



World Vision®

Latin America and Caribbean

# Child Protection Systems in Latin America and the Caribbean:

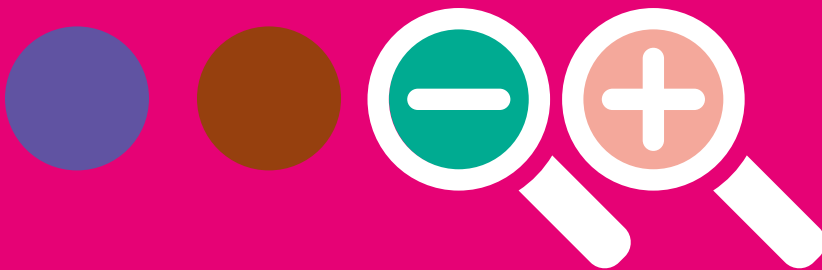
## A National and Community Level Study across 10 Countries



# Acknowledgements

This publication represents the joint efforts of World Vision staff and partners in Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru who managed and facilitated the participatory research process. We are grateful to the many children, parents, community leaders, and government officials who participated in the consultations and analysis of results. We are inspired by the actions they are taking to end violence and improve the situation for children in their communities and countries.

Finally, we are appreciative of World Vision Australia, World Vision Canada, and World Vision US for their generous funding and support of this regional research effort.



# A Message from World Vision's Regional Leader

Dear Partner,

It is my pleasure to present this publication, which synthesizes the results of a study on the current situation of child protection systems in 10 countries and dozens of participating communities in the Latin America and Caribbean region.

In WorldVision, we bear witness to alarming levels of violence against children, which continue to increase. As a Christian, child-focused and community-based organization that cares about the poor and marginalized, we are compelled to put an end to this situation of violence, taking into account the concerns, priorities, and proposed solutions shared by children, their families, local authorities and other key partners. This high level of grassroots participation is what really sets this study apart from many others based solely on national statistics.

In the Latin America and Caribbean region, World Vision has decided to prioritize our efforts to contribute to the prevention and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and all other forms of violence against children and have come up with a regional cause that expresses this aspiration: "Protected children promoting a more just and secure society."

Research carried out at the national and local level supports our aim to better understand and gather evidence from the perspectives of diverse stakeholders to guide our next steps, both in local programming and advocacy efforts at all levels.

The results of this study are clear and they urge us to act, working systemically with both civil society and state actors to strengthen and implement political and legislative frameworks and transform social norms that devalue children and their development. We see an urgent need to respond to structural causes, to the inequality, social exclusion, and injustice suffered by our region; to eradicate prejudices and stereotypes that stigmatize and perpetuate violence against women and which often translate to violence against children.

We stand for the right of every girl and boy to live a life free of abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and see this as key to the fulfillment of all other rights and to our broader aspirations for child wellbeing. As it does for us, we hope this cause inspires you so that we may all take on responsibility and commit to work together to create protective environments for children.

We will not tire until every adult and institution takes responsibility for the protection and care of children.

It is for this reason, esteemed government officials, leaders of civil society organizations, religious institutions, and the private sector, that we invite you to use your influence so that children may live free from fear; for academics and other civil society organizations to continue to document evidence to support evidence-based solutions, and, finally, for every community, family, adult, youth organization, and children themselves to join us in building a mass movement to protect all children, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized, so that every child may reach their God-given potential and enjoy life in all its fullness.

**Stefan Pleisnitzer**  
Regional Leader, Latin America & the Caribbean  
WorldVision International

# Executive Summary

For all of its diversity, the Latin America and Caribbean region shares the unfortunate reality of alarmingly high levels of violence, which disproportionately affect children, adolescents, and youth, particularly the most vulnerable, with devastating consequences for their development and wellbeing. As a strong advocate for children, World Vision in Latin America and the Caribbean has made it a priority to take a stand against all forms of violence against children and to build evidence that will compel communities, governments, and broader civil society to act.

To this end, between 2011 and 2012 World Vision offices throughout the LAC region carried out a comprehensive assessment using the Analysis, Design, and Planning Tool (ADAPT) to identify and analyze priority child protection issues as well as strengths and gaps in the child protection system at both the community and national levels. The results will guide World Vision's work moving forward, informing both programming and advocacy efforts to contribute to strengthening child protection systems. The process has also revealed the key actors to engage with and influence in order to strengthen the protective environment for children.

The tool was developed by World Vision, and is specifically designed to help with the identification, prioritization, and root cause analysis of child protection issues, as well as with the identification and mapping of the systems that are in place to protect children.<sup>1</sup>

The ADAPT methodology focuses on children and adolescents as active participants in the assessment, seeking out their voices and perspectives in order to gain the most complete understanding of extant child protection services, as well as gaps and needs that are not being met. ADAPT is not only an assessment framework, but an analytical tool that aims to uncover new information that can be used to strengthen child protection systems. Additionally, it aims to gather information to assist in planning World Vision's programmatic offer and strategic plans for strengthening child protection systems together with the CPA group<sup>2</sup> and through various advocacy actions (mobilization and campaigns, among others).

It is important to underscore that this is the first report of its kind at the regional level – a document in which children are the primary protagonists, bringing to light problems and causes, strengths and gaps in child protection and child protection systems. A great deal of the current information on child protection systems is based on analysis centered on adults, opinion leaders and subject experts. In contrast, the singularity of this research lies in the fact that it begins with the lived experience of each child, which is then transmitted back to adults, who analyze and complement with additional data.

The current report presents findings from the ADAPT assessments carried out in 10 countries and a total of 34 local Area Development Programmes (ADPs) in the Latin American and Caribbean region in 2011 and 2012. The countries that participated in the assessment were Bolivia, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Peru.



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<sup>1</sup> The child protection system refers to the set of coordinated formal and informal elements working together to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of violence against children. Forbes, B., Luu, D., Oswald, E., and Tutnjevic, T. (2011) *A Systems Approach to Child Protection: A WV Discussion Paper*. WVI, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Local-level group of formal and informal actors that meets with the objective of working collaboratively to ensure that a protective environment for children is in place.



## Strengths of Child Protection Systems in Latin America and the Caribbean

- **Economic growth and health and education improvements in the region:** All of the countries that participated in the ADAPT assessment have shown macroeconomic growth and improvements in health indicators. Over the past decade 73 million people have been lifted out of poverty, productivity has increased, and there are fewer jobless residents in the region. These are significant advances, since social and economic factors can have a strong impact on child protection. Despite advances in the region on many human development indicators, macro-level issues of poverty and inequality that persist in Latin America must be addressed in order for children to live in the protective environments free from violence that we aspire for them.
- **Strong legal frameworks for child protection:** The number of laws on the books varies from country to country. Some countries, like El Salvador, have more than 15 national and 18 international laws related to the protection of children and adolescents and their rights.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, many countries have implemented innovative conditional cash transfer programs, and have ratified international laws to strengthen child protection systems.
- **Informal actors strengthen the social safety net:** The primary informal actors that were identified by children and adolescents who participated in the ADAPT assessments were families, schools, community-based NGOs, World Vision, and UNICEF. These informal actors play an important role in ensuring a protective environment for children.

<sup>4</sup> ADAPT Final Report, World Vision El Salvador, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Ecuador, 2012.

## Weaknesses of Child Protection Systems in Latin American and the Caribbean

- **Child protection legal frameworks do not match reality on the ground:** Despite the strength and number of child protection laws that exist in countries in the LAC region, many of those laws are not applied at the local level nor do they respond to specific local realities.
- **Lack of knowledge about rights, resources, and services related to child protection and of laws to protect children when they do exist:** Children, their parents, and many community members do not know their rights. Not only are they unaware of their rights, but they are also unaware of which service providers to turn to when reporting crimes, or who official actors are and what their roles are. As such, in countries where laws are in existence, children cannot use them for their benefit.
- **Lack of state capacity and collaboration between actors:** In all 10 countries the state lacked the capacity to act on the legislation that was in place to protect child and adolescent rights. There is a diversity of public policies on different aspects of child protection but a low level of coordination between them and lack of sufficient resources to put them into practice. In Ecuador, for example, it was pointed out that “the majority of the legal structures are not operational or functional at the [local level]. As such, they do not have the recognition, the resources, or the coordination necessary to be effective actors.”<sup>5</sup> The ADAPT studies also revealed a notorious absence of the primary government institutions responsible for child protection in the sample communities (often in the more distant and rural areas).

- **Home and school, the closest environments in children's circle of care, are the primary sites of violence:** Through prolonged absences in their children's lives, lack of displays of affection toward them, by mistreating them directly or by failing to report cases of abuse, many times mothers, fathers, and other guardians are the ones who most hurt children and violate their rights. Children also indicated being subject to violence and bullying at school, perpetuated by teachers as well as by their peers. Sexual assault and abuse occur in both the home and at school with adolescent girls most acutely affected. In many countries in the region, sex, sexual health, and reproductive health are considered taboo and education on these topics is not provided in schools. For this reason, teen pregnancy was also underscored as a major issue of concern in many communities.
- **Lack of public spending on services related to child protection:** State services related to child protection do not receive sufficient funding to meet the existing demand, especially at the local level and in more remote communities.

## Main Child Protection Issues

**In almost all of the communities where ADAPT assessments were carried out, a disturbing trend of intense and constant maltreatment of children and adolescents by adults was revealed. Specifically, the following child protection issues were among the most commonly identified:**

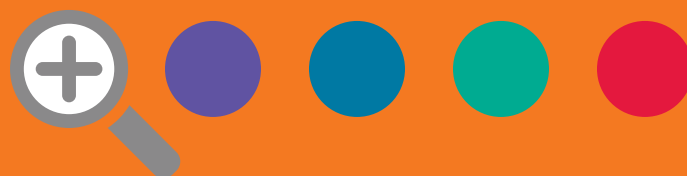
- Physical and psychological abuse, primarily in the home and school and often by parents and guardians closest to children
- Sexual assault and abuse
- Neglect and abandonment
- Child labor
- Child trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation
- Teen pregnancy as a result of sexual abuse
- Domestic violence



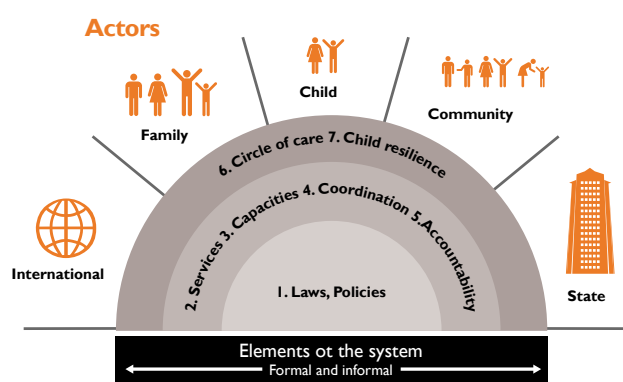
## Immediate and Root Causes

- High levels of poverty and unemployment
- Attitudes of machismo and aggression against women and girls
- Lack of parent education and knowledge
- Drug and alcohol consumption
- Death or absence of a parent or both parents
- High levels of migration, family separation or dissolution
- Discrimination based on gender and ethnicity, and against rural populations
- Violent contexts, existence of organized crime, and influence of gangs
- Lack of opportunities for children and youth
- Lack of spaces for recreation, cultural and artistic expression, sports, etc. to discover talents, grow and develop, and open new possibilities for the future.

# Introduction



World Vision defines a child protection system as “a set of coordinated formal and informal elements working together to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of violence against children.”<sup>6</sup> A child protection system consists of seven elements: laws and policies, services and their delivery mechanisms, the capacity of the service providers, cooperation and coordination, accountability mechanisms, the ‘circle of care’ surrounding a child, and children’s resilience and life skills.



The ADAPT methodology is a participatory assessment, analysis and planning tool that seeks to understand the state of child protection in a given country. The tool is specifically designed to help with the identification, prioritization and root cause analysis of child protection issues, as well as with the identification and mapping of the systems that are in place to protect children.<sup>7</sup> The ADAPT methodology focuses on children and adolescents as active participants in the assessment, seeking out their voices and perspectives in order to gain the most complete understanding of extant child protection services, as well as gaps and needs that are not being met. ADAPT also includes the voices of parents and family (principle actors in child protection) as well as community-level

informal actors, international NGOs, and finally formal state actors. In addition to the participatory workshops, key informant interviews with informal and formal child protection actors serve to provide a robust understanding of child protection, lending a voice to the other mapping tools provided by the methodology. ADAPT is divided into a national level assessment and a community level assessments. It provides a set of tools, guidelines, and resources for implementors to carry out the assessment in a variety of settings.

The information in the current report is compiled from data collected through ADAPT assessments carried out in 10 countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region in 2011 and 2012. Each country implemented the ADAPT assessment in part or in whole in an effort to identify, understand, and map the child protection system in their country and in local communities. They also sought to identify weaknesses and gaps, as well as areas for improvement and action.

The national-level studies rely mainly on secondary data to map the child protection services – including laws and policies in place, services, capacities, coordination of actors, accountability, and prevailing attitudes and beliefs about children and child protection – while the community-level studies use participatory methods to collect firsthand perspectives on these same elements to reveal how child protection services are actually functioning at the local level.

There are several major weaknesses and gaps that plague the region and prevent children from being well protected. First, legislation rarely matches reality and laws are not suited to local contexts. Important gaps exist in the formal child protection system and the basic services needed to guarantee children’s rights at the local level, for example, a grave lack of coverage including an almost complete absence of the principal

<sup>6</sup> World Vision International, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



government entities responsible for child protection in the areas covered by the study. This lack of coverage by the child protection system generates significant vulnerability and neglect of the child population.

Second, a pervasive lack of good, consistent data about children makes law-making a difficult prospect. Third, enforcement mechanisms for child and adolescent protection are weak or non-existent, rendering laws relatively useless. Fourth, there is a lack of collaboration between state and local offices, as well as a lack of collaboration between state and informal actors. As such, the protection system is weaker than it could be. Finally, despite advances, violence against children is prevalent in homes and in schools. There must be an expansion of safe spaces for children and education about their rights.

This publication explores in depth the data and trends that emerged from the 10 countries that participated in the ADAPT assessment. It will look first at principle strengths and successes in the region, including an “in focus” case study of how the Dominican Republic is making sure that communities are the subjects of rights, and actors with agency in advancing child and adolescent rights in their country. Next the report will explore the weaknesses and gaps that exist, going “in focus” into Honduras, where extremely high rates of violence tear at child protection systems in the country. Third, this publication will look at major trends in the region, with a special look at how Haiti is educating their youth, trying to build understanding

and agency to promote active involvement in improving rights. Finally, it will present recommendations and possible next steps, including who the key actors in the region will be in carrying out those next steps.





# Principle Strengths of Child Protection Systems



## Economic Growth and Health and Education Improvements in the Region

A major strength in the region is the rate of positive growth that has occurred in the last decade. All of the countries that participated in the ADAPT assessment have shown macroeconomic growth and improvements in health indicators. Infant and maternal mortality rates have decreased in the region, and access to healthcare and education has increased concurrently. Over the past decade, 73 million people have been lifted out of poverty, productivity has increased, and there are fewer jobless residents in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Violence in the Latin America and Caribbean region should be understood as a multi-causal phenomenon, contributed to by individual, family, social, economic and cultural factors that can have an impact on abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of violence against children. For this reason, approaches to confronting and preventing violence must also be interdisciplinary and work to strengthen the various actors and elements of the child protection system at all levels, including addressing underlying systemic causes. The stresses of poverty and social exclusion

can contribute to the persistence of certain child protection issues, whether for lack of access to social support networks or out of economic necessity or hardship. Therefore, despite advances in the region on many human development indicators, macro-level issues of poverty and inequality that persist in Latin America must be addressed in order for children to live in the protective environments free from violence that we aspire for them.

## Strong Legal Frameworks

The number of laws on the books varies from country to country. Some countries, like El Salvador, have more than 15 national and 18 international laws pertaining to the protection of children and adolescent and their rights.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, many countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and have included it in their constitutions. The legal frameworks are often extensive and approach an all-encompassing set of rules, creating a network of ostensibly very consistent protections for children and adolescents.

The region's commitment to ratifying international laws and consistently updating national legislation to improve child and adolescent protections

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank, *Latin America and Caribbean, 2013*,

<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/LACEXT/0,,contentMDK:20340156~pagePK:146736~piPK:146830~theSitePK:258554,00.html>

<sup>9</sup> ADAPT Final Report, *World Vision El Salvador, 2012*.

demonstrates a willingness to continue to improve the situation of children and adolescents in each country. However, translating legal frameworks and protections from paper to enforcement is another matter in the region. The lack of capacity to enforce laws will be discussed later.

Furthermore, there are innovative child protection policy developments emerging in the region that are taken into account by the ADAPT country reports. For example, conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs like *Hambre Cero* (Zero Hunger) are cash transfers that incentivize children's attendance at school in exchange for a cash transfer to the mother to make up for potential income loss experienced if that child does not work. The CCT works to eliminate child labor, keep the child in school, and supplement household income to make schooling a viable option.<sup>10</sup>

### **Informal Actors Strengthening the System**

One of the principle strengths of the child and adolescent protection systems in the Latin America and Caribbean region is the presence of informal (non-state) actors. The primary informal actors that were identified by children and adolescents who participated in the ADAPT assessments were families, schools, community-based NGOs, World Vision, and in some cases international organizations like UNICEF. The identification of informal actors was especially prevalent at the community level. At the national level, key informants and other participants were able to name a more wide-ranging set of actors. A general lack of knowledge about rights, laws, and actors on the part of children and adolescents limited the extent to which they were able to distinguish a wider range of state actors.

The informal actors who are working in the region are making strides in advancing child protection systems. World Vision in particular with its implementation of the ADAPT assessments is paving the way for a new, participatory means of understanding the child protection systems in the LAC region, and providing communities with tools and skills to meet the challenges of the current gaps in child and protection systems. Without the efforts of informal actors, the

gaps in child protection would be precipitous. There is a widespread lack of communication and coordination among and between formal actors that inhibits effective implementation. The extant child protection systems would be further crippled without the presence of organizations like World Vision to fill some of those gaps.

### **In Focus: The Dominican Republic**

The Dominican Republic is a small, ethnically diverse country with widely varying levels of income, education, and access to resources. Rural and urban areas present starkly different realities. In light of this, the national government has created an innovative response to address child protection needs according to local context. This response is the development of *Juntas Locales de Protección y Restitución de Derechos* or Local Committees for Protection and Restitution of Rights. These local committees are mandated as part of Law 136-03 as the community-level manifestation of CONANI, the National Council on Children and Adolescents. Unfortunately, lamentably few of these local committees have been established or are functional, so World Vision pushes for broader implementation and works directly with communities to set up this official entity.

The local committees are made up of seven members, three representatives, three alternates, and a child representative. The local committee in the town of Villa Altagracia has been successful in assisting in registering complaints with the police, strengthening the enforcement of national-level child protection laws, organizing documentation and information gathering, and expanding the networks of child protection actors.<sup>11</sup>

The difference in Altagracia since the establishment of the local committee is enormous. Children are more able and more comfortable making police reports about crimes. Where there are violations of rights, community members now feel like there will be some recourse for these incursions. The feeling of safety is changing with the strengthening of the local committees. Additionally, the establishment of the local committee has created a space where children's voices

<sup>10</sup> ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Nicaragua, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Dominican Republic, 2012.

are included as worthwhile contributions to community development. Including their voices in an official capacity provides a space for children to be heard as well as strengthening other rights. As stated in the ADAPT report from Villa Altigracia:

“The creation of the Local Committees for Protection and Restitution of Rights and its performance in the municipality of Villa Altigracia are two strengths of the child protection system in this community. As an example of best practices, they hold a meeting every 15 days to establish rules or to determine an action plan around specific children's rights that are at risk...”<sup>12</sup>

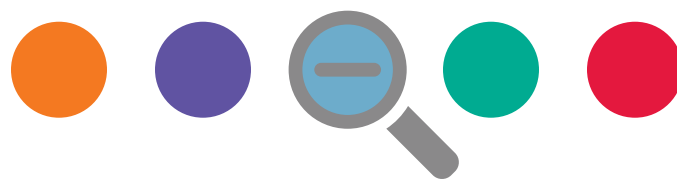
This is instrumental for building a framework that will include the voices of children in the long run, and be positioned to grow deeper as further Local Committees are established. Finally, this is a model that

could be adapted to many situations in multiple contexts, and used throughout the region. However, despite the potential for success only 10 of the 157 promised Juntas Locales have been implemented. These numbers must be increased, and locally based entities of this kind established, in the Dominican Republic and beyond in order for child protection systems to effectively function in diverse contexts.





# Principal Weaknesses of Child Protection Systems



## Legal Frameworks Do Not Match Reality on the Ground

Despite the strength and number of child protection laws that exist in countries of the LAC region, many of those laws are not suited to the local context. As was indicated previously, many countries have developed national laws and ratified international conventions designed to protect children's rights. However, these laws are often adopted wholesale without taking into consideration adapting each set of laws and regulations to the unique and nuanced set of circumstances in their country.

Furthermore, the laws that are legislated, especially from international conventions, are adopted to show that a country is keeping up with the pace of enacting child protection systems. Sufficient thought is not given to the different types of enforcement mechanisms that are needed to ensure that laws that are created can be implemented. As such, the gap between legislation and enforcement grows as the legal structure develops more rules and lacks follow-through. Ineffective legislation allows perpetrators of violence against children and adolescents to continue

committing the same crimes with no fear of prosecution or punishment. It also allows the continuation of harmful traditional practices including abuse as an educational measure, physical violence because a parent "loves their child," and silencing conversations on sexual health and safety. For example, one 9 year old female participant in Bolivia related the following story. "The other day I burned the rice while I was cooking. Upon returning to the house, my father heated the spoon up in the fire and burned my mouth with it so that I would learn to cook well. [My father] is right. I can't do that." As harmful traditional practices persist unnoticed or unchallenged, more children are put at risk and the state cannot respond effectively. The lack of enforcement capability demonstrates a wider weakness in government capacity that endangers the wellbeing of children and adolescents throughout the region.

Finally, as will be discussed in the In Focus section below, the same set of laws will not be appropriate for every country. For example, in Peru there is an astounding level of child labor and child abuse taking place, whereas in Honduras, children suffer on a daily basis from the pervasively high levels of violence in

their homes, communities, and cities. Laws must be thoughtful and responsive to be effective, they cannot just be adopted and implemented wholesale.

### **Lack of Knowledge about Rights, Resources, and Protection Services**

One of the primary weaknesses of the child protection systems in the countries that participated in the ADAPT assessment is that children, their parents, and many community members do not have information or a clear understanding of their rights nor of services that should be provided to them. They are unaware of their rights and are uninformed on which service providers to turn to when reporting crimes, who official actors are, and what their roles are. As such, in countries where laws are in existence, children cannot use them for their benefit.

When children were asked, they could speak only in broad strokes about what their rights were. For example, in Honduras, when participating in the Umbrella of Care activity,<sup>13</sup> children could not identify a single law or protection policy that related to them. They could name informal actors such as their community church, school, families, or World Vision, but laws on child protection and formal actors responsible for upholding children's rights were largely unknown. The same phenomenon occurred with parents who participated in the ADAPT assessment. This trend was recurrent in many of the ADAPT country reports highlighting that education about rights is not reaching much of the population throughout Latin America, especially the most vulnerable. In order to rectify this problem, children, adolescents and their parents must be educated on what their rights are, and who they can turn to when those rights have been violated – otherwise, these laws serve no purpose.

### **Lack of State Capacity and Collaboration between Actors**

In all 10 countries that participated in this round of ADAPT assessments it was reported that the state lacked the capacity to act on the legislation that was in

place to protect child and adolescent rights. In Ecuador, for example, it was pointed out that: “The majority of the legal structures are not operational or functional at the [local level]. As such, they do not have the recognition, the resources, or the coordination necessary to be effective actors.”<sup>14</sup> Another example can be drawn from El Salvador. When participants were asked about the services they receive, they spoke to the following issues:

“When asked if there are state strategies, measures or services to prevent violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect, including support to vulnerable families and children at risk in the community, community members responded: a) there are strategies, but on a very low scale, b) they exist, but do not reach the communities...”<sup>15</sup>

The cases of Ecuador and El Salvador are typical. Services exist, but the coordination and capacity are too weak to effectively provide those services at the local level. It is for this reason that the informal actors have grown to be such a force in providing protection services to children and adolescents in the region as was mentioned above. In Guatemala, the lack of the presence of formal child protection actors has led to the normalization of state failure to enforce child rights. Guatemalans have come to expect private NGOs and other informal actors to provide child protection systems.<sup>16</sup>

The countries that participated, however, were not able to effectively gauge what individual NGOs, religious organizations, and other non-state actors were doing to strengthen child protection in various communities. This lack of coordination resulted in overlapping services, reduced efficiency, and a missed opportunity to ensure more robust child protection systems throughout the region.

It is also necessary to mention that many times informal child protection systems may actually take on roles that do not pertain to them and in the process

13 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Honduras, 2012.

14 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Ecuador, 2012.

15 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision El Salvador, 2012.

16 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Guatemala, 2012.

exacerbate rights violations instead of bringing them to justice. This can be clearly witnessed in Bolivia, where the ADAPT results revealed that informal community mechanisms frequently reconcile what should be irreconcilable actions, such as sexual violence where girls who are victims are made to marry their aggressor.

Another facet of the lack of state capacity is the inability for the state to keep accurate records about child and adolescent rights violations, crime statistics, and in some case even basic birth registration of children. Without accurate information the state cannot draft laws that will be responsive to the local context. In Nicaragua, nearly 30% of sex crimes against children and adolescents were not punished due to a lack of follow through and a lack of proper information.<sup>17</sup> This lack of capacity is damaging the rights of children and adolescents in tangible, destructive ways.

### Schools as Sites of Violence

A final weakness that was present in nearly all the countries that participated was that children indicated being subject to violence and bullying at school. There is a dichotomy that manifested itself in the comments of children who participated in the ADAPT assessments. First, children identified schools as one of the safe spaces they could turn to when their rights were threatened or violated. On the contrary, however, they also indicated that in school they were subject to violence on multiple levels.

First, children reported being subject to violence and verbal abuse on the part of their teachers. In many countries there is an acute lack of trained teachers, and as such they are more inclined to use corporal punishment. In Bolivia, for example, the phrase “letters enter with blood” is a common justification for punishing students for doing poorly in school. Some of the punishments in school include:

“The pig: If students do not fulfill their tasks, teachers instruct children to do a handstand against the wall, forcing the arms, head, and neck to carry the child’s bodyweight

The sapling: Boys and girls must hold a desk or other heavy object with his hands up for the time the teacher considers necessary.

The wet rod: Children reported that teachers sometimes use a tree branch as a whip, either to scare unruly children or even beat them if the offense is very serious.”<sup>18</sup>

The second type of violence that children reported was bullying by their peers. Many children who participated in the ADAPT assessment indicated that often they are scared to go to school because they will be subject to bullying, teasing, and violence from other children.

The third type of violence in schools is experienced specifically by adolescent girls. In many countries in the region, sex, sexual health, and reproductive health are considered taboo subjects. As such they are not taught in schools and they are not taught in the home. Conversations about sex and reproductive health are avoided entirely. When teenage girls become pregnant, they thus have no education, and no way to access resources to manage their pregnancy, neither at home nor at school. Being a taboo subject they are forced to hide their pregnancy from their peers. This means that they eventually must stop attending school once their pregnancy begins to show. Pregnancy means the end of formal schooling for many teenage girls. So, in denying girls sexual health education, they are being denied the right to education, the right to health, and the right to physical safety. The consequences of teen pregnancies are multi-faceted, complex, and uniquely faced by young girls.

These findings are troubling, especially given that the state, ideally, should provide the framework and basic protections in a child protection system. However, the gaps and weaknesses in the region demonstrate the need for a retooling of the child protection system. Legislating more will not accomplish anything without commensurate development of appropriate enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, gaps and weaknesses in child protection manifest differently in different countries. The next section, an In Focus on

17 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Nicaragua 2012.

18 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Bolivia, 2012.



Honduras, will show how violence shapes children's lives in that country to a greater extent than anywhere else in the region, necessitating a different set of responses. There can be no one-size-fits-all approach to strengthening child protection systems in the region.

### **In Focus: Violence in Honduras**

**“In the countryside they demand money from us and they threaten us at gunpoint...”**

**“In one of the houses they sell drugs, but as soon as the police come, they bury them...”**

**“I don't go to the soccer fields anymore because they buried a woman there...”**

**“I have seen people get shot in their cars and on their motorcycles...”**

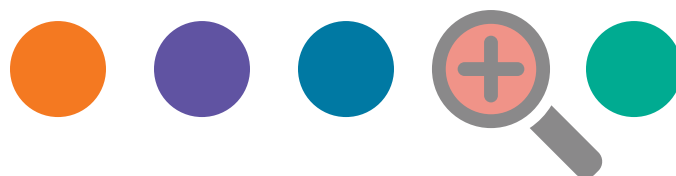
**“They killed a man in the countryside and now I am scared...”<sup>19</sup>**

These five quotes illustrate the damage that the violence is doing to the fabric of child protection systems in Honduras. Children live in a constant state of fear. Currently, Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world, at 82 murders per 100,000 people. According to the World Health Organization, murder has reached epidemic proportions in the country. Violence, however bad on its own, prevents children and adolescents from enjoying their other rights as well.

For children who live in the countryside and must walk to rural schools, they are too afraid to do so alone. If no one can accompany them, they will miss school thus losing out on their right to education. Safe spaces such as soccer fields and even their own communities are no longer safe due to drugs and violence. Thus they are being deprived of their right “to be.” Finally, without safe spaces, access to education that is compromised by violence, and being constant witnesses to violence, children and adolescents are being silenced.

In Honduras any legislation protecting child rights will also need to be mindful of approaches that tackle violence as well. Without reducing the levels of violence in the country, there will be no way to effectively change the child protection system in the country either. While other countries such as Guatemala, Bolivia, and El Salvador also face issues with violence, Honduras stands out as being most profoundly affected.

# Crosscutting Trends and Key Actors



## Crosscutting Trends

As can be seen from this article, there are several crosscutting trends. In this context, crosscutting means that it is experienced by several countries in the LAC region, but not by the region as a whole. Gang violence is one of the most prevalent cross-cutting trends. It affects Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras profoundly enough for children in those countries to list physical violence and/or gangs as one of the most substantive threats to their rights. In El Salvador, gangs and gang violence stretch up the Central American isthmus through Mexico and into the United States. The maras in El Salvador have extended their reach internationally. Violence in Honduras has ballooned with the increase in drug trafficking in the region and also extends throughout Latin America. These international issues that threaten children's rights must be combatted in an equally international fashion. Partnerships must be created in any campaign to stop violence from threatening the rights of children.

In building up a comprehensive child protection system in LAC, it is also necessary to take note of the trend of stark rural-urban divides in all of the countries that participated in the ADAPT assessment. There is a consistent lack of access to resources and child and adolescent rights protections that is experienced by

rural residents in the LAC region. This divide means that rural areas are poorer, less educated, less healthy, and even more vulnerable to rights abuses. In order to effectively establish a national or regional advocacy campaign around child protection issues, it must target both urban and rural locales, and push to provide access to protection services for both environments concurrently.

Immigration and resulting child abandonment is a third cross-cutting trend. This trend affects Ecuador, El Salvador, and Honduras most acutely. Many Ecuadoreans emigrate to the United States and to Spain. Those from El Salvador primarily emigrate to the United States. In Honduras, men migrate to the United States, and women take jobs in the maquiladora industry making garments. The end result of all of these cases is higher rates of child abandonment. Child abandonment has profound effects on the moods of children, their ability to stay in school or excel academically, and their vulnerability to rights violations. When children are left by their parents, they are most often left with other family members. Children are far more likely to be in danger of incest, molestation, or rape when they are put in the care of extended family and neighbors. Bolstering circles of care and increasing education about the effects of child abandonment are tantamount to successfully strengthening child protection systems in the region.

These are just a few of the primary crosscutting issues. Other issues such as racial divides between indigenous groups, Afro-descendant groups, and mestizo groups must also be addressed. For example, one can look to Ecuador to see how stark the divides are between mestizo, Afro-descendant and indigenous groups. These education statistics in Ecuador paint a clear picture of inequity: “Currently 68% percent of children nationally begin school on time at 5 years of age. This number drops to 33% when looking specifically at indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian groups. Information is lacking on the causes for repeating grades, abandoning school, dropping out and retention, and therefore must be studied further. For those currently not attending school, 49% report that it is because of economic reasons. 6 of 10 white/mestizo Ecuadoreans are enrolled in secondary school, while only 5 of 10 indigenous and 4 of 10 Afro-Ecuadoreans are attending secondary school.”<sup>20</sup>

Finally, in nearly all of the countries that participated, the persistence of machismo and discrimination against women and girls is manifested through physical, verbal and sexual abuse.

### **Key Actors**

Several key actors emerged through completing this analysis. The state is a principle actor, though its capacity to carry out a majority of child protection services is severely limited as indicated above. The state functions as a legislating body, but must be supported by outside organizations when acting to enforce child protection laws. In each country the different formal actors vary in name and, to some degree, in function, but they are rarely able to be present at both the national and the community level. The sole exemptions to this general lack of capacity are public schools and health clinics. In many cases children identified their schools and community clinics as institutions to which they could turn for help.

Informal actors such as World Vision, UNICEF, churches, and other community-based organizations are crucial to child protection systems in the region. While there is a lack of consistent collaboration

between these different groups, they work to fill in where the state cannot. Especially at the community level children were able to name these organizations as those they would turn to if their rights had been violated. Informal actors are more active and more present, and as such they become more widely known than the state offices in many communities. As is the case for Guatemala, in some countries it is expected that informal actors provide all services that the state cannot.

There must be a unification of actors in the region in order to strengthen child protection systems. More communication and more collaboration will reduce redundancy and increase efficiency of the services that are provided. Furthermore, capacity building and training for state officials will allow for the state to take on more of the role of child protection than it can currently.

### **In Focus: Children and Adolescents as Actors with Agency in Haiti**

Currently, the actors who are missing from this picture are the children and adolescents themselves. A key principle of the ADAPT methodology is to see that children and adolescents are participating in their own protection and advocating for their rights. Children must see themselves as having agency in order to make change. One example of where this is taking place is Haiti.

In Haiti, the Youth Parliament brings together about 130 young people over the course of several days to become parliamentarians during parliamentary simulation sessions. This facilitates the learning of democracy and strengthens the role of young people as citizens. However, this initiative is only open to young people aged 16 to 25 years.<sup>21</sup> While it is limited in terms of who can access it, it is one successful model working in the countries that implemented the ADAPT methodology. The opportunity to simulate debate, learn about legal proceedings, engage with other youth, and gather around policy creates a sense of agency in the youth of Haiti. This is a model that can be replicated in the other countries in the region.

20 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Ecuador, 2012.

21 ADAPT Final Report, World Vision Haiti, 2012.



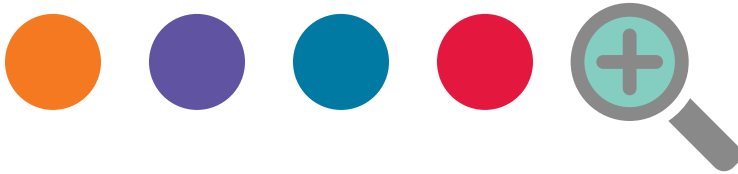
Currently, Ecuador, Peru, and Uruguay have Consejos Consultivos, or advisory committees, that function similarly to the youth parliament in Haiti.<sup>22</sup> This is a meaningful way for youth to participate that could be further expanded in the region.

Children must be seen as citizens with agency. In many countries children are not treated as people who are subjects of rights. Instead, they are seen as extra hands for labor in the household, or at times as domestic servants for other wealthier families in order to pay debts. The Youth Parliament in Haiti is a way to recognize the voices of youth, and raise their importance to the level of a national conference that focuses on youth as change-makers.



22 Inter-American Children's Institute 2012. <http://nuestravozcolores.org/2012/04/09/%C2%BFque-son-los-consejos-consultivos/>.

# Conclusions and Recommendations



Given the existing strengths and weaknesses in child protection systems identified in the 10 participating countries in the ADAPT assessment, the following recommendations are the most pertinent to developing an advocacy campaign and other actions at the local, national, and regional level to strengthen child protection systems.

- **Say something, do something!** In each of the 10 countries, laws are created and enforcement is promised, but follow through is lacking. There must be a comprehensive capacity building effort to increase the state's ability to provide services it has promised to protect children and adolescents. These efforts must be multifaceted, first uncovering what promises have been made by the state, then identifying steps for implementing those promises, and finally selecting actors who can carry out those changes.
- **Community-based education:** Children and adolescents do not know their rights. They also do not know to whom they can turn when they have a problem, or when their rights have violated. In order to increase awareness, strategic action plans for community-level education should be put in place. This could include community theater, workshops, talks with local government officials, and collaborative community engagements that bring together formal and informal actors.
- **Strengthening partnerships:** Though informal actors are able to compensate for gaps on the part of state service provision, efforts to strengthen

child protection systems would be further enhanced through effective partnerships. Concretizing partnerships, and increasing communication between formal and informal actors will be crucial in developing child protection systems, and determining necessary interventions by non-state actors.

- **Love with tenderness, not aggression:** Showing love for children is universal, but how that love is demonstrated is not. There is a high prevalence of children who suffer abuse from their parents and family members, claiming that they are hurt because they are loved. Love, education, instruction, and discipline are important, but harmful traditional practices that tolerate physical violence and verbal abuse must be abolished. Harmful traditional practices have been normalized, and this is a reality that must be targeted and reversed.

While there have been great strides made in the Latin America and Caribbean region, especially in the last decade, there is still a long way to go in protecting the rights of children. In many countries children still lack access to basic services and education. Until the right to basic needs is fulfilled, strengthening the other rights of children will be difficult. The region is diverse, and it is facing myriad challenges. No one answer will be suitable or comprehensive enough to begin to tackle the challenges that exist. However, despite the differences amongst the 10 countries in this first implementation of the ADAPT methodology, there are some unifying themes.



First, the countries in the region are all dedicated to improving the status of children and protecting their rights. The dedication by the governments in the 10 participating countries to legislating laws that protect children, and adhering to the international standards for child protection shows that there is a base on which to unify advocates of child rights.

Second, in all of the countries there is an active network of informal actors. These actors include international organizations like World Vision and UNICEF, community organizations, churches, and other faith-based organizations. The presence of these informal entities who are creating change on micro and macro levels will allow for a cohesive strategy to strengthen child protection systems that can be supported by both the governments in each of the 10 countries, as well as the informal actors who have high levels of visibility.

Though violence, poverty, and inequality will be substantial challenges to overcome, the ADAPT assessments do demonstrate that progress is being

made. More importantly, the ADAPT assessments shed light on the next steps to take and which paths to follow in considering building a campaign to strengthen child and adolescent rights and specifically protection from all forms of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean.



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