

Strengthening the care environment for children in Central America

The experiences of five organisations in projects among children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua

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Cover:

Aprendiendo en Casa project promoter Jaro Fransisco Tellez talking to Diana Martinez aged 2 and a half and her mother Elizabeth Cruz. Juigalpa, Nicaragua.

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Foreword

This publication is the result of a collective effort to describe the experiences and lessons learned among five organisations that rely on support, care and education programmes to carry out work among children, families, and communities in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. The programmes were undertaken because of awareness that, for many children living in situations of disadvantage and risk, the existing services were insufficient to respond to their social, emotional, physical and educational needs, or to the needs in integrated childcare.

The programmes were financially and technically supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. In 2006, the Foundation decided to reduce the number of countries in which it is active, including those in Central America. The organisations and the Foundation therefore decided to highlight their many years of co-operation and the knowledge and experience they have jointly acquired.

Marc J. Mataheru
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Introduction

The recent history of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua has been affected greatly by the armed conflicts of the 1980s that, besides exhausting the societies, added violence to the many social and economic problems that had plagued these countries for many years.

These problems weakened the countries' capacity to sustain government expenditure, including their spending on already meagre programmes of common social interest such as health, education and nutrition. The poor were thus burdened with fewer opportunities to satisfy basic needs, particularly among those populations living in more vulnerable areas.

Various organisations involved in international co-operation brought resources to the countries to offset the effects of the crisis in public spending and services. Some of these organisations came to respond to the emergency situation through short-term projects, while others sought to implement more wide-ranging co-operation programmes. The Bernard van Leer Foundation was among the latter.

Beginning in the 1980s, with financial resources provided by the Foundation, five non-governmental organisations undertook projects involving children 0 to 6 years old who were living under conditions of poverty and marginalisation. The projects emerged in an environment of deficiencies occasioned by war, authoritarian government and excessive centralisation in public administration.

Paradoxically, because of this deprived environment, the organisations were able to create early childhood development services based on alternative, innovative methods that would not have been possible in traditional centralised public services. For example, they introduced teaching practices and curricula that had never been used in public schools. Because of the limited resources, they were obliged to experiment with approaches that relied on inputs from other public and private actors and on the participation, in the early childhood development processes, of the parents and children who were the beneficiaries.

Methodology

Since the 1980s the Bernard van Leer Foundation has provided resources to finance projects that support children in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Its partner organisations were: in El Salvador, the Centros Infantiles de Desarrollo (Child Development Centres) (CINDE) and the Fundación Salvadoreña de Desarrollo y Vivienda Mínima (Salvadorean Foundation for Development and Housing) (Fundasal); in Guatemala, the Fundación Esfuerzo y Prosperidad (Effort and Prosperity Foundation) (Fundaespro) and the Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral y Multidisciplinario (Integral and Multidisciplinary Development Association) (Appedibimi), and, in Nicaragua, the Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular (Centre of Communication and Popular Education) (Cantera)

In May 2007, staff of the Foundation and these organisations decided to develop a process to document and structure their experiences in implementing projects aimed at children aged 0 to 6. The process of documentation was planned to create a tool that could be used to analyse the projects and thereby contribute to the practice of these and other organisations, and add to knowledge on efforts to strengthen the care environment of children.

The collection and analysis of data and documentation were carried out on the basis of five descriptors:

- Concepts applied
- Socio-economic contexts of the countries, especially the situation of children
- Successes and failures in project implementation
- Actors
- Coverage, awareness building, social networks and lessons learned through advocacy initiatives.

The data were collected using questionnaires in which each of the descriptors were detailed. The data were gathered by partner organisations based on:

- Their archives
- Interviews conducted by the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, in El Salvador, during 2007
- Interviews conducted for another exercise in documenting the experiences of the organisations supported by the Foundation
- Fresh interviews with personnel, project associates and beneficiaries.

Documents were also consulted to gain insight on conceptual and theoretical issues relating to the descriptors. A longer version of the present document was then drafted in Spanish as a consolidated report on the experiences of the five partner organisations.

I. The socio-economic context

Because of their difficult socio-economic context, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua offer only limited opportunities for thorough, well-documented approaches to early childhood development in education.

On the crest of a wave

During the 1980s, political and military conflicts, nourished by unbending ideological positions, submerged El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua in a profound social crisis that at times spread to other countries in Central America.

The crisis had its roots in the 1950s and 1960s with a military build-up in the three countries. The build-up was an effect of inefficiencies in government institutions that were unable to resolve serious social conflicts. Arguments surrounding the distribution of land were a major factor in these conflicts. The build-up was also a result of the outcome of the revolution that culminated in the rise to power of Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1959. The United States had begun to form a barrier to the potential spread of communism in the region. The barrier required military preparedness.

The social impacts of these internal and external pressures were impressive. The concentration of power in armies led career military officers to assume control of economies and governments (Solá 2007). Insurgent movements increased in size. Before long, violent conflict had spread across the region, engulfing, besides the three countries, Honduras and parts of other countries (Solá 2007). The confrontations spanned the decade of the 1980s.

Peace was gradually restored in the 1990s. In El Salvador, during 12 years of conflict (1980–1992), 75,000 persons perished, and around 9,000 disappeared. In Guatemala, during 36 years of civil war (1960–1996), 200,000 persons lost their lives, 45,000 disappeared, and 50,000 were left widows or orphans; there had also been many mass killings of indigenous peoples. In Nicaragua, there were 38,000 victims. The effect of violence on the economic infrastructure in each of the countries was enormous, including hundreds of destroyed bridges, energy transmission facilities, water systems, villages, hospitals and schools.

Recovery efforts and reforms were undertaken, but public expenditure on social programmes has been too limited to improve conditions appreciably among the populations. For example, per capita public education budget expenditure in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua was only US\$32 to US\$67 in 2002–2003 according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). This compares with US\$279 in Argentina and US\$328 in Cuba over the same period. In healthcare, the corresponding sums in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua over the same period according to ECLAC were between US\$17 and US\$34. This compares with US\$291 and in Argentina and US\$168 in Cuba.

The structural environment for children

The traumatic historical events and economic difficulties have had important impacts on development in the three countries and, consequently, on conditions among their populations, including children.

Living in poverty

Poverty is an important social problem. While statistics show a trend towards reduction, poverty is still a reality for almost half the population in El Salvador and for over half the population in Guatemala and Nicaragua (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Population (percent) living in poverty, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 1989–2002

Indicator	El Salvador			Guatemala			Nicaragua		
	1995	2001	2004	1989	1998	2002	1993	1998	2001
Poverty	54.2	48.9	47.5	69.4	61.1	60.2	73.6	69.9	69.3
Extreme poverty	21.7	21.9	19.0	42.0	31.6	30.9	48.4	44.6	42.4

Source: ECLAC (2006)

Numbers of children

Children under the age of 9 are a significant population segment. Among the three countries, the share of this age group is largest in the population of Guatemala, where it represented 32.9 percent of the population in 1980 and 30.4 percent in 2005 (Table 1.2). This represented a variation of only 2.5 percent in 25 years. In El Salvador, the corresponding population share was 31.4 percent in 1980, but 23.2 percent in 2005, a drop of 11.2 percentage points. In Nicaragua, the share fell from 34.5 percent in 1980 to 26.4 percent in 2005, an 8.1 percentage point reduction.

Table 1.2 Total population ('000s) and population (percentage) by ages 0–4 and 5–9, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 1980–2005

Country, Indicator	1980	1990	2000	2005
<i>El Salvador</i>				
Population	4,585.9	5,110.1	6,276.0	6,874.9
0–4	771.7	703.2	797.1	806.0
Share (%)	16.8	13.8	12.7	11.7
5–9	684.5	677.0	750.9	788.9
Share (%)	14.9	13.2	12.0	11.5
<i>Guatemala</i>				
Population	7,013.4	8,907.6	11,225.4	11,269.9
0–4	1,264.5	1,519.9	1,863.1	2,036.3
Share (%)	18.0	17.1	16.6	16.0
5–9	1,045.5	1,355.7	1,658.6	1,823.6
Share (%)	14.9	15.2	14.8	14.4
<i>Nicaragua</i>				
Population	3,066.6	3,959.7	4,956.9	5,483.4
0–4	576.6	685.8	731.2	730.9
Share (%)	18.8	17.3	14.8	13.3
5–9	480.4	628.5	698.3	717.3
Share (%)	15.7	15.9	14.1	13.1

Source: Celade (1999)

The high percentages of young children are associated in these countries with the large number of families with many children, a trend towards lowering infant mortality rates (the annual number of deaths of infants under 1 year of age per 1,000 live births), and rising total fertility rates (the sum of the age-specific birth rates for all women of childbearing age). In the three countries, the infant mortality rate and the under-5 mortality rate (annual number of deaths of children under age 5 per 1,000 live births) show a declining trend, more evident in El Salvador and Nicaragua, but also important in Guatemala (Table 1.3). In El Salvador, the infant and under-5 mortality rates fell, respectively, from 77 and 118 per 1,000 live births in 1985–1990 to 26 and 35 in 2000–2005. In Guatemala, the respective rates dropped from 79 and 118 in 1985–1990 to 39 and 48 in 2000–2005. In Nicaragua, the rates were 80 and 117 in 1985–1990 and 30 and 40 in 2000–2005.

Table 1.3 Infant and under-5 mortality rates per 1,000 live births, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 1985–2005

Country	Infant mortality rate				Under-5 mortality rate			
	1985–1990	1990–1995	1995–2000	2000–2005	1985–1990	1990–1995	1995–2000	2000–2005
El Salvador	77	40	32	26	118	51	41	35
Guatemala	79	55	46	39	118	74	59	48
Nicaragua	80	48	35	30	117	62	46	40

Source: ECLAC (2006)

The total fertility rates show a falling trend, more apparent in El Salvador and Nicaragua and less apparent in Guatemala. Women have, on average, at least three children. In El Salvador, the rate dropped from 4.5 children per woman of childbearing age in 1980–1985 to 2.68 children in 2005–2010. In Guatemala, the rate changed from 6.1 to 4.15 during this period. In Nicaragua, the rate declined from 5.85 to 2.76.

Repercussions of armed conflict in routine violence?

El Salvador and Guatemala are considered among the most dangerous countries in the world (UNICRI 2007). In the 1990s, they registered rates of 43 and 24 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. Since 2000, the rate in El Salvador has remained at 43, but, in Guatemala, it has risen to 47. Nicaragua appears to be safer today than it was in the 1990s; the homicide rate fell from 20 to 12 per 100,000 inhabitants between 1992 and 2004.

Another revealing statistic concerns the membership of children and youth of both genders in youth gangs. Many crimes and misdemeanours are attributed to these gangs, whether committed against other gang members or persons who are not in gangs. The number of youth members of youth gangs was recently estimated at 65,000 in the three countries: 10,500 in El Salvador, 14,000 in Guatemala and 4,500 in Nicaragua (UNICRI 2007).

Police statistics on assault and other types of violence committed against women, besides being limited in scope, are difficult to analyse to determine their significance. Nonetheless, recent studies agree that geographical location, social inequality, discrimination and weak governmental institutions mean that the countries of Central America are relatively more likely to be characterised by activities that tend to foster violence (UNICRI 2007).

In a Latinobarómetro survey of the countries in Central America (including the Dominican Republic) in 2004, only in Costa Rica and Panama was the idea less generally accepted that women should stay at home, while men

should leave the home to work (UNICRI 2007). Among an interview sample of 5,000 fathers in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, 51 percent considered themselves traditional men, which was understood as the heads of families, the breadwinners, and the sources of discipline (UNICRI 2007). A series of surveys in Nicaragua found that a fifth of all women had experienced acts of physical abuse, a fourth of all men in rural areas agreed that one might strike a wife if she neglected to care for the children or the home, and a tenth said one might strike a wife who refused sex; only a sixth of women victims indicated they would report abuse to the police (UNICRI 2007). The killing of women was the focus of an Amnesty International report on Guatemala in 2005. Recalling incidents that were frequent during the period of armed conflict, the report found that women victims of homicide are often also mutilated and tortured. Statistics show, moreover, that the share of women in all homicides in the country has been rising. Thus, in 2002, 4.5 percent of homicides victims were girls or women; in 2003, the share was 11.5 percent, and in 2004, it was 12.1 percent (UNICRI 2007).

Central America is a bridge in the trade in illegal drugs that crosses especially into the United States from within Central America, from elsewhere in Latin America and from other countries. This too is a relic of the civil wars. Because drugs were a source of income for participants in the conflicts, criminal organisations involved in the traffic in drugs were able to gain a foothold and penetrate into the region. Today, 88 percent of the cocaine imported into the United States passes through Central America (UNICRI 2007). The market for cocaine in Europe and the United States was estimated at US\$50 billion in 2006; this is equivalent to a little more than half the gross domestic product (GDP) of all the economies of Central America, which was estimated at US\$90 billion in the same year (Table 1.4).

Table 1.4 Total GDP of the countries of Central America and GDP share-equivalent in the cocaine market in Europe and the United States, 2006

Indicator	Belize	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Panama
GDP (US\$ billion)	1	19	16	28	7	5	14
Cocaine market (%)	2	38	32	56	14	10	28

Source: Compiled by the author based on United Nations' data

Recent migration flows

The populations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua show a trend towards urbanisation, though they are still considered agrarian economies because of the size of the agricultural sector in their economies. The share of the urban population in the total rose in El Salvador from 40 percent in 1971 to 57 percent in 1992. The urban population in Guatemala increased from 40 percent in 1994 to 51 percent in 2002. The urban population in Nicaragua represented 47 percent of the total in 1971 and 56 percent in 2005.

Because of the armed conflicts, there was also a massive exodus of people from the three countries in the 1980s. After the peace agreements, asylum-seeking became less of a reason for migration, but migration flows to the United States for economic reasons expanded (UNICRI 2007). The economic effect of these flows was significant partly because of the steady increase in remittances sent to Central America (Table 1.5). El Salvador and Guatemala were among the 10 countries of Latin America that received the largest amounts through remittances in 2007.

Table 1.5 Top 10 countries receiving remittances, Latin America

Total remittances, 2007			Remittances as share of GDP, 2006		
Rank	Country	US\$ million	Rank	Country	%
1	Mexico	25,000	1	Honduras	25.6
2	Colombia	4,600	2	Guyana	24.3
3	Brazil	4,500	3	Haiti	21.6
4	Guatemala	4,100	4	Jamaica	18.5
5	El Salvador	3,600	5	El Salvador	18.2
6	Dominican Republic	3,200	6	Nicaragua	12.2
7	Ecuador	3,200	7	Guatemala	10.3
8	Honduras	2,600	8	Dominican Republic	10.0
9	Jamaica	2,000	9	Ecuador	7.2
10	Peru	2,000	10	Bolivia	5.5

Source: Compiled by the author based on World Bank (2008) data

Families, education, and child labour

Child labour is an historical reality in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Statistics show that children are an important component in the labour force in the three countries (Table 1.6).

Table 1.6 Population 5–17 years of age, total and share in economically active population, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 2005

Indicator	El Salvador	Guatemala	Nicaragua
Population 5–17, total	223,014	1,033,958	276,882
5–11	32,875	222,683	65,879
12–14	74,949	332,708	90,334
15–17	115,190	478,567	120,669
Economically active population, total	2,784,000	4,457,000	2,281,000
5–17 (%)	8.0	23.2	12.1
5–11 (%)	1.2	5.0	2.9
12–14 (%)	2.7	7.5	4.0
15–17 (%)	4.1	10.7	5.3

Source: Based on International Labour Organization (ILO) (2005) data and ECLAC (2006)

For El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, the ILO found that, in 2005, 738,246 children in the 5–14 age group should have been removed from the labour market because of age contraventions. Of this number, 73,502

were working minors in El Salvador, 517,865 in Guatemala and 146,879 in Nicaragua. Around 53 percent of the minors were involved in employment activities that would be classified as the worse sorts of child work; this represented 413,727 minors: 57,040 in El Salvador, 272,916 in Guatemala and 83,771 in Nicaragua.

Poverty is a factor in this outcome, but there are other related factors as well. For instance, perhaps at least partly as a result of the armed conflicts of the 1980s and early 1990s, one-parent families are rather common, particularly mother-only families (Table 1.7).

Table 1.7 Distribution (percentage) of households in urban areas, by type, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 1993–2004

Household type	El Salvador		Guatemala		Nicaragua	
	1995	2004	1998	2004	1993	2001
Non-family households	12.3	15.6	8.4	9.5	9.4	8.4
One-person households	6.1	9.3	4.3	5.3	5.2	4.1
Non-nuclear family	6.2	6.3	4.1	4.2	4.2	4.3
Family households	55.0	56.4	63.3	69.2	54.5	53.3
Without children	5.5	7.1	5.6	6.0	3.5	3.7
Two parents with children	38.1	36.3	46.0	50.7	40.0	33.7
One parent, man-headed	1.2	1.3	1.3	2.2	1.4	1.1
One parent, woman-headed	10.2	11.7	10.4	10.2	9.5	10.8
Other households	32.7	28.0	28.4	21.4	36.2	38.3
Extended family	30.3	27.3	26.6	20.3	34.2	36.1
Joint family	2.4	0.7	1.8	1.1	2.0	2.2

Source: Compiled by the author based on ECLAC (2006) data

Another factor is the problems associated with public services, particularly the education system. In policy and law in the three countries, primary education is compulsory and free. In El Salvador, this is also true of pre-school education. Nonetheless, in reality, the three countries show low levels of educational attainment. This is the result of the limited coverage of the education system and the costs associated with schooling, which, while low, are onerous for many families, especially poor ones (Table 1.8). Moreover, public education establishments apply entry criteria. Children in poor families are often unable to meet these criteria even if the education is offered at low or no cost.

Table 1.8 Net rates of pre-primary and primary schooling and the average cost of schooling per student, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 1993–2001

Indicator	El Salvador	Guatemala	Nicaragua
Net rate of schooling, pre-primary school (%)	40.0	37.0	27.0
Net rate of schooling, children aged 6–11(%)	84.4	66.3	81.4
Average cost of schooling per student (US\$)	131.0	105.0	8.0

Source: Sauma (2005)

II. Models of positive childhood environments in Central America

With financial support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, five non-governmental organisations have been carrying out projects that benefit children, mainly 0- to 6-year-olds, in Central America since the 1980s. The projects are based on concepts that foster the creation of a positive environment for children.

Project origins

The armed conflicts of the 1980s affected all sectors of society in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, but the greatest impacts were recorded among the populations that were living in the areas where the fighting occurred, or that were deprived of public services because of the fighting.

In El Salvador, the coverage of the education system shrank because of the strife. The Ministry of Education estimates that in 1980 877 schools were closed because of destruction or abandonment, affecting more than 100,000 students. In 1987, another 198 schools were closed.

On the periphery of San Salvador, statistics of the Ministry of Education showed that public services, including education, were inadequate. This deficiency led CINDE to seek alternatives to support vulnerable populations in the poor urban areas of Mejicanos, Soyapango and Zacamil.

In 1989, CINDE with the financial support of the Foundation, undertook a project to assist pre-school-age infants and children in the families of women market sellers in these areas. Among these families, education services were practically non-existent.

In Guatemala in the 1980s, armed conflict had led to the displacement of thousands of people in rural areas, mainly in the central plateaux. Some sought refuge in Mexico, and others went into the mountains or other remote areas. Limited public health and education services had already begun to erode because of the risks of being caught up in the fighting.

In 1986 in the Ixil region in the western department of Quiché, the scene of fighting in 1981–1982 that led to the destruction of many hamlets, the French organisation Enfants réfugiés du monde (Children Refugees of the World) launched a pre-school education project for under-6-year-olds with financial resources, provided by the Foundation. This project was subsequently taken over by a local organisation – Appedibimi.

Meanwhile, urban areas on the periphery of Guatemala City had become less well served by public health and education services because policy had dictated that public service coverage should be limited in cities so that resources could be channelled towards the countryside. The policy preference for investment in rural areas was based on two arguments: the rationalisation of expenditure, given that urban areas were already better served and showed better indicators of development, and – less explicit – as a means of discouraging the illegal occupation of urban land. This was a method used by poor migrants from rural areas and from other urban areas to settle in cities.

In 1986 in El Mezquital, a poor urban area in the south of Guatemala City, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) began establishing community childcare centres (centros comunitarios infantiles) aimed at promoting a focus on the health and care of young children (Espinosa and Hidalgo 1994). This project was also supported through resources provided to UNICEF by the Foundation. Eventually, Fundaespro a local women's organisation, took over responsibility for the project.

In Nicaragua, an immediate outcome of the revolution of 1979 was an immense initiative in social participation. Undertaken in 1980, the effort was able to reduce illiteracy from 60 to 15 percent. Through a joint programme involving 60,000 secondary and university students and more than 35,000 factory workers, a successful literacy programme was carried out among inhabitants in poor urban areas of Managua and in rural areas. The Government also greatly increased the resources available for social services in education and health. For example, because of the initiative, the number of teachers rose from 2,696 in 1978 to 19,289 in 1987 (Solá 2007). Although these and other initiatives were limited to an extent by the lack of Government resources because of the war and the economic crisis, they demonstrated the potential for interaction between citizen volunteers and the Government in the establishment of public services.

By 1988, the coverage of public services had diminished throughout the country. Moreover, education services, were being used less. This was partly because of the fear among youth of the aggressive military recruitment that was taking place in schools. Numbers of children and youths frequenting the alleys and streets of poor neighbourhoods also rose as the economic situation caused them to seek a means to generate income. Youth gangs became more numerous.

Around this time, Cantera undertook an education support project, *Menor y Familia (Minor and Family)*, in Ciudad Sandino, a poor urban district in the periphery of Managua. To implement the project, Cantera sought the assistance of two associations of the poor in Ciudad Sandino, the Colaboradores Históricos del Frente Sandinista (Historical Collaborators of Sandinist Front) and the Movimiento Comunal (Communal Movement), as well as one governmental organisation, the Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social y Bienestar (National Social Security and Welfare Institute). The Foundation provided financing for the project.

In 1992, Cantera also undertook *Preescolares Comunitario (Community Preschool)* a support project for children under 6, which was endorsed by the Ministry of Education. This project stressed: high-quality early childhood care, the recognition of teachers in early childhood development establishments as a new professional category, and the participation of parents and caregivers in the project (Cantera, Torres, personal communication 2008).

Current projects

The Foundation supports two more projects currently in progress in Central America. In El Salvador since the 1990s Fundasal has been running childhood development projects in Las Palmas, Los Manantiales and El Sauce – three poor communities in San Salvador.

In Nicaragua, Cantera is running *Aprendiendo in Casa (Learning at Home)* in urban and rural communities in the municipalities of Mateare (department of Managua), Juigalpa (department of Chontales), and San Lucas (department of Madriz). This project was undertaken following a 2005 co-operative agreement between Cantera and the Ministry of Education.

The concept of integrated childhood development

The features that distinguish the projects of these organisations are their holistic vision of the initiatives, the innovative nature of the approach to education and care, and the reliance on inter-institutional co-ordination in the delivery of goods and services for children.

The projects of these organisations aim to foster stimulating, pleasant and secure environments for the education and integrated development of children 0 to 6 years of age. They also run programmes in support of schooling among children in other age groups (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Ages of the beneficiaries of childhood development projects of Appedibimi, Cantera, CINDE, Fundaespro and Fundasal

Project-implementing organisation	Age of target population
<i>El Salvador</i>	
CINDE	0–6, 7–15
Fundasal	5–12
<i>Guatemala</i>	
Appedibimi	0–6
Fundaespro	0–6
<i>Nicaragua</i>	
Cantera (in Ciudad Sandino)	3–6, 6–12
<i>Aprendiendo in Casa</i> (Cantera, Ministry of Education)	0–8

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the organisations

The term 'integrated' derives from an organisational principle according to which it is practical and effective to involve, in a timely manner, other services in any specific initiative aimed at the development of young children who are living in poverty. The integrated service approach was an outcome of a critical analysis of the division of projects into sectors that was preferred in the government provision of public health, education, nutrition and other services. The integrated approach presented the advantage of being flexible in the difficult environment in which the programmes and projects were being carried out. In addition, it was also a response to the resource limitations imposed on, for example, educational activities, as well as the quality limitations that seemed to derive from the sectoral division of projects and that one might easily observe in the low support capacity and small coverage of public education services. The failure in coverage was evident. In pre-school education, which is a reference point for the projects undertaken by organisations supported by the Foundation, the coverage was quite restrained (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Enrolment rates in pre-school education, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, 2003

Country	Age	Gross rate (%)	Net rate (%)
El Salvador	4–6	48.6	46.3
Guatemala	5–6	55.2	41.1
Nicaragua	3–6	27.7	27.7

Source: Compiled by the author from various sources

So that their objectives can be transformed into initiatives that are adapted to conditions, the organisations have identified and applied the following methods of support for children that differ from the sectoral approach of governmental organisations:

- Application of techniques based on the principle that families must be involved in education processes and on teaching and learning concepts and methods that are not reflected in official curricula.
- Development of resource management mechanisms based on co-ordination between the diverse resource suppliers and services providers; co-ordination being a mechanism of on-site integration among services provided in different sectors.

Innovation

Within participating organisations, innovation involves reliance on teaching concepts and techniques that are not found in public education programmes. Such innovation evolves from:

- The spread of knowledge and awareness on themes of social interest through methods not used in public education curricula
- The application of teaching–learning techniques that are different from the logical and mathematical methods used in public education.

The knowledge and awareness on themes of social interest include the introduction of messages that tend to promote tolerance among students, families, and the education community. The basic theme is the concepts in the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC 1989).

The organisations emphasise knowledge about concepts relating to environmental protection, gender studies, healthcare, and children's participation in the development of society through teaching environments and methods that foster the involvement of families, especially mothers, in education processes. Other concepts include the worldviews of peoples and inter-cultural experiences, such as the bilingual pre-school curriculum (in Ixil and Spanish) designed and used by Appedibimi in kindergartens that Appedibimi runs in Ixil communities in Guatemala.

The teaching methods and materials used by the organisations include play activities and, according to project staff, the liberal application of affection and tenderness as a contrast to traditional techniques that draw a distinction between games and academic activity and rely on authority as a mechanism of discipline.

Coordination: a precondition

In the implementation of the projects, the organisations rely on a model for interactive processes among providers of services for children. In this model the interaction has two goals. First, projects in support of children must arrange and distribute information on their work among civil society, the private sector and governmental institutions and must also focus on the relationships that children develop with other members of their households. Public and private institutions responsible for early childhood development programmes must support households in the formation of the consciousness of children individually and collectively. This means that they must foster the capacities of children to relate to the family, the community and society.

Second, childhood development processes must involve all relevant actors. This differs from the public education systems concept that considers students as the only recipients in education processes. However, parents, teachers and all other relevant actors should also become involved in the same process of understanding the significance of the child in the family, the community and society.

All this interaction is reflected in the concept of a positive environment in favour of early childhood, that is, the effort to create and sustain an environment that facilitates early childhood development and in which various social actors may interchange. The following initiatives have been undertaken by the organisations to establish this positive environment.

For the family, the organisations run programmes aimed at parents of school-age children. Appedibimi holds work sessions to help mothers follow guidelines in child-rearing. Cantera provides mothers the chance to attend classes to enhance their education and raise the level of education among the families of children. *Aprendiendo in Casa* helps mothers prepare their children under the age of 6 for entry into pre-schools (Báez, *Aprendiendo en*

Casa, personal communication 2007) Fundaespro runs adult literacy programmes among mothers of children in community childcare centres. Fundasal offers after-school programmes to assist students in basic education to improve their educational performance.

For community associations, the project organisations promote the establishment of parents associations and associations of childcare providers. Appedibimi encourages the creation of parents associations to develop the capacity for educational support in kindergartens and the management of the resources that the Ministry of Education of Guatemala assigns to education (school meals, grants, maintenance). Cantera urges parents and community organisations to assist the community childcare centres, and in *Aprendiendo in Casa* Cantera promotes the formation of community networks. CINDE helps mothers establish support groups for childcare centre staff.

As civic organisations, the organisations manage childcare centre resources and staff. Appedibimi, Cantera, CINDE and Fundaespro operate early childhood development centres, community childcare centres and kindergartens. They also run support services for education and care activities through technical teams that are responsible for the projects in the design of curricula, supervision, staff training, resource allocation contract negotiations, and advocacy.

In association with other social institutions, the organisations form or join networks of civic organisations, particularly those that advocate policies in favour of children. Appedibimi and Fundaespro act as social networks. Persons responsible for education are associated in Appedibimi and employed by the Ministry of Education of Guatemala. Fundaespro welcomes representatives of community organisations, especially those of women that are active in Guatemala City and surrounding rural areas.

In relations with governmental institutions, the organisations seek mechanisms to coordinate initiatives with the government in research, operations, policy or the management of programmes aimed at promoting children's rights. Teaching staff in kindergartens administered by Appedibimi are under service contracts with the Ministry of Education of Guatemala. Appedibimi also manages the bilingual curriculum in kindergartens. *Aprendiendo in Casa* is a result of Cantera's advocacy efforts. Fundaespro receives financial resources and technical support for community childcare centres through the *Programa Hogares Comunitarios (Community Homes Programme)* of the First Lady's Secretary for Community Services.

Views on the positive environment for children

A better understanding of the concept of the positive environment and the application of this concept can be reached by examining the perspectives of the organisations.

The concept of the positive environment

At Appedibimi, the positive environment begins within families in which children feel involved in learning, lessons and life. The positive environment also exists outside the family wherever children are able to live and meet their needs. This environment must be reinforced to the extent that there are families troubled by alcoholism, poverty and a scarcity of economic resources (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, the positive environment is found in those conditions that favour the well-being of individuals, families and society. The family must satisfy basic needs. The State is responsible, along with the family, for ensuring integrated development among children through education, health and housing services, and the

strict observance of the rights of citizens and of children. Civil society organisations must also aim for this goal. The creation of positive environments for the growth and survival of children requires a focus on integrated development that takes account of physical, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural and spiritual factors. Children must be encouraged to participate actively in initiatives that will determine their future as adults (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

In Aprendiendo in Casa, the positive environment resides in the different spaces in which children develop in the family, the school and the community. Each of these spaces must offer a stimulating environment that is able to contribute to the cognitive, emotional, social and physical development of children (Báez, *Aprendiendo en Casa*, personal communication 2007).

At CINDE, the positive environment represents all those conditions that facilitate cognitive, social, physical, and affective development among children aged 0 to 6. In the construction of positive environments for children living in poverty, initiatives directed at the causes and consequences of poverty should be undertaken. Working with children, families and communities to ensure sustainable change, integrated programmes benefit children over the long term. Children, women and men must be empowered through participation in decisions that affect them. They must be considered as agents of their own future. It is essential to give families the resources, the information and the power to make decisions because of the role of families in raising children from 0 to 6 (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, a positive environment is an environment that fosters development among children aged 0 to 8. The positive environment encourages children and their families to fulfil needs. Its effects extend to other environments, such as the community, the municipality and the nation (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, the positive environment is one that enhances the access of children to health resources, education, opportunities for development, protection, basic subsistence, and learning and knowledge acquisition that responds to their curiosity, creativity, imagination, and motor and growth development (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

The following cooperative actions must be undertaken among institutions – with the family as the focus – to construct and sustain a positive environment that benefits children.

First, the projects must foster actions and create services aimed at guiding families in the development of an environment that stimulates the cognitive capacities of children and promotes the successful entry into and participation of children in the education system.

Second, local community organisations and the staff responsible for education and care are the initial line of support for satisfying education needs and helping families in child-rearing. They must care for the children while the parents, especially the mothers, are at their jobs, and through early childhood development services, they must help the children gain the most benefit possible from the education system.

Third, the projects must embody good relationships among the implementing organisations, other public or private institutions, and international co-operation agencies so that financial, human and material resources

are properly channelled towards early childhood development activities. Development organisations must therefore typically become advocates for early childhood development within the inter-institutional context.

Barriers to the positive environment

The organisations are committed to realising a positive environment in a context that is not always favourable for the proper development of children. Today, socio-economic problems, natural disasters, the waves of violence generated by the traffic in drugs, and emigration are all having negative effects on families in the three countries.

The future of the projects

The projects have emerged in a context of gaps in social services among poor communities. These gaps have arisen because of the absence of governmental institutions in war zones or, at least, in areas where there was a risk of armed conflict, because of political and ideological conflict, and because of excessive centralisation in public administration by governments that were not always dedicated to democratic principles. The organisations undertook the projects to fill the gaps in public services among poor communities because of these conditions.

The risks represented by armed conflict diminished because of the peace agreements. However, the proportion of the population living in poverty is still large.

In the three countries, efforts aimed at democratisation have reached beyond changes in mandates and legislatures because of free elections. Thus, decentralisation in the administration of public services has created a role for civil society participation, although this alone may not be sufficient to create profound change.

Likewise, education reform has opened new possibilities in determining education policy through education councils and the administration of public resources through community organisations that are acting as intermediaries. The experience gained by civil society organisations in coordinating with public entities is evidence of the new possibilities opened up in the three countries.

The organisations are now likely to dedicate more effort to advocacy than to the provision of services, that is to focus less on services and more on rights on the basis of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the accumulation of knowledge and expertise generated in the development of projects, and the advocacy brought into play in adopting policies and obtaining resources.

The organisations note that among the most serious problems they face, aside from poverty, are:

- In the family: intra-family violence, breakdown in cohesion in the nuclear family, risks of alcoholism and the use of drugs, unemployment, death among men heads-of-household, the large number of orphans and illegal adoptions
- In the community and society: insecurity in general and, in particular the violence of youth gangs
- Limited public social service expenditures, including expenditure on services aimed at children
- The tendency among many adults in the three countries to deny that children have rights, particularly the right to participate in decisions on matters that affect them, including education.

III. Experimentation and theory

The organisations supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation originally grounded their childhood development interventions on experimentation with various approaches. However, as they gained experience, they began to apply theories of knowledge, psychology, pedagogics and social development in their methodologies.

The challenges of modern education systems

It has been clear for many years that expanding the coverage of education systems, especially public education systems, is not sufficient alone to provide individuals with equal opportunities in life. Differences in educational performance and achievement also depend on socio-economic factors. Likewise, major differences arise because of the family environment, especially the cultural inheritance of parents reflected in their educational attainment, and other factors linked to diversity in society.

It thus seemed that these difficulties in educational achievement among populations might be offset by compensating for economic differences through grants, meal programmes and more investment in education materials. Subjective or other psychosocial factors were still underappreciated, including the attitudes and educational aspirations of individuals.

The process of education reform differs according to the level of a country's development. Thus, developed countries undertake education system reforms to achieve improvements in efficiency, effectiveness and competitiveness. Less-developed countries also undertake reforms to enhance effectiveness. However, the effectiveness they seek is generally at more basic levels of improvement (Royer 2005). Thus, in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, education reform must coexist with government reform, widespread poverty and the numerous barriers to effective government.

Innovative methods

The concepts of teaching and learning used in the development of education initiatives by the organisations supported by the Foundation owe much to the theories of popular education of Paulo Freire. However, the education programmes also show the influence of other intellectual developments and modern methodologies.

At Appedibimi, the theoretical principles of the French organisation Enfants réfugiés du monde have been adapted to education projects. Projects are based on the idea that children are active learners who play and otherwise interact with objects and people (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007)

At Cantera, curricula and pedagogical methods are based on the theories of Jean Piaget. The approaches of Daniel Goleman (1995) in his book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* and Laurence E. Shapiro (2001) in his *La Inteligencia Emocional de los Niños (The Emotional Intelligence of Children)* are also used. Both of these stress the importance of the development of the emotions of individuals, particularly in childraising and education (Torres, *Cantera*, personal communication 2008).

At CINDE, staff apply the Montessori method (<http://www.montessori.edu/method.html>). According to the theory behind this method, children learn by themselves, and for this reason, teachers should avoid creating teacher dependence among the children. Without such dependence, the children will acquire a sense of security and learn to take decisions. Thus, staff apply some of the Montessori techniques such as free play, free work and

group activities. Jean Piaget's ideas about creativity and active discovery have also been taken up (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, education programmes are based especially on the learning theory of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1962), who considered language fundamental to education processes. Staff also rely on participatory approaches that involve the construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of knowledge among teachers and students, whereby the latter are considered as active agents rather than merely passive receptors of education. This methodological focus assumes that all persons possess a prior history, a living experience, and a body of beliefs, mythologies, stereotypes, prejudices, attitudes and practices that are involved in the process of the construction of knowledge. According to staff, the participatory method has the advantage of strengthening the capacity of creative and critical thinking among the participants in educational processes (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, childhood development projects are based on community development theories and a focus on the urban setting. Staff cite Grissel Ponce de León García's book *Manual de Organización y Desarrollo para Comunidades Marginadas de las Ciudades* in affirming that the development of the community is the process of transforming the material and cultural conditions of the population (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

Social participation and children's participation

Education reforms have encouraged decentralisation, that is, the transfer of decisions on pedagogical issues and curricula from the government or other centralised educational authorities to schools. This has meant that the administration of schools has been passed along to the education community, including school administrators, teachers, students, parents and community organisations.

The concept of a positive environment for children represents a model for the approach to education of each decentralised school or school system, including a national education system. This model involves the participation of all actors, especially the children.

Child rights and the legal concept of the child

At Appedibimi, there is no universal concept of the child; each people, nation, or culture defines the child according to age, physical development, and behaviour. For example, in indigenous Ixil communities in Guatemala, childhood lasts until the girl or boy reaches age 13; then, according to custom, the individual may marry and support the family by earning income (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, staff believe that the concept of the rights of the child represents a paradigm shift in the perception that society has of children. The idea that the child is the object of programmes or social policy interventions is being replaced by recognition that the child is the subject of human rights. In Nicaragua, according to the *Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia* (*Code on Children and Adolescents*), the law that governs the rights of the child, childhood is a period in the development of a human being, from birth to the first signs of puberty, and generally lasts until about age 12 (Ulloa, Cantera, personal communication 2007). However, in *Aprendiendo in Casa* Cantera staff act on the conviction that the definition of school age and working age should be consistent across countries. The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* presents a series of universal norms that all countries may follow (Báez, *Aprendiendo en Casa*, personal communication 2007).

At CINDE, staff maintain that the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* defines basic human rights that one may not easily deny, but that, in turn, one would have difficulty applying this concept of rights in the countries of Latin America (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, staff find that the *Ley de Protección Integral de la Niñez y Adolescencia (Law of Integral Protection of Children and Adolescents)* sets out legal rights and responsibilities with regard to the protection of children in Guatemala. The law adapts the definition in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, according to which a child is every: 'human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.' In Guatemala, this definition is understood in the light of the socio-economic and cultural realities of families. Thus, children are often important actors in obtaining household income. Moreover, age-old traditions assign different roles to the boy child and the girl child (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, the definition of the child in the convention is 'mainly ethereal'. The concept of the child is generally accepted, although one also generally accepts that, in each culture, country, and epoch, the concept may have a specific meaning by use, custom, or law (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

The concept of the child within societies

At Appedibimi, staff believe that, in society, the concept of the child is based on the perspective of adults; according to this concept, the child is a person who is small, playful, curious, and defenceless and doesn't care about tomorrow (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At CINDE, staff find that, in El Salvador, the child is the object of assistance, but not the subject of rights, and, therefore, the ability of the child to transform reality is not recognised by society (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, staff think that society in Guatemala considers the child as a minor who is not prepared to face life, needs parents and a family to subsist, and, especially if it is small and young, should not go to school, 'where it would only go to play' (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, staff believe that for society, the concept of the child in the convention is theoretical, while in social practice, the child lives in conditions of poverty and a lack of protection and suffers because crimes against minors are committed with impunity (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

The concept of the excluded child

Staff at the organisations supported by the Foundation believe that poverty and social exclusion are risk factors in child development in the three countries, particularly with respect to children in the first stages of development between the ages of 0 and 6. They maintain that their projects represent support mechanisms for children who are socially excluded. This is manifest in that the children who participate in the projects are: poor, face difficulties in using public childhood development services; risk dropping out of the education system because of poor performance; live in unstable families; face discrimination because of their ethnic background; or are victims of violence because of violence in the community, mainly related to youth gangs and drugs.

The concept of children's participation

The views of organisation staff on children's participation are reflected in the definition provided by staff at Cantera, according to which children's participation is a process. In this process, children are able to express their thoughts and feelings on the reality and environment in which they live and in which they are involved. It is an ongoing process of active expression and intervention by children in decision-making in different social contexts (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

Organisation staff find that children's participation has an educative or development role – the development of the identity of the child within society – and that, as an effect of this identity, they may become social actors who are the subjects of rights and duties. Thus, the staff seek to develop the capacity of the children to act as protagonists in the social environments in which they are involved and to identify opportunities to improve their situation as members of a community and society.

The application of the concept of children's participation

To illustrate the concept of children's participation, the principal characteristics of the approach undertaken at Cantera to realise children's participation are described. The approach is essentially the same across the projects of the organisations.

At Cantera, children's participation is promoted through the application of two basic methods:

- (1) The creation of a space to stimulate a sense of leadership among children
- (2) Education and training among teachers.

The creation of a space to stimulate a sense of leadership among children consists of a series of activities undertaken among groups of children in pre-schools and primary schools that Cantera runs, or with which it is associated. For these activities, children are divided into two groups: children 4 to 6 and children 7 to 12.

The method among children aged 4 to 6 is:

- Children who have already demonstrated leadership qualities in other activities are asked to participate in events organised by teachers after school.
- During these events, messages related to the rights of the child are communicated. To communicate the messages, the teachers rely on play learning games, such as puppet shows, games in groups, or the telling of fables or fairy tales.
- Children choose the activity and decide how to carry it out. They might decide, for example, to vote on the activity or game or on the children who will play roles in the game.
- Children who have taken part in these after-school events then supervise similar events in their respective childcare centres.
- Activities are all recorded in a souvenir document. The document is put together by the teachers and others who add comments, descriptions and additional information about the participation of the children.

The method among children aged 7 to 12 is:

- Cantera runs an extracurricular course, the *Programa de Habilitación a las Artes (Habilitation Program in the Arts)*, to stimulate the artistic ability of students. Children who have shown leadership qualities are asked to take part in meetings. During the meetings, themes are presented such as the rights of the child, self-esteem, gender studies, leadership and organisation.

- Students are asked to present the same themes during subsequent events. They are given responsibility for the events and assisted in learning how to run group activities.
- Responsibility for the events includes planning and carrying out activities during an annual programme and the design and use of play learning techniques (games and theatre).
- Students also develop other community activities, such as the organisation of environmental protection activities, consultations on municipal development plans, and the circulation of messages in *Ilusiones*, a magazine that Cantera publishes twice yearly.
- Cantera staff provide technical support during the entire process.

Education and training among teachers, involves two training courses. The first is for teachers in the childcare centres run by Cantera. These teachers undergo training in the concepts and techniques Cantera uses to promote children's participation so that these teachers can become *promotoras* – advocates and agents – for child participation during the development of related events and activities. The teachers are trained how to foster gender equality and respect for diversity. They learn how to organise activities so that children may contribute in decision-making on the content of learning activities. They study how to encourage children to express ideas.

The second training course is aimed at teachers in other pre-school establishments. Staff at Cantera train these teachers so that they are able to return to their own establishments and launch similar activities to promote children's participation.

IV. Awareness building, social networks, and advocacy

The creation of positive environments in favour of children requires that civil society organisations and governmental institutions become actively involved. The organisations supported in Central America by the Bernard van Leer Foundation have therefore undertaken efforts to spread awareness about their projects. They have also formed social networks and established alliances with public and private institutions to increase the opportunities for advocacy.

The first step: awareness building

Awareness building is a function of communication (Pedroni 2004). In the case of the organisations supported by the Foundation, project visibility has been an ongoing concern. Staff at the organisations have indicated that their efforts to focus attention on the projects are aimed at accomplishing two tasks: awareness building about the accumulated experiences of the organisations in project implementation, and advocacy within society about the situation of poor and marginalised children.

At Appedibimi, awareness building is defined as the provision of information about the experiences gained through projects and programmes, including successes and failures, to the community, local government, central Government, and co-operating agencies. Awareness building is supported by the creation of a record of the initiatives undertaken in a project. This record includes documents, videos and other media output. Appedibimi staff stress that the best way to understand the projects and programmes is to see the work in action (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, awareness building is aimed at relieving individuals, groups, sectors, and social classes from oppression and subordination. Thus, for example, staff seek to promote the concept of the child as the subject of rights and the concept of women as the equals of men (Ulloa, Cantera, personal communication 2007).

At CINDE, awareness building is the action of highlighting the need to join together in a policy effort to improve living conditions among marginalised children. Such an effort might be exemplified by the development of CINDE projects within the socio-economic context of El Salvador (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, awareness building is the preparation, organisation, and realisation of activities that allow other social actors and sectors to examine early childhood development projects and programmes, evaluate them, and understand the new opportunities they may represent in fostering the healthy development of children aged 0 to 6 (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, awareness building involves the provision of information on the organisation's projects and programmes so as to make it possible to replicate them, generate fresh resources and foster sustainability (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

The tool: social networks

The network as a social structure is a group or team of people or entities. Within the context of social and economic policy, social networks are groups of entities joined together to achieve a common goal. Thus, such networks might undertake important social or policy initiatives in furtherance of a civil society role, but also to achieve specific political or policy goals.

The organisations supported by the Foundation participate in local and national social networks, as well as social networks with organisations in other countries.

At Appedibimi, social networks represent an opportunity to discuss and reach conclusions about solutions to problems; they provide mutual support and reinforcement, and they lead to new knowledge (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, a social network consists of a group of individuals, organisations and institutions that share an interest or objective. Participants are linked in an alliance and represent a social movement based on a system of relationships (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

At CINDE, participation in social networks signifies undertaking efforts to reach shared objectives. Social networks allow service coverage to be widened in support of the population, while facilitating exchanges and the enrichment of experiences and approaches (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, participation in social networks provides a means to strengthen projects and programmes through the development of joint action plans that avoid duplication and ensure complementarity. At a practical level, participation in networks allows Fundaespro to achieve greater impact through its programmes and projects. Participation in social networks increases the interaction with other social networks, thereby allowing the organisation to increase the positive effect of initiatives and innovations to benefit children (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, social networks are a distinct form of organisation that are oriented towards the achievement of shared objectives, represent a segment of the population, and act within the public sphere (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

Advocacy: the goal

The overall objective is advocacy. Advocacy is a struggle to generate policies in favour of a specific interest and, subsequently to create mechanisms to implement the policy (laws, programmes, projects, monitoring). As a concept, advocacy is a type of representation in that it gives a voice to those who have no voice, a type of social mobilisation in that it speaks to power, and a means of transferring power in that it allows those who have had no voice to speak for themselves.

Advocacy is a means for people to exercise their rights as citizens and, more generally, their human rights before economic and political authorities. In the case of the organisations supported by the Foundation, advocacy initiatives have three goals: to change attitudes among individuals and institutions with respect to the relationships they have with children, to obtain resources for the implementation of projects, and to generate government policies in favour of children.

At Appedibimi, advocacy seeks change to improve the situation of children in at least two areas: (1) at local level aimed at convincing parents to assume more responsibility in reducing child labour, and (2) at regional and national levels to convince government entities, especially the Ministry of Education, to adopt a national curriculum for pre-school education (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, the aim of advocacy is to influence others to alter a situation. For example, political advocacy seeks to influence individuals, groups, and institutions to take decisions to create or change public policies (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007). Staff indicate that advocacy on behalf of *Aprendiendo in Casa* is aimed at promoting public participation in policy-making so that the government responds to the interests of all national sectors (Báez, *Aprendiendo en Casa*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, advocacy represents the opportunity to modify the children's programmes of other public and private organisations through the example of Fundaespro programmes and, by the same means, to transform public policies (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, advocacy helps transform public policies so that they seek the common good; generally, advocacy reflects the vision of civil society organisations (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

The initiatives of the organisations and their outcomes provide examples of advocacy.

Appedibimi won approval for a Spanish–Ixil bilingual curriculum in pre-primary education through an advocacy initiative with the Ministry of Education of Guatemala. Staff have also coordinated advocacy initiatives with ministry departmental representatives in Quiché for new contracts for kindergarten teachers and for the implementation of curricula (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007).

At Cantera, the following are listed as outcomes of advocacy efforts:

- A schedule of resource investments by municipal officials in programmes and projects in favour of children
- The creation of the Office for Children by the mayor of Ciudad Sandino
- Certification for the establishment of the Network of Community Educators of the Municipality of Ciudad Sandino
- An agreement between Cantera and the Ministry of Education to provide technical and administrative support for 18 community pre-schools in Ciudad Sandino

- Agreement with the Ministry to recognise teachers in childcare centres as a professional category
- A co-operative agreement for the creation of a municipal children's information system in Ciudad Sandino.

The most important outcome of Cantera advocacy was a 3-year agreement with the Ministry of Education for the launch of *Aprendiendo in Casa* in 2005. The project is the result of a collaborative effort between representatives of various social sectors and the Government of Nicaragua that led to the adoption by the Comisión Nacional Intersectorial (National Intersectoral Commission) of a strategy to implement a programme of initial education in Nicaragua through the project.

Fundaespro shares responsibility for social mobilisation and communication in the Movimiento Social por los Derechos de la Niñez, Adolescencia y Juventud (Social Movement for the Rights of Children, Adolescents, and Youth), which has realised advocacy activities to reform a law on the protection of children and adolescents and to revise a draft law on adoptions. Fundaespro staff routinely undertake advocacy in coordination with municipal government institutions and the central Government of Guatemala to obtain public resources for childhood development activities such as meal programmes in community childcare centres and finding space for the use of the centres (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, advocacy initiatives have been carried out to change norms that regulate the establishment of basic urban services in poor areas of San Salvador. Staff have also advocated projects for social housing and integrated support for urban communities.

V. Lessons learned

The projects implemented by the organisations supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation over the last 20 years have had impacts on local communities. Staff at Appedibimi, Cantera, CINDE, Fundaespro and Fundasal have explained the lessons learned at their organisations on the basis of this experience.

Interpreting the context

The decentralisation of the administration of public services has created opportunities for the participation of civil society, although this participation is not yet sufficient to generate vast changes. The organisations find that the socio-economic context, particularly the high proportion of the population living in poverty, presents many challenges in the effort to create and sustain positive environments in favour of children.

In addition, there is a tendency among many adults in the three countries to deny that children have rights. This tendency is manifest particularly in the lack of support among adults for children's social participation.

The successes of the projects

At Cantera, the following positive factors are listed:

- Need for services at a time when there is a cutback in early childhood development services by governmental organisations
- Generation of local capacities in support of children resulting from the assistance provided to families and communities
- Commitment and quality of the community teachers that are evident every day in the efforts of the teachers to educate and develop children and communities (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007)

- Introduction of activities to strengthen integrated childhood development; these activities – for example, the activities in sports and the arts – have been widely appreciated by the adult population (Torres, *Cantera*, personal communication 2008)
- Building of awareness in communities so that children and adults act responsibly (Torres, *Cantera*, personal communication 2008)

At *Aprendiendo in Casa*, the following are considered accomplishments:

- Joint action by social actors and public and private institutions with the common objective of contributing to a change in the attitudes of individuals with regard to the establishment of integrated childhood development programmes
- Increased awareness and capacities among families and the systematic assistance provided to strengthen the support for children's education.

At *CINDE*, the following areas are highlighted:

- Placement of childcare centres in or near poor communities
- Low cost of the public services provided
- Quality of the staff charged with caring for the children in the childcare centres
- Long duration of the project and the appropriateness of the methodologies applied (Aguirre and Martínez, *CINDE*, personal communication 2007)

At *Fundaespro*, the following successes are indicated:

- Regular assistance provided to actors responsible for the projects, combined with the skill development among staff charged with providing services in community childcare centres
- Programmes offered directly within communities, thereby reducing the costs of transportation among beneficiaries and eliminating extensive travel by children
- Enthusiasm of the children because of their enjoyment of the teaching and learning activities
- Meetings with parents to involve them in the childhood development activities
- Trust of the entities that have supplied resources for the projects (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

Making adjustments after failures

There have been failures. However, timely analysis has allowed the organisations to adjust. Thus, at the beginning, the profile of the teaching skills and the nature of the teaching materials needed in the education projects of Fundaespro were unknown. Today, Fundaespro relies on a basic curriculum to train teachers, as well as teaching materials adapted to the requirements of students (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

The use of innovative methods

At *Cantera*, staff note that new school subjects have been introduced, particularly in pre-schools. Thus, education programmes have taught more than 5,000 children in art, music, dance, painting, handicrafts and sports. The achievements of students have been recognised through prizes and awards at local and national competitions, festivals and sporting meets (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

Enhancing the abilities of other actors

The organisations have undertaken initiatives to improve the skills and capacities of various actors involved in the projects, as follows:

At Appedibimi, the success of the projects in Guatemala are said to derive from these features:

- Active community participation
- Recognition of teachers at this level of the education system through establishment of a new professional category; initially, teachers at this level were merely hired, for example, to care for children who were living in refugee camps or had survived in areas where many people had been uprooted because of armed conflict
- Technical teams continue to provide assistance to teachers (Raymundo and Terrazas, *Appedibimi*, personal communication 2007)

At Cantera, staff indicate that local communities appreciate the organisation because of the children's services it provides, but also because of the training initiatives it undertakes among the poor (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, staff run training programmes among women on topics related to the organisation's children's projects, but also in preventive community healthcare and microenterprise management (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

The support of volunteers

The contribution of volunteers has been important in the development of project activities, for example:

At Cantera, the participation of volunteers has been a significant factor in the development of the education programme (Ulloa, *Cantera*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundaespro, an important element in the sustainability of the services provided through the community childcare centres is the many hours of work supplied by the women volunteers (García and Hernández, *Fundaespro*, personal communication 2007).

At Fundasal, the contribution of secondary school students who have offered assistance without pay in the realisation of the education activities organised through the project has been invaluable (Aguilar and Martell, *Fundasal*, personal communication 2007).

Contact the organisations

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

We work in three issue areas:

- Through “Strengthening the Care Environment” we aim to build the capacity of vulnerable parents, families and communities to care for their children.
- Through “Successful Transitions” we aim to help young children make the transition from their home environment to daycare, preschool and school.
- Through “Social Inclusion and Respect for Diversity” we aim to promote equal opportunities and skills that will help children to live in diverse societies.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the projects we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our evidence-based advocacy and publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

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