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Peru: Fighting the “Vicious Cycle of Poverty”

In a 3-year program organized by the University of Piura, more than 500 children in one of the poorest districts of the region were helped to overcome chronic malnutrition.

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“Although there has been a lot of concern about the fact that almost half the children in the Piura region suffer from chronic malnutrition,”

says Dr. Gerardo Castillo, Director of the Department of Biomedical Sciences at the University of Piura, "in the past this has resulted in partial and disjointed efforts. Now seemed to be the moment to combine all these efforts and try to really accomplish something significant."

The University of Piura, located in the northwest corner of Peru in the oldest Spanish town in South America, was begun in 1964 under the impetus of St. Josemaría Escrivá.

In organizing the Program for Nutritional Recuperation, Dr. Castillo relates, "the decision was made to focus attention on one of the local areas with the highest incidence of malnutrition, and to seek the assistance of a number of other city and regional organizations, pooling resources in a united effort."

Integral social development

The current program, financed by the Government of Navarra in Spain and ProPeru in Peru, began in January 2008 and concluded in December 2010. Castillo says that “from the beginning we tried to give the program a focus of integral social development.”

The project started when a number of studies brought to light serious intellectual deficiencies in the malnourished children, along with the insufficiency of the food supplements the children were receiving from PRONAA (National Program of Nutritional Supplements). The key to the solution was seen in teaching the families, especially the mothers, to provide the required nourishment on a regular basis.

A plan is drawn up

To draw up an effective plan, a thorough study of the nutritional

state of all the children in the Medio Piura region under the age of five was carried out, including the incidence of illnesses such as diarrhea and intestinal parasites that can aggravate malnutrition.

With the information this study provided, a plan was drawn up based on the following six goals: 1) nutritional vigilance; 2) medical care for both pregnant women and children; 3) overcoming intellectual deficiencies; 4) maternal education; 5) self-sustaining food supplies; 6) strengthening local community organizations. The most important factor was educating the mothers in caring for personal hygiene and preventing intestinal diseases. At the same time, an effort was made to help the mothers prepare food stuffs at low cost but with high nutritional value. The first step was to help the families raise ducks and guinea pigs,

and to provide other sources of nourishment in “bio-gardens.”

Women the key

As women were seen to be the key to the solution, an effort was also made to raise the self-esteem of the mothers in the program. And since many of them didn't even have a National Identity Card, this became the first priority. Then a Basic Literacy Program was begun, which a surprising percentage of the mothers decided to attend.

When for a certain period of time PRONNA ran into problems in providing additional food supplies, those in charge of the program were worried that the children would begin to lose weight. But fortunately the mothers were already well enough instructed to be able to come up with the necessary sources of nourishment on their own.

Breaking the vicious cycle of poverty

As a result of all these steps, in a little under three years 98% of the children no longer suffered from malnutrition. “We selected the children from birth to five years of age because it is at this age that the greatest cerebral deterioration takes place if the child does not receive the proper nourishment. The harm that can be done then is enormous and can lead to grave consequences later on.” And as Dr. Castillo adds, “this is the stage at which there is the greatest risk that poverty will become a vicious cycle.”

A group of professionals supervised learning programs at the clinics. In addition to the notable improvement in the children’s overall physical health, a considerable improvement in the intellectual capacity of most of

the young children was also found to have taken place.

A strategic alliance

This program was made possible thanks to the combined efforts of public and private institutions in the Piura area. A strategic alliance was formed, combining the efforts of parents, public health workers, government institutions (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Production, Ministry for Women, Ministry of Education), regional and local governments, and private enterprises.

Summing up the project, Dr. Castillo said: “The University of Piura provided the technical knowledge, students and professionals needed. But each institution and sector made its own contribution, spurred by the guarantee that the project, if successful, would be self-sustaining over time.”

The 507 children who benefitted from the program came from 14 villages on the east bank of the Piura River.

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