



Children first... organisation and recovery in Latin America

by Nidya Quiroz

Promoting the concept of children as owners of rights and as actors in their own development has been the challenge taken up by UNICEF in Latin America.

In addressing forced displacement in Colombia, for example, UNICEF has implemented a number of creative initiatives, with a rights perspective, that are being replicated in other parts of the world.

Breaking the cycle of violence

For more than 40 years Colombia has experienced armed conflict that, in a decade, has displaced more than two million people. 50% are children, the majority of whom have seen their parents killed, their homes destroyed and their neighbours massacred. Dysfunctions are clearly detectable in these displaced children: 80% show fear, cry, have nightmares, wet their beds, do not concentrate, have memory problems or are more dependent on adults. Many wish only to obtain a weapon, join a rebel group and take their revenge. Overcoming the impact

of conflict is necessary for the children's development and for building peace.

UNICEF therefore decided to prioritise education for peace, social mobilisation and the psychosocial recovery of affected children and adolescents in Colombia. It was agreed that it was essential to work with rights in a holistic manner; for example, to promote the organisation of displaced children (Article 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child) to voice their opinion on what affected them in their new situation (Article 13) and participate (Article 13) in their own psychosocial recovery (Article 23).

Displaced children and adolescents in conflict zones and camps chose to be peace builders, in spaces called 'territories of peace' - schools, families, municipalities. UNICEF and more than

400 other institutions¹ supported them and provided access to communications media so they could voice their ideas directly.

The programme is known as the Return of Happiness (*Retorno de la Alegria*) programme. It seeks to engage children, adolescents, parents, communities, teachers and social science professionals in mental health recuperation strategies. The methodology has been successfully used by UNICEF in countries such as Colombia, Mozambique, El Salvador and Venezuela during emergency operations after violent conflict or disaster.

The methodology involves adolescents in the emotional recuperation of children as a fundamental means to reconstruct the social network in communities affected by disasters. It includes games and recreational components with well-structured objectives as tools to achieve psychological and emotional recuperation in children, significantly increasing the quality of children's communication

and relational capacities. Equally, it incorporates families and schools as the therapeutic axis that promotes and supports the emotional recuperation of children.

Developing a culture of peace

The children promoted a wide range of activities in their schools. Providing training, motivation and stimulating material was sufficient to generate a wave of creativity that took them out of a culture of death and violence. They invented invented stories in which the wolf no longer ate the grandmother, they held art exhibitions on subjects of peace and tolerance, they developed conciliation skills, they held discussions on non-violence, they issued invitations to peace concerts, they reported mined areas for marking by the Red Cross, they supported the creation of fish-breeding ponds and they collected waste from banana plantations in Urabá for recycling and transformation into slabs and roof tiles for the huts of those displaced.

These activities were free but run to a set timetable and supported by adolescent supervisors. Day by day the children developed a culture of peaceful coexistence rather than violence. The institutions involved acknowledged the value of involving children in their programmes and taking them into account when planning. Little by little, a children's movement was built: the Children's Movement for Peace.²

After working in the Children's Movement for Peace, Juan, a displaced boy whose father and cousin were killed, decided not to take vengeance but to study law. María, another child who lived in one of the areas most affected by conflict, decided to study psychology. Cecilia and Isabel, one of whose schoolmates was killed, have found employment directing the Child Constructors of Peace process in one of the allied institutions.³

When armed groups approached the camps and suburbs for recruitment purposes, they found children and adolescents who knew what the right to life meant. Many children preferred to move to other municipalities rather than be recruited. Instead of learning to kill, the young people were now saying yes to peace. Many people asked, "What do you give them that the armed groups don't?" We answered, "Everything except the gun." UNICEF and its allies – principally the Church, which is the best ally for protecting the presence of UNICEF in the field – offered adolescents visibility and identification, gave them the tools for helping psychologically affected children, trained them, gave them status in the community, supported them so they could organise in groups and provided transportation subsidies when they travelled to help distant displaced populations.

The best example of the voluntary work of these children took place when they replicated their psychosocial recovery experience with other children affected by disasters, after

the earthquakes in Armenia and Colombia and the mudslides in Vargas in Venezuela.

Displaced Afro-Colombian children took the Return to Happiness methodology to these affected areas and, in a very short time, helped thousands of children through in-service peer training of young people in the Scouts and

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Red Cross. Through recreation and play, they were able to help children express their feelings and analyse the events that made them feel guilty. They used the same monkey puppets to facilitate the projection of fears by the children. The wooden vehicles that, together with the rag doll families, served in Colombia to recall displacement now served to recall the evacuation. The helicopters that attacked communities in Colombia were now used to tell how the victims of water and mud in Caracas were saved. The motorcycle that helped to narrate the attacks of paramilitary groups served to express the delivery of aid by the Red Cross.

Enabling organised adolescents and children to participate in humanitarian action for peace removes them from the danger of the spiral of violence. There is nothing of greater priority than tearing children from the hands of war.

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In 2001 UNICEF published *Out of War* by Sara Cameron, a dramatic account by ten young people in the Children's Movement for Peace in Colombia of their lives and their struggle for peace. ISBN 0-439-29721-4. \$15.95. See www.unicef.org/children-in-war/out-of-war/aboutbook.htm

1. Including the Red Cross Society, Boy Scouts, Redepaz, Pastoral Social (the Catholic Church), World Vision and Save the Children-UK.
2. The Children's Movement for Peace was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1998. See www.unicef.org/children-in-war/out-of-war/unicef.htm and www.unicef.org/initiative/p-colombia.htm.
3. Juan, María, Cecilia and Isabel are fictitious names used to protect the privacy of the children.

An adolescent boy from the Children's Movement for Peace conducts a Return to Happiness workshop, Quindío, Colombia.

