

Ethiopia

The Love for Children Organization

The Love for Children Organization (LCO) is an Ethiopian NGO established in 1999. LCO's vision is to see all Ethiopian children growing up in an environment that gives them the opportunity to become self-reliant and productive members of society. The organisation focuses on addressing and advocating for the rights and needs of disadvantaged children. It works to bring about lasting improvements in their lives through strengthening the institutions that support them. LCO currently operates in Addis Ababa in five *kebele* (districts).

Ethiopia has many needy and vulnerable children and LCO conducts several programmes. One of the main activities is to create a better future for orphans and other children who live on the streets. This includes running a childfriendly centre that caters for children's social, recreational and health needs and providing community-based care for orphans and vulnerable children. The organisation also caters for the mothers of these children, helping them to develop the skills they need to earn a living and provide for their children themselves. A revolving credit fund has given many women the opportunity to start up their own businesses.

Many children are orphaned through HIV/AIDS, and LCO runs an HIV prevention programme aimed specifically at street children and their mothers. Experience has shown that street children are more likely to listen to health and welfare advice when this is delivered by their peers. The Red Children (see box), a group of former street children, have thus been recruited and trained to communicate messages about HIV/AIDS to mothers and children living on the streets.

In partnership with the Oak Foundation, LCO is running a pilot project that aims to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation. This is achieved through a programme that helps them

to strengthen their resilience. The programme communicates through special Red Children who have been trained in identifying and dealing with sexual abuse/exploitation and promoting life skills. These children disseminate information on the causes and consequences of sexual violence. In addition, they motivate sexually abused girls to get together and discuss their experiences. This has led to the formation of special 'clubs', which can form a voice for action. The club members have conducted a number of panel discussions on the problem of sexual abuse and exploitation.

This project is making encouraging progress. The problem of sexual abuse has long been hidden or ignored, but now the general public and those involved are beginning to discuss the issue more openly. This includes a change in attitude on the part of the police and other concerned organisations. Now the problem is more openly recognised, the victims have better access to medication and counselling services. In addition, skills training for abused girls helps them to deal with their past and plan ahead for a brighter future.

The Red Children

The Red Children are former street children recruited and trained by LCO. They wear red uniforms to signify that they are alerting others to the dangers of living on the streets. In addition to raising awareness of the dangers of HIV/AIDS, they help reunite lost street children with their families or relatives, they report sexual and physical abuse to the police and other concerned institutions, they conduct non-formal education by teaching illiterate children to read and write, and they encourage street children to attend evening classes and advise them on how they can build a proper income.

El Salvador

Joining forces, opening spaces

Marisa de Martínez, Asociación CINDE para el Desarrollo Infantil y la Promoción Humana

The Asociación CINDE para el Desarrollo Infantil y Promoción Humana (CINDE International Centre for Child Education and Human Development) was founded in 1989 to help women with small children who live and work in impoverished urban areas and under precarious conditions, an all too common situation in Central America. The majority of these women are street sellers who subsist on the sale of a variety of articles and who work all hours without any kind of guarantee. They carry out their work on busy streets with their young children, who are breastfed or sleep on makeshift cardboard beds on the ground amid the hustle and bustle, while their mothers offer their wares to passers-by.

The CINDE Childhood Development Centres were opened to improve the children's welfare and offer support to the mothers. They care specifically for children aged 6 years or less, since this is the age at which the vital foundations for future development are laid. The first centre was opened in the town of Soyapango, with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and the model has been applied to two other centres in the metropolitan area of San Salvador in Mejicanos and Zacamil. Today, 300 children under 6 years old are taken in on a daily basis.

The urban context

Soyapango and Mejicanos are the most densely populated towns in the country, with over 5,000 inhabitants per square kilometre. They are run-down areas with few public services, overcrowded living conditions (some dwellings house up to five families), streets packed with street sellers and high unemployment. These conditions often lead to turbulent relationships within families and between inhabitants. Parents, particularly mothers, live in a constant state of tension brought about by the struggle for survival. This often affects their mental health resulting in coercive and sometimes violent behaviour towards their children.

Young people have uncertain futures and many are obliged to work from an early age, thus missing out on their education, a situation that favours the formation of violent juvenile gangs. Many adults are forced to migrate to the USA to find work, splitting families apart.

The majority of family groups in the project's target population are led by a single mother. These women generally have a low level of education and their income comes mainly from casual or domestic work. Average earnings are USD 50 per month, while a basic monthly family shopping basket costs USD 130. The result is that 50% of under-fives are malnourished.

Dealing with the problem

Initial project activities aimed to address the mothers' violent behaviour towards their children. It was alarming to note the degree of brutality used to physically punish children. Wounds caused by beatings had to be treated, children were sent to hospital suffering from bruising and the official child protection institution was kept informed. The hardest part was tackling the women: "I hit her last night because she asked me for food and I had nothing to give her", shouted Sofía, a 23-year-old widow and street-seller with three children. Talking to Sofía and other women in similar circumstances has helped project staff understand their problems and develop an appropriate training plan. These are desperate women whose human rights have been trampled on and who had been left to fend for themselves and their children with little moral or financial support. Training and counselling that allows them to become free from their guilt, understand the reasons for their aggression, develop their self-esteem and start to love themselves will help to unlock the tenderness inside them and allow them to express affection towards their children.

Forging a future

At the end of 1989, CINDE asked the Department of Psychology of the University of Central America for assistance. This was given in the form of a methodological project, formulated and implemented by a team of five 5th year undergraduate students. Over six months, the students conducted twelve 90-minute meetings and three 6-hour workshops with the mothers. The agenda involved getting them to understand the different types of violence against children and its consequences, as well as children's need for affection and security. The sessions were successful to some extent in changing attitudes, but the effects did not last very long. The centres continued to deal with verbal, psychological and, to a lesser extent, physical abuse.

Project staff then began to visit the children's homes and develop relationships with their mothers and this started to inspire trust, friendship and intimacy. The mothers began to tell their personal stories and air their worries and aspirations, revealing the tragedy of poverty in all its manifestations. This had a large effect on the project's educational team, a factor that was to be decisive.

As a result of this greater understanding, the project changed its methods of intervention. These women's lives, marked by social exclusion, would not be transformed by discussions and advice from 'experts'. Instead, they needed to take the initiative themselves. This led to the formation of the CINDE mothers' circles. These provide a space where the women can talk amongst their peers, hold discussions and offer advice. Trying to answer questions as simple as "Who are we?" and "What do we want to get out of life?" has helped them discover that they are all facing the same reality of an uncertain future.

The questions the women came up with helped them discover the origins of their negative attitudes towards their children and the harm they were doing. Comparing their personal stories and how they had been affected by their childhood experiences, they discovered that many had been victims of sexual abuse. There were memorable moments of attentive listening and catharsis, which inspired a feeling of belonging and created firm friendships.



Training and counselling helps parents, particularly mothers, to understand the reasons for their children's aggression and develop their own self-esteem.

Further progress was made by asking "What do our children need?". The women discovered that their daily struggle for survival prevented them from seeing beyond material things. And they began to make commitments: no more shouting, insults or blows, but a focus on strengthening their relationships with their children. They began to suggest positive alternatives that would keep the family united and help them to overcome their difficulties.

At the same time, the women started craft, hairdressing and dressmaking workshops, community savings and loan banks, CINDE support groups, family trips to the beach, etc. The mothers who join now find it easy to feel part of the social dynamic of CINDE.

Providing continuity

When they reach 7 years of age, the children attending the CINDE day centres have to start school. To provide some continuity for both children and their mothers, project staff came up with the idea of children's Saturday clubs. These offer integrated activities such as help with school work, play facilities, arts/crafts and sports, all designed to develop their sense of self-worth. Older children are encouraged to help the younger ones and have a say in which activities are provided.

After three years of positive experiences, the Saturday club idea was extended to five days a week. Children and teenagers attend these sessions, where they can get help with their school work, strengthen their friendships, organise communal activities and continue to grow emotionally and socially. The centres support the efforts of the children and their mothers to stay in high school until they graduate. In 2004 the project celebrated its first success, the graduation of Evangelina. Her mother, Doña Consuelo, sells hairpins, combs and similar items on the streets of Soyapango, and had only three years of schooling. She encouraged other mothers with the words "If I can do it, so can you".

CINDE awarded a diploma of recognition to Doña Consuelo for her efforts and for keeping the promise she had made 11 years earlier with her daughter. Now Evangelina has her own challenge: she has promised that she will obtain a university degree so that she too can say to the group "If I can do it, so can you". She is now studying physiotherapy and working as a waitress to pay for her studies.

Conclusions

It is important to note that it was the impoverished mothers themselves who showed the project the way forward. All they needed was a space, a meeting point and someone to listen and support them in their efforts to provide for their children. The project now has other challenges, including the organization of a savings and loan cooperative for the women and the production and commercialization of craft items. The children of this neglected sector of the population need continued support from their first months to the end of their basic education. The project will therefore aim to open additional Childhood Development Centres to widen the scope of its work.