

# **PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: AN INDISPENSABLE FACTOR FOR A BETTER MUNICIPAL INVESTMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA**



Central American Learning Circle  
on Children's Rights and Local Development

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## INTRODUCTION

In May 2016, the Central American Learning Circle on Children's Rights and Local Development convened to a Central American Seminar of Children and Adolescents in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, under the slogan "Participation of children and adolescents: an indispensable factor for a better municipal investment in Central America".

Adolescents, youth and adults representing organizations from the Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua Chapters exchanged experiences and reflected on the challenges and good practices related to the direct involvement of children and adolescents in municipal investment processes for the fulfillment of their rights.

As result of the debate and consensus reached among children, adolescents and adults, this document was developed. It contains key elements based on their own experience in achieving quality municipal investment for children and responds to the fulfillment of their rights.

Validated and enriched by 120 children and adolescents from 3 Central American countries, we publish this booklet with the intention of helping improve investment in children and adolescents at the municipal level, thus favouring compliance and full exercise of their rights.

*Central American Learning Circle  
on Children's Rights and Local Development*



## BACKGROUND

Created in November 1999, the Central American Learning Circle on Children's Rights and Local Development is a non-formal, horizontal space, self convened and self-guided for reflecting, sharing and learning.

People from Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama) participate in their personal capacity or on behalf of institutions and organizations. More than 150 people have participated. The commitments and activities of the Circle revolves around two main areas: 1) Children and adolescents as subjects of rights, and 2) Local development. The goal is to establish a connection between both areas and support the fulfilment of children's rights in municipalities of Central America. From this perspective we also aim to contribute to Central American integration.

By searching for new ways of sharing and learning to make these rights a reality, the Circle has convened and organized five large meetings in its 17 years of existence where representatives from more than 250 municipalities have participated with municipal government delegations, children, adolescents, organizations, networks, associations and cooperation agencies.

- In the First Central American Meeting held in February 2002 in El Salvador, under the slogan "Children and Adolescents, subjects of local development", 153 people from 54 municipalities participated.
- In the Second Meeting held in December 2004 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, under the slogan "Investment in Children and Youth: A National Priority", 180 people from 44 municipalities participated.
- In the Third Meeting held in December 2000 in Managua, Nicaragua, combining the two previous themes under the slogan "Investment and Participation of Children and Adolescents Guarantee Local Development", 205 people from 51 municipalities participated, including the deputy chair of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- In the Fourth Meeting on Quality Municipal Investment in Children and Adolescents, held in November 2008 in Retalhuleu, Guatemala, 201 people from 65 municipalities participated.
- In the Fifth Meeting on Public Policies and Municipal Budgets: Tools for Compliance of Children and Adolescents Rights, held in October 2010 in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, 179 people from 69 municipalities participated.

The Central American Learning Circle have also organized six discussion seminars with mayors and other local players, as well as exchanges among municipalities from different countries for sharing good experiences in municipal investment, municipal policies and child participation. The meetings,



seminars and exchanges are forums for sharing and learning experiences to promote full exercise of children's rights and the participation of children and adolescents in diverse local development processes in Central America.

These meetings and seminars have produced outputs and publications, such as

- **“Central American Guide for Municipal Policymaking for Children and Adolescents** (August 2009)
- **Proclamations by Municipal Governments of Central America in favor of Children's Rights** (December 2006, November 2008 and October 2010)
- **“Contributions for Improving Investment in Children and Adolescents, and Child Participation in the Municipalities of Central America”** (July 2011), which was also produced in a child-friendly version.
- **“Children's Rights and Local Development in Central America: a necessary link”**. Systemisation of experiences and lessons in 1999-2007 (May 2008) and 1999-2012 (June 2012).
- **“Municipal Coordination for Children's Rights in Central America”** (August 2015)
- **“Participation of children and adolescents: an indispensable factor for a better municipal investment in Central America”**. This material which is the result of the seminar held in May 2016.

Currently, it is difficult to find a Central American municipality that does not know about the importance of municipal investment in children and is not doing something about it.

Although not yet a majority, more municipalities are developing plans, policies and budgets that take into account the views of children and adolescents. This leads to better decisions and improves the quality of investment in children. It leads to a better quality in their lives.



## BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Municipalities are a closest public space for children and also a most appropriate environment to develop their full potential and exercise their citizenship. Along this line, various experiences developed in the Central American countries promote direct participation of children and adolescents in municipal investment processes for the fulfillment of their rights. These processes have been considered key elements to improve the quality of municipal investment.

According to estimates, children and adolescents represent more than 50% of the total population of Central America. This data indicates this is an opportune time to promote strategies aimed at sustainable human development. Municipal investment in children is a key strategy for achieving development goals and objectives.

In the past 20 years, many municipalities of Central America have witnessed multiple forms of participation by children and adolescents in building their own citizenship and contributing to municipal development. We have seen hundreds of municipal policies, plans, projects and budgets drawn up with the direct and propositional participation of children and adolescents and enriched with their vision, opinions and concrete proposals.

Central American children, adolescents and youth have used different forms of expression and organization to communicate their demands, ideas and proposals to decision-makers. Some of these have been town meetings, surveys, consultative councils, municipal governments involving children and adolescents, clubs, groups of interest, congresses, assemblies, movements and children organizations.



**In the search for effective municipal budget allocations that directly benefit children and adolescents, some Central American countries have recently enacted laws for allocating funds. In the case of Guatemala, not less than 0.50% of the municipal budget, and in the case of Nicaragua, 22% of the municipal budget, under the following definitions: 5% for health, 5% for education, 7% for risk management, and 5% for water and sanitation.**

**Promoting municipal investment has undoubtedly generated a more fluid dialogue between children, adolescents and municipal authorities. However, children and adolescent organizations indicate there have been some setbacks in this dialogue in recent years.**



## **FACTORS FAVORING PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS FOR BETTER INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN**

In addition to sharing a close geographical area, Central American countries have lived experiences that favour and generate better investment. Among them:

The will of a growing number of municipal governments to promote children's rights and open spaces for child participation.

The accompaniment of institutions and organizations knowledgeable in this topic that facilitate participation of children and adolescents in municipal investment and disclose information.

The knowledge that authorities have about the situation facing children when they allow children and adolescents to produce information from their own perspective.

The approval of instruments favourable to children and adolescents, such as policies, agendas, projects, budgets and municipal ordinances and enriched by children and adolescents.

Short and long-term planning and management mechanisms in place in the municipalities to fulfill the rights of the child, taking into account the opinions of children and adolescents.

The institutionalisation of spaces, mechanisms and bodies formed by children and adolescents that contribute to municipal affairs and decision making, such as municipal governments integrated by children and adolescents, town meetings, consultations, surveys and congresses, among others.

The formation of new leaderships by civil society organisations, particularly by children and adolescents.







## FACTORS LIMITING PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS FOR BETTER INVESTMENT IN CHILDREN

Although progress in investment in children with the participation of children and adolescents is recognized, we also identify some limiting factors, such as:

- ⊖ Authorities know little about the rights of the child and are very adult centered. It is difficult for authorities to keep and share up-to-date information on children.
- ⊖ In some countries, municipal governments have difficulties in implementing projects prioritized by children due to restrictions in the national planning system.
- ⊖ In many cases, those who are familiar with the law, ignore the reality faced by children and adolescents and prefer to invest in things that are not so necessary.
- ⊖ Many municipal authorities lack a methodology for direct investment in children and adolescents.
- ⊖ There are few financial resources from municipal governments for children and adolescents.
- ⊖ Many municipalities do not assign people to give follow-up to the proposals made by children and do not have offices about childhood.
- ⊖ In some countries, the ruling party controls participation spaces and partisan interests influence them.
- ⊖ In some countries, municipalities that do not belong to the ruling party do not receive transfers of funds in due time and form.
- ⊖ Scarce participation of State institutions in activities aimed at fulfilling the rights of the child.
- ⊖ Municipalities and central government institutions lack mechanisms for evaluating investment in children.







- ☹ Lack of interest in hearing our voices. Do not listen to our opinions or demands.
- ☹ Decision-makers are insensitive to the demands of children and adolescents.
- ☹ New municipal governments are not aware of the progress made by the previous government.
- ☹ Lack of information on investment in children.
- ☹ Children and adolescents have few spaces where we can actually participate.
- ☹ The economic constraints faced by our families sometimes affect our participation in activities for making proposals.
- ☹ Children and adolescents also affected by the lack of public transport between communities, mistreatment and poor service provided.
- ☹ Another reason is fear of street gangs and violence.
- ☹ Little participation of civil society organisations in projects benefiting children and adolescents.
- ☹ Some NGOs have an adult centered vision and only support us when they have projects and resources.
- ☹ Other NGOs want to take over the work carried out with children and adolescents. Their only interest is meeting goals and then they leave.





## ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS FOR BETTER MUNICIPAL INVESTMENT

- ✓ “We have contributed to civil society empowerment to later demand fulfillment of our rights”.
- ✓ “Allocation of budget lines to implement municipal policy for children and concrete actions for fulfillment of the rights of the child.
- ✓ “Creation of a municipal office for children, adolescents and youth in some municipalities”.
- ✓ “Recognition and institutionalisation of participation spaces and mechanisms for children and adolescents by the municipality”.
- ✓ “Presentation of our proposals to decision makers and their approval by the government/ municipal corporation”.
- ✓ “More children, adolescents and youth are now participating”.
- ✓ “The organization of exchanges of experience with other children and adolescents on investment and fulfilment of our rights”.
- ✓ “We have learned to prioritise things. We express what we have learned. We are no longer shy and we are more participatory”.
- ✓ “We learned how to participate in municipal affairs, who we should talk to in order to be heard. We learned to organize with others in order to be more effective.
- ✓ “Collective construction of municipal policies and projects for children and adolescents”.
- ✓ “Public launching of municipal policies and inauguration of projects with creative actions”.
- ✓ “Incorporation of our proposals into municipal plans and projects based on an institutional framework, agendas, policies, diagnoses and investment documents.”
- ✓ “Improvement and construction of schools and parks”.
- ✓ “We have more knowledge about our rights”.
- ✓ “NGOs that support children and adolescents and take our opinions into account.”
- ✓ “We have learned to make proposals and also to make decisions”.
- ✓ “We have also learned that investing in children is not an expenditure”.





## GOOD PRACTICES

-  In many municipalities and locations, we are organized in children councils and various forms of organisation.
-  We participate in town meetings with the municipal authorities where we present our proposals.
-  After broad consultations on a specific topic, we elect our representatives to present our proposals.
-  Before we delve into a specific topic, we prepare ourselves and we receive training on that topic.
-  We have participated in drafting child agendas, municipal policies for children, budgets, and proposals for plans and projects through creative processes, including participatory consultations and consensus building.
-  Some of the creative processes have been artistic festivals, walks, rights fairs, radio programmes, forums and press conferences, with the objective of incorporating our proposals into municipal plans and budgets.
-  In some municipalities, the Municipal Commission on Children is a space for cooperation among social and institutional actors related to childhood, adolescence and youth. Children and adolescent representatives participate in some of them.



## LESSONS LEARNED

- 😊 The participation of children and adolescents is not achievable from one day to the next, it is a gradual process that begins with small mobilisations in favour of their rights.
- 😊 To be effective, participation requires systematic information for children and adolescents and constant and up-to-date training for their representatives.
- 😊 These long-term processes require specific goals by phases.
- 😊 To influence municipal investment, it is necessary to maintain systematic positive and propositional interaction with the municipal government.
- 😊 The participation of children and adolescents begins by identifying what they like, what motivates them and what they identify themselves with until contributing broader actions with which they are convinced.
- 😊 We must seek methodologies and creative forms to stand out and influence decision makers. It is not simple propaganda.
- 😊 When there is positive communication between civil society and local authorities regarding children and adolescents, the tendency is to change minds and actions in favour of the rights of the child.
- 😊 If we really want to influence investment in children and adolescents, we must strengthen their participation at the grassroots level, have specific proposals, develop them together, and present them in coordination with other social actors in the municipality.
- 😊 A sensitized municipality in favour of the rights of the child is half of the journey.
- 😊 By investing today in children and adolescents, we will achieve better citizenship now and in the future.
- 😊 The participation of children and adolescents stimulates value education, positive coexistence in the community, camaraderie, respect and discipline.



## CHALLENGES LYING AHEAD

Establishing coordination with different organizations, institutions and social movements in the territory.

Improving the design and planning consultation meetings and spaces to increase representativeness and leading roles of children and adolescents.

Supporting our proposals on municipal investment with the Resolution of the UN Human Rights Council and General Comment 19 of the Human Rights Committee, both on investment in children.

Documenting and disseminating experiences.

Searching for advocacy spaces that are more effective.

Keep at bay institutional protagonism.

Strengthening mechanisms for assessing policies, plans, projects and budgets.

Maintaining systematic sensitisation and education processes as a strategy to promote municipal investment in children.

Working on generational replacement.

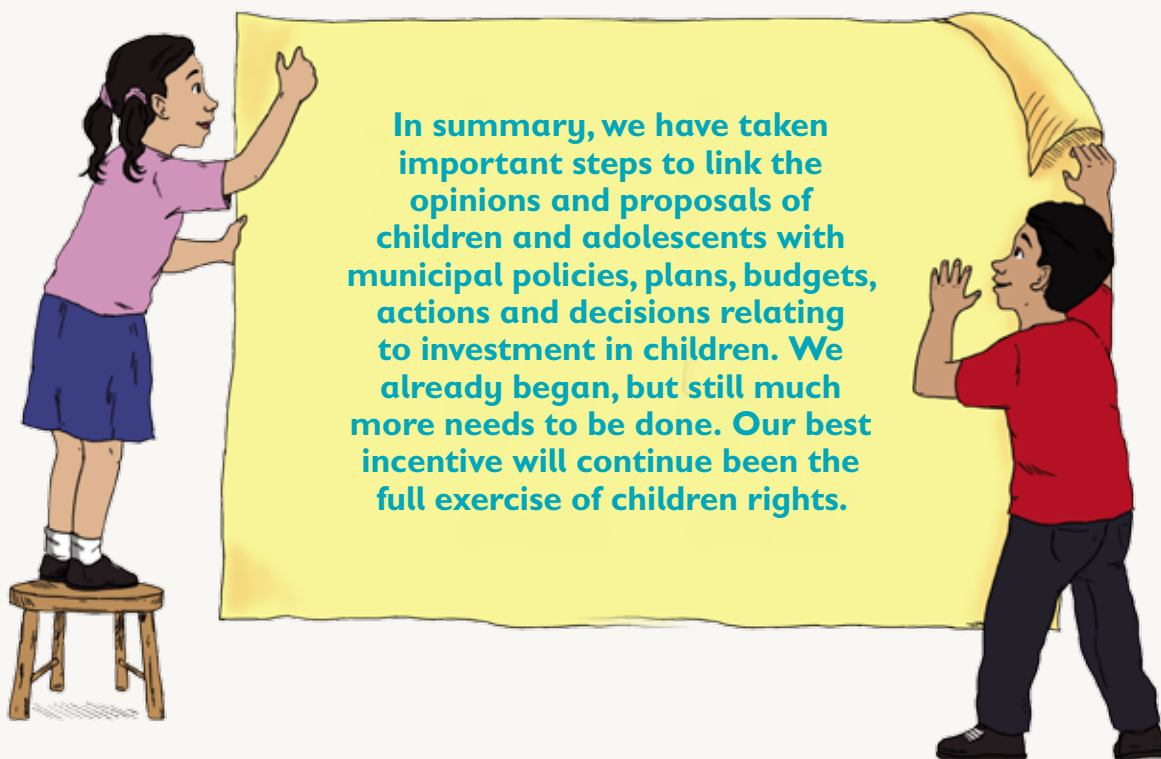
Replicating good practices and learnings.





## MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Participation of children and adolescents in municipal investment processes is a key element to ensure that the voice, opinions, priorities and interests of children and adolescents are incorporated into municipal plans and budgets.
- Municipal policies, agendas and specific projects on children and adolescents have been the main institutional means for promoting investment for fulfillment of their rights.
- Many municipalities in Central America have increased budget allocations for the benefit of children and adolescents, but in most cases without institutionalising them.
- Participation of children and adolescents in municipal investment processes still depends on the initiative of civil society organisations, including children and adolescent organisations. Integrating children and adolescents in municipal management systems is necessary.







## Participants at the Sixth Central American Seminar of Local Actors

**“Participation of children and adolescents: an indispensable  
factor for a better municipal investment in Central America”.**

(Tegucigalpa, May 2016).



From left to right: María Esther Manzanares, Elías Villalta, Adriel Esaú Alfaro Centeno, Lucía Aguilera. Standing from left to right: Alexa Orellana, Martha Lily Lovo, Marvin Moreira, Janeth Castillo, Elmer Fuentes, Mariano Planells, Andrés Alfredo Morales, Ligia Mencia, Debora Ixcompame, Pedro Hurtado Vega, María Marta Bonilla, Shira de León, Jose Aguilar, Linda Ferris and Marco A. Pérez, Wilmer Vásquez, Doris García. Not appearing in the photograph: Alma Salmerón, Rosy Quintanilla and Carlos Torres.

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