

# BASES FOR THE FORMULATION OF A NATIONAL PLAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT\*

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## ***Abstract***

*This article sets up the preliminary and general foundations for a national plan of development for first childhood. With this purpose in mind, the arguments which uphold these foundations are bolstered by putting forth conceptual benchmarks of worldwide consensus. Later, a collection of the current national programs working in the field of child development is showcased, pointing out both their accomplishments and their shortcomings. Last, an outline for the design of public policy in this field is proposed, which acknowledges the growing concern to establish effective mechanisms through which first childhood can be understood as well as be contextualized psychosocially within the country*

***Key words:*** *First childhood, development, national plan, community, childhood.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

For some time, several civil society organizations have joined their efforts in order to advance in the understanding of the situation of children in Colombia as well as analyze and strengthen the public policy in order to contribute to the defense and promotion of children's rights in Colombia. Within this framework, growth during early childhood has been identified as one of high-priority amongst the set of policy, which, because of its importance and its particularities, demands special attention.

When it comes to speaking about early childhood development, it is important to highlight far beyond health and nutrition of children, the progressive deployment of a set of psycho-social capacities, a fundamental process in which the circumstances are important, specially during the first six years of life, even though it is understood that said deployment extends throughout the entire vital cycle. To achieve full development of such capacities is considered a fundamental right of children, according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and therefore, it is a responsibility of the family, society and the State to offer the contexts of socialization and an adequate care for said purpose.

This ideal is far from being reached, especially in developing countries. For this reason, development during early childhood continues to be one of the great world wide intentions and a fundamental basis in the construction of *a world fit for children*, as is titled the final Declaration of the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN, May 2001), where were renewed the commitments subscribed in the World Wide Summit in favor of the childhood in 1990.

This paper raises three great goals to achieve during the next ten years, the first one being “That children acquire a good foundation for the future, in a nurturing and safe environment that allows them to survive, stay physically healthy, mentally awake, emotionally safe and socially competent, and in conditions to learn” (United Nations 2001). Thus, development during the first years of life becomes strategic, since its promotion clearly contributes to a greater social fairness only possible with the improvement of opportunities for all. This purpose acquires the character of moral obligation in a country like Colombia, marked by poverty and social exclusion.

In 2001, Colombia had a calculated population of 4.849.561 children under five years of age (Ministerio de Salud, 2001) and an approximated 5.800.000 below the age of six, (13% of the general population), with a 2.6 rate of fertility (Profamilia 2000). Accordingly, in 2002 there would have been approximately a million new Colombians born. Since the fertility rate is much higher amongst the poorest sectors of the population (4 amongst women without education as contrary to 1.5 for University students) (Profamilia, 2000), most of these children are born in poverty, which could affect their development. If in 1997 fifty four percent of the population were below the line of poverty (Ministerio de Salud, 2001), this percentage could be well over 60% when it comes to children, and this situation could have worsened in recent years with the increase of social exclusion and the deterioration of the quality of life of the greater part of the population due to the social and the economic crisis that goes on in the country.

## **WHY A NATIONAL PLAN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD?**

At present, few people doubt the importance of care and attention for the youngest ones, because they are aware that without care and attention, survival and psycho-social development of young children can be at risk. Adults, parents and professionals of various disciplines recognize in this task a responsibility and an important social investment in both medium and long terms. Furthermore, the international community, governments and organizations of the civil society recognize the multiple benefits of public investment in programs for development of the early childhood.

Early childhood as the initial and basic period of human life deserves high priority and attention in governmental programs for several reasons:

### **Political and Legal Arguments**

Most governments worldwide and Colombia in particular, had compromised with the rights of children, elevating the commitments they acquired to constitutional principles when subscribing the CRC. Article 44 of the Constitution recognizes the fundamental rights of children (all of them related to its integral development). It establishes that it is mandatory for the State, society and the family to protect them against all forms of mistreatment and exploitation and is committed to fulfill the primordial interest of the child, declaring that “the rights of the children prevail over the rights of others”.

The CRC, as expressed by the Group on Childhood and Adolescence (1997), “does not only represent a universal consensus of normative character, it is the broadest in the history of human rights treaties. The Convention is also a political project that demands the definition of priorities and goals for public policies”. Therefore, the subscription of

the CRC and several later international agreements must be converted in real effective commitments.

The Convention change social ideas about childhood: children start to be recognized as citizens and social subjects in democratic contexts with rights; it also gives society and the State the role of stakeholders of the validity of this condition. In this frame, growth appears as one of the universal rights of children, turning it into an “asset” to which all must have access, independently of its personal or family condition.

This goes to assure the development of personality and individual capacities to each and every child, which means education, health, play, and participation in cultural activities (CRC, articles 24 to 31). The family, to which the primary affective bonding is attached, is considered as the main accountable entity in order to succeed in this process, as it is the primordial caretaker of the child and the one responsible for upbringing and educating the young members of society (article 18). The Convention also recognizes the relationship between the parents and the children as a fundamental support of the development of children (articles 9 and 10).

The Colombian State has promoted in previous decades national plans and programs for early childhood development and the subject has been incorporated in the most recent national plans of development as well as in numerous public documents, economic and social policies. Unfortunately the so called adjustment policy, economic crisis and the intensification of the armed conflict have affected the course of the public policy for childhood in the country, preventing its fortification and diminishing its impact.

## **Scientific Arguments**

Academic research has proved that first years of life are critical for the development of human being in all its aspects: biological, psychological and social. The accumulation of evidence contributed by studies of diverse nature in health areas, nutrition, sociology, psychology and education, among others, confirms:

- Prenatal period and first years of life have great impact later in the physical and socio-emotional development of children and, therefore, they are crucial for the structuring of personality, intelligence and social behavior.
- At birth, children already have physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills which serve as foundation for learning, communication, socialization and in general for the development of abilities, capacities and competences.
- It is critical to recognize and promote these skills at birth and even during the prenatal period; these stages are of enormous flexibility and crucial for development.
- The first year of life is basic when it comes to nutrition and physical growth, as well as the affective bonding with mother and father figures. Deficiencies in the health, physical and nutritional state often take risks in the child's development. On the other hand, a favorable affective bonding understood as the dyadic relationship mother-child at the beginning of life promotes an adequate physical, psycho-social and emotional development. Within the primary bonding, the paternal role must also be pointed out, equally affective as well as a regulator that contributes in a decisive way to social adaptation and the relationship with others.

- A minimal of nutrients is the biological basis upon a good psychological and social development relies.
- Brain cells grow rapidly during the first two or three years of life and within the same period, the neuronal connections proliferate. Brain development depends on the state of health and the quality of the relationships with others and the atmosphere that surrounds the child.
- Environmental conditions and specifically the ones related with the first socializing agents (families and people responsible for early caretaking) set the standard for later scholar failure or success.
- Biological, environmental or relational conditions are necessary but non-sufficient on their own. It is a fact that environmental conditions can affect the structural conditions of neuronal connections and vice versa.
- Great part of the cognitive development process determining the intelligence of the subject takes place before the age of seven; the same occurs to the socio-emotional processes that set the relational quality. Scholar failure is associated to insufficient attention during the first childhood.

### **Economic and Social Development Related Arguments**

There are also economic and social reasons justifying the investment in early childhood development. Given its impact in the dynamics of societies, said impact may be analyzed from a human development perspective, in terms of life quality and social fairness, and from economic benefits approaches measuring the productivity or income.

In the first case, a clear relationship between the promotion of early childhood development and human development, as the enlargement of opportunities and capacities of people proposed by Amartya Sen, can be established:

Human development can be expressed as the process of enlarging people's choices... The three most critical options are: to have a long and healthy life, to acquire knowledge, and to have access to minimal resources allowing a decent standard of life" (PNUD, 1990, p.15).

It is worth noting that when human development and not just economic development becomes the goal of society, then inequality, social exclusion, and the search for a general well-being become goals, and these guide the direction for early childhood development programs.

Human well being as a social purpose is the result of raising the life standards, the accomplishment of social justice and the enlargement of opportunities so that the population can develop its superior abilities as educated, healthy, participants and contributor citizens (United Nations, 1995, p. 90).

This way, people's life quality is placed in the center of the debate, for their opportunities of self-accomplishment and the exercise of their rights depend on it. The notion of life quality is not reduced to access to material goods and services (bound by income or wealth) since the conditions that encourage the unfolding of human capacities and its productive, recreational, cultural or political goals are emphasized. For that reason, the quality of life also requires the modern societies' so called intangible goods (security, social justice, identity and sense of belonging) (Corredor, 1995, p.40).

In this context, it is clear that the well-being of any person and children's in particular, is not reduced to survival (absence of disease and good nutrition) or to access to basic goods and services (drinkable water or basic health attention); neither can be considered a subject of income or wealth. Well-being is a condition needed so that citizens fulfill

their capacities in order to enjoy and to participate in the social life in a dignified way and realizing their own individual objectives (Sen, 2000).

Children's well being is not independent from the general well-being of the community to which they belong; in fact, it is affected by poverty, violence and social discrimination as shown in different studies. Therefore, in order to promote early childhood development, all the necessary material, social and cultural conditions must be available to assure a worthy life in which children's rights are respected, as well as their basics need satisfied.

A second assertion acknowledged by the World Bank (World Bank Institute, 2000) makes evident the relationship between early childhood development and the so called human capital, which is considered an important component in the modern economies for the construction of better societies. Human capital analysts have asked themselves, "What determines the possibility of success in a person's life?" And in that sense, "What determines their productivity?"

From this perspective, it is considered that societies benefit economically from the attention given to children during their first years of life because from that moment on, medium and long term conditions of productivity of citizens are constructed. Also, it is recognized that childhood development programs contributes to overcome the vicious circle that produces poverty, which in turn diversifies and each time makes more complex the needs for attention.

According to scientific arguments, success in the processes of development during early childhood echoes on scholar and academic performances, and at the same time impacts in the processes of employment generation that constitutes lastly the foundation of productivity. Similarly, promoting the development of children's capacities makes possible the existence of future adults able to contribute to the economy at home, community and society in general.

On the other hand, when taking care of early childhood development, some possibilities are promoted so that members of the family and other adults dedicated to their attention join labor or education, improving their chances to participate in social activities.

Moreover, taking care of development during early childhood contributes to prevent school desertion and diminishes the costs of repetition, programs of scholar reinforcement or psychological support. The same happens when it comes to the reduction of juvenile delinquency and drug addiction, which involves high rehabilitation. Cost-benefit studies of comparative investment in early childhood development during the pre-school stage, have shown differences in the criminality levels and demand for remedial social programs (World Bank Institute, 2000).

### **Social and Cultural Argument**

Important social changes in the world compel to think the ways of childhood attention and care, in order to offer an adequate support for the family in their task. Accordingly, the inclusion of women in the labor market, the transformations of the family structure and the diminishing of mortality rates increase the demand of educational, social and health programs addressed to the youngest ones. Besides, the social problem in

Colombia (that includes violence and poverty, displacement and childhood exploitation, among other factors) raises concrete urgent questions.

The inclusions of women in the workplace and the cultural changes opposing them to their more traditional roles have generated new relationships within the family group and have modified the traditional forms of care and attention of the youngest ones. It is no longer the mother's exclusive responsibility as the role of the father is also recognized and the participation of other socializing agents, such as members of the family group is accepted (grandmother, aunt, elder siblings) or people in charge of care-giving programs (communitarian mothers, educators).

These new forms of attention for the early childhood demand the strengthening of the paternal bond, and familial and communitarian support networks in order to avoid the increasing risk factors associated to mistreatment, abandonment or affective detachment, which in turn have consequences in the physical and mental health of the child.

The aggravation of armed conflict has also hit the family, communication structures, socialization contexts and early childhood development. Many children have lost one or both parents. Frequently they are displaced towards other regions of the country in dramatic conditions because of the separation and rupture of bonds, as well as the loss of physical and emotional security. When they relocate to a strange place, the families (most of them headed by female figures) have weak or non existent support networks to rely on. This in turn makes adequate attention of children more difficult; on the other

hand, poverty forces these children to assume productive roles affecting their education and individual development.

Disadvantageous conditions in which the first years of life of Colombian children occur constitute another reason for turning early childhood development into a social priority, as well as a condition for the preservation of cultural patrimony. Actually, when family and social networks are strengthened to assure the care and socialization of the youngest ones, this assures the conditions for the continuation of traditions, values and habits, through contact between generations.

### **Beyond all argument, an ethical subject**

To assure early childhood development is also a moral obligation, if it is understood that the reason for a public policy of childhood is its commitment with the construction of more fair and equitable societies. Thus, to assure children their right to develop is the best way to extend their opportunities in the society:

*To understand the human development as the enlargement of peoples' capacities implies to act on the initial endowments and to educate for the exercise of rights, so that they can be translated into quality of life (Corredor, 1999, p.55)*

Conceived as initial endowment, development during the early childhood stages is, at the same time, a condition and a result of the global project of human development in which actions and public policies are framed. This endowment encircles the idea of overall well-being. Such incorporates the survival, feeding and health, protection, psycho-social development, education, benefit of the cultural goods and the exercise of social rights such as participation.

The relationships necessary to assure the well-being and total development of children promote the creation of a subject who is able to exercise his or her rights and to respect those of the others; in other words they are fundamental in the education of new citizens. Also, early childhood development guarantees the emergence and strengthening of indispensable capacities needed to participate in social life, fighting the so called “citizenship poverty”, in the sense of Eduardo Bustelo:

*The poor are not only those victims, one way or another, of a bad income or wealth distribution, but also those whose material and immaterial resources do not allow them to fulfill the social demands and habits that are demanded from them as citizens. That's why poverty is, mainly, poverty of citizenship. (Bustelo, 1999, p. 41).*

Citizenship poverty is expressed in multiple ways: exclusion, marginality, low participation in social and political life, unemployment and underemployment among others. For children, this means fragile conditions for their development as individuals and in most cases, few opportunities to fully become members of society.

From the previous reflections, it may be concluded that, because of the effect it has over development, understood as cultural capital, education and caring for the youngest members of society plays an important role in the extension of certain cognitive, social and emotional capacities inherent to the conditions of citizens of the contemporary world. These abilities can be developed in all children, since they do not rely on special talents but fundamentally on the quality of life and the so called cultural capital, term used by some sociologists and economists to designate the result of the processes of family and scholar socialization.

## **HOW TO UNDERSTAND CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT?**

In general terms, there is a general consensus amongst different disciplines and different institutions about what we mean when we talk about childhood development.

Integrity, complexity, continuity and sequentiality, multidimensionality, holistic and accumulative natures are common criteria; likewise, biological and social determinants are widely recognized as having some effect on development<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, there is no doubt about the developing subject active role, as he or she is an essential part of the process. It is not about a passive agent molded by its surroundings, but rather one that interacts with its present capacities so that such interaction helps consolidate new ones.

Child development is, first of all, a complex process that takes place in the child conceived as a biological and socio-cultural subject. Under the perspective of complex processes, infantile development is conceived as a whole integrating change of diverse natures, and as an evolutionary sequence of complexity, not necessarily lineal. On the other hand, it has been recognized that aspects related to biological growth and socio-cultural factors, and the development, are mutually determinant of each other. Besides, it is important to note down that childhood development is also a result, a product of the relationships which take place in the contexts of daily socialization, which is the reason why it can be object of an attention plan.

Although childhood development is conceived as a whole, for analytical purposes it can be decomposed into sub-processes. This way, one speaks about childhood development in different areas or interdependent dimensions: cognitive, social, emotional, linguistics and motion. Nevertheless, such totality is not the simple sum of the above mentioned areas; it is the interaction of different dimensions which simultaneously develop, even if they do not act synchronically. Actually, nowadays we recognize important differences in the levels of development reached in each dimension or area, which leads to the

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<sup>1</sup> It is not a question here of biological or environmental determinism, but to indicate the components in which development is sustained in an interactive way.

acceptance of a certain specificity, as it would happen while playing a score where each instrument plays its part, compliments the others and, at the same time, takes part in the totality of the score.

Since temporality appears here as a central subject, it is important to point out that chronological age is a relative criterion: childhood development does not have to be understood only as a set of behaviors associated with age. Nevertheless, parameters of development are a useful and valid tool to guide the observation and recognition of the child's needs for attention, since these vary accordingly to the stage of development.

To recognize the developing child as a biological and socio-cultural subject implies accepting the importance of contextual factors and the way they affect his or her development. While nutrition and health gives the biological foundations the contexts of socialization (family, institution, community) sets the social foundation; all are necessary conditions for children development. Childhood development cannot be separated from biological processes, as the physical and intellectual growth, nor from socio-cultural dynamics, as the relationships with other people and the experiences with the social and cultural world, inherent to the socialization process.

Childhood development then somehow refers to social development, because the idea of childhood development transcends the individual to penetrate the group. The child develops into a human being with an individual and cultural identity; he becomes socially and personally productive (Sandoval, 1996). For that reason, full development during the childhood stages contributes to improve life conditions, understood here as the strengthening of the ability to acquire important cultural skills; acquisition of

behaviors that allow them to work effectively within their present context; acquisition of behaviors that allow them to adapt successfully in conditions of change (World Bank Institute, 2000).

To consider the development as a universal right of children as has been declared by the International Convention, makes it an obligation for the family, society and the State to guarantee the conditions for its accomplishment. This way, development stops being a subject of individual endowments to become a collective responsibility which can be acted upon, and this in turn provides the foundations for the design of public policy in this field.

### **Significance of a plan for the attention to childhood development**

The design of actions meant to promote early childhood development has had a clear evolution in both Colombian and world-wide contexts, certainly because of the close relationship that exists between the design of the plans and goals and the way of understanding childhood development.

In the Colombian case, those who have been key participants in the formulation of plans and programs recognize in this field the way this concept has progressed and, the proper ways to approach childhood development in the country: Colombia has come a long way from assisting frameworks centered on survival, on health and nutrition, to proposals that add to the previous the recognition of the present capacities and potentials of the child, in a social and community context, until more recent approaches, including the notion of citizenship and subject of rights (Ortiz, 2001).

Today, in the formulation of plans for early childhood development the complexity of the subject is recognized, as occurs with the acknowledgment of its importance in order to obtain social goals widely known. Its character as an area where social intervention is possible, points out the possibility to advance actions for its promotion. These actions must be oriented towards the direct attention of children and the improvement of the contexts of socialization (family, institutions and community) in which development takes place, in order to turn them into scenarios of democratic formation, in which both children and adults can find better opportunities. This way, childhood and social development appear closely related.

To offer opportunities for childhood development is the first step, and it implies social intervention over multiple factors of the context: basic health as guarantee for better health; feeding practices, caretaking practices, and health care; access to basic services; and educational opportunities and cultural enjoyment among others. Since early childhood development takes place in the interaction with people and objects in a socializing context, it is important to think about the atmospheres, spaces, materials and mainly, in the quality of the relationships with adults, all in the daily practices of taking care of the children.

An attention plan for early childhood development must include all the participants (children, adolescents, young people and adults: mothers, fathers and caretakers) and the relationships among them in the specific contexts (kindergarten, households, community homes, parks, markets, theaters , etcetera), and it must be oriented towards assuring the well-being of children and the promotion of their rights. In the present, an attention plan for early childhood development would have to go beyond the simple

offer of social programs of initial education or nutrition and health, like the vaccination and prevention of the most common diseases, in order to promote cultural changes in the way to relate us with our children.

## **THE COLOMBIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

Since their first formulations in 1970, programs oriented toward early childhood have had important transformations as a result of diverse dynamics: the new social realities of the Colombian childhood, development of concepts and directions for intervention, the models of economic development and the tendencies rising from the globalization processes, modernization and decentralization of the State.

In fact, since the so called National Policy for the Attention of the Minor in 1979, until the latest National Plans for Development, there has been a long stretch in the conceptualization and design of the plans and programs. In a few years it went from a welfare approach, oriented towards improving childhood survival to become better, to approaches centered in human development and, more recently, to the general frame of citizenship and rights of the children.

Although the creation of the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF) and the appearance of the Preschool Centers of Integral Attention make a good start, in the mid 1980s an effort was articulated in order to transcend those of a single institution. Diverse analysts agreed that the National Plan for the Survival and the Childhood Development (*Supervivir*), adopted by

presidential decree in February, 1985, was the beginning in the construction of a policy for early childhood development, due to its integral glance.

*Supervivir* was an innovating proposal in many ways: the concept of a health process, the role it attributed to people's practices and knowledge, its inter-sectorial perspective and, of course, its methodological strategies, were subjects introduced for the first time in the state and social actions in favor of the childhood. In the field of childhood development, the features and manuals made by *Supervivir* put their stress on the role of affective bonding, adequate stimulation and play, promoting thus new forms for adults and children to relate.

In the framework of *Supervivir* a study was made for the design and normalization of the abbreviated scale of development (1988-1990). This was a test instrument oriented toward the early detection of impediments and risks for childhood development, addressed to health professionals and to those in charge of consulting growth and development in particular. Aside from its scientific value, this work is an expression of the importance granted in that moment to the promotion of childhood development.

Thanks to its inter-sectorial perspective, *Supervivir* got several actions of the educational sector involved, one of which is the Program of Health Watchers (*vigías de la salud*), with high school students, and the Family Education Program for Childhood Development (PEFADI) (Ministry of National Education agreement-ICBF-Unicef 1985) addressed to the rural population. These two programs share as their fundamental strategy the education of the family and the promotion of changes in the know-how and practices of the adults responsible for the care and the education of little children.

Between 1987 and 1998, PEFADI developed actions in more than 100 municipalities and around 3.500 surroundings located in thirty two departments, mobilizing officials of diverse institutions and representatives of rural communities. They were able to get normal schools involved and did an important work with the teachers of rural schools and the parents, strengthening the communitarian component of the “New School” concept.

The emphasis in formal preschool education in the general educational law and the establishment of the mandatory preschool grade since 1995 contributed to weaken the initiative of the Ministry of National Education, to prompt communitarian actions oriented towards promoting early childhood development, a task that went almost entirely to the ICBF. In the opinion of some of its participants, little by little the initial impulse of *Supervivir* weakened, in good part due to the little capacity of the Ministry of Health to institutionalize and to decentralize the strategy. The proposal wore down until it almost completely faded away with the restructuring of the State, towards 1992. This gradual abandonment allows us to see a leap in the decrease of the childhood mortality rates and in the health related indicators, between the decades of 1980 and 1990. In the field of development, these tendencies cannot be evaluated, because there is a lacking of indicators and statistical series. Nevertheless, certain continuance of the program of Growth and Development in the health sector should be recognized, since it has incorporated concepts of integral development, transcending the emphasis in the diseases and promoting an integral look of the health and childhood development, just as proposed today in the Integral Health Program for the Infancy of the Inter-institutional Group for the Programs of Health of the Child in Antioquia and in the

document elaborated by the Social Pediatrics group of the National University of Colombia for the District Secretary of Health of Bogotá (Castro and Duran, 1998).

At the same time *Supervivir* was set in motion, in the end of 1982<sup>2</sup> the ICBF adopted the Communitarian Homes of Welfare (CHW) program as the principle strategy of attention to the children below the age of seven. This decision was preceded by the experience of over ten years in the Centers of Attention of Preschool strategy (known today as childhood homes) and the recognition and impulse of other strategies for early childhood development in several regions of the country. This last process was given the name New Modalities, because of its emphasis in the search of less formal alternatives, which could strengthen the traditional forms of attention of the children with the involvement of the family and community.

Since its initial formulation, CHW incorporated the perspective of early childhood development as its central purpose, collecting the advances of the ICBF experience in other programs. Thus, CHW was defined as:

*The set of actions of the State and of the community, addressed to favor the psychosocial, moral and physical development of the children under the age of seven belonging to sectors of extreme poverty, by means of the stimulus and support to their socialization process, and the improvement of nutritional and living conditions (ICBF, 1990).*

This emphasis explains the interest of the Institute in child development, which was summarized in its support to the publication and diffusion of the document “*Childhood Development: A Conceptualization from the ICBF (1990)*” and subsequently, to the execution of the national study for the construction of the “*Qualitative Appraisal Scale of Childhood Development (1992-1993)*”. These documents became national guidelines

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<sup>2</sup> On that date, the national Council of Social and Economic Policies (Conpes) approved the national plan of fight against the absolute poverty, which incorporated the program of communitarian homes in close relationship with *Supervivir*.

for the design of strategies and monitoring of the psychosocial development and pedagogical components of the program.

Starting as a modality of the CHW and then as an independent program, in the 1990s the ICBF started to build another strategy for the promotion of childhood development, this time oriented towards the expectant mothers or with children younger than two years: the program FAMI, which incorporates educational activities with the children, the mothers and other relatives.

The CHW expanded all through the country, reaching an extensive coverage close to a million children of the poorest strata, and concentrating significant resources for several years. The CHW also became a bigger social achievement: it implied a distribution of wealth in favor of the children, a matter that contributed to change the social culture of the country. After that, we began to think beyond the working class, in the less favored ones, creating an alternative against the iniquity.

Unfortunately, those achievements were not accompanied by a process that assured the implementation of all the thoughts and basic orientations with which it was conceived, with serious consequences to its quality; this situation was evidenced by the evaluation of impact carried out in 1996 with World Bank funding, as well as with the findings of other studies and evaluations of the Community Welfare Homes.

In spite of the numerous criticisms of the CHW, analysts agree that it is an important experience that should be qualified, keeping in mind, amongst other things, the social

role and cultural transformations it can comply, surpassing the nutritional and minimum care functions which it seemed to have been reduced to.

### **Lessons learned**

As can be observed, between 1985 and 1995 the country came a long way in the promotion of a national policy for early childhood development. In this period there were not only designed and put in practice diverse strategies and programs, but, also, managed to create a favorable context for research, design of materials and instruments, the exchange of experiences and the consolidation of intervention models. All of them, thanks to the efforts addressed towards achieving inter-sector coordination, local initiatives, systematization of experiences, social mobilization and the production of knowledge.

The importance of the aforementioned programs has been internationally recognized, as well as in all the key documents for the creation of public policies of childhood in the country: since the Pafi (1992), passing to the Conpes document "The time of the children" (1995), until arriving to the report presented by Colombia as balance of the 1990-2000 decade before the international community. Even though there are some differences in emphasis or concepts among them, all of these papers coincide in indicating the existence of an accumulated capital in the country in the field of early childhood development, in spite of the weakening of the policies.

This weakening contrasts remarkably with the dynamics of many regional initiatives that continue to develop to strategies and contribute with an important experience. Such is the case of projects as *Promesa* (Promise) in Antioquia and Chocó, Project Costa

Atlántica in communities of Atlántico and Bolívar; and *Gestación, Infancia y Desarrollo Humano* in Caldas, among others.

The experiences accumulated, both national and regional, allow us to affirm that the country counts on a significant knowledge on the promotion of early childhood development, knowledge that is also up to date in conceptual aspects, successful strategies (play, adequate stimulation, emotional bonding, work with parents) and the development of personal instruments for the evaluation of childhood development, among others.

The major advances in matter of programs for early childhood development were achieved while counting with political will and State initiative. When these conditions changed, the national programs entered a phase of lost dynamism, quality deterioration or disappearance.

### **PROPOSAL OF FEATURES OF A NATIONAL PLAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

According to the proposal, it is necessary and urgent for the country to formulate a public policy of childhood, which transcends the defense of the vulnerable rights of some children to look at the situation of the childhood in general, in a country where multiple forms of being children coexist. Said policy should include a plan for early childhood development, one whose objective is to guarantee the full right of actual children to develop as well as for those who will be born in the future, giving them a fair beginning in their transit through life.

Understanding the integral development of children as an essential social need, we propose to make early childhood development one of the priorities of the social policy, in order to build a more democratic and fair society, in which the childhood is the axis of civic construction. Having a high childhood population should not be seen as a problem, it should be seen as a potential for wealth. To invest in the childhood is to invest in both the present and the future.

The Plan should be based on the following principles: solidarity, equity, universality, flexibility, holism (in two senses: holism of the services and of the subject), participation, sustainability and joint responsibility (understood as the obligation shared among the State, society and the family to guarantee the children better conditions for their development).

The superior interest of the children (which places before any decisions concerning them the promotion and protection of their rights) should be principal axis of the Plan, which, though it should start at the principle of universality, it should also maintain the historic tendency of attending primarily the childhood sectors that are in greater risk due to their extreme poverty situation or because they belong to groups in disadvantage situation (children of parents in misery; adolescent mother or father; poor women head of family; sons or daughters of sexual workers; delinquents; drug dependents; inhabitants of the street; abandoned children, abused, exploited, with disabilities or limitations, with growth or development retardation, victims of violence, displaced people or victims of natural disasters).

It is proposed to rescue the achievements obtained and lessons learned obtained in the different local, regional and national experiences implemented in the country, to develop, from the know-how acquired, strategies, projects and sustainable programs available to all the population, adapted to the local and regional needs, respectful of cultural differences that promote equality, improve the social inclusion and allow to achieve the most extensive coverage, with quality and warmth.

The main aim is that the strategies, projects and programs respond to the potential of development of the childhood, their needs and the demands of the present and future worlds, as well as the challenges of the globalization and the scientific revolution, and to contribute to diminish the negative effects of poverty and put the stress in their development, emphasizing on the prevention and anticipation of problems, rather than their correction.

It is intended to guarantee to all children, no matter the gender, the necessary learning so that they can fully exercise their rights, be active partners in a constructive and lasting effort (not only passive receivers of charity), builders of fair, equitable and peaceful societies.

It is acknowledged that the first responsibility of the attention to children is in the household, but the support of the local community and of the State is required so that the families, especially the most vulnerable, acquire the knowledge, the confidence and the organization skills required to attend the needs for survival and development of their children. Especially important is the development of actions directed to improve the welfare of women.

We propose to work with five complementary foci, according to the results of national and local experiences in different countries: 1) direct attention; 2) reinforcement of the institutions; 3) education of those who tend to the children; 4) community development centered in the children; and 5) strengthening of the conscience and demands (Myers, 1999).

The projects and programs that develop should be participatory, built from inside the communities, and flexible, so that they adapt to the different socio- cultural contexts of the country and be supported by the diverse local forms to face the attention of children and promote their development. For the public construction of a plan as the one that is proposed, it is necessary to rethink the traditional hierarchy among policy designers, executors and beneficiary families.

Since the earlier the positive intervention is, the greater and more lasting in time the impact obtained will, a plan for early childhood development must provide the expectant families with the best conditions during the gestation, labor and the puerperium, preparing the new mothers and fathers for the rearing and the loving and responsible care.

Once the child is born, he or she needs the attention and care of his/her two parents, which implies that they must have time for their care, particularly during the first year and in critical moments like the attention of illnesses. It is necessary to develop policy strategies and a legal framework that facilitate this time for both parents, primarily for the mothers.

The first right of a child is the right to an identity, and therefore a public policy that allows the quick inscription in the civil registration of all the children born in the country should receive priority.

The maternal lactation guarantees to the new being the necessary nutrients during the first six months of life, as well as the indispensable physical contact, promotes emotional strong bonds and stimulates its integral development; subsequently, it continues to be the basis of the child's diet until he or she reaches 2 years of age. Currently, the country faces the problem of the short duration of nursing for most of its infants; therefore, it is a priority to promote nursing using all the available media.

A Plan for early childhood development should be joined closely to the National Plan of Diet and Nutrition, not only in its component of promotion of maternal lactation, but in everything that has to do with adequate nutrition during childhood. It must comprise the construction of healthy eating habits for children starting in their family environment; the prevention and specific protection set against the deficiency of micro-nutrients, with special attention to iron and vitamin A; an integral nutritional education for children, teachers and attendants; surveillance of the nutritional state for the expectant mother and unborn child; the prevention and control of food poisoning; the guarantee that children consume safe and harmless food; the inclusion of children with nutritional deficit in programs of aid and food assistance; and the promotion of programs of food supplementation and fortification for the younger ones with specific lacks.

Such a plan must rescue the development of different strategies in detection and attention of child abuse in the country, as well as the promotion of good treatment, providing family, community and institutional environments in which children are respected, loved and protected and the exercise of their rights be guaranteed, by means of strategies that improve the quality of the treatment in the institutions, promote the massive diffusion and in all the activities the mandate of good treatment, protecting mistreated, exploited or abused children, and promoting a culture of good treatment in all of society.

The construction of a more tolerant, more democratic and less violent society, that is today a national urgency, starts by guaranteeing the new beings, since the moment of conception, some minimum living conditions, as well as an upbringing based on love and respect, a family and a community that protect them and a society and a State that are attentive of them. An upbringing that foments respectful, free beings who love themselves as well as others will create supportive individuals, builders of peace and democracy, creative, resilient, and, of course, productive to society.

It is fundamental to build a respectful civic conscience of children's rights, which turn their socialization and formation into a social priority and a responsibility of all, process in which the same children should be involved, the families, the people attending them, the public officials and the society in general. Also, to form a culture that promotes worthy living conditions for all citizens, and to promote collective and individual changes in the ways of life and in the practices and guidelines of upbringing, that facilitate and promote an integral development of the new generations, and to fortify values such as solidarity, tolerance and respect for the others.

Since the family is the fundamental environment for child development, it is necessary that all the programs and strategies emphasize its work with them, permanently training parents and attendants, to strengthen the emotional bonds and the protective role of the family.

For children to develop adequately, it is necessary that they remain in friendly environments that stimulate their development, significance, minimum sanitary conditions such as aqueduct, drinking water, sewer system and adequate garbage disposal, as well as accessible buildings of quality that are also functional, secure, hygienic, illuminated, ventilated, warm, with minimum contamination, as well as adequate public spaces to the childhood's characteristics and needs. The physical environment where children remain should be improved, which up to now has been secondary in the plans and programs directed to the early childhood.

Since in the first year of life and in the early childhood the illnesses and health problems seriously affect the life of the children and their families, with important repercussions in their growth and development, a Plan for early childhood development should go closely connected with the policies of health, and comprise, at least, the following aspects as for promotion of the health and prevention of the illness: massive diffusion of measures of promotion and prevention; guarantee that children receive the activities of health promotion and disease prevention included in the *Plan Obligatorio de Salud* (contributive and subsidized) and in the basic attention plans; the development of activities for the early detection of health problems; incorporation of aspects of the health promotion and prevention of illness in the curriculum of preschool and initial education; training in promotion and prevention for the families and the people

responsible for the attention of the children; a greater vaccination coverage; epidemiological surveillance of priority events in childhood health. It should also assure that the children receive fast and opportune attention, with quality and warmth and without any discrimination to one or other health plan, guaranteeing them treatment and full rehabilitation to those that are sick, applying strategies of favorable attention for it, like *Aiepi* program (*Atención Integrada a las Enfermedades Prevalentes de la Infancia*, Integral Attention for Infantile Prevalent Diseases). Likewise, their linking to the social security system is priority.

It is fundamental to empower the actions that had been carried out for several decades in the health sector, towards the promotion of growth and harmonic development, as well as in the early detection and in the opportune management of the alterations of both growth and development. These actions have turned second to the prioritization of attention of the illness, and consequently they have lost important opportunities for the children, their families and the country, because of the high economic and social cost it has for the families and the State to not detect and handle said alterations opportunely.

All children with development problems or special education needs due to a certain degree of limitation or disability have the right to access the processes of habilitation and rehabilitation that allow them to improve their potentialities of development, to be integrated to the society and to be productive and active citizens. Then the early detection of said disabilities is fundamental as well as the opportune and integral attention that comprises their psychological, social, cultural, and family aspects. They should be integrated to the different strategies, projects and programs that come around, having their incorporation to them as a priority, which should be facilitated, and

physical, economic and cultural access promoted. The families should receive training from certified personnel for the attention and care of their children.

For children ages 1 to 3 it is necessary to develop strategies of support to the families, be of formal or informal types, which facilitate the conditions for a responsible upbringing and an adequate development. They can combine strategies according to the possibilities and local resources, which comprise: household-based programs, which cover support and education to the families; institutional-based programs, which include care and education; and community based programs, which contemplate support and education. The country has developed strategies of the three types, but for this particular age group, the household-based are predominant, and these are not always the ones that the community or the families need.

For children ages 3 to 5 the developing countries have the goal to progressively achieve the implementation of a preschool education, as already given in other contexts. Currently, Colombia has an acceptable institutional public offer, even with some service problems, and limited in its coverage. A greater effort is necessary; the challenge is to revive and modernize the existing programs, shifting from the attention centered in care and nutrition, which were the aspects emphasized at the end of the twentieth century, to the attention centered in the development, without neglecting the two other aspects. The existing institutions should be more sensitive to the demand of the different socio-cultural groups that inhabit the country, surpassing the traditionally rigid institutional offering, and they should be projected more to help the communities and the families, promoting the strengthening of social support networks to the families and the reconstruction of an entire social web round the care and protection of the childhood.

The institutional teams should try to transfer the accumulated knowledge in academic and institutional practice, so that the communities devise their own knowledge and produce as much adequate interventions as possible, within the framework of their own cultural specificity.

In an analysis about the communitarian homes program (Cinde-Unicef, 2001) is said that it is urgent to revise the training, monitoring and evaluation of the communitarian mothers strategies. Without a doubt, training and suitability of the adult attendants for children in the different plans and programs is a critical point. It is necessary to redefine the current pedagogical model within the institutions, and in connection to this approach revise the training and the knowledge that these people handle. In order for this redefinition to be effective one must seek to diminish the distance among programs, designers and executors, which at times is so big that a change in a program can delay years in benefiting the users, if not to benefit them at all.

Another aspect that should be revised is the criteria and ways of access to projects and programs, to avoid frequent exclusions that currently limit the access of children who needs them, as in the case of the integration to the regular programs of disabled children or with critical social problems. It is necessary to carry out an active search of children in critical situations in every community and to prioritize his/her entrance to these programs. The institutions or centers of attention for early childhood development should be articulated to it with the system of protection, complying, besides their traditional functions, with the protection of these children.

For children ages 5 and 6 a transition degree in private and public institutions was established, which signified a very positive advance since the last decade; nevertheless, the goals of proposed coverage did not comply and the country has still a great debt that should be settled with this age group, in the following years. The recognized challenge, to improve quality in basic education, begins with having a first year of school life in the best conditions, which supports foundations for a much more promising educational future.

A few years ago, a debate began about the depth and the quality of the basic education, given that in previous years the educational policies were centered in coverage. It is important to learn from historic errors and not to repeat them; the present emphasis in the public programs that have to do with preschool and initial education is to achieve the access of more children to the same one, and little is debated on its quality. It is necessary to implement strategies of systematization and of evaluation, as much of processes as of results, of the initial education and of the preschool education, that also comprise evaluations of each of the programs and officials responsible for the same, just as is proposed today with basic education. In order for this to happen, short, medium and long term goals need to be established as well as some indicators, resuming knowledge on the matter. The evaluation will allow strengthening and developing the programs, by recognizing the advances and achievements, and also the gaps and needs.

It is necessary to develop both an information system that permits the continuous monitoring of the different projects and programs that are being carried out, as well as of the situation of childhood development in the country, that utilizes a set of definite

indicators and that clearly establishes the sources and mechanisms of harvesting information.

Citizen control can become a key element in the evaluation and improvement of the quality of the different programs. Who better than the families, the communities and the same children to say how much use does a program or intervention has? The communities must be empowered in this function, given technical elements and knowledge so that they can do a constructive checking of the different projects and programs, that at the same times gives them opportunities to do their contributions to the development.

For monitoring and consolidation of the plan, the promotion and investigation of lines of development are necessary, as much in the analysis of situation as in the evaluation of strategies, projects and programs, that be constituted in a support for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of the plan, facilitating academic knowledge serving social policy, strengthening networks and scientific communities wind up to the development of the childhood.

A plan as the one that is proposed should include a well qualified human team for its implementation, and for this there should be links established with the institutions, shapers of human resources, in seeking their commitment to the formation of professionals and technical experts in children's rights, their process of growth and development, the practices of upbringing and the pedagogical strategies for the work with children, families and communities. It is also necessary to work with the secondary school, technical and university education institutions, to include in the curriculum

teaching related to the upbringing, fatherhood, motherhood, the child development and the rights of children.

It is indispensable also to count with pedagogical support material in the different projects and programs, which though today is partly produced in the country, has not been very widely diffused. A line of work in materials of support should be established at low cost and high-quality, easily accessible to all of those interested.

As the media supply a fundamental role in children's socialization, is necessary to present some clear features on media and childhood, so that they play a positive role in their development. Particularly, it is necessary to impact in the contents of television, which today sees the children more as potential consumers than as users who benefit from it. The media also has great influence on parents and attendants and on the community in general, and for this it should constitute a key element of a strategy of promotion of a respectful culture of the rights of children and of promotion of better conditions for their development.

The plan should be cost friendly and sustainable through time. The resources for the early childhood programs have diminished in recent years; therefore, it is necessary to do an economic effort, to maintain or to increase the para-fiscal and other existing resources, or to seek new resources, public and private, taking advantage of the great assembly power that childhood investment has in the communities; to negotiate international supports, to commit businessmen and citizens in general, to motivate local resources without overloads or exclusion of the families of little resources (this mistake has been made before).

To increase the quantity of investment is not sufficient, since just as important is its quality. The different projects and programs should be viable from the financial and cost-efficient point of view, seeking to promote to the maximum the existing resources. To establish this it is necessary to do cost-benefit evaluations of the existing and prospects for all new projects that develop. The indicators of social impact should guide the priorities of investment; the resources should be where the needs and the problems are, which means that zones and the populations of higher risk should receive priority.

The needs and potentialities of childhood are not sufficiently known and recognized by the community in general and by the policy establishment in particular: it is urgent to pass a "law" for it among the communities, leaders, businessmen and all the social sectors, to visualize the children as the beings in development, that need the solidarity and the support of the adult company.

A plan as this should have an institution, person or people responsible for its development, with a clear definite leadership, at the same time that an inter-sectorial network of support groups. In the local environment authorities, the organized community, public institutions and non-governmental organizations should be linked to a group that can be articulated with the Local Counsels of Social Policy, in order to take charge of the plan and to control its implementation, seeking a complementary action of the different participants.

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