

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS RELATED TO CHILD RIGHTS IN THE MUNICIPALITIES OF CENTRAL AMERICA



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

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2017, the Central American Learning Circle on Children's Rights and Local Development convened a seminar in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, about **"The role of civil society organizations in the municipalities of Central America."**

Representatives from organizations and different municipalities from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica shared experiences and reflected on the challenges and good practices related to the current role of civil society organizations (CSOs) working within the complex conditions of Central America's municipalities.

This document is the product of both debate and consensus, and contains key elements emerging from the experiences of actors who are working to generate conditions that favor the exercise of child and adolescent rights.

We publish it with the intention of helping CSOs to work more effectively in promoting and defending the rights of more than half of the population of Central America.

*Central American Learning Circle on
Children's Rights and Local Development
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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 18 years of existence where representatives from more than 250 municipalities have participated with municipal government delegations, children, adolescents, organizations, networks, associations and cooperation agencies.

- The First Central American Meeting held in February 2002 in El Salvador under the slogan "Children and Adolescents, subjects of local development", where 153 people from 54 municipalities participated.
- 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.
- 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.
- The Fourth Meeting on Quality Municipal Investment in Children and Adolescents, held in November 2008 in Retalhuleu, Guatemala, 201 people from 65 municipalities participated.
- 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 seven 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 have been 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”** (March 2017).
- 🚲 The present material, which is a product from the seminar held in June 2017.

Currently, it is difficult to find a Central American municipality that does not know about the direct relationship between the fulfillment of Child Rights and municipal development. Most of them are doing something about it.

In that work, CSO –from their diversity- have played and will continue playing a key role.



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Municipalities are the most accessible public arenas for children and adolescents, providing opportunities to develop their potential to exercise their citizenship and rights. Based on this idea, many social organizations in Central America have championed children's rights, playing a key historical role in legislative processes and in the development of public policies. Many of these organizations—large and small, urban and rural—have provided support to children and adolescents, facilitating dialogue between them and municipal authorities.

Without a doubt, many of the plans, policies, strategies, budgets and arenas that have been created in municipalities to favor children have been conceptualized or have received support from CSOs, but in recent years there have been indications of some setbacks. Let's talk more about this situation.

THE ROLE OF CSOs

- ① Facilitate, promote, and accompany processes and actions that support children's rights.
- ① Advise and counsel different sectors in promoting children's rights: guarantors, communities, families, and children and adolescents.
- ① Facilitate and demand arenas where children and adolescents can participate.
- ① Demand respect and protection for children and adolescents.
- ① Propose actions and projects that help insure children's rights.
- ① Work to influence budget allocations that support children's rights.
- ① Demand accountability.



Young people expressing their views



FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE ROLE OF CSOs

- ☺ Countries have legal and legislative frameworks in place that favor children's rights.
- ☺ Organizations have strategic institutional definitions, a serious work platform, and a long-range vision.
- ☺ When capacity building is prioritized by organizations if they are not satisfied with their effectiveness.
- ☺ When mechanisms, strategies and arenas for collaborating with guarantor institutions, including municipal governments (working groups, councils, committees, commissions) are promoted.
- When social innovations are sought.
- ☺ When municipal processes and rhythms are not dependent upon either the local or external contexts.
- ☺ When mechanisms and spaces exist that allow children and adolescents to participate.

FACTORS THAT LIMIT THE ABILITY OF CSOs TO FULFILL THEIR ROLE

- ☹ Institutional corruption.
- ☹ Indifferent state institutions.
- ☹ A political context dominated by party patronage.
- ☹ Favoritism, a disinterest in acting, and the imposition of agendas by municipal governments.
- ☹ Weak institutional capacities for monitoring compliance with public policies.
- ☹ Insufficient budget allocations for insuring children's rights.
- ☹ A weak and uncoordinated protection system for children and adolescents.
- ☹ CSOs attempting to assume the government's role.
- ☹ Civil society passivity in confronting the existing situation.
- ☹ Violence and citizen insecurity.
- ☹ Leadership is scarce and inadequate.
- ☹ Communities are not organized.



CIRCUMSTANCES AND FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE ROLE OF CSOs

- ✎ Multiple cases of corruption among government institutions.
- ✎ New immigration policies that affect thousands of Central Americans.
- ✎ Electoral periods that saturate public agendas and displace social issues.
- ✎ Violent acts that are covered by the media in a sensationalist manner that terrifies and intimidates the population.
- ✎ International cooperation funds allocated to the countries of the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador).
- ✎ Forced internal displacement due to violence.
- ✎ Proposals to toughen the sentences of convicted adolescents.

GOOD PRACTICES

- 👏 Supporting peer-to-peer training (children, adolescents and young adults training other children, adolescents and young adults).
- 👏 Respecting the initiatives of children and adolescents and their own forms of organizing.
- 👏 Availability of a platform that children and adolescents can use for consulting about projects.
- 👏 Protection Councils (Honduras).
- 👏 Systematic actions to build the capacities of CSOs.
- 👏 Decision-making based on analyzing evidence, and not circumstantial events.
- 👏 Supporting local policies that respond to the population's proposals and needs.
- 👏 Developing work in a coordinated manner with municipalities.
- 👏 Accompanying processes that raise awareness with mobilizations.
- 👏 Accompanying demands with concrete and feasible proposals.
- 👏 Coordinating work with various CSOs, based on common realities.
- 👏 Programmatically and institutionally unifying the work of various CSOs.



THE CHALLENGES THAT LIE AHEAD



Building collectively

Achievable (absolutely possible):

- ☺ Continue promoting the participation of children and adolescents in decision-making processes.
- ☺ Consult with children and adolescents about plans, projects and budgets aimed at insuring their rights.
- ☺ Continue actions focused on building citizenship and leadership.
- ☺ Train youth leaders.
- ☺ Empower civil society.
- ☺ Raise the awareness of municipal governments.
- ☺ Promote Programming with a Focus on Child Rights within our organizations.
- ☺ Provide training about topics of interest.
- ☺ Include mechanisms within our organizations that guarantee consultations with children and adolescents.
- ☺ Support the institutionalization of public policies and decisions that favor children's rights.
- ☺ Empower civil society.
- ☺ Raise the awareness of municipal governments.



Moderately Achievable (difficult but possible):

- 👉 Continue promoting legislative changes that favor children's rights.
- 👉 Promote Programming with a Focus on Child Rights among public institutions that operate in the municipalities and among municipal governments.
- 👉 Strengthen the position of children and adolescents as key actors in local development.
- 👉 Allocate budgets that are sufficient in terms of quantity and quality for insuring children's rights.
- 👉 Municipal governments inform the population about annual budgets and plans.

Very difficult to achieve at medium term:

- ☹️ Eradicate government corruption.
- ☹️ Public institutions provide transparent, up to date and accessible information.
- ☹️ Systematic accounting to children.

CONCLUSION

A long and winding road lies ahead in the effort to making children's rights a reality. Civil society organizations, including many types of social movements, have already played an important role promoting children's rights in the municipalities, and facilitating communication between children and adolescents and decision-makers.

Multiple challenges lie ahead that will not be easy to confront. There are no common rules applicable to all contexts, municipalities or countries. We must not be complacent; rather, we should be constantly searching for initiatives and new forms of organization, expression and communication. All with the goal of making children's rights a reality.



**Participants in the 7th
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