

*A shared challenge*

# *Indigenous childhood and education*

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Indigenous children living in the Mesoamerican region (Mexico–Guatemala) share a common element: they grow up in multi-cultural societies stigmatised by marginalisation and exclusion. In central, southern and south-eastern Mexico and Guatemala, indigenous boys and girls grow up in a social environment where discrimination and violence are a part of daily life: in the home, school or health centres, at work and on the street.

Although both countries ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, the current conditions of life for indigenous children in these countries is far removed from the optimum for their development. There are many similarities in the living conditions of indigenous children in Mexico and Guatemala, a situation that results in major challenges in terms of upholding children's rights, especially in terms of health, education and culture.

In Mexico, according to the Index of Mexican Children's Rights (for children between 0 and 5 years of age), published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in May 2006, the States of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero have the lowest scores on the Children's Rights Index particularly on the rights to life, healthy upbringing and access to education. At national level, out of every 1000 children born, 18.8 die before they are 1 year old. This statistic becomes worse in states with larger indigenous populations, such as Oaxaca and Chiapas, where the figure rises to 25 (Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México 2006). In the area of childhood nutrition, Mexico is within the average for Latin American countries, better than such countries as Ecuador, Honduras and Guatemala, but worse than Chile, Argentina and Costa Rica (UNICEF 2005). Additionally, in those states with the highest

indigenous populations, two or three out of every 10 children are shorter in stature than average. The figures for Guatemala are very similar. Out of every 1000 children born, 39 die before reaching their first birthday, while the level of chronic malnutrition in the country is the highest in Latin America (ENSMI 2002). The rural areas, where the majority of the indigenous population live, receive the lowest levels of public investment and have the worst social indications.

In both countries, indigenous children have few possibilities of finding help with schooling. The principal reason is the limited economic expenditure on schooling coupled with the low income of indigenous families. This is also why many children start working at a very early age. Of the children who manage to register with a school, a considerable percentage drops out, because in many cases they feel that schooling does not meet their needs. In Mexico, the retention rate in indigenous primary schools is 3.1 percent, while the non-passing rate is 9.2 percent (La Infancia Cuenta en México 2006). The equivalent figures for Guatemala are 7.71 percent for dropout and 16.93 percent for non-passing (INE 2002).

### **A common focus**

The situation of indigenous children in the Mesoamerican region is more complicated than the well-organised official statistics implies. The data gives us a glimpse of the general panorama; however, in order to adequately understand the complexity of the situation and what the figures really mean, we need to delve into the lives of indigenous children and their families.

Over time, social and non-governmental organisations such as ours working to uphold and



Photo: Kathia Loyzaga

The Grupo de Trabajo Infancia Indígena y Educación aims to provide a joint response to shared issues, such as influencing public policy in favour of supporting and watching over the rights of indigenous children

oversee the rights of indigenous children have improved our knowledge of the history of these regions, communities, districts and families. We have also acquired in-depth knowledge of the social context and the relationships that they establish with parents, relatives, teachers and the relevant communication media. In this way, we have been able to collect a large amount of information and have contributed to its understanding. However, it is quite common that understanding gained by organisations involved in education is used within their immediate sphere but is not shared and communicated more widely. Because of this and in order to address the observed similarities in the life styles of indigenous children in the region, we have formed the Grupo de Trabajo Infancia Indígena y Educación (Working Group for Indigenous Children and Education) composed of various organisations and social investigators working for children's rights and the improvement of their social conditions.

The proposal to form a working group on the subject arose during the Encuentro Construyendo

Ciudadanía: Convivencia y Participación Infantil en Contextos Multiculturales (Meeting to Build Citizenship: Children's Lives and Participation in Multi-cultural Contexts), organised by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and held in February 2004 in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Various partner organisations of the Bernard van Leer Foundation and others from the European network Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) met to exchange experiences and to devise and implement new cooperative action plans with shared agendas.

Currently, the Group is composed of five organisations and three individuals who share their interest in using the knowledge acquired in the education of the region's indigenous children. We also share a desire to construct a common conceptual framework that will enable us to take part in the debate on the subject from a regional perspective and to influence public policy in favour of supporting and watching over the rights of indigenous children, thus providing a joint response to shared issues.

### Sharing and building

One of the biggest challenges in the first and second years of the Group's work has been that of collective building. By 'collective' we mean not only to the organisations and individuals participating in the Group, but also the indigenous children and their families.

As a first step in the task of building a common conceptual framework, we started to debate one of the basic perceptions (i.e., infancy, boy, girl, childhood) that figures most highly in the practice of all the organisations working with indigenous communities. Each organisation organised a consultation event and/or an internal think tank in order to understand the different perceptions of infancy that underpin their educational practice and operational team. However, after an initial results-sharing session, which revealed our diverse and almost contradictory ideas, we realised that reflection on this concept had to be carried out with the children themselves. The results of that experience were unexpected and very enriching, taking into consideration that for some of the organisations, this was the first time they had ever involved the population in this type of activity. It is important to mention that this is still a work in progress and currently the Group is making an in-depth analysis of the results obtained.

Currently, it is common practice for organisations to establish fundamental concepts that support their work from a theoretical perspective, but which are often far removed from reality, or the perceptions and needs of the population with whom they work. It is for this reason that as a Group we chose to work by systemising and investigating current practice, involving the children and families who participate in our projects in the construction of a common framework. This is our principal strength.

During the first and second years, we have been developing our own method of working, founded on the recovery of experience, openness to criticism and placing a high value on work in learning groups (Mtra in Melel Xojobal 2004). In this model, which is still being built, the work carried out during various meetings of the Group in the headquarters of the participating organisations has been very valuable. It has enabled us to gain

in-depth knowledge and give feedback on the work of each organisation and has also encouraged the organisations to stand back and reflect on their educational practice; identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. In this way, the initiatives of the Group have become opportunities for reflection and training, not only for the children and their families, but also for the staff who work in the organisations, thus contributing to their professional development.

### Challenges

One of the main challenges that we have faced as a Group is constructing a common agenda, finding equilibrium between local features and regional similarities, and aiming to ensure that the initiatives of the Group are integrated into the work plans of participating organisations and are not perceived as additional activities.

It should also be remembered that during the second half of 2006 and the first months of 2007, social tension grew considerably in both countries, which for us meant undergoing a considerable learning curve. Principally, this enabled us to understand the importance of constructing a regional perspective that overcomes local situations and allows us to continue working both as a Group and a region. We have identified the opportunity to make regional generalisations starting from local experiences and to construct replicable models that enable us to consolidate regional strength and vision.

Finally, we have been able to confirm that the work of this Group has contributed considerably to institutional life and development, as well as to the professional development of each participating organisation and individual. It elicited the following comments:

- "This additional effort has been of great interest for all the team and we consider that it can bring benefits resulting in the improvement of daily practice. We are committed to continuing this process of enrichment and strengthening of our role as social agents." (Member of Unidad de Capacitación e Investigación Educativa para la Participación A.C.).
- "The development of this activity is very interesting for us as participants in the organisation. However, it was a little difficult to

understand the concepts, given that we are not accustomed to analysis and reflection about the work we are doing.” (Member of an organisation in the Foro Oaxaqueño de la Niñez).

We have also identified a number of opportunities for improvement, including:

- ensuring the continuity and sustainability of the processes of reflection and knowledge-generation within the organisations and with the benefiting population
- optimising our communication processes, breaking down the physical distances separating us by effective use of information and communication technologies.

In this way we aim to consolidate our position at a regional level in the fight to watch over and uphold children’s rights, as well as to start the Group’s second stage that will focus on developing intervention policies in the region at both social and political levels.

#### Note

- 1 The author is Coordinator of of Institutional Development of Melel Xojobal A.C. and coordinator of the *Grupo de Trabajo Infancia Indígena y Educación (Working Group for Indigenous Childhood and Education)*. Patricia Figueroa is Director of Melel Xojobal A.C.
- 2 Which, together with the states of Hidalgo, Puebla, Veracruz and Yucatán contains 77.3% of the total national population of indigenous girls and boys aged between 0 and 14 years, according to *La Infancia Cuenta 2006 (Childhood Counts 2006)*, a web-based publication by the Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México.
- 3 The Group is composed of: *Asociación para la Educación Integral Bilingüe Intercultural Maya Ixil (APEDIBIMI)*, based in the Ixil region of Guatemala; *Integración y Atención a Niños y Adolescentes Trabajadores A.C. (INTEGRANAT)*, Cintalapa de Figueroa, Chiapas, Mexico; *Melel Xojobal A.C.*, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico; *Unidad de Capacitación e Investigación Educativa para la Participación A.C. (UCIEP)*, Oaxaca and Mexico State; and the *Foro Oaxaqueño de la Niñez (FONI)*, Oaxaca, Mexico. The individuals are: Krisjon Olson, Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley and Professor in Colgate University; Dra. Ileana Seda Santana, Full

Professor, Postgraduate and Research Division, Psychology Faculty, National Autonomous University of Mexico and Lair Espinosa, Phd in Public Health.

- 4 Some of the responses of the girls and boys who took part in the think tank on behalf of INTEGRANAT A.C. were: “A child is a human being, not an animal, he/she is a helper, obedient, a student, a playful child, intelligent, speaks *tsotsil*” (a Mayan family language). “A child is a man, a person, he is big, someone important”.
- 5 The approaching presidential elections in Guatemala and the social conflicts that arose in Mexico, especially in Oaxaca State.

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