

From empowerment to ownership – a transition process

Niños Refugiados del Mundo (NRM)¹ – Asociación de Promotores de Educación Inicial Bilingüe Maya–Ixil (APEDIBIMI)²

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By 1992 the Bernard van Leer Foundation had only two partnerships in Guatemala, and the organisation was therefore seeking to expand its portfolio in the country to increase its effectivity and impact. That's why on a mission to Guatemala that same year I visited the project 'Jardines Infantiles' (Children's Playschools) in Nebaj, initiated by the French organisation Enfants Refugiés du Monde in 1987. Ms Nicole Dagnino, Executive Director, who accompanied me on that visit, explained that NRM's mission is to support refugee families and children. The organisation operated in countries going through conflict situations or civil war, providing its target group with access to health and education services. In Guatemala NRM focused on the indigenous Ixil population in the Department of Quiché, as the Ixil had suffered most from the long, brutal civil war in the country. By 1992 NRM operated two model centres, one in the Las Violetas neighbourhood, close to the municipality of Nebaj, and the other in the village of Salquil Grande. These centres offered information, advice and support to the parents of children aged 3–6 years with regard to their development. The immediate goals of the pilot project were to train young Ixil *promotores* in child development theories; to develop an adequate preschool curriculum; and to open additional preschools in and around Nebaj. The ultimate goals were to have the training of the *promotores* and the curriculum of the preschools recognised by the Guatemalan Ministry of Education and to convince the education authorities and the Ministry to recognise the programme and assume full responsibility for the operations, including the payment of the *promotores*.

NRM had an administrative office located in Guatemala City and a small office and field staff in Nebaj. A start had been made in recruiting young Ixil *promotores*, who were trained and supervised by predominantly European staff. These European 'volunteers' stayed for only a limited time in the programme and were supported by a few Guatemalan staff with mainly administrative and low-level support responsibilities.

The goals of NRM's Jardines Infantiles project and the target group (the indigenous population) did fit the goals and mission of the Bernard van Leer Foundation of that decade. I discussed at length with Nicole Dagnino: the programme design; how she envisioned it should develop; the strategy for convincing – in the longer run – the

Ministry of Education to recognise the Jardines Infantiles; and plans to secure investment needed for scaling-up the approach and methodologies. We also discussed what NRM needed in terms of financial and technical resources to broaden the pilot project and achieve the longer-term goals.

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After thorough discussions in the Foundation, NRM was invited to submit a three-year proposal for funding and technical support for the programme in Nebaj. The central aim would be the development of a good-quality preschool programme that would cater to the needs of the indigenous population in the Ixil region, with the potential to be scaled up by the Guatemalan Government. However, the Foundation stipulated the following conditions:

- 1 The Foundation would commit funding for the operations in Guatemala executed by NRM, but would not cover travel and lodging costs for NRM volunteer staff from Europe. Our advice was to identify and hire Guatemalan professionals willing to train the *promotores*.
- 2 The Foundation's support would prioritise strengthening the skills of the indigenous *promotores* (the future teachers), so that they could support the development of a suitable curriculum and educational materials, become the cornerstones of the programme, and represent the voice of the indigenous parents and communities.
- 3 Although the final goal would be the adoption of the programme by the Guatemalan Government (specifically the Ministry of Education), an intermediary goal should be to transfer the overall responsibility for the programme – once it had become sufficiently mature and consolidated – from NRM to a national Guatemalan organisation.

At the end of 1992 the first three-year grant for the Jardines Infantiles project was approved by the Foundation, followed by three grant extensions. In total, Foundation support for the programme covered the period 1992 to 2004. Monitoring was done by the Foundation by analysing progress reports submitted by NRM, frequent monitoring visits, and strategy discussions that took place in Guatemala and Paris.

It was a slow process but over time NRM succeeded in training some 40 young adults as *Promotores Bilingüe* (bilingual preschool teachers) and opening 20 preschools in the Quiché Department. Interestingly, the majority of the *promotores* were male, indicating that, in the cultural traditions and views of the Ixil, working with young children was not exclusively a task for women. In 1998, the training of the *promotores* by NRM was recognised and certified by a Teacher Training College and two and a half years later the Ministry of Education extended the official title of *Educadores* (teachers) to the *promotores*. This meant that the certified *promotores* qualified for the newly created post of bilingual preschool teacher, with the major advantage that their position as teacher was secured (in the Jardines Infantiles preschools where they were already working!) and that they were entitled to a salary paid by the government.

While the training process was taking place, the Ixil trainees organised themselves and formed the Asociación de Promotores de Educación Inicial Bilingüe Maya Ixil (APEDIBIMI).³ This association was legally registered as an independent agency in 1998. Following this, initial discussions started between the three stakeholders to prepare for the handover of all responsibilities for the Jardines Infantiles programme from NRM to APEDIBIMI. Meanwhile, in its third grant to NRM the Foundation included funds to be administered directly by APEDIBIMI and to be used to

purchase motorcycles and other items for the *promotores*, so that the association could gain experience and build capacity to execute programmes independently from NRM. APEDIBIMI was directly accountable for the use of those funds. Furthermore, in 2001 the Foundation made funds available through a planning grant directly to APEDIBIMI to enable the agency, with the help of consultants, to develop its organisational structure, strengthen its executive capacity, and formulate its mission and strategic plan. A *Junta Directiva* (Management Board) was established, headed by Benito Terraza, the first Director of APEDIBIMI, who was supported by two other core staff, Sebastiana Ceto and Magdalena Pérez (who now form the current leadership).⁴ Meanwhile, APEDIBIMI assumed increasing responsibility for other aspects of the programme, such as organising the parent committees in the villages and building preschools with community support.

In 2000, the association succeeded in buying a piece of land in Nebaj with funds raised by its members; in 2002, the association secured funding from Spanish agencies to construct a building that houses APEDIBIMI's headquarters and its Training Centre (the *Centro de Capacitación APEDIBIMI*), including a dormitory for trainees.

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When discussing the fourth grant to NRM (2001–2004), it became increasingly obvious that the most logical next step was to initiate the process of transferring responsibility for the programme from NRM to APEDIBIMI. However, tensions between the two parties had increased as the NRM team was not fully convinced that APEDIBIMI was ready and able to take on all the responsibilities of the programme, while APEDIBIMI felt that the association and its leadership were kept out of the decision-making processes and not taken seriously by NRM staff. Given this situation, I looked for a way to structure the ongoing discussion and negotiations between the two agencies, of which the outcome had to be a 'peaceful and organised' transfer of responsibilities. This was achieved by inviting an 'outsider', Mr Lair Espinosa, to lead this process. I assigned him the task of organising a series of consultation meetings between NRM and APEDIBIMI in order to prepare for the transfer; I was at times included in these as a representative of the Foundation. Lair Espinosa, of Mexican nationality and residing in Guatemala, is a medical doctor by professional training, with broad international experience, but his main interest and experience lie in the processes of social change and capacity building in civil society. Lair Espinosa had a good reputation as mediator, he had previously even undertaken work for NRM, and he was familiar with APEDIBIMI and the Jardines Infantiles project.

In early 2004 Lair Espinosa started his assignment with an assessment of the Jardines Infantiles programme and travelled to Nebaj to: (a) organise a series of consultative meetings with the two agencies, NRM and APEDIBIMI, to explore pathways leading to a common understanding; and (b) to draw up a road map for a 'peaceful' transfer of responsibilities. This process took several months and culminated in a three-day meeting in a community centre near the capital in April 2004. Participating in this meeting were delegations from NRM and APEDIBIMI; myself, representing the Bernard van Leer Foundation; and at specific moments representatives of the Ministry of Education and agencies who were interested in or contributed to the Jardines Infantiles project, such as Unicef. The agenda and protocol for this crucial meeting had been prepared by Lair Espinosa and his assistant Julio Cano and agreed to by all parties.



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We met for three consecutive days. Under the chairmanship of Lair Espinosa an intensive and lively discussion took place, with emotions often running high, during which the nature of Jardines Infantiles, its future and the role of the respective organisations were on the table. Obviously, it all came down to the topic of the transition of responsibility for this programme and step by step the details of an agreement were hammered out. It resulted in a document containing all agreements between NRM, APEDIBIMI and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, which was named *Los Acuerdos de Nebaj* (the Nebaj Agreements). The main agreements were:

- 1 Over a transition period of seven months, NRM would transfer all operational responsibilities for the Jardines Infantiles programme to APEDIBIMI.
- 2 APEDIBIMI would, vis-à-vis the educational authorities and the Ministry of Education, fully assume the role of Representative of the Jardines Infantiles programme and NRM would withdraw from the scene.
- 3 APEDIBIMI would continue to promote the methodologies and nature of the Jardines Infantiles programme and seek to expand it by lobbying for additional funding from other agencies to finance training schemes, materials development, etc.
- 4 The Bernard van Leer Foundation would respect the ongoing grant to NRM and its role in the programme until its expiry in December, 2004.
- 5 This would be succeeded by a direct partnership between APEDIBIMI and the Foundation. APEDIBIMI would prepare and submit a three-year project proposal before the expiry of NRM's grant.
- 6 As NRM would continue other activities in Guatemala and keep its offices in Guatemala City operational, it was stressed that all parties agreed to maintain a cordial relationship.

The first grant to APEDIBIMI was made at the end of 2004 and covered a period of three years, until end-2007. It was extended by a further year until the end of 2008. However, in 2006 the Foundation had decided to withdraw from the region, a process that had to be completed by the end of 2008. Consequently, the one-year extension of the first grant to APEDIBIMI was provided to allow the agency additional time to prepare for the Foundation's exit and search for alternative funding sources. In fact, all partners of the Foundation in Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua) received this 'exit grant'.

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In 2005, a conflict emerged within APEDIBIMI, at the root of which lay two opposing visions. Some of the original 40 teachers (both male and female) considered that APEDIBIMI should become a vehicle to promote the specific interests of the teachers themselves, for example by lobbying (the government) for higher salaries. Any funding that APEDIBIMI would obtain from donors should – according to this group – be used only within the existing programme to benefit the teachers. Another group of teachers remained faithful to APEDIBIMI’s original mission, which included lobbying for good-quality preschool programmes for indigenous populations in Guatemala; improving the quality of the Jardines Infantiles programme by continued training of teachers; materials development; and strengthening parent involvement. It also included an expansion of the organisation’s mission and linking up with the first grades of the primary school system – preferably, even extending the programme to all grades in primary school. This conflict was discussed in depth with me as Programme Officer, but the two groups could not reconcile their opposing views. In consultation with the leadership of the time, I arrived at the conclusion that the only viable option was the solution – presented by the Management Board – that there should be a complete separation of the two groups and the establishment of a new agency that would carry on with the original mission.

In 2007, a new agency under the name APPEDIBIMI⁴ was established by those who remained faithful to the original mission and it is this organisation which, under the new leadership, continued the work of the original association. The Bernard van Leer Foundation agreed to and approved of the transfer of all ongoing agreements and contracts from APEDIBIMI to APPEDIBIMI. The new agency succeeded in attracting funding from various other donor agencies such as the Global Fund for Children and USAID, which has allowed it to expand its activities and continue working closely with the educational authorities. The article by Jean Friedman-Rudovsky reports on this ‘new’ organisation, the current leadership and the achievements of APPEDIBIMI after the Bernard van Leer Foundation left the country in 2008.



This account illustrates the Foundation's strategy in the 1990s: combining a focus on early childhood development with a policy of investing in the capacity building of local organisations, providing support to leading thinkers and stimulating advocates to seek opportunities for scaling programmes while maintaining quality.

Notes

- 1 The association Enfants Réfugiés du Monde (ERM), in Spanish known as Niños Refugiados del Mundo (NRM) was established in France in 1981. It is a non-governmental organisation operating on all continents with a focus on the (educational/health) needs of refugee children. Additional information is available on the following websites:
<http://www.comminit.com/early-child/content/strengthening-community-participation-early-and-pre-school-bilingual-intercultural-educa>
<http://www.enfance-violence-exil.net/index.php/ecms/it/3/822>
www.unicef.org/guatemala/english/1037_24035.html
- 2 The acronym APEDIBIMI means in English: 'Association of Promotors of Bilingual Maya–Ixil Early Childhood Education'.
- 3 APPEDIBIMI stands for Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral y Multidisciplinario (Association for Holistic and Multidisciplinary Development). To distinguish it from the original organisation a letter P was added, but overall the mission remains the same and was even broadened. See also <http://appedibimi.org/>
- 4 Benito Terraza describes the work of APEDIBIMI in his article 'Bilingual education and community participation' in *Early Childhood Matters* (2006: 38–41), available at:
https://issuu.com/bernardvanleerfoundation/docs/transitions_in_the_early_years/38