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Mexico

Works for Children's Rights

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AN EMERGING ISSUE

In recent years, in conjunction with processes of globalization and political transformation that have opened up the way to what has been called democratic normalization, slowly but surely, Mexico has seen a new culture of respect for individual rights and dignity grow and take hold. While this was a marginal question 25 years ago, of interest mainly to small groups of intellectuals and political activists, undoubtedly the persistent and combined endeavors of non-governmental organizations, political parties and both public and private institutions has borne fruit and placed the issue of these rights in a prominent position on the nation's public agenda.

In the context of general thinking and debate about rights (the rights of women, the physically and mentally challenged, cultural minorities, etc.), it is no wonder that the issue of children's rights —of both boys and girls— has also emerged. Without disregarding the importance of previous efforts, the main impetus in this field undoubtedly came from the Convention on the Rights of the Child approved by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and the 1990 World Summit for Children. Both had important repercussions in Mexico. The Mexican government ratified the convention in 1990 and also created a National Action Commission for Children, charged with implementing the summit's Declaration and Action Plan. From that time on, the



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government carried out many activities in very different areas (such as health, nutrition, primary education, etc.) that have been taken up and given continuity in the National Action Program for Children 1995-2000.

Beyond what the government itself does, other autonomous public, private and socially concerned institutions have also carried out important activities to make people aware of and foster respect for children's rights. Suffice it to mention

the educational and protection activities carried out by the different human rights commissions, or the assistance, training and educational programs carried out by different non-governmental organizations like the Mutual Support Forum, the Mexican Collective to Support Children and the Citizens' Cause National Political Group.

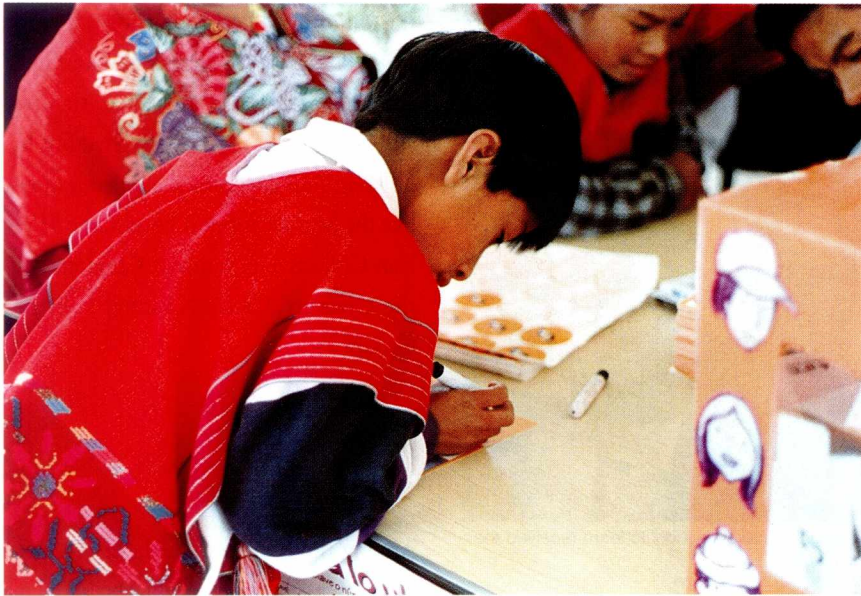
THE CHILDREN'S ELECTION

Among the activities that have put children's rights in the spotlight, special mention should be made of the children's election held July 6, 1997, promoted by the Federal Electoral Institute and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The balloting aimed at making the public aware of children's fundamental rights, contributing to their recognition and protection, creating a space for their participation to find out their perceptions and opinions about their problems and fostering education about civic-democratic values and practices. These goals were successfully reached with the enthusiastic participation of slightly under 4 million boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 12 who cast their votes at the 9,000 polling places set up nationwide.

It was very clear to the organizing institutions that children had to be offered concrete answers no matter what the outcome of the consultation. Otherwise, it would create frustration and resentment.

The children's elections, then, were seen as the beginning of a vast process that would ideally branch out into many other activities and gradually incorporate other public and private institutions, as well as organizations from civil

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The right to a clean, healthy environment was the second most voted.

society, into the fight for children's rights from their different fields of endeavor.

The election process included stages of research, data organization and assessment which culminated in late 1997 with a forum attended by representatives of public agencies, political parties, non-governmental organizations and educational experts. The meeting aimed to critically review the July 6 experience, look into the meaning of the children's vote and decide general lines of action for the immediate future given the children's concerns.

The forum was enormously enlightening and at another time it might well be worthwhile to examine its results. For the time being, what is of interest here is to recall that the three most voted topics were children's right to have a school to learn and improve themselves, the right to have a healthy clean environment and the right to be loved and protected from all forms of mistreatment and abuse. It was a forceful message that cannot and should not be ignored.



The right to be loved and protected from all forms of mistreatment and abuse received the third highest vote.

JOINT ACTION PROGRAM

After the forum, the IFE, UNICEF and Mexico's National System for Integral Family Development (DIF) agreed to work on a new publicity campaign in favor of children's rights with emphasis on the fight against mistreatment.

The idea was to relaunch the issue of children's rights, but in addition, and above all, to answer a concrete concern profoundly felt by children.

The involvement of the UNICEF's Mexico office and the DIF hardly need expla-

nation. Both their legal mandates include seeking better living conditions for children as a central concern. On the other hand, the Mexican Constitution confers on the IFE, the federal electoral body, a series of responsibilities in civic education and the dissemination of democratic culture. Its participation in a campaign of this nature is due to the certainty that:

- 1) The issue of children's rights is crucial in a process of forging a citizenry; for this process to be effective, it must begin at an early age.
- 2) The best civic education that can be given to boys and girls is to teach them their rights and how to exercise them here and now, not talk about what rights they will have in the remote future when they actually become citizens.¹
- 3) The struggle against child abuse is, in practice, a message against all forms of violence as a means of social intercourse and a form of championing tolerance, respect and living together peacefully within the family itself so that it can spread to other spheres of society.

The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), the Mexico City Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) soon joined in supporting this initiative. After four months of arduous work to develop the concept and come to agreements, last April 30—a symbolic day in Mexico, since it is Children's Day—the heads of the six institutions signed a joint declaration in which they committed themselves to developing a permanent Joint Action Program to promote greater awareness of, respect for, implementation of and protection for children's rights.

The number and character of the participating institutions, as well as the concrete commitments they made, makes this an unprecedented agreement. It lays the foundation for inter-institutional activity with a view to the long term, not subject to immediate political agendas, organized around the great challenges posed to children's integral development by a society which combines both wretched poverty and opulence, both vestiges of the distant past and problems typical of developed countries.

It also seems clear that the inter-institutional agreement can operate as the kernel of greater efforts with more participants to develop specific programs and activities, which will make the Joint Action Program very versatile and give it broad coverage.

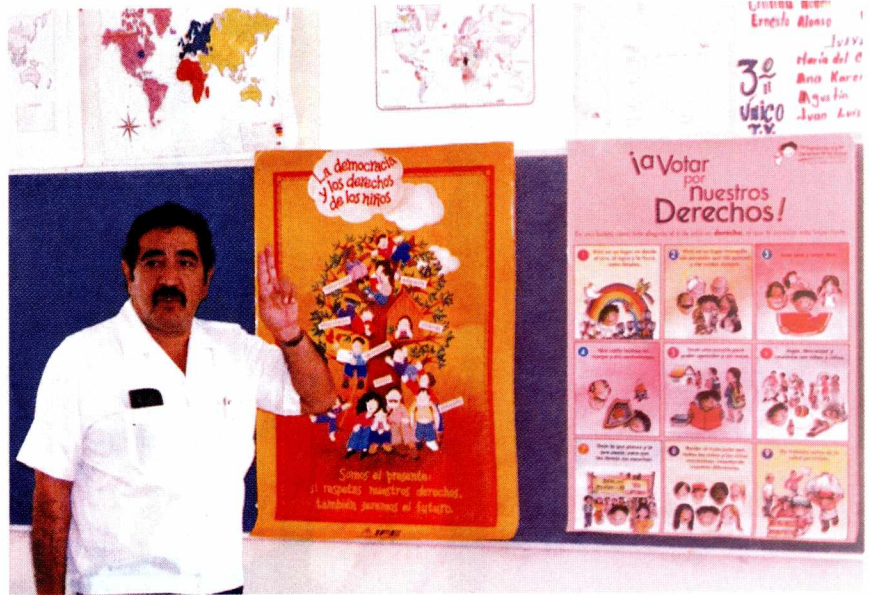
If anything, far from seeing children's rights as an ephemeral issue like so many others, this agreement shows a very clear determination to make them a central part of the political and social activities of a society which, at the beginning of the new century, aspires to equity and justice.

In more than one sense, the struggle for children's rights is yet another facet of the complex and multi-dimensional ongoing fight in Mexico today for a full and more effective democracy.

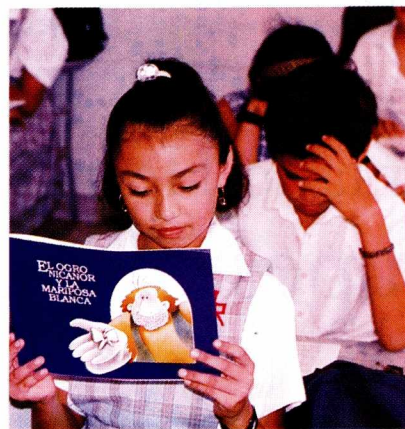
DEMOCRACY AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS FINAL THOUGHTS

Why can we say that democracy and children's rights are closely linked?

First, democracy, in contrast with all other forms of government, is by definition something built by its citizens. A democracy is a democracy insofar as it is supported and nurtured by the participa-



The civic education program in action in public schools.



Reading about democracy in elementary school.

tion of the public and, in general, people's taking part in collective decision-making. One of the critical pillars of democracy is the recognition and exercise of freedoms and rights by the individuals who make up the political community.

In contrast with authoritarianism (not to mention totalitarianism), democracy is founded on the recognition and protection of these rights and freedoms. In that sense, we can say that democracy is the form of government most capable of recognizing and protecting the basic rights of all, including, of course, child-

ren's rights. This does not mean that the existence of a democracy automatically solves children's problems, just as, in and of itself, it does not automatically solve other problems. However, it is the condition under which these problems can best be faced.

In the second place, creating awareness about children's rights can be understood as the most fundamental civic education possible. In my view, in effect, there is no better civic education that can be given to children than a clear, unclouded message that, as children, they have rights, that they are individuals who have a right to their own opinion, that their interests and expectations are worthy of being taken seriously, and that their voice and participation are relevant for society. For that and for many other reasons, children's rights are a primary notion in the process of forging a democratic citizenry. ■■

NOTES

¹ By Mexican law, anyone born in Mexico is a Mexican national, but nationals do not become citizens until they come of age and assume all their rights and responsibilities as such. [Translator's Note.]