



The Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development

TELLING THEIR STORY: PERCEPTIONS FROM TWO RURAL COMMUNITIES IN BOLIVIA

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Bolivia is a land-locked country in the heart of South America, with a rich multi-cultural heritage. There are more than 32 ethnic groups, some of which consist of millions of people (2,200,000 Quechuas), and other groups which comprise up to 4% of the population (the Zamuco and Mataco living in the southern sections of Bolivia).¹ The land is divided politically into nine Departamentos or States, and is distributed in three geographical zones: high plateau, valleys, and tropics.

It is primarily a Catholic country, with a mixture of European, mestizo, and indigenous populations; Aymara, Quechua, Guaraní are the three main indigenous populations which have maintained their ancestral traditions, although the Spanish colonial influence is evident in many of their ceremonies. For example, in the Aymara culture, when a boy or girl turns two years old, a hair cutting ritual is carried out called *rutucha*. The *rutucha* coincides with the closing of the soft spot on the child's head. The *rutucha* is also considered a moment when the child is presented to the society at large. This ancestral indigenous tradition has incorporated the Christian baptism, reflecting the influence of colonial traditions.

With a total population of 6,420,792 and 1,098,000 square kilometers of land, Bolivia is considered a sparsely populated country: 5.8 people per square kilometer, of which 58% live in the urban areas and 42% live in rural areas.² The population is made up primarily of young people; 42% of the population is under 15 years of age. The population of children under 6 years of age is 1,319,096, and the number of girls is slightly higher than that of boys, 667,716 and 651,380 respectively.³

The Political and Economic Situation

The political situation within the past 12 years has progressed from being a dictatorial to a democratic government. Recent political reforms and new laws have caused political unrest, as evidenced by the many strikes carried out and roadblocks set up during the past two years.

Economically it is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, with a per capita income of 690 US Dollars.⁴ Within the past 15 years, the inflation rate has gone down from 47% in 1980 to 10% in 1992.⁵

Health and Nutritional Status of Women and Children

The health status of infants has improved over the past few years, but it still remains poor. The mortality rate for children under 5 years of age is greater in Bolivia than in other Andean Countries. The nutritional status of girls differs from that of boys, especially in the rural area. According to the information obtained on the prevalence of malnutrition for children under the age of 5 in the Department of La Paz for 1992, for girls it was 25.5% and for boys it was 21%.⁶

The mortality of women in childbirth is very high—480 for every 100,000 live births. Women with no schooling have 6.1 children as compared to women that have attended secondary school or higher, who have 2.9 children.

How Do Treatment and Perception of Children Between 0–6 Years of Age Differ by Gender and Culture?

For the purpose of this study, *community* is defined as a group of families served by the same municipality and health center. The two communities selected were El Chaco and Quilloma. Plan International, an international, non-governmental organization already working in both villages, was asked to participate in the gathering of information.

El Chaco is located at approximately 2500 meters above sea level in the Province of Oropeza, Department of Chuquisaca. Quechua is the primary language spoken, although many people are bilingual (Quechua/Spanish). The province of Oropeza extends over a 3943-square-kilometer surface, with a population density of 44.71 per square kilometer. The high density is because the province includes the city of Sucre, the capital of Bolivia.

Located in the middle of the *Altiplano* (High Planes) at 3959 meters above sea level, Quilloma is an Aymara-speaking community of over 200 families. It is one of the communities in the Province of Pacajes, Department of La Paz. It extends across approximately 130,295 square kilometers, with a population density of 4.1 per square kilometer. The study represents 71 households, which are sponsored by Plan International-Altiplano.

In Preparation for the Collection of Data

Prior to the collection of data, personnel from Plan International in Sucre and in La Paz visited the communities to pave the way for future visits. They spoke to the *Dirigente* or community leader and made the necessary arrangements to assure maximum participation. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday were selected, since they were days when people would normally meet, and this would allow the greatest number of community members to participate in the study.

To create a support team during the PLA process, the technical personnel of Plan International in Sucre and in La Paz participated in planning/training meetings. During these meetings the objectives, methodology, and forms were discussed. Some of the support team had experience with *participatory diagnosis*, but their experience was limited to focus groups and group dynamics. Since the languages spoken in the selected sites were Quechua and Aymara, two members from each of the Plan offices were designated as translators. For the majority of the activities, a translator was present, so that the researcher could help get the activity started. However, once the activities were under way, either a community member or Plan staff member took over, and the activity was carried out primarily in the native language.

The Collection of Data

■ EL CHACO

El Chaco is a community with approximately 110 families living within a 10-mile radius. The majority are farmers; a few are tradespeople. Ninety-five families were represented in the study, all of whom are sponsored by Plan International Sucre.

Most of the diagramming of the instruments was done on a cement basketball court. When the heat got too intense for everyone, the instruments were drawn on chart paper and/or indoors on the floor.

To initiate participation and explain the purpose of the following three days, the community members were asked to tell *The Chaco Story* so that it could be shared with others and so they could use the information collected to plan better programs for young children.

Three groups were formed by the leader of El Chaco; each group participated in different activities throughout the three days. The only activity in which all of the groups were present was for the mapping of the community.

■ QUILLOMA

Two days were dedicated to the collection of data with the community. The first day all of the community representatives chose to participate in all of the activities. During the second day, four groups were formed, with each group carrying out two sets of activities. A cement playground in the elementary school was used to draw most of the instruments. Due to a thunderstorm on the second day of the study, some of the activities were carried out inside the elementary school classroom.

Results

■ EDUCATION

Mothers' education appears to have a positive effect on the education of both boys and girls of a community. In El Chaco, where more mothers are educated than in Quilloma, a larger percentage of boys and girls are in Early Childhood Education programmes.

The role of mothers is also important in the education and general development of boys and girls. Mothers from El Chaco teach education concepts to girls more than fathers do. In Quilloma, mothers teach education concepts to girls but not to boys. Thus having an educated mother will probably improve the education level of girls. This finding was shared with the community and their response was: "The education is probably in the hands of the mothers, it is important to think of this, and especially for women." Even though both communities indicated that education was important for boys and girls, differences were encountered when information was gathered using a variety of techniques. "Boys and girls both need education," said the community of El Chaco. But when asked "What are boys and girls like?", they mentioned study-related aspects for boys more than for girls. When asked how they praise boys and girls, the reply for boys was that they tell them, "You need to study; and know what we know, you need to be better than others." The response for a girl was in relation to herself. No incentive for improvement or competition was given, "You do your homework well, you will learn a lot."

In Quilloma, where many more boys than girls (3:1) are enrolled in ECE programs, all children are praised for going to school. However, girls are praised by their mothers and fathers, boys are praised by their mothers, fathers, and teachers. The way they are praised also differs. Girls are told "congratulations." Boys on the other hand are told "congratulations," and they are given money.

■ HEALTH

Health issues were raised in relation to who teaches them, and how boys and girls grow to be healthy.

In El Chaco for example, during the final meeting, when information on the prevalence of malnourishment in boys was presented, one mother indicated that "boys are weaker than girls. Even though more attention is given to the boys, they get sick more." In contrast, "even though girls are sprawled on the floor they don't get sick." When this information was crossed with data obtained from what boys and girls need to know, the only thing girls needed to know more about was being clean. During the meeting in which data was returned to the community, people indicated "It is good that we are now aware; by talking between women and men and the community leader, we will find a solution."

It is interesting to note that in Quilloma, the father teaches girls and boys about personal hygiene, while the mother teaches aspects related to being healthy (eating). In order to help boys and girls to be both clean and healthy, both the mother and the father need to participate in training children.

During future meetings held with the community, Plan International-Altiplano will present the results of this study to initiate a joint planning process.

■ CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY

Who boys and girls perceive themselves to be is influenced by their relationship with others. A girl who sees that her brother is given money and congratulated not only by her mother and father, but by teachers as well, may tend to feel that education is not rewarding for her when she only gets congratulated. Later on, will they also be careless, playful, healthy, and behave inappropriately?

Use of PLA for Programming Purposes and in Other Areas

The data obtained through the PLA techniques provides information in a way that can be used by different institutions and the community for programming purposes. The results obtained can determine what types of actions are included in a project. Will the actions be within one single sector, or cross health, education, and other sectors?

If training is one of the strategies in a project, who will be the participants, (i.e. fathers, mothers, both)? What content will be taught?

What are the community's perceptions? Do they place value on education, or more on their livestock and property? As one community person in El Chaco said: "We think more about our property, about our lots, and not about education. It is time to change."

The active and true participation of the community facilitates the ownership of both the problems and solutions. When telling their own story, people reveal their problems, and solutions emerge. This is more effective than having someone come in to tell them what they need to know or do.

In Bolivia, this methodology will be extended into other areas. One of them will be a Plan International project working with adolescent street children. "We will use it to prioritize the problems confronting children and adolescents; and in vocational orientation, so that they can identify their abilities and possible professions."

The implementation of this study using PLA techniques has provided many people with the opportunity to tell their story about how boys and girls develop in their community, and opened many eyes as to what can and needs to be done to improve the lives of children 0–6 years of age!

Endnotes

¹ IV Conferencia Mundial Sobre la Mujer, Beijing 1995: Acción para la igualdad, el desarrollo y la paz, Foro Alternativo de ONGÖS *Situación de la mujer en Bolivia: 1976-1994. Una Protesta con Propuesta*. Bolivia, 1995.

² República de Bolivia. Ministerio de Planeamiento y Coordinación.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ República de Bolivia. *Ministerio de Desarrollo Humano. Mapa de Pobreza--Una guía para la acción social*. La Paz, UDAPSO, INE, UPP, UDAPE, 1992.

⁵ UNICEF, 1994, *Ibid.*

⁶ Instituto nacional de Estadísticas, Encuesta de Seguimiento del Consumo Alimentario (ESCA) de 1991. La Paz, 1992.

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