



The Situation of Children and Adolescents in Curaçao:

Key findings and recommendations

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Introduction

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A situation analysis of children, adolescents and women in Curaçao was undertaken in 2012. Commissioned by the United Nations Children’s Fund-The Americas and Caribbean Regional Office and conducted by the Observatorio Social del Ecuador (OSE), a non-governmental organization based in Ecuador, it took a right-based and participatory approach. It analysed the socioeconomic and political processes affecting the situation of children, adolescents and women and was informed by local voices through interviews and focus groups with key informants and young people. Data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses were reviewed as well as multiple documents and research from

various national and international organizations. However, a limitation was the small amount of disaggregated statistical information available on children and adolescents.

Once a Dutch territory, Curaçao became an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands in October 2010. Among the major legacies of this historical dependence are the island's legal framework focused on rights, its judicial system and its political stability. Being a young state in transition implies a number of challenges, however, among which is forging a national identity: the country is home to over 60 different nationalities. This cultural diversity is one of the country's strengths but at the same time offers possible challenges regarding integration and social cohesion. A hangover from the colonial period is the persistence of discriminatory attitudes regarding ethnicity and class, which could lead to marginalization, vulnerability and at-risk environments for some young people.

In 2011, children and adolescents aged 0–19 made up 30 per cent of the population, which totals 149,679 (81,231 women and 68,488 men). The population is currently ageing. It is a multilingual country: Papiamentu is the main language spoken at home (78.6 per cent), followed by Dutch (9.4 per cent), Spanish (6 per cent) and English (3.5 per cent).

Curaçao has one of the highest standards of living in the Caribbean and is categorized by the World Bank as a high-income country. Its free market economy is diversified, with oil refining, tourism, financial services and ICT (information and communications technology) predominating. However, poverty and inequality on the island have somewhat increased. There are a large number of low-skilled jobs, and unemployment for 2009 was 9.7 per cent of the economically active population

Curaçao's legal system has a focus on human rights and the country is committed to a number of international agreements relating to children, adolescents and women. The rights approach means that the state provides subsidies to and support for vulnerable groups. The essential elements are also present to organize a child and adolescent protection system through the interplay of state and civil society foundations; these provide an excellent framework to highlight the importance of the country's commitments to children and their families. However, the new state has some limitations, including a shortage of trained human resources to meet the needs of the country, poor coordination among ministries and between these and foundations, and the absence of mechanisms to monitor public policy execution and its real impact in improving people's lives.



Key findings

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Curaçao has made great strides towards accomplishing many of the rights and goals defined in international agreements; at the same time, there are some that still need to be implemented or improved. Specifically, while the rights to health and education have been largely fulfilled, the rights to protection and participation need to be further addressed.

The right to health

Progress achieved

There is near-universal health-care coverage as only undocumented immigrants lack health insurance (and they can access the system if they pay). Preventive health measures emphasize antenatal and postnatal care and almost all babies – 99 per cent – are delivered in health institutions. The vaccination programme has achieved 95 per cent coverage of children between 1 and 4 years.

Among the established goals, priority has been given to actions for children and adolescents aged 0 to 24 in the areas of immunization, control of communicable diseases and reproductive health. Emphasis is also placed on HIV and AIDS prevention and on nutrition. The recently passed Maternity Law is intended to ensure the health and safety of the working mother when she is pregnant.

Challenges remaining

Health care is not organized in a single system and there is a gap between preventive and curative care. Some health data are lacking or scattered and the existing information is not always used to make decisions.

In the last 12 years the number of children dying before their fifth birthday has increased and, while in absolute numbers these figures are not alarming, studies are needed to determine the reasons. There is no law promoting breastfeeding and low coverage of antenatal care for undocumented women. Although undocumented children have free access to preventive care, treatment must be paid for.

Another challenge is obesity, with experts estimating that between 25 and 30 per cent of children and adolescents are overweight. The explanation is both cultural as well due to hyper-caloric diets – as a result of the very high costs of healthier foods, which are imported – combined with lack of exercise. Obesity can lead to diabetes and hypertension.

While the percentage of teenage pregnancies has remained stable in recent years, adolescents are getting pregnant at younger ages and the number having more than one child before age 18 has increased. Reasons include the lack of sex education in schools, lack of communication within families and the persistence of erroneous beliefs about forms of birth control. Early pregnancy has dangers for the health of the mother and child and may put girls at risk of ongoing poverty.

Addictions also pose a health risk to children and adolescents: one study found 13 per cent of pupils in primary education and 32 per cent of students in secondary had smoked; 79 per cent of pupils in primary education and 76 per cent in high school had consumed alcohol; and 2 per cent of primary school students and 4 per cent of secondary school students had used cannabis.

Other health challenges include HIV and AIDS, with the number of registered HIV-infected in June 2011 showing an increase of 11 per cent compared to the previous year, and possible negative health effects related to pollution from the oil refinery.

The right to education

Progress achieved

Education in Curaçao is free, is guaranteed in Article 21 of the Constitution and is compulsory for children from ages 6 to 18. Primary school enrolment stands at 97 per cent and secondary school enrolment at 77 per cent. Due to the compulsory education law, undocumented immigrant children have access to schooling. The Mandatory Social Training Act was passed in 2005 to address the issue of dropouts and provide education and training in different career sectors to young people aged 16–24 who have left school without qualifications.

Challenges remaining

The Dutch model of education leads to challenges in identification with their society and culture among children and adolescents and could result later to 'brain drain'. Although Papiamentu is now used in the early stages of schooling, educational materials in this language are limited. The tests to move from primary to secondary maintain the Dutch structure and are based on arithmetic and language. Rigid teaching methods persist and there is little emphasis on sport or cultural activities.

There are high levels of dropout: 23 per cent of adolescents, the majority boys, are outside the educational system. Explanations include the above factors as well as poverty, the desire to work to earn money and the lack of family support due to parents working multiple jobs. Schools also follow girls' learning speed in the classroom, leaving boys behind. Children with learning disabilities (mainly boys) may be referred to special education schools. Children with disabilities are not necessarily integrated into the regular education system. Due to the limited supply of after-school activities, children and adolescents are often left alone while their parents work. This increases their likelihood of engaging in activities such as drug use and crime.

Although education is ostensibly free, schools often ask parents to cover for additional costs because state funding does not cover all the costs. There are not enough teachers or educational materials.

While both documented and undocumented immigrant children have access to education, the latter cannot receive a diploma when they complete secondary education. As a result, it is virtually impossible for them to go to college and it remains extremely difficult to find a job at a higher level.

The right to protection

Progress achieved

There is an initial system of child protection in which various private and public entities are involved in the detection, prevention and restoration of violated rights. The Government emphasises the right to social protection, and there are universal benefits – either a cash contribution or subsidies for services – for all citizens that require them. There is no evidence of child labour on the island. A number of foundations and civil society organizations are financed by the state to implement programmes and projects for at-risk children and adolescents. A new juvenile sanction system was launched in 2011 and is much more flexible than the previous one.

In the last three decades, Curaçao has made important advances in legal terms that have ensured compliance with the rights of women. Since 2003, it has had a centre to assist women victim of violence and since 2007 it has had a shelter for women aged 18–24 who have had conflicts in the home.

Challenges remaining

There is no comprehensive child protection system that includes prevention, care, rehabilitation and restitution of rights which is based on a single system for monitoring at-risk children. Such a system would have to link the various state ministries through a single policy for children and ensure better cooperation between the state and civil society. Currently civil society organizations lack state oversight; often experience financing problems, and limited availability of technical or specialized knowledge.

The number of reported cases of violence in the home has risen and has been attributed to several factors: single parents, mothers who go out to work leaving their children alone and unprotected, lack of a male role model, high levels parental stress in some parts of society that has negative repercussions within the household. About 38 cases of sexual abuse of children are reported yearly. It is also argued that incest is not uncommon. However, there are no statistics on the real magnitude of the problem. There is also the phenomenon of ‘loverboys’: young men (around 18 to 24 years) who cause vulnerable girls to fall in love with them by providing emotional and economic support, then ask them as a personal favour to have sex with other people and charge for these services. The girls do not report this as they do not consider it to be abuse.

According to the US Department of State, Curaçao is a source, transit point and destination country for women and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labour and the Government has so far not fully addressed the minimum standards for eliminating this. Although the 2001 Penal Code provides stringent penalties for these crimes, there have been no proceedings or convictions. There are also no specific policies for the prevention and detection of these issues involving children and adolescents.

Adolescents are at risk for drug trafficking because they sometimes consider it a quick and easy way to make money. While the Government has programmes to educate the community about drug use, the prevention of trafficking is not being specifically addressed.

The new juvenile justice system still allows those aged between 16 and 17 years to be sentenced as adults and most young offenders end up with adult detention facilities, which is a serious problem and needs to be avoided.

The right to participation

Progress achieved

In general terms, the participation of adolescents in the public sphere is in an initial phase. There is a Youth Parliament that has objectives related to the political education of youth. While it has no power to make policy changes, it is open to hearing the views of young people and presents ideas and proposals to the state. A magazine created by adolescents circulates among all schools, and children and adolescents can also express their views on local radio stations.

Historically, civil society organizations have played an important role in the island. Currently 90 organizations are associated under a single federation working with children and youth (0–24 years). This includes the United Neighbourhoods of Curaçao which involves 1,500 to 2,000 volunteers from 70 neighbourhoods.

Challenges remaining

Measures to promote the participation of children are needed since existing programmes focus only on those over age 12. Laws to ensure youth participation are still in development.

Equity has not been achieved in government as women only account for five of the twenty-one members of Parliament and hold just two of the nine posts on the Board of Ministers. While women excel in the educational environment at primary, secondary and particularly tertiary levels, more women than men are unemployed. Women also earn less than men and, as the majority of single parents, may have more than one job in order to support the family. There is no policy to assist women to fulfil their dual role as caregivers and guarantors of the household economy.

In the past, the state granted a grace period for legalizing undocumented children, but many people did not take advantage of this as they were able to fulfil the requirements demanded or feared being deported. This creates a stressful situation for children, who have to deal with the emotional aspects of growing up in a family that is excluded by society and the state.

Recommendations

General

- Strengthen coordination and cooperation between government institutions and departments in addressing the rights of the child in health, education, child protection and participation.
- Strengthen the role of the state in setting norms and standards for quality and functions of non-governmental organizations and foundations, including establishing clear mechanisms for referral to address the rights of children holistically.
- Provide monitoring and evaluation systems with reliable and accessible data on the implementation of action plans related to childhood and adolescence.
- Undertake research to deepen understanding of the situation of children and adolescents in terms of health, education, protection and various aspects of social life. A survey that disaggregates by national origin would catch important variations in the population that could feed state planning.
- Put in place mechanisms, including citizen oversight and the use of contemporary forms of communication such as the Internet and social networks, to ensure transparency and accountability regarding actions in favour of children and adolescents.
- Encourage dialogue with other countries in the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as cultural and economic exchange, so as to contribute to the process of constructing a new state.

Health

- Put in place a preventative, curative and rehabilitative care system that places special emphasis on child obesity, tendency to addiction and teenage pregnancy.
- Create a communication campaign along with education on healthy diets in workplaces, schools and colleges as well as the promotion of physical exercise for all, both in order to address obesity
- Undertake further research on the causes of the health problems of children and adolescents. This would include studies into the impacts of the environmental pollution.
- Make greater efforts to promote exclusive breastfeeding and comply with the International Code of Breast-Milk Marketing.
- Carry out research on the increase in child mortality and look at the quality of antenatal care as well as the social conditions of pregnant mothers with problems.

Education

- Support working families by increasing the number of state childcare centres, offering after-school activities and promoting and creating public spaces for cultural and sporting activities.
- Maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the available resources with the aim of increased school attendance and improved learning outcomes.
- Consider the adaptation of the Dutch perspective in the education system to a more local perspective and provide innovative teaching methodologies for children at different levels.

- Strengthen reintegration programmes for children and adolescents that have dropped out of school and continue to monitor the impacts of the measures taken to reduce school absenteeism.
- Introduce early warning mechanisms in schools to detect any socioeconomic problems or learning disabilities affecting children.
- Train teachers and provide learning materials so that children with disabilities remain as much as possible integrated in the regular school system.
- Include sex education in the school curriculum and encourage families and schools to work together on preventing unwanted pregnancy with a special emphasis on girls 12 and older.

Protection

- Strengthen the child protection system through a network coordinating the various ministries and public institutions related to education, health, protection and justice and the foundations that care for children and adolescents.
- Create mechanisms for the State for increased monitoring and evaluation of the actions of NGO's and foundations working in child protection and to monitor their efficiency and effectiveness and their compliance with government regulations.
- Design and implement a code for the protection of children and adolescents that responds to the local reality.
- Train state staff on specific issues related to the protection of children and adolescents.
- Implement policies regarding trafficking – detection, educating the population and tracking and prosecuting people – with prevention and the protection of children and adolescents as the main pillars. This could be complemented by care services for affected children.
- Address the problem of violence in the home and bring it into the open so that it does not become normalized.
- Create alternatives the juvenile justice system aimed at providing them with educational programmes and psychological treatment. Placing children in institutions should always be the last resort and alternative systems should be prioritized
- Create an information system that tracks the age of children in conflict with the law, their socioeconomic background and the type of crime committed and ensure the various social protection agencies work together reintegrate them into society.

Participation

- Ensure that all schools have student councils and promote the participation of children under 12.
- Develop policies to reverse the disadvantages that persist between women and men in the areas of employment and political participation, to help fathers be more involved in the care process and to support mothers who are in the workplace.



Conclusion

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Curaçao's enormous potential comes from universal access to education and health and the fact that it is a multicultural and diverse country with a legal framework that could ensure full rights compliance. The country is also going through a transition process that involves social, political, economic and cultural factors. This historic juncture could be an auspicious time for state and social action to guarantee the fulfilment of the rights of children, adolescents and women.



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