

Toward a Bolivian national policy for child friendly municipalities

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The Bolivian government is seeking to improve the social and economic conditions of its most vulnerable populations through greater inclusiveness and focus on human rights. To turn its vision into a reality at local and community levels, it has implemented development plans for municipalities, focusing on institution-building for local economic development and promotion of inclusive social policies. To achieve the latter goal, it notably put forward the promising Child and Adolescent Friendly Municipality (CAFM) initiative to make children's rights an integral part of local governance, which could announce an innovative shift in social policymaking.

The CAFM puts a municipal participatory model in place that involves the whole community in advancing measures to improve the quality of life and establish citizenship rights for children and youth. This initiative acknowledges that well-structured municipalities that show solidarity with and concern for their children and for the social dimensions affecting their human development have greater chances of delivering an effective human-centered development strategy. The CAFM sets social guidelines for dignified human life in society and creates pressure to adopt policies that protect and promote human rights that are essential to achieve an adequate standard of living.

In recent years, approximately 50 municipalities selected on the basis of poverty criteria have developed integrated social action plans promoting children's rights with the help of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). With an all-encompassing goal of social development, these plans organize the delivery of public services in the fields of education, health, sanitation, protection and capacity-building, among others. In some of these municipalities, UNICEF has also promoted a project to certify municipalities as "child and adolescent friendly." Overall, these experiences have helped establish the conceptual cornerstone and socioeconomic justification for the CAFM policy.

CAFM reflects a new development paradigm that recognizes that protecting and promoting children's rights is essential to creating the conditions for enhanced human development for future generations. It follows a bottom-up and participatory approach that gives community members -including children and youth- a key role in prioritizing the dimensions of well-being they want to integrate in the local development plan.

The rationale behind CAFM emerged from the acknowledgment of: (1) the role of the State in guaranteeing citizens' rights and implementing comprehensive policies to protect them; (2) the need for public policies that take children and youth into account as a condition for any sustainable development plan; (3) the lack of prioritization of children's rights in the past 15 years of municipal decentralization in a country where 47.2 per cent of the population is under 18 years old; (4) the absence of coordination between sectors on policies and actions in favour of children; (5) the poor coordination of international cooperation efforts; and (6) the fact that the newly created Ministry of Autonomy is mandated to promote, develop and implement decentralization policies, which will accelerate and deepen the existing process and establish new institutional guidelines for the future autonomous territories.

Thanks to its human rights-based approach, CAFM will be able to establish goals and indicators that cover six constitutive dimensions of children's well-being, including education, health, basic services, social protection, participation and communication, and institutional municipal development. Specific results and procedures indicators will be used to monitor municipal performance on each dimension. The overall achievements will determine whether a municipality can be certified as child friendly, as measured by the composite Child Friendly Municipal Index (CFMI) that integrates indicators linked to access and quality of services on all six dimensions. This index will capture the multidimensionality of children's well-being and their development opportunities, with a particular emphasis on the social determinants of poverty that characterize the human rights-based approach.

More specifically, the CFMI will build upon literature on the social determinants of health because it can provide a holistic approach to tackle poverty and vulnerability conditions. Indeed, there is strong evidence of the link between a population's socioeconomic situation and its health. To create a CFMI that provides the necessary information to address social gaps, research will have to focus on health inequalities. If it can foster a better understanding of the relationship between health and social conditions, this can be a huge step forward in the fight against poverty and inequality in Bolivia. It would also allow the country to implement more efficient social programs that better target vulnerable groups.

In sum, there is a need to start addressing the social determinants of poverty instead of their symptoms if Bolivia is to have a sustainable development strategy. Accordingly, the CAFM initiative will monitor indicators such as open-air garbage and dirt prevalence, delinquency and citizen security rates, or intra-household dynamics in order to explain child mortality for example, instead of only recording child mortality rates.

Hence, municipal certification will be based on a CFMI that looks at joint advances and accomplishments on the social minimum for various indicators. This is in line with a human rights-based approach, which states that all human rights are equal and interdependent and should therefore all be taken into account when assessing children's well-being.

It remains to be seen if CAFM will succeed as a national policy. But whatever the end result, the planning and implementation process of such a public policy represents a huge leap forward in terms of understanding social problems and finding ways to address them in a systemic manner by promoting social participation and focusing on human rights. Through this initiative, the Bolivian government is, deliberately or not, changing the paradigm of social policymaking and delivery.

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