

La Muralla Soy Yo: Combatting commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Colombia

UNICEF Colombia

The partnership

La Muralla Soy Yo ('I Am the Wall') is a campaign, funded largely by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), to prevent the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in the city of Cartagena, Colombia. The campaign is carried out by a partnership including UNICEF, the Cartagena Tourism Corporation, COTELCO, Colombia's largest association of tourism hotels, the University of Cartagena and the Fundación Renacer, a national non-governmental organization that for nearly a quarter of a century has been dedicated to preventing the sexual exploitation of children and youth and working to rehabilitate its victims. Through awareness-raising and training activities, the campaign has built an alliance of committed partners to identify and prevent sexual exploitation of young people.

The challenge

Tourism is the main economic activity in Cartagena, one of Colombia's top tourist destinations. On the country's north coast, it is a popular beach resort and has a walled old town that has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since the mid-1980s. Besides regular influxes of tourists, however, the city has also absorbed a large proportion of the people internally displaced by the country's ongoing armed conflict, and a high percentage of its population lives in poverty. In this context, commercial sexual exploitation – mainly among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, such as the Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations – has become a significant problem.

Because private tourism businesses – including hotels, restaurants, bars and transport services – have benefited economically from the growth of tourism, many have preferred to turn a blind eye to this illegal activity, and some have indirectly facilitated it. An initial analysis of the dynamics surrounding commercial sexual exploitation and its causes revealed that hotel receptionists, taxi drivers and street vendors, often act as intermediaries in the sexual exploitation. The whole community, including the tourism businesses and other relevant actors, had not recognized the issue as a problem, mostly due to lack of knowledge and information, among other factors.



In order to address the problem, mobilizing the tourism industry, whether its formal sector (tour operators, travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, bars) or its informal sector (carriage drivers, taxi drivers, vendors, guides), and strengthening the capacity of authorities was crucial.

Background

Before *La Muralla Soy Yo* was established in 2008, several attempts had been made to put an end to the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Cartagena. These initiatives had limited success for several reasons. Firstly, interventions were often isolated and not based on a full understanding of the issue and the actors involved. In addition, tourism businesses did not recognize their indirect role and therefore did not seek to prevent commercial sexual exploitation.

The campaign developed by UNICEF and Fundación Renacer, the main local NGO working on the exploitation issue, was named *La Muralla Soy Yo* in reference to Cartagena's surrounding walls. Just as they had protected the city for two centuries, the campaign would construct a barrier of public, private and civil society stakeholders to protect children and adolescents from commercial sexual exploitation. It would build the commitment and capacity of tourism businesses and their employees to act as prevention agents and would raise awareness of the issue among the community and tourists.

In parallel to the campaign, UNICEF advocated at national level to strengthen legislation in order to ensure adequate punishment of offenders. UNICEF also leveraged its engagement with the private sector and its close working relationship with local authorities and civil society to bring the actors together. In addition, UNICEF was able to bring financial support to the initiative by redirecting some of the proceeds of its Latin-America-wide *Huésped de Corazón* (Guest with a Heart) fundraising initiative.¹

The other key partners in the campaign contributed their expertise, networks and technical capabilities. Fundación Renacer,² with its decades of experience working to prevent commercial sexual exploitation and its experience as the only organization in Colombia accredited to certify the tourism industry with The Code,³ as well as its knowledge of the local context and communication capacity, played a crucial role in raising awareness. COTELCO also played a central role by organizing training events to familiarize its affiliates with the seriousness of the problem and their role in preventing it. The Cartagena Tourism Corporation, a public-private entity, convened key actors to raise their awareness of the problem of exploitation. The University of Cartagena facilitated a diploma course for tourism operators and policemen on commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

¹ Huésped de Corazón gives hotel guests the opportunity of adding the equivalent of US\$1 to their hotel bill as a donation to UNICEF to help meet the Millennium Development Goals.

² Fundación Renacer is the Colombian partner of End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT International).

³ The Code is an international, industry-driven initiative that joins the tourism sector and children's rights organizations to promote responsible tourism and prevent child sexual exploitation at tourism destinations.

Activities

Once the commitment of the key actors had been secured, partners undertook the following activities:

- Increasing skills through training: More than 70 police officers and 71 informal tourism operators were trained using the University of Cartagena's diploma course. Specific training events were also organized for more than 3,000 hotel staff, government agents, police officers and judges, among others.
- Raising awareness through sensitization events and materials: Information sessions on child rights run by Fundación Renacer helped to sensitize more than 600 children and adolescents from the most vulnerable neighbourhoods and to develop their life skills and self-esteem. More than 300 parents from these neighbourhoods were also informed on child rights, gender equality and commercial sexual exploitation. Communication materials were distributed widely to communities, tourists and the media.
- Mobilizing tourism actors through coordination: for example, COTELCO, Colombia's largest hotel association, incorporated the prevention of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents as a policy for all its members.
- Standard-setting through certification: 64 tourism-related businesses, such as hotels, restaurants and discotheques, had received The Code certification by July 2012.

Results

One of the main outcomes of *La Muralla Soy Yo* was to increase reporting of cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. By mid-2012, more than 80 cases had been reported to the Colombian justice system, many of them by informal tourism operators, an indication that the problem has gained attention and is recognized as a reportable offense. This was made possible through changes in legislation to fully penalize sexual exploitation and establish a system for reporting incidences as well as for the care of affected children and adolescents. As a result, the community's ability to more confidently take action to protect children and young people was reinforced.

Moreover, as the number of tourism-related businesses certified by The Code rose from one in 2008 to 64 in 2012, Cartagena became the city with the largest number of certified businesses in the world. For tourism businesses, being associated with the campaign and certified with The Code became essential to demonstrate their corporate responsibility and ensure the viability of their businesses.



Beach vendors



Taxi drivers

The campaign successfully reached out across the diverse tourism sector to promote social change and spur the tourism industry to fight a problem that had been largely overlooked. Notably, the campaign succeeded in building an alliance of non-traditional partners – private and public, formal and informal, community and business, some actually in conflict or competition with each other – around a common goal. Furthermore, informal workers were empowered to become community leaders, training their peers and raising awareness within their communities.

The use of communication for development strategies led to increased awareness among citizens and tourism operators of the impact of child sexual exploitation, thus breaking the prevailing public tolerance of the issue. This was achieved by designing and developing messages, communication materials and dissemination channels in a participatory manner with all stakeholders.

Lessons learned and way forward

La Muralla Soy Yo demonstrates that broad-based collaboration among non-traditional partners can bring about social change. Through the campaign, partners were able to gain the trust of tourism industry operators, who came to acknowledge their role in a social problem that had previously been ignored. Unlike the isolated initiatives of the past, the campaign based its interventions on recognition of the social dynamics and landscape of the actors involved, and it is therefore considered a model of integrated intervention with the potential for replication in similar situations and for the prevention of other kinds of violence.

Another important element of success was the technical support provided by UNICEF to national and local authorities in order to strengthen the judicial system. The laws now clearly recognize the responsibility of tourism businesses in sexual exploitation. Hotels, restaurants and other businesses are identified as places of possible exploitation and therefore their owners and managers can be prosecuted. This has also increased commitment of businesses to prevent exploitation and ensure that staff has adequate skills and knowledge to take action.

A key challenge for *La Muralla Soy Yo* is to ensure its financial sustainability through *Huésped de Corazón* (Guest with a Heart), the fundraising initiative that is being carried out simultaneously with *La Muralla Soy Yo* and which has provided the resources to deliver and expand the campaign's activities in Cartagena. In order to maintain momentum, the campaign also needs to ensure that new private or public stakeholders join the alliance and that political actors remain committed.



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