

Colombia: playing to learn. An alternative for rural children

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Colombia is probably living through one of the most difficult times in its history, times marked by extreme and worsening poverty and its economic, political and social consequences; by problems linked to drug trafficking; by armed violence and the associated forced displacement of populations; by unemployment; and by migration. The result is that people have had to create alternatives to ensure their survival, and to satisfy their basic needs in housing, food, health and education, by working together in a spirit of solidarity.

A case in point is the rural areas of the department of Caldas, where communities that were engaged in coffee production used to enjoy extra private social benefits because the coffee plantations were profitable. These extra benefits allowed them to build good schools and roads, improve the quality of basic services, and access communication technologies. This continued until the 1990s and the start of the coffee crisis – at which point social systems quickly collapsed into chaos and instability.¹ Families saw the economic basis of their lives evaporate and their purchasing power diminish at an accelerating rate; they faced increasing hunger, malnutrition and illness, especially in children; and they had to cope with the increasing migration of men in search of work that would help the family to survive, something that damaged normal family dynamics.

Here, it's important to recognise the particular connotations that destabilisation has for rural populations. On the one hand, unemployment obliges men and women to leave their lands for the cities and take on poorly paid manual work. On the other, the social violence that condemns them

to live in continuous chaos and forces them from their despoiled lands, means that they leave without knowing what destiny holds for them; that they lack alternatives, knowledge and homes; and that they face an uncertain future in which to make their dreams come true ... or in which to somehow survive.

The challenge

In Colombia, the state does not have the capacity or resources to counteract unemployment or violence in rural areas. But armed groups that operate on the margin of the law do have a direct impact: they invite or force peasant farmers to cultivate illicit crops such as coca, and such crops become the only viable sources of income. Overall, the lack of opportunities for vulnerable peasant farmers clearly affects young children in particular and therefore will also impact on the future of Colombian society. This is underlined by Rikard Nordgren:

*Poverty from this perspective is the negation of options and opportunities for a tolerant and decent life. The solution necessarily lies in greater promotion of the poor as citizens who are agents of their own development.*²

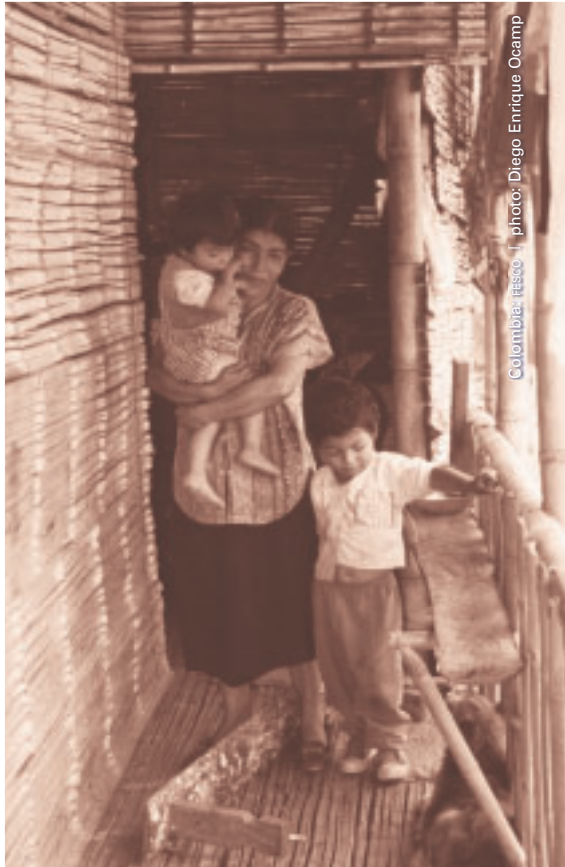
Clearly, peasant communities have been completely abandoned and the reconstruction of their social fabric and rural economies is unlikely in the short term. It is also clear that this context is – and will remain – detrimental to the socialisation and psychosocial development of children. Indeed it is especially hostile for children: the environment in which they are developing is being totally distorted by violence and aggression.

In addition, we have to recognise that rural children sometimes face situations in their immediate surroundings (their families) that damage their holistic development: traditionally, their parents have taken an authoritarian line in their approach to their responsibilities for the growth and education of their children. One consequence is that children have few opportunities to participate in how their lives or those of their families are decided. Rural parents with whom we work often say that they are repeating the childrearing model that their parents used on them, that they are following their parents example because 'It made us into good people'.

While this is their justification for keeping to the old norms, including the use of force, other factors – such as the stress that helps to ensure the survival of the family, or the fear with which families confront uncertainty – can also be expressed as violence against family members.

Multiple and complex factors such as these pervade the family context, and guide our reflections on the nature of our commitment to support, strengthen and transform the environments that young children are growing within, environments that must include a strong focus on early childhood. In our reflections, we start by recalling the words of Berger and Luckman: 'Children arrive in a world that is already established.'³ The challenge then is for adults to be the bridge, to communicate with young children, develop the kinds of relationships with them that will enable them to internalise the culture, the norms, and the social and individual worlds that make up their daily lives.

Fathers are increasingly leaving the land in search of work



Colombia: FESCO | Photo: Diego Enrique Ocaamp

Gaining access to development opportunities that uphold their rights and responsibilities is difficult for children. Equally difficult is access to opportunities to participate as actors in, and makers of, their own lives: it's the adults who have the power here. For the past four years, FESCO has therefore been constructing a model of intervention that includes everyone who is involved: the families; young people; educators; and the children. In the FESCO model, the children are at the centre and processes are woven around them.

FESCO's strategies

The FESCO model sets or articulates rural children in the family-childhood relationship; and this is reflected in FESCO's three strategies: Playing to Learn; Growing in the Family; and We Share and We Learn. The first of these, Playing to Learn, is about promoting and maximising the potential of the environment of children to enhance their emotional and physical growth, and their socialisation with their peers. It achieves this through stimulation and a range of appropriate experiences.

Working in parallel, the 'Growing in the Family' strategy helps families to see children as people who have rights and responsibilities, people for whom families must provide the best possible physical and social development environments.

At the same time, the 'We Share and We Learn' strategy opens up opportunities for municipalities to learn about childhood and to recognise the strategic significance of childhood for their own development. This is shown by the interest of the people who know the contexts: teachers and the staff of the Hogares de Bienestar Familiar⁴ (Family Well-being Centres): they have reconceptualised the teaching processes that underpin their planning for the education of children.

Playing to Learn: how we do it

With children under eight years, the programme organises sessions in which their abilities, skills and knowledge are developed through play and interaction with other children, around themes and values. Themes include peace and family life. The methodology is creative and play-based, encouraging children to interact

with each other as they discover and explore their needs, interests and anxieties. At the same time, it also reflects their developmental needs.

In the process, it has become clear that the affective relationship between adults and children is important in building and facilitating learning environments in which children relate well to themselves, to other children, and to their environment. The methodology, coupled with the kinds of relationships established, allows children to strengthen their abilities and skills; adopt positive attitudes to themselves, each other and the environment; and develop holistically.

The sessions are centred on processes of socialisation and communication with other children. Activities are designed to enable them to express the kinds of relationships that they establish with adults and other children; as well as those that symbolise their daily lives. This strategy is supported through play.

For children, to play is to live, to grow, to show what they know about what they have learned, to share. In other words, it is to establish relations that mark out the path that they will travel through life. This is because play is linked to creativity, to the solution of problems, to language learning, to the development of their social roles, and to the development of their capacity to present that knowledge about their material and social world which they cannot verbalise explicitly.⁵

Impact

For children, the programme is fundamentally about learning. But their testimonies, even if they tell us little about the importance of the programme for

them, allow us to compare their views with those of their parents about child development and how adults correct the behaviour of their children. From this, we can deduce that the views of both sides largely coincide: parents say they are looking for less violent ways of correcting their children's behaviour; and children tell us that they are experiencing less violent ways of being corrected. This happens because families come to recognise that greater dialogue and the coordination of the norms and rules of interaction, are more appropriate in reorganising family groups. And without any doubt, that recognition comes about because the children who take part in the programme largely drive this process of change by sharing the experiences they have gained from the programme, or by taking on a more political or active stance in demanding a better deal as they argue against abuse. From here, they are strategically well-placed to initiate new processes in the socialisation of their parents, in the sense that they can present new ideas that can help to improve family life.

In parallel, we can see that, as families understand and recognise children's rights and responsibilities, this helps to bring about the consolidation of better and more just parent/child relations. And, at the same time, it also teaches children about their obligations in their families, their schools and their communities.

We also see changes in children's personal hygiene habits, in nutrition, and in their social interactions with peer groups and adults, as they acquire values and responsibilities for different kinds of work in the family. In addition, we look for children to start to develop new forms of thinking, feeling and taking

action, forms that support their own individual and collective development.

Tendencies to change can be observed beyond the family environments. For example, in different ways, the programme has allowed each participating group to identify those situations or experiences that have changed and those that still have to be changed. Above all, the groups recognise that they are changing their perceptions about childhood and about the child-family relationship as the principle socialiser in infancy. They are also coming to understand the roles that other institutions play in this process throughout the lifetime of each human being and each community.

These then are the ways in which the project revolves around the environment of the child and the family, as it thinks about how to stimulate the development of children and of their families. Including enriching experiences about exercising their human rights (and child rights in particular) promotes a culture of non abuse, as children take on responsibilities that are appropriate and pertinent to their ages, gain the capacity to insist on expressing themselves, and are heard and respected. Beyond this, it is the children who energise new processes that socialise their parents and teachers. They do this each time that they share their new knowledge about their life in terms of their development and biological growth (sexuality, maturation of their bodies), and in terms of their rights and responsibilities. And this is reinforced as their confidence and security increases, and they declare a need for a better deal for themselves via a dialogue with those who hold the power – a dialogue that they request.

But, while the programme may consolidate progressive changes in people in terms of their ways of thinking, and in terms of how they conceptualise family and community life, it also brings about changes in behaviours. Here it is evident that many people – especially mothers – recognise the power and effectiveness of using less violence when educating and correcting their children:

I try to restrain myself.

I've changed the way I correct them: before I hit them, now I stop them doing things they like such as watching television.

I have more patience with my children.

Remaining challenges

FESCO set in motion a process that has been taken up and sustained in and by the communities: its mission to build up the country has been ratified. Nevertheless, as the process itself was being incubated by the communities, it stirred up specific challenges in each area, and in each community. One such challenge is whether FESCO should keep working in the rural world at all: violence and insecurity mean that the lives of social workers are permanently at risk. On the other hand, the condition of the country is directly linked to the fact that the basic needs of children are not being met. Therefore the challenge is to continue working – despite everything – to ensure that children can exercise their right to a worthwhile life. Here, it is their parents who must take on the responsibility for their children's growth, development, education, recreation and rest; for

keeping them from exploitation; for being open to them; for encouraging their freedom of thought; and for ensuring that they enjoy higher levels of health and nutrition, and greater security.

We must also keep on responding to the challenge of making sure that adults don't just take on a commitment to the holistic development of their children, but do so through joint negotiation – children and parents; children and teachers – that are based on respect, understanding and dialogue.

And our fundamental challenge is to have many more communities test and validate our proposals for social development in such a way that, given the reality of a country such as Colombia, these proposals are not seen just as answers to the difficulties of a given time and particular place, but as an ideal way of accompanying communities, of intervening in line with what they themselves want.

What do the children feel?

Mario, Carolina, Victor, Tatiana and Julián are just a few of the children who have been through the Playing to Learn experience in different parts of the rural area of Manizales. From their children's world, they confidently claim that what they have learned with FESCO's professionals 'has served them for life'. Although they are still small, they share with their companions 'a great deal of self-esteem'. Themes such as these are covered in Playing to Learn and young children handle them comfortably and in detail. However, the core importance of the work becomes clear when we discover that through the programme, these children have learned to interpret

their reality through their consciousness of many of the problems from which they suffer – problems such as public order, violence or poverty. Also, they can't help but see the many other children who arrive in their communities with their families, having been displaced from violent areas, and who, after a short time, move on because their terror of being caught stays with them wherever they are.

Most of the children who have participated understand that, if they work now, they will do well as they grow. In fact many of them are motivated to work already, whether in the house or in the fields, and are therefore acquiring the habit of working, and with it the necessary skills.

They also say that they see many items about violence and war in their country on television news, and that they do not understand why people do not resolve their problems by talking: for them, there is no need for bullets or force.

They, Mario, Carolina, Victor, Tatiana and Julián, believe that when they grow up they are going to behave differently to many of today's adults – some of them in their play; others by helping with household tasks; others by earning 40 USD cents for four hours of work in the fields; others in their school work. In short, although their routines and realities are different, these children are taking on conscious new attitudes and positions in life that will gradually generate radical transformations in the social contexts in which they are going to be actors. Play has enabled them to acquire the tools to build their own society. □

Notes

1. FESCO document.
2. Nordgren R (2002) *PUNO report on human development*; Norwegian Counsel for the Refugee, Oslo.
3. Berger and Luckman (1968) *La construcción social de la realidad*; Ed. Amorrutu.
4. The Hogares de Bienestar Familiar programme was established by the Colombian Government about 15 years ago, aimed at children under seven years from the most vulnerable socio-economic strata of society. It operates via Community Mothers, women from the community who care for young children five days a week, from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, ensuring that they have food and can play together with other children to help in their socialisation. Community Mothers receive a small allowance and are given the food for the children and materials for the activities.
5. *Niños y Niñas Caldenses: una Cuestión de Desarrollo* (2001); FESCO.