EMPOWERING WOMEN IN MINING COMMUNITIES OF BOLIVIA

AN AWARD-WINNING HUMANITARIAN PROJECT
Acknowledged by President Bill Clinton at the Second Clinton Global Initiative University meeting.
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Featured Project: Empowering Women & Families in Mining Communities of Bolivia

BACKGROUND

With a population of about 10,290,003 (July 2011 est) and a GDP of $27.04 billion (2012 estimate), Bolivia is still considered one of the poorest countries in South America. Although Bolivia has been very rich in natural resources, its political instability has not allowed a sustainable economic growth to be achieved. For that reason, this country has often been referred to a “donkey sitting on a gold mine”. The inequality in education and health among the various groups in Bolivia is striking. The gaps in child mortality and malnutrition are wider in Bolivia than in other Latin American countries. Disparities in literacy rates between urban and rural residents are vast.

Mining was one of the main sources of income in Bolivia during the 1940s when minerals, mainly tin, silver and tungsten constituted more than 70% of its total exports. Its abundant resources influenced the economy of America and other continents. Bolivia has suffered economically from its landlocked position and its political and social instability. Although it is rich in resources, it has the lowest per capita in South America.

The inequality in education and health among the various groups in Bolivia is striking. The gaps in child mortality and malnutrition are wider in Bolivia than in other Latin American countries. Disparities in literacy rates between urban and rural residents are vast. These inequalities suggest Bolivia’s failure to ensure equal enjoyment of all people to economic, social and cultural rights.

In the 1980s, COMIBOL was responsible for almost two-thirds of Bolivia’s mining output. However, by the late 1980s, Bolivia had slowly begun to capitalize on and privatize mining, which ultimately led to COMIBOL’s share of mineral production reducing to less than 30 percent by the mid 1990’s. COMIBOL’s
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bloated work-force, which had reached about 30,000 in 1984, was reduced to fewer than 3,000. At around the same time, joint ventures between COMIBOL and private concerns started to come into existence. By 1997, COMIBOL produced 30.6 percent of the declining tin production and only 4.3 percent of the increasing zinc production. All other mineral production was being undertaken by private enterprise.

The Bolivian economy came crashing down after a dramatic fall in the price of tin and other minerals during the 1980s. In 1985 under the presidency of Hernan Siles Zuazo, the Mining Cooperatives were legally formed as private and independent companies under the supervision of the National Council of Cooperatives under the Ministry of Labor’s umbrella.

Today, even though minerals constitute a smaller part of Bolivia’s exports, some mineral production like gold, zinc, lead, tin, antimony, silver, iron, copper and ulexite (a white crystalline mineral) still continues. El Mutun, for example, a 40,000 metric ton deposit located close to the Brazilian border, is considered one of the largest in the world. There are approximately 100,000 Bolivians still depend on mining for their livelihood. They live below the poverty line and have limited and, in some cases, no access to education, information or training.

THE CHALLENGE

Of the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty around the globe, 70 percent are women. For these women, poverty doesn’t just mean scarcity but it means rights denied, opportunities curtailed and voices silenced. In Bolivia, a woman who is married to a miner, staying at home and taking care of the children is called “Ama de Casa” (housewife). A widow who has lost her husband in the mines, been abandoned or is a single mother, has to assume the role of provider for her family and is therefore unable to pursue any educational desires whatsoever. In some mining communities, these women are rarely allowed to work inside the mines because of economic considerations, superstitions and discriminatory regulations.

Women in mining who are widows are called “palliris” (hand pickers) or “barranquilleras”, and their work involves gathering and hand picking minerals. Nowadays in some mining communities, women who grew up as “palliris” are also allowed to work inside the mines. Hence, they call themselves “Socías Mineras de Bolivia” (Mining Partners of Bolivia) instead of “palliris”. They pay a fee to become part of the Miners Association (Cooperative) and play an equal role in the decisions making process as well as having a strong influence in all mining activities.

They face many challenges:
They work excessively long hours under extremely difficult conditions with contaminated water to drink and no protection.

They have limited access to information or assistance in relation to health, safety and legal rights concerns that are needed to protect the livelihood of their families and themselves.

Whilst the provision of information has greatly improved over the last few years through the creation of, and participation in these mining associations, illiteracy remains as a major barrier to accessing this much needed information.

They do not have the opportunity to learn alternative skills together with the necessary business acumen that would allow them to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. This pursuit is further exacerbated by the limited, or in many cases, nonexistent access to micro credit.

They have limited, or in many cases, nonexistent access to micro credit and they are forced to send their children to work on the mines or send them far away to live with relatives.

Accident rates in small-scale mines are routinely six or seven times higher than in larger operations.

An estimated 75% of cooperative mineworkers do not receive health insurance or pension benefits. The sector commonly ignores health and safety laws and uses primitive extraction techniques that exploit the environment and shorten the life of the mine.

**INNOVATIVE MODEL**

This project aims to create a system where there is a simultaneous commitment to developing education, health care and economic diversification for women and children in mining communities of Bolivia.

By empowering women and families from these mining communities through education, training and information, the following goals will be achieved:

1. The level of general education and literacy will improve the status of women;
2. Women and their families will have better access to health care services, with good quality.
3. There will be more opportunities for women to participate and benefit from the economic, political, cultural and social lives of their communities.

The model of this project is based in three main focus areas:
FIRST FOCUS AREA - EDUCATION

In relation to education, approximately 85% of the total rural population in Bolivia is illiterate and is one of the main reasons for the ongoing poverty and low socioeconomic development in this Country. This problem is certainly more pronounced in mining the communities. Few people have the opportunity to go to school owing to different mobility reasons. In some communities, children go to primary school but on completion, most of them do not continue on to higher education because the schools are too far or their parents cannot afford it. Children from a single parent home are typically forced to go back to the mines and work alongside their mothers after primary school, searching for mineral scraps in the dumps and rivers. Today, children are not allowed to go inside the mines but are still exposed to the hazards and dangers that are inherent to mining. Their mothers work excessively long hours under extremely difficult conditions with contaminated water to drink and no protection.

We want to demonstrate that the relationship between women’s education and the socioeconomic development of these poor regions is relevant. Therefore, the first focus area of this project includes literacy courses using an innovative Spanish method for adults with “andragogia” techniques. These courses are based on the book “Hacia Mi Porvenir”, a method created 40 years ago by Josephine Vera, a teacher/pedagogue, who has written this book especially addressed to people from rural and mining areas.

SECOND FOCUS AREA - INFORMATION
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Women in these communities have limited access to information or assistance in relation to health, safety and legal rights concerns that are needed to protect the livelihood of their families. Whilst the provision of information has greatly improved over the last few years through the creation of, and participation in these mining associations, illiteracy remains as a major barrier to accessing this much needed information.

The second focus area embraces informational workshops and conferences about health, family planning, childcare and other issues related to women. All of these courses are designed based on the community environment, their native language and availability. Trainers at these community centers will also teach women about nutrition whilst providing them access to medical evaluations and attention. Campaigns will also be organized with the local Association for waste removal, clean-up of trash cans, pollution prevention and recycling.

THIRD FOCUS AREA - TRAINING

Women in mining do not have the opportunity to get trained with alternative skills together with the necessary business acumen that would allow them to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities. This pursuit is further exacerbated by the limited, or in many cases, nonexistent access to micro credit.

The third focus area consists of training courses and workshops to learn different skills such as painting, clothing design of native costumes and sewing. Other talents addressed to strengthen their traditions and beliefs as well as to stimulate their communities' economic and commercial development will also be developed. This area also includes the design and manufacture of eco-friendly products as reusable shopping bags and other products that helps to reduce plastic bag consumption.
ABOUT MINING COMMUNITIES

As of 2014, mining cooperatives account for about 35% of Bolivia’s mining output.

The National Federation of Mining Cooperatives of Bolivia (Federacion Nacional de Cooperativas Mineras de Bolivia) served as an umbrella organization for the country’s 1,660 mining cooperatives (75% are located in La Paz). Most cooperatives are small and consist of individual miners organized by region or specific mineral and using very little technology. There are approximately 110,000 miners working with the cooperatives.

The project focuses in La Paz because the majority of mining cooperatives are located there. These 1,245 cooperatives are organized in 8 mining communities (Centrales).

La Paz

1. COMMUNITY “CENTRAL CARACOLES”
2. CENTRAL COLQUIRI
3. CENTRAL YANI LIJUATA
4. CENTRAL COTAPATA
5. CENTRAL PELECHUCO
6. CENTRAL NORTE DE FRANZ TAMAYO
7. CENTRAL ILLIMANI
8. CENTRAL OMEJA

The Community “Central Caracoles” is located in Quime-Inquisivi, 248 kilometers from La Paz. There are approximately 2,588 miners (1,348 men and 1,240 women). Forty percent (40%) of these women are widows (400 women).1 Caracoles is one of the most important silver mining community in La Paz and Bolivia: Caracoles. The Empresa Minera Central Caracoles manages eight mining cooooperatives: El Nevado, Libertad, Porvenir, Gran Poder del Asiento, Santa Rosa, Choquetanga, Chamilla and Pacuni.

1/ Based on Survey conducted in Quime
After COMIBOL left in the 80’s, miners of this community decided to start a private Company called Empresa Minera Central Caracoles. This private organization manages eight mining cooperatives: El Nevado, Libertad, Porvenir, Gran Poder del Asiento, Santa Rosa, Choquetanga, Chamilla and Pacuni.

Its main activities are the prospecting, exploration, exploitation, concentration and commercialization of silver concentrates. In the exploitation phase, the mineral is extracted from the mining interior, forecasting approximately 100 tons per day. So far, a total of 1,600 tons per month have been actually extracted. They have learned to organize and manage themselves, without any support from other entities, private organizations or, to our surprise, the current government’s administration; therefore, these miners’ rights and health are still far from guaranteed.