



ENDING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS
AGAINST CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS HOUSED IN INSTITUTIONS:
A CALL TO ACTION

Launched on the Webinar of March 8th



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In Latin America, more than 240,000 children have been separated from their families and are growing up in residential care, where they lack the individualised care they need. Estimates suggest that in Guatemala at least 5,600 children are living in residential care facilities. Some are “large scale institutions” that house hundreds of boys and girls who live in isolation from society, while having insufficient staff and scarce supervision from the state.

Not only in Guatemala, but also in the majority of countries in Latin America and other regions, residential care is still the predominant policy when it comes to caring for children affected by different complex social and family circumstances. Under these circumstances, families might give up the custody of their children and request that they are temporarily or permanently placed under institutional care, with the aim of ensuring that the children receive food, sanitary care and education. This means that most of the children living in residential care could be raised within their families and communities if governments and civil society invested in initiatives and services that could guarantee adequate psychosocial and material support.

The first week of March 2017 saw Guatemala and the international community in mourning due to a tragedy that resulted in the death of 41 girls, while also physically and psychologically harming 15 others. The incident took place in the institution Virgen de la Asunción, which was under government supervision (and is paradoxically called Hogar Seguro or safe home). The institution sheltered around 1,000 children and adolescents when a group of girls who were locked in set fire to their mattresses to protest against the living conditions, the violence and the sexual abuse they had been subjected to. This preventable tragedy is an alert signal which leads us to call, “NEVER AGAIN”. Here we are highlighting an often overlooked social issue: human rights violations against boys and girls living in institutions in Guatemala, in Latin America and all over the world. In light of this tragedy, the Guatemalan government carried out a diagnosis of the situation and has committed to implementing a series of reforms with the support of civil society entities and the cooperation of the international community.

At the same time, the international community must continue the transformative work already underway in the region. The measures proposed in this Call to Action, which intend to promote or expand and strengthen initiatives (depending on the progress achieved in each country), aim to put an end to residential care for children whenever this does not meet the necessity and suitability principles outlined in the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The goal is to promote a protection system that allows the replacement of mass residential care with mechanisms to support families and communities, within a public policy framework that contributes to a gradual process of deinstitutionalisation.

The goal is to establish national systems for comprehensive care and protection of children which enforce care and protection policies that respect children’s rights. Ideally, these systems should develop child care policies that include initiatives and services to help strengthen families and communities so they can fulfil their role and responsibilities in caring for children. This call to action also has a fundamental purpose: to establish permanent mechanisms that enable deinstitutionalization, in order to go beyond small scale results, so as to achieve a government policy that is universal and sustainable over time.

The Sustainable Development Goals encourage countries to “Leave No One Behind”. There is an increasing level of technical expertise which can help governments plan and finance the reform of child protection services.



Thus, we call for governments to urgently pursue these courses of action:

- Promote public policies to ensure the protection of children and adolescents which can be sustained over time.
- Gradually eliminate the institutionalisation of children under three years old in the region by establishing and strengthening family-based alternatives.
- Pass the relevant legislation to limit the separation of children and adolescents from their families of origin to those cases when it is really necessary, and encourage family reunification whenever possible.
- Allocate technical and financial resources to make the protection of children and adolescents a priority, support families providing care and raising children, and develop specific programmes to prevent the separation of children from their families.
- Implement family-based alternative care programmes, staffed with competent professionals who can provide care for children who are at risk of being separated from their families.
- Create and apply standards for all alternative care options, such as temporary and permanent, family-based and residential or other care modalities
- Create and offer small-scale services, capable of demonstrating and putting into practice models of individualised, temporary and participatory family-based and residential care
- Set up programmes and take measures to encourage the reunification of children with their families, or their inclusion in foster care, adoption or similar family based placements.
- Develop standards and protocols to regulate the practices of professionals within the protection system who are involved in situations related to children at risk of being separated from their families.
- Set up mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the conditions and the programmes related to providing alternative care for children who have been separated from their families.
- Carry out public awareness and media campaigns.

Regarding the International Community's actions:

- Private sector donors and independent volunteers often play a significant role in supporting institutions, hoping to offer a better future to children and adolescents. We call on individuals, organisations and companies currently supporting institutions to redirect their efforts and funds towards quality care, ethical volunteering and programmes that support raising children and adolescents within their families and communities.
- Bilateral and multilateral donors also play a strategic role in accelerating national reforms of care systems. We call on all international cooperation agencies and other institutional donors to support governments and civil society organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean and across the world striving to transform their care systems.

This Call to Action is open to new stakeholders and we invite you to join us:

internacional@relaf.org



GLOBAL



REGIONAL



COUNTRIES FROM THE REGION



GUATEMALA

