



FAITH AND POSITIVE CHANGE FOR CHILDREN

GLOBAL INITIATIVE ON
SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Case Study

UNICEF Panama

*Inter-faith initiative on
engagement of young
people in support of ending
violence against children*

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Twenty-two-month-old Maria Luisa Jaen stands near a window in Hogar San José de Malambo, a residential care centre in the town of Cerro Silvestre, Arraiján District, in Panama Province

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OVERVIEW

- UNICEF and COEPA's (the inter-religious council of Panama) partnership has brought together diverse denominations in Panama to advocate for ending violence against children. The core of the initiative is to see enhanced cooperation among these groups, supported by UNICEF engagement, and reinforced by increased youth participation and empowerment so that young people are less affected by domestic violence and child abuse.
- Studies show that young people in Panama particularly trust their religious leaders. Outreach within youth groups and at the Youth Assembly has been a primary way to reach adolescents with messages about child rights.
- UNICEF and COEPA have cooperated on Annual Days of Prayer and Action to End Violence Against Children for a decade and more recently have expanded the campaign to include outreach through television and radio.

BACKGROUND

Key country statistics on child wellbeing and religion:

- Estimated population: 4.2 million (estimate total); 1.3 million children.¹
- Panama recently became a High-Income Country with a GNI per capita at \$13,280 (2017), just above the high-income country threshold of \$12,235 (World Bank, 2017). However, it has a GINI coefficient of 0.50 (World Bank, 2016), which places it at the 15th highest in the world in terms of inequality.
- According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index of Children and Adolescents (2019), 32.8% of Panamanian children are living in poverty. The majority of these children live in indigenous reserves. In the Guna Yala reserve, 99.3% and in the Ngäbe Buglé reserve, 95.4% of children are living in poverty. On average, children in Panama are considered poor in 4.5 of the ten indicators measured (e.g., access to the internet, household conditions, WASH services, caregiving).²
- Panama is a multi-ethnic country. According to the Panama census conducted in 2010, 9.2% are Afro-descendants, 12.3% are indigenous, and 78% are distributed amongst mestizo population, Caucasians, Asians, and others. In terms of children and adolescents, 7% are Afro-descendants and 18% are indigenous.³
- In 2013, the UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) suggested that 44.9% of children under 14 in Panama have experienced violent discipline at home. Violence is used for punishing children and is widely accepted as the primary method for discipline. High rates of domestic violence also lead to abused parents continuing the spiral of violence towards their children.
- In 2018, there were 2,811 reports of physical abuse and 4,015 reports of sexually-related crimes against children. Of these sexually-related crimes, 91% were against girls. In the same year, there were 15,434 reports of domestic violence nationally.⁴
- UNICEF Panama conducted a survey in 2014 called La Voz de los Adolescentes, suggesting that children trust religious leaders more than local authorities.

Access to the media

According to the 2013 MICS survey, 86.3% of households in Panama reported having a TV and 75.1% reported having a radio. In rural areas, 63.5% reported having a TV, and 72.2% having a radio. There are approximately 2.9 million Panamanians that are internet users (69%). Of those, 2.2 million are active media users (52%), and 2 million are mobile social media users (48%). Approximately 63% of the population are mobile users.⁵

Major religions

According to the Latin Barometer conducted in 2017 the following is the religious affiliation within Panama:

- 54.6% Catholic,
- 16.5% Evangelical
- 6.4% Protestant,
- 1.5% Adventist,
- 0.7% Mormon,
- 0.5% Jehovah's Witness
- 16.0% not religious⁶

There is also an active population of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Bahá'ís in Panama but the exact numbers are unknown.

Review of the inter-faith strategy on engagement with young people in relation to the C4D Theory of Change

Children particularly trust their religious communities and leaders. In 2014, the Voice of Youth survey confirmed this trust and highlighted the need to further engage with faith actors as part of UNICEF's response to child wellbeing. Since a high proportion of children and young people experience violence at home, and youth tend to trust religious leaders, reaching out through religious groups is an important avenue to promote ending violence against children.

1 Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2018). Estimaciones de Proyección. INEC, Panamá.

2 MIDES, MEF & INEC (2019). Índice de Pobreza Multidimensional de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes. Panamá 2018. Panamá, Panamá: UNICEF.

3 National Institute of Statistics and Census (Panama). Panama Population and Housing Census 2010.

4 Ministerio Público (2018). Estadísticas Oficiales. Ministerio Público, Panamá.

5 Hootsuite (2019). Digital Panama. Available online at: <https://dataportal.com/reports/digital-2019-panama>

6 Corporación Latinobarómetro (2017). Informe 2017. PNUD, SIDA, CNF, BID & OEI. Santiago: Chile.

C4D OUTCOMES

UNICEF's Global C4D Outcomes

Outcome 1: Increasing Knowledge and Demand for Services

Outcome 2: Improving Caregiving Practices

Outcome 3: Addressing Social Norms, Attitudes, and Public Opinions

Outcome 4: Improving Community Engagement and Social Mobilization in Humanitarian and Development Settings

In Panama, UNICEF is aiming to end violence against children and adolescents by working with young people and their caregivers to change attitudes and behaviours against the acceptability of violence.

Increasing Knowledge

At the individual level the focus has been on improving knowledge and interaction between young people, their parents and faith leaders/actors:

- Increase children's knowledge about their rights so that they are able to identify that domestic violence is not normal and should not occur (individual level).
- Increase parents' and caregivers' knowledge on definitions of violence and reinforce positive communication between parents and their children and the use of positive discipline (individual and interpersonal levels).
- Improve religious leaders' knowledge on definition of violence and promote positive discipline (individual and community levels).

This increase in knowledge also has the opportunity and influence of working towards addressing social norms.

Addressing Social Norms, Attitudes, and Public Opinions

- **Community:** Religious leaders (at the community level) communicate/advocate within their faith communities about preventing violence against children through positive discipline and working with local authorities to engage in positive parenting initiatives.
- **Institutional:** The partnership with religious organizations has the opportunity to influence attitudes and practices related to corporal punishment in schools and to promote and influence positive approaches to discipline.
- **Policy:** Religious leaders (at the highest level) advocate for the creation of policies that protect children's rights, and policies that prevent violence rather than vilify adolescents and condemn juvenile crime. Policymakers approve the implementation of policies to prevent and end violence against children and establish a child protection system, as encouraged by religious leaders, among others.

These C4D outcomes are linked to the overall strategy to prevent and end violence against children.

C4D STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

Day of Prayer and Action to End Violence Against Children

UNICEF Panama and COEPA⁷ (the inter-religious council of Panama) started collaborating in 2008 through the Day of Prayer and Action to End Violence Against Children (DPAC) which has had an average participation of approximately 100 children each year, between 12 and 17 years old, from the different faith communities' members of COEPA and the Interreligious Committee of Panama. UNICEF Panama and COEPA have continued the DPAC collaboration each year through small scale funding agreements. DPAC has now expanded the campaign to include media activities. These usually include children and religious leaders in media tours on TV and radio and a public statement from senior faith leaders in print media. It is important to note that based on negotiation by UNICEF Panama, throughout the DPAC month, media airtime is given at no cost from TV and radio stations and the faith leader statement is also published at no cost.

The During the DPAC and beyond, religious leaders support the initiative by speaking about ending violence against children (EVAC), through their religious gatherings and services. At the end of the campaign month, a Catholic mass is televised nationally with the participation of other faith-based groups leaders. Additionally, an interreligious event is held with children and leaders which provides an opportunity to honour their traditions, encourage peace, and end violence against children.



© UNICEF/Panama/2016/Aranda:
Panama, 2016 - Children from different faith communities in Panama participate in the annual youth assembly plenary session organized by the Interreligious Committee of Panama and UNICEF. The interreligious committee of Panama and UNICEF established the youth assembly in 2011 to provide a space where children participation is fomented.

⁷ COEPA members: Calvary Baptist Church, Catholic Church, Episcopal Anglican Church of Panama, Evangelical Methodist Church of Panama, Greek Orthodox Church, Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, Russian Orthodox Church.

Youth Engagement and Participation Program

In 2011, alongside the annual campaign events with religious leaders, UNICEF Panama initiated a more sustained engagement with the COEPA (the inter-religious council of Panama) to end violence against children. The partnership focussed on strengthening COEPA's existing work with youth, especially in at-risk and lower-income working class communities through faith-based organizations and community groups.

COEPA convenes a core group of youth throughout the year that meets every Saturday. This group of youth is balanced with respect to geographic, gender, and ethnic representation and geographic origin, with many of these young people coming from lower-income communities. Due to the constraints of meeting on Saturdays, some young people from Jewish and Muslim backgrounds have not been able to participate.

At these group meetings, young people learn about various topics and build skills in speaking, writing, and acting. Youth are trained through the "Learning to Live Together"⁸ methodology from Arigatou International (in consultation with UNESCO and UNICEF), which is "an interfaith and intercultural program for ethics education that contributes to nurturing ethical values in children and young people and improving communication and relationships with their parents. The young people learn about child rights and values once a month. They choose the other topics they want to cover and COEPA and UNICEF provide technical support to help prepare and present the information. The youth provide feedback about the training to improve the content. More recently, the groups have begun to engage parents. Through this avenue, parents also learn from the content they hear in Youth Assemblies and learn from their children.

A core group of youth plan the periodic Youth Assembly held for young people from all religions in Panama. During the Youth Assembly, young people gather to continue learning as well as practice values focusing on leadership, collaboration, and peace. Many of these youth also become spokespersons for the yearly DPAC campaign.

⁸ Mesa, Matthew. Ethics Education for Children - Learning to Live Together. <https://ethicseducationforchildren.org/en/what-we-do/learning-to-live-together>.

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

The partnership between UNICEF and COEPA has increased faith-based activities focused on EVAC in Panama. COEPA and UNICEF are currently documenting the overall initiative over the last five years in order to share results as there has been less documentation of results until now. The Core Group and Youth Assembly have also grown in number over the years. This documentation process will help to determine indicators and measure results and impact of the collaboration on social and behaviour change, as well as a way to develop a road map for the future. It is expected that the documentation of the inter-faith youth program will help to systematize youth engagement processes and provide not only tools and a methodology to help evaluate success better, but potentially help to inform the scaling up of efforts across the country.

Although several organizations are part of COEPA and work on the DPAC and Youth Assembly, there is not a broader outreach to other partners, such as government ministries. COEPA has expanded its organizational partnership as it is now the Panamanian chapter of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC).

The joint collaboration from DPAC has also been successful for UNICEF and COEPA in that it was recognized by the GNRC as a best practice example of interfaith initiatives to end violence against children. This identification of best practice encouraged GNRC to host its Fifth International Forum in Panama in 2017.

Overall, young people in the Youth Assembly have learned key life skills for peace and tolerance. They have learned to be with other youth from other religions.

“

*They feel like peers. They don't feel this barrier of, I cannot hang out with you because you belong to a different community.*⁹

”

The young people choose the topics in most cases. For example, the gatherings have focused on subjects from leadership, to respect, collaboration, and inter-faith work. In recent years, they have started to link the themes of the core group with the advocacy and C4D outcomes. In 2017, many of the youth shared their opinions during the GNRC Global Forum with other religious leaders and partners to end violence against children.

Though there were not any specific indicators tracked throughout the years, the coordinators of the program have seen that the youth meetings are changing behaviours in young people not only at meetings but also how they act in school and at home. For example, the youth now feel comfortable speaking up and using the group in a support capacity to share their own stories of the violence they have experienced.

Now that the youth are becoming more involved in the community, they have also started to become leaders in advocating for their own rights and encouraging nonviolence. One of the policies they are hoping to encourage leaders to work on is advocating for an integrated child protection system.

⁹ JLI Interview with UNICEF Panama Country Office Representatives. Bangkok, 2018, July 9.

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Religious diversity has been galvanized in this initiative through the cooperative efforts of COEPA and the partnership with UNICEF. The core of the initiative is to see enhanced cooperation among diverse groups, enhanced by UNICEF engagement, and reinforced by increased youth participation and empowerment. As the initiative is able to increase diversity this will provide more space for encouraging participation from religious minorities in the country. However, the growth of the DPACs and Youth Assembly every year shows the power of engaging with religious leaders and the desire for this engagement with the population at large.

COEPA has brought the knowledge of the faith landscape and the institutional structure through which to work with religious leaders and other faith actors to the partnership with UNICEF. This has helped enhance the acceptance of the messages being promoted by UNICEF and, through media platforms, these messages have been amplified to a wider audience. COEPA has also benefited from enhanced visibility through the DPACs and the DPACs have provided a direct way to reach a large audience. Young people have benefited from the establishment of safe spaces to express their feelings and also learn more about tolerance and nonviolence. These have been spaces for sharing on faith, on emotions, and learning about methods to improve themselves and their interactions within their family, community and society (related to scripture, technical, and heart dialogue approaches for faith and SBCC). The young people have been guided in some areas, but also encouraged to define their own needs and interests for their group sessions. The question now is how to leverage these activities so far for sustained influence on social and behaviour change related to domestic violence and child abuse.

Strategies for the future include

- Strengthened documentation on the UNICEF-COEPA partnership strategies are planned and this provides an opportunity for increased capacity building around evidence and learning, in which UNICEF can play an important part.
- Continued and strengthened outreach to parents and caregivers is a particularly significant direction for future activities. While parents have received some messages from an awareness of DPACs and the activities of young people in their group sessions and the Youth Assembly, there remains opportunity for more direct and systematic engagement of parents linked to UNICEF's plan to launch an integrated initiative on positive parenting.

In order to engage in wider spread advocacy and enhance partnerships, there is an opportunity to explore relationships with relevant government ministries under the recently launched National Strategy to Prevent Violence against Children.

Lessons learned

- Working through an inter-religious council, such as COEPA in Panama, is a strategy for increasing the inclusion of religious diversity.
- Focusing on safe spaces for young people has allowed them to express their own religious beliefs and practices, as well as their emotions, and find common ground with other young people of different faiths and denominations and to assert their leadership in influencing positive change specifically in relation to ending violence against children.

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