2012 Bolivia: “Hay Pan”: Creating a Sustainable Business at a Children’s Center

Foundation for Sustainable Development: Centro Infantil Mis Huellitas

Cochabamba, Bolivia

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Background

Cochabamba, Bolivia:

Bolivia is a country of diverse regions, people, and resources. Bolivia, officially known as the Plurinational State of Bolivia, is a landlocked country in central South America. It is bordered by Brazil to the north and east, Paraguay and Argentina to the south, Chile to the southwest, and Peru to the west. The current president is Evo Morales, popularly known as “Evo,” is the first Bolivian president to self-identify as racially indigenous. Though Bolivia is known for being the poorest country in South America, it is rich in culture and history. The Evo administration has aimed to emphasize the indigenous cultures and indigenous rights of the people throughout Bolivia. Bolivia is a pluri-ethnic society, and the various regions and cultures within Bolivia have many different beliefs, cultural practices, and languages. As a testament to the linguistic diversity that reflects the ethnic diversity, there are many official languages in Bolivia. However, Spanish, or “Castellano,” is widely spoken, as are Quechua and Aymara- which correspond to the two largest indigenous groups in the country.

Cochabamba is the country’s 3rd largest city, holding about one million people of the country’s 10 million person population. It is at over 9,000 feet in elevation in the Andes Mountains, though it is in a valley. Cochabamba was the site of large-scale water protests in 2000, and these protests are reflected in the country at large in which the political climate is turbulent: protests and strikes are a daily occurrence.

Our host organization was an international development organization that aims to facilitate project-based development initiatives. Teams of volunteers and employees work together with local organizations and community leaders around the world to create lasting change in areas of great need. This organization has sites in 6 countries, and they work to pair volunteers like GESI students to NGOs in those countries.

Sources:


Our Team:

Our GESI group had a variety of talents and skills to bring to the project, but everyone was willing to learn and communicate. Lauren had a more solid background in Spanish which was useful especially in the beginning to get us situated. Where Mitch said he needed to fight his procrastination tendencies, Michelle was great at micromanaging and keeping us organized. Mitch helped keep the group calm and positive, but everyone was truly dedicated to the Center and making the team work.
We also acknowledged that other outside resources consisted of the host organization’s Cochabamba team, as well as our host families, all of whom knew Cochabamba very well and were likely to have connections in the city. The host organization’s Cochabamba team was very useful to us as we decided on our projects. Michelle’s host family had a computer, internet, and some computer programs which made Michelle’s computer skills even more useful. Mitch’s host family was also very willing to answer questions we had or to proofread our materials.

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I. NGO Immersion

During our first week, we were immersed in every sector of the Children’s Center—primarily childcare, fundraising, and cooking. As we spent time with the staff, we reached a better understanding of the organization’s history and current condition. Before discussing a potential routine and methodology for the week-long immersion, our group determined what sectors we would individually focus on. The focus of each individual’s immersion was determined by our emerging relationships with the children and staff. Michelle volunteered in the room for two-year old children after quickly bonding with their teacher. Because Mitch was frequently summoned to do physical, heavy-duty tasks with the only male staff member, Mitch often accompanied him throughout the day. Given her strong Spanish skills, Lauren worked with the more communicative five-year-old children and also helped sell bread to parents throughout the week.

During a meeting with the Director, we learned more about how the organization functions and the financial tribulations it has faced over the years. The Children’s Center aims to provide a multicultural, interdisciplinary space where children and youth in the community can receive education, healthy food, and support. The employees at the Center incorporate these goals into their programming and work with the parents to expand the Center’s resources. However, the leading advocate for and face of the Center is the Director. In tears, the director shared a story regarding an assistant that stole the Center’s funds and led her to trust no one but herself with her organization. She also shared her appreciation for our group’s commitment to the Center and reassured us that she would be there to support our work in any way she could. Our meeting with the director was held in the beginning of the week, giving us a strong foundation for our observations. Each day, we contributed to our designated sectors of the Center and compiled the following observations and questions.

Lauren:

· The Children’s Center faces sanitary issues; evident through the communal water buckets used to wipe faces and hands, rarely accessible soap, and sick children that are cared for by teachers who not only wipe their noses, but also clean the spaces, serve food, and handle the garbage.

· There are more young children than old in the Center. Do the older children have different school hours?
The Children’s Center functions more as a daycare than a school. The children eat and play throughout the day, with less emphasis on lesson planning.

The Center and its participants are extremely active. The Director, employees, and students are running constantly from 8 am – 5 pm and the children come and go throughout the day depending on the schedules of their caretakers.

The employees appear to know every child, even those working in the kitchen. The older and younger children also appear to know each other.

Michelle:

Surrounding the Children’s Center are several community-oriented centers, including a basketball court, soccer field, and dance center. What is the relationship, if any at all, between Center and these areas that are consistently used by youth throughout the afternoon?

The rooms are divided by age and they each have their own day-to-day curriculum. Other than the nutritious meals served throughout the day, there appears to be no consistency in manifesting the values of the Children’s Center—health, culture, and education. The only reflection of these values is in the posters on the walls around the Center. What is the basis upon which the teachers create their daily activities?

The Children’s Center uses its available classroom and work spaces efficiently, but the resources are aged (e.g. tables, toilets, sinks, books—the resources that would be the epitome of an organization that promotes health, culture, and education)

Financially, the Center also appears to depend heavily on selling candy and bread to their main customer base, the parents of the children at the Center.

Mitch:

The families and children of the Center do not appear to be in financially destitute circumstances. Based on superficial observations and short conversations, they appear to be middle class Cochabambinos.

The students and employees come from all regions of Cochabamba. The Center’s community is not confined to the Villa Granada neighborhood.

The Director is an extremely warm and open person. She is directly involved in the management of the Center at all levels, so in order for our team to make a difference, her support will be vital.

The Children’s Center operates much like a regular business; perhaps treading along the line of social entrepreneurship. The staff is full time, yet the organization also appears to be financially unsustainable, even with paying customers and consistently paid employees.

The societal norms infiltrate the workplace, particularly in the relationship between men and women. Of all the staff, there is only one male and he is inhibited in certain interactions with his co-workers. For example, there are limits to how much he can casually talk a select female co-worker without her spouse feeling threatened.

We initially planned to collect information through interviews. After establishing questions to ask the Children’s Center’s staff and parents, we soon realized that candid responses were difficult to solicit from calculated conversations regarding the Center’s community, goals, finances,
assets, and needs. Because the Center has an unpredictable atmosphere with approximately 100 children to be cared for and fed, it was difficult for our group to premeditate formal interviews. Ultimately, the most fruitful information was collected through casual conversations while lending a hand to the interviewee’s work. For example, while baking bread with the male teacher every other morning, Mitch not only learned more about his personal history with the Center, but also experienced first-hand how the Center bakes bread, one of their several sources of income.

Our group was challenged by unpredictability of the Center, especially when physical labor or random responsibilities with the children interrupted focused conversations. As we adapted to the routines and expectations of daily tasks, we found it increasingly difficult to hand over a task to an overburdened teacher in order to reconvene with the group. Balancing time between our responsibilities as volunteers and our goals as students preparing a community-based project was difficult, especially as it became apparent how understaffed the organization was. Additionally, we found it harder than expected to avoid speaking in English to each other after laborious days of work. After an immersive first week at work, the group began to brainstorm project ideas and reach out to the teachers for further insight. During an impromptu meeting called by the Director, the teachers contributed three ideas to our project development: a laundry room, a park, and a renovated bathroom.

**Discussion Questions:**

Do you believe the children should have been directly involved with brainstorming for the project? If so, how? What other groups might have been considered?

Was this an adequate immersion? What are some other ways you could have evaluated assets in the community or located other potential partner organizations?

**II. Project Development: Our Original Plan**

After about two weeks of getting acclimated to the Center’s routine and developing relationships with the workers, we sat down as a group to consider our observations and begin considering project ideas. We analyzed the ideas suggested to us in interviews with the Center’s teachers and saw there was a clear disconnect in our respective expectations; their ideas for what we should do revolved around more immediate, concrete improvements along the lines of a gift or donation. While a new playground or laundry room could clearly improve the day-to-day functioning of the Center, these ideas left little room for continued development and would prevent us from executing any type of sustainable project for the next six weeks. Though their exact ideas weren’t feasible given our goals and resources, the things they wanted and obviously needed played a key role in shaping our own ideas.

For our project to have any hope of sustaining itself after we were gone, we knew it would have to be in harmony with the Center’s stated mission, which is threefold: promoting the education of its students, providing for students’ nutrition and increasing environmental awareness. This last component intrigued us most; classrooms and hallways were decorated with numerous hand-drawn posters urging care for el medioambiente through recycling and planting trees.

With that in mind, we thought that developing a recycling program could be a great opportunity for the Center. By encouraging students’ families and people in the surrounding community to collect and bring recyclables to the Center, the program would bolster its mission while offering a multitude of possible activities to engage children and educate on the importance of recycling. Furthermore, if collection was successful enough, it offered the possibility of bringing
in money to the Center that could be put towards one of the more tangible items that teachers had originally suggested to us, such as a playground.

Before presenting this idea to the Director of the Children’s Center, we wanted to make sure we had a fully fleshed-out proposal. The biggest challenge, it appeared to us, was setting up the logistics of a recycling program in Cochabamba, a city hampered with infrastructure issues and no public recycling program. Our research started on the internet, where we were able to identify two private recycling organizations in the city. We exchanged emails with their representatives to explore possible partnerships and set up in-person meetings, though as was often the case, it was difficult to find a convenient time to leave the Children’s Center without feeling that we were abandoning the teachers.

The first organization, a private recycling organization, turned out to be a much more largely scaled operation than we could hope to work with; they partnered mostly with industrial companies to collect hundreds of pounds of recyclables at a time. Though this was clearly beyond our reach, our conversation with their representative was valuable in getting information about recycling rates and how to organize a smaller operation. It appeared we would end up having to partner with a local centro de acopio—recycling center—which generally doesn’t pay back very well. Thinking long-term about the sustainability of our project, that would also require a teacher to leave the Center (never an easy task) and haul the recyclables to the recycling center. Still, we were excited about the prospects of a recycling program.

At that point, our group met with the Director at the Children’s Center to present the recycling idea. While she was far from enthusiastic, and the teachers seemed slightly disappointed that we weren’t pursuing one of their specific ideas, they pledged their support behind the project idea.

Next we met with representatives at a government-sponsored recycling program that partners with small businesses, schools and other organizations to promote recycling; they sign agreements with organizations that set a regular recyclable collection goal in return for an agreed-upon gift. For example, if we were to partner with the program, we could agree to collect, say, 100 pounds of recyclable plastics per month for six months, in return for a tangible reward instead of money—something like the teachers had told us they wanted for the Center, e.g. a playground or laundry room. What’s more, the program employees would come to the Center each month to haul away the collected items, easing the burden on workers at the Children’s Center. In addition, the program would provide the Center with educational materials and send over recycling experts to share lesson plans with teachers.

As a group we were very excited about the prospects of partnering with the program; it seemed as if the organization had been designed exactly for what we were trying to accomplish. Unfortunately, as we learned after proposing the idea to the Director at the Children's Center, it was, in fact, too good to be true.

We learned from our Director that the Center had actually tried a recycling program in partnership with a centro de acopio before (a point either lost in translation or somehow unaddressed during our first meeting), and she also speculated that they may have partnered with the government-sponsored recycling program, though she couldn’t remember. These efforts apparently had not been fruitful or even worth the effort. She also put us in contact with the principal of a local school who had worked with the recycling program; in a phone conversation the principal told us that despite more than a year of collection, the program had never followed
through in providing their agreed-upon rewards. We were unable to locate any organizations who had had a successful relationship with this program, which was immensely discouraging.

Seeing that the teachers at the Children's Center had good reason to be skeptical of working with organizations that had proven unreliable, we determined that although on the surface the idea seemed like a perfect match, it simply did not fit. The Center needed a project that teachers believed in for it to have any chance of sustaining itself once we were gone. It was an incredibly challenging reality that nearing the half-way point of our stay, we would need to shift gears completely and start at square one with a new project idea.

**Discussion Questions**

What are some signs that a host organization might not have full faith in a suggested project idea? How significant of a factor should that be in selecting an idea?

How would you try to explain to your host organization that some of their suggested ideas simply didn't fit into your sustainable development model?

How could the government-sponsored recycling program have been more effectively evaluated as a partner organization? How would you approach starting from scratch at the midpoint of your trip?

### III. Project Development: A New Plan

After the recycling project fell through, our group began brainstorming and revisiting old ideas. With input from the Director and the Children's Center staff, we explored a project revolving around bread sales. The Center generates significant income from bread sales, but as the bread makers--Mitch and the male teacher--experienced throughout the week, the baking process is time consuming and laborious. Also, parents are the only customers for the bread sales on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. After discussing the current state of the Center's bread sales, the staff and our group determined that the new project would focus on expanding their bread business. Because the Center was committed to the bread business prior to our arrival, the staff was committed to seeing its growth and contributing to the development of the project. Additionally, the income produced from the bread sales provided healthy food for the children. Ultimately, a bread project seemed to be the most impactful project to initiate given the timeframe, the resources available, and the cultural and financial context of the Children's Center.

Using our asset maps and reviewing two-weeks worth of immersion in the Center, we began detailing the goals of the new project. Noticing the time-consuming and exhaustive process of baking the bread, Mitch suggested the purchase of a dough mixer. That sole male teacher is responsible for baking the Center's bread and an electric mixer would significantly contribute to production quality and quantity. While selling bread during the first two weeks, Lauren noticed that the only customers were parents. She suggested that our project reach out to the community surrounding the Center. With access to Photoshop at her host family's home and familiarity with editing, Michelle offered to spearhead the potential community publicity campaign through flyering. We further explored ideas of community and parent involvement, including the idea of parents selling bread at their jobs and in their neighborhoods. After discussing the community surrounding the Center, we realized that parents with limited money and time would not be committed to regularly selling bread in their workplaces or neighborhoods. Our group wanted to improve the bread business in a manner that is financially sustainable, realistic, and culturally relevant. We eventually determined the goals of increasing bread production, improving the visibility of the Center through community publicity, and increasing the involvement of parents in bread sales.
During the development of a new project, we felt challenged by the deadlines for submitting project proposals. Casual meetings with the Director reassured us that we could commit as much time in the workday to the project and use her closed office as a meeting space. However, it was difficult to negotiate time for planning the project with our responsibilities as volunteers. With unpredictable tasks such as taking large groups of children to the bathroom or cooking lunch in the kitchen with little assistance, it was hard for us to convene and discuss the project. We unsuccessfully tried volunteering in the morning and working on the project in the afternoon after we return from lunch. But each of the group members were called to different duties throughout the day. Additionally, articulating concerns with our project and our balance of time at work was difficult due to the language barrier.

Discussion Questions:

How could the group realistically organize their time between volunteering for understaffed Center and their responsibilities for the project?

Considering the language barrier and the unpredictable nature of the Center, how could the group better articulate their time management concerns to the Director?

IV. Project Facilitation

Once our group switched to the bread project, we knew time was of the essence to plan and begin to implement a successful project. We aimed to address several aspects of the bread at our site:

Bread Production:

For the success of the project it was essential to make bread production faster and easier: if bread were produced more efficiently, the Center could sell more bread and reap greater profits. To do this, we looked into prices of electric bread mixers. We researched online, asked our host families, and took a trip to the kitchen supplies district of the city. The director and a teacher came with us to ask about prices because we were encountering a great deal of price gouging: as foreigners, the vendors assumed we had more money and would charge higher prices in turn. In addition to the price hikes, it was also more difficult for us to barter and make clear business deals with the language barrier. We found that the mixers were all very large and industrial, and the prices were out of our budget. We did not find a medium size mixer, which was a challenge because the physical process of making bread is very laborious and only one teacher makes the bread (Mitch helped throughout our time at the Center).

The other side of the bread production, after making the dough and rolling it out, was the baking. The oven at the Center was relatively small, old, and baked the bread unevenly. It required the teacher to flip each individual bread at least once during the baking process. We started looking into better ovens to make the bread bake more quickly, and more evenly (which would also make higher quality bread!)

The Director knew a saleswoman near La Cancha, the city's large outdoor market, who would give us a good deal, and after some phone calls and field trips, we decided on a larger oven that could hold and bake more bread at a faster rate, and without any flipping required.

Publicity:
A second aspect of the bread project involved publicity. The Center had no outdoor sign indicating that it was a school and daycare, and the bread-selling was informally sold to parents as they picked up their children. We designed a large sign to be hung outside of the Center, and after the Director approved the design, we priced out sign companies and sign materials to determine which store would be best. We successfully submitted an order for the large outdoor sign, and picked it up with the Director on another shopping day in La Cancha.

We also designed, found prices for, and ordered a smaller chalkboard sign that can be put outside to advertise when bread (or other products) are being sold. These chalkboard sidewalk signs are very common in Cochabamba, and they are a major way that passersby know that stores sell things like bread, milk, or phone cards.

We also designed a flier to be used to spread awareness of the Center and its bread sales in the immediate area. We posted these fliers on poles in the surrounding neighborhoods, and handed them out to spectators at the Independence Day parade on August 6th. This was a big parade with many schools performing, so there were parents and local people standing in their doorways and on the streets—we were able to distribute over 100 fliers this way. Many of the people we spoke with were unaware that the building was a Center for children, much less that they sold bread after school.

Parent Involvement:

We initially envisioned a project that would enlist the help and support of the parents. However, we soon realized that the parents were already loyal customers of the Center, and that the existing parent involvement felt forced. Parents often had negative reactions to the repeated attempts by teachers and the Director to get them to buy more bread, candy, or other products they were selling. Because these parents were already customers, we focused our attentions on the surrounding community to widen their customer base.

Business Plan:

The final aspect of the bread project involved the creation of a more formal business plan. This was relatively easy to create on our part, but it was apparent that the Center (and the city) operated in a very informal way. While the host organization’s team encouraged us to create this business plan, and it gave our project a stronger backbone, we were unsure throughout the process that the Center would end up utilizing a formal business plan. Therefore, when we made a business plan that included: schedules for bread to be sold, using an Excel spreadsheet to track profits and expenses, or looking at sales and analyzing which days sold more, etc., we knew that this would be a challenge to implement.

The business plan did include aspects of the bread sales like formalizing a schedule, increasing visibility of the sale, and formalizing the bookkeeping process, and this helped our team focus on these aspects that we felt important to address in our time at the Children’s Center.

Discussion Questions:

Who had more input in the project plan: the community members, or our group members? What would be the ideal balance between the two groups?

To what extent does this project plan allow for sustainable change in the Center after our group leaves? What may be some barriers to sustainability?
V. Results

In the short time frame we had to observe the results of our efforts (one week), we saw several distinct outcomes.

- **Better quality/greater quantity of bread:** The new oven nearly doubled bread production, as it bakes up to 40 *pancitos* in about ten minutes, compared to just 24 *pancitos* in about twelve minutes with the old oven. The new oven also does not require the baker to flip the bread, saving energy and preventing burned bread.

- **Better visibility/community awareness:** The new sign makes the Center more immediately identifiable in the neighborhood, and the smaller, portable sign attracts pedestrians when bread is on sale. Flyer distribution during the community parade also informed numerous people who hadn't known the Center existed.

- **Increased bread sales:** Bread sold out each day it was produced with the new materials.

- **New customers:** With the increased community awareness, people from outside the Center's immediate circle—not related to students or teachers—began buying bread from the Center.

- **Motivation for other projects:** Some of the ideas we suggested had been attempted before and largely forgotten; our suggestion spurred them to try and re-energize those plans. For example, when we suggested our idea of a school garden, we learned something similar had been started at the Center but neglected for years; the next day, Mitch and a teacher were outside planting flowers.

**Discussion Questions:**

Are these all legitimate criteria for analyzing the group's results? What criteria are more effective than others? What else should be considered?

**Conclusion**

Our group's experience at the Children's Center was a rich opportunity for learning about the assets and needs of a community organization in a foreign culture. The process of jumping into a completely new environment and assessing its characteristics to design a development project—and then watching that initial project fail utterly and completely—forced us to adapt until we found, together with the community, an idea that did fit. We are confident that the teachers at the Center are fully behind the revamped bread business, and we hope it continues to be a reliable financial resource for the Center in the future. We are excited to check back in with them to see where they have taken it.