

Early Childhood Matters

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ECD in changing rural realities



There is no one rural reality

change: how to understand and interpret the context that the programmes operate in. They noted that the accelerated changes that modernity has brought, have reached not only the urban zones but also the rural, and are readily seen in a wide variety of forms throughout Latin America and Europe. But they also noted that, while factors such as the scarcity of services and isolation were common to both non-European and European settings, other factors were experienced in different degrees: for example, poverty is often much starker when it is found in rural communities in Latin America. At the same time, they pointed out that some factors were typical of non-European settings, for example, an ethnic dimension to the phenomenon of the exclusion of rural populations; while factors such as the ageing of rural populations, the relative

that work to construct and develop community organisations that can integrate themselves into networks centred on the basic necessities of modern life, such as schools, peripatetic health services, early childhood development, safe water, sanitation, and so on. However, while such programme characteristics are not exclusive to Latin America, work in Europe is linked more to local development that counters rural poverty, and that works for the effective organisation of essential services. Some of this work may be based on a redefinition of rural identity and a process of rediscovery of what it is to be rural. ECD programmes set out to provide – or ensure the provision of – important missing experiences for young children and their families, and aim to combat the increasing human costs imposed by the changing rural environment.

lack of young children and the service provision that they need; and the relocation of urban people and their social, cultural and economic links are more characteristic of rural Europe.

In considering programmatic responses, they saw that rural ECD programmes in Latin America focus more on community development programmes

Interestingly, the notion of the development of citizenship in young children emerged as a key strategy in both Latin American and European settings.

Much of this edition of *Early Childhood Matters* is taken up with a selection of the articles produced by participants in the meeting, to demonstrate the important contextual realities of the environments in which they operate, and to show the conceptual frameworks that underpin the responses that they have devised and put into practice.

The first article – ‘Education, Development and Citizenship: the foundations of an alternative rural intervention’ – is by Rui d’Espiney (page 7) and offers a detailed analysis of the modern rural world from a European perspective, showing how modernisation and other factors have critically damaged the fabric of rural societies. From this, he postulates the need for rural people to collaborate with those who have the power, in partnerships dedicated to inventing a new rural reality. This builds on the best values of the rural world, yet embraces new ideas and ways of thinking as it constructs and controls its own modernity. The article is illustrated by an example of how this works in practice (page 12).

In the same line, ‘Betting on education the Preescolar na Casa way’ by María Sara Paz Combarro (page 15), outlines current rural realities in the remote and sparsely populated North West of Spain. In her view, few people there value rural life and children feel this from a very early age. In addition, many live with older people where they may be over-protected, develop slowly, and have no opportunity to play, or to enjoy the company of playmates of the same age or of adults

from other families. She goes on to discuss the bet that the Preescolar na Casa project is making: that the best way forward is to break down isolation by building on the resources that are discovered and nurtured in parents by professionals who act as sensitive guides and mentors. The project also uses radio and television programmes – and perhaps more important given the isolation of many families and children – provides ‘encounter rooms’ in which they can come together with other families, simply to be together, and to share activities, experiences and ideas.

Peter Lee from Scotland shares experiences from a quite different perspective. As an academic and researcher, he focuses especially on rural poverty and its unexpected complexity in ‘Enjoying the rural life in the Highlands of Scotland’ (page 20). The project includes training parent volunteers to work with vulnerable families and support them through home visits, listening, helping with transport, shopping, childcare, running group work activities and helping families to use other services. The project generally aims to counter both rural poverty itself, and its effects on young children, partly through alliances of service providers. This approach demands the whole-hearted support and collaboration of the service providers, a strategy that depends for its success on Sure Start, a Scottish national programme in which the project participates. A key feature of Sure Start is its insistence on generating maximum effectiveness through inter-agency cooperation.

Turning to Latin America, the problems faced by rural populations in Colombia are extreme: the long-standing civil war has impacted most damagingly in rural areas; some of the most basic social structures

have been destroyed; unemployment and violence continue to increase; forced migration due to the civil strife or to the collapse of commodity prices is common; and so on. One consequence is that rural communities have lost the capacity to organise themselves and have lost their sense of belonging together. In her article ‘Playing to learn: an alternative for rural children’ (page 24), Alba Lucía Marín Rengifo discusses experiences with three interlinked strategies. The first promotes and maximises the potential of the environment of children to enhance young children’s emotional and physical growth, and their socialisation with their peers. The second helps families to see children as people who have rights and responsibilities, people for whom they must provide the best possible physical and social development environments. The third enables local authorities to learn about childhood and to recognise the strategic significance of childhood for their own development.

Reina Melania Vargas de Ramos (page 29) presents a picture of rural Venezuela that, although it may lack the extreme violence that characterises areas of rural Colombia, has nevertheless been damaged and torn by huge tensions and uncertainties that have precipitated worsening poverty. In ‘Promoting active citizenship in rural children’, she discusses the profound transformation that her country and its political life is going through; the impact of this on the rural world and especially on young rural children; and a response that centres on promoting active citizenship in children, their families and members of their communities.

To complement the work that emerged from last December’s analytical and reflective exercise, we

have two further features. The first offers a contrast to the other projects discussed in that it has grown in a context in which change has been more gradual and ordered. In ‘Stronger teachers, stronger children, stronger parents and stronger communities’ (page 34), Francis Xavier discusses how a national programme for the children of Tamil Indian rubber and palm oil plantation workers has evolved and developed from a small training initiative for six teachers that began in 1988. Recognising that remoteness and isolation could be conquered by developing a close knit network of small, local initiatives, the ‘Growing up stronger’ project now extends over all of the eleven states of Peninsula Malaysia, working in partnership with parents as they develop, energise and sustain rural preschools. The objective is to ensure the availability in rural areas of quality early child development and education that is culturally and contextually appropriate, and that uses local resources that are meaningful to young children.

The second complementary article is drawn from the Effectiveness Initiative (EI), a five-year Foundation programme that is looking into what makes ECD projects work. In ‘Small but valuable lessons’ (page 37) Leonardo Yáñez, former Coordinator of the EI, discusses findings drawn from rural settings. He points out that, set against the backdrop of harsh rural poverty, to be effective, a good rural ECD programme has to offer much more than good childcare in order to hold and attract people. He also stresses that, very often, it is the small elements in a programme that prove to be important in helping it to achieve success.

Jim Smale
Editor



Portugal: education, development and citizenship. The foundations of an alternative rural intervention

Rui d'Espiney

The author is the National Coordinator of the 'Rural Schools' project operated by the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas (ICE). In this article he offers a detailed analysis of the modern rural world from a European perspective, showing how modernisation and other factors have critically damaged the fabric of rural societies. From this, he postulates the need for rural people to collaborate with those who have the power, in partnerships dedicated to inventing a new rural reality. This builds on the best values of the rural world, yet embraces new ideas and ways of thinking as it constructs and controls its own modernity. The article is illustrated by an example of how this works in practice (page 12)

A critical look at the politics of rural development

The recognition of the extent and depth of the crisis that pervades rural areas of Europe is not new as is shown by the fact that, for several years, the European Union (EU) has invested massive amounts of money in such areas, especially those that it considers under-developed. Just one example: the LEADER+ Programme that supports civil society organisations

in stimulating the development of rural areas, has provided more than EUR 162 million to Portugal alone – and that represents only a small fraction of the EU's investment in rural areas. Overall, national and European efforts and proposals, while they value some original solutions, are based on a perception of the current state of the rural world in Europe as 'delayed' or 'a mistake' when compared with industrialised zones.

Because of this, efforts and proposals are structured around three major axes. The first of these centres on an increase in productivity and in the competitive capacity of the agricultural sector. This is to be achieved by:

- modernising production processes and products;
- rationalising agricultural activities via production quotas for each country and each region; and
- improving infrastructure to facilitate the movement of products.

The second axis is about funding the development and marketing of non-agricultural rural industries such as crafts and tourism; and the third is about the reorientation of rural areas, of their functions

and needs, and of those who depend on these for their livelihood. This means attracting industries and capitalising on the unemployed by training them so they are qualified to work in the new industries. Effectively, the idea is to de-ruralise rural areas.

Clearly there have been some positive results from these investments. But, overall, they have not energised or upgraded the rural world. In fact, as many surveys and studies show (Amiguinho, 2002), they did not even achieve enough to justify the 'demographic bloodshed' that they have caused; did not make up for the loss of competitiveness of goods and products; and did not alter the rural world's dependence on, and subordination to, the urban world since 1950 (Freitas, Ferreira de Almeida and Villaverde Cabral, 1976).

Everything was determined and managed upstream, with the idea of bringing the rural world into line with the urban world. The decisions were made by people who themselves lived in the urban world, with the consequence that the kinds of investments that were made hastened the de-characterisation of

the rural world without offering its inhabitants new opportunities in their lives:

- the only time that many people in the rural world actually earned any money as a result of these initiatives was during their training for employment;
- many of the alternative businesses were barely able to survive;
- new businesses did not necessarily generate economic development; and
- as a recent Portuguese television report showed, although some agricultural enterprises created, for example in the Alentejo region, were successful, this was because they were set up by businessmen who had previously established that there was a preferential European market for their produce. This explains why few of these business are owned by Portuguese.

The contribution of the state

Over the last 10 to 15 years, we have seen interventions on the part of the state that, in some ways, don't especially reinforce the de-characterisation of the rural world. Instead they help to paralyse it rather than support its rebirth or regeneration. Led by economic objectives – especially the need to save money – and by rationalisation (business efficiency), administrators have centralised resources and services such as education, health, mail and so on, in small towns. And the consequences are clear:

- that support to the rural world is conceived in terms of an urban logic, with services appropriate to urban dwellers;
- that rural inhabitants are implicitly encouraged to

move to where the services are; and

- that interactions between resources and those who use them are weakened which, in turn, means that the potential of rural inhabitants to exercise power, influence and pressure is also lessened.

This network of state services meshes with the actions and growing omnipresence of local Governments that, to a large extent, organise life in rural environments. They do this by satisfying the basic necessities of rural inhabitants – being the source of what people need in order to survive – and therefore being the source of the jobs. In its turn, this reinforces the tendency towards rural stagnation and crisis, as it finds its way down to the level of rural councils. Further reinforcement of this tendency stems from a growth in administrative staff, with many new jobs being filled by outsiders attracted by such employment. The effect of this is to replace local people in rural areas, many of whom are driven to the fringes of the big cities.

Putting this another way: the centralisation that is carried out in the name of improving quality is actually contributing to the stagnation and inertia of the rural environment that it is supposed to revitalise. (d'Espiney, 2003)

An alternative way of looking at development

The profound crisis that is afflicting the rural world is structural. It won't be overcome by returning to the past, by reconstituting the old order, or by removing the original causes of the crisis. Instead, it must start from the effects of the expansion of the market economy and the transformation that occurred in the relation between output and the structure of ownership.

Because of this, the development of the rural world, and the investment necessary for that development, presupposes the inevitability of accepting changes in ways of life, and in the ways in which wealth is generated. And it also clearly presupposes improvements in accessibility, better public services, and new understandings of the nature of agricultural activities.

But the persistence of the rural crisis, despite the measures that were introduced to bring about improvement, shows that these measures alone will not bring about a revitalisation of the rural world. In fact, they have led to greater marginalisation, thereby showing the error of thinking that to modernise is to follow modern fashion.

Seeing rural development in terms of its reanimation and well-being implies seeing it not as something technical and/or organisational, or as a matter of modernising activities or introducing efficient systems. Rather it has to be understood as, and achieved through, social processes that are centred in, and created from in the potential of the rural world.

Seen in this way, modernisation happens through new forms of socio-economic and cultural intervention, through the functional transformation of property and of ownership, and through new rural realities that stem from a new social understanding of rural inhabitants. It is not about external help and the logic of that, but about social processes that produce a future of new forms and practices, that is lived and built by the victims of today's crisis. This must be at the heart of rural development.

Obstacles to the social development of the rural world

It's important to know the causes of a structural crisis, to understand its contours and the depth of the changes that it imposes or produces. However, it's not enough to just have an understanding of the factors that militate against social processes. It is also necessary – even fundamental – to spell out the nature and form of the social obstacles that militate against the involvement and the mobilisation of those who will both be changed, and be the agents of change themselves. There are many such obstacles but here I will focus on just five.

1. *The residual character and the interconnected nature of those activities that are specifically rural*

Rural populations tend to depend more and more on non-agricultural activities for their livelihoods and on agricultural activities becoming viable through these (Leeds 1975). Investment in new forms of rural activities has, in many cases, been related to the creation of facilities that are complementary to those of the urban world, and that are for the enjoyment of urban dwellers. These include: hunting areas; ecological reserves (which, being conceived from an urban logic, are forbidden to rural populations); rural tourism; second homes; and so on.

2. *The rural dweller's dependency on, and subordination to, the urban dweller*

This is, in many ways, a consequence of the first obstacle. Such dependency and subordination is partly a result of rural clients finding themselves facing a multitude of urban providers of essential

goods and services. Equally, it is partly caused by the distance between the rural world and the political and economic decision-making institutions – and indeed, the rural world's distance from the markets for its goods. The nature of the relationship is further reinforced by the increasing amount of goods and non-local produce that the rural dweller requires.

3. *The compartmentalised nature of the essential services that are provided*

In contrast to normal family income which is spent according to need, the income or benefits which a family (and any of us) receives from the state, comes in packages (health, education, culture, and so on). And it is very often provided according to the organisational logic of each service provider, in the form of 'sub packages' that compete with each other.

4. *The social and cultural disruption of the rural way of life affects the identity and the practices of families and of each family member*

Such disruption polarises aspects of rural life that were once interacting: output and consumption; nature and man; informal and formal education; culture and education; possibility and opportunity; and so on. As O'Neill (1988) and Pinto (1985) show, rural communities are not, and never were completely homogenous. The notion of macro and micro is a false dichotomy (O'Neill, 1988) and it has never been, and is not now, possible to talk of communities harmoniously managing the production and consumption of what their labours win from the soil, or of living in a free relationship with nature. The management of these

polarities has always been marked by tensions and imbalances that resulted, and still result, from the structure of society. But even though these tensions and imbalances existed, there was, until recently, interaction between the polarities. Inevitably, the breakdown of interactions necessarily produced changes: new relationships had to develop in families and communities.

5. *The real and continuing loss of the competitiveness of social, economic and cultural goods produced in the rural environment compared with those of the urban world.*

Entering the EU has aggravated this process as traditional products such as cheeses, sausages, vegetables and fruits now have to meet centrally defined standards. In many rural communities, the consequence of this has been the abandonment of traditional activities such as wine making, olive pressing, leather tanning and the making of dairy products.

Towards a definition of strategies for rural development

If these obstacles are to be overcome then it's necessary to define the presuppositions that underpin an alternative rural development that is determined by the rural world itself, a development that understands the rural world as the subject of the development not as its object.

In this, the first necessity is to bring initiatives together. They can't simply pursue their own goals but must act as a means to encourage fellowship, to generate forms of cooperation that help to re-

establish an identity that binds people together, and to develop affection. No initiative, for all that it produces wealth, will ensure development unless it contributes to new relationships with authorities – and those new relationships must develop through establishing fellowship. Initiatives that depend on current relationships tend to lose their potential and be reabsorbed into the current systems and structures. Instead, they need to carry what I would call the ‘alternative power gene’.

The second necessity is to see development as integrated or holistic. This means not only overcoming the effects of the currently compartmentalised efforts of the state and others, but also reestablishing interrelations between those aspects of rural life discussed above that are polarised. Generally, there is a tendency to regard development as integrated when it is carried out simply through the convergence of activities, each of which is designed to remedy problems in one relevant area of community life – education, health, the economy, culture, and so on. In addition, each activity is carried out by the institutions responsible, in line with their own distinct vision. The sum is actually not integrated development, but simply an *ad hoc* collection of actions that responds to a particular set of problems.

I’m not denying the importance of the institutions that deliver such services and resources. But they must work in partnership with the actors of the rural world, and those actors must have the time and space to define strategies to regain – or reinvent – their identity as rural dwellers. An integrated development project has to organise the partnership rather than the

partnership organising the project, adapting itself as agreement is reached about what is relevant.

The third necessity is to anchor the process of constructing the future in activities and dynamics that ensure the sustainability of the alternative way that is developed, and its competitiveness. This is a necessary measure, one that depends on ascribing fair value for produce and services, and on fair exchange in the markets of the urban world – something that is achieved, for example, by several of the initiatives of the Rural Schools project of ICE.

The final necessity is to promote the quality of life, guaranteeing access to the various forms of well-being that modernity brings, but simultaneously to avoid the kind of patronage that transforms rural life into something imposed from outside, something that is somehow contradictory to the rural way of life.

Some strategic challenges

It is clear that we don’t know yet what the rural reality that is to be created will be: that is something that will be decided by rural dwellers themselves, through the processes I have outlined. The four strategic necessities to bet on that are set out above, should be understood not as mapping the path of rural development. Rather, they indicate entry points for the progressive involvement of the currently marginalised rural citizens in the development of a future that is centred in their rural world.

Four such entry points are evident. The first is education as a medium of culture that helps to bring about fellowship. As a time of explanation of

intentions and of the reproduction of social practices, education functions as, or can act as, a bridge between, on the one hand local knowledge, attitudes and practices that socialise contexts and lead to deep understandings of situations; and on the other, the universal knowledge that refines and amplifies local knowledge and carries it forward, thereby breaking down isolation.

It is not by chance that education is regarded as the determining factor in sustainable development; and that, in an initiative in February 2003, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation launched an initiative inviting all its member countries to raise awareness and understanding about the importance of education for the rural population, as a crucial step in reaching the Millennium Goal of the eradication of poverty and hunger.

The second entrance is through the power of traditions and the use of artisan knowledge in energising and promoting rural populations. Naturally, this is not to say that the work practices and beliefs of the past are the future. But it is to say that the work, the traditions, the competences that are passed down from generation to generation, can help to restore an affection for the rural ways, an affection that is the most important ingredient in restoring esteem for rural life and self-esteem, and laying the foundation for rural solidarity. And the future organises itself around solidarity!

The third entrance is via a necessary redistribution of rural resources. This requires a new relationship with those who manage public property, one based on promoting organisation and on the promotion

and exercise of citizenship. And it requires the identification of rights that can and should ensure participation and influence on political decisions – for example, in determining the priorities in autonomous budgets.

The fourth entrance is through treating the older generation and children as priorities and as the main subjects of rural development. The crisis of the rural environment is characterised by desertion/ depopulation, and by the ageing of those who remain. Becoming the majority, yet simultaneously excluded from the active population, older people could be seen as bastions of conservation, of stasis, not of the rural future. But if they were seen not as obstacles to progress but as keepers of the affective fabric, as treasuries of knowledge and as custodians of the sense of belonging, they could prompt the discovery of a new identity with specifically rural roots. Their availability because they are pensioners, together with the mobilising force that can be generated by nostalgia for the past, means that older people are very visible actors in several projects that ICE operates – indeed their involvement is a permanent feature.

But to talk of the future necessarily demands being aware of the need for involvement with future generations. In a context of desertion and ageing, children emerge as privileged actors in the transformation of past affection into affection that is recreated and enriched by the new realities that they so easily absorb. Again, the experience of ICE projects, and of projects in several other countries that I have had the pleasure of knowing, allow us to see the potential of children to generate and sustain a particularly dynamic relationship with older people.

Conclusions

These reflections about the rural world centre naturally on the realities of Portugal, realities that are very much parallel to situations in other areas of the Old Europe.

However, the situation of the rural world in countries on other continents – Asia, Africa, Latin America – is clearly distinct. As we had opportunity of seeing during the international workshop in December 2002 in Alcácer do Sal, Portugal, and Lugo, Galicia, the poverty is much starker there; the extent of desertion and ageing is a long way short of that in Old Europe, and generally there is an ethnic dimension to the phenomenon of exclusion in many rural environments.

Curiously, as we also saw in the workshop, these differences are caused, above all, by the specific times and phases in which the process of rural transformation finds itself in a particular place, at a given moment. There are some realities in the Portuguese rural world (especially its crisis) that are embryonic forms of the rural realities of those other countries, on those other continents.

This is not intended to be a universal problematisation of rural realities, and I must underline the fact that intervention projects will only be appropriate if they are drawn from reflections about the situation in the country in which they are operating.

However, I can say that the development of the rural world can in no circumstances be seen as separate or independent from the reality of the urban world,

or from the general structure of society. On the contrary, the crisis that pervades the rural world is the other side of the coin to the crisis that is growing and deepening in the urban world. The causes may be different, as are the routes by which the cities came to be in crisis, and the alternative futures that they will face. But the cities are also being affected by marginalisation, by the loss of quality and character, by centralised control of the measures that are meant to redeem the situation – and even by desertion.

But, it was not my intention in this article to explore the plight of cities! □

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Portugal: a bet on the new rural realities (ruralities) – the Educational and Environmental Farm of Santo André and da Sancha lakes

Rui d’Espiney and Isabel Pereira

The authors are, respectively, the National Coordinator of the Rural Schools project operated by the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas; and the Coordinator of the Rural Schools project. This feature is adapted from *Educação, Inovação e Local*, Cadernos ICE No. 6, ICE, Setubal, Portugal. It offers an example of how the new rural realities discussed in the previous article offer opportunities for the education and development of young children while simultaneously helping to revitalise the rural world by valuing and building on what is there.

In August 2000, the area that includes the Santo André and da Sancha lakes in the Alentejo littoral in Portugal was designated a nature reserve. Also included in the reserve were eight communities: Costa de Santo André; S Bartolomeu da Serra; S Francisco da Serra; Santa Cruz; Roncão; Cruz de Loão Mendes; Brescos; and Aldeia de Santo André. Given its heritage and its scientific importance, the reserve could naturally be

regarded as a cultural, economic and social asset that would improve and promote the locality.

Adapting process and context to development

In the early 1990s, an initiative of the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas (Institute of Educational Communities), via its ‘Rural Schools’ project, swept through practically the whole of the Alentejo littoral, transforming and constructing a social dynamic focused on learning and development, and on breaking down isolation. Here, we consider what happened in the area that comes under the auspices of the District Council of Santiago do Cacém, and that includes the nature reserve around the Santo André and da Sancha lakes.

In this area, one outcome was the operation of so-called Different Days. A Different Day is an encounter between the children from a group of schools,

held in a community with the full participation of the members of that community. Children of all ages mix with community members of all ages, to learn together and enjoy a full and rich range of experiences.

Typically children work their way around the area, participating in a series of investigative activities that are set up and run by local people whose aim is to share their knowledge and skills. The outcomes of the children’s investigations are recorded in albums and in mini documentation centres so they can be consulted daily, and can be communicated to other classes during Intercultural Days, and to other pupils through the schools’ Children’s Workshop.

In the development of this process in Santiago do Cacém, the schools found themselves face to face with the limits of what they could do while the communities needed to create the dynamics that

would transform these initiatives into self-sustaining and permanent local processes. The way forward was a structure in which the partners in this initiative could move its centre of gravity from the initiative and the schools, into the communities – or rather into the social network through which the initiative operates.

To do this required the setting-up of a platform of all the relevant local organisations, that would reflect together on the development of Santiago do Cacém, and that would establish poly-centred initiatives that could become permanent foci of development. And one of these poles was the Educational and Environmental Farm of Santo André and da Sancha lakes.

A farm for a new rurality

The resultant Educational and Environmental Farm is a proposal for integrated development that is based in and on the nature reserve. It is feasible because it is co-owned by all relevant institutions: the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas, the Instituto da Conservação da Natureza (Institute of Nature Conservation), the Câmara Municipal de Santiago do Cacém (Municipal Council of Santiago do Cacém), and the Junta de Freguesia de Santo André (Parish Council of Santo André); and because its main objective is to ensure that the nature reserve remains a natural and social heritage.

Because of the secrets and knowledge that it guards in its breast, the reserve preserves the past uniquely and well. But above all – at least in our belief – it is also a reserve and resource for the future, something



Portugal: Rural Schools project, Instituto das Comunidades Educativas (ice) | photo: ©Jim Smale/BVLFF

A Different Day – children learning in the community

that can reorientate the present of the people who live within it. This is the vision that informs our work and guides our investigations.

The idea is to invent a kind of educational territory into which knowledge gained from informal and formal education, and from life experiences can be integrated, a device that brings together components that until now have been disconnected: development; cultural identity; and knowledge of the natural and physical environment and all its inherent wealth.

The creation of infrastructures

To achieve this required a logistical infrastructure to support the project. In concrete form, this consists of the Welcome Centre in which visitors stay; the Experimental Centre; the House of Kneading and the Bread Oven; the Cowsheds and Stables; the Interpretation Centre, and the Wine Cellar.

Obviously a normal farm isn't made up of such elements, but then this Farm isn't intending to make

its living through normal commercial means. Instead it provides rural people with an integrated set of learning spaces in which to explore the story of agriculture. The point is to ensure that a visit isn't just a way of gathering knowledge and experiences, but that it also acts to strengthen rural self-esteem and to stimulate the revaluation by rural people of the knowledge that has been handed down to them.

Children as the subjects of development

At the Farm, a team of local teachers and technicians work with children in ways that transform them into people who help build the project. They are involved in decisions about the direction that the Reserve will go in; about the socio-cultural or recreational activities that are carried out; about the organisation of the spaces; and about the scientific research, in which they participate by observation and collecting data.

In their schools, sometimes accompanied by the technicians from the Farm, the children make use of what they saw and experienced at the Farm. Basic notions about zoology, botany and meteorology, or the Latin names of birds and plants, arise naturally through the learning by doing/discovery approach, and by exchanges between children. Here they talk among themselves about what they have seen, and through that, they learn to like it.

Some of their comments demonstrate how effective this approach is at a number of different levels.

- Scientific: *The ducks are very clever, they build their nests in the reeds so no one can see them or steal them.* (Ruben)

- Relational: *For me, the Farm is small but it has water, flowers, people, life, birds, herbs, sea, land, termites, and bees. Its the richest small farm I know.* (Francisco, 7 years)

- Affective: *The leaves of the sage bush are like the hands of my grandmother Arlete, very soft.* (Bernardo, 4 years)

- Social: *This weekend, I went to the pond with my father to 'research' crayfish.* (Carlos, 6 years)

- Citizenship: *For me, the Farm is like a magical garden with animals of the garden and creatures of the pond that want to live and not be destroyed.* (Ana, 6 years)

The children's enthusiasm is exceptional: they frequently talk about going 'to our Farm'. They are also building affective and cognitive links with the reserve and its flora, fauna, norms, ways, happenings and life and this is important in terms of its potential for the future. The children are builders of adult consciousness in these areas as well.

All of this takes place in a context of continuous contact between the children and the local communities and people, calling in to talk, be shown skills, share in knowledge and be given explanations about all sorts of unfamiliar matters – such as when and how to fish, when and how the fishing net is thrown, how to judge the freshness of a fish, how to milk livestock, how to sow seeds.

In this way, local people see themselves as wellsprings of knowledge about such things as the

secrets of nature as well as about social or collective activities such as fishing, the construction of boats, and so on.

In this process of child-mediated development, what stands out is that it bets on children being able to take on the responsibility and to share power. This is shown in the way in which they are able to collect and deliver the Christmas mail, then reinvest the profit from this in trees for the garden, in planting strawberries, in constructing screens for the garden, or in restocking areas of the reserve that are in poor condition. □

Spain: betting on education the Preescolar na Casa way

María Sara Paz Combarro

The author coordinates and organises activities and training of professionals in the Preescolar na Casa project, a rural early childhood development (ECD) project that, since 1977, has been operating in Galicia, an autonomous region in the north west of Spain. In the absence of any other provision, the project is centred on training parents to provide the preschool needs of their children. But it is doing so in ways that help to revalidate and revitalise the rural world.

Rural Galicia

The current rural world of Galicia is complex and contradictory and there are many different rural realities. In addition, it has gone through – and is still going through – many changes. Among these are:

- *The separation of arable farming from cattle-raising, and the parallel weakening of the importance of agriculture and stockbreeding to the country's gross domestic product (the total wealth that the country produces).*

This has diversified rural society, and rural life is no longer automatically associated with the land. In turn, this impacts on rural social structures: social classes are not now necessarily linked to land ownership; instead more people tend to have occupations. At the same time, there is a weakening of the links between agricultural activity and living in the country: instead of the classic model of small

farmers who live and work on their own land, the rural world is full of people who have no rural background; while owners of arable, forestry and cattle-raising businesses may live in the city.

- *The industrialisation of agriculture.*

The economic activities of family farming businesses have become a kind of agro-industrial chain, both in terms of what they need to buy (seeds, fertiliser, agrochemicals), and in terms of what they sell (meat, milk, grains). And almost all of the links in the chain are pre-determined: the prices, the quantities, the quality.

- *Agrarian specialisation.*

Increasing differences are developing between rural regions because of specialisation in terms of crops and produce.

- *The social and geographical blurring of rural and urban distinctions.*

Added to this in Galicia is the fact that residents of small villages and towns don't lose their links with the rural environment: most of them have family in the countryside and/or still retain rural ways of doing things.

It's possible to identify two determinants of these changes. The first is the loss of the cultural characteristics of the rural world because the urban world is regarded as so desirable. Mass communication media contribute greatly to this, and rural dwellers may reinforce it by becoming contemptuous of their own cultural and traditional beliefs and norms, and by losing their sense of the worth of their own language. They may also encourage their children to study and perform well in school so they have the opportunity to move to the towns and cities, instead of working in the fields.



The second determinant of rural change is imposed from outside. It derives from ideas about development and industrialisation, and results in traditional family businesses trying to compete with businesses that are based solely on an economic vision. This causes a number of problems, including:

- *that rural living has to be subsidised.*
This doesn't just reinforce dependence and insecurity, but also confronting farmers with the paradox about short-term expediency and consequent long-term problems. There are two obvious examples of this paradox. The first is about using animal feed that was derived from infected animal products and resulted in the mad cow disease crisis. The second is about encouraging intensive production and subsequently trying to promote sensible ecological development.
- *That only large businesses are viable.*
This increases the difficulty of maintaining authentic rural ways and activities. Such businesses also change the nature of rural jobs: often the men work away from home, in the service sector or the construction industry, while the women run the homes, care for the children and elderly people, and run small-scale farming activities.

All this devalues the rural world and leads to its progressive abandonment: young and more dynamic people move to the cities thereby reducing the viability of services such as schools and public transport – a factor in increasing the motivation to leave the countryside.

This massive depopulation also means that the population is thinly scattered – a key characteristic

of rural life. Some figures help to give a clear idea of the scale of this in Galicia. Galicia has an area of 30,000 square kilometres and a population of almost 3,000,000 people. Of these, about one million are concentrated in the seven main cities. The remainder are distributed among the approximately 30,000 small Galician communities (some 51.2 percent of the total number of such communities in Spain). Over recent years, the reduction of the birth rate and emigration to the cities, have created a middle-aged and remote rural world.

Rural childhood

Undoubtedly, all this has repercussions on rural childhood. Few people value rural life and children feel this from a very early age. In addition, many of them live with older people where they are over-protected and develop slowly because each of them may be the only child in the community. They have no opportunity to play, or to enjoy the company of playmates of the same age or adults from other families. Only when they start school will they have the opportunity to be with their peers – but at the price of having to leave home early to catch the school bus on its long and circuitous journey around the dispersed communities that the schools serves. And they return very late and very tired from schools that, far from demonstrating respect and consideration for the rural world, are much more likely to distance them from their roots.

This is the context in which Preescolar na Casa tries to make a difference. It is conscious that it can only add stones (such as the promotion and appraisal of the rural world through its educational work) in the

construction of a cathedral (a rural environment that is valued and respected) by a concentration of forces (integrated social, educational, economic policies) that are driven by people who are aware of the importance of their collective efforts.

Educational and cultural instruments for the revitalisation of the rural world

Faced with a challenge, the normal response of people with low self-esteem is to believe that it is beyond them. But in working with such people, and coming face to face with the classic myth of ‘I do not know’, Preescolar na Casa tries to reinforce the value and bring out the potential of each of them. It tries to rescue and reveal all the possibilities that the rural world contains. It is not a matter of maintaining something that is idealised but out of date, it is about evolution, it is about bringing into play elements and factors that can help to improve the quality of life for the rural people, and it is about preserving their distinctiveness.

Rural values

- The relation with the environment.
- Closeness to the realities of life, its cycles and the crucial phases that help us to understand it better.
- The consciousness of the value of things that comes from having lived close to their creation.
- Neighbourliness, acceptance and support.
- Cultural wealth: legends, sayings, songs, stories, traditional festivals.
- Knowledge gained from experience over time.

Perhaps this article may seem to suggest that Preescolar na Casa has the answers to rural challenges. It does not. What it does have, is a long-standing programme that brings education to remote and dispersed rural people by helping them to reflect, individually and collectively, in order to find their own answers. It helps them to abandon the role of victims and change themselves into people who can make a difference, social actors who work together to find answers and look for the best ways to put them into practice.

Up until now, rural development has been determined by outsiders. Through the programme, rural dwellers now analyse what they encounter and look for solutions. The ideas of Preescolar na Casa derive from the concept of supportive education. According to the definition elaborated by Antonio Gandoy, founder of the programme, education is understood as action that has the objectives of developing and perfecting a person's faculties, developing their capacities, adding to their knowledge and enabling them to devise values via learning and external influences. The point is to enable people to understand the realities of their lives, intervene in them and live in harmony with others and with nature.

Preescolar na Casa is against the concept of a non-challenging or conformist education of the person. Its concept is of a critical education that emancipates people so that – as the great Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire indicated – they don't simply have rights and responsibilities but are agents in the struggle to attain those rights and meet those responsibilities. That is our utopia.

Making the bet concrete

Discrimination against rural children in the 1970s meant that there was no access to preschool for those aged four to six years. This caused high school failure rates and precipitated the birth of Preescolar na Casa. As this article should have made clear, Preescolar na Casa chooses to concentrate on improving opportunities for young rural children for young children because, as UNICEF declares:

The early years should receive priority by governments, as expressed in laws, policies, programmes and resources. But the reality is that these children are not prioritised and this is a tragedy, as much for them as for their countries.

Preescolar na Casa knows that the environment of the child is critical for her or his development, that affection is indispensable for children's development, and that the family is where children spend the

majority of their time. So it does its work, not directly with children, but through the medium of their families. Our objective is to support families as the children's main educators, helping them to reflect on how they are performing their work, and thereby discover new ways of being educators who contribute to the harmonious and integrated development of their children.

Preescolar na Casa organises bi-weekly orientation meetings for parents, enabled and mediated by a programme professional (the guide or orientator). These meetings are based on the day to day experiences of the families, and by discussing these experiences between themselves and with the guidance of the orientator, the parents gain a better understanding of their children. This means that they can respond effectively to their children's needs. Parents are also encouraged to see each child as unique, as having particular needs, as an individual who reacts in specific and determined ways. They come to recognise children as being active, not passive, in their development. They recognise that it is through their responses and messages, and through the challenges and situations that they present to their children, that their children will be shaped and confirmed as autonomous people who learn through reflection, and are able to confront challenges and devise responses. Or, on the other hand, will simply be dependent and unable to contribute to change.

The orientation meetings are especially important given the isolation in which the families live. Parents value them because they meet with other people but – much more – because their children can be with children of their own age. The orientators consider

these meetings essential as much for the socialisation of the children as for the learning processes that the families go through. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to organise these inter-family meetings because of rural depopulation. This can mean that the orientators meet with just individual families and therefore have to work harder, travel further and incur higher costs.

In all aspects of the programme, the orientators are crucially important. Their attitudes, who they are, how they behave with the families, all show their belief in the families and that they are valued. Through this, the orientators are fundamentally important to the effectiveness of the programme.

Other means are also used. For example, the Encounter Rooms are especially important here because they are so effective in promoting meetings and energising the rural world. Encounter Rooms are spaces especially designed for encounters between adults and children, without the presence of the professional orientator. They are provided by the programme and launched by the orientators but the families have the responsibility of organising, operating and developing them. Preescolar na Casa supports them via its travelling games/toy library, lending toys and books to underline the importance of play and of reading in the lives of even the smallest children, and to deepen the emotional ties between them and their parents.

The impact of the programme

What does the programme contribute to the development of the rural world? In the field of

How the programme maintains contact

- Encounter Rooms.
- Bi-monthly orientation meetings for parents.
- A bi-monthly magazine.
- A library.
- A travelling games/toy library.
- Locally-generated materials.
- A weekly radio programme.
- A weekly television programme.
- Teletext.
- A website.

education, it is never easy to see a direct connection between action and effect. However, there are indications that the programme is effective. For example, it is evident that its operations in the rural environment, by taking advantage of what the environment has to offer geographically, culturally and within the families, help to restore a sense of the worth of the rural world. Here it is significantly different from some others: the professionals come to the families rather than the other way around.

Equally, it is clear that, from birth, children can perceive and internalise the value that those around them place on the rural environment and its culture. Changing this is helping to establish the foundation for the progressive revaluing of the rural environment.

To reinforce habits of reflection, reading, exchanging, listening, observation and communication on themes related to infancy, is to help adults see aspects of their own reality, personal just as much as social. To recognise the potential of parents, and increase their self-confidence and self-esteem so that they feel more capable of confronting their problems, not only contributes to the education of their children but also to positive changes in all the environments in which they are actors.

In conclusion, Preescolar na Casa is a contribution to the revitalisation of the rural environment because it works through people. And it is in people that the wealth of each community is concentrated. □

Taking advantage of what the environment has to offer



Spain: Preescolar na Casa project | photo: María Xosé Miranda Barros

Scotland: 'enjoying' the rural life in the Highlands of Scotland

Peter Lee



Scotland: Highland Preschool Services

This article shares the perceptions of an academic and researcher, who is concerned to ensure that adequate and appropriate services are available to poor rural children and their families. It sets out the realities of the rural world of Highland Scotland, highlighting the challenges that young children and their families face and focusing especially on the particular ways in which rural poverty impacts on everyday life. The project that he goes on to discuss, includes training parent volunteers to work with vulnerable families and support them through home visits, listening, helping with transport, shopping, childcare, running group work activities and helping families to use other services. The project generally aims to counter both rural poverty itself, and its effects on young children, partly through alliances of service providers. This approach demands the whole-hearted support and collaboration of the service providers, a strategy that is linked to 'Sure Start', a Scottish national programme with which the project is associated. A key feature of Sure Start is its insistence on generating maximum effectiveness through inter-agency cooperation.

The very term ‘rural’ may conjure up idyllic images, social cohesion and a good family life style but is better understood as a term which can hide diversity – in size, remoteness, economy, services, demographics and so on – while also obscuring the deprivation that exists within rural areas.

In the picturesque Highland Region of Scotland, the total land area is 26,484 square kilometres, a third of the landmass of the whole of Scotland; and it is inhabited by about 200,000 of Scotland’s population of just over 6 million. Of these, a little over half live in very remote areas; and there’s a population density of 8 persons per square kilometre in the Highland Region, compared to the Scottish average of around 70 per square kilometre.

All rural areas of Scotland have seen a gradual erosion of their social distinctiveness through changes in patterns of consumption, complex migration patterns, tourism, transport, mass media, employment and education. One major example is the dramatic shift in demographic trends and the growing age of the population. The most satisfactory dimensions of life quality in rural Scotland can be seen as access to scenic areas, the safety of the environment for bringing up children, and the health care facilities. By contrast dissatisfaction with rural living was strongest in terms of features of the rural economy. These factors confirm that the rural environment is strongest on the very features which the elderly have identified as essential to their quality of life, but weakest on the economic features that are more critical to families with young children and to younger people. Logically, these quality of life variables mean that rural areas could lose younger people and gain older residents. But the cold figures can be surprising. While the

population continues to get older, there are still just under 50,000 children living at home with their parent(s) in the Highlands.

Needs and services

In the context of provision of services for families and strategies for combating the impact of poverty and disadvantage in rural areas, we need to accept that families who live in rural areas face many of the same problems and difficulties faced by individuals, households and communities in urban Scotland. However, nearly 17 percent of rural families are dependent on income support from the Government and unemployment figures in the winter months are the highest in Scotland. Homelessness represents the most acute form of housing need with families headed by lone parents forming a bigger proportion of households applying as homeless or potentially homeless than the Scottish average. Against this, they have problems in accessing the range of services that they want and need, and that urban families have within easy reach.

In general, poverty and disadvantage within remote areas of Scotland is widespread: over half the families live on incomes below the Scottish average; and this is exacerbated when one remembers that the costs of living in rural areas are higher. However, families accept this and find ways of adjusting. Mauthner, McKee and Strell’s study (1999) of families living in rural Scotland reported that:

- parents accept the limitations on family life: lack of activities, limited transport, low employment opportunities, fewer professional services;
- parents felt that children were free and safe, had access to natural surroundings; communities

where everyone knew one another;

- parents placed a high value on parenthood, men and women could work flexible hours in order to care for their children; and
- parents (male) worked away from home most often and their employment was limited.

In this context, is the decline of patterns of social service provision a reflection of how rural residents choose to use those services that are available to them? In the local economy, the discussion of shopping is often conducted in terms of the growth of urban supermarkets which have forced village shops to close. In a discussion of service quality we need to ask whether, given the choice are ‘rural services’ are those that are sited in rural areas or those that rural residents use? And we also need to define quality. For the purposes of this short article I will define quality in rural service provision for families with young children as a level and standard of service which meets the needs, expectations or aspirations of the parents who use that service.

Family disadvantage in rural areas

A typology of family disadvantage.

In rural areas, this is very similar to the typology of family disadvantage in urban areas: alcohol abuse; child abuse; mental health problems; isolation; drug abuse; special needs; unemployment; stress etc. But in rural areas, there are three main factors that contribute to family disadvantage. First, families are deprived of resources because of low income levels and lack of access to good housing stock; second, there is a lack of health, education and social services; and third, families face high transport costs and the inaccessibility of jobs, services and facilities.

A fourth major and emerging factor is the retention of professional staff within rural areas and the problem of recruiting enough professionals to operate essential services.

The meaning of rural poverty.

While we can establish how many households in rural areas in Scotland are suffering from poverty, there is lack of clarity about what it actually means to be poor. Importantly, there is evidence that those who experience different kinds of deprivation, conceal their condition because of the lack of anonymity. In this way, serious social problems within families can be denied, attributed to a point in the past or constructed as a failure of the individual. And there is a similar reluctance to seek assistance. The 'Disadvantage in Rural Scotland' report (Shucksmith, 2000), for example, reported low usage of the welfare and benefits advisory service, and suggested that rural people were not well-informed and were reluctant to take up welfare benefits because of what has been termed a dominant rural ideology of self-reliance. In some cases, even calling the doctor is viewed as a last resort.

Understanding rural deprivation

Similar problems occur when trying to research deprivation in rural areas. Essentially, the 'normal' indicators of deprivation have different meanings in the urban and rural context. For example, there are indications that the reason there are so few young families claiming housing benefit within the rural area is the shortage of affordable, accessible private sector housing. This shortage has been described as the 'principal engine of social change in rural Britain' (Shucksmith, 2000), with house prices inflated by

urban people buying rural properties as second homes. The condition of properties in the private rented sector is also on average relatively poor and, if measurable, would be a better indicator of rural disadvantage than overcrowding. At the same time, the quality of life experienced within rural areas can depend on conditions at a very local level and, while linked to other areas, its impact may be felt by few families.

Overall, the picture is hardly neat and tidy, something that is also partly due to the fact that rural deprivation and poverty in Scotland tends to be the consequence of low paid, and self-employed, part-time and seasonal work rather than long-term unemployment. Those working in the countryside therefore 'survive economically in more diverse ways than city-based wage earners could ever understand' (Stern and Turbin, 1986). An example of this is overcoming the problem of the cost of a typical family food basket. Local shops are more expensive: the Scottish Poverty Information Unit (1999) reported rural food prices to be eight percent higher; and given that the cost of basic items consume a disproportionate share of household income, such price differentials also have a greater significance. One answer is using public transport (which is 13 percent more expensive than in urban areas) to reach the big supermarkets; another is to run a private car, an indicator of wealth in an urban area but often a necessity in rural terms.

Isolation, social exclusion or the lack of access to networks which could offer support and advice are also problems: Hooper (1996), working with rural lone-parents, for example, found social networks to be fairly limited and somewhat fragile.

From the perspective of health, there are widely, and officially acknowledged, variations in mortality and morbidity rates within the rural population. Research tends to reveal a complex picture which in some cases points to a 'healthier' rural environment and in other cases does not. Young male suicide rates, for example, have been consistently higher in the Highlands over the last twenty years compared to Scotland as a whole, with farmers the single largest occupational group at risk (Stark *et al.*, 2000). Poor diets have also been identified as a particular problem for remote communities such as those in the Western Isles (McKee, 2000). The opportunity to improve diets is hampered by high food prices, low income and (ironically) the limited availability of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The complexities of rural deprivation derive from a mix of factors that include: low income levels; lack of access to good affordable housing; lack of available health, education and social services provision; higher transport costs; inaccessibility of jobs, services and facilities; and the non-retention of professional staff within rural areas. But the combinations in which they are found, and the importance of each of these elements in each of the combinations that are found, suggests that differing approaches to families with young children need to be considered if we are to provide high quality services in remote local areas to vulnerable families.

Programmes

Due to recent policy initiatives in Scotland, there have been some expansion in early years education and childcare facilities. In general, however, the inhabitants of rural areas still have little access to affordable



childcare facilities, just as they are typically expected to travel further to access education and further education.

To meet the need, the Highland Preschool Service (HPS) is committed to the development of quality care and education in a wide range of early years groups, each of which respect the rights, responsibilities and needs of all children and their parents and carers. HPS

aims to develop, support and improve early years provision, promote high standards of development and learning through play, and encourage the personal development of staff and the parents working within their groups. HPS currently runs over 150 groups throughout the Highlands of Scotland, working in partnership with local authorities and other agencies. It has also developed a variety of approaches to delivering direct support to families, and elaborated an accredited training programme for staff and volunteers.

One example of its approach is the Family First programme. This was created to develop a high quality, flexible and responsive model of family support to families with young children, who were experiencing stress and difficulties at home. It's mission statement is clear:

Family First exists to provide a support service to young families in rural Highland, valuing the uniqueness of each individual family and helping

to build on its capacity to become independent and confident contributors to their local community.

Family First recruits local parents to work directly with local families. These parent volunteers are trained by HPS and Family First staff to work with vulnerable families and support them through home visits, listening, helping with transport, shopping, childcare, running group work activities and helping families to use other services. In this way the root causes of disadvantage, while not being eradicated, are being tackled through family empowerment.

The Family First programme is part of the Scottish Government's push to increase services to vulnerable young families under a policy programme entitled Sure Start. Sure Start is aimed at stimulating service provision for families with children 0-3 years of age and has four broad objectives:

- the improvement of children's social and emotional development;
- the improvement of children's health;
- the improvement of children's abilities to learn; and
- the reinforcement of families and communities.

In addition to the broad aims outlined in the Government's guidance to Local Authorities, service providers were encouraged to:

- provide stimulating environments for children 0-3;
- provide parents with opportunities to assist in their children's development;
- provide direct support for parents;
- promote self-esteem among families in greatest need; and
- increase parental involvement.

Conclusion

The word 'rural' will continue to conjure up idyllic images of a good family life style. But it is apparent that there are numerous instances of families living in disadvantage in rural areas. While programmes like HPS and Family First cannot possibly tackle the complicated roots of disadvantage in rural areas, they may be able to help alleviate the stresses and pressures on young families that deprivation has caused. □

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Colombia: playing to learn. An alternative for rural children

Alba Lucía Marín Rengifo



The author is a social worker who specialises in designing, planning and evaluating social projects; and Coordinator of the 'Programa de Infancia y Familia Rural' of the Municipality of Manizales-Caldas, that is operated by the Fundación para el Desarrollo Integral del Menor y la Familia (FESCO – the Foundation for the Integrated Development of the Minor and the Family). In this article she outlines the extreme problems faced by rural populations in Colombia, showing that rural communities have consequently lost the capacity to organise themselves and have lost their sense of belonging together. She goes on to discuss experiences with three interlinked strategies that have been devised for work with and around young children. The first promotes and maximises the potential of the environment of children to enhance young children's emotional and physical growth, and their socialisation with their peers. The second helps families to see children as people who have rights and responsibilities, people for whom they must provide the best possible physical and social development environments. The third enables local authorities to learn about childhood and to recognise the strategic significance of childhood for their own development.

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

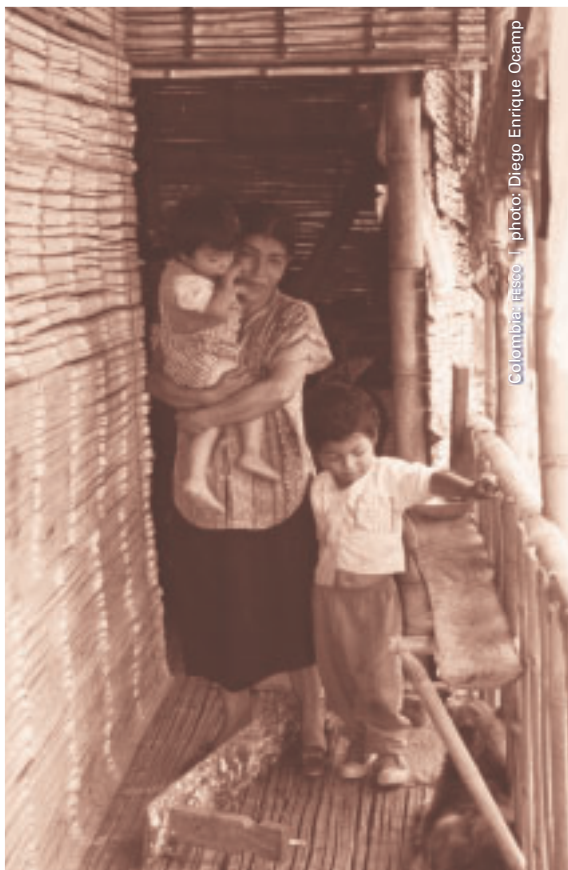
Clearly, peasant communities have been completely abandoned and the reconstruction of their social fabric and rural economies is unlikely in the short term. It is also clear that this context is – and will remain – detrimental to the socialisation and psychosocial development of children. Indeed it is 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 Ocampo

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) *PUND 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.

Venezuela: promoting active citizenship in rural children

Reina Melania Vargas de Ramos

The author is General Director of the Fundación las Iseletas (Fundaisletas), a non-profit organisation that developed the CECOFAIN project in the state of Anzoátegui, Venezuela. This programme focuses on the holistic development of young children via family participation. Within this, it has developed a response to the profound transformation that Venezuela and its political life is going through, and the impact of this on the rural world and especially on young rural children. Taking the long term view, it promotes active citizenship in children. To make this work, the project sets out to change the perceptions that adults have of children, and of the roles that society has assigned them; helps adults learn to listen to children and take into account what they suggest; nurtures the generic capacity to participate that children have; and provides the means and the opportunities necessary for children to participate.

Here in Venezuela, thinking in the long term, and reflecting on the profound transformation that our country and its political life are undoubtedly going through, citizenship is a central concept that is of growing relevance. In reflecting on this concept, I will start by trying to respond to three questions: what do we understand by citizenship? Why does it preoccupy us? and to what extent do we Venezuelans have or want it? I will then reflect on how, in its work, Centros Comunitarios de Orientación Familiar y Atención Infantil (CECOFAIN – Community Centres for parental orientation and child care) is promoting active citizenship in rural children.

What do we understand by citizenship and why does it preoccupy us? Here we want to refer to the definition that Adela Cortina offers:

*Citizenship is a relationship between an individual and a community, a relationship through which the individual feels her or himself to be a member of that community with full rights, and also feels a permanent loyalty to that community.**

José Mayora, the Venezuelan Sociologist, adds that:

Exercising citizenship means that towns don't just have inhabitants, they have citizens, people

who know that the quality of their life depends in considerable measure on what they do, on what they contribute to building the collective.

So, to be a citizen is to behave like someone who defines reality by what she or he does as a citizen. A citizen is not someone who hopes that others will build the reality that she or he would like to have.

In that sense, it is possible to affirm that, in practice, to be a citizen means enjoying the same rights as everyone else, but also means accepting responsibilities – whether governing or being governed. The key characteristic of the democratic

conception of citizenship is self determination on the part of the citizens themselves: they are agents of their own lives within a cultural/legal/value framework. In the same way, local, state and national governments have to function responsibly, must respond to the needs of society and, at the same time, account for what it has and has not done.

In practical terms, citizenship means participation in public life: it's a social status in which all citizens have the same rights, and in which conditions are equal for all.

However, in contemporary societies, freedom is relative. Equality before the law may be a reality but so are inequalities in access to, and availability of, resources. From this reality arise themes of inclusion and exclusion, and of the qualities or types of citizens depending on their social, economic, historic, cultural or ethnic positions.

These problems are not new, but they have assumed greater relevance over the last decades because of the rise in the numbers of new socio-economic minorities, by the fight for emancipation by minority groups, by threats to well-being and, in general, by threats to participation by citizens and by processes of social marginalization at the end of the 20th century.

Building citizenship in Venezuela

In Venezuela, there has been a strong cultural conditioning that limits active citizenship; a long tradition of hierarchy and centralisation, of passivity and the delegation of decisions. This is part of our colonial legacy and has translated itself into the nature of our institutions, institutions that express our deficits as citizens: we see them, and in them we

see ourselves. In this culture, there are three critically important deficits: in responsibility, confidence and participation. Yet these three attributes are fundamental if people are to stop delegating and make themselves into active agents of their own lives.

But, what can we do? How can we reconstruct that which we jointly share, through citizenship? In our opinion there are two key ways. The first is the most elementary, the simplest, the most routine: we have to discard the idea that our individual contributions are trivial. In the public spaces that we all share, there is a great deal that can be done by practical and responsible citizens. No contribution is trivial ... but we do have to relearn the value of the individual contribution in the collective effort.

The second way is through conscious and systematic education for citizenship. By that we mean, the express and explicit promotion of citizenship in all people, educating them and educating ourselves and each other, as much by what we do, as by organised and systematic education. It is from this perspective that Fundaisletas works in six rural communities in the State of Anzoátegui, creating learning spaces in which the capacity of people – including children – can be developed and unleashed, so that they can be agents of their own development through participation. That participation is learned, is built, is taught.

The need for change

Within the widespread crisis of poverty that our country is living through, it is the rural population that is most disadvantaged. The quality of life in the countryside is very precarious, as can be seen in the high child mortality and morbidity rates,

the continuing inadequacy of housing, the lack of most basic services, the dietary deficiencies and the poor communications. We haven't achieved a just distribution of land, fair access to credit or a reasonable level of modernisation; while the uneven distribution of income continues because labour is less well rewarded in the rural sector.

The potential of rural dwellers has not been sufficiently nurtured and focused, and that potential is not therefore available for local, regional and national development. Neither does education lead to a rational use of rural resources and the consequent big increase in the productivity of the rural labour force. The education that rural dwellers have received has not given them the resources that they need to stay in the rural environment, nor to improve their productivity: the difference between an educated rural individual and a non-educated individual is almost imperceptible.

In short, the world of rural Venezuelan children, their families and communities is of a world full of deprivation and despair. One of our biggest challenges is to overcome the scepticism of people who believe that things cannot improve for them, that there is no possibility of change, and that they must resign themselves to accepting life just as it is – a scepticism that is transmitted from one generation to another.

The task now is to invest in the necessary processes and create opportunities for participation: the most effective vehicle to bring about change is to replace waiting and resignation with participation in change.

To sow the seeds of citizenship through participation is a complex process that requires innovation and a



Adults can change their
perception of children



Venezuela: Fundasisetas | photo: Eddy Leon

change in practices. It is also an educational process because to educate properly is bring out in a person, all of the participative faculties that they are gifted with. In addition, the development of participative competencies invokes all aspects of education: knowledge; abilities and skills; attitudes and values.

Promoting participation from childhood

What does this mean when we work with children? The right of children to be citizens is recognised in

the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) promulgated by the United Nations in 1989. This document recognises, clearly and explicitly, the important roles that children play in society, and their capacity to participate in society and to enjoy defined civil and political rights that go much further than just their protection and other basic needs.

The CRC also established as fundamental the need to inform children of their rights so that they know them, understand them and can insist that they are met. Subsequent other documents stress the need to promote child participation and also that of parents and children, as a way of developing their sense of community responsibility and making citizenship a real experience for them.

In the specific case of children, to develop citizenship requires:

- that adults change their perceptions of children, and of the roles that society has assigned them. To do this is to recognise the generic capacity that children have for participating as active and committed citizens.
- That adults learn to listen to children and take into account their ideas and suggestions.
- That the children's generic capacity to participate be nurtured so that they can use it effectively – something that is best done through practising participation, applying the principle of learning by doing.
- That the means and the opportunities necessary for their participation be provided.

The children of rural Venezuela – and their parents and other members of their communities – have considerable constraints on them in terms of participation. It costs them a lot to offer their

opinions and to make proposals to others. Their levels of participation are low, being reduced to simply attending or participating in activities that are organised and directed by someone else. Given these realities, CECOFAIN works with children, their parents and other significant adults, to promote children's participative abilities and capacities. We do this through interactive and experiential learning (learning by doing), providing children with the means, the space and the opportunities to practise their right to participate.

This kind of learning facilitates children's accomplishments in the four dimensions of communication discussed earlier: knowledge; abilities and skills; attitudes; and values. At the same time, we work with their mothers and other significant adults, to ensure that institutional spaces in which they are developing – such as their homes and schools – are democratic structures that facilitate children's socialisation, make them feel accepted and understood, give them room to express their own feelings and emotions in their own way, encourage them to think and develop their own initiatives, and experiment to develop their competence and their self-esteem.

We facilitate learning experiences that develop children's ability to communicate among themselves and with adults. This means promoting their interests and skills so that, in small groups, they can progressively learn to discuss and agree plans for activities, set the rules and later tell the larger group what they have done. It is also important that they see that their words influence the conduct of other children or adults, or events that they are associated with.

These experiences also help children to learn and understand the values of justice and solidarity and the usefulness of respecting obligations that have been made, and norms and rules that have been agreed – without the need for supervision or punishment.

In the project, children have the opportunity to plan for the fulfilment of their wishes or objectives, and they understand that this is the best way for those to be attained. Planning allows children to express their interests, choose activities and material, take decisions, resolve difficulties, seek solutions to problems – and accept the limitations that sometimes arise. All of these actions facilitate the development of autonomy, self-expression, self-esteem and the appreciation of others and their needs, attitudes that are so necessary for a democratic conception of living together.

In a subsequent phase, we create spaces for participative consultation, in which children are asked about their views on matters that, directly or indirectly, concern them. This encourages them to think, to propose, to make judgements and to value the fact that there are channels open to them. Then, as they become more active, they move beyond thinking to acquire a greater commitment and a sense of co-responsibility. At this level, the questions demand greater involvement and are more about what they are going to do and how they are going to do it, rather than about what they think and, hypothetically, how they might take action. The activities or projects that were once in the hands of adults, are taken over progressively by the children themselves.

Gradually, the children acquire more maturity in their participation, developing their ability to organise communal activities, developing their own projects

and developing actions that will bring about changes in their families and communities.

But in all of this kind of work with children, it is very important to keep in mind that what they attempt must not be too abstract for them and must be achievable. Objectives must be within what they understand, and they must have sufficient information with which to express their opinions and take action.

Consolidating the transformation

As a result of the work we have done on developing participation, a group called ‘Vigías Comunitarios’ (Community Lookouts) has been formed. It is made up of adolescents and youngsters of 13 years and older. Here, they build themselves up as actors and agents in change: they relate well inter-personally; promote creativity; develop their social commitment; and acquire consciousness of their socio-economic realities, and of the transcendental importance of becoming leaders who can transform the conditions of their lives and those of their communities.

In working with them, our programme has a high level of training and community participation, structured around three components:

- personal development, strengthening their abilities and personal skills to work on behalf of the community;
- the knowledge, abilities and skills necessary to take on central roles in the community and perform them well; and
- studies and their continued development so they will be able to work productively as adults.

Our commitment

Our programme has only a short history. But our experiences make us cautiously optimistic about the strategies we have implemented to promote citizenship through participation in rural children and young people.

In contexts in which a large proportion of the population lives in poverty, as is the case of Venezuela where 70 percent belong to the lowest socio-economic sector, strengthening active citizenship, promoting the involvement of people in processes that affect them, is both a necessity and a means to resolve their problems.

Therefore, one of the biggest challenges of this century should be the social construction of citizenship. Teaching and learning is one of the best ways that teachers and social workers have, above all in their work with poor children, especially those of the rural sector. □

Note

* This definition by Adela Cortina, and the subsequent one by José Mayora, were formulated during the cycle of conferences called ‘Institutionality, Government and Society’ organised in June 1999 by the Fundación SENSa and the Industrial Chamber of the state of Lara, Venezuela.

Malaysia: stronger teachers, stronger children, stronger parents and stronger communities

Francis Xavier

The author is Project Director of Persatuan Guru Tadika (PGT – Association of Kindergarten Teachers) in Malaysia. In this article, he reflects on the rationale for the organisation's 'Growing up stronger' rural preschool project, discussing some of its key ideas and the challenges and concerns that stimulated them. PGT has been working to develop a network of preschools for the children of the Tamil Indian workers on the rubber and palm oil plantations of Malaysia since 1988. Most of these plantations are remote from the big cities and, before PGT became involved, the workers had little contact with the outside world and therefore lacked information and news; had limited access to services; and had few facilities with which to support the healthy and holistic development of their children.

PGT started with the idea of training six preschool teachers who were at that time operating separately. But it quickly saw that, not only was there a need for many more preschools and teachers but, much more important, they should be networked together to provide a structure for expansion. Today, that structure has become an organisation that extends over all of the eleven states of Peninsula Malaysia, reaching out to around 6,200 children in over 224 preschools. PGT's core strategy is to create and sustain a network of trained teachers, drawn from the communities, who work in partnership with parents, as they develop, energise and sustain rural preschools together. The point is to ensure the wide availability in isolated rural areas of quality early child development and education that is culturally and contextually

appropriate, and that uses local resources that are meaningful to young children.

The Malaysian Tamil Indians in the plantations were once unaware of the needs of their own young children in terms of early childcare, diet, health care, and education. However, over the years PGT, through its 'Growing up stronger' project, has changed the mindset of these parents. Now parents are more aware of the needs of their children and are keen to learn and participate in the early childcare development of their children.

Within the preschools, a major concern is to balance cultural considerations with the demands of Malaysian education which is highly competitive

and places high priority on school skills. To help PGT to get the balance right on this key issue, its project team made an extended visit to Tamil Nadu, India, in order to revive and reinforce their understanding of the richness and dynamism of Tamil Nadu's cultural history, and to develop their skills in fields such as cultural transmission through the performing arts. Going further, PGT has hired a Tamil colleague from India for a two-year period to give special attention to the cultural component.

Thoroughness such as this is evident throughout the project, for example in the Government-accredited training of the teachers. This is to a regular schedule. It is organised at district level – where the training focuses on matters identified by teachers as needing

special attention, syllabuses and activities; regional level – where training focuses on community development skills and activities such as backyard gardening and animal husbandry to supplement their incomes; and national level – where training is about teaching skills. A more recent element in the training brings teachers into contact with information and communication technology.

This preparation equips teachers not just to deliver the curriculum successfully and to ensure that the preschools play their part in transmitting Tamil culture, but also to support parents as children's first educators. This means much more than just helping parents to develop their skills and qualities in early childhood care and development: it extends to enabling parents to fully participate in all aspects of the preschools. As a result, Parent Support Groups (parent/teacher committees) now operate at estate level; and District Committees of parents operate at a higher level. These entities are strong and active forces that hold the programme accountable for meeting local needs, promote the well-being of children, and help to find sponsors to contribute to the preschools financially or with resources.

Teachers' rapport with parents is a prerequisite to their work; and by effectively promoting the interests of parents, the project has managed to build a very large constituency: the strong link with parents is a main reason why PGT has been disseminated so widely despite its limited resources. To sustain, strengthen and widen this constituency, PGT puts out a newsletter four times a year. This has proved very effective in terms of communicating throughout the national network of preschool teachers, to parents, and to

other NGO's. Parents contribute to the content of the newsletter, something that helps make it important as a device for creating a thorough understanding among its membership, as well as among the public, about the work that PGT is doing and why it is doing it.

The teaching materials that PGT has developed for the children are designed to stimulate proactive learning and are backed up by highly participative activities. Typically, children enter an environment that immerses them in the topic that they are investigating and learning about. The walls may be covered by pictures and artefacts, the room crowded with games and toys and other devices to engage their attention. Children can move from activity to activity, often choosing what they will do next and for how long. Their teachers know their interests and work with these. But they also encourage children to try new things, develop other abilities and interests, fulfil their potential. While independent and personal work is encouraged, so is group work. Music, art and performance feature strongly; and the project takes learning through fun and play very seriously.

Curriculum materials are created from local resources and opportunities, reflect local realities, and replace more generic, outside materials. For example, children learn that 'G' is for Goat (an animal that they play with/keep as pets) rather than for Grapes (something that is not found in their environment). Overall, the materials themselves have evolved into well-respected products that have been accepted by the national library in Kuala Lumpur as resource materials. It has also registered PGT as a book publisher. PGT owns the copyright of its materials and sells them – especially to urban private preschools – to generate income.



Malaysia: Growing up Stronger project | photo: Puspa Krishnan

Physical environments should immerse children in what they are exploring

Outcomes

Children from the 'Growing up stronger' project do better and obtain better results compared to those who have not attended the preschools – and their parents say they enjoy going to school. Some children from these rural settings have obtained better results than their peers in well-off urban settings, taking on roles as head students, class monitors and library prefects, and performing well in sports. Once such children were considered shy with inferiority complexes but now they demonstrate leadership skills, and are more motivated to participate in classroom and extra-curricular activities, thereby reflecting an all-round improved mental and physical development.

For their part, parents have also become more interested in their children's education – but, at least as important, they are adjusting their work patterns to meet the needs of their children. Once they might have disappeared at 5.30 am to start on the two jobs they had, returning after dark. Now they are finding ways to ensure that they have more time with their children. Via the Parents Support Groups,

they also work with the teachers on health awareness campaigns, women/mothers/fathers days, harvest festivals and children's day events. And above all, they are convinced of the need to sustain their preschools, organising local fund-raising activities to supplement and upgrade the resource centre, and fund teachers' salaries and equipment. Beyond this, they are aware that the Government has to play a positive role in reaching out to the children in the plantations, and are lobbying for the Government to fund preschool programmes for all children. The increasing strength of the Parents Support Groups is beginning to produce results.

Similarly the teachers, the majority of whom are young, are also more committed to early childhood care and education and to the children. With the training they have received, they have gained a new sense of self-confidence and are able to communicate more effectively with the children, parents and the community – even to estate managers. Despite receiving low wages compared to urban and Government preschool teachers, they are more committed to their profession and to providing community services, sometimes outperforming local leaders in the community. On some estates, their wages have been increased to acknowledge the significant roles they are playing.

Ensuring sustainability

The PGT preschools are a model of what can be achieved on small budgets, and on the proceeds of local fund-raising efforts. But to remain viable, PGT is soliciting public investment in the preschools to complement the more consistent contributions that

it has secured from the estates to meet the costs of maintaining infrastructure (playgrounds, premises, latrines, and other basic amenities). The need now is for structural support for the teachers' salaries and teaching materials from local and national Government. To achieve this, it is working with elected representatives, inviting them to visit its preschools, and take part in its seminars and training sessions. Interest is strong and the need for preschool provision

is recognised. Its lobbying activities also extend to the Ministry of Rural Development and include the Department of Social Welfare and Ministry of Education. As a result, the Government is aware of the importance of preschool facilities in rural areas. Now PGT is awaiting a policy decision to fund the work. Here it faces a major challenge: there is no precedent in Malaysia for a 'real' NGO to emerge from civil society and be eligible for Government investment. □

How children see things

It's so important to be aware of how children see things so you can understand children better. We encourage creativity in the children, and we give them the time and means to express themselves – even though this doesn't really fit into the very competitive Malaysian education system.

One of our schools had some VIP visitors a little while ago and naturally all the teachers were very anxious to impress them with what the children were doing. In one room, the VIP's were fascinated to see the amount of imagination and observation that the children were putting into drawing and painting. They particularly liked the work of one boy and watched as he drew a chicken and then painted it in beautiful glowing colours.

But then, to the horror of everyone, he suddenly stuck his pencil through the eye of the bird making a hole. Once we got over the shock, we wanted to know why he had done this. I visited his home, just casually. He was very pleased to see me, and showed me everything – including his pride and joy, his pet chicken. They were very close and he hugged it and played with it. And then I saw that the bird was blind in one eye.

I wonder what the VIPs made of his behaviour – and I wonder what we might have made of it too, if I hadn't visited him in his home.

The lesson for us all was that his creativity was accurately expressing reality as he saw it. This is one reason for encouraging children to be creative: it can give us insights into who children are, how they see the world, how they think, and so on. But we go further than that in the 'Growing up stronger' project: we believe that creativity is anyway a very important element in holistic early childhood development.

Small but valuable lessons: insights from the Effectiveness Initiative

Leonardo Yáñez

The author was Coordinator of the Foundation's Effectiveness Initiative (EI) for three years before moving to his present post in the Latin American Desk in the Foundation's Department of Programme Development and Management. The EI is a five year, in-depth, qualitative look at what makes early childhood development (ECD) programmes work for the people who take part in them, and for the communities that are intended to be enriched by them. Starting in 1999, it involves 10 diverse projects operating in a range of diverse settings. Most of the projects have now finished the research stage and are moving into dissemination of their results. This feature reviews some of the EI's insights into why certain early childhood development (ECD) projects in rural areas work. The author points out that, set against the backdrop of harsh rural poverty, a good ECD programme has to offer much more than good childcare in order to attract and hold people; and that very often it is the small elements in a programme that prove to be important in helping it to achieve success. More information about the EI is available on the Foundation's website: www.bernardvanleer.org

Most of the programmes participating in the EI operate in rural settings; and the observations that follow are drawn from rural projects in India, the Philippines, Mozambique, Colombia and Honduras. Essentially, the EI project has shown that these projects shared many common, similar or parallel characteristics. These can be grouped under the following five headings.

1. Creating a sense of community to support, *inter alia*, the development of young children.
2. Visibility: making sure that young children are noticed.
3. Mediation: enabling access to resources and power to help generate what young children need.
4. Consolidating ECD project operations.
5. Keeping everyone on board: participation in change by those concerned with the well-being of young children.

Creating a sense of community

Most rural communities are dispersed and many are remote. This means that families and communities do not necessarily relate to service providers and the centres of power collectively, but rather on an individual basis. As a result, their prospects of bringing about change are limited, more so where local cultures have been weakened or lost. To counter this, ECD projects have created an overarching identity for communities that binds them together, as they have worked to bring communities together to support the holistic development of their children. These more cohesive units now have a greater impact in securing services and bettering the welfare of their members.

For example, the Promesa project in Colombia used radio communication to enable scattered villages to establish immediate contact with each other, and to share information in a matter of minutes. These isolated hamlets are spread along the undeveloped Pacific coast. But, initially centred on malaria diagnosis and prevention and other health-related information, communication like this melded them into a strong community.

On the opposite and distant shore of the same ocean, the Mt. Pinatubo project in the Philippines used participatory tools to help the Aeta people to rebuild their history, following a severe volcanic eruption that had forced them to relocate their lives in new lands. Through a programme that included making family albums, the Aetas also gained a new perspective

of themselves as a people living through changing realities, thereby cementing their coherence as a cultural group.

The union for poor self-employed women (SEWA) in Ahmedabad, India, provides another example. The organisation of the women in the different units of the union creates a sense of belonging and power to access the benefits of the larger society. SEWA acts as the umbrella under which a sense of community identity is created among otherwise disperse and isolated poor working women.

Visibility: being noticed

One distinctive feature of extreme poverty is invisibility: nobody in the centres of power and decision-making seems to be aware of the poorest people and it is as if they do not exist. This is particularly true in rural settings: because access to such places and to the people who inhabit them is so difficult, it is all too easy for public servants and planners to overlook them when making decisions and designing policies and programmes. One of the benefits of ECD programmes in rural settings derives from their capacity to identify inhabitants and to make their needs visible. In itself, this can mobilise other actors.

Again, the Promesa project offers a good illustration. Working with the implementing organisation CINDE, Promesa was able to provide information about the population and its needs, and provide the necessary coordination to enable flying doctors, among other agencies and organisations, to plan their contribution to a rural health and emergency programme.

Further north, in Honduras, the Madres Guías project has ensured that, no matter how remote the populations and the children with whom it works, vital statistical information about them reaches the capital city and is included in the national statistics. This means that services and assistance can be provided.

Mediation: enabling access to resources and power

In addition to creating community identity and ensuring visibility, mediation by projects can also help to ensure that rural communities have access to services and can influence policies.

For instance, the poor women that constitute SEWA in Gujarat, India, had no direct access to politicians and other public servants. However, the project could speak both the language of the community and that of the bureaucracy. Highlighting the holistic environment of a child in the poor villages of India and relating this to the statistics and rules that define the national policies of a nation, energised the synergy between public policies and the social programmes that are now directed to these people. As a result, 35 high level professionals of SEWA enabled the transfer of resources to about half a million affiliates, as SEWA itself continued to acquire its organisational capacity.

In southern Africa, CDF in Mozambique acts as a mediator between isolated communities and the centres where resources are; and also between these communities and a Government that has been unable to reach them. It does this by acting as a translator or interface, feeding village conditions and needs into networks it has developed and cultivated in main cities.

Consolidating project operations

Coherence between the planning and monitoring elements of rural projects on the one hand, and their operational elements on the other, is essential to sustain effectiveness.

The operations of the CCF project in Honduras, for instance, are overseen by central offices in Tegucigalpa, and a strict line of command and authority is maintained with the peripheral units spread across the country. At first sight, this degree of apparent verticality and strict adherence to the rules, could seem troubling. However, once inside the project and in contact with the different stakeholders, the benefits of a structured set of information, procedures and mechanisms for decision-making at local level becomes apparent.

Interestingly, although a good percentage of the population is still non-literate, they all respect what is in writing; and the systematic use of the written language in this programme therefore helps circumvent the restraints and isolation of these rural settings. For example, the handbook for the implementation of the curriculum for early childhood development and resilience is a quality publication that contains everything that each Madre Guía (Guiding Mother) must know in order to provide proper advice and support to 'her families'. She always carries it with her and, in case of any doubt, she will go straight to the book. There is such confidence in this book that there is no record of anyone challenging its authority.

The structure of the project is so solid that, in a region where the (false) stereotype is of indifference to time and a certain laxity in fulfilling responsibilities, the

project functions effectively and efficiently. And this level of performance can have unforeseen advantages: when hurricane Mitch tore through Central America, the distribution of external aid was exemplary in the areas where the project was operating. This was because the strength and coherence of the project's structure and procedures extended right through to the Madres Guías and their commitment to, and punctuality in, maintaining their family visits.

Words such as 'mechanistic' might come to mind in reading about this project. But the word that actually reflects its nature and feel is 'acompañamiento'. This signifies the human and technical support provided by the project to the Madres Guías; and the sense that the Madres Guías have that all the people who together constitute the project are with them as they carry out their distant work. It is a word that recurs in relation to many of the projects participating in the EI.

Keeping everyone on board: participation in change

The European rural context has been defined by Rui d'Espiney (see page 6) as a process of ruptures and changes. He points out that many rural dwellers are excluded from this process, and that very often the ruptures and changes are brought about by external forces. That, in turn, makes it impossible to keep the traditional relationships between the rural economy and its cultural traditions and institutions. In contrast, most of the projects participating in the EI demonstrated a capacity to include family and community members in the planning of change and the processes by which change is accomplished. All that the rural dwellers collectively needed to define, as a group, the future of their children, their families and

their houses, was relevant information, and formal and informal spaces for reflection. Four cases can illustrate this point:

In India, the SEWA crèches are organised as cooperatives and this promotes the active participation of the caregivers. In the Philippines, processes of active learning and participation include looking at the past to build the present and the future. In Colombia, the parents and promoters are responsible not only for planning the work with the children but also for other decisions related to the community. In Honduras, the programme is managed by the Parents' Associations – associations that have a steadily growing proportion of female members.

Building trust and noting the results

Finally, while these five aspects of good practice have been observed in many rural sites, observing the impact of the programmes on the children is both the alpha and omega of the effectiveness of a programme. Enhancing the chances of young children is a very important motivation to create community, to promote involvement in proactive participation, and to make yourselves visible to the larger public audience and thereby affect policy-making and the programmes that planners devise. Programmes can be the mediators between the rural communities and service providers, and promote opportunities through the building of effective and appropriate methodological approaches based on locally available capacities. But it is when people can see the impact on their own children and accept it as good and desirable, that the whole process is assessed as successful and effective. Paraphrasing a Madre Guía's own words:

You can do many things to help the families raise their children, but it is when they see that their children speak more and are not afraid of visitors, that they enjoy being with other children; when they see their children put on some healthy weight and overcome illness, that is when they really believe in the project and invest more energy.

In the end, it is results that builds trust in a programme, in its operations and in its promoters. Given that parents and caregivers are the most relevant agents of change, building trust in a programme means building the self-confidence of the caregivers as the promoters of early childhood.

Although the simple benefits of daycare are very often acceptable in themselves by urban dwellers, for the rural family this is not enough most of the time: amid the particular harshness of rural poverty, the isolation, the scarcity of services and resources, and the need to survive that characterises the vulnerable rural family, a good programme has to do much more to attract and hold people. And when it does this well, the results can be spectacular. An example makes this clear. It was Hurricane Mitch which made the Madres Guías programme in Honduras famous. This was because it was so well-established in the communities and so organised and efficient in its operations, that it was uniquely able to make sure that relief efforts reached the remote and scattered communities in which it operates. In the same way, such was SEWA's effectiveness in responding to a cycle of disasters in Ahmedabad (a drought, a flood, an earthquake and a religious massacre) that its membership subsequently leapt from 300,000 to 500,000. □