

# Colombia: an environment of credibility: a key element for effective action

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*In participating in the EI, stakeholders in PROMESA saw that it was important to find out what people consider to have been effective, and how their perceptions have changed over the years. EI work in the project consisted of a study that was carried out with participants in the PROMESA project; advisers of CINDE and of CIDEAL; other organisations with which PROMESA has coordinated activities; municipalities; and children and mothers who have used the project's services. The central question of the study was: 'What lessons have been learned during the life of the project?'*

*This article draws on that study to discuss what is now seen as the key importance of credibility to the effectiveness of the project, showing its relationship with other important elements that have been identified in the process of validating the information that the study is producing.*

As a result of the EI study of the PROMESA project, the groups involved in the study have established that credibility is a necessity if a project is to be effective.

Information for the study was gathered by interviews and workshops with different participants in the project. This

information was then analysed, and the analyses were validated by taking them back to the people who had provided the information so they could not just discuss and refine the analyses, but also add to them. This article therefore presents a way of understanding credibility and its importance from the point of view of all the stakeholders.

The theme of credibility emerged as a constant in the interrelations between all who participated in the project, serving as a model for establishing factors in effectiveness. It also led us to carry out a preliminary analysis that itself was an example for establishing relationships between other elements in the project.

The project's credibility was born in the environment of real confidence that it generated. Before PROMESA, community members really lacked confidence because they lived in a reality in which their values and knowledge had never been recognised and in which they were little valued or respected. As they saw it, their experiences with other institutions

and projects had been shaped by party political relationships and corruption, and this contributed to a climate of non-confidence and caution with others.

Once CINDE began its work, the climate began to evolve into something more favourable. Confidence in people, in the community, in the organisations and in the project grew; and the project's credibility increased as these reinforced each other and brought out each other's potential. The roots of credibility lie in the feeling in community members that they were starting to feel valued and respected by PROMESA, when, as many of them reiterated in the study,

*'They believed in me.'*

But why did people feel that the PROMESA project believed in them? There are four factors that can be seen as key in PROMESA: the project's nature (its philosophy, policies, methods and objectives, and the ways in which these were intended to promote people's development); the attitudes of the advisers to the project; the human relationships; and the construction of a safe learning environment. The first two

of these factors are discussed in detail below; the last two recur throughout.

But it was the interrelation of these factors that produced the necessary conditions for people to feel valued because they were valued, and because their culture, their knowledge and their capabilities were recognised. In addition, being valued contributed to their sense of self-worth, something that they had previously lacked. All of this allowed them to prove to themselves and to others that they could be agents in their own transformation and in that of the environment in which they live.

**The nature of the project: 'They taught us how to fish'**

The nature of the project as it is defined above, can be also established from testimonies that illustrate very well how people regarded it.

*They didn't give us fish, they taught us how to fish.*

*We were part of ...*

*They trained us for action.*

*They never abandoned us.*

The study shows that people saw education, based on a flexible model of learning that responded to people's needs and that encouraged community participation, as one of the most significant elements in driving forward personal development.

In addition, education in this form was seen as the most important and valuable element in PROMESA. Indeed it almost defined and shaped the project by allowing people to develop the knowledge and abilities necessary for them to direct the project, resolve its problems, and so on. Participation was closely linked to this and helped to carry things forward by establishing an environment in which people had opportunities to act.

Providing education and enabling participation can be understood as two sides of the same coin: on one side, strengthening people's skills and knowledge so they resolved their own problems; and on the other, generating the conditions necessary for the application of those new skills and that new knowledge in a real process of applying theory to practice. It was a

matter of education for action, and for the means to carry out that action.

Within this, participative evaluation was regarded as a critically important force for learning. In an environment of mutual confidence in which relationships were constructive and people felt safe, it was possible to establish permanent mechanisms for evaluation at all levels that enabled reflection on what was being done. At the same time, the advisers – who continued to work to enhance people's skills and knowledge in evaluation – were also seen as a constant source of help, a continuing stimulus that helped to overcome people's anxieties, conflicts and uncertainties. Essentially, people had confidence in each adviser; and the advisers offered ongoing support, even when they were not there.

It is worth stressing the conviction of the different stakeholders in PROMESA that the nature of the project was a result of its inclusiveness: it directed its energies to all the people of the community, in contrast to traditional approaches in which only the most capable were selected to participate in



Colombia  
photo: Centro Internacional de Educación y Desarrollo Humano (CINDE)

coordinating action. In PROMESA, housewives and small farmers alike – with little formal preparation – were transformed into highly competent people who were able to carry out the project. Very significant in this respect is the wide recognition that the paraprofessionals earned as a result of their work and their abilities.

**Attitudes and values of the advisors:**  
*'They recognised us as people'*

The institutional philosophy, as manifested in the attitudes and values of the project advisers, was seen as key in generating the environment of credibility. The stakeholders in the project reiterated the importance of horizontal relationships with the advisers, relationships that were human and warm, and based on mutual respect and on valuing local knowledge and culture. There is no doubt that these established a feeling of confidence and helped to build productive and secure learning environments.

The sensitivity of the project advisers towards the needs and problems of

people, and of the community in general, were evident in many ways: the project advisers recognised the personal and cultural characteristics of the stakeholders, worked flexibly with them and, above all, kept in mind their worries and needs. Also notable were their example, their commitment and their sense of responsibility to the work, and to meeting the project's goals and objectives. In addition, the 'culture of hard work' that was established was very different from the rhythms that the stakeholders were used to. But this arduous work was carried out in a friendly and human way. Long and demanding work days revolved around group activities, thereby helping to consolidate teamwork: the people knew they could count on others to help to resolve the difficulties that arose in their daily work.

Finally, the project advisers were outstanding in the ways in which they changed their relationships with the people of the communities. Traditionally, such workers had underestimated people in poor communities because of their low

socio-economic status and because they had little formal education. This encouraged an environment of distrust and caution. Transforming these kinds of relationships into something more human and constructive bonded advisers and local people. The result was that all felt that they were working together in resolving the problems of the community.

These attitudes and ways of working were also transmitted to the leaders (the promoters; those who extended the coverage of the project; and the local advisers) and to other organisations. For example, the promoters showed it in affirming: 'We learned to reach parents' and relating this to such elements as their own flexibility, and their interest in the worries and problems of the parents. In this, they went beyond official project activities, and established spaces for parental participation.

These attitudes and values were disseminated more widely, and influenced other institutions and groups, thanks to coherence between the actions of the advisors and their

philosophical premises. Teaching by example was a key factor, not only for them but also for the promoters.

**Credibility of the project: 'PROMESA WAS not just promises'**

From the start, all stakeholders in the project were worried about achieving the proposed goals and objectives – that is, about fulfilling PROMESA's promises to the community (the acronym PROMESA is also Spanish for 'promise'). In contrast with previous projects and programmes, PROMESA was characterised by constancy and persistence, and by a 'search for other methods or other roads' to ensure success: 'PROMESA was not just promises'. In this sense, participative evaluation has been crucial, as will become clear from the next part of this article.

The fact that planning and evaluation depended on participation by representatives of all the various sectors of the community, allowed plans of action to be constructed collectively, and for the results to be fed back to the community – results relating to the achievements and difficulties; the use of resources; the

successful carrying through of the programming; and the performance of the different stakeholders. Participative planning and evaluation were valuable instruments in guaranteeing that project objectives and goals were met. But they also constituted a powerful instrument of communication, ensuring that everyone knew what was happening.

All this contributed to the project being perceived as effective, efficient and transparent: people saw that 'things were done well'. Interesting in this sense are reflections about the role of CINDE that emerged from the EI study. Some years after CINDE stopped working in the area, information about children who had benefited from the preschools showed that, as young adults, few of them had remained in the community. The reason? They were studying in different universities, something that is not at all common among young people in this part of Colombia.

Overall, both the evaluation of the project and its effects reveal that CINDE cared about what happened in the lives of the people with and through whom it works.

**The project's outcomes strengthened the environment of credibility**

The results achieved brought about the environment of credibility, as much as did the processes through which the project reached its aims and objectives. Three elements and the ways in which they interact, have been key in constructing overall credibility: the credibility of the promoters; the credibility of the organisations and institutions involved; and the credibility of the community.

A variety of disparate factors determined the credibility of the paraprofessionals in the eyes of the community. They were obviously outstanding in terms of the level of competence they reached, their positive self image as paraprofessionals, and their skill and sense of responsibility in solving problems; and they were also appropriate interlocutors or spokespeople for the community because of their nature, abilities, knowledge, ways of establishing respectful and horizontal relations with people, and, in general, their commitment to the needs of individuals

and the community as a whole. These factors crucially underpinned their competence and their legitimacy in doing their work within the project.

The credibility of local organisations and institutions grew in the eyes of those with whom they worked – for example, in the coordination of plans, strategies and activities. Different kinds of formal, non-formal and informal training contributed to this, especially training that emphasised promoting relationships that were more human, more respectful and more productive. Likewise, the coordination that was achieved between some organisations and institutions (which in some cases went as far as jointly agreeing and producing planning and evaluation processes) produced better outcomes. Similar processes among other stakeholders in the project also had similar effects – for example, systematic and coordinated work to bring the local population together with organisations and institutions helped dialogue and mutual recognition.

Within the community, the family was the focal point both in terms of education and of possibilities for participation and organisation, and this allowed collective and personal growth. Bases were created for the development of knowledge and abilities to improve people's lives, and spaces for participation were opened that ensured that people felt that they were important in the development of the project.

The credibility of the paraprofessionals and the organisations and institutions and – above all – the credibility that people were gaining for themselves, generated important synergies that facilitated the solving of collective and individual problems.

Overall, the general perception was that the most important achievements of the project were those related to the growth of the people and their community. Their learning, the nature of the attitudes that they developed, the quality of the human relationships that evolved, and their understanding of early

childhood, all these add up to lasting human achievements. The following testimonies illustrate this.

*Many of the children that passed through the preschool are capable of becoming professionals. The most important part of the project was the training and the results it has on the families. We learned to respect children and to want more for them.*

### Conclusions

This article presents some of the initial findings from the EI work with PROMESA. Credibility was identified by everyone who participated as a necessity if a project is to be effective – and credibility starts from mutual trust and confidence among all of those involved. That this is the case is evident from the nature of the project and its core focus on human development – on the human being. It is also evident in the nature of the training provided; and in the ways in which the project helped people to realise their potential through

participation that reveals their capacities to resolve their problems and meet their needs.

Key is PROMESA's model of education and its pedagogical nature. Given this, it is essential that all theoretical principles and methodologies are in line with the needs of this kind of liberal education, an education that enables the kinds of collective and individual growth that makes social change possible. This is why the project was perceived as enduring: it produced changes, and the most important of these were in people. ○