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Developing a Regional Policy for Children in Nicaragua's Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region

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Executive Summary

Children growing up in Nicaragua's Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) face numerous constraints that make it difficult to thrive. Regional economic weakness, poor physical infrastructure, lingering effects of conflict and natural disaster, and sociocultural complexity all challenge the services and human relationships supporting children's healthy growth and development in this diverse region.

Many wide-ranging development interventions have sought to address these challenges. Measured improvements in children's health, participation in education, and other key requisites for children's growth over the past decade speak to the impact of these efforts. However, the success of interventions supporting children is often limited by the same constraints that keep the region's children from achieving their full potential. The interwoven factors of the region's history, economy, geography and politics create a common context that defines the challenges and opportunities available to children and those who seek to support them.

Authorities in RAAN's Regional Government and Council are committed to overcoming these obstacles to improve the lives of the region's children. Recognizing that the complexity of the social environment requires a holistic response, a consortium of regional policymakers, in partnership with UNICEF Nicaragua, are crafting a comprehensive regional policy for children. The policy will provide a framework for guiding programmatic efforts to protect and empower children in RAAN.

Regional leaders and UNICEF Nicaragua believe in exploring and adapting new approaches to policymaking to improve children's lives. They saw in this policymaking endeavor an opportunity to engage constituents more deeply in the policy design process, and to increase their understanding of nuanced factors shaping their constituents' lived experiences. Policymakers believed they could channel their newly gained empathy to better tailor interventions more to the diversity of constraints, capacities and interests found among children and their larger context. At the outset of the policymaking process, they sought to identify the tools that would help them achieve this vision.

UNICEF Nicaragua provided external support to these efforts by engaging Reboot, a global social enterprise experienced in bringing empathy to the design of policies, programs and services. Their team worked closely with a multi-sector working group of local policymakers led by the Regional Secretariat on Women, Family and Children and staff from UNICEF Nicaragua. Consultations with communities allowed citizens to communicate their priorities based on an initial baseline of issue areas assessed by a prior survey. Through interactive synthesis techniques, policymakers, UNICEF Nicaragua staff, and Reboot collectively analyzed findings of these consultations and articulated six key objectives to support the development of RAAN's children:

1. Supporting universal access to high-quality maternal and infant health care
2. Building a shared understanding of social values and discipline
3. Promoting protection of identity and children's personhood
4. Creating opportunities to develop intellectual and practical skills
5. Creating safe environments to promote overall health and well-being
6. Progressing toward a childhood free from violence

The first two objectives were chosen for deeper inquiry to understand what would be necessary to achieve the desired outcomes. To accomplish this, the team applied ethnographic research methods to understand the relevant human and contextual factors. Over the course of this immersive policymaking process, they observed, spoke with, and joined in the daily lives of more than 300 residents of RAAN. These included children, mothers, fathers, teachers, school directors, health providers, and policymakers and other public servants. Through this process, policymakers with local expertise gained a nuanced understanding of the varied lived experiences of their constituents, and strengthened their connection to the people they serve. They also built skills in qualitative research that they intend to re-use in the design of future policies and programmatic initiatives.



Key Findings—Maternal and Infant Health Care

In recent years, RAAN has progressed in improving and expanding the resources and care available to mothers and their babies. Yet ongoing systemic weaknesses in the design and delivery of healthcare services negatively impact the health of women and infants. The investigation found that:

- › **Resource constraints undermine service quality and diminish trust in critical, formal providers.** Inadequate financial, material and human resources open critical gaps in the quality of care delivered. In addition, services are often poorly coordinated or integrated, exacerbating the effects of these weaknesses.
- › **Poor communications negatively impacts relationships between patients and providers.** Linguistic and cultural barriers compound the existing rifts between patients and health care providers. Weak communications design also limits the accessibility and use of key health information. These barriers reduce the effectiveness of provider diagnosis and patient adherence to treatment plans. Repeated frustrating experiences discourage women from using formal health care services.
- › **Mothers rely on trusted informal support networks that provide underutilized benefits.** Personal networks, most often close female family members, are invaluable sources of support for pregnant women and mothers caring for new babies. These networks are often expected to compensate for gaps in formal services. However, their potential benefits are reduced by a common lack of access to resources or quality information. Furthermore, support based on personal relationships cannot guarantee reliable care for all mothers and infants.

There are opportunities to directly address current systemic weaknesses through strategic redesign of crucial services, as well as through building on the current ways that individual women supplement weaknesses in formal services in order to attain care for themselves and their children. By focusing on improving coordination and communication between women, health providers, and informal support networks, future efforts can have the potential for wide-ranging impact.



Key Findings—Social Values, Discipline, and Self-Development

Young people in RAAN today lack adult support, positive role models, and formal services to aid their transition to adulthood. This is manifest in increasing anti-social behavior among adolescents. Research into this issue identified key challenges that policy interventions may address:

- › **Opportunities for self-development are limited.**
Scarce resources and sporadic institutional support for programs promoting children and youths' agency, creativity, and responsibility (including extracurricular activities, community-based initiatives or academic programming) restrict avenues for personal growth and social development.
- › **Attitudes about discipline restrict children's development.**
Relationships between adults and children are often strictly defined by rules and expectations demanding adult-like behavior from children. Such emphasis on a narrow definition of discipline limits children's options to make their own decisions and explore their creativity.
- › **Families under strain struggle to support children's social and emotional growth.**
Economic, social, and other environmental factors weaken parent-child relationships and leave children lacking nurturing adult figures and positive models of behavior and good values.

There are ample opportunities to address these issues through interventions that promote and provide childhood opportunities for nurturing, learning, creativity and exploration. Programming that connects children with positive, relevant role models; expands and validates activities fostering agency and creativity; and that is adapted to constraints restricting parent-child relationships may help overcome current obstacles to children's healthy social and self-development. Indeed, promising initiatives already exist in Puerto Cabezas, and may provide models for expanded interventions.

Looking Ahead

Beyond the study's analytical findings, this report also makes frequent reference to the broader policy design process that began with this project. This effort is a response to the enthusiasm policymakers have shown towards applying these human-centered methods to their broader development agenda.

This process has also opened a door to a new approach to supporting human progress in RAAN: policymaking driven by empathy, developed through collaboration and creativity. Training and practical experience policymakers gained during this process have provided the capabilities and motivation to design and implement a child policy according to human-centered principles.

At time of writing, policymakers are continuing to translate this approach and the project's findings into a final policy framework. It is hoped that this process can also serve as a model and an inspiration to future policymaking endeavors.