EVALUATION REPORT

Project:
“Evaluation of the ‘Return to Happiness’ methodology as a strategy for psychosocial recovery and as a component of the strategy for preventing the recruitment of children and adolescents by illegal armed groups”
“What’s most appropriate is what’s your own”

Evaluator
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Consultancy hired in the city of Bogotá, D.C., directly by the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF.

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UNICEF
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequently-used Acronyms</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Location; Nature of the institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACIN</td>
<td>Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca)</td>
<td>Cauca; a private indigenous non-profit indigenous organization operating under a special regime.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>Agente Comunitario de Salud (Community Health Agent)</td>
<td>Cauca; a project support figure on each reservation.</td>
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<td>Cabildo (Council)</td>
<td>A body representing the reservation’s political and social organization, comprising community authorities</td>
<td>National; this figure is responsible for the internal organization of the different indigenous peoples living in Colombia</td>
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<td>CAD</td>
<td>Comité de Ayuda al Desarrollo (Development Aid Committee)</td>
<td>Global; consultative organization for the OECD.</td>
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<td>CARNUI</td>
<td>Centro Ambulatorio de Recuperación Nutricional Indígena (Mobile Centre for Indigenous Nutritional Recovery)</td>
<td>Chocó; a special, itinerant and massive programme of the Diocese of Quibdó with the indigenous communities</td>
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<td>EAH</td>
<td>Evaluación de la Acción Humanitaria (Evaluation of Humanitarian Action)</td>
<td>Global; an evaluation methodology used by the OECD.</td>
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<tr>
<td>IAMI/MBFH</td>
<td>Institución Amiga de la Mujer y de la Infancia (Mother and Friendly Hospital)</td>
<td>National; an initiative aligned with the Ministry of Social Protection’s policy on humanizing maternal and infant health and nutrition services with a rights approach and gender perspective, emphasizing programmes on maternal breast-feeding.</td>
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<td>ICBF</td>
<td>Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (Colombian Family Welfare Institute)</td>
<td>National; a governmental organization that works for the protection and promotion of children and adolescents</td>
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<td>IPS</td>
<td>Institución Prestadora de Salud (Health Service Institution)</td>
<td>Cauca; the ACIN has its own IPS, which plays an active role in implementing the Activities in the agreement with UNICEF.</td>
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<td>Nasa</td>
<td>An indigenous people, also known as the Páez</td>
<td>Cauca; reservations in the north and north-east of the department.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Scope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>OCDE (OECD)</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
<td>Global; international organization ascribed to the United Nations system.</td>
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<td>PEC</td>
<td>Community Education Plan</td>
<td>Cauca; an innovative document suggested by the ACIN for reservation schools.</td>
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<td>PEI</td>
<td>Institutional Education Plans</td>
<td>National; Ministry of National Education norm applying to all public schools in the national education system.</td>
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<td>Reservation</td>
<td>Territorial, economic and cultural unit ceded by law to an indigenous people</td>
<td>National; this legal figure applies to all the nation’s ethnicities.</td>
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<td>SENA</td>
<td>Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Apprenticeship Service)</td>
<td>National; a Colombian governmental organization dedicated to promoting and educating labour for technical and technological jobs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
<td>Global; an international organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of children and adolescents.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
# Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The projects to be evaluated</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Purpose and context of the evaluation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Evaluation criteria</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Evaluation Results</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Conclusions and Recommendations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lessons learned</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## List of Annexes

1. Terms of Reference
2. General Evaluation Schedule
3. Evaluation Instruments
4. Timeline and agenda of activities in the regions
5. Interviews performed in the regions: local narratives
6. Photo record of regions visited
7. General lists of participants in the evaluation
8. Maps, project geographic coverage
Introduction

The present report is the result of the mentioned contract, signed between the consultant and UNICEF, and presents the results of the activities for evaluating the methodology called “Return to Happiness”, carried out in the period between the signing of the document on November 25, 2008 and March 31, 2009.

A single progress report was presented in February 2009, accounting for the activities performed up until that moment and complementing them with the comments received by the UNICEF Monitoring and Evaluation Officer in Bogotá.

The following evaluation of the Return to Happiness as a methodology and a strategy for UNICEF in its mission to apply methodologies and strategies that help with the psychosocial1 recovery of children and adolescents living in areas of irregular armed conflict in Colombia, on one hand, and as a tool for preventing the recruitment of children and adolescents by illegal armed groups, required the comprehensive evaluation of four projects in the departments of Cauca, Chocó, and Córdoba in which Return to Happiness was one of the essential components.

In Cauca, the evaluation process looked at phases I and II of the UNICEF—Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN) agreement, between January 2006 and June 2008; in Chocó it reviewed UNICEF’s agreements with the Dioceses of Quibdó and Istmina between 2007 and 2008; and in Córdoba the agreement with the Diocese of Montería, implemented in 2007 and 2008.

Executive Summary

This consultancy embraces the technical criteria of pertinence, efficacy, efficiency, sustainability and impact suggested in the contract Terms of Reference, which appear in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) principles for evaluating development assistance and in the guidelines proposed in the Committee on Development Aid – CDA – (OECD, 1991), complemented by the special application of these criteria for cases of Evaluation of Humanitarian Action (EHA) (ODI, 2006).

The Return to Happiness strategy is one of the components in the broader set of actions included in the projects evaluated, since in addition to the dimension of psychosocial recovery, they include components of health, food security, and restitution of rights or institutional strengthening. However in general all the projects share, as a central objective, the psychosocial recovery of children and adolescents in areas of armed conflict, and the prevention of the recruitment of children and adolescents in illegal armed groups.

1 Throughout the document, the term “psychosocial” will be used as a generic concept that includes special variations of a psycho-emotional and psycho-affective nature. Psychosocial is the concept that best encompasses the effort to obtain the psychological progress and wellbeing of persons as they are able to apply and experience in with their immediate (family) and expanded (community) environment.
The evaluation also incorporates elements of qualitative evaluation, based on tools of critical ethnography\(^2\) and participant observation\(^3\). The most frequently used tools were focal groups, semi-structured interviews, conversation groups and observation. The evaluator found community assemblies (of 60 or more participants) in some municipalities of the three departments visited, with representatives of all the actors expected to participate in the projects: young volunteers from the Return to Happiness methodology, teachers, parents, and participating children. In addition, structured sessions were held with the leaders of the indigenous councils, both in Cauca and Chocó, to present the objectives of the evaluation mission and to answer their questions regarding UNICEF and its projects.

The evaluation had a limitation in its being performed *ex post facto*, with an average lapse of six months since the culmination of the agreements (June 2008). This is considered to be a limitation because there were actors, like teachers that know the projects and especially the Return to Happiness methodology, who were no longer in the zone or in the schools that served as project sites, because of transfers or simply having moved away, or because the directly benefited children and adolescents were no longer in the institution being visited, which especially was the case of some volunteers who had graduated from secondary school and had left their towns. Nonetheless, and to counter this limitation, spontaneous continuations of the projects’ recreational activities were found, making it possible to infer the methodology’s sustainability, such as the fact that youths were continuing their voluntary work with children, coordinated by a young woman who had participated in the activities.

The evaluation process included three weeks in the field, one in each of the participating departments. The visits were made between February and March 2009. The process also included an induction to the process by the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer and the Populations in Crisis Officer in UNICEF’s Bogotá office; establishment of basic agreements on the expected results and the methodology to be followed; a meeting with the two most important sponsors and defenders of Return to Happiness in UNICEF, both world-wide and in Colombia, Nydia Quiroz and César Romero; and, finally, direct coordination with each of the three departmental coordinators in order to coordinate each visit: Helena Romo in Cauca, Adriana Guerra in Chocó and Stella Díaz in Córdoba. Each coordinator decided which municipalities to visit and whom to visit, and informed each participating institution or actor of the upcoming evaluation visit.

General documentation of the established agreements was requested and received; and in the field more information was obtained in the form of books, readers, manuals and technical reports. The questions for facilitating the focal groups and group meetings were developed. The evaluator kept a field diary – a documentary centrepiece for permanently recording the experience of the current social context of the communities visited and their living conditions after having participated in and experienced Return to Happiness during the implementation of the projects. The data obtained were extracted and ordered; a critical analysis was made of the activities observed; all the material collected in the field, downloaded from the Internet and found at the UNICEF office in Bogotá was read and confronted and a triangulation was made of the compiled information, cross-referencing it to establish patterns, tendencies, constants – elements for use in preparing this report.

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\(^2\) Ethnography is a widely used research methodology in the social sciences. Interviewing, observing and collecting documents to support conclusions are part of this methodology. Critical ethnography constantly stresses the central nature of social factors in the life of a community. Every look or each analysis of reality is frequently, if not always, related to the social relations among members of the community.

\(^3\) A special application of ethnography, wherein the researcher (or in this case, the evaluator) must understand the context in which the phenomena which he or she is studying through participation, because that is where the social life of communities can be understood, and where it is best represented.
In the course of the evaluation in Cauca, seven municipalities and three reservations, the main headquarters of the ACIN, and six schools were visited; 22 individual interviews were performed; 5 community assemblies were convened, and five recreational learning demonstrations were observed. In Chocó six municipalities were visited, along with one indigenous community called Unión Wounaan, where a recreational learning campaign was observed and the evaluator stayed for two days. Four community discussions were held; two demonstrations with the Afro-descendant population and a focal group of parents were observed; and four semi-structured interviews were held. In Córdoba, four municipalities, one rural community, and five schools were visited, five semi-structured interviews were performed and five discussions were implemented with as many community assemblies.

Regarding the social and human effects of Return to Happiness, this evaluation found positive evidence of criteria for belonging among the communities. The projects have met the psychosocial recovery needs of children and adolescents, since the communities in their entirety and the children themselves recognized it, and it was reflected in some children’s drawings produced under this methodology (Seen Annex No.3) with childish expressions far removed from themes of conflict or war. The concept that best indicates the pertinence of the activities is that of harmonization in Cauca, where the original approach in UNICEF’s version of Return to Happiness was adapted to the Nasa world-view, especially with regard to the adaptation to the cultural requisites of indigenous traditions in the area of health. In Chocó the projects also took care to adapt the parameters of intervention to the indigenous traditions that are most respected and adopted by the communities – as in the case of the strategy for nutritional and food security recovery, CARNUI, or Mobile Centre for Indigenous Nutritional Recuperation.

Of special interest is the methodology’s impact on the volunteer youths, the segment of beneficiaries that perhaps most vigorously defends the pertinence of Return to Happiness. Transversally – in all the departments – indigenous, rural peasant and Afro-descendant youths, after participating in the Return to Happiness as recreational therapists, have experienced an unexpected process of personal and social change in themselves and their environment, helping them to become aware of their role in defining their own life plans. This aspect was considered positively in the evaluation as an indicator of mental and psychosocial health in the community of youths. In other words, these young people express, organize, seek support for and prepare projects for life after secondary school. Also, this new psychosocial reality being experienced by the young persons has distanced them and protected them from the possibility of becoming involved in the illegal armed groups, which is one of the central objectives in each project’s strategy. In this regard, the testimonies and information collected positively mention the reduction of this tendency in these regions, previously marked by a high rate of recruitment.

With respect to the participation of girls and women, all the projects showed the participation of this sector of the population. There was no evidence of any kind of gender-based exclusion or discrimination. Among the youth volunteers, an important number of women were found to be participating in all three departments, both among the volunteers still in secondary school and among those that had graduated from school – some of them currently serving as voluntary coordinators of the groups of young persons that have wanted to continue their recreational therapy activities with the children in their municipalities. In Córdoba, women heads of household formed handicraft production units while accompanying the Return to Happiness processes in their children’s schools. These women admit to having participated during the planning stages in order to find ways of generating new income with the skills they had obtained.

Also found was the intention of involving girls in the projects to counter a situation that could lead to their becoming involved in the armed groups: romantic relations with members of
the illegal armed groups. A pattern of men in arms seeking out adolescent girls has been clearly diagnosed in the project beneficiary communities in all three departments. In response, the Return to Happiness activities were oriented to protecting girls from this kind of menace by making explicit the facts associated with the unwanted involvement in armed groups and creating spaces for participation in the different groups of young persons, in order to foster cohesion and a sense of belonging to the community, which tends to have a protective effect on all the participants. When they join Return to Happiness, young men and women in the three departments form units of solidarity and mutual protection, endorsed by adults that have witnessed their process of personal development.

In terms of efficacy, the evaluated projects achieved the goals of the Return to Happiness’ intervention – an important achievement given the numerous elements required for implementing the methodology and the need to guarantee accompaniment and follow-up for optimal implementation of the strategy. It should be mentioned that the thematic “heart” of Return to Happiness, its reason for being, was understood by all the groups that learned about the strategy, were trained in it, used it and experienced it. In general, all the departments met the proposed levels of coverage of children and adolescents, with the creation of support groups with actors including parents and teachers and without the discrimination or exclusion of any group. In addition, triangulating the information made it possible to determine that Return to Happiness was able to fit functionally in the schools, either as a reference for the Community Education Plans (PEC), in Cauca, or for the Institutional Education Plans (PEI) in all the departments in general, or simply generating important changes in the way teachers work or in children’s demands that their classes be made more dynamic and enjoyable. The activities planned for implementing the Return to Happiness strategy were fully implemented in all the projects, indeed surpassing the level of execution of the other components.

Among the other components of the projects – other than the Return to Happiness strategy – it might be mentioned that no evidence was found to the effect that the goal of institutional strengthening was achieved, with respect to the role of municipal mayors’ offices or municipal secretariats of education, or active and evident support from State entities like the ICBF. In Chocó, the text of the agreements with the Dioceses reflects an expectation of working in network with multiple institutions like the SENA, the aforementioned ICBF or the personero’s and inspector general’s offices. (Although the priority of this evaluation was to determine the performance of the Return to Happiness strategy in the context of the selected projects, care was taken to gauge the community impact generated by working in association with the public and private institutions present in the regions.) Instead, the active and committed role of the participating schools prevailed – a role underscored spontaneously by the regional coordinators in the way they designed the agendas of the evaluation missions. In Córdoba, however, the evaluator noted the active role of the department’s public library network, and the University of Córdoba’s work in making complementary activities more dynamic and contributing to the impact of Return to Happiness, for example, by creating the Story and Reading Club (still functioning at the time of this evaluation) which included the publication of a book with a selection of stories by the children and adolescents. Also, at SENA’s El Porvenir training centre, graduates of the secondary schools of Tierralta are developing their life plans, training as interns in agricultural and livestock technicians.

The projects’ efficiency in using resources of time and money was satisfactory, supported by the degree of general satisfaction expressed by all the actors in the places visited, with respect to the projects’ impact, particularly Return to Happiness. Except for an isolated comment on the inconvenience caused by the delay of one of the disbursements by UNICEF in Cauca, the flow of resources ensured the implementation of the activities with no major hitches other than the ones to external causes like problems of public order or the condition of the highways due to the flood emergencies, which affected the rhythm of the technical teams’
orientation visits. As a reflection of the efficiencies encountered, we might mention the financial counterpart provided by the ACIN in Cauca, the assignment of teams of accountants (more than one functionary) to manage and protect the resources, and the clarity and organization of the information with which the members of the field teams performed their activities.

The projects are clear about their strategies for sustainability, and the evaluation missions was able to gauge how well the process is continuing, more than six months after the formally planned activities had ended. Thanks to the impact of the activities on the community, schools are spearheading the sustainability of Return to Happiness, or at least this has been the case so far. The strategy’s articulating axis is based on the identification and training of youth volunteers as recreational therapists, and we could see the initiative for continuing to train yearly cycles of 9th-grade youths who want to participate in the project, replacing graduating students. This is backed by the initiative of creating youth organizations which, among other things, will have a permanent line of work with Return to Happiness in the formalization of socio cultural animation activities for social and human development. Furthermore, indigenous authorities have given their backing to these UNICEF initiatives, since they have found them to be eminently respectful of their traditions and culture, as reflected in the respect and humane and professional quality of the technical teams in each region. There is functional and professional harmony between UNICEF’s functionaries and the local communities.

The limitation to sustainability that was detected is the low level of active participation by local and municipal authorities. Schools – all from the public sector – join the project, but not the leading authorities in the area. Although the Nasa indigenous organization in Cauca is strong, for example, the assignment of teachers for the reservations’ schools is performed by the Secretariat of Education in Popayán, and its inefficiencies in naming teachers or making school repairs, decidedly affected the sustainability of the projects in this component. The same can be said of health, since the projects, with the generation of the figure of the ACS – Community Health Agent – have the possibility of serving as an effective link for resolving problems in the area, as long as the respective public authorities understand and act in accordance. And the ICBF, the lead agency for public policies for children and youth, was perceived as being functionally distant from the indigenous communities. Nonetheless, the figure of the indigenous social pastorate of the Dioceses of Chocó is a significant resource for the communities.

This evaluation has collected enough information to affirm that the Return to Happiness strategy has had impacts on family, community and social life in the communities where it has been implemented. Once again, it should be emphasized that the youthful volunteers have played an important role as artifices of the general perception that the methodology does have an impact. with concrete results in terms of social cohesion, prevention of problems that are socially relevant to young people, facilitator of the development of life plans, social organization of young persons, involvement of parents and response by schools – because these young people contribute to raising the psycho-affectivity of children and adolescents, and feed back positively to their parents and teachers, encouraging them to pay more attention to them and thus affecting the quality of child rearing, on one hand, and the education that is offered, on the other. The projects have generated behavioural changes in the community and have made adults more aware of the rights of children and adolescents, and of their own role as protectors and guarantors of the integral development of the child population, even under conditions of emerging social violence. This awareness has increased among indigenous communities, where the authorities now include the themes of the rights of children and adolescents on the agendas for their Councils’ sessions.
Among the most important recommendations for these projects with respect to potential future developments, we may indicate the following:

1. They are projects with a very short average life, between 12 and 15 months, and processes of social transformation in areas of permanent conflict are constantly threatened. Longer cycles – for example, three years – would make it possible to create groups of beneficiaries whose options include guaranteeing the incorporation and formation of new generations of beneficiaries, providing a clear strategy for sustainability.

2. The projects evaluated along with the Return to Strategy have developed productive initiatives, with handcrafts for women or agriculture in the schools, especially in Córdoba. But there is no project for promoting the commercialization or marketing of products, or the generation of cooperatives or other instances of solidary economy, which threatens the sustainability of the productive efforts that were observed. This development component must be made more explicit in the overall consideration of future projects for fostering their integral effect on the psychosocial reality of the benefited communities.

3. Participation and coordination with State entities that have direct responsibility in the great majority of the project themes must be a functional coordination, and not only a declaration in official documents. In other words, it is necessary for the coordination to be visible and operational. These entities must guarantee their presence in the areas of influence with functionaries that are properly trained in matters of social and community development.

4. International technical cooperation in the areas visited is led by UNICEF, with a scarce presence of other organizations like Misereor or Diakonie. In these regions, more social and economic development must be promoted, since it is necessary to take advantage of the overcoming of children’s and adolescents’ psychosocial obstacles, where the communities have come together and there are leaders that understand how to work for the collective good.

5. The counterparts already are aligned with many of UNICEF’s objectives, in the broadest possible sense of promoting and protecting the rights of children. The ACIN and the dioceses are present in the territories and continue to work with the communities, and their multiplying effect is permanent. This guarantees the sustained appropriation of new knowledge and experiences derived from technical cooperation.

6. Return to Happiness is not necessarily a finished product. It is under permanent construction, since the recreational strategy should be included in educational and learning processes in a more comprehensive and systematic way. Psycho-socio-cultural animation in education communities is a permanent catalyst of learning achievement and training in children and adolescents. It is important to promote psychological and educational research around the strategy, with the regions’ universities.

7. The Return to Happiness methodology is solid, and the youth volunteers agree that they are ready for more and manifest that they need more extensive training over time, since they are attracted by the psychosocial themes and would like to contribute a bit more to their direct beneficiaries. On the other hand, the teachers feel the challenge of incorporating new methodologies into their teaching/learning practice, based on recreational practice, and this would be a significant contribution from the universities, as mentioned.
The Projects to be Evaluated

This evaluation focused on four agreements (the projects) signed between UNICEF and four counterpart organizations in the departments of Cauca, Chocó and Córdoba. At the time of the field work, all the agreements had been concluded—three by June 2008 and the fourth as of November of that same year.

This is the basic profile of the four projects, by department.

Cauca

With the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), an organization of the Nasa people, UNICEF signed an agreement for the implementation of two projects that focalized municipalities in the north of that department. These agreements permitted the two entities – culturally and historically different in every sense – to reach agreements and establish basic coordination mechanisms based on mutual respect and negotiation, which ensured the success of the activities. The goal of the second phase was to expand the geographic coverage of the agreement.

The title of the agreement and its general goals in each of its phases were as follows:


  Overall goal, Phase I: Psychosocial Recovery in the North of the Department of Cauca through the implementation of a process of intervention in the health, psychosocial and reconstruction of social fabric areas, integrating the Nasa worldview in the municipalities of Miranda, Caloto, Buenos Aires and Santander.

  Overall goal, Phase II: Promoting psychosocial recovery in the department of Cauca through the construction and development of the plan for intervention in the health, psychosocial areas and the reconstruction of social fabric, based on the Nasa world view, in the municipalities of Miranda, Corinto, Caloto, Buenos Aires, and Santander, and the strengthening of the groups created in the municipalities of Toribio and Jambaló.

The specific objectives of each of the phases describe the additional intervention components to Return of Happiness, revealing a comprehensive community intervention project.

Phase I

Institutional Strengthening

- To strengthen the capacities of municipal mayors’ offices, municipal and departmental secretariats of education and schools, in the areas of promotion, demandability and guarantee of the rights of the children and adolescents on the different Nasa reservations.

Psychosocial Recovery

- To heal the psychosocial effects produced in children by the armed conflict through the implementation of UNICEF’s “Return to Happiness” model, contextualized for the Nasa cultural approach called “Children in harmony and equilibrium”.

12
Community Participation
- To contribute to the Nasa community’s implementation of actions to promote respect for the rights of children and adolescents.

Education
- To strengthen the pedagogical process in schools so that they can help fulfil the rights of children and adolescents in the school environment, providing them with a quality education for their comprehensive development.

Phase II

Institutional Strengthening
- To strengthen opportunities for cooperation and co-responsibility arising from the commitment assumed by the departmental government and the municipal mayors’ offices to promote policies for the protection of children and adolescents.

Restitution of the rights of children, adolescents and women
- To favour the reconstruction of the social fabric in the beneficiary municipalities, from the rights and gender equity perspectives, to benefit children, adolescents and women from the perspective of the Nasa worldview.

Strengthening of Health Care
- To strengthen the ACIN’s IPS that operate in the zone, by introducing therapeutic actions that are coherent with the Nasa’s traditional medicine, leading to well-being and harmony, repairing the damage produced by the armed conflict and the processes of social decomposition.

Psychosocial recovery
- To heal the psycho-emotional effects produced by the armed conflict through the implementation of the “Return to Happiness” Programme, using the school as an axis to articulate the actions.

Project coverage and beneficiaries:
- 2,962 boys, 2,937 girls, 340 adolescents from Nasa communities in eight municipalities.

Chocó

Work in this department was organized and coordinated with the Dioceses of Quibdó and Istmina, two ecclesiastical entities with great geographical coverage in the department, and an optimal installed capacity for project management. They also have their lines of work with the indigenous social pastorate clearly defined, with religious personnel trained in anthropology and ethnography, and services provided by professionals in the social sciences – all appropriate profiles for working with Embera Katío, Embera Chami, Embera Dóbida and Wounaan communities.

The title of the project and its major and specific objectives are:
- Atrato Humanitarian Attention Project. Diocese of Quibdó – UNICEF Agreement.
Overall objective: Prevention of the involvement of adolescents in illegal armed groups in high-risk communities of the municipalities of Atrato, Lloró, Bagadó and Carmen de Atrato, in the Upper Atrato region, through the strengthening of protective environments for children and adolescents.

The specific objectives of the components of this version of the project, including the Return to Happiness component and working primarily with Afro-descendant communities, were the following:

- **Participation in psychosocial recovery**
  - To strengthen the participation of adolescents in psychosocial recovery; improve health and nutrition conditions of children, adolescents and pregnant women in the municipalities of Atrato, Lloró and Bagadó; and initiate the process in the municipality of Carmen de Atrato.

- **Organization of youth participation**
  - To strengthen and promote the organizational and cultural expressions of adolescents through the consolidation of the Subregional Youth Network, training and support for groups of adolescents in these municipalities in alternative communication techniques and folkloric, artistic and cultural expression, including radio broadcasting, community television and the printed media.

- **Enterprise promotion**
  - To support groups of adolescents in developing small productive businesses.

There is a version of the project focused on indigenous communities:

- **Project on the Creation of Protective Environments for Children and Adolescents in Indigenous Communities in the Area of Influence of the Diocese of Quibdó.**

Overall objective: To prevent the involvement of indigenous children and adolescents in illegal armed groups, through the construction of protective environments with the right to participation and improved access to health and education services.

The specific objectives, also associated with the additional integral components, were established as follows:

- **Training of adolescents as recreational therapists and community health agents**
  - To promote the participation of indigenous adolescents in psychosocial recovery and the improvement of health and nutrition conditions in indigenous communities included in the project, through their training as recreational therapists and community health agents.

- **Promotion of alternative education for strengthening identities**
  - To develop a programme of alternative education for indigenous children and adolescents that helps them to strengthen their cultural identity and active participation in their communities, in the exercise of various kinds of leadership.

- **Promotion of nutritional health**
  - To contribute to the improvement of the nutritional conditions and health of children, adolescents and pregnant women through a process of nutritional evaluation and monitoring, and education in child rearing patterns adapted to the indigenous cultural context.
For the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Istmina, which includes various vicariates on the Pacific Coast, this is the basic text of the agreement with all its objectives:


Overall objective: To prevent the involvement of indigenous children and adolescents in illegal armed groups, through the construction of protective environments with the right to participation and improved access to health and education services.

Specific objectives:

- Training for adolescents as recreational therapists and community health agents
  - To promote the participation of indigenous adolescents in psychosocial recovery and the improvement of health and nutrition conditions in the project’s target communities through their training as recreational therapists and community health agents.

- Promotion of alternative education as identity strengthening
  - To develop an alternative education programme for indigenous children and adolescents to help them strengthen their cultural identity, and actively participate in their communities exercising different kinds of leadership.

- Promotion of food security
  - To initiate and/or strengthen processes of food security and sovereignty through support for small productive businesses.

Coverage and beneficiaries of the agreement:

- 1500 children and 1000 adolescents from black and indigenous (Wounaan and Embera) communities in the Middle San Juan, Istmina, and Upper, Middle and Lower Baudó; 7,956 indigenous children and 1200 adolescents from the Embera communities in Alto Andagüeda, Highway Zone and Murindó; 7,000 Afro-descendant children and 700 Afro-descendant adolescents and youths in 21 rural communities and urban areas in the municipalities of Atrato, Quibdó, Lloró, Bagadó and Carmen de Atrato

Córdoba

The Diocese of Montería, headed by Monsignor Julio César Vidal Perdomo, is UNICEF’s counterpart in this region. Monsignor Vidal is a special figure in this project because he has played a major role in the process of demobilization of the paramilitary groups in the governmental peace plans in this region.

The project in this department is called:


- Overall objective: The children and adolescents from the Department of Córdoba that are most heavily affected by the conflict in the Municipalities of Montería, Tierralta
(Corregimientos of Santa Fe Ralito, Volcanes, Caramelo, and Carrizola), Valencia and Canalete, are protected against recruitment into the armed groups, ensuring protective environments that create opportunities for consensus and peace for the complete fulfilment of their rights.

For the general components of the project in Montería, the following specific objectives were established:

Specific Objective 1
- Adolescents have a lower risk of recruitment by the armed groups; participate in the creation of spaces for psycho-affective support and promotion of recreational learning, play, cultural, sports and communication opportunities, in the construction of their life projects; play a lead role in the development of their communities through active participation in democratic processes based on respect for difference and healthy coexistence.

Specific Objective 2
- Children remain at home with a lower risk of recruitment by armed group, thanks to the family’s recognizing the importance of a healthy coexistence and peaceful conflict resolution.

Specific Objective 3
- Children and adolescents from the populations most affected by the conflict remain in school, finish their basic/secondary education and achieve basic, citizen and work competencies for life.

Specific Objective 4
- Children and adolescents are receiving health services with an optimal level of quality, as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Specific Objective 5
- Emergency committees strengthen and guarantee the effective exercise of children’s rights to protection against natural or human threats in their areas of influence.

Departmental coverage:
- 4,210 children and adolescents in the municipalities of Montería, Tierralta, Valencia and Canalete.
Context and purpose of the Evaluation

The official terms of reference for planning and performing this evaluation are based on the prestige of Return to Happiness among the beneficiaries in the communities where it has been applied, not only in Colombia but in other Latin American countries like Costa Rica, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic. Another reason is that “(...) to date no evaluation has been made that would allow us (UNICEF) to know with certainty, how great the pertinence, impact and sustainability of this strategy has been. Therefore, it was decided to evaluate the strategy, in the expectation that it will shed light on the good practices, lessons learned and errors made in implementing the Return to Happiness strategy in different Colombian municipalities”.

As mentioned above, learning about Return to Happiness in its contexts and discussing it with all the actors involved directly and indirectly in implementing the methodology in their regions, even amid the continuation of the perturbation and hostility, and then triangulating the gathered information and trying to establish tendencies or patterns in the final interpretation of the results of the finished projects, allows us to learn, in depth, the kind of intervention this methodology represents for its beneficiaries and why it has won acceptance and support from the benefiting communities.

The purpose of this evaluation is thus to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy, analyzing the implementation of the activities, what the results were, and whether there are ways of establishing mechanisms for sustainability -- mentioning the adjustments that need to be made to further increase the positive impact already recognized in other experiences with Return to Happiness.

This evaluation is being made after the four agreements have terminated (three at mid-2008 and one in November of that year) in the three departments. Understanding and evaluating the impact and results of Return to Happiness in three departments with high rates of guerrilla and paramilitary violence offers a special opportunity for analyzing the scope of its potential for psycho-affective recovery and prevention of the involvement of children and adolescents in armed groups.

Especially, with regard to the evaluation of aspects of the sustainability of Return to Happiness the nature of the terminated projects made it possible to determine where and how the sustainability indicators were found. Indicators like the number of volunteers that, under their own initiative, are continuing to perform recreational therapy with the children in their schools, and teachers using recreational learning techniques in their classes.

Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation will operate along three central axes:

Does it meet its objectives?

Based on the declared objectives of the central protocol of the “Return to Happiness” strategy, we want to establish whether there is coherence between the announced objectives and the ones achieved – that is, whether each of the goals for achievement has been reached once the activities have terminated. To do this it is important to identify what was expected to be achieved and contrast that with what finally was obtained. Achievement indicators will be
designed based on the plan of action, and beneficiaries will be consulted as to whether they perceive that the indicators are reflected in each one of the actions received. At this point it is important to triangulate the information with the beneficiaries’ environment, asking the participants’ significant adults – like parents, teachers, guardians, community leaders and social agents that interact frequently with the children and adolescents.

What has its impact been?

The impact of a project’s actions is measured by analyzing the difference between the beneficiaries’ living conditions before the intervention – that is, the reigning psychosocial condition – and the conditions following the project experience and participation in its actions. In other words the new, recuperated psychosocial condition. To measure the impact, the evaluation instruments will be designed to establish whether the children and adolescents perceive a change in their way of viewing and feeling their own lives in terms of identifying, controlling and overcoming their individual and collective emotional and relational affectations experienced as a result of political violence and natural disasters.

Are its results sustainable?

The measurement of the results is in consonance with the detection and identification of the new changes perceived in the individual and collective relations (the social fabric) found in the respective communities where the project has operated. For this purpose, instruments will be created to establish whether there are identifiable products that the project leaves the communities as a fruit of the activities and the participation of the beneficiaries.

At this point, we shall verify whether there is agreement among the sources in each of the evaluated communities as to the perception of a concrete product that is identifiable by the members of the community, and which they can name and describe in all its characteristics. The sustainability of the results will be evaluated beginning with the detection of who, within the communities, expresses commitment to the permanent and continuous dissemination of the methodology and the knowledge acquired, in addition to new and innovative proposals for psychosocial actions intended to be performed in communities, families and schools.

In addition, the commitment to sustainability will fall only on the community actors that have been involved and impacted by the Return to Happiness strategy. We also must take into consideration the participation – conscripted, if necessary – of official entities with missions of protection and promotion of the rights of children and adolescents, and of other actors that can be detected and that participate by contributing resources other than the ones provided by UNICEF.

The evaluation also must include the identification of good practices resulting from the successful execution of the project, the aspects that are proposed for improving it and the lessons learned in each intervention. For this purpose, the evaluation will have primary information obtained through structured interviews with the beneficiaries participating in each of the scenarios – children, adolescents and adults.
Evaluation Results

**Introduction**

This evaluation clearly affirms that Return to Happiness is a methodology that is conceptually and technically pertinent and efficient when used for purposes of humanitarian aid for the psycho affective recovery of children and adolescents living in areas of armed conflict and natural emergencies. If there is a single characteristic that is ponderable it is the individual, family and community impact it causes in the localities where it is implemented, with special qualitative variations depending on the entity that has been exposed to the strategy. They may be children, youths, adolescent volunteers in training as recreational therapists and wind up being the leaders of youth organizations; or teachers with experience in education that discover in Return to Happiness a different way of doing things in the classroom, favouring agreeable ways of teaching and inspiring groups in the teaching-learning process. They might be parents that rediscover their role in their families in a different way when they acquire competencies that let them face and solve conflicts and prevent intra-family violence. Or they might be local authorities – especially the ones on the indigenous reservations – that found the planning, implementing and monitoring of Return to Happiness to be a source of protection and promotion not only of the rights of their children and adolescents, but also of their culture. However all, in unison, have positively shown the impact caused by this intervention strategy.

But Return to Happiness needs context, institutional backing within the education system, leaders capable of detecting and interpreting when the conditions of violence or natural emergency are exacerbated, or contrariwise are mitigated, since that determines the manner and intensity with which the strategy is applied in the communities. So inserting Return to Happiness in community social development projects with a comprehensive approach is a point in favour of the methodology’s sustainability.

There was no evidence of resources being provided by the municipal mayors’ offices or national-level entities like ICBF, supporting the implementation of the projects in their jurisdictions. What was detected in the evaluation process was the partnership between UNICEF and its counterparts. A report by the Diocese of Istmina, Chocó, mentioned that the projects “that needed to be done” were prepared for presentation to the mayor so that “he could contribute the resources needed for this education project”. The presentation to mayor was made by each participating school director. The evaluation collected declarations by the principals of these institutions wherein they manifested, on the contrary, the traditional dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate attention to their institutional needs by such public entities.

**Pertinence**

The “Return to Happiness” methodological strategy has come about because of, and responds to, the needs for psycho affective and psychosocial recovery of the groups of children and adolescents living in areas of marked armed conflict. In this sense, it is a pertinent methodology.

Furthermore, the specific objectives of the projects in Cauca, Chocó and Córdoba, one of whose sub-components is to develop and transfer the Return to Happiness methodology, are supported by this methodology, and offer an ongoing solution that is pertinent to the desired goals. This is possible because it was observed and inferred that Return to Happiness creates a sense of community ownership of projects, and strengthens the management capacities of the actors that most need a functional and productive approach to the projects as direct and indirect
beneficiaries. These actors are the adolescent volunteers, the teachers, and the parents that form support groups that the children and adolescents need to have at their side. Special mention should be made of the school principals that have shown special leadership in each of their schools, which were the main scenarios for Return to Happiness activities.

A common tendency found in the entities visited is that the strategy convenes, and incorporates, the entire community. There is special value and recognition of the discovery that restoring, protecting and favouring the rights of the children and adolescents generates new perceptions of community life which lead to cohesion and protection.

The application of the strategy in indigenous Nasa, Embera Katio and Wounaan communities has been pertinent, since it follows the steps for adapting and harmonization with the respective cultures. The formal steps of socialization, review, adaptation and production of materials to support the methodology were followed, in consonance with the cultural postulates and world view of each culture.

The children and adolescents recognize the change and the overcoming of the negative emotions and adverse sentiments in favour of other, more adaptable ones that better fit their daily lives. These sentiments of security, harmonization and equilibrium were manifested in the drawings made in the demonstrations of recreational therapies in the three departments, in several of the schools visited. They were done by children that had already participated in recreational workshops, even after the conclusion of the projects, and had guidance, during the demonstration, from the same young persons who six months or one year before had accompanied them in the Return to Happiness activities.

The findings in this evaluation are interpreted as the objective conditions in which the children and adolescents are of continually present conflict in their territories, at least as a latent threat. But the functional alliance among schools, families and the community has permitted that, as long as events that are traumatic due to their intensity and/or violence do not occur, there is a residual effect deriving from the quality of the relations among all the participating entities that the methodology has helped to generate in the last two or three years, on average, in the municipalities and reservations visited.

But the factor that best reflects the equilibrium in mental health is the adolescent volunteers – the best informants of the virtues of the methodology. The assimilation and appropriation of their life plans is a good indicator of the way that the ideas, perceptions and attitudes of these youths towards themselves and toward others were seen as results of their experience with Return to Happiness. Staying in school, integration with the community through their role as recreational therapists, the creation of youth groups and improvements in the youth organization in the three departments, the improvement of relations with adults (derived from the community prestige acquired by their leadership of children) are indirect indicators of socio-community development, which benefits mental health.

On the evaluation missions it was important to establish, among the young volunteers, that their participation in Return to Happiness helped them to understand why they should not accept invitations or suggestions of joining the illegal armed groups. Just as they are aware of the risk, or the frequency, with which this kind of invitations or pressures are proffered or received in the areas where they live, they also held firmly to their leadership role in the communities and to the affection they were developing for the children and adolescents with whom they worked.

There also was a dynamic closely approaching the precepts of social control. The youths learned to care for themselves, monitor themselves, share and feel very united while formulating
life plans; this variable that has impacted them heavily. Triangulating the findings of the visits, wherever volunteers were found – groups that even include secondary school graduates – the unity found among them was overwhelming, and clearly appears to be a protective factor against recruitment into the illegal armed groups.

In general, in all the departments we found that the technical teams coordinating the projects were adequately informed about the kind and quality of the threats to public order that the communities were facing in the project planning phase. Not only the threats, but also the actors involved and the trajectory of the illegal groups in the projects’ regions of influence. The best example of this observation was the executive presentation made by Montería’s Bishop Monsignor Vidal on a map of the department, covering the history of the armed conflict in Córdoba and alluding to the intervening forces. The clarity of his knowledge is constantly communicated and reiterated to the technical team of the agreement with UNICEF, especially since he is the head of said working group.

As far as the specific impact of these conditions of violence, baselines were devised in the departments around the mental health symptoms most frequently observed in children and adolescents. They derived from the impacts of acts of violence from sources as varied as the illegal armed groups and intra-family violence and/or deficient conflict resolution. These baselines, plus the information collected, were used to orient the thrust of the planning and design of the training sessions for the strategy participants in the different regions.

For example, in Chocó a regional diagnosis was performed in April 2008 to learn about the impacts and degree of psychosocial affectation of children and adolescents, to profile the Return to Happiness interventions.

To complete the analysis of pertinence of Return to Happiness in the departments, the experiences and opinions of the communities were taken into account when planning the intervention. Given that there are three agreements aimed specifically at indigenous communities, the necessary adaptation to their cultural traditions took their experiences and opinions into account. In the Return to Happiness strategy this was especially notorious in matters of games and traditions, on the one hand. And in matters of health it was significant for its incorporation of the teachings of the Thé Waala and the Jaibaná in the Nasa, Embera Katio and Wounaan communities. It should be noted that, with these cultural contributions plus the baselines of symptomologies the violence caused in children, significant progress was made towards guaranteeing the pertinence of the projects evaluated.

Efficacy

The projects’ formulation of the effects, results, products and activities is clear. The formulation of the application of the Return to Happiness strategy as one of the project components applies the same rigor as the other components – be they health, education, community participation, food security or institutional strengthening. The Return to Happiness component has a clear role in the overall scheme of each of the projects, since it is a dimension designed to guarantee the achievement of the general objectives, and therefore is expected to help meet the proposed goals.

The projects were all implemented as formulated in the basic proposals, the training protocols, the design of the agendas and the scope of the beneficiary populations. Especially, the definition of the population groups to impact on children, youths, parents and teachers was careful and coherent with the intentions of the planned activities. The activities related to the Return to Happiness strategy have a high level of methodological systematicity that ensures that processes advance in a sure and cohesive way.
No difficulties with assimilation or comprehension of the communication and pedagogical elements for implementing Return to Happiness were found. Linguistic correspondence between the facilitators and the participants was guaranteed throughout the Return to Happiness activities. This also was observed in the case of the Nasa and Wounaan communities, in the form of concrete efforts to produce bilingual materials, for example in the projects in northern Cauca. General activities were implemented with schoolchildren, even when they were not performed in the schools but in the community – as in Córdoba, where the recreational programmes were held on Fridays after school, or in Chocó where Saturday sessions were programmed.

Cultural specificity was found in the printed matter and the toys in the therapeutic backpacks. For example, the design of covers for the volunteers’ manuals, were specifically contextualized for the regions where the projects were to be implemented. In the demonstrations that were observed, when presenting the toys the adolescent volunteers alluded by name to the grandfathers or elders, depending on the culture and community. Such fine-tuning constituted pertinent adjustments contributing to the effectiveness of the actions.

“Now I know that my Daddy loves me, even though he’s far away”. This sentiment expressed by a six-year-old Nasa girl on the Tacueyó reservation in Cauca reflects her psychosocial recovery process. The anguish and contingent anxieties around the absence of her father were converted into a tranquil and hopeful wait, keeping negative emotions from overwhelming her daily life while helping to reduce the associated feelings of anger. In general, the children interviewed identify with the good feelings and emotions associated with play and sharing with others, particularly with stories like “The Happy Little Monkey”, in the sense of “helping others” so as to always be able to count on their friendship.

No child or adolescent was excluded from the Return to Happiness process, even if they were only focalized at the moment the project was planned. Overall, no project reflected such exclusion. On the other hand, no evidence was found of substitution of children and/or adolescents previously focalized in the planning phase when the strategy was implemented.

We found a few simultaneous activities by other organizations or programmes aimed at similar objectives of psycho affective recovery or prevention of recruitment by illegal armed groups. In the Department of Chocó we observed and documented a programme called “Fiesta of Embera Happiness, a Pedagogical Tool for Attention for and Development of Indigenous Children” (Moreno and Lascano, 2007-2010). Originally implemented by the Indigenous Social Pastorate of the Diocese of Quibdó in the Lower and Middle Baudó with the Embera community beginning in December 2008, also supported by UNICEF, it later was moved to the Diocese of Istmina’s area of influence, also in the area of the Return to Happiness project with UNICEF. In Unión Wounaan (Middle San Juan) its activities were observed directly during the evaluation process, through a strategy called CARNUI (National Indigenous Recuperation Campaign), specifically focused on the transfer of the knowledge acquired with the Embera. CARNUI is a multi-faceted strategy to strengthen the role of women in childcare, beginning with a nutritional methodology that seeks to prevent and address child malnutrition in indigenous families. It has an additional component in the area of health, with emphasis on care for newborns and environmental improvement, and a recreational and artistic component that seeks to develop and protect the most idiosyncratic cultural patterns, using methodologies and approaches quite similar to those of Return to Happiness.

In our opinion, these activities contribute to the continuity and expansion of Return to Happiness actions, with greater emphasis on adaptation to indigenous culture. Better still, we believe this to be the materialization of a methodological transfer of positive practices with
cultural adaptation, from one indigenous community to another. This continuity amply supports any attempt to formalize sustainability strategies.

Also in this locality we found Doctors Without Borders in a health post that opens twice a month, providing activities strictly limited to medical attention. On the other hand, in the municipality of Jambaló (Cauca) we detected the presence of an international cooperation organization called Diakonie, with which the ACIN coordinates the participation of adults demobilized from the illegal armed groups in productive processes of gardening or subsistence crops, in order to reduce the load on the family budget. The technical team in the zone confirmed that UNICEF and this organization have not formalized any kind of operational coordination.

On the other hand, in Toribío (Cauca) the German international cooperation organization Misereor provides this municipality’s youth organization with its own office space; some of these youths formerly participated in Return to Happiness and have chosen to continue playing a leadership role in their community. In this case, UNICEF’s technical team tries to maintain permanent, functional contact with this programme, feeding back to them frequently on progress in the projects under each entity. This does not constitute a formal or official relation, but is merely indicative of an interaction that adds value to the purposes of social and community development in the municipality. In Córdoba, this same entity provided economic support for working with mothers, based on “training in personal and work skills to improve their living conditions and achieving better treatment and attention for children and adolescents”.

The projects that were evaluated operate with a significant level of coordination with the three counterparts: the Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca (ACIN), the Dioceses of Istmina and Quibdó, and the Diocese of Montería. These three entities were the direct institutional interlocutors of the technical coordination teams in each department.

In matters of general coordination with local authorities, this evaluation found that UNICEF, represented by its technical teams in the field, coordinated fluidly with indigenous and ecclesiastic authorities. Coordination with entities of the Colombian State was less visible during the evaluation missions, although there are references in this regard in the technical reports consulted. For example, in Córdoba, there is a report of monitoring a strategy called IAMI in association with the departmental Secretariat of Health, performing technical assistance and pre-evaluation of the implementation of the strategy.

Despite this isolated reference, coordination of the projects with municipal organizations like Secretariats of Education and/or Health or municipal mayors’ offices per se, in the three departments visited was not evident. This indicates a need for more dynamic actions on the parts of UNICEF teams, at least in terms of permanent, staggered dissemination and external communication. Evidence of this situation is found in the fact that, when preparing each of the field evaluation missions, the technical coordinator in each of the departments did not find it useful to programme visits and/or interviews with municipal mayors, as previously mentioned.

With indigenous authorities, on the other hand UNICEF’s coordination and acceptance was based on mutual respect, writ large. A Council member of the ACIN, an indigenous organization, confirms that “UNICEF did not come to do, but to respect and support”. In this way it was able to have an impact in the zone in general, with a direct coordination with the indigenous authorities in Cauca. In Chocó and Córdoba, the three Dioceses not only have been counterparts, but intermediaries with the indigenous authorities. At any rate the technical teams are the ones that come directly into contact with the authorities, and with them are guaranteeing
that the agreements for coordination and action are established based on conditions of equal information.

The importance of the projects for the departmental educational structure, first, and the health structure, secondly but no less importantly, indicates a need for more support and functional coordination with the public entities representing these social welfare sectors. In Cauca and Chocó, testimonies were gathered from school authorities, particularly school principals, who lamented the lack of attention from their municipal secretariats of education regarding aspects of institutional operation that necessarily require support from these entities – like the timely appointment of teachers, or the expansion of physical plants, or not transferring teachers with no forewarning (teachers already trained in Return to Happiness). Indeed, being a centre of project activities was not a differentiating factor regarding undesirable bureaucratic attitudes, indolence, or administrative negligence. We consider that these entities’ degree of knowledge about the projects is not adequate.

In Córdoba, by contrast, we found effective partnerships between the project and education authorities, even to the extent of generating special activities like the Reading Club or a writers’ programme in Montería, for children and adolescents participating in the project with UNICEF. The action of the Diocese of Montería in this regard has been quite important. Also, there were agreements with universities in Montería and with the public library network.

Efficiency

It was only possible to learn about the control, use and appropriation of resources in Cauca by interviewing the entire accounting team, and in Chocó by interviewing the person responsible for handling the resources for executing the agreement. In Córdoba, the person or persons responsible for this area were no longer associated with the Dioceses of Montería.

In terms of the clear and precise assignation of responsibilities associated with the execution of each project’s activities, it is noteworthy that, although the areas of influence are very extensive and dispersed, on the one hand, and the teams small in terms of numbers of professionals hired, on the other, no complaint was received regarding the saturation of functions or work overload. The reason for this lies primarily in the commitment and service vocation of all those responsible for the tasks. When working with communities, a service vocation should always be the main factor; this undoubtedly feeds people’s sense of belonging to the project in which they work. But in this case our evaluation found it to be more a sense of belonging to the beneficiary communities. The use of local professionals was common in all the projects, and might explain the capacity to commit and align with project objectives. It also might be inferred that this vocation has been subtly but explicitly moulded into the actors recruited in the field and who play concrete roles in guaranteeing the success of the interventions. Specifically, we are talking about the adolescent promoters, the community health agents (ACS), or the youth volunteers. They were the driving force of the projects, with permanent guidance from the mentioned professionals.

On the other hand, the financial structure of the evaluated projects was coherent with the distribution of the planned activities. The Return to Happiness component received priority attention when the different budgetary appropriations were made, because of the methodological rigor needed to preserve the achievement of the goals. The campaigns for training volunteers and preparing materials, and the activities required for moving the technical teams, all received the needed attention of the administrators.
Given the special conditions of the regions where the projects were implemented, the geographic dispersion of the municipalities and reservations covered by them, or the occasional demanding mobilization of technical teams by land or water required positive administrative continuity on the part of those responsible for assigning and disbursing the resources. The counterparts therefore assigned teams of accountants with the specific task of implementing the controlling and supervising the adequate management of resources, interacting with UNICEF to guarantee the flow of disbursements, and making sure that the suppliers met the requirements of each project.

Administrative support personnel were provided by the counterparts in each region, with adequately organized accounting teams permanently oriented to the needs of the projects. In the case of Cauca, the ACIN leveraged the project’s needs with a supply structure that made it possible to guarantee the flow of purchase orders and distribution of materials, without the flow of UNICEF disbursements affecting the execution of actions at any time.

In Chocó and Córdoba the Dioceses of Quibdó and Istmina, and the one in Montería, fully guaranteed the administration and assignation of resources.

In Cauca we heard an important comment on the way the accounting team views its role in the implementation of this kind of project. They do not agree that their work should begin on the basis of faits accomplis by the planners, without their having had the opportunity to participate in the planning sessions. They consider that if they understand from the outset the importance of an activity calling for the acquisition of goods and services, they can anticipate the flow of activities necessary to increase the efficiency of the actions and thus make a better contribution to a project’s anticipated results and impacts.

It also was suggested that adjustments be made to UNICEF’s flow of disbursements, since in the case of Cauca it seems that there were several delays that caused some annoyance and created shadows of tension, given the difficulty of responding in a timely way to the everyday requirements of the activities. In addition, in this department there were surplus funds in several line items when the activities were finished, and after requesting UNICEF’s approval to use these funds for unanticipated activities, they were used to purchase sports equipment for the communities.

We could only find a few details on the project’s resource monitoring setup in northern Cauca with the ACIN as a counterpart. We found that accounting software had been used, along with a structure for anticipating the flow of activities and generating requests for the purchase of goods or payment for services. In Chocó we found direct control by the Social Pastorate Unit in Istmina, with fewer human resources assigned than in Cauca, but with a full-time, experienced person dedicated to controlling the resources. In the Diocese of Quibdó an organizational structure also was placed at the service of the projects in its area of influence. In Montería, the Diocese managed the agreement with UNICEF from its centre of operations, assigning the necessary human resources to precisely address the needs of the activities.

Sustainability

The resource that was best used by the coordinators and facilitators of Return to Happiness in the regions where the projects operated was the school. Using private and public schools enhances the possibility of generating stable local networks, especially for approaching the project beneficiaries’ parents. So, in the case of families that were actively involved in their children’s schools, the strategy has a natural scenario full of possibilities of stability and projection. We also found the creation of youth networks to be one of the effects of the programmes’ implementation. Thus the implementation of Return to Happiness generates local
networks that contribute to maintaining the effects of social cohesion among young people and their families in the community where it operates.

In our opinion, knowledge and experiences from projects already implemented in other zones or municipalities should be incorporated into new projects that include Return to Happiness as one of their components, whenever possible. It should be a requisite that new projects using Return to Happiness communicate directly with other experiences that have already terminated or are being extended by the communities themselves. The subsidiary components of comprehensive projects – for example, components on health, food security, or attention for pregnant women – should consider what has been “harvested” over a trajectory that goes back to 2002, if not earlier, in Colombia. The learning curve is now mature and it would be unreasonable not to seek guidance from these experiences, when at any rate this can contribute to their sustainability.

There is a generalized effect of Return to Happiness on the overall morale of the communities, which we consider contributes to their sustainability. The interpretation of prevention of recruitment by illegal armed groups is viewed positively in all social circles in the communities. Young people unanimously attest to personal changes in themselves, and to the potential for developing life plans that has been generated through their participation in Return to Happiness. In this sense, the aspect of Return to Happiness that is especially oriented to young people’s life plans not only is proving to be a source of sustainability for the methodology, but constitutes the greatest value added perceived by the volunteers that become actively involved.

With respect to the community participation dimension, it was found to have been positive, since it is present in the Return to Happiness value chain: in the unity of young volunteers, schools committed through their directors and teachers, the selection of children and the involvement of parents. The indigenous organizations interpret community participation as a milestone of civil resistance, especially in those areas where the instability caused by the armed actions is notorious.

This evaluation found that the Return to Happiness experiences have been continued in two or three communities in each of the three departments, based on the involvement of trained adolescent volunteers that are willing to continue working with children in their schools. This sustainability is more viable when it involves the education community from the outset. These young people either are doing it on their own account or through youth organizations that they themselves have formed, from where they begin to write proposals seeking funding and materials to continue the Return to Happiness activities.

There is an example of this in Cauca, which has three subsidiary programmes under the psychosocial recovery intervention that remain in operation in 2009 with the same technical team. The reason for these programmes is the opportunity to show that “young people are repairing the errors of war”. They contribute to sustainability because they permanently foster the organization of young people, generating the proper conditions for planning and leadership by Return to Happiness volunteers. The basic postulate is that young people, by working in Return to Happiness, learn the worth of organizing to prevent the formation of an attitude of acceptance of, or the desire to join, the guerrilla, paramilitary forces or emerging groups (militia). When these youths win the affection of children and adolescents, this reality becomes a protective condition that protects them from the risk of falling into the hands of these irregular groups. The ETAJ – or youth animator workshop schools – in Cauca have been created as an example of sustainability through youth organization.
These programmes are:

1. *En la jugada* ("In the action")
2. Socio-cultural animation
3. Comprehensive psychological attention for demobilized persons

In Córdoba and Chocó, subsidiary programmes or initiatives under the agreements that are the object of this evaluation also have been created. In Córdoba, because of the agreement with objectives of psychosocial recovery, the “Childhood as a Space for Consensus and Peace” was created, to continue follow-up and participation in formal activities associated with the agreements in the department. This programme generates more visibility in the education communities in the participating municipalities, and now forms part of the community heritage – beyond participation and UNICEF support. Activities like homework workshops, reading clubs, and communication for development activities are all initiatives created around the “central” project with Return to Happiness as one of its components.

In the Chocó, the agreement has fostered its own creation of a programme they have called “Fiesta of Happiness”, which better motivated the community and is a product of the process of cultural animation. In addition, there is the “Youths developing our thinking together” group. Its directors are young people, one of whom is the direct contact with the Council. The Board of Youths operates permanently.

Special mention should be given to the matter of inclusion of the Return to Happiness tool in the school curriculum. There is general consensus among the schools in the three departments in which Return to Happiness, its materials, its methodology and its structure should be part of the school curriculum – be part of the Community Education Projects (PEC). Teachers and school directors have found in the strategy a special tool for strengthening the “teaching/learning” processes, as well as revitalizing the task of teaching. Nonetheless, at the moment of this evaluation it was not possible to get documentary evidence that any school had taken this formal step. The inclusion of Return to Happiness was mentioned in the PECs, but again, there was no opportunity to view the respective document.

Continuing with the sustainability initiatives in the schools, the cyclical involvement and training of new 9th-grade students, supported by 10th-graders and graduating 11th-graders in the area of recreational therapy, has been one of the sustainability mechanisms best received by students. On the other hand, teachers have incorporated Return to Happiness’ precepts of socio-cultural animation as educational and didactic technology to make their role as teachers and permanent animators more dynamic and stronger – not only in the classroom but in the institution itself. Indeed, the teachers say that children now demand that their classes be more dynamic (recreational).

Return to Happiness is a strategy offered en masse to all children and adolescents in the participating schools. The recreational therapists’ experience allows them to detect children with specific symptoms, and they know what steps to take, including advising when the detected case is complex and exceeds their capacity to handle it. There are schools that have a high percentage of affected children and adolescents among their students. For example, at the Nazareth Campus of the Catalino Gulfo School in the barrio of Paraguay in Valencia, Córdoba, around 70% or more of the children enrolled are from displaced families. The secondary branch of this same institution provides visits by volunteers to provide recreational therapy. As we have indicated, this sustainability is in line with the adolescents’ capacity to organize and provide the support needed for prioritizing this kind of institutions. The fact that most of the children and adolescents are IDPs could lead to prioritization when a project for psycho-
affective recovery of displaced children is to be financed, and this would benefit them. Therefore the special conditions of some groups of children favour a project, although they are not related to the sustainability of the strategy.

With respect to the capacity of the counterparts to continue and sustain the strategy, the analysis and evaluation of the projects showed that the ACIN, in Cauca, and the Dioceses of Quibdó, Istmina and Montería, all have the management and technical capacity to execute a Return to Happiness intervention. Their levels of organization, their trajectory in their regions, the credibility they enjoy and the profile of their professionals in matters of humanitarian aid, psycho-social intervention and monitoring of beneficiaries would guarantee their success as executors of this kind of activities. At present, despite the projects evaluated here being closed, a large percentage of the professional personnel continues to work with the Dioceses, and in the case of Cauca other, complementary initiatives also sponsored by UNICEF are being implemented. Nonetheless, in all the departments the wish of once again receiving support from UNICEF to continue the work of psycho-affective recovery and prevention of the involvement of children and adolescents in the armed groups was sounded.

From the financial point of view, the ACIN was the only entity that contributed counterpart resources in the agreement with UNICEF. This indicates that this organization has a certain financial autonomy, allowing it significant margins for negotiation when seeking a partner to implement projects. We cannot say whether this is the case, or not, with the Dioceses, but only confirm that their socio-community activity level is high, they have a recurrent capacity for implementing contracts, and a dynamic such that they can enter into counterpart negotiations like the ACIN does.

Impact Factors

Return to Happiness has an effect on everybody in the community, to the point where its impact is assumed as a life change for each member. This change has the gratifying quality of changing fear into happiness. The only ones capable of making this emotional transition naturally between these two poles, without rationalizations or concessions, are the children and adolescents. The entire community observes them and finds that it is real, that thanks to a recreational methodology the subjective conditions can indeed change, even if the objective conditions that feed the armed conflict remain present in the region.

There is a chain of community events that comprises the Return to Happiness “value chain”. The negative feelings of some children are gradually transformed into positive ones, thanks to some adolescents’ dedicating time and attention to them, chatting and playing with them, and visualizing their everyday problems because they have the tools and training to do so. But the methodology has other virtues. The adolescents that play with the children discover themselves, and appear as important members of society – in their own community. This is a change in the traditional position of the adolescent as someone who questions and challenges everything in his or her environment. No, in this psycho-affective project the adolescent is recovered for his or her environment, since he or she now feels that he or she is a useful member. The methodology opens up the possibility of bringing children and adolescents together, communicating, letting off steam, conversing. This event necessarily invites parents to stop and rediscover their own roles as protectors, guides and parents. Mothers and fathers begin to question and change the environment of household relations, which often are the cause of violent and aggressive treatment. In parallel, teachers also rediscover their roles for leading the new generations to enjoy the teaching-learning processes differently, ensuring a greater impact of their educational techniques. And in the process the teachers also begin to feel useful – useful to the children, the adolescents and their families. With support from the education
authorities, school principals and education administrators in general, the Return to Happiness value change is completed.

Imagining that amid a war or natural disaster the tragedy affecting children and adolescents can be transformed into happiness is a wonderful idea. Neutralizing the negative effects on the psychosocial life of adults certainly sounds like a complex task, since it is a situation that is fatiguing, and fatigue is nothing more than a hard load to bear. The psychological and emotional needs of a child are very concrete: they want to get back to playing, since recreation is the best emotional barrier to bullets. The capacity to feel happiness is a sign of good mental health. Whether it is the mitigation of pain or not does not matter much, since if the child or adolescent feels that the risk of violence is lurking there, expectant and observant, his or her happiness can help to overcome it – creatively and with a lot of energy. And such energy is truly contagious among children and adolescents.

The strategy conceives psychosocial recovery as a means, and not an end. The end is community- and not individual-focused. Perhaps for this reason the individual treatment of specific, referral-type cases by a psychologist due to the complexity of a problem, or referrals to the ICBF when necessary – as suggested in an activity report – was neither seen nor recorded during the evaluation missions. The impact is on the community, and the happiness is for everybody.

The theme of intra-family violence is another matter. This socially-relevant problem was present transversally throughout the evaluation process. The recreational therapists detected it, the children and adolescents communicated it, the teachers noted it in the classroom through comments by the students, and parents began to suspect that something apparently routine like violence in their child-raising patterns, or treatment between spouses, was beginning to change. However, intra-family violence continues to be the most common threat to the happiness of the children and adolescents. Its being left in a past that is forgotten by most families is a permanent result that is hoped for by those who comprise and promote the Return to Happiness methodology.

In this sense Return to Happiness acquires conciliatory potential, and helps to resolve conflicts. Not because it is necessary to take a recreational workshop to a Family Commissary, but because the role of each actor within the community becomes so clear and specific that the child recognizes that his or her job is to play; the youth, to serve (no longer playing); the teacher, to teach; the parent, to love and protect his or her children. And the formal leaders, to support and promote the beginning of a new cycle every time the 9th-grade students begin to train as recreational therapists.

The free time of the strategy beneficiaries is thus used in activities associated with Return to Happiness. Cultural manifestations through dance and music, like the “whistles and drums” activities, are indicators of the special effects that the intervention dynamic gradually impresses on the children and adolescents in the beneficiary communities.

The community cohesion generated in the shadow of Return to Happiness, with its whistles and drums marking the rhythm of the restitution of the rights of children and adolescents, protects the community against frontal attacks like the recruitment of youths or children into illegal armed groups. The guerrilla will have to face increasing community barriers to achieve its goal, since it clearly is not linked to the community, but instead truly extraneous and threatening to social tranquility and cohesion.

The indigenous authorities in Cauca and Chocó, and education leaders in Córdoba, concede that of every ten youths sinisterly seduced to join these groups, one winds up joining.
This is an honest statistic, which shows that resistance needs more reinforcing, more support and continuity. And Return to Happiness by itself cannot be the only element in the shield, since the level of basic unsatisfied needs, which is high in these territories, needs other components deriving from comprehensive community and social development projects, as observed particularly during this evaluation process. The social value chain generated by Return to Happiness should be one of the components in projects that address the communities’ basic needs in areas of natural and human-caused risk, in order to design pertinent and effective interventions.

**Conclusions**

**Strengths**

Among the strengths of Return to Happiness, we should emphasize:

The Return to Happiness methodology is a good central axis of a broader and more comprehensive nature, and should be a component of a project dedicated to other community needs when there are psycho affective needs to be addressed, or to prevent the recruitment by armed groups, or to restore the rights of children and adolescents. As a special case, we could mention that the young women that participate wind up finding elements of training and attitude for preventing unwanted pregnancies. This is the case of Afro-descendant and peasant women in Córdoba, as they discover that a Life Project does not fit and is contrary to early pregnancies.

Young people are the predominant figure for communicating the strength of the strategy. They not only develop skills of dedication and support for children, but also experience their own personal transformation, generating ties among the groups of volunteers in each municipality. They know each step of the strategy quite well, in addition to being able to create a Life Plan as an outcome of their involvement in the activities.

The agendas are methodological items that have transformed teachers’ way of doing things. Especially in Cauca, the agendas have been valued as appropriate tools for education planning, where their capacity to communicate with children is appreciated. In summary, they allow the teachers to do their job better, and become a permanent source of motivation.

The socio-cultural animation nature of the strategy has made it possible to have levels of acceptance that can be generalized for the entire community. This shows that Return to Happiness is not an end, but a means for community building.

**Weaknesses**

The adolescent volunteers need more support and training for handling cases in which children show symptoms that they are able to detect and evaluate as indicative of the presence of psycho-affective problems. There is a need to be able to profile follow-up strategies for special cases in children, wherein the adolescent can meet with the family and document the reason for the symptoms very well. But behind this event there must be professional help available, and here is where the presence of the public sector, with its corresponding entities, must find the way to participate actively.

The training of recreational therapists is short, averaging three days, which constitutes a weakness compared to the generally positive effects attributable to Return to Happiness, and it
would be useful to create self-support groups among the adolescent therapists, led by a teacher acting as self-support coordinator.

In this line of thinking, teachers recognize the value of recreational learning as the cornerstone of Return to Happiness, and appreciate quite well the contribution that this mechanism for action can make to their work, enriching their classroom performance. However, they are not proactive in advising the adolescents on how to formulate a psycho affective intervention that would allow a child to overcome an emotional crisis associated with the traumatic events in her or his municipality.

The tendency to work with schoolchildren and adolescents might tend to lead to the possibility of excluding those that are out of school. This risk of lack of coverage should be controlled, emphasizing the child population in the censuses, combining the search with displacement statistics on forced displacement in the regions where projects are being implemented. Schools continue to be the natural scenarios for this kind of out-of-school population.

The activities foster detection of problems, but there is no work plan associated with an intervention per se, which also could be recreational but with a different intention. After all, not everybody is “cured” in the same way. In many cases, the strategy’s effective is preventive in nature, but it is necessary for teachers and adolescents to be able to differentiate among primary prevention, applied before a problem appears; secondary, when the harmful effects of the problem are incipient; or tertiary, meaning “a treatment”.

### Lessons learned

What are the things learned that might adequately be generating favourable attitudes towards psycho-affective recovery and prevention of the involvement of children and adolescents in the illegal armed groups, fostered by the Return to Happiness strategy?

It is viable to use the Return to Happiness methodology with indigenous communities, since UNICEF already has enormous experience in working with respect for the cultural baggage of a group that wants to preserve its identity, without imposing its own interests over those found in the community.

The adolescent volunteers are and will continue to be the essence of the central activities of Return to Happiness. To preserve their role before they reach 11th grade and graduate from school, the youth organization should be present as a backup and guidance mechanism for those in this group. Promoting this kind of youth organizations promotes the strategy for community productive purposes. Schools are not the only ones that should promote youth organization for the promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents, but also churches, municipal authorities or civil society led by merchants or other social actors in the communities.

Intra-family violence is an undesirable factor that is present on the scene, stretching beyond the scope of the methodology. The young volunteers will open the door to access to the family and beginning the work; but this door, once opened, should admit all the members of the community, since it will no longer be the adolescents alone who generate solutions to these social problems.

In the Return to Happiness strategy, the nutritional and food security programmes have an appropriate tool for their dissemination and maintenance. The recreational learning activities
associated with the preparation and consumption of foods, emphasizing cultural traditions as with the indigenous communities of Cauca and Chocó, provide valuable support for strengthening new nutritional behaviour in the communities.

It is clear that Return to Happiness has convening power in the community. One lesson to be capitalized is the transfer of this knowledge to State entities like the ICBF or the Personeros’ Offices, so that they can give institutional backing for activities that are not harmful from the economic perspective, but do require broad and generalized participation in order to be successful. A poster referring to the armed violence in the municipality of Tierralta indicated a call for “blood not to flow from your roads”, in clear reference to an end to the bloodshed. It was signed by the Office of the Personero of Tierralta. This kind of entities can enrich their function by working with children and adolescents, and transmitting their objectives and functions.