



Case Study: Innovative Partnership Encourages Sustainability on Education and Gender Equity in Piracicaba, Brazil

Introduction

Launched as a three-year partnership with The Caterpillar Foundation, The Resource Foundation's (TRF) Regional Education and Gender Equity Program targets thousands of disadvantaged children in over 70 elementary schools and community centers to develop a comprehensive model for improving academic achievement, gender equity and life skills. The initiative is being implemented in Caterpillar's key Latin American locations—Brazil, Mexico and Panama—and in countries where the need for educational support, particularly for girls, is great: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Peru and Uruguay.

In parallel, TRF and its local partners have formed a practitioner network to share best practices, successes and challenges related to program implementation in their respective countries. The network connects through a customized online portal, periodic webinars and an annual seminar-workshop through which participants have exchanged methodologies, identified opportunities for collaboration and developed a shared evaluative framework.

In Brazil, the program site is in Piracicaba, a city located in the state of São Paulo. In consultation with the Secretariat of Education and after review of Regional Program objectives and the needs of the local Piracicaba community, it was determined that vulnerable children living in shelters were in particular need of academic reinforcement, gender equity and life skills support and that there were no existing initiatives that addressed their unique needs. Therefore, the TRF pioneering partnership between UniSol, Universidade Metodista de Piracicaba (UNIMEP) and Casa do Bom Menino ultimately formed the Brazilian project.

Profiles & Roles of Partner Organizations

TRF implementing partner **UniSol** is a recognized non-profit leader in educational programs and has extensive experience working with governments and universities on implementing educational initiatives across Brazil. The partnership with UniSol is integral to the project formulation and monitoring stages of this program, conducting program oversight to ensure that activities align with Regional Program objectives while also providing key coordination and technical assistance to both UNIMEP and Casa do Bom Menino. This organization brings knowledge of best practices in pedagogy, community development, literacy programs and university extension models so as to ensure that projects are ultimately beneficial to all stakeholders.

Collaboration with **UNIMEP** leverages the institution's expertise in educational, program and community development through the participation of a team of university students who are guided by faculty advisors in contributing to project



With support from Caterpillar Foundation through TRF's Regional Education and Gender Equity Program, three (3) libraries have been established at Casa do Bom Menino. These attractive spaces are equipped with books, learning materials, bookshelves and designated reading areas.



development and implementation. UNIMEP is recognized for its effective outreach and university extension programs, and focuses on connecting its students with practical and mutually beneficial projects. This student team allows Casa do Bom Menino to expand its work and to further improve the overall quality of care that the shelter is able to provide its school-age residents; UNIMEP students and associated faculty offer an inter-disciplinary perspective (incorporating experience from the education, psychology and pharmacy departments) and structure activities that improve Casa do Bom Menino programs. With these strengths, UNIMEP students are able to effectively partner with Casa do Bom Menino and UniSol to successfully implement the Regional Program in Brazil.

Casa do Bom Menino is a community-based shelter organization that provides direct services to vulnerable children and youth whose families are unable to care for them. Its facilities include multiple residences, a dining room, a recreation area and common spaces where academic reinforcement and psychological support services are provided. Many children have been abused, neglected or abandoned by their families and have frequently experienced high levels of instability and rejection. This organization enhances TRF's Regional Education and Gender Equity program through its deep understanding of the target population and its ability to keep pace with the evolution of the child welfare system in Brazil.

Strengths of the Piracicaba Project Site

This project has been characterized as a unique partnership because it is UNIMEP's first experience working together with a national NGO (UniSol) and a community-based facility (Casa do Bom Menino) to participate in a regional program coordinated by an international nonprofit organization (TRF) that has been funded by a corporate donor (Caterpillar Foundation). This broad multi-stakeholder partnership was developed in partnership with local government and education authorities, and is therefore well-positioned as leverage for further negotiations and advocacy on the formulation of public policies related to children and youth living in institutional settings. In conversations with TRF and UniSol, the Secretariat of Education felt that efforts to promote academic achievement through innovative methodologies would create the most impact if implemented with a student population living in shelters. Children living in community-based facilities are frequently in and out of school, which leads to grade repetition and being years older than their classmates. These youth are highly vulnerable and can benefit greatly from the alternative teaching methodologies available through this program.

This particular alliance has greatly enhanced the overall quality and richness of the Regional Program's practitioner network – UniSol has participated in network activities and has been able to offer a unique perspective to the other nine (9) implementing organizations. Overall, this partnership has strengthened the organizational capacity of both UNIMEP and Casa do Bom Menino related to evaluation and program development. Casa do Bom Menino has developed new methodologies and further systematized its work, which are improvements that would have been difficult to achieve acting alone with an exclusive focus on day-to-day operations.

Although working with children and youth who are used to abandonment and rejection is difficult due to their lack of trust in adults, the participating university students are in a unique position to relate with this vulnerable population while still being able to carry out project activities. The ongoing partnership has permitted the students to effectively work with the children in fun and alternative ways. Beneficiary youth have consequently been more receptive to not only academic subjects (reading, math and activities that encourage writing, creativity and imagination), but also to gender equity issues and life skills (self-esteem, responsibility and autonomy).

Conclusion

The collaboration between Casa do Bom Menino, UNIMEP and UniSol is exceptional. The opportunity for multiple years of participation, along with partners' emphasis on an empowering collaboration with the local community, has made the project effective in ways that would otherwise have been highly challenging. This methodology ultimately lends to long-term sustainability while facilitating community development.