

# **It Came to Me Like a Tsunami: Discussing the I Municipal Plan for the Care of Children, Adolescents and Families of the City Council of Santa Cruz de Tenerife**

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## ***Abstract***

*In this article the reader will find fragments of a dialogue held between Harlene Anderson and some of the people directly or indirectly involved in the development of the I Plan for Children, Adolescents and Families of the City Council of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (Spain). The conversation focuses mainly on what the development of this plan has meant for each one of the participants involved. The fragments of dialogue were written in a quasi-literal way, using both the memories we had and any other aspects that we could contribute in addition. This dialogue helps us to reiterate the role that Child Welfare plays as the glue that unites us.*

**Key Words:** *Childhood Adolescent and Family Service Plan Project, adolescence and families, collaborative-dialogic practices, child welfare, municipality*

This article responds to Harlene Anderson's invitation to the participants to share their story of the collaborative process in which a Municipal Plan for the Children, Adolescents, and Families of the City of Santa Cruz de Tenerife (Canary Islands - Spain) was created. This plan was developed using the assumptions of the Collaborative and Dialogic Practices. But what is a Municipal Plan for Children and what do we mean by collaborative practices? Let us briefly explain:

## **A Municipal Plan**

When we talk about a Municipal Plan, we are talking about a written document used to collect information about the situations of groups of people who want to provide services that improve their life circumstances in the city in which they live. In this case, the groups of people we addressed were children, adolescents, and families, although special emphasis was placed on the first two.

From the beginning when the Plan is approved and implementation begins, the city and its citizens can rely on both a document that reflects their needs and the actions that will be taken gradually to address these needs. Furthermore, this document is valid for at least four years, and guarantees a specific budget from the local government.

## **Collaborative-Dialogic Practices**

Collaborative-Dialogic Practices (from here on, CDP) are not a concrete working methodology. They respond rather to a philosophical stance, that is, to a way of thinking with, speaking with, acting with, and responding with the people we meet and talk to in both the professional and personal world (Anderson, 2012). They can be defined as a way of being in relation to our peers, a way of thinking about them and interacting with them.

In turn, the CDPs are inspired by philosophical approaches that are framed by how knowing is built and the use we make of language. From this point of view, knowledge is communal; it is bound to culture and the result of a fluid and constant process (Anderson, 2012). In other words: it is relational, the result of the exchange of social agreements that we reach within culturally located contexts in which we find ourselves and remain in constant transformation.

As for language, from this point of view it carries with it a special "nature": it is relational and generative. From such an argument, we may be led to consider that language by itself does not turn out to be a tool that faithfully describes what we know or think we know. On the contrary, it is active: it transforms. And it is transformed, probably, when we imbue ourselves in relationships, in dialogue with others, being able to re-conceptualize and co-conceptualize what is taken for granted to create new approaches, which is what it is to be generative (Gergen, 2007).

Seen this way, then, the CDPs invite us to generate spaces in which, through language (of any type) and the joint construction of meanings, we open possibilities that we had not previously been able to visualize. In this way, in the case that we were focused on, we were able to promote the involvement of the people participating in these spaces in the construction of a better city for children, adolescents and families.

### **A Plan for Children**

This Plan is a written document, the composition of which constantly pivoted between two concepts: process and result. To one side, the result, which made specific reference to the development of the document; and to the other, the process, because of our collaborative philosophical posture, did not specifically correspond to a timeframe for a work plan established "a priori", but was instead developed in response to different conversations that were held with people as they were happening and that, in turn, constantly opened possibilities.

Our goal with the document itself is that it becomes one of the first stones in what adds up to a greater objective: that of drawing attention to children and adolescents. We hope that the document will be understood as an invitation to dialogue and reflection about the situation of these groups. Furthermore, we do not intend for this document to become a static document, but rather a document that is alive to the extent that the reader wants to enliven it in their internal dialogues or in conversation with other people.

Additionally, the development process has been fundamentally inspired by three action principles: in the first place, *Shared Inquiry* (Anderson, 2012), which responds to a clear intention to try to make all the people who participated in the process feel that they were *together-in-this*, that is, together in the inquiry about the situation of childhood, adolescence and the families of the municipality. Second, *Joint Action* (Shotter, 2001), which refers to an interest in also generating spaces and moments in the conversations in which to jointly reflect on what could be done in collaboration to improve the situation of these groups; and in addition, to see what it would take for the city to become a better place for children in general. Finally, *Uncertainty*, which was the result of making the aforementioned principles coherent, since they placed value on keeping alive

the process of attending to the things that were happening and that transformed the process regularly.

Therefore, the writing and preparation of this document, perhaps, should have been structured in *a single draft* that resulted from a successive mix of actions were not taken in response to a delimited timeframe, but rather to a criterion that emerged as it was built with the people involved, and according to the synergies produced by the search for shared intentions. The mix was as follows:

- Preparation of the proposal for actions of the Diagnostic-Study about the children, adolescents and families of Santa Cruz.
- Preparation of the Diagnostic Study on the situation of the children, adolescents and families of Santa Cruz.
- Meetings and conversations with involved representatives and mentors in the municipality, both from other areas of the municipality and the IMAS,<sup>i</sup> as well as with other municipal services, other entities and resources that contributed their vision.
- Playful and/or reflective dynamics with children and adolescents from different nursery schools, high schools, institutes, day services and with other municipal resources in which we took stock of the needs from their points of view.
- Dynamic conversation with the Technical Commission (expert commission) for Childhood and Family to collect information about the visions of the people that attend their meetings, and available resources.
- Dialogues and information collection about families through different participation forums to add their point of view to the situation.
- One day to talk to the public participating in the activities that take place on the first Sunday of the month in Santa Cruz, where more demands and possibilities for improving the city were collected.
- Educational work trainings about Collaborative and Dialogic Practices for part of the IMAS technical staff, in which work roles were specified for the Plan.
- Dialogues with political representatives.

Likewise, along with all these actions came the writing of reflections and the summarizing of the information we received from the conversations we had with people. We did this so that we could later forward those documents to them and make them a part of our reflections. We also allowed them to contribute something new if that was convenient for them. That is, we tried to generate dialogues about the dialogues.

And, specifically, children and adolescents were one of those groups that we wanted to give special attention to. One of the motivations for the fulfillment of this Plan, inevitably leads us to reflect on the need to make them visible, since they are a population with widely ratified rights and duties. Moreover, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, from November 20, 1989, ratified by Spain the following year, tells us that they have the right to express their opinion. Additionally, the convention tells us that they should be taken into account when we encounter issues that directly affect them; and similarly, that they should be allowed to participate in social and political decisions that may impact their lives.

Similarly, and with the aforementioned in mind, it is necessary to understand that the whole process has also been inspired, even before its beginning, by a central idea: turning the city of Santa Cruz into a UNICEF *Child Friendly City*. Another important challenge that would imply the promotion of the well-being of children and adolescents in the municipality, is the active participation of these groups and networking among all municipal services, among other things. It is a novel challenge. The challenge assures that together we continue building a future that we have not yet seen, but where we can corroborate so that the voices of children and adolescents would have a privileged place.

### **The Conversation with Harlene Anderson, Rocío Chaveste and Papusa Molina<sup>ii</sup>**

The convening of the III International Congress of Collaborative and Dialogic Practices in Tenerife allowed us the opportunity to make known the work process inspired by and developed in relation to our philosophical position. Rocío and Papusa took charge of setting up a meeting between all of the people involved in this Plan; this meeting was facilitated by Harlene Anderson herself.

What the reader can find from here on are fragments of the conversation we had with Harlene Anderson, written *a posteriori*, in a quasi-literal way and using both the memories we had of the dialogue and any other aspect that we wanted to contribute, to the extent that we reflected while writing.

Although it is not a transcript of a conversation, we wanted to present it in this format to try to give it a more lively, agile and moving nature; qualities that accompanied us in the large number of conversations we maintained in the process of preparing the Plan.

But first, let's introduce ourselves to those who don't know us.

#### **Who We Are**

These are the people who have in some way been involved in the development of the Plan:

- **Óscar García:** City Counselman for Social Welfare and President of the Municipal Social Care Institute of the City of Santa Cruz, politician responsible for the Plan.
- **Maximino Acosta:** Head of the Sectoral Programs Section of the Municipal Institute of Social Care of the City of Santa Cruz, responsible for the development of the Plan.
- **Mónica Campos:** Head of the Child and Family Bureau of the Municipal Institute of Social Care of the City of Santa Cruz, responsible for the development of the Plan.
- **Ana Elba Herrera:** Deputy Director of the Childhood and Family Unit of the Social and Social Welfare Institute of the Cabildo de Tenerife, institutional participant.
- **Juan Báez:** Director of the Insular Service Specializing in Children and Families, responsible for coordinating the work of the psychologists in charge of the project.
- **Pedro de León:** Psychologist in charge of collecting information, preparing and writing the Plan.
- **Xavier Lobo:** Psychologist in charge of collecting information and developing the Plan.

## The Conversation

And, without further ado, this was what we “talked about”:

**Harlene:** *Monica, what could you tell us about this story?*

**Monica:** *Sometimes I think there are other ways of doing things in Public Administrations. We had the opportunity to live an experience from the Collaborative and Dialogic Practices (CDP), with a family intervention project that was carried out in a neighborhood of the municipality of Santa Cruz, called the 'Child Welfare Project in Valleseco', that turned out to be very interesting and innovative. Initially, the project aimed to create a network of families, and ended up becoming a professional network project. The project lasted approximately six months, during which time relationships were generated, which continue three years later. This experience was recounted to the members of the Expert Commission for Children, and both the people who had participated and those who had not, assessed it positively, with some saying that they would have liked to participate in it.*

*A group of professionals who worked with children in that area, professionals from different administrations and social initiative entities all started meeting. We held several meetings, all with the support of another Public Administration, the Institute of Social and Health Care (Cabildo de Tenerife), which for a few months facilitated the training of staff in Collaborative and Dialogic Practices, with the hiring of a psychologist.*

*The experience fostered relationships among the people who participated, and the results were obtained naturally, without being forced, in a comfortable and satisfactory way for everyone. All this made me think for a while about the possibility of developing the I Plan for Children, Adolescents and Family in the City of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, from this philosophical position.*

*I had been in charge of making this Plan for some time, but I had doubts about how to approach it, about the methodology and the theoretical perspective to follow; I couldn't find any with which I identified. After the experience with the Child Welfare project in Valleseco, I began to think about the possibility of making this plan from the position of the CDP, and one day I asked Juan about it. What initially was a possibility, finally became a work experience. This Plan has been developed by listening to the voices of many people (families, children, adolescents, professionals and political representatives) and it has achieved a form of collaborative work that favors the development of common objectives, from reflection, joint work, personal relationships...*

**Harlene:** *What could you add about what Monica said?*

**Pedro:** *The truth is that what Monica has said is very complete ... Perhaps I would reiterate the role of relationships, and how we have taken care of them throughout the whole process. The way in which we related to the people with whom we sat to talk generated more possibilities. Curiosity and respectful listening were key to this ... The process, by adding so many voices and trying to maintain more horizontal relationships, had no choice but to become a rhizome, that grows and grows and overflows.*

**Harlene:** *Is there anything you would like to add to what you've heard?*

**Juan:** *At this moment, a specific moment in the process comes to mind: the day I went to the City Council Children's Commission with Ana Elba. I had participated in a committee meeting a few months before, specifically they had consulted me to assess the possibility of doing something collaborative in the Valleseco neighborhood. My response at that time was to create a small script (not a very collaborative thing to do) to encourage the professionals who would implement it to approach to people with whom they were already working in the neighborhood collaboratively. The day I attended with Ana, I had informed her of this, and we agreed that that day interested us because of what had happened. Our intention was not to continue participating in that process. When we asked what had happened with the application of the script, the professionals began sharing positive outcomes about the implementation of the script and Ana approached me and said, 'we can't stop this' and I said 'but I can't continue in the process'. This circumstance opened up the possibility of hiring someone specifically for this process and it was then that we contacted Pedro.*

**Ana Elba:** *Our participation in the Children's Commission a priori, I felt a sense of closing a project that did not make much sense. After examining it, we understood that it corresponded not so much to a co-intervention with Santa Cruz in the field of childhood, but rather to an action framed more at the community level and in citizen participation.*

*We were going in with the idea of not starting the work, and at the end of the conversation with all the professionals—our focus on the approach of dialogic practices helped us maintain the possibility of working with the families of the Valleseco neighborhood—and then in our day to daywork, the goal was transformed and again professionals from different areas working with family and children participated in the implementation...*

*The idea is that the dialogue itself helps to define the demand and that it adjusts to the needs and the reality that is operating at that moment.*

**Óscar García:** *As a participant in the dialogue in honor of the visit of Harlene and Papusa and other speakers about the process of developing the First Municipal Plan for Children and Families, I am pleased to express that I felt very comfortable, this being my first experience with this type of dialogue. After intense active listening, it was my turn to tell my three-month experience as an observer, receiver, and*

*promoter of the dialogic initiative in which I finally participated. And I started by saying that for me, it was like a “Tsunami” of information and energy for a goal as powerful as putting “Minors” at the center of the politics of a capital like Santa Cruz, with their rights and proposals, requests and suggestions. The suggestions can act as tool that can undoubtedly stir awareness for the future of a city designed and improved for new generations; with the right not only to give their opinion but also to have their ideas seriously considered by those who listen to them.*

*It is novel not only that the children of the municipality were heard, but also that the adults stepped into their shoes and got down to their level to remember and recognize their demands, their needs, in short, to listen seriously, responsibly, to trace a path of dialogue never seen before. A path that for us will mark the idea of making Santa Cruz a Child Friendly City, in the year 2019, an exciting way in which every worker, every official, every person in charge and every contemporary politician will have to be involved, setting an example for those to come and continuing to maintain the spirit sown by this six-month dialogue that has resulted in an open Childhood and Family Plan; in continuous enrichment, also with today's dialogue (March 29, 2017). I hope that I have recounted my humble but unforgettable experience.*

Months after having the first draft of this paper circulating so that some colleagues could offer opinions about how we could improve it, we sent it to Xavi. He was a very important person to our project, but for work reasons, could not attend the meeting with Harlene, Rocío and Papusa. We decided to let him take a look at the whole draft and, if he felt like it, provide what he thought was necessary. These are his words:

**Xavi:** *Even without being present in the conversation that day, the words come to me months later as a sign that the conversations never end. I am struck by how they generate in me dialogues that arise from lived emotions, despite the fact that more than a year has passed since the experience of developing the Plan. I remember a process focused precisely on paying attention to these emotions. Despite having an objective focused on a “serious result”—a “Childhood and Family Plan for the City of Santa Cruz de Tenerife”—for which the logical and the rational would usually take the reins, it was a process that did not limit the experience and participation of people—what was important to them was permitted. And if we talk about childhood and family, the important thing is the emotions, and these can only be attended to and accompanied by a relationship that allows their expression. Freeing ourselves from the need to reach a place predetermined by our professional and institutional logic allowed emotions to have a place in each relationship, between everyone, and, in my personal experience, those that emerged in me become present: emotions of love, joy, care and belonging and also emotions of anger, sadness, abandonment and marginalization. All of them present, without needing to be denied or forced, are voices found and can be developed in joint actions in which the Institution shows itself to be more humane and understanding, listening and attentive, caring and protecting, about what people say they need and not what we impose on them. I take this experience with*

*me and I hope that it will also continue to be present within the Institution and the decisions that are carried out to develop actions that improve the well-being of children, girls, adolescents and families in Santa Cruz de Tenerife.*

## **The Surprise**

When it was almost time to interrupt the conversation, Ana proposed that we reflect using a photo she had brought us, but not before explaining that it was part of a work that they were promoting inspired by the rights of children:

**Juan:** *Throughout the work process we developed, we have always referred to the Promotion of Child Welfare as the glue for the relationships that made the process possible. My presence in the project allowed for advertising to be one of the objectives of the work we do with the Childhood and Family Unit, in which Ana Elba is the deputy director, and today we would also like to share some of the actions we are developing, inspired by collaboration and dialogue.*

**Harlene:** *Oh, what a surprise!*

**Ana Elba:** *We are preparing a traveling photography exhibition that will be composed of photographs accompanied by small texts with which we intend to generate a process of dialogic interaction with the people who come to see them. These images have been prepared by the participants in a photo contest that we expressly organized to promote children's rights. In the context of the traveling exhibition we use the photographs as a resource to put people and groups from the island in conversation and thus promote the transformation of our society for the benefit of minors. The dialogue that is established around photography is reflected in a text that accompanies the photographs in the exhibition.*

*The images have been developed to draw attention to and help people reflect on the rights and duties of childhood and adolescence, as well as the fulfillment of basic needs, both physical-biological, cognitive, emotional and social. For example, there is:*

Title: *Good evening, dad*

Author: Nuria Bendicho Giró

Article 19 Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. The Participating States shall take all measures (...) to protect the child against all forms of physical or mental damage or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, ill-treatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while the child is in the custody of the children, parents, a legal representative, or any other person in charge of them (...)"



"This image represents a right of childhood. What does it suggest to you?"

- Maxi:** *The age difference between generations, the really tender look that the man is giving the baby. It makes me think about what one can expect naturally from people, when it comes to good treatment and behavior with children. A look that is not forced, that arises from the very nature of people, and that we would need to raise awareness of in society; that this is the objective, to make natural what is natural.*
- Juan:** *It makes me think about the importance of touch, of the skin, how there is a relational element that is prior to words. The word heat comes to me. I have a partner who always talks about the warmth in the relationship, without that heat nothing grows.*
- Monica:** *I am struck by the hand that holds, protects, the need for physical contact, from skin to skin. We all need to be hugged, and children fundamentally do, too. The need to be with the others in natural contact. The word that comes to me is protection, it is tenderness, it is attachment.*
- Pedro:** *The child's open mouth catches my attention... it says to me: 'listen to me'. When we are little you want to protect me and when I grow up, I still need protecting. I will listen to you to see what you need and continue to protect you.*
- Ana Elba:** *I think what Pedro is saying is interesting, because he is suggesting that what we are seeing in this evolutionary stage is maintained over time.*

- Rocío:** *The first thing I thought of was security and that idea of knowing that there is someone who is always there; it also has another very special meaning for me, which has to do with the hug, with touching people. I am here with you, not only letting you know that I am here, but making you feel this protection through the hug, this assurance that I am here.*
- Papusa:** *The moment you showed it to us, it made me think about the man, in the right to paternity; also that on many occasions, when we think of a relationship between an adult and a child, we think of a relationship of abuse, especially between men, and this is a relationship of love, care, the right of children to interact with men that make him feel that affection and that care.*
- Harlene:** *It made me think of grandparents and grandmothers as great support for families, and also what we can communicate with our bodies: respect, trust, love, care....*
- Óscar:** *Responsibility, tenderness and a message that the rights of minors, of infants, are not rights if they are not protected or exercised. These little people, like the one he has in his arms have the progressive capacity to exercise their rights, their multiple rights as a human beings and that makes me think about what we, the adults, have to do so that they can exercise them.*
- Ana Elba:** *We could add a lot to this with the dialogue between us, but today, so that we do not go overtime, we will stop here, having committed to editing a text that collects some of the voices expressed to accompany this photograph in the exhibition.*

The following contribution is also made by Xavi months after having read the first draft of this writing:

- Xavi:** *Seeing the image, I think about the idea that what separates us is nothing more than learning that we are somehow separated, how a baby needs to feel connected and how that takes us as adults towards feeling connected again, from the skin and from the heart. Our stories are theirs and their innocence is ours. How to sustain the growth of our children by allowing us to grow by their side? With stories, with innocence, with spontaneity, with uncertainty, with emotion, with the body and with love....*

### **By Way of: Conclusion?**

The word conclusion for us creates a real question, because, as we have already mentioned in this essay several times, this has only been a pause, an interruption we made to write about something that remains in motion, that does not stop and that continues to build new futures.

Child Welfare is something that unites us, that means something to us, that leads us, without a single doubt, to build generative processes that bring us not only to improve the lives of children, but, as Tonucci (2015) makes us see, expand this improvement towards the other groups that surround them, because what is good for our girls and our boys, will be good for society in general.

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<sup>i</sup> IMAS refers to the acronym for the Municipal Social Care Institute of the City Council of Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

<sup>ii</sup> Rocio Chaveste and Maria Louisa Molina, of Kanankil Institute, Merida, Mexico, who were familiar with the project were also participants in the conversation.