

# Small but valuable lessons: insights from the Effectiveness Initiative

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*The author was Coordinator of the Foundation's Effectiveness Initiative (EI) for three years before moving to his present post in the Latin American Desk in the Foundation's Department of Programme Development and Management. The EI is a five year, in-depth, qualitative look at what makes early childhood development (ECD) programmes work for the people who take part in them, and for the communities that are intended to be enriched by them. Starting in 1999, it involves 10 diverse projects operating in a range of diverse settings. Most of the projects have now finished the research stage and are moving into dissemination of their results. This feature reviews some of the EI's insights into why certain early childhood development (ECD) projects in rural areas work. The author points out that, set against the backdrop of harsh rural poverty, a good ECD programme has to offer much more than good childcare in order to attract and hold people; and that very often it is the small elements in a programme that prove to be important in helping it to achieve success. More information about the EI is available on the Foundation's website: [www.bernardvanleer.org](http://www.bernardvanleer.org)*

Most of the programmes participating in the EI operate in rural settings; and the observations that follow are drawn from rural projects in India, the Philippines, Mozambique, Colombia and Honduras. Essentially, the EI project has shown that these projects shared many common, similar or parallel characteristics. These can be grouped under the following five headings.

1. Creating a sense of community to support, *inter alia*, the development of young children.
2. Visibility: making sure that young children are noticed.
3. Mediation: enabling access to resources and power to help generate what young children need.
4. Consolidating ECD project operations.
5. Keeping everyone on board: participation in change by those concerned with the well-being of young children.

## Creating a sense of community

Most rural communities are dispersed and many are remote. This means that families and communities do not necessarily relate to service providers and the centres of power collectively, but rather on an individual basis. As a result, their prospects of bringing about change are limited, more so where local cultures have been weakened or lost. To counter this, ECD projects have created an overarching identity for communities that binds them together, as they have worked to bring communities together to support the holistic development of their children. These more cohesive units now have a greater impact in securing services and bettering the welfare of their members.

For example, the Promesa project in Colombia used radio communication to enable scattered villages to establish immediate contact with each other, and to share information in a matter of minutes. These isolated hamlets are spread along the undeveloped Pacific coast. But, initially centred on malaria diagnosis and prevention and other health-related information, communication like this melded them into a strong community.

On the opposite and distant shore of the same ocean, the Mt. Pinatubo project in the Philippines used participatory tools to help the Aeta people to rebuild their history, following a severe volcanic eruption that had forced them to relocate their lives in new lands. Through a programme that included making family albums, the Aetas also gained a new perspective

of themselves as a people living through changing realities, thereby cementing their coherence as a cultural group.

The union for poor self-employed women (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, India, provides another example. The organisation of the women in the different units of the union creates a sense of belonging and power to access the benefits of the larger society. SEWA acts as the umbrella under which a sense of community identity is created among otherwise dispersed and isolated poor working women.

#### **Visibility: being noticed**

One distinctive feature of extreme poverty is invisibility: nobody in the centres of power and decision-making seems to be aware of the poorest people and it is as if they do not exist. This is particularly true in rural settings: because access to such places and to the people who inhabit them is so difficult, it is all too easy for public servants and planners to overlook them when making decisions and designing policies and programmes. One of the benefits of ECD programmes in rural settings derives from their capacity to identify inhabitants and to make their needs visible. In itself, this can mobilise other actors.

Again, the Promesa project offers a good illustration. Working with the implementing organisation CINDE, Promesa was able to provide information about the population and its needs, and provide the necessary coordination to enable flying doctors, among other agencies and organisations, to plan their contribution to a rural health and emergency programme.

Further north, in Honduras, the Madres Guías project has ensured that, no matter how remote the populations and the children with whom it works, vital statistical information about them reaches the capital city and is included in the national statistics. This means that services and assistance can be provided.

#### **Mediation: enabling access to resources and power**

In addition to creating community identity and ensuring visibility, mediation by projects can also help to ensure that rural communities have access to services and can influence policies.

For instance, the poor women that constitute SEWA in Gujarat, India, had no direct access to politicians and other public servants. However, the project could speak both the language of the community and that of the bureaucracy. Highlighting the holistic environment of a child in the poor villages of India and relating this to the statistics and rules that define the national policies of a nation, energised the synergy between public policies and the social programmes that are now directed to these people. As a result, 35 high level professionals of SEWA enabled the transfer of resources to about half a million affiliates, as SEWA itself continued to acquire its organisational capacity.

In southern Africa, CDF in Mozambique acts as a mediator between isolated communities and the centres where resources are; and also between these communities and a Government that has been unable to reach them. It does this by acting as a translator or interface, feeding village conditions and needs into networks it has developed and cultivated in main cities.

#### **Consolidating project operations**

Coherence between the planning and monitoring elements of rural projects on the one hand, and their operational elements on the other, is essential to sustain effectiveness.

The operations of the CCF project in Honduras, for instance, are overseen by central offices in Tegucigalpa, and a strict line of command and authority is maintained with the peripheral units spread across the country. At first sight, this degree of apparent verticality and strict adherence to the rules, could seem troubling. However, once inside the project and in contact with the different stakeholders, the benefits of a structured set of information, procedures and mechanisms for decision-making at local level becomes apparent.

Interestingly, although a good percentage of the population is still non-literate, they all respect what is in writing; and the systematic use of the written language in this programme therefore helps circumvent the restraints and isolation of these rural settings. For example, the handbook for the implementation of the curriculum for early childhood development and resilience is a quality publication that contains everything that each Madre Guía (Guiding Mother) must know in order to provide proper advice and support to 'her families'. She always carries it with her and, in case of any doubt, she will go straight to the book. There is such confidence in this book that there is no record of anyone challenging its authority.

The structure of the project is so solid that, in a region where the (false) stereotype is of indifference to time and a certain laxity in fulfilling responsibilities, the

project functions effectively and efficiently. And this level of performance can have unforeseen advantages: when hurricane Mitch tore through Central America, the distribution of external aid was exemplary in the areas where the project was operating. This was because the strength and coherence of the project's structure and procedures extended right through to the Madres Guías and their commitment to, and punctuality in, maintaining their family visits.

Words such as 'mechanistic' might come to mind in reading about this project. But the word that actually reflects its nature and feel is 'acompañamiento'. This signifies the human and technical support provided by the project to the Madres Guías; and the sense that the Madres Guías have that all the people who together constitute the project are with them as they carry out their distant work. It is a word that recurs in relation to many of the projects participating in the EI.

#### **Keeping everyone on board: participation in change**

The European rural context has been defined by Rui d'Espiney (see page 6) as a process of ruptures and changes. He points out that many rural dwellers are excluded from this process, and that very often the ruptures and changes are brought about by external forces. That, in turn, makes it impossible to keep the traditional relationships between the rural economy and its cultural traditions and institutions. In contrast, most of the projects participating in the EI demonstrated a capacity to include family and community members in the planning of change and the processes by which change is accomplished. All that the rural dwellers collectively needed to define, as a group, the future of their children, their families and

their houses, was relevant information, and formal and informal spaces for reflection. Four cases can illustrate this point:

In India, the SEWA crèches are organised as cooperatives and this promotes the active participation of the caregivers. In the Philippines, processes of active learning and participation include looking at the past to build the present and the future. In Colombia, the parents and promoters are responsible not only for planning the work with the children but also for other decisions related to the community. In Honduras, the programme is managed by the Parents' Associations – associations that have a steadily growing proportion of female members.

#### **Building trust and noting the results**

Finally, while these five aspects of good practice have been observed in many rural sites, observing the impact of the programmes on the children is both the alpha and omega of the effectiveness of a programme. Enhancing the chances of young children is a very important motivation to create community, to promote involvement in proactive participation, and to make yourselves visible to the larger public audience and thereby affect policy-making and the programmes that planners devise. Programmes can be the mediators between the rural communities and service providers, and promote opportunities through the building of effective and appropriate methodological approaches based on locally available capacities. But it is when people can see the impact on their own children and accept it as good and desirable, that the whole process is assessed as successful and effective. Paraphrasing a Madre Guía's own words:

*You can do many things to help the families raise their children, but it is when they see that their children speak more and are not afraid of visitors, that they enjoy being with other children; when they see their children put on some healthy weight and overcome illness, that is when they really believe in the project and invest more energy.*

In the end, it is results that builds trust in a programme, in its operations and in its promoters. Given that parents and caregivers are the most relevant agents of change, building trust in a programme means building the self-confidence of the caregivers as the promoters of early childhood.

Although the simple benefits of daycare are very often acceptable in themselves by urban dwellers, for the rural family this is not enough most of the time: amid the particular harshness of rural poverty, the isolation, the scarcity of services and resources, and the need to survive that characterises the vulnerable rural family, a good programme has to do much more to attract and hold people. And when it does this well, the results can be spectacular. An example makes this clear. It was Hurricane Mitch which made the Madres Guías programme in Honduras famous. This was because it was so well-established in the communities and so organised and efficient in its operations, that it was uniquely able to make sure that relief efforts reached the remote and scattered communities in which it operates. In the same way, such was SEWA's effectiveness in responding to a cycle of disasters in Ahmedabad (a drought, a flood, an earthquake and a religious massacre) that its membership subsequently leapt from 300,000 to 500,000. □