

Child participation in Cuba

October 2007

Since our arrival in Central America in 1974, Save the Children UK has contributed to the construction of a rights based framework, which has led to dramatic changes in the lives of children and young people.

This case study highlights our work in the Caribbean and Central America over the last five years and the changes we have inspired, and is a record of the lessons we have learned, the challenges we have identified and the recommendations we have for all those involved in development work and the defence of human rights, especially the rights of children.

Since the closure of our programme in the Caribbean and Central American (CARICA) in March 2007, the legacy of our work for children continues through the ongoing work of our dedicated partners throughout the region. This particular study focuses on child participation in Cuba.

The programme

Through a child participation focus, the Cuba programme succeeded in engaging key government entities at one end of the spectrum while developing sustainable youth leadership in risk management and disaster response at the grass roots. We also made advances in the promotion of environmental education and violence prevention with socially disadvantaged youths.

Our Umbrella Project involved eight counterparts in 11 environmental education and protection projects coordinated by the Centre for Environmental Information, Administration and Education (CIGEA).

We targeted social exclusion among disadvantaged youth through two projects: "Living Together Without Violence," which



Children working on recovering a beach in Cuba, benefiting from their environmental education, implemented by the Save the Children UK Umbrella Project

dealt with domestic violence, and "Barrio Kids," which carried out a variety of activities with disenfranchised youth in the Jesus María neighbourhood of Havana, Cuba.

Why we did it

We worked in Cuba because we felt that it was important to develop awareness raising and education about the environment and about disadvantage and exclusion in the context of a socialist economy. We found broad acceptance of our basic premises in this country, where child participation and children's rights are generally held in high regard.

What we did

The Umbrella Project involved more than 10,000 children and adolescents in environmental education projects and provided training on environmental issues to more

than 2,000 teachers. It also produced valuable educational materials, including books and an interactive CD. The project developed participatory methodologies for environmental education, including for disabled children. It resulted in the creation of spaces for dialogue between children and political powers, environmental groups, and other influential individuals. The project concluded with a participatory sustainability review, which was published and disseminated across the country.

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The programme also promoted and provided support for a review of Cuba's National Strategy for Environmental Education, contributing technical support for the inclusion of children's views to our main partner, the state environmental agency and national aquarium CIGEA/CITMA. The process empowered young people who had gained environmental experience through other projects, and will also aid in the consolidation of the island nation's educational strategy for environmental issues.

The first year of the programme's domestic violence project consisted of an in depth study of selected international research and of national statistics. A critical analysis of the information was conducted to provide a conceptual framework for further work. The national research collected departmental data from the past 15 years.

The second year of the project consisted of designing a methodology for addressing domestic violence, including diagnostic review, awareness raising, and skill development workshops and their evaluation. This methodology was then validated in schools and churches through their work with children. A component of the project that attempted to apply the methodology in rural communities via local citizens councils had to be abandoned due to difficulties keeping project coordinators in those areas.

The Barrio Kids Project spent a year training the different social actors who would be in charge of implementation. A broadly representative Project Administration Group was created and led by government social workers, who during the second year, set about giving workshops to disadvantaged children on child participation and children's rights. Publications linked to this project were well received by the Ministry of Education, where officials saw them as valuable pedagogical resources that could be applied in a variety of contexts.

Our partners

For the Umbrella Project we worked with the Centre for Environmental Information, Administration and Education (CIGEA) and the National Aquarium of Cuba.

The Living Together Without Violence Project involved the Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research (CIPS), and Barrio Kids was implemented by the Central Institute of Pedagogic Sciences (ICCP).

Results

Direct benefits to children

Children participating in the Umbrella Project showed a general improvement in academic performance. They enthusiastically greeted the many extracurricular activities promoted by the programme, and through them learned to identify and seek sustainable solutions to their problems. Participating children became active and gained influence in their communities, and even took their message to the media, boosting their communication skills and their self-confidence in the process.

Children also made improvements to their immediate environment through programme activities such as reforestation, recovery of beaches, and cleaning of school campuses and community grounds.

The Living Together Without Violence Project succeeded involving not just individual children, but families. This created a group dynamic that greatly facilitated the transfer of positive messages to the home. In this sense the children benefited from frank intra family discussion of adult behaviours that constitute child abuse, and from tips on creating a family environment that discourages violent forms of child-rearing. This project brought forward an issue that had not been the topic of much public discussion in the past.

The Barrio Kids Project created educational materials addressing social disadvantage from a children's rights perspective and made them available to primary and secondary schools in participating neighbourhoods. Participating teachers and principals reported improved working conditions and increased motivation by the process. Recreation centres in the community were also invigorated. The project benefited older children through workshops aimed at helping them identify vocational and occupational interests.

Impact on public policy

Save the Children UK's strategy in Cuba focused on facilitating the application of good policies. As a result, the ministries of Education and Environment embraced materials generated by the programme and the Ministry of Education endorsed methodology developed through the Umbrella Project as a model for replication in all coastal areas of the country. The national education system benefited from the generation of resources that were useful in the incorporation of environmental education into the curriculum. Teachers involved with the programme learned how to increase child and family participation in education, and also improved their knowledge of environmental issues and how to teach them. The programme's emphasis on child participation and children's rights also exposed our official entity partners to these issues.

Advances in Participation

The programme's decision to work through schools ensured a high degree of child participation. Children then took the lessons they learned and disseminated them within their communities. They were transmitted to official levels as well, extending youth participation far beyond the classroom. Teachers were given workshops on the use of participatory methodologies.

Networking

Initially, the programme sought to build networks within communities. The Umbrella Project's implementation of community strategies brought students together with teachers, local officials, community and civic leaders, and created new models for addressing common issues, while ensuring child participation. The Living Together Without Violence Project launched itself into communities by networking with schools and churches, again by using a participative approach. At the end of the projects the scope of networking was expanded through dissemination of results, methodologies, and lessons learned to members of Cuba's cultural and scientific communities and to government officials.

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Advances against discrimination

The Umbrella Project worked with the Museum of History and the National Aquarium in developing methodologies to include children with different disabilities in group activities. This aspect of the project was carried out under the slogan “We Laugh About Everything, Not At Anybody.” Boys and girls participated in equal numbers in all programme activities, and efforts were made to reach out to children living in the poorest urban and rural conditions that Cuba has to offer.

What we learned

The unique Cuban context – the high priority that government and society give to child participation and children’s rights, the government’s commitment to environmental issues, and the characteristics of Cuban political structures and education systems – created a supportive context for Save the Children UK’s programmes in Cuba.

Our own approach to programming was also helpful. National project partners noted the respectful and ‘horizontal’ way in which we approached them. All work, from needs-identification and project design to the training of the field workers, was done hand-in-hand with local stakeholders with the aim of increasing their capacity, not replacing

them. Involving children directly in our programmes, such as environmental education, rose awareness of the benefits of approaches with a focus on child participation.

Working with government partners in Cuba had its benefits and its limitations. One constraint arose from the lack of preparation of designated partners in terms of project planning and management. Also, as is the case in many developing countries, public officials tend to be overburdened. In the case of the Umbrella Project, the national programme co-ordinator had to manage 11 projects implemented by eight different institutions, in addition to the co-ordinator’s normal duties.

Working with government entities in Cuba facilitated access to the target population of children through their schools and held big benefits with regard to sustainability. The school is the cultural centre of the community, with the greatest power of convocation and organisation. Our decision to support structures and processes already in place, rather than begin new ones, proved critical. This capacity building approach, combined with the political will demonstrated by involved institutions and teaching staff, should enable processes initiated by the programme to continue long after our withdrawal.

Project research on domestic violence confirmed that this societal ill cuts across social class, race, religion and specific family structure. Our experience taught us that domestic violence cannot be addressed in terms of victim and aggressor, but rather should be approached from the broader perspective of the family as a complex system of human interactions within a determined socio-historical context.

We found it helpful to put forward a model of the democratic family, where everyone has rights and obligations, where all opinions are important, and where there are no privileges accorded to age or gender. This model encourages children’s concerns and needs to be listened to, ensuring children’s participation in their family environment and the decisions made within the family.

Environmental education was most successful where it contributed to the solution of real problems identified at the community level. Project activities got an added boost where they could establish operational links to political decision makers.

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Feedback:

If you have any comments regarding any of the issues highlighted in this case study or are interested in acquiring further information on “Child participation in Cuba” or any of our other work in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South East Europe region, please contact the LACMESEE Regional Office at lacmesees@savethechildren.org.uk

Learning case studies:

This case study is one of a wider series focusing on learning from experience in key areas of our programmes work. If you have ideas for topics we should examine in other learning case studies or any other comments please contact Gema Vicente at g.vicente@savethechildren.org