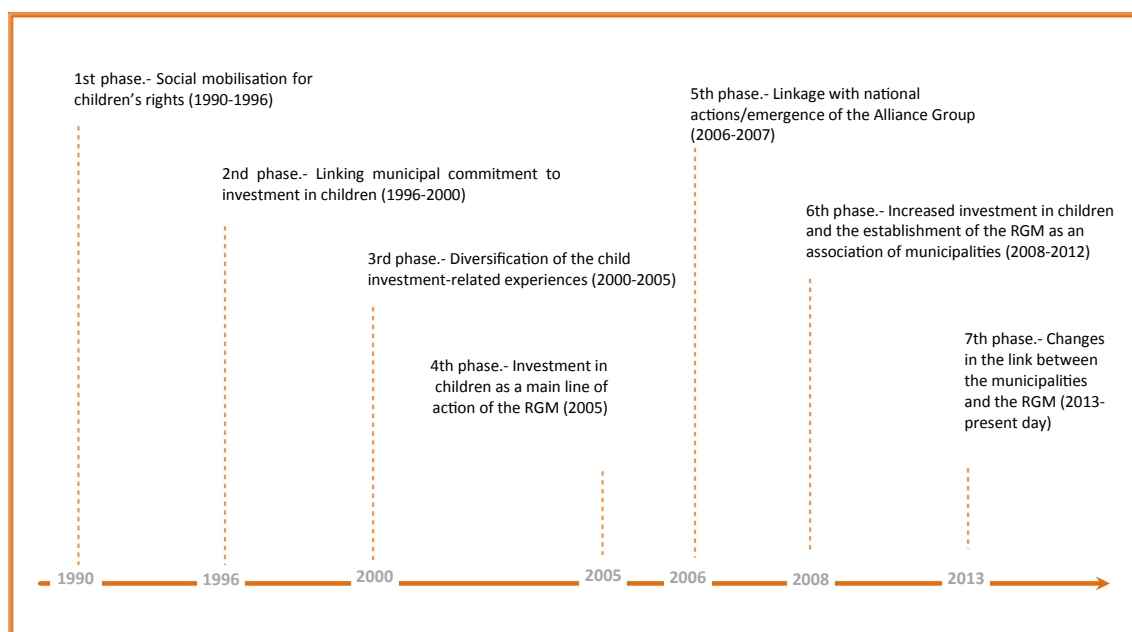


III. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EXPERIENCE

Save the Children's experience of municipal investment in child rights has been developed with the RGM and other organisations with which collaboration relations have been established. Its development has been influenced by different factors that have modulated its objectives, methodological processes and approaches and influenced its results.

For the purposes of this documentation process, the experience has been organised into seven phases that have been developed consecutively from 1990 to the present day. The overall experience is the result of a cumulative process in which each phase has generated knowledge, good practices and lessons that are then passed on to the next phase.

The following diagram illustrates the time line of the experience:





1st phase.- Social mobilisation for children's rights (1990-1996)

The basis for municipal investment in children is the CRC's mandate to the State to adopt legislative and administrative measures to ensure the implementation of child rights, including the allotment of economic resources *"to the maximum extent of their available resources"* (art. 4).

In the framework of the ratification of the CRC, an executive branch delegation attended the World Summit for Children in 1990 in which it was recognised that municipalities should commit to the implementation of the rights recognised in the CRC.

This recognition coincided with the election of new municipal authorities and the creation of INIFOM as a body under the Presidency of the Republic. INIFOM was responsible for providing technical assistance to the new municipal authorities to support building their capacity to exercise their responsibilities. Among these responsibilities, children's rights were starting to be highlighted.

Meanwhile, the election of municipal authorities coincided with the global "Child-Defender Mayors" initiative promoted by UNICEF, which called on *"all the world's municipal mayors and leaders to join this international initiative [...] establishing the needs of children and the protection of their rights as a maximum priority in their plans"* (1993, p.2).

In the framework of this global initiative, certain international events were held with the participation of the mayors of the Nicaraguan municipalities of Wiwilí, Jalapa and Estelí, who joined a Latin American Network of Child-Defender Mayors. Motivated by this experience and with support from UNICEF and Redd Barna (Save the Children Norway), in 1994 they organised the 1st National Meeting of Mayors in the city of Estelí to encourage the mayors' commitment to child rights and reflect on municipal responsibilities in relation to them.

In 1995 a 2nd National Meeting was held in which the mayors who attended formed a Network of Child-Friendly and -Defender Mayors. The Network's emergence was a milestone in the history of municipalism and child rights in Nicaragua. It was the first time the municipal authorities used their autonomy to recognise that their responsibilities can be extended to implementing child rights and that realising those rights required the allotment of economic resources from their local budgets, thus assuming municipal investment in children as an issue of primary importance.

The RGM was created as an autonomous local stakeholder made up of and coordinated by municipal authorities with the capacity to bring together its counterparts to highlight municipalities' responsibilities in relation to child rights and raise their awareness of the central importance of local investment for the fulfilment of those rights. As such, it was an essential element in the development and sustainability of this experience.



In the next two years, the dynamic of the Network of Mayors mainly consisted of developing child rights awareness-raising and education actions with municipal stakeholders, going as far as to accompany certain municipalities in drawing up specific annual plans. During this period, the Network put child rights on the local agenda, but there were few advances in investment as the municipalities limited themselves to social initiatives and direct assistance to children in conditions of vulnerability. Awareness-raising actions played an important role in generating favourable changes for the municipalities to assume their role in the fulfilment of child rights and to do so from a development focus that translates into significant and quality investments.

The creation of the Network of Mayors coincided with the emergence—a little earlier—of the municipal commissions on child and adolescent affairs as bodies for inter-institutional meetings and coordination in relation to linking efforts for the implementation of child rights in the municipalities. The CMNAs include representatives from the municipal offices of central government institutions, municipal governments and civil organisations (nongovernmental organisations, social movements and other local stakeholders).

The civil organisations that made up the commissions advocated for them to take up the demand for greater investment in children from the point of view of improving their living conditions. However, the demand to allocate resources for the implementation of children's rights and to have a municipal planning instrument to guide the authorities on what to invest in was still not explicit. -Enrique Pilarte, former national liaison of the CMNAs

By 1996 there were 24 municipal commissions on child and adolescent affairs (Hurtado, 2005, p.29), most of them in municipalities whose mayors were members of the Network.

Achievements in the experience's first phase included local authorities recognising the linkage between their municipal functions and child rights and highlighting the importance of investment; and local stakeholders brought together in the CMNAs coordinating around the idea of joining forces to promote, demand and implement those rights. A local stakeholder (the RGM) was also identified that was capable of bringing together and working in a direct and sustained way with the municipal authorities.

2nd phase.- Linking municipal commitment to investment in children (1996-2000)

In 1996, with the support of Redd Barna/Save the Children Norway, INIFOM strengthened the implementation of the programme "Support for the Network of Mayors" aimed at providing technical support for coordinating and linking the efforts made by mayors to promote child rights.

In the framework of this programme, a technical team was formed that accompanied the drawing up and implementation the plans of the Network, whose main activities consisted of training municipal officials on child rights and incorporating child rights into municipal planning.



The mayors involved in the Network supported the process of creating the CMNAs, which played a key role in calling for the approval of the Child Protection Code, which establishes the municipalities' responsibility for helping to implement child rights (articles 51 and 60).

When the Child Protection Code came into force in 1998, it fostered an environment that revitalised the Network, encouraging it to take a big step forward in terms of quality in the way the local commitment to child rights was thought out. Its 3rd National Meeting in 1999 approved nine lines of action to guide its work, including one that established the municipalities' responsibility for "assigning a percentage of budgetary financial resources and negotiating extra budgetary resources for promoting actions in favour of children." (Network of Mayors, 1999, p.1)

In this context, the number of municipalities with a CMNA increased to 91 in 1999 (Hurtado, 2005, p.29), highlighting the need for a platform to bring these bodies together and promote the definition of their identity and work.

In the second phase, the municipal authorities invited through the Network of Mayors recognised that the local commitment to child rights had to be translated into the assignment of financial resources from the municipal budget. There was also strengthening of the linkage among local stakeholders, which through the CMNAs were contributing to the defence of child rights and advocating for greater investment for the implementation of those rights; and an effort was made to enhance the technical capacities of key municipal authorities and officials with the aim of incorporating child rights into the local planning cycle and resource assignment.

3rd phase.- Diversification of the child investment-related experiences (2000-2005)

The end of 1999 saw the creation of the Central American Learning Circle on Child Rights and Local Development, which right from the beginning included the active participation of representatives from Save the Children and the INIFOM programme in support of the Network of Mayors and the CMNAs. As a result, the experience of investment in children was notably diversified and enriched, involving different local stakeholders from the national and Central American spheres.

The Circle acts as a regional reflection group on the application of child rights in the municipal sphere and the participation of children in the processes of local development, proposing investment in children as one of the key issues for realising child rights in the municipalities. In the meeting spaces it promoted, its members shared experiences and good practices on municipal investment in children, helping to position the issue as a basic condition for local-level compliance with children's rights.

The municipal authorities in the Network and local stakeholders in the CMNAs shared with their counterparts in the region their conceptual understanding of municipal investment in children and the methodological processes to promote it, while also taking up ideas from experiences promoted in other Central American countries.



At the same time, in April 1999, during the Network's 3rd National Meeting, Save the Children proposed the holding of competitions to publicly recognise mayors and municipal governments that stand out in terms of the promotion and implementation of child rights. Municipal investment was one of the parameters to be considered for granting social and economic recognition to winning municipalities. By 2014, nine such competitions had been held.³

This phase coincided, in 2000, with the first municipal elections held separately from the national ones. This contributed to the population reflecting on the role municipal governments play in satisfying its demands. The elections also provided the opportunity to focus on children's local realities, as those running for municipal office had the chance to learn about the problems they were facing, thus contributing to the presentation of proposals to address those problems and the commitment to resolve them.

After the new municipal authorities had been elected, the Network of Mayors called its 4th National Meeting in September 2001, during which nine lines of action were approved, the first of which was "allocating in the municipal budget, for approval by the municipal councils, an amount the equivalent to at least 1% of current income starting in 2002 and for the whole current period, earmarked for the implementation of actions in favour of children."

During this meeting the Network expressly and publicly assumed investment in children's rights as one of the municipalities' priority responsibilities, while at the same time approving other lines of action that indirectly contributed to greater investment in children, including:

- Support for the setting up, strengthening and formal recognition through municipal ordinances of municipal commissions on child and adolescent affairs (CMNAs). The CMNAs directly influenced the allocation in the municipal budget of funds for implementing child rights.
- Promoting the creation of child affairs offices as reference points for addressing problems affecting children and supporting coordination with local bodies.
- The assignment of a councillor, technician or other person designated by the mayor as responsible for addressing child-related affairs.

³ A jury decides on the winning municipalities based on a review of compliance with previously-established parameters (e.g. investment in children, child participation, etc.). The first, second and third placed municipalities receive prizes of US\$5,000, US\$3,000 and US\$2,000, respectively, which must be invested in projects that directly benefit children.



That same year, the municipal commissions on child and adolescent affairs held their 1st National Meeting, supported by Save the Children, in which they asserted their identity as coordination bodies for the promotion and realisation of child rights in the municipalities. They declared themselves a national movement and expressed their support for the Network of Mayors' line of action on municipal governments earmarking at least 1% of their income for the implementation of actions in favour of children.

The Commissions took on the issue of municipal investment at the same time as the Network, so that the two experiences coincided in their demand for municipalities to assume their responsibilities in the implementation children's rights. -Pedro Hurtado Vega, Save the Children.

In February 2002, the Learning Circle held the 1st Central American Meeting on Child Rights and Local Development in San Salvador, El Salvador, under the slogan "Children and Adolescents: Subjects of local development," publicly taking on the issue of investment as one of its programmatic areas. A total of 54 municipalities from Central American countries participated, including 6 from Nicaragua. Since then, the Circle has positioned itself as one of the reference points in the promotion of municipal investment in children in the Central American sphere.

One external factor that contributed to municipal investment in children was the approval of a law regulating the transfer of resources the central government has to make to the country's municipalities⁴ with the aim of complementing the funding for complying with their responsibilities. The regulation of the municipal transfers allowed those municipalities with a lower capacity for collecting their own funds to have more resources to invest in the wellbeing of their population, particularly children.

The Central American Learning Circle reflected on municipal investment in its 2nd Meeting, held in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in December 2004 under the slogan "Investment in Children and Adolescents: A national and local priority" (Save the Children, 2012, p.33). The meeting included the participation of representatives from 44 municipalities, 9 of them from Nicaragua, who shared national experiences and contributed to collective reflection on the central importance of investment in children.

During this meeting it was agreed "to promote increased investment in children, with investment understood as not only the monetary amount, but also the quality of comprehensive attention." (Central American Learning Circle, 2008, p.83). In other words, a broader vision of investment in children was taken on that goes beyond the allocation of resources in budgets to include municipal responsibility for ensuring that the investments are of the required quality and effectively contribute to children's comprehensive development.

⁴Law of Budgetary Transfers to the Municipalities of Nicaragua (Law No. 466), approved on July 3, 2003.



In this third phase, municipal investment in children became established as a topic of reflection in most Nicaraguan municipalities, taking on the dimension of a necessary condition for implementing child rights (116 municipalities were integrated into the RGM in 2000, with the total rising to 127 out of a total of 151 at the end of 2004). The sense of urgency around investing in child rights was extended to the Central American sphere, generating opportunities for the sharing and dissemination of good practices among the different countries involved.

4h phase.- Investment in children as a main line of action of the Network of Municipal Governments (2005)

The 5th RGM Meeting was held in September 2005, during which decisions were adopted that positively influenced municipal investment in children. Firstly, it was agreed to include deputy-mayors and councillors from the municipalities involved, from which point it became a Network of Child-Friendly Municipal Governments.

Deputy-mayors and councillors were included. This allowed more people to participate and the space to be more dynamic because [previously] the participation was very closed. -Salvador García, mayor of San Marcos and member of the National RGM Committee in the period 2005-2008

In addition to the need to energise the participation in the RGM, the inclusion of other stakeholders from the municipal governments responded to strategic considerations, as the budgetary decisions in the municipalities depend on the collegiate arena known as the municipal council, one of whose members is the mayor. So in order to be effective, advocacy on investment has to include these local stakeholders. Investment in children also calls for the strengthening of the capacities of the technical personnel that formulate and implement the municipal budgets.

We could not separate all the municipal government stakeholders in the issue of investment, because all those stakeholders are important—the mayors, councillors, technical personnel. -Loyda García, mayor of Tola and coordinator of the RGM during the period 2005-2008

The second decision relevant to the issue of investment adopted at the 5th Meeting (following consultations made during the previous months) was the substantial modification of the RGM's line of action on municipal investment in children, which changed from establishing a minimum amount (at least 1% of the annual budget) to calling on the municipalities to "Significantly increase direct investment in children in the municipal government's use of the available funds." (RGM, 2005, p.1)

The decision to reformulate the RGM's first line of action was no accident, as Pedro Hurtado explains:



“In 2000 mayors agreed that the municipalities had to invest at least 1% of their income in children and adolescents, but many mayors assumed they had to invest the 1% and limited themselves to that percentage. That is why no determined percentage was set out in the lines of action of 2005. Instead, it was indicated that the municipalities had to significantly increase their direct investment in children. Reaching that proposal took several months and many clarifications.”

It was also the first time that members of the RGM reflected on the meaning of investment in children and specifically of direct investment, as reflected in the document explaining the lines of action approved in 2005, which says:

“Children and adolescents account for half of the population in the municipalities. Investing in them represents both a way of implementing their rights and a development strategy for the municipality. The municipal government must be clear about what it will do in relation to inhabitants up to the age of 18 and put that down in writing. The municipal government must propose the objectives to be achieved, the specific goals to obtain and the projects to be developed on children, expressed in their municipal development plan, multi-annual investment plan, operational plan and annual budget accordingly.

Direct investment means the implementation of projects or actions that directly benefit children, whether in infrastructure works (parks; roads, streets or bridges leading to a school; places frequented by children; wire meshing, drinking water and hygienic services in schools, etc.) or in actions linked with the implementation of their rights (registration, recreation, culture, sports, support for vaccinations, scholarships, libraries, etc.). The experience of the last two years demonstrates that it is not enough to assign a percentage of the municipal budget to actions that benefit children (whether 1%, 5%, 10%, 15% or more). Rather:

- a. The municipal government must assign a greater volume of funds for direct investment in children than in the previous period, and*
- b. In all municipal government projects and in the different components of the plans—even if they are aimed at the population as a whole—the specific benefit that will be obtained by children should be stipulated and emphasised and it should be guaranteed that they really obtain it.*

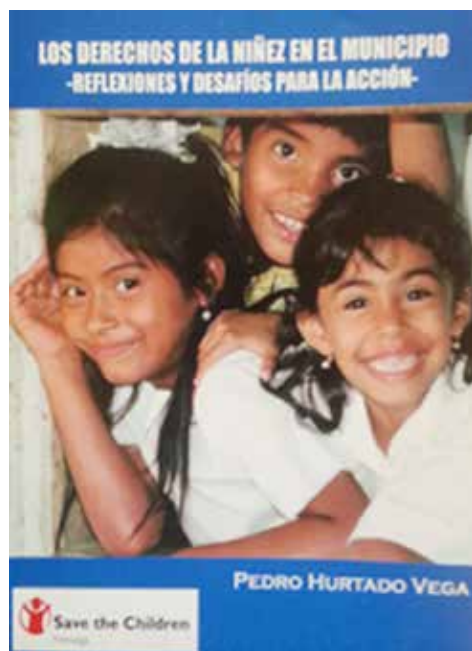
The resources the municipal government must take into account are its own and also those that come from central government transfers and projects. Children are certainly not everything that exists in the municipality, but they must be a prioritised sector or age group. Prioritising children means always taking them into account in everything we propose and do.” (RGM, 2005, p.3)

This long quotation reflects how the experience collectively built up a solid conceptual basis in relation to the issue of municipal investment in children, allowing the municipal authorities to have a common understanding of the issue, which contributed to the optimisation of the economic resources assigned annually in the municipal budgets.



A reflection process was initiated within the RGM on the quality of investment in children, which among other factors implies the real participation of children in local development processes based on their own interests and forms of organisation. In other words, it involves the possibility of children being listened to and having their opinions taken into account when the municipal investment priorities are being defined.

In January 2005, the Save the Children Norway office in Nicaragua published and disseminated



Cover of the publication "Children's Rights in the Municipality". Source: SC

the publication "Children's Rights in the Municipality: Reflections and challenges for action", which described certain conceptual advances related to the issue that were taking place in the country at the time and in which investment in children was a priority issue.

These reflections helped to establish conceptual reference points on investment in children that were taken up in national and regional publications and that contributed to the municipalities having a common language on the issue and strengthening their capacities to invest directly in children.

At the same time the RGM reaffirmed its backing for the Municipal Commissions for Children. By the end of 2004 over a hundred had been established, calling on the municipal councils to recognise them through municipal ordinances (Hurtado, 2005, p.29).

In conclusion, the fourth phase was characterised by the expansion of experiences related to municipal investment in children, reaching beyond just mayors to include other members of the municipal governments.

It was also characterised by a collective effort to create a conceptual basis for the meaning and scope of investment in children, at both the national and Central American levels. At the same time, progress was made in creating methodologies for the participation of children in the municipal planning and budget design processes.



5th phase.- Linkage with national actions/emergence of the Alliance Group (2006-2007)

In the period 2000-2005, the central government advanced with the approval of national public policies for comprehensive attention for children. However, there was a prevailing perception that the social situation of children was continuing to deteriorate, to a great extent due to the limited public investment the State was earmarking for it.

In this context, January 2006 saw the creation of the Alliance Group for Investment in Children as an advocacy consortium made up of civil organisations, networks, movements and cooperation agencies linked to child rights in Nicaragua. The Group assumed the ongoing purpose of “achieving greater and better investment in children for the fulfilment of their rights.” (Alliance Group, 2006, unpublished)

The Alliance Group was one of the first alliances among different organisations around investment in children [...] we were carrying out advocacy actions for the national and municipal governments to consider the fulfilment of their rights [...] as a way of realising the rights the State has recognised in international treaties and local laws. - Ana Lucía Silva, UNICEF protection specialist

Save the Children and the RGM were founding members of the Alliance Group. This platform was used to promote increased public investment in children in the national budget through the implementation of the public campaign “Before approving the budget, put yourself in my shoes”, the conducting of national assessments of investment in children, and the drawing up of proposals for the legislative and executive branches on greater investment in child rights.

The Alliance Group also contributed to the Committee on the Rights of the Child assuming investment in children as part of its agenda, dedicating a day to discussion of the issue in September 2007.⁵

Although the Alliance Group stressed national investment, it also addressed municipal demand, supporting the RGM’s work, which in turn enriched the Alliance Group’s experience by complementing its proposals with the logic of local development.

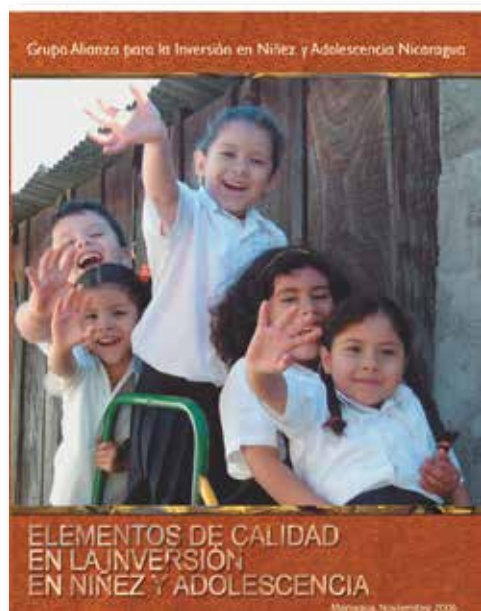
⁵46th Session Committee on the Rights of the Child. Resources for the Rights of the Child - Responsibility of States.



There was an emphasis on the national sphere, but the local issue was on the agenda because it was necessary to define how the municipalities were going to respond budgetarily to the rights of the children in their territories. -Ana Lucía Silva, Unicef protection specialist

The Network strengthened the Alliance Group by drawing attention to municipal investment. Our main contribution was to reach the conviction that investment via the national budget is not the only means for investing and that the municipalities can support the national investment. -Janeth Castillo, Executive Director of the RGM

The Alliance Group also contributed to the reflection on the quality of investments in children. In this sense, the publication “Elements of quality in investment in children” (November 2006) contributed to the municipal authorities taking on the idea that it is not enough to assign resources in the budgets, as it is also necessary to ensure that the said investments are of the required quality. It also provided a tool (matrix for the verification of elements of the quality of investment in children) for assessing and improving the quality of their investments for the fulfilment of child rights. This checklist tool was validated by the CMNAs of seven municipalities.



Cover of the Alliance Group for Investment in Children's publication. Source: Save the Children

The elements related to the quality of investment in children highlighted by the Alliance Group were:

- 1) clear intentionality in terms of children's best interests;
- 2) directionality based on state policies;
- 3) being linked to the national plans;
- 4) responding to the situation and aspirations of children;
- 5) being transparent;
- 6) being monitored, measurable, evaluable and demandable;
- 7) being based on the exercising of children's citizenship;
- 8) being sustainable and having a long-term vision;
- 9) being significant and timely. (Alliance Group, 2006, pp. 10-14)

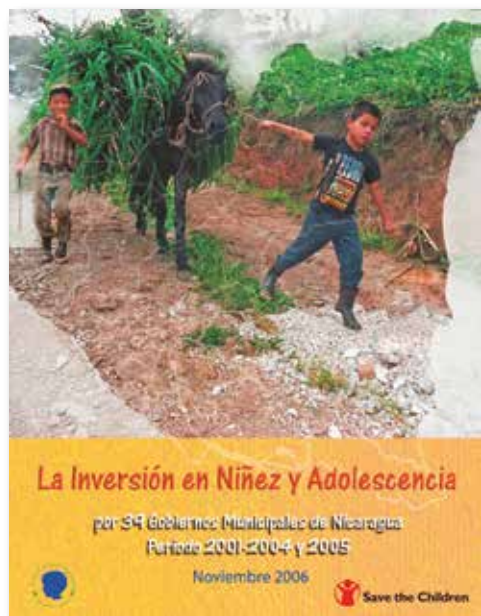


Reflecting on the imperative of the quality of municipal investments in children and the checklist tool encouraged the municipalities to self-assess their work, propose actions to improve those aspects that could be improved and to periodically evaluate their progress.

In April 2006, Save the Children staff from the Child Rights Governance area produced the document “Direct Municipal Investment in Children: Premises and examples” (unpublished), which defines the term in the following way: “It is direct investment in children when they are at the centre of the motivation or the main reason for the said investment, or when they are a very important beneficiary of it.” (p. 1). It also proposes concepts and includes a menu of investment actions for each right. Those examples of direct municipal investment in children, based on the experiences of the RGM and the CMNAs, helped disseminate the idea of investment in children being an everyday matter.

These publications demonstrate the interest of Save the Children and the RGM in contributing to reflection on the quality of investment in children and its central importance in local development.

Promoting increased municipal investment in children has gone hand in hand with one element related to its quality: child participation. -Pedro Hurtado Vega, Save the Children.



Cover of the 1st Study of Municipal Investment in Children. Source: SC

Also in 2006, Save the Children and the RGM conducted the first study on municipal investment in children, which “describes, analyses and consolidates the information on the investment of 39 municipal governments in areas related to child rights during the period 2001-2004 and the year 2005.” (Save the Children, 2006, p.7).

This first study revealed that during the period 2001-2004, the municipalities were earmarking an average of 8.47% of their income for the implementation of child rights (2006, p.27).

This percentage therefore became the baseline, which in addition to allowing the advances in the area of investment to be assessed, encouraged the municipalities to continue their efforts to increase municipal investment in child rights.



The study was the first of its type in Nicaragua and the Central American region, so in addition to providing a baseline for monitoring municipal investment in the country and identifying the amounts of investment, sources of financing and the rights invested in, its methodological guidelines also helped guide similar studies in other countries in the region.

The Central American Learning Circle held its 3rd Meeting in Managua in December 2006 with the participation of 51 municipalities from 5 Central American countries, 7 of them from Nicaragua. Under the slogan “Child Investment and Participation: Guarantees for local development” the participants reflected on the idea that “investment aimed at children is still a passive and ‘symbolic’ process in many municipalities [...] it is minimal and not always in line with the priorities or needs of children, adolescents and young people.” (Save the Children, 2008, p.84)

This 3rd meeting included the participation of the vice-president of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Norberto Liwski, whose message focused on the elements required for good investment in children. He also announced that the Committee had recently decided to dedicate its discussion day in 2007 to the issue of investment in children by the States, which is addressed in Article 4 of the CRC. During the Meeting a “Proclamation of Municipal Governments of Central America in Favour of Children’s Rights” was adopted that, among other aspects, includes the results of the Circle’s reflections and proposals for action with respect to investment in children.

In its declaratory part, the proclamation stressed that “Investment in children and adolescents must be a fundamental part of the poverty-reduction strategies in our countries” (no. 3),” while also resolving “To increase our investment in children [...] making explicit the commitment to investment in children as an obligation and responsibility of the municipal governments [...]” (Save the Children, 2008, p.89).

The same year the Alliance Group was formed, national elections brought a change of national government, returning the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to government. The FSLN is a political party that promoted and defended municipal autonomy when in opposition and demanded greater investment to ensure the rights of the population, in particular the right to health and education.

In conclusion, during its fifth phase the experience made progress in the linkage of national and international organisations and cooperation agencies with a view to ongoing advocacy on greater and improved investment in the implementation of child rights. The first study on municipal investment was also conducted, which in addition to generating evidence on the advances made by the municipal authorities in this respect and stimulating further efforts, also established an unpublished methodological proposal for conducting similar studies.



6th phase.- Increased investment in children and the establishment of the RGM as an association of municipalities (2008-2012)

By January 2008, the RGM had become the main national reference point and one of the most relevant ones in the Central American area in relation to municipal investment in children. In the framework of the Network's institutional capacity building, the municipal governments involved in the RGM resolved to establish it as an association of municipalities, defining its mission, vision and operating regulations.

For those that participated in the process, establishing the Network as an association of municipalities reflected the high degree of development it had achieved, which motivated the search for functional autonomy that would allow it to negotiate and implement projects to continue and expand the work it was doing with over two thirds of the country's municipal governments.

A periodical publication produced by the RGM⁶ summarised in the following way the motivation and significance of establishing itself as an association of municipalities:

The legal establishment has been a great success for the municipal governments, which shows us that the Network has grown and can now establish collaboration agreements and accords, manage resources and promote initiatives in favour of the human rights of children and adolescents in the local sphere based on its own management. It also shows us that it intends to further encourage governments to integrate themselves and take on the objective that brings them together: "greater investment for the implementation of the rights of children in each of our municipalities." -Isaac Travers, quoted in the RGM's Bulletin No. 14 (January-March 2008)

For us, the Network's establishment has to do with the autonomy that the association is taking in this case, which means it can act for itself in the management of resources with international and national organisations and have the ability to negotiate resources to fund projects that benefit children and adolescents. -Sandy Peralta, deputy-mayor of Matagalpa and member of the RGM's National Committee in the period 2005-2008

⁶Children, Mayor's Offices and Something More. Information Bulletin No. 14. January- March 2008.



Municipal authorities that signed the document establishing the RGM as an association of municipalities (January 2008). Source: RGM

The RGM's autonomy matches the nature of the municipalities, which enjoy an autonomous regime that allows them to decide on their affairs and even negotiate funds to finance their budgets.

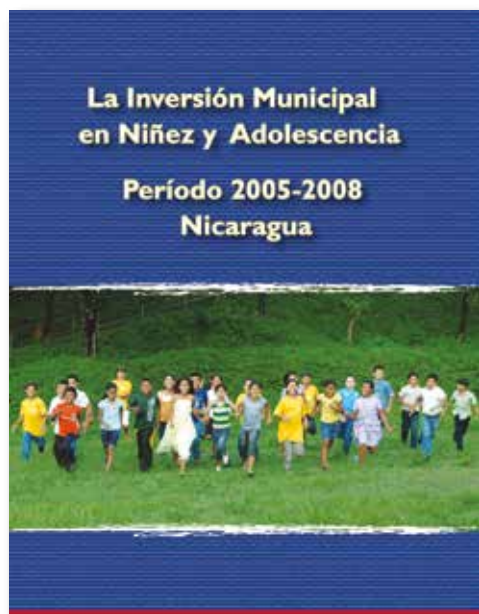
In this sense, forming an association of municipalities allowed the RGM to negotiate resources and sign collaboration agreements to promote initiatives in favour of child rights, particularly municipal investment in the implementation of those rights. As a result, it signed its first cooperation agreement in January 2008 with Save the Children and subsequently signed other agreements with international agencies that supported different components of its lines of action.

The same year it was established as an association of municipalities, the RGM initiated a process of accompanying the municipalities in defining a vision of development for children, based on their own realities. The idea was to institutionalise this in municipal public policies drawn up with the active participation of children and other local stakeholders with a view to guiding and linking local efforts on determined common objectives. The first of these policies was approved in 2008 in the municipality of Granada.

The 4th Central American Meeting promoted by the Central American Learning Circle was held in November 2008 in Retalhuleu, Guatemala, with the participation of representatives from 66 municipalities, 10 of them from Nicaragua. Under the slogan "Quality of Investment in Favour of Children", the Meeting stressed the relevance of investment in children being of the required quality and of child participation being one of its most important elements.

In the context of accompanying the municipalities in formulating their public policies, in 2008 the RGM initiated a strategy of funding municipal projects with a child-rights focus, which includes a methodology for child participation in the selection of projects of interest to them.

The proposed methodology for the identification and selection of investment projects was taken on by the municipal authorities with different levels of commitment. While some took advantage of the opportunity to promote the practice of consulting children, even to the extent of institutionalising participation spaces and bodies, others limited themselves to developing formal consultations with groups of children without really incorporating consultations with children as a systematic practice for the municipal government.



Cover of the 2nd Study of Municipal Investment in Children. Source: Save the Children

In 2009, following the municipal elections of the previous year, the RGM called its 6th Meeting to elect a new board of directors and define its lines of action for the period 2009-2012, reaffirming “Significantly increasing direct investment in children...” as the first of them.

That same year, Save the Children promoted the conducting of a 2nd Study of Municipal Investment in Children, corresponding to the period 2005-2008, which showed that the percentage of resources earmarked by the municipalities for the implementation of child rights had increased from 8.47% to 15.50% of total municipal income.

These data show that the RGM’s opening up to the participation of other municipal authorities and its awareness- and capacity-building actions significantly contributed to the amount of resources the municipalities allocate to the implementation of child rights.

The 5th Central American Meeting promoted by the Central American Learning Circle was held in December 2010 in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, under the slogan “Public Policies and Municipal Budgets: Instruments for implementing child rights”. The Meeting included the participation of representatives from 69 municipalities, 10 of them from Nicaragua, and approved a proclamation recognising that:

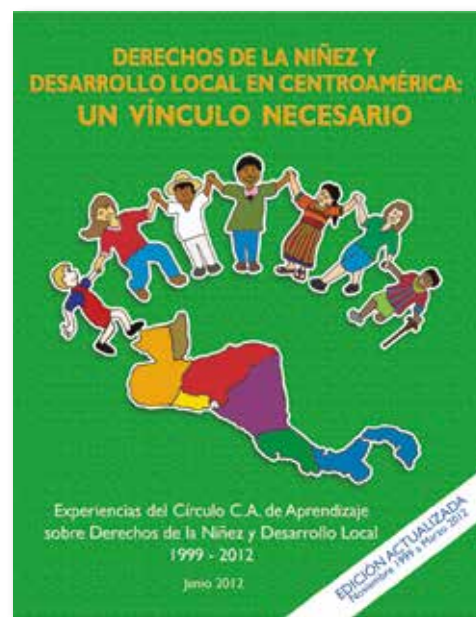
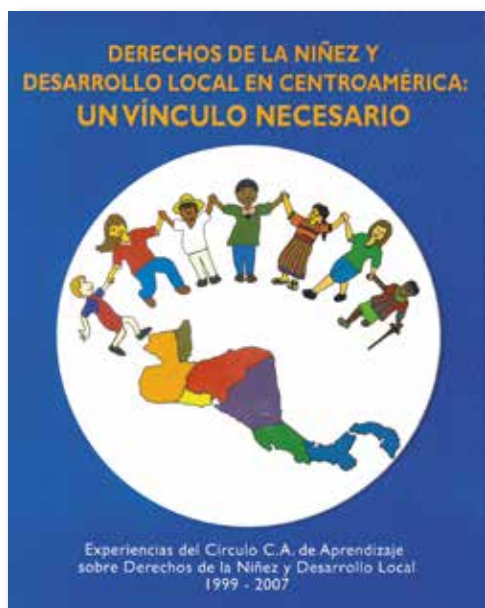
“...investment in financial, human and material resources—in quantity and quality—is a channel for implementing their rights” and reaffirmed the commitment to “increase quality investment for children, making an effort to ensure the continuation of investment policies, plans and projects beyond the current municipal governments.” (Central American Learning Circle, 2012, p. 112)



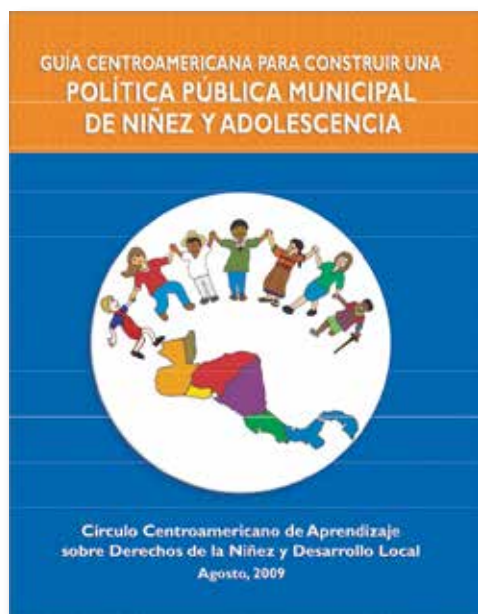
With the aim of taking up the lessons learned from the Central American Learning Circle, the experiences of this initiative were systematised in 2008 under the title “Child Rights and Local Development in Central America: A necessary link”. This summarised the experiences and lessons accumulated during the period 1999- 2007. Five years later, a further publication updated the document to 2012.

Both systematisations helped share the reflections of local stakeholders from the Central American region on the issue of direct, quality municipal investment in child rights.

During this period, the Central American Learning Circle highlighted municipal public policies as valuable instruments for institutionalising the municipal responsibility of investing in children, as well as identifying and ordering the investment priorities.



Covers of systematizations of the experiences of the Central American Learning Circle. Source: Save the Children.



*Cover of the Central American guide to drawing up a municipal public policy for children and adolescents".
Source: Save the Children.*

In this context, the collectively produced “Central American guide to drawing up a municipal public policy for children and adolescents” was published, providing the region’s municipalities with a conceptual basis and methodological proposal for building their vision of children and institutionalising it in public policies.

The sharing of experiences among peers was also fostered. In this respect, and accompanied by Save the Children, the RGM board of directors participated in “internships” (on-site learning visits to Guatemalan municipalities) in May 2008 and July 2010 to learn about the process of formulating municipal public policies there.

The period 2009-2011 saw the strengthening of initiatives aimed at getting the municipalities to invest more in child rights, especially through the approval of municipal public policies in which the local authorities identified and defined their investment priorities with the participation of children.

In 2011, Nicaraguan citizens participated in elections to choose a President and legislators. The incumbent President was re-elected and his party increased its number of National Assembly representatives, occupying over 60% of the seats.

At the beginning of his follow-on term in office, the President intensified the reforms to the citizens’ participation model, which favoured the creation and functioning of the Councils and Cabinets of Citizens’ Power⁷ (now known as Cabinets of the Family, Community and Life). These bodies include members of the community who give their opinions on matters of a municipal and national nature through consultation spaces.

Municipal elections were held the following year and certain mayors from the previous period were re-elected. The ruling party won a total of 127 of the 153 mayor’s offices (75.7% of the total).

After the municipal elections, the RGM encouraged the municipal authorities concluding their functions to motivate the incoming administrations to continue participating in the experience

⁷Established through Decree No. 112-2007, approved on November 29, 2007.



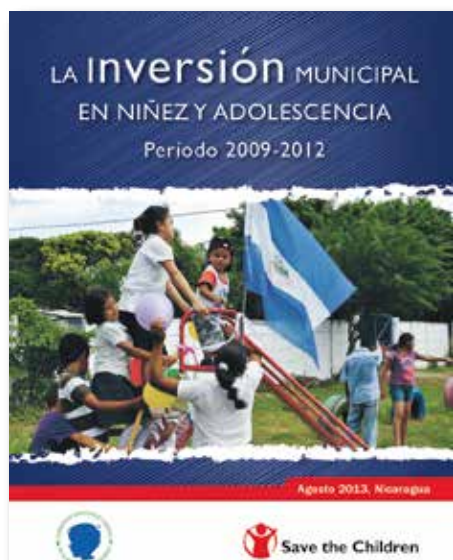
and provide continuity to the processes of formulating and implementing municipal policies, which defined a long-term vision to guide their child-investment efforts.

In this sixth phase, the experience achieved its greatest level of development. The RGM's establishment as an association of municipalities implied the possibility of negotiating funds with national and international organisations to finance its child-investment actions. Save the Children also continued fostering the sharing of experiences among the region's municipalities on issues related to municipal planning with a rights-based focus.

7th phase.- Changes in the link between the municipalities and the RGM (2013-the present day)

At the beginning of 2013, the RGM included 124 municipalities (81% of the total), whose authorities and technical personnel were participating in awareness- and capacity-building processes aimed at increasing the amount and improving the quality of municipal investments for the implementation of child rights.

Promotion work was done with the aim all the mayors in the country earmarking specific municipal budget resources for investment in children, fundamentally in education, health, recreation and the dissemination of laws that recognise child rights. -Maryan Ruiz, mayor of the municipality of La Dalia and national coordinator of the RGM in the period 2009-2012



Cover of the 3rd Study of Municipal Investment in Children. Source: Save the Children

The Network has made a very significant contribution. The municipal governments' interest in investing in children has been awoken [...] Before participating in the Network, we didn't view the issue of children as very important, but now we realise that it's worth investing in and working for children. -Luis Ramírez Gutiérrez, mayor of the municipality of Waslala, 2013-2017

In 2013, the 3rd Study of Municipal Investment in Children was conducted, revealing that the municipalities were investing more in child rights (18.3% in 2009-2012, for a 2.8% increase compared to the previous period) (Save the Children, 2013, p. 28).

Despite the RGM's dynamism and the willingness of its members to continue participating, during the first half of 2013 INIFOM authorities oriented the mayors to stop participating in RGM activities, as the government has focused attention to children through the Ministry of Family, Adolescence and Children.



This INIFOM instruction stopped the members of the RGM from coming together to elect the national committee for 2013-2016. As a result, the coordination members from the previous period are still in their posts. The processes for formulating municipal policies have also been affected because many mayors are no longer open to working on them with the RGM.

“INIFOM is a body that provides the municipalities with technical accompaniment, as well as acting as a communication channel with the executive branch, whose guidelines they assume,” according to Maryan Ruiz, current National Coordinator.

Since mid-2013, the RGM has seen its capacity for action limited in most municipalities. These processes are currently being developed with 30 municipalities that continue coordinating their efforts in the RGM framework.

Despite the factors limiting the RGM’s tasks, the work carried out with the local stakeholders with a view to greater and improved investment in child rights continues to generate positive results, as it is discussed in later pages.

In 2013, the Municipal Transfers Law⁸ was reformed at the executive branch’s request, establishing that every year the municipalities have to assign certain minimum percentages from the investment transfers to prioritised areas: health 5%, education 5%, the environment 5%, and water and sanitation 7.5% (article 12).

To a large extent, the law institutionalized the practice of almost two thirds of the country’s municipalities in terms of assigning resources for direct investment in children. At the same time it had a motivating effect for the other municipalities, which, mandated by law, started to realize their commitment to child rights through investment aimed at achieving them.

The seventh phase contains a paradox. The processes promoted since the beginning of the experience continue generating positive changes for municipal investment in children. There is social and regulatory recognition of the municipalities’ responsibilities in relation to child rights, while at the same time the municipal budget resources assigned for this every year continue to increase. However, the RGM, which has been the main driving force behind the experience, now has a seriously limited work possibilities. This situation still persists, despite the efforts made over two years to overcome it.

⁸Law No. 850, approved on November 27, 2013. Article 13 says that: “The municipal governments will annually assign the minimum percentages from the investment transfers for the following prioritised sectors: health 5%, education 5%, the environment 5%, and water and sanitation 7.5%.



IV. RESULTS

During the 25 years in which it has been developed, the experience has generated a number of successes, which are described below:

A progressive and sustained increase in municipal investment in children

Given that the municipal budgets do not provide any information that allows the amount of resources invested in child rights to be disaggregated and the need for a baseline to reveal the state of municipal investment in children and adolescents, Save the Children and the RGM conducted the first study on municipal investment in children in 2006 with a representative sample of 39 municipalities.

Three investment studies have been conducted to date, revealing that Nicaraguan municipalities that have participated in the experience have progressively increased the economic resources they assign to the fulfilment of children's rights, which have risen from 8.4% (2006, p.27), to 15.5% (2010, p.22) and 18.3% (2013, p.47) in the periods 2001-2004, 2005-2008 and 2009-2012, respectively.



Covers of the three published studies on municipal investment in children. Source: Save the Children



The information on budgetary implementation has been provided by the municipalities' finance areas, giving the investment studies broad credibility. The results of the studies are publicly available and have been backed by the local authorities, which can use them to assess the advances made by their municipalities in relation to investment for the achievement of child rights.

The largest proportion of municipal resources invested in children come from the transfers the municipalities receive from the central government, although investment with their own funds has registered a slight increase in the periods analysed (20.43%, 23.70% and 21.20%).

The investment studies have revealed that the municipalities are increasing the amount of economic resources they assign for the implementation of child rights. However, the increase in direct investment in children in the period 2009-2012 (2.8%) was less than registered for 2005-2008 (7.1%).

There is still a lack of information on the amount of resources invested in child rights by those municipalities that have not integrated into the RGM. What there is evidence for is that those municipalities that have participated have more indicators of support for the fulfilment of children's rights, such as better focused investment, personnel responsible for the issue of children, support for municipal coordination bodies and decisions favorable to children. And all of this is to a large extent the result of the awareness-raising and capacity-building actions promoted by the RGM among its members.

Table No. 1.

Which rights do Nicaraguan municipalities invest in?

Rights	2001-2004	2005-2008	2009-2012
Education	62.60%	68.30%	69.80%
Health and nutrition	16.81%	14.70%	14.00%
Recreation and culture	18.22%	14.10%	12.00%
Other rights	2.37%	2.90%	4.20%

Source: Studies of municipal investment by Save the Children



The municipal investment has mainly been earmarked for compliance with the right to education, with lesser percentages for health and nutrition and recreation and culture.

Those municipalities with active child participation have decided what to invest in and how much to invest according to the children's capacities, needs and interests. Overall, the data reveal a diversity of investment priorities, contributing to the fulfilment of a wide range of rights.

In the area of education, the municipalities have invested in the construction, repair and rehabilitation of schools and school and municipal libraries, as well as roads and bridges to access them. They have also invested in the provision of didactic materials, consumable materials (e.g. notebooks, pencils, laboratory materials) and the delivery of equipment for musical bands. These investments have a direct impact on the lives of children, who benefit from improvements in their educational surroundings, ensuring them a safe and quality environment.

With respect to the right to health and nutrition, they have invested in the construction and rehabilitation of health centres, as well as the logistics for vaccination campaigns and the fight against hunger. In relation to the right to recreation and culture, investments have been made in giving communities recreation spaces (parks, sports pitches/courts, sports equipment, and props for cultural groups). The investments in health and recreation have a positive effect on children and adolescents in terms of contributing to the health system's capacity to provide them with timely and comprehensive care, while also giving them public spaces where they can enjoy themselves, play and socialise.

The municipalities also support the fulfilment of other children's rights, including the rights to a name and nationality (birth registration), child participation, citizens' security and protection against violence, as well as economically supporting the CMNAs.

The investments are equally distributed in terms of their targets (education, followed by health and nutrition, recreation and culture, and "others") in municipalities that are also the capital cities of their department or autonomous region and in those that are not, although the average investment was less in the former (11.2% between 2009 and 2012) than in the latter (25.5% in the same period) (SCI, 2013, p. 30). This configuration can be partly explained by the fact that the majority of the investments in child rights come from the transfers the municipalities receive, which are generally speaking larger in non-capital municipalities, which usually have higher poverty rates. As a result, these municipalities have more resources available to invest.

According to data provided by the municipalities, a total of 721,875 children benefitted in 2009-2012 for an average of 19,510 per municipality, representing an increase of 4.7% compared to 2005-2008. However, there is a need to continue strengthening the municipalities' capacity to record their investments, the children they directly benefit and the impact of these investments on their lives (SCI, 2013, p. 44).



These data show that local investment has the potential to complement national efforts, as it is easier for the municipalities to identify children's unsatisfied and most deeply-felt demands, assigning resources with greater resolve.

The studies' results appear to establish a relationship between the increase in municipal investment and the approval of municipal public policies. This is because the policies institutionalise the local responsibility for investing and because their formulation process allows the authorities to identify the demands of children, thus facilitating the assignment of resources to implement them. However, there is a need to conduct a study that analyses the impact of approving municipal public policies on investment in children.

Municipal authorities that have taken on management posts in the RGM and others that are currently exercising their functions coincide in highlighting the importance of the experience of increasing municipal investment in children.

The mayor's offices have gradually included children in the municipal budgets. Now there is more investment because we managed to get the authorities building their awareness and taking the children sector into account in their budgets. -Maryan Ruiz, national coordinator of the RGM in the period 2009-2012

We have a percentage that is set aside in the municipal budget for investment in children, and it's [the children themselves] that decide what to do through town hall meetings with children. -Oscar Gadea Tinoco, mayor of Santa María de Pantasma, 2013- 2017

Although those municipal authorities elected for the period 2013-2017 that were consulted highlighted an increase in the assignment of economic resources for the implementation of child rights, they often do not know how much they invest in children. This makes it hard to confirm the increase, while also revealing the relevance of continuing to promote the notion of direct investment in children and the need to record it in a suitable way.

Advances in the municipalisation of child rights

The actions aimed at awareness-raising and education on child rights; processes to build the capacities of local stakeholders; and the spaces fostered by Save the Children, the RGM, the CMNAs, the Central American Learning Circle, and at a certain moment the Alliance Group have all contributed to the municipal authorities recognising that compliance with child rights is a responsibility they share with other national stakeholders.

The municipal authorities have internalised the link between municipal responsibilities and child rights and that the implementation of the latter requires the allocation of economic resources in the municipal budgets.



The Network gave us a body in which we could reflect on child rights and highlight the municipalities' responsibility in relation to them. -Loyda García, mayor of Tola and coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

As municipalities, we have responsibilities in relation to the rights of children. This implies that we must consider them in the budgets, assign them resources. -Manuel Antonio Zelaya Meneses, mayor of the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa, 2013-2017

In addition, the coordination mechanisms among the different local stakeholders have been strengthened through the CMNAs with a view to pooling efforts for the promotion, defence and implementation of the rights of children.

We managed to make the issue of child rights a municipal matter. The municipal commissions were organised around realising the rights of children in the municipal space. -Enrique Pilarte, former liaison of the Movement of Municipal Commissions

To comply with their child rights-related responsibilities, all of the municipalities have named delegates (frequently deputy-mayors, councillors and technicians) to address issues related to children (Save the Children, 2013, p.26) and in many cases organised the opening of units or offices whose personnel are responsible for identifying children's demands and coordinating their resolution with municipal and central government bodies.

We hold consultations with children, identifying and prioritising their demands by age-group in order to respond to them through the municipal budget. It is those priorities that guide the efforts made by the mayor's office. -Lester Suárez Suárez, children's technician for the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa

These units or offices, which are funded with local resources, also provide the municipal councils with information on the situation of children, thus helping make the municipal investment more efficient.

My functions as a technician are to support the functioning of the CMNA, which is where the activities in favour of children are proposed that are then presented to the municipal council for its approval and the assignment of funds. -Damaris Castro Jarquín, children's technician for the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma

The municipalities have also institutionalised the CMNAs through ordinances (95.9% of the municipalities had such commissions at the end of 2012) and supported their functioning as multi-sectoral coordination bodies to ensure the rights of children in the local arena. In this sense, they help make the municipal investment more efficient and determined (Save the Children, 2013, p.47).



The municipal commissions for child and adolescent affairs significantly help the inter-institutional coordination, the population's education on child rights, rights promotion, and the demand for municipal investment in children's rights. -Erwin de Castilla Urbina, Deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2001-2004

The CMNAs have played a key role in local coordination around child rights, but their actions are often limited by a number of factors: their lack of economic sustainability, party-based disagreements among their members, and a limited capacity to convoke local stakeholders. For their part, the children's units or offices are affected by a lack of definition of the functions of those responsible, as well as the high turn-over of the staff that coordinate them.

The approval of municipal policies that institutionalise the local responsibility for investing in children

Public policies are the instruments through which the municipalities institutionalise their commitment to child rights and provide strategies for implementing them.

The municipal public policies were conceived of as tools for the municipalities to build their vision of development in relation to children and define their approach strategies. They have allowed the national strategic proposals to be translated to local contexts, defining the responsibilities the municipalities have to take on with respect to child rights. -Janeth Castillo, Executive Director of the RGM

We recognise that the policies made at the national level do not have the coverage that can be achieved by the municipality, which has a better knowledge of the demands of children and adolescents because it is closer to them. -Isaac Travers, deputy-mayor of Chinandega and deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

In the period 2008-2014, a total of 43 municipal policies were approved that either explicitly or implicitly established municipal responsibility for investing in the implementation of child rights.⁹

⁹Another 24 municipalities have initiated—but have yet to conclude—the process of drawing up municipal public policies.



Map of Approved Municipal Policies for Children (2008-2014)

The map displays the 43 municipalities of Chiapas, each color-coded according to the year in which a municipal policy for children was approved. The colors represent the years: 2008 (red), 2009 (orange), 2010 (yellow), 2011 (green), 2012 (pink), 2013 (purple), and 2014 (light green). The legend on the left lists the municipalities and their corresponding years of approval.

Year	Municipality
2008	Granada
2009	Mozonte
2009	Telpaneca
2010	Santa María
2010	Telica
2010	Corinto
2010	Las Sabanas
2010	Dipilto
2010	Macuelizo
2010	San Lucas
2010	El Tuma la Dalia
2010	Desembocadura
2010	Siuna
2010	Nueva Guinea
2010	Nagarote
2010	Bluefields
2010	San Miguelito
2010	Tisma
2010	Villa Nueva
2010	Puerto Morazan
2010	Villa Sandino
2010	Juigalpa
2010	Acoyapa
2011	Palacuquina
2011	Ciudad Antigua
2011	Puerto Cabezas
2011	Tipitapa
2011	Buenos Aires
2011	Rancho Grande
2011	Ocotál
2011	San Ramón
2011	Chinandega
2011	Morrito
2011	San Rafael del Sur
2011	Rosita
2011	San Carlos
2011	Santa Teresa
2011	Waslala
2011	Prinzapolka
2011	Wiwilí NS
2011	Mulukukú
2011	Río Blanco
2011	Santa María de Pantasma
2012	San Rafael del Sur
2012	Rosita
2012	San Carlos
2012	Santa Teresa
2012	Waslala
2012	Prinzapolka
2012	Wiwilí NS
2012	Mulukukú
2012	Río Blanco
2012	Santa María de Pantasma
2013	San Rafael del Sur
2013	Rosita
2013	San Carlos
2013	Santa Teresa
2013	Waslala
2013	Prinzapolka
2013	Wiwilí NS
2013	Mulukukú
2013	Río Blanco
2013	Santa María de Pantasma
2014	San Rafael del Sur
2014	Rosita
2014	San Carlos
2014	Santa Teresa
2014	Waslala
2014	Prinzapolka
2014	Wiwilí NS
2014	Mulukukú
2014	Río Blanco
2014	Santa María de Pantasma



In their ongoing relations with municipal authorities, Save the Children and the RGM have identified signs of a relationship between the approval of municipal policies and increased investment in children, but there is no evidence currently available to confirm that. There is also a need to explore the practical use the authorities make of their policies, and in particular if they are used as an instrument for guiding the municipalities' work related to implementing child rights.

The process of participatory formulation of public policies fosters children playing an active role in the identification and prioritisation of their demands, which facilitates the municipalities resolving to satisfy them in a progressive way through resource allocation.

Although the participatory public policy formulation process is guided by a single methodological process, the experiences have been diverse, particularly in relation to child participation.

In many municipalities, broad consultation processes have been developed, methodologies have been designed adjusted to different age groups, and permanently-operating child participation bodies have even been created. In other municipalities, the consultation processes have been limited to reduced groups of children (urban, with schooling, adolescents, members of civil organisations, sympathisers with certain political parties), which in turn reduces the possibilities for the sustainability of the child participation spaces.

The projection of Nicaragua's experience in the Central American sphere

The experience of municipal investment in children has been disseminated to other countries in the Central American region through the network for experience-sharing, learning and action promoted through the Central American Learning Circle with over 250 municipalities. In this way, the Nicaraguan experience has been scaled up, encouraging the region's municipalities to develop their own initiatives.

[...] guidelines have been provided on the awareness-building and organisation of municipal authorities, employing a child-rights focus in municipal planning, budgeting and management and stimulating the municipal governments to take on their role as child-rights duty bearers. (Save the Children, 2012, p.91)

A growing number of the region's municipal governments have formulated municipal public policies, using a participatory methodology that promotes children identifying and prioritising their own demands and the municipal governments committing themselves to direct investment for the implementation of children's rights.



We, the municipal governments, have to change practices and attitudes and understand that investing in children today is both a responsibility for us and a right for them. The problems facing children in Central America are similar, so we have to join forces to achieve municipal policies and comply with their rights. -Loyda García, mayor of Tola and coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

Certain conceptual and methodological reference points on investment in children have been collectively designed, shared and standardised, serving as a guide on how to formulate municipal policies and planning/budgeting with a rights-based approach.

Greater participation of children in municipal spaces and institutionalisation of child participation spaces

Child participation has been an essential element in the development of the experience. There has been deliberate and systematic promotion of children participating in local consultation spaces (e.g. town hall meetings with children) and forming their own bodies (e.g. child councils/ governments).

Through town hall meetings and participation bodies, groups of children exercise active citizenship and participate in demanding their rights in the municipal sphere.

In the municipality, small town hall meetings are held in the schools, in which we give our opinions about the projects we want. Then a town hall meeting is held with representatives from the different schools where the project the mayor's office is going to implement is chosen through a vote. -15-year-old Oleydy Rodríguez Urbina from the municipality of Mulukukú

When the child council was elected, children's assemblies were organised in the communities so that each community named its candidates. Then the council was elected. Children came from all of the communities and the candidates talked about what they were going to do if elected. They presented proposals and tried to convince you to vote for them. The voting was secret and people were chosen post by post until the whole council was established. -22-year-old Hugeth Sánchez Martínez from the municipality of Tisma

Save the Children, the RGM and the Central American Learning Circle have promoted both children's active participation in the processes for formulating municipal public policies and the real and effective nature of such participation. In other words, they have sought to guarantee that the largest possible number of children participate, ensuring equity among males and females, children and adolescents, and children from urban and rural areas, including groups traditionally excluded (e.g. people with disabilities, indigenous people).



Aware that child participation requires adequate spaces and methodologies, some municipalities have developed methodologies that help children in their schools and communities express their opinions, questions, demands and proposals related to the way in which the municipalities should ensure the implementation of their rights.

These initiatives have encouraged the municipal authorities to initiate the process of transforming their thinking and attitudes on child participation and to value children's potential to contribute to their own wellbeing and that of their municipalities.

For us [the mayors], the focus for children was to benefit them, but we have learned that we must promote the active participation of children, that they should decide what they want. -Salvador García, mayor of San Marcos and member of the RGM National Committee in the period 2005-2008

Children are capable of proposing, presenting and developing ideas. We have given them the place that corresponds to them so that they can express themselves and have the freedom to discuss, participate and put forward their own ideas. -Isaac Travers, deputy-mayor of Chinandega and deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

In most of the municipalities in which municipal policies have been approved, participation spaces (child councils/governments) have been set up in the form of a group of children elected through the votes of their peers to identify the demands of the municipality's children and transmit them to the municipal authorities. Children who are members of the child council are frequently called upon to participate in consultation activities conducted by the municipality.

The child participation bodies have diverse dynamics and realities. Generally speaking they are in the process of developing and face multiple challenges, including: ensuring their members are elected with the greatest possible participation of children (of all ages, rural, with disabilities); functioning permanently and not being limited to the policy formulation process; and taking on their own forms of organisation and functioning, distancing themselves from adultist models frequently marked by centralism and a top-down structure.

Greater awareness and training among municipal authorities and personnel.

The actions to build the awareness and capacities of the municipal authorities and technical teams involved in the municipal planning and budgeting process have helped to generate awareness of the central importance of investment in children in terms of local development.

Many municipalities are increasingly putting behind them the kind of "assistentialist" practices with an immediate-term logic that for a long time characterised attention to children and are managing to build a vision of children's development in their municipalities.



Building the awareness of the municipal authorities is helping generate the political will to internalise the implementation of child rights in municipal functions and consequently increase the economic investment to realise those rights. At the same time, strengthening the technical capacities of the teams responsible for municipal planning contributes to the municipalities optimising their resources, assigning them assertively in accordance with the demands of children and with a strategic vision of development.



Cover of publication about child rights municipal programming.
Source: RGM

The experience assumed that both components—the political one and the technical one—are interrelated and essential for generating positive changes in the lives of children:

The Network's actions have made us public servants more aware about topics related to children, to the point of institutionalising children's rights, trying to invest more. -Gary Contreras Gil, children's technician from the Muelle de los Bueyes mayor's office

Participants in the focus group with children said that the municipal investments have had a positive influence on their lives:

The mayor works more with children than with adults, because we have more needs. They do projects in my municipality: schools, sports areas, parks. -12-year-old Adriel Esaú Alfaro from the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma

[The mayor's office] consults mothers and fathers [...] it asks why their children don't go to school and if they say they don't have the money to buy them notebooks, a project is implemented to give them notebooks so they can attend classes. -15-year-old Oleydy Rodríguez Urbina from the municipality of Mulukukú

The RGM's actions have contributed to publicly-elected officials and technical personnel from at least 124 municipalities receiving awareness building on their child rights-related responsibilities and capacity building on municipal planning with a child-rights focus. However, the initiatives to build the capacities of the municipalities' technical personnel were affected by the high staff turnover, particularly in the context of the change of municipal authorities.



The design of conceptual reference points on what investment in children means

It is now generally accepted by the local authorities and stakeholders that investment in children is a basic condition for ensuring the municipalities take responsibility for the implementation of child rights, but for a long time different interpretations co-existed about what “investing” meant and what was considered to be “investment in children.”

There were resources for children in the social items of the mayor’s office’s budget, but they were not defined. There was no clear and precise vision of children in the budgets. -Erwin de Castilla, mayor of Juigalpa and deputy-coordinator of the RGM, 2001-2004

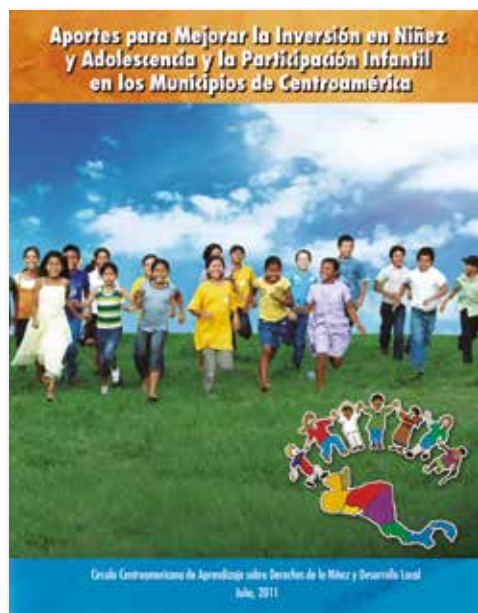
Many municipal authorities did not understand what investment in children meant, leading them to associate any social project with children. Meanwhile, other authorities carried out their functions without paying any attention to the issue of child rights.

In this context, Save the Children encouraged collective reflection on the meaning of investing in children, implementing through the RGM and the Central American Learning Circle exercises for the collective construction of knowledge. These led to the consensual definition of a conceptual basis for “investment in children” and then for “direct municipal investment in children” and “quality investment.” After being widely debated and validated, this collective knowledge has been disseminated through Save the Children, RGM and Central American Learning Circle publications. The following is a summary of the reflections on the meaning of the experience’s key concepts:

Direct municipal investment	Quality investment
This is investment that involves economic, material or human resources contributed by the municipalities, but also a willingness expressed through support actions, the generation of participation and consultation arenas, and the creation of conditions conducive to children’s comprehensive development. Direct investment in children is when they are the focus of the motivation or the main reason for the said investment, or when the investment’s direct usufructuaries are children and adolescents (Hurtado, 2006, p. 2).	This refers to the specific parameters that must be complied with for the municipal investment in children to have the expected effects and generate positive and lasting changes in children’s lives (Alliance Group, 2006, p. 10).



These conceptual reference points have established a common language among the local stakeholders in the Nicaraguan and Central American areas that serves to guide the processes of municipal public policy formulation and local planning and budgeting.



Cover of a Central American Learning Circle publication on investment in children. Source: CCA/SC

They also allowed the establishment of theoretical and methodological frameworks for the studies to measure municipal investment in Nicaragua and served as the basis for the municipal child investment competitions. As a result, both the results of the studies and the selection of the municipalities that most invest in children enjoy broad credibility based on a common understanding of the criteria to be evaluated with respect to municipal investment in children.

The investment studies imply the development of a sequence of actions, described below:

1. Production of a conceptual reference point on what comprises direct municipal investment.
2. Selection of a representative sample of the country's municipalities.
3. Production of an information gathering instrument, including a database.
4. Identification of sources of primary and secondary information.
5. Gathering of primary and secondary information (with the municipalities' budget teams).
6. Analysis of information by municipality and production of a consolidated report.
7. Publication and dissemination.
8. Use of investment report by the municipal governments, NGOs and children.

Despite the technical consistency of the conceptual framework on investment in children and the efforts to share that conceptual and methodological understanding, the municipal authorities find it difficult to determine the amount of resources they assign to child rights. This suggests that while they benefit children, their investments are not always exclusively thought out with a view to the implementation of their rights. In other words, there is still some way to go to affirm the notion of direct investment in children.



V. GOOD PRACTICES

During the development of this experience, Save the Children and the RGM have evolved a set of initiatives that can be considered good practices due to their positive impact on increasing municipal investment and improving elements related to its quality. The following are the most relevant:

Learning to invest by investing: municipal demonstration projects

Investment in children is not an abstract exercise performed by the municipalities, but rather a concrete practice that implies political processes (willingness of the authorities), administrative processes (identification of demands, prioritisation, budgeting) and operative processes (monitoring social projects).

In relation to linking investment in children with the day-to-day practice of the municipal governments, a joint Save the Children and RGM strategy has been to offer a child rights-focused project to the municipal authorities that consists of transferring US\$5,000, complemented by a local counterpart fund of at least 20% more. This must be invested in a project for the well-being of children, selected by children themselves through a participatory process. These projects have been widely accepted among the municipal authorities, as they imply the delivery of development efforts to the community. From this perspective they provide a stimulus that opens the municipalities up to the experience of listening to children, implementing projects that respond to their aspirations and interests, and discovering the central importance of investment in children for local development.

Along with the project, the municipal government is provided with a methodology for incorporating child rights into municipal planning and for the promotion of child participation in decision-making processes through consultation activities and the strengthening and/or creation of municipal bodies made up of and representing children.

The project was decided upon through a participatory process with children from the schools. We wanted it to be based on what they wanted. A culture promotion project was chosen, which involved providing schools folk costumes. I was surprised because I thought they were going to ask for sports equipment. As a result, we understood that children need a space to express their opinions, because the opinions of the adults aren't the same as theirs. -Juan José Jaime, mayor of the municipality of Muelle de los Bueyes, 2013-2017

Through these projects, the municipalities open or reinforce a budgetary category for children (which tends to receive more resources every year) and strengthen the capacities of their technical personnel in relation to child-rights budgeting. The RGM has reported that the demonstration



projects have helped increase municipal investments in child rights, but there is still a need to document the specific amounts involved and the projects' sustainability in the years following their implementation.

The project methodology also encourages the municipal authorities to recognise the right of children to actively participate in local management, motivating them to support the creation of child participation bodies (councils or cabinets) and to conduct consultation processes so that the children themselves identify and prioritise their demands and finally select the project or projects that will be implemented for their benefit.

The Network has helped the municipalities to work on the issue of children's rights, because the authorities thought we couldn't organise ourselves and make decisions. But now they recognise that children are capable of identifying their most relevant demands: schools, sports and recreation. -22-year-old Hugeth Sánchez Martínez from the municipality of Tisma

We've decided the projects the mayor's office carries out. We did one on giving school supplies to over 150 children and others on toys in 15 communities and the renovation of a school. The first thing the mayor's office does is to consult us through town hall meetings and meetings. The mayor says that 'It's the children who call the shots in these projects; we do what they tell us to. -12-year-old Adriel Esaú Alfaro from the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma

The projects are also a valuable experience in terms of promoting child citizenship, as child participation is actively promoted in municipal management, presenting concrete proposals in line with their interests, while also ensuring that they are informed of the project's implementation.

Meetings are held so that children can express their opinions about projects for their well-being. They've been enabled to express their opinions, present their demands and ask what you've done to respond to them. -Manuel Antonio Zelaya Meneses, mayor of the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa, 2013-2017

A total of 57 projects were implemented in 2008-2014, including the construction or improvement of children's parks; the renovation of libraries; the repair of schools and construction of new classrooms; the provision of school materials; the equipping of a school for children with disabilities; the provision of equipment for sports, cultural activities and musical bands; the installation of drinking water systems; and the improvement of school hygiene services.



Some of the projects implemented in the municipalities of San Francisco, Telpaneca, Tipitapa, San Jorge, Granada, Ocotal, Nandaime and Malpaisillo. Source: RGM

Municipal child rights competitions

During the Network's 3rd National Meeting, held in April 1999, Save the Children Norway proposed holding national competitions to encourage the implementation of children's rights in the municipalities and to recognise the most stand-out municipal governments and their mayors. The proposal was enthusiastically welcomed. The first competition took place that same year and the ninth in 2014.



The competitions consist of a public invitation to municipalities to present evidence of their investments in children over a pre-established period with a view to publicly identifying and recognising (socially and economically) the three municipalities that have invested the most.

The competition has US\$10,000 for three prizes—US\$5,000, US\$3,000 and US\$2,000 for the first, second and third places, respectively. One of the conditions of the competition is that the prize money has to be invested in projects for children.

The competitions are not held during election years to avoid conflicts of interests, nor in the first year of new municipal governments as the budgets they execute in that period are inherited from their predecessors and they do not therefore have any real possibility of influencing the resources assigned to children and adolescents during their first year.

The competitions have fostered healthy competition among municipalities, contributing to them investing more in child rights. The municipalities that have won make an effort to maintain their ranking, while the others are motivated to invest more in a better way to obtain the social and economic recognition the competition bestows.

The difficult thing is not winning the competition, but rather remaining in first place. It has been a fraternal competition among the municipalities because we always want to win and make an effort to do so. This motivates us because we're thinking about what to do, how to get that recognition. -Erwin de Castilla, mayor of Juigalpa and deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2001-2004



Prize-giving ceremony for the winners of the 5th Competition (2007). Source: RGM



Prize-giving ceremony for the winners of the 9th Competition (2014). Source: RGM



Prize-giving ceremony for the winners of the 8th Competition (2011). Source: RGM

The competitions also attract the attention of the social communication media, a platform that has been exploited by Save the Children, the RGM and the mayors themselves to reaffirm the municipal responsibility in relation to children's rights.



Transferring the initiative to new local authorities

The investment experience depends to a great extent on the mayors, who exercise their functions for a period of four years (this changed to five years in 2013) and can be re-elected by the citizens in their municipalities. In this sense, the RGM has made an effort to transmit the experience from one generation of mayors to the next. One of most successful experiences in this respect has been encouraging the outgoing authorities to pass their membership of the RGM on to the incoming ones, motivating them to continue participating.

The year 2000 saw the initiation of meetings with mayoral candidates to which both the authorities concluding their term of office and the candidates are invited. The outgoing authorities present the work carried out during the previous period, inviting the candidates to commit themselves to being part of the RGM and to take children into account in their work. For their part, children get to present their demands and proposals to the candidates. These meetings were held for the fourth time (2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012) in the context of the 2012 municipal elections.

Assessing municipal efforts to invest in children in relation to the municipalities' capacities

There is diversity among Nicaraguan municipalities. Some have greater resources, while others depend to a large extent on the national transfers as their collecting capacity is limited by the economic conditions of their population and the development of their productive resources.

Municipal child-investment efforts cannot therefore be assessed by the net amount of resources allocated in the municipal budget; they have to be assessed by how much this income represents in percentage terms, as this is a more reliable indicator when it comes to assessing the level of effort and commitment of each municipality in relation to the implementation of child rights.

It is not a question of the amounts, but rather the percentages they invest in accordance with their own capacities. In fact, it is the small mayor's offices that have won the investment competitions because they have demonstrated that despite having limited resources, they make an effort to invest more in children. -Isaac Travers, deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

Experience has shown that, generally speaking, the municipalities that make the most effort to increase the resources they assign for the implementation of children's rights are those with the most limited economic capacity. It is therefore important to recognise those efforts, highlighting the fact that investment in children is more linked to the willingness of the authorities and the technical capacities of those participating in the planning process than to the level of development of the municipalities.



Transferring experiences at the country and Central American level using the peer-based methodology

Sharing experiences among peers (municipal governments, municipal councils for child and adolescent affairs, child councils) within a country or among countries is an attractive and effective mechanism for sharing successful child-investment practices and learning from the experiences of others.

Save the Children has fostered the holding of meetings of municipal governments, child councils and CMNAs with a view to peers sharing their experiences, good practices, lessons learned and reflection on topics related to investment in children.

The Network allowed us to share our experiences and learn from the other municipalities. There was a fraternal relationship in which we assessed who was doing more for the rights of children.
-Erwin de Castilla, deputy-coordinator of the RGM in the period 2001-2004

The RGM has enabled us to find out about the experiences of other municipalities, learn from what they have done and improve what we do, while at the same time sharing our experience with them.
-Lester Suárez Suárez, children's technician for the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa, 2013-2017

In the framework of the Central American Learning Circle, exchanges have been encouraged among countries through seminars (which foster sharing on specific topics), internships (on-site learning visits), and meetings (exchanging the experiences of different countries with the aim of sharing good practices). During these processes, the region's municipalities have shared their experiences and lessons learned, as well as contributing to the collective construction of conceptual and methodological knowledge related to investment in children.

The internships in the framework of the Central American Learning Circle allowed us to find out what the other countries are doing with respect to national investment in child rights and assess whether we could take up those experiences, while other countries learned from our experience.
-Loyda García, mayor of Tola and coordinator of the RGM in the period 2005-2008

Creating Child Attention Units/Offices

One initiative that has contributed to municipal investment in children is the creation of units or offices to address this population group in the municipalities and the designation of councillors or technical personnel to run them.



Covers of publications about systematization of experiences.

Source: RGM/ SC

The municipal technicians [who are in charge of the child attention units/offices] act as a liaison between the child government and the municipal government. They gather the demands of children and coordinate with the mayor's office to execute the assigned budget to satisfy those demands. -Oscar Gadea Tinoco, mayor of the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma, 2013-2017

These units or offices receive children's demands and then pass them on to the municipal authorities to be considered in their planning and budgeting exercises. The creation of these units/offices represents investment in children in itself because the administrative and operating costs they imply (materials, personnel) are assumed by the municipalities, which assign a budget allocation every year for their functioning.

They also contribute to the coordination of local stakeholders (including non-CMNA members) around the implementation of child rights, as representing the municipal government and knowing the demands of children they can directly negotiate with the stakeholders called upon to respond to those demands.



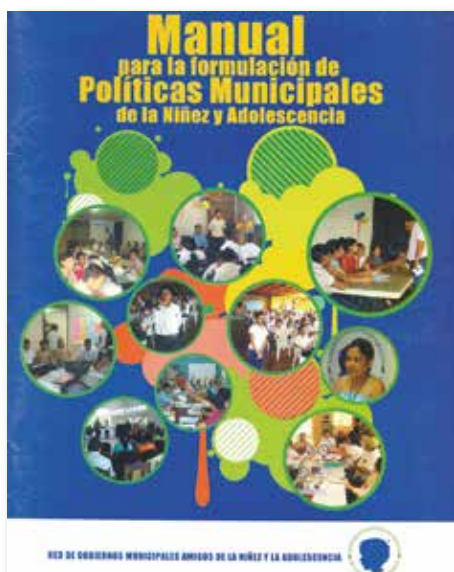
Documenting the experience and collective production of child investment-related instruments and materials

The experience has devoted considerable efforts to documenting its work in terms of knowledge production, methodological approaches and results obtained. This has been translated into multiple national and regional publications that are distributed free of charge among municipal authorities, local stakeholders, NGOs and the children themselves (in child-friendly formats).

The constant documentation has allowed evidence to be generated from the work carried out, while at the same time fostering the scaling up of the results by sharing the experiences of Nicaraguan municipalities in the national and Central American spheres.

Documentation has also allowed the building of extensive conceptual and methodological knowledge on investment in children's rights, resulting from processes of collective reflection and the daily practice of the municipal governments.

With the aim of sharing the lessons learned from the experience and providing the municipalities of the country and the region with certain reference points for developing their initiatives to municipalise child rights, manuals and guides have been documented, systematised and produced to develop processes that contribute to greater municipal investment in children. These include a manual for formulating municipal public policies and guides for child participation in municipal planning (development plans, budget consultation).



The publications that particularly stand out include the guides for the formulation of municipal policies, which serve as a reference for municipalities that are ready to build their visions of development for children, and the matrix for the verification of elements of the quality of municipal investment in child rights that has contributed to the self-evaluation and improvement of the local work. This matrix contains nine quality elements in the form of statements, each of which is disaggregated into different responses, providing a scale of five different options (we are not fine, fine, regular, very good and tremendous!), each with their respective points that contribute to an accumulative score.

*Cover of publication about municipal policies.
Source: RGM/SC*



Considering the diversity of local contexts

The whole municipal investment experience must take into consideration that the municipalities have diverse institutional contexts and dynamics. While some are more receptive to internalising their responsibilities through the implementation of child rights, the process proves more complex for others. Some have more resources to invest and others have very few. In addition, the visions of development they have in relation to children can be very different depending on the municipalities' urban or rural condition or ethnic identity.

Se deben respetar los distintos ritmos de trabajo de los municipios y sus capacidades, reconociendo The municipalities' different work rhythms and their capacities must be respected, recognising the good experiences without intending them to be taken on as a model to be imitated, but rather as a reference point that could help other municipalities if adjusted to their own reality and context.
-Pedro Hurtado Vega, Save the Children

The recognition of the diversity among the municipalities also implies that the experience of municipal investment should be guided by a local stakeholder that is both plural and representative. In Nicaragua's case, one of the experience's main stakeholders has been the RGM, which at one point brought together over two thirds of the country's 153 municipalities.

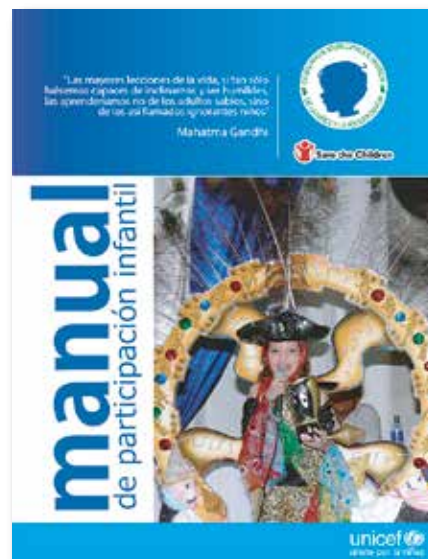
In its different periods, the RGM's National Committee was made up of mayors and deputy-mayors from the country's different geographical regions and from municipalities with different development conditions. This enriched the approach to investment in children through discussion based on a variety of perspectives, including those of urban and rural areas and the country's Pacific, northern, central and Caribbean regions.

Promoting children's participation in defining their investment interests

To be of the required quality, municipal investment must respond to the demands of children. This implies that their active participation has to be fostered in the consultation and decision-making processes with respect to how and in what to invest.

Child participation in local development requires the design of methodologies that are different to those used with adults and spaces that foster participation in which children can freely express their opinions, build consensus and draw up proposals.

Multiple efforts have emerged during these years to promote children's participation. One prioritised aspect has been the identification of their investment demands for the implementation of their rights



Cover of publication on Child Participation. Source: RGM



It was promoted for children to influence the municipal governments, for them to express their demands and organise the local investment priorities in the town hall meetings, because what we adults want does not always coincide with the children's demands. -Maryan Ruiz, mayor of Tuma-La Dalia and coordinator of the RGM in the period 2009-2012

Child participation bodies (child councils/governments) have been established in more than 60 municipalities over a period of ten years, almost always elected through the direct and secret voting of children. Although they perform different functions, most of these councils or governments have helped transmit children's demands to the municipal authorities.

Linkage with universities and academic training processes

The municipal investment experience has been linked to the academic experience of the Central American University, which has been offering a Master's Degree in Social Policies and Children's Rights since 2007, with the fourth master's course currently underway.

The experience has influenced the incorporation of municipal investment-related issues into the master's degree curriculum. As a result, the subject of "municipal public policies" is currently being taught, covering the relationship between municipalities and children's rights, a rights-based focus in municipal planning and investment in children as a tool for achieving municipal co-responsibility for the fulfilment of child rights.

Participation in the master's programme has also been promoted for stakeholders from the RGM and municipalities, strengthening their personal capacities to contribute to institutional development with the aim of promoting and improving the quality of investment in children.

The master's degree, which has been supported by Save the Children, has also been developed as a privileged space for the dissemination and sharing of information on investment in children, particularly the investment studies and the methodological tools for guiding the formulation of municipal public policies and local planning processes.



VI. DEFICIENCIES AND CHALLENGES

Although it has achieved important advances related to the municipal commitment to children's rights, the experience faces the challenge of overcoming a series of deficiencies that to a greater or lesser degree have limited the purpose of increasing investments in child rights and improving the quality of those investments.

The following is a description of the main deficiencies and challenges:

Few participation spaces and deficiencies in their quality

Although children's participation has been promoted in the municipal sphere, the opportunities for them to meet, organise and express their opinions on matters that affect them remain very limited, as are the spaces in which they can present their demands.

Consultations with children often only take place in the framework of the approval of the municipal investment projects proposed by the RGM, the formulation of municipal policies for children and other specific consultations.

Many of the participation processes have also been limited to children with schooling or with experience in civil or party-based organisations. Those who live in rural areas, have disabilities or are excluded from the education system have fewer opportunities of being consulted about their demands and of participating in bodies in which they can present those demands to the authorities.

The challenge is to advance towards ongoing participation that does not depend on external action and that is institutionalised (recognised as a right) and inclusive (involves children from urban and rural areas, from different indigenous populations and ethnic groups and with disabilities, without any social, religious or party-based distinctions).

The young people that participated in the focus group (who during their childhood were members of child councils and displayed leadership qualities) stated that there are now fewer opportunities to participate:

They used to consult with children from the municipality to see what their demands were, but that doesn't happen anymore because what is going to be invested in now comes established in the budget. -Harry Somarriba Treminio, youngster from the municipality of Tipitapa

There is currently a political willingness to support children, but in previous years it was the children that decided what they wanted, what needs they felt they had, through a town hall meeting. We were making quite a lot of progress in the consultations, but this work has been waning. Despite the good will of the mayor, we no longer have the chance for children to decide what is going to be invested in, because it's now already decided what the municipal budget is going to be used for... [...]. 22-year-old Hugeth Sánchez Martínez from the municipality of Tisma



In this context, the challenge is to promote children's participation in the current municipal planning processes.

Adultist formalisms in child participation spaces

The child participation spaces established in the municipalities for children to express their opinions and demands follow adultist models with formal and top-down structures (councils/ governments) that are often removed from children's natural dynamics, which tend to be more spontaneous and horizontal.

It is still a serious challenge to get the local authorities and stakeholders to respect and recognise the different expressions of child organisation, encouraging children to participate naturally in more dynamic spaces that are closer to their reality and based on their own interests.

Responding to this challenge requires greater investment to implement awareness-building processes with adults and support children in the definition of their own forms and dynamics of organisation and participation.

The need to document the impact of municipal investment on children's lives

The experience has been very successful in terms of assessing the amount of economic resources earmarked by the municipalities for the implementation of child rights, but no methodologies have been designed to explore the impact the municipalities' investments have on children's lives. There are also challenges in terms of establishing the number of children that directly benefit from the municipalities' investments, as well as their ages, sex and where they live. This limitation affects the planning processes and could generate inequities in the exercising of their rights (privileging certain groups and concealing others) and lead to the duplication of efforts.

There is also a need to document the impact of the investments in greater depth, in areas such as the relationship between the improvement of education and sanitary infrastructure, children's learning and the prevention of diseases.

Anecdotal evidence appears to indicate a correspondence between the public policy formulation and implementation processes and an improvement in children's quality of life. However, it is not possible to establish this relationship due to a lack of information.

This deficiency limits the capacity to reflect on the intervention's impact in terms of generating positive and lasting changes for children and improving the way those changes are practiced in an ongoing way.



Documenting how the municipalities use their public policies, plans, projects and budgets

Almost a third of the country's municipalities have a policy for children that has been published and disseminated at the local level. However, it is not known to what extent these policies are being used to guide the municipal planning process and no relationship can therefore be established between increased investment in child rights and the implementation of these policies.

The results of the consultation with mayors and deputy-mayors that took on coordination posts in the RGM during the periods 2000-2004 and 2005-2009 appear to indicate that the policies tend to be more observed during the period of the municipal government that approves them and that changes in the municipal authorities (the consecutive re-election of mayors was not permitted before 2012) affected continuity in the implementation of the policies.

The challenge remains of exploring the municipalities' practical use of the policies they approve and how they are considered in the municipal planning processes and in the decisions taken by their authorities. It is also necessary to know to what extent the child policies are known by all children and if they use those policies to articulate their demands.

In this sense, designing methodologies for the participatory evaluation of the public policies remains a challenge. To date, there is no knowledge of any processes for evaluating municipal policies.¹⁰

Lack of institutionalisation of processes

Over the years a large number of technical staff from the mayor's office and members of the municipal governments, including mayors, have participated in experience sharing activities and multiple training actions. All of these efforts—organised by the RGM, the CMNAs and CODENI and supported by Save the Children and other organisations—have helped generate changes among the public officials involved with a view to them considering themselves child rights duty bearers. However, the reality is that a good part of these human resources are no longer in the mayor's offices or currently have other functions unrelated to the issue of children. Furthermore, the new human resources assigned have not participated in processes of this nature because the municipalities do not promote them off their own backs. This situation has limited the continuity of the processes, eroding their institutionalization.

Capacity building on planning and investment with a child-rights focus cannot be limited to the initiative of the RGM or any other organisation or association of municipalities. These efforts need to be assumed and institutionalised by the municipalities, which is another top-priority challenge.

¹⁰For 2013 the RGM had planned to support evaluative processes, but the change in relations with the municipalities hindered continuity in this respect.



It is also necessary to institutionalize accountability in relation to investment in child rights. Although the municipal budgets are public and can be consulted on government websites, their contents do not provide information that allows the identification of direct investment in children, such as how much is invested, in whom, and who benefits (disaggregated by age, sex, and the area where they live). The reports on municipal investment depend on the initiative of the RGM and SC, so the municipalities need to take on their responsibility to be accountable to children regarding their actions aimed at achieving child rights.

The RGM promoted the design, creation and implementation of a system for monitoring the municipal budgets, for which personnel from more than 80 municipalities were trained, but since 2013 most of the municipalities have stopped updating their records. This is relevant because to a large extent the sustainability of investment in child rights and the ongoing improvement of its quality depend on the monitoring of that investment and the capacity to share the results and mobilize proposed improvements.

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Save the Children and the RGM have played an important role in helping to highlight the municipalities' responsibilities in relation to child rights, stress the central importance of investment to achieve them, and increase the amount of resources earmarked for that purpose.

The development of this experience has involved a series of elements that are considered to have been essential for the attainment of its objectives, including:

- ☞ The creation of: the RGM as a local stakeholder made up of and coordinated by municipal authorities with the aim of promoting investment in child rights; and its technical team, which accompanies the municipalities.
- ☞ The participatory definition of the experience's objectives and lines of action, as well as the definition of a conceptual framework for a common understanding of the meaning of direct investment in children and its quality requirements.
- ☞ The implementation of combined actions to build the awareness of municipal authorities and strengthen technical capacities for planning with a child rights focus.
- ☞ The establishment of synergies with municipal bodies (CMNAs) that coordinate the municipal response for achieving child rights.
- ☞ The promotion of municipal public policies as local planning tools for the fulfilment of child rights; and the production of methodological guidelines for their formulation.



- ☞ The promotion of child participation and the creation of local spaces for children to express their ideas, demands and proposals and participate in municipal planning.
- ☞ The implementation of specific municipal investment projects in which municipal authorities experience consulting their investments with children, who in turn organize to decide in what and where to invest.
- ☞ The production of studies on municipal investment in children that allowed the establishment of a baseline on the resources the municipalities earmark for the fulfilment of child rights and periodic evaluations of advances made in this respect.
- ☞ Participation in national and regional arenas to share the experience, reflect on the methodological processes involved and promote scaling up the results.



Sharing of experiences between municipalities (Dec. 2014). Source: RGM

These elements have helped the experience attain its purpose of increasing municipal investment in children, supporting the improved quality of the investments made and incorporating child participation dynamics into municipal planning.

After 20 years of the experience being implemented, municipal investment in children is a prevailing issue on both the child-rights municipalization and local development agendas. Although the local authorities and stakeholders have made a great deal of progress in terms of understanding themselves to be co-responsible for the implementation of children's rights, there is still a need to promote efforts to realise that commitment in the form of greater assignment of resources for direct investment in children.



Although the municipalities are increasing the economic resources they assign to the social sector (by law they must now earmark specific percentages to health and education), there is a need to promote this greater availability being translated into direct investments for children.

It is also necessary to continue generating evidence on the relationship between municipal investments for the implementation of child rights and their impact on children's lives, as well as the relationship between public policies and the municipal planning process.

Despite the relevance of continuing to promote municipal investment in children, the RGM, which has been a key protagonist in this experience, is now facing serious limitations in terms of establishing coordination with most of the country's municipalities.

The RGM will have to take on new work strategies, exploring different possibilities for continuing to contribute to municipal investment in children.

Despite the advances, there is a need to continue strengthening the linkage between the municipal and national spheres. This involves working on the synergy between national and municipal policies with a view to improving the efficiency of the use of the resources invested in child rights, encouraging complementarity among the efforts promoted by the municipal governments and the national government.

The experience has helped the municipalities improve their positioning as child-rights duty bearers, but it is a responsibility they share at differentiated levels with the central government, making it necessary to establish consensus for funding the implementation of child rights and to organise local priorities in relation to national ones, and vice versa.

It is also necessary to continue promoting reflection on the quality of the municipal investments in children, encouraging the municipalities not only to invest more, but also to do so with greater quality. In this sense there is a need to design and/or review tools that allow the municipal authorities to plan their investments and systematically evaluate their quality, with the participation of all the local stakeholders, including children.

Child participation must continue to be a central part of the experience, fostering the participation and leading role of children in the local development processes. This implies maintaining the spaces for ongoing participation in the municipal sphere (both those exclusively for children and those for interaction with adults), recognition and support for their different forms of organisation, and the strengthening of strategies that allow progress to be made towards more real, systematic, effective and inclusive child participation.



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Annexes

People consulted in the systematisation process

I.a Stakeholders from the Network of Municipal Governments interviewed

Name	Post
Erwin de Castilla Urbina	Mayor of the municipality of Juigalpa, 2001-2004 National deputy-coordinator of the RGM, 2001-2004
Loyda García Obando	Mayor of the municipality of Tola, 2005-2008 National coordinator of the RGM, 2005-2008
Isaac Travers Zeledón	Deputy-mayor of the municipality of Chinandega, 2005-2008 National deputy-coordinator of the RGM, 2005-2008
Salvador García	Mayor of the municipality of San Marcos, 2005-2008 RGM National Committee, 2005-2008
Maryan Ruiz	Mayor of the municipality of El Tuma-La Dalia, 2009-2012 National coordinator of the RGM, 2009-2012
Janeth del Carmen Castillo Medal	Executive Director of the RGM, 2007-to date
Oscar Gadea Tinoco	Mayor of the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma, 2013-2017
Manuel Antonio Zelaya Meneses	Mayor of the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa, 2013-2017
Karen Mabelkia Álvarez Juárez	Deputy-mayor of the municipality of Mulukukú in the Northern Caribbean Autonomous Region, 2013-2017
Juan José Jaime Duarte	Mayor of the municipality of Muelle de los Bueyes, 2013-2017
Luis Hervin Ramírez Gutiérrez	Mayor of the municipality of Waslala, 2013-2017
Damaris Castro Jarquín	Children's technician for the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma
Lester Suárez Suárez	Children's technician for the municipality of San Francisco de Cuapa
Gary Contreras Gil	Children's technician for the municipality of Muelle de los Bueyes



I.b Other stakeholders interviewed

Name	Post
Ana Lucía Silva	Child protection specialist, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
Enrique Pilarte	Former national liaison, National Movement of Municipal Commissions for Child and Adolescent Affairs
María de Jesús Gómez	Executive Secretary, Coordinating Body for NGOs Working with Children and Adolescents (CODENI)
Pedro Hurtado Vega	Coordinator of the Child Rights Governance Programme, Save the Children in Nicaragua

I.c Participants in the focus group with children and young people

Name	Participation body they represent
Osleydi Rodríguez Urbina	Member of the child council of the municipality of Mulukukú
Hugett Sánchez Martínez	Social promotion area of the Tisma Municipal Mayor's Office
Harry Somarriba Treminio	Representative of the child council of the municipality of Tipitapa
Adriel Esaú Alfaro	Member of the child council of the municipality of Santa María de Pantasma
Luis Carlos González	Technical adviser of the Municipal Commission on Child and Adolescent Affairs of the municipality of Granada



Save the Children



Participants in annual assembly of the Network of Child-Friendly Municipal Governments (November 29, 2012). Source: RGM

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