

Commercial sexual exploitation of children in Honduras

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 the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Honduras.

The programme

The commercial sexual exploitation of children programme consisted of supporting Honduran counterparts in the creation of both legal and operational frameworks to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of Honduran minors. The effort involved a broad range of citizens, from the community promoters and municipal child defenders of Honduras' North Coast, to the president of the country's Supreme Court.

At the policy level, Save the Children UK was the principle international backer of "Inter-institutional Commission Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Boys, Girls and Adolescents" (CICESC). The programme provided primary logistical



Key members of the Inter-institutional Commission Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Honduras attending a meeting at the Save the Children UK office in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

and technical support for the Commission's successful effort to draw up and initiate implementation of a National Action Plan against commercial sexual exploitation. With the support of Save the Children UK, the Commission also drafted and pushed for modernising penal code reforms. The programme also supported the Honduran National Police in the creation and training of its Division against child sexual abuse, trafficking and exploitation.

At the local level, the programme strengthened Municipal Children's Defenders offices in the capital, Tegucigalpa, in the North Coast area of Atlantida and in some of the most impoverished municipalities of mountainous and remote Western Honduras (Yamaranguila, Masaguara, Intibuca, La Esperanza, San Lorenzo, Nacaome and Sabanagrande). The programme-supported mapping of child exploitation routes had indicated a high incidence of crime in these areas, where the projects were implemented by our partners the Centre for Research and Promotion of Human Rights (CIPRODEH) and Save the Children Honduras.

Why we did it

The commercial sexual exploitation of children has a long history in Honduras, at least back to the "White Trade" of colonial times in which Europeans commonly exploited indigenous women and children. Our best estimates indicate that more than 10,000 boys and girls are victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Honduras. Analysis conducted at the programme's outset showed that the Honduran legal framework, pertinent institutions, and local mechanisms for the protection of children were weak and ineffective at dealing with the problem.

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The programme was inspired by the World Conferences of Stockholm and Yokohama (1996 and 2001/2002), which focused international attention on the complex issues of sexual abuse, commercial exploitation, and trafficking affecting millions of children around the world. Within the framework of the international Save the Children Alliance we took on responsibility for the specific sub-theme of commercial sexual exploitation of children. The initiative was brought to Honduras by Alliance members Save the Children UK, Save the Children Honduras and Save the Children Spain.

The following factors are associated with the existence of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Honduras and Guatemala:

- Dominance for reasons of age: adult-centric outlook
- Dominance for reasons of gender: machismo and the controlling power of the male
- Inequality that functions within the society for reasons of ethnicity, class and social status
- Generalised poverty and insecurity: money valued over human reason
- Lack of legal, institutional and social protection
- Violence and insecurity at all levels: the family, the community and society in general
- Lack of family education as regards sexuality
- Lack of family education about the integral and adequate formation of young boys and girls

What we did

Goals

The programme was able to achieve significant political impact at the institutional, legislative, and municipal levels. Our partners placed the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children on the national agenda and established a framework for addressing it.

Individuals from key institutions such as the National Police and Attorney General's Office sat down with national and international human rights experts and developed the National Action Plan against commercial sexual exploitation of children and ado-

lescents (ESCNNA). They then set about lobbying for the approval and the implementation of that plan.

One of the Commission's most important achievements was modernisation of the section of the Penal Code that deals with commercial sexual exploitation. It supported the creation of a sexual exploitation and trafficking division within the National Preventative Police and integrated a three-stage curriculum on this issue into all levels of Police Academy training.

Efforts to improve the attention given to victims of this terrible crime included the creation of community and municipal level networks in Atlantida and western Honduras. Humane procedures for the repatriation of minors who have fallen victim to international trafficking were validated and distributed to the proper authorities. In addition, the Inter-institutional Commission spearheaded a national awareness raising campaign which used the news media to raise public awareness of the gravity of commercial sexual exploitation in Honduras.

General activities

The programme supported complementary activities across a broad range of disciplines, including: participatory research; the identification and mapping of routes for the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents; lobbying of congress and political parties; diplomatic lobbying; the training of and sharing experiences among police and justice system operators; case studies; awareness raising with the public and public officials; institutional strengthening; the promotion of inter-institutional coordination; technical cooperation; creation of spaces for community and child participation; systemisation of experiences, and curriculum development.

Our partners

In Honduras:

States Attorney for Children and the Disabled, Attorney General's Office; the Division Against Child Sexual Abuse, Trafficking and Exploitation, National Preventative Police; the Honduran Children and Family Institute (IHNFA); Save the Children Honduras; and Casa Alianza/Covenant House Honduras.

In Guatemala:

Conacmi.

Results

Direct benefits to children

The programme supported successful inter-institutional coordination between official Honduran entities, such as the State Attorney for Children, the Honduran Childhood and Family Institute (IHNFA), and the Ministry of Justice and the Interior, achieving important results.

In the two-year period 2004-2005, these entities have cooperated in the successful prosecution of 35 cases, and another 25 cases were in process of investigation at the time of this evaluation. In addition to prosecuting the violators, the state provided holistic protection to the child victims of commercial sexual exploitation through an IHNFA-run "Protective Homes" programme. IHNFA and law enforcement authorities are also engaged in ongoing operations that systematically pursue and break up child sexual exploitation rings.

State efforts have been complemented by non-governmental projects such as the Casa Alianza's Hogar Querubines, which attends specifically to victims of this type of exploitation.

Impact on public policy

The programme used the framework of inter-institutional cooperation to great effect in the promotion of improved public policies. Justice operators including police detectives, prosecutors and magistrates improved their abilities to deal with this scourge through training on attention to victims and the gathering of evidence. They have been supported in this endeavour by community leaders engaged with the programme.

The institutional resolve to confront commercial sexual exploitation is perhaps best expressed in terms of the penal code reform. This replaced antiquated laws that had been used to indirectly govern the issue with state-of-the-art definition of the full range of commercial sexual exploitation, including international trafficking and the exploitation of children in internet pornography. Stiffer

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penalties also were introduced, bringing Honduras in line with international standards.

The programme-sponsored Inter-institutional Commission has become the nation's point of reference for this issue and its National Action Plan has been endorsed by key officials of all three branches of government, giving its recommendations and targets the profile of national policy.

The programme has had a dramatic effect on policy within Honduras' National Police, fostering the creation of a specialized unit to pursue cases of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children, as well as new police procedures for dealing with these cases. The issues have been incorporated into the police academy curriculum at three different levels, beginning with a basic module taught to all new recruits. Police coordination with the State Attorney for Children has been enhanced through programme activities.

The State Attorney for Children has created a special team to investigate and prosecute cases of commercial sexual exploitation and is training prosecutors and judges in the application of new sections of the penal code addressing these crimes.

The Honduran Tourism Institute also got involved with the programme, developing special rules for businesses taking part in the tourism industry. These activities have benefited from shared experiences with other Central American countries that have done the same.

IHNFA, or the Honduran Childhood and Family Institute, has taken on the responsibility of caring for repatriated children and young people who have fallen victim to international traffickers, an activity they coordinate with immigration officials. The instruction provided to IHNFA personnel is designed to respect the human rights of victims. They developed a special protocol for interviewing returning victims and a mechanism for referring cases to the Attorney General's Office for legal action.

Networking

The programme fostered the creation of local alliances that allowed civil society to impact municipal public policies in the capital, Tegucigalpa, in seven municipalities of

Atlantida and in the municipalities of Yamanguila, Masaguara, Intibuca, La Esperanza, San Lorenzo, Nacaome, and Sabana Grande, located in western, central and southern Honduras. These grass roots efforts have made law enforcement officials more responsive to community concerns, and have increased community-level vigilance with regard to violent sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, helping to bring these once taboo subjects into the public light.

The programme has also fostered regional networking through a series of internships and experience-sharing exchanges between justice operators from several Central American countries. The Office of International Migration, OIM, was involved in repatriation processes and facilitated international cooperation with regard to the investigation and prosecution of cross-border cases.

Participation

School children and adolescents got involved with the process in municipalities where the programme supported local institutional strengthening around the issues of child sexual abuse and exploitation. Children joined the local networks fostered by the programme and were provided training in the identification of sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation. They learned how to respond to suspected cases and how to assist other children who have fallen victim to these crimes. The boys and girls participating became advocates for the prevention of these types of abuses in their communities.

What we learned

Inter-institutional framework

The depraved nature of commercial sexual exploitation of children ensures that the issue generates a lot of solidarity, facilitating work with justice operators and other state officials. Thus, the two most important members of the programme-supported Inter-Institutional Commission set up to counter this societal ill were Commission President Nora Urbina, who heads the Attorney General's division for crimes against children, and its secretary, Commissioner General Mirna Suarez of the National

Police. The fact that both are women is perhaps no coincidence. A majority of commission members are high powered women with decision making powers within the institutions they represent, ensuring that the commission's work benefits from a gender sensitive and rights based analysis.

The prevalence of machismo in Honduran culture generally means that men are less



Commissioner General Mirna Suarez, shown here promoting the Inter-Institutional Commission Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation's agenda

sensitive to these issues, and both the programme and the Commission invested a lot of time conducting awareness raising among male officials and justice system operators. The Commission's advocacy work made major inroads in combating old prejudices and stereotypes surrounding this issue.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is an issue that attracts a lot of attention from the media, and efforts should be made to enlighten reporters about the child protection issues involved and about the media's role in educating the general public. The programme and its counterparts succeeded in working with the media to make sure their coverage contributed to educating the public. An OIT/IPEC media study recorded more than 103 reports on this issue appearing in the Honduran press between March and August of 2005. This was in large measure due to the willingness of Commission members to invest their time, and their stature, in contacts with the press.

Empowerment of national actors was of paramount importance in bringing this issue to the forefront. The international contribution, or that of the programme, was to identify willing national figures and provide the necessary encouragement, technical and

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logistical support for those individuals to take the issue to their nation. The programme, while essential to the process, should remain in the background. Because society has only recently awakened to the need to systematically address the commercial sexual exploitation of children, Honduras had few experts on the issue when the programme began. The Inter-institutional Commission played an important role in creating a core group of influential individuals who were educated about the phenomenon, who were able to use their positions on the commission to assume a leadership role in educating the public, the government in general and, in some cases, the government agencies to which they belong. The process has made them undisputed experts on the topic.

Local framework: working with municipalities and civil society

Conceptual clarity is a prerequisite for local-level interventions. A rigorous analysis of the phenomenon or problem at hand and of existing institutional capacities to deal with it must be conducted to establish a baseline from which progress can be designed and measured. The initial stage of the programme's local intervention identified the needs and problems of participating children, as well as the challenges implied by strengthening local institutions charged with addressing those problems. This ensures that programming responds to actual conditions rather than any preconceived notion of the problem or its solutions.

Key to achieving remarkable policy changes was the inter-institutional coordination of policy efforts, which created a stronger, more credible and lasting mechanism for effecting changes in public policies. It was also a mechanism to build local leadership abilities.

“The level I have attained within the National Police is going to make me leader within the institution until I die. My commitment is to continue building up the special unit to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children”
Commissioner General Mirna Suarez

Sexual violence is often accompanied by impunity. Victims are afraid to speak up in a culture dominated by machismo, which tends to ignore the problem. This culture of secrecy must be confronted before the efficacy of administering justice in these cases can be addressed and impunity can be reduced. The community, including its children and young people, have an important role to play in demanding that local justice system operators take these cases and see them through. Communities that prioritise child protection issues become a catalyst for addressing these issues at all levels of government.

Child participation was key to raising this issue at the local level. Working with children requires the use of participatory methodologies that infer ownership over the process while educating participants about the issues. The programme relied

heavily on recreation-based processes to educate and motivate young participants.

In an atmosphere of limited public funding, the programme encountered problems getting municipalities to live up to their commitments to support municipal child defender offices. More work with the municipalities was indicated as well as follow up with community leaders who can advocate for active child defence offices.

Community level work that uses schools and school advocates to engage child participation is more effective when it includes a component aimed at involving the children's parents. Future efforts should consider use of family meetings or counselling sessions to further involve parents in the process.

People Trained	Trainee Affiliations
150	Preventative Police
1,244	Judges, Prosecutors and Detectives
100	Key representatives of Tourism industry
15	Print, radio, television and electronic communications media
250	Journalists and social communicators
63	Technical personnel of IHNFA
600	Mayors, personnel from NGOs, labour unions, businessmen and others

Other learning case studies from the Caribbean and Central America

- Child labour and poverty reduction in Honduras & Guatemala
- Juvenile justice in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua & Guatemala
- Child participation in Cuba
- HIV and AIDS in Jamaica
- Advocacy in public policy in Honduras
- Emergency preparedness in the Caribbean and Central America

Feedback:

If you have any comments regarding any of the issues highlighted in this case study or are interested in acquiring further information on “Commercial sexual exploitation of children in Honduras” or any of other our work in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South East Europe region, please contact the LACME-SEE 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