

LATIN AMERICA: TOURISM COMPANIES HELP END CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION



UNICEF together with companies in the tourism industry has been running a campaign dubbed 'La Muralla soy Yo' or 'I am the wall' trying to stop child sexual exploitation in Latin America.

It is estimated that in the year 2011, 8.6 percent of the total GDP in the region came from tourism. In terms of money, the sector contributed a total of \$364.3 billion and is one of the greatest sectors in terms of creating jobs. Ironically, the poverty prevalence in the region stands at 34.1 percent. This is mainly due to unfair wealth distribution. Moreover children are more vulnerable to be sexually exploited in popular travel destinations.

UNICEF developed The Children's Rights and Business Principles, a compact to save the children. These are guidelines that help companies know how to respect and support the rights of the children. The 'I am the wall' campaign is in line with the fourth and fifth principles of this document. The fourth principle is all about protecting children and ensuring they are safe while the fifth ensures that products meant for children are safe.

The tourism infrastructure such as hotels, airlines and so on in Latin America is a good example of how the same facilities that the community benefits from in terms of revenue can also be used to sexually harass and exploit minors.

In 2008, this initiative was launched in Cartagena, Colombia by the office of UNICEF in conjunction with its partners, Fundacion Renacer and the Cartagena Tourism Corporation. **This is a great indication that the region is trying to mobilize the tourism sector to end the exploitation.** Some successful outcomes to this step include the clear switch that employees at hotels, taxi drivers and other people involved with worsening the problem made. There was also a case of tour operators who after finishing the diploma held a meeting and convinced others to denounce the practice.

Another sector that UNICEF has worked very closely with is the police and Judicial system in Cartagena. They have worked out a method of reporting when an incident happens. They are also concerned with taking care of the victims of the vice. Even though there is still a lot of work yet to be done, UNICEF's campaign has resulted in dramatic behavior change.

The first assessments of the project indicate that there has been an increase in reporting of the cases of children being exploited. By June this year, more than 80 cases had been reported in Columbia. Most were reported by informal tour operators, meaning that people are realizing it is an offense worth reporting.

In order to prevent trafficking of children by tour and travel companies, ECPAT has a code that includes a set of business principles to be followed. There has been a tremendous increase in the number of businesses that are certified by this code in Cartagena. In addition to the certification, staff from the participating company gets training from UNICEF on detecting suspicious activity, and what path to follow when reporting.

UNICEF has been very instrumental in crusading for the respect of children's rights in

Latin America. Their signature campaign 'Huesped de Corazon' or 'Guests with a heart' is supported by FADEHI. Many hotels in different tourist destinations have helped raise funds for UNICEF programs. They have also committed to The ECPAT code. National laws have also been amended to address the issue; for instance, Colombia's law penalized sexual exploitation in 2008.

Studies show that over 80 percent of child sex abuse cases are not planned. This means that working with organizations such as Huesped de Corazon goes a long way in preventing exploitation. However, for significant change to be felt there is need to involve the whole tourism industry. Special focus should be on taxi drivers and street vendors. Cartagena's case is an indication of how a sector can regulate itself and deal with problems affecting it.

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