



# Children and young people as protagonists in creating sustainable schools: Lessons from Nicaragua



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This Powerpoint presentation contains a summary of the findings of the research project “*Children and Young People as Active Citizens in Nicaragua: How to achieve real policy impact*” carried out by CESESMA and the University of the North of Nicaragua UNN in 2009-2010, funded by Irish Aid, through the *Active Citizenship in Central America* programme, coordinated by Dublin City University.

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The full report of the research project will be published by CESESMA (in Spanish) in August 2010. A summary paper in English will be prepared for publication shortly after. For more information on these, please contact the author at the above e-mail address.

For further information visit CESESMA's website: [www.cesesma.org](http://www.cesesma.org). Among other things this includes an album of freely downloadable photographs.



# Starting points

1. We want to change things.
2. This means making decisions.
3. We want to make wise decisions about change:
  - based on good information;
  - based on the reality of people's lives;
  - reflecting on the underlying issues;
  - taking on board different perspectives;
  - considering options;
  - seeking consensus.
4. We cannot make this kind of decisions about schools or schooling without children and young people being part of the process.
5. Children have a legal right, guaranteed under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to express their views and have these given due weight in all decisions that affect them – **and if their schooling doesn't affect them, what does?**







# Matagalpa: Tropical, rural, mountainous





Coffee is grown in the forests, protected by the partial shade of the forest canopy





Much of it is still produced on large feudally-run plantations like this one, Santa Martha





Harvesting coffee is highly labour-intensive. During the harvest period (November to February) many thousands of children work all day every day picking coffee





Living conditions are very basic These are typical family homes





The basic diet is rice, beans and maize-flour tortillas.





Primary schools exist in most communities, but are under-resourced, poorly staffed, and often in bad repair

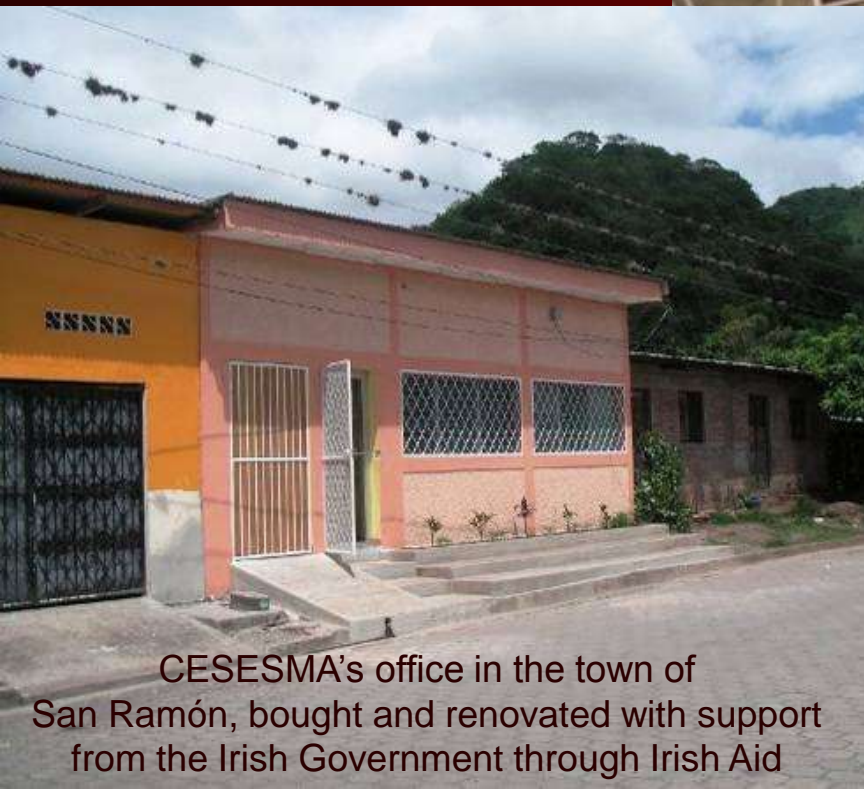




There are no secondary schools in rural areas







CESESMA's office in the town of San Ramón, bought and renovated with support from the Irish Government through Irish Aid

CESESMA, the Centre for Education in Health and Environment, is a local voluntary organisation based in San Ramón.

CESESMA started in 1992 as a teachers' action group to improve environmental and health education in rural primary schools. It was incorporated as a non-profit voluntary association in 1998. Of the 38 staff, all but two are Nicaraguan and most are local people.



# Research Project: Children and Young People as Active Citizens in Nicaragua: How to achieve real policy impact.

**Research Partners:** CESESMA and the University of the North of Nicaragua UNN.

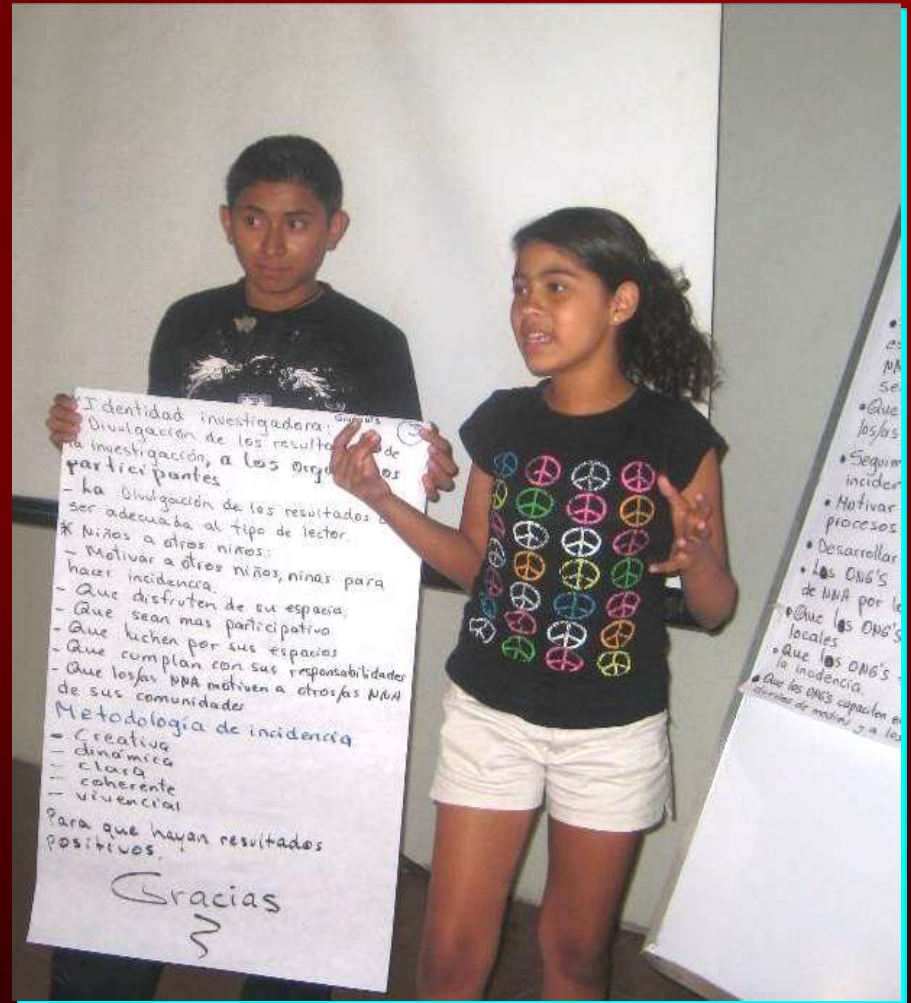
**Funder:** Irish Aid, through the Active Citizenship in Central America programme, coordinated by Dublin City University.





## We sought answers to four questions:

1. What prior conditions increase children and young people's chances of achieving policy impact?
2. What spaces or forms of organisation help children and young people achieve policy impact?
3. What methods and approaches by adult helpers/facilitators increase children and young people's policy impact?
4. What are the main problems faced by children and young people seeking to impact public policy?





## Why did we choose this topic to research?



- Children's participation is fashionable. "There's a lot of it about".
- Yet several studies suggest there is little solid evidence of impact on public policy-making (which includes environmental policy and the design of public spaces such as schools).
- In the few cases where such an impact is reported, we know little about how this is achieved, or how to replicate it.
- We set out to rectify this.



## Research methodology:

1. Through a survey, we identified ten cases throughout Nicaragua where there was firm evidence that children and young people's efforts had influenced public policy decisions that affected them and their communities (including local education policy).







2. We selected four contrasting case studies, from different parts of the country and further investigated these through:
- Focus groups of children and young people who had participated in the experience.
  - Focus groups of adult professionals who had helped facilitate the processes.
  - Interviews with key decision-makers in the four local authorities who confirmed that their policy decisions were influenced by the young people's proposals.



3. Two-day seminar bringing together children and adults from all four areas, to consider the findings and jointly formulate recommendations.





# Some key findings

## Children and young people organising as active citizens

- 1 Children and young people are more likely to impact policy decisions when they are campaigning on issues that they identify as important, not just responding to consultations (consultations are important, especially when planned and carried out by the children and young people themselves, but they are just part of the process, not the whole of it).





2. Children and young people can then form action groups around issues they want to work on with a strong collective sense of identity and purpose.



3. Children and young people need their own organisational spaces (i.e. spaces where they make the decisions, albeit often facilitated by adults), which they can use as springboards to approach adult decision-makers with confidence and knowledge of the issues.





4. Existing structures such as Schools Councils can be an important part of change-making in schools, but often they themselves will need to change:
- Become more democratic, more open and inclusive;
  - More empowered to take real decisions;
  - In control of their own agenda and self-organisation;
  - Able to influence matters of resources and budgets;
  - Better dialogue with teaching staff and management.





5. Supportive adults should encourage children and young people to organise for themselves, support autonomy and gradually diminish dependence on adults.





6. Children and young people value networking and sharing experiences with peers from different schools and communities (different countries if resources allow).

7. Children and young people are capable of leadership. Young leaders with good organisational and communication skills play an important role in taking forward children's ideas and proposals to influence policy-makers.





8. Understanding, support (and, ideally, involvement) of parents and wider family is important for children and young people to become effective as active citizens.



## Preparation and training

9. Children and young people's effectiveness as change-makers is increased when they participate in training processes, learning what it means to be an active citizen and the skills they need to put this into practice, and thus become empowered to act.





10. Children and young people want active citizenship training to be fun, active, participative, and built on their real-life experience. They don't mind working hard on a project if they see a worthwhile result, but they want adult facilitators who know how to combine work and play in the right measure.



11. Children and young people can share skills and knowledge through peer education, child-to-child.





12. Before offering training to the children and young people, the adults who are going to facilitate the process need to be trained. Children and young people themselves can play an important part in training adults in facilitation skills.



13. There needs to be a relationship of confidence and mutual respect with adult facilitators. Kids need to know that adults will listen and take on board what they say, even when the children are saying things the adults don't want to hear.







14. Children and adults can share responsibility for identifying factors that discriminate and exclude some kids, and working out how to overcome these.

# How to impact policy processes

15. Children and young people need access to the people and places where the real decisions are being made. Supportive adults can help them negotiate this.







16. Children and young people need to be involved, not just in making initial decisions, but also in monitoring and follow-up to ensure proposed changes take effect in practice.





17. If children and young people are involved in change-making, keep them informed at every stage.



## I believe reflecting on these findings may help us answer some key questions in UK schools



1. What role can and should children and young people take on in the design, establishment and maintenance of sustainable, lower-energy-use schools?
2. How can adults, including teachers, support and facilitate them in this role?
3. What barriers (legal, bureaucratic, and above all mental) may we have to overcome to achieve this?
4. How can adults and children work together to bring down these barriers?

FIN



¡Muchas gracias!

