

Working Children in Ecuador Mobilize for Change

María Fernanda Espinosa Talks to Michael Schwab

MICHAEL: IN ECUADOR, LOW-INCOME WORKING CHILDREN LIVING IN VERY difficult circumstances have organized themselves to create better conditions and better environments for themselves. Some tens of thousands have become involved over the last 10 years. You're from Ecuador — you are well known there as an environmentalist, a broadcaster, and a poet — and have worked with these children. Tell us about your work with them.

María: I should start out by saying that this program for working children, PMT (*Programa Muchacho Trabajador*), is organized around the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and it operates like a nongovernment organization. It receives funding from UNICEF and the Central Bank of Ecuador, but it has a non-defined status, which gives it lots of freedom. PMT's work has more than 10 years of trajectory working on children's rights issues: advocacy, action-research projects, plus public awareness and information campaigns. PMT is directly working with children in difficult circumstances to empower them so they become their own rights advocates.

I was brought to the program as an environmentalist to look at the contents, feasibility, and methodologies for environmental action-research that was to be designed and implemented by the children. My role was to facilitate the “thinking” and “acting” on environmental issues. I had to learn to keep a very open mind about the scope and boundaries of what was being defined by the children as “environmental” — from violence to urban pollution.

What PMT does is create “alternative spaces” for working children. These are in between a school and a home, physical spaces where the children can go, talk about their problems, reflect about their rights, and exchange their experiences with other children, who are aged from four or five years old to 18. Representatives of alternative spaces from all over the country meet once a year at a national summit. The delegation process is very complex and very democratic. They select who they want to represent themselves, first locally, at the neighborhood level, then at a city level, then regionally, and finally at the national level, through interest elections.

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At the national meetings, the children set their working agenda, which is based on the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. They discuss and choose one of the rights in the Convention and decide how to work on it. For example, in the first year, 1985, the children voted to address their right against maltreatment. They decided to devote a year to working against maltreatment on all levels, from the family level to the community level, to the school level, to the national level. For example, they decided to work with the bus drivers. The children said, “We are very maltreated by the drivers of the buses. We’re pushed. We’re very maltreated.” So they launched a national campaign against maltreatment.

At the second summit, the children decided to devote themselves to the article that talks about the quality of life, which for them meant a healthy environment, and that is when I was brought into the project. There were many factors in our favor — e.g., social structures already in place such as the alternative spaces, as well as children and families sensitized to the rights of the child — and my task was to help bring in the environmental theme into the discussions and actions.

When I first went to these alternative spaces and started to interact with the kids, I asked, “What do you think the environment is?” At first, they didn’t answer, but then they would say, “Well, environment, trees, environment, forest.” It should be said that environmental education in our country is very formal and instructive. We tell children: “Don’t litter. Don’t cut down trees. Don’t...” We give them information and that is where they get their ideas about the environment as “trees.” However, for low-income, working children, children in difficult circumstances, the reality of their environment is certainly not trees.

PMT and the children started with a sensitizing phase to awaken the senses of the kids to their own environment — what was next to them, what they were dealing with at home, where the water they were drinking came from, or if they didn’t have water, why not? If they had light, where did this electricity come from? If they were working in the streets and having problems breathing, why was this happening to them? It was an attempt to lay the groundwork for an awareness of their environment. Since this was a national project, the sensitizing processes were very different in different places. Children living in the city had different issues from those in rural communities.

Then we went through the phase of problem identification, so the children designed some forms to orient the process. The cost was minimal, since we used very inexpensive materials — just a few sheets of paper to record the major problems of the community, to interview the elders, to interview other people in the community, to hold discussions in their alternative space, and to fill out forms. We had the most amazing research sheets, very thorough, very serious. And I’m talking about people who, for the most part, almost don’t know how to read and write. It was amazing what they were able to do in terms of identifying their own problems, which were vast and diverse. Some problems were related to nutrition, while others were related to the pollution of their water, and still others were

related to violence in their neighborhoods. Violence, by the way, is a major environmental problem, especially in suburban neighborhoods. So we had sheets of paper and children exchanging experiences about the problems. It was the children who decided what were the major problems of the community, the problem they were going deal with.

They decided on several points to address. One of the major points was how to involve the authorities, how to have a voice with them, how to sensitize them and change their behaviors. We wanted the children to see that they had the *right* to live in a healthy environment, so that they could say: “We’re not asking for favors anymore, this is our right.”

The children designed micro-action at the community level, sometimes with a school, or with neighbors, depending on what they were talking about. The projects were very diverse. For example, in the rural areas, there were reforestation projects in very dangerous, steep hillsides with illegal settlements. But the children didn’t do the forestation by themselves. They decided to get help from middle-class children in primary school, going up the mountains and planting trees with them and trying to solve the problem together. This social mobilization was very important and politically significant.

In the cities, a major problem is garbage in the markets. Children work with their parents in the markets, selling food and meat, and the conditions there are terrible. So in one city the children mobilized a whole market to improve the garbage collection system and the garbage containers. They mapped the areas that had this problem and used the maps to work out their solutions. They had meetings with the adults, since they know we have to work on problems together, and that neither the state nor the mayor is going to help. They knew that it was up to them to make the first response. We organized meetings where the participants of the project in each city met together. The children brought what they had done at the neighborhood level, and they shared. We had 18, 19 kids representing their neighborhood, their alternative spaces. They exchanged their experiences and then started to think globally, not thinking anymore about their neighborhoods, their alternative spaces, their homes, but thinking about the city as a whole and discussing the larger issues. They finally reorganized the garbage collection system of the markets in a city of a million and a half people.

We had these meetings in 21 cities and it was amazing to watch these working children talking together, one saying, “Well, I think the major issue is such and such, and we should improve our quality of life in such and such a way,” and another saying, “No, I think what we have is this problem.” Gradually, they did begin to think broadly together. We were working with a very big age range and the teenagers between 15 and 18 years old were the facilitators. They would lead the meetings to a consensus to identify the major problem of the city and to develop a planning process for macro-action involving the city, the politicians, and the commitment of many adults. Gradually everyone learned to see further than their

immediate surroundings, but the process was very different according to the situation in each city.

The case of Quito will serve to explain it better. Working children, especially shoeshiners, decided that the major problem in Quito was air pollution. They came to this conclusion because they were having breathing problems from spending 10 hours in the street in the old part of Quito, a very closed area where the pollution problem is very severe.

They decided that this was the main issue for the city and that they should hold public demonstrations, talk with the police and sign an agreement with them, and run a campaign to stop the cars from polluting the air. They wanted to work together with the police and that is symbolically very important, because a lot of the maltreatment of street and working children comes from the police. According to an agreement with the police, the kids would stop cars that were polluting and put a sticker on them saying, "I don't want to pollute." The cars with the sticker had three weeks to go to the police station and have their engines fixed so they wouldn't pollute. The children also made a petition to the mayor, asking him to pass stronger regulations in order to set new standards for car emissions.

It was amazing. Quito is a city of almost 1.5 million people and everybody was aware of the project. Everybody was looking at these stickers and you could hear conversations like this: "Do you have a sticker on your car?" "No, I don't." "Oh, you're lucky," since the polluting cars were the ones wearing a sticker....

Michael: What role were you and other adults playing along the way, in the matter of guidance, support, or training?

María: Sometimes it was the adults who made the first political connections, or dealt with the media, making the initial contacts and connections, making decisions all the time, organizing. They were all part of Team PMT, which is a national team made up of seven people, with others coming in and out doing mostly volunteer work. The people on the team come from several different backgrounds and included social communicators, anthropologists, a psychologist, and one heterogeneous person. I was the heterogeneous person, more environmental than anything else. Also, each alternative space has a facilitator, and these people are very important. They are people from the communities we go to. Sometimes they are paid modestly and sometimes they are not paid at all. Some got involved because they knew of other alternative spaces and wanted to have them in their own community or neighborhood; they organized a local alternative space, using the same principles and methods as the one they knew.

These working children and the facilitators have been receiving training from the PMT team about the rights of the child for about 10 years now. So they really know what they're talking about. They can speak out amazingly about their rights, about what they are doing, and about their problems and struggles.

Michael: You started with working children as a defined group, but you spread to other children. Did they all get drawn into the alternative spaces?

María: The alternative spaces can't accommodate 70,000 children. No, we did just the opposite. The children involved in the project in the first place, about 500, went into the schools to talk; they explained the project and tried to induce the schools to participate. We had many working children going to middle-class schools saying, "You know, we have rights. We're fighting for this and we would like you to join us." And it was quite a learning process with middle-class kids getting involved in environmental problems, not the classical environment as "tropical rain forest," but local issues that directly affected their lives and had deep political implications.

I took some of the children to a middle-class "white" school for the first time. I was frightened; they came with their slogans and started to talk with these middle-class kids, saying, "The environmental crisis is not just our problem. It's also your problem, and we have to work on this together." And I watched them work together. They decided to do reforestation to protect their living conditions with the middle-class kids. They climbed the mountain together, an hour and a half, and planted trees. They worked together during city and national meetings to share information and discuss broader environmental issues. The pedagogical and political impact of this is going to be a landmark for these kids, who normally don't have a chance to understand what is going on out there.

Michael: Given that these children work — sometimes 10 or 12 hours a day — where do they find the time in their lives to engage in these alternative spaces?

María: Alternative spaces are very diverse in every part of the country and in every neighborhood and in every region. The schedules and how frequently they meet depend on the community and on the time that the children have available. Their occupations play a role. Shoeshine boys have to be up early, you know! Sometimes they set sessions three times a week and they have a schedule for that. Those children that can make it, do make it. Otherwise, they set up their own meetings. "Are you free?" — "Yes, I'm free." — "I can't come." — "Okay, never mind." It's very flexible in terms of scheduling. PMT does not have set meeting times. It's not like a school-type thing. But this means the facilitator must be available and flexible. You may have alternative spaces meeting four times a week. Some have found the best time to be at nine o'clock at night, because it's when school is finished and their jobs are finished. Others only meet on the weekends.

Michael: When you say "alternative spaces," are they real spaces that you go to?

María: It depends. We wanted to try to put the alternative spaces inside some physical space in the community. PMT tried two main ideas. One was the schools; having these kids meeting and thinking and speaking there is symbolically very important. The other was to use the health care centers, one room. Sometimes we would use the community center. In some cases the community didn't have space available. So we would have the community get together to build a room for the alternative space with a very, very simple roof and wall and window space. This was in one or two cases.

Michael: Was it dedicated solely for this use?

María: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. For example, in one primary school we were using one classroom. It was very nice, because when you went to the school you knew where the alternative space was. All the walls were painted and there were flowers outside. It was just one classroom, and during the day it was used as a normal classroom.

Michael: How sustainable are these projects that the children develop?

María: The most difficult thing has been to transfer the projects to the communities in each city. I don't think there's a method for that. It's very complicated. We've worked with 21 cities in Ecuador, but as far as I know, we have had only four successful responses of communities saying, "Okay, we'll take care of this project. We already have the networks. We know how to do it." This is because it is not like an input/output project; instead, it's a very, very long process. To keep it in a larger perspective, you have to bring it to the community. Otherwise, we cannot guarantee a continuance, which is very important.

Michael: These four cities or communities that promised to take on a project — how did they manage that? Was it a political commitment by the mayor? Or some political process?

María: Every case was different. In one particular case, a local group transcended the alternative space idea and became a nongovernment local organization, with its own name, and got support from other environmental NGOs. In another case, we had a very committed mayor who was working with the project. This mayor created an island for the children to create a model called "the democratic republic for children," and part of this was to maintain continuity for the project. In another case, the alternative space made its own connections to get funding and support on the local level, so they could keep going on their own. It is different in each case. I don't know if there is one major characteristic, or one ingredient that makes it work.

Michael: Given that the project has been going for about 10 years, has anyone watched the kids? What has happened to them?

María: I think, again, there is no one single pattern. I've seen a generation of instructors and facilitators of alternative spaces working with the younger kids. One thing I can say is that they are very powerful; they're not the common everyday children and teenagers. They are not average and we have to accept that. They are still youth and children living in difficult circumstances, but taking their situation in a very different way, in a more self-reflective way, and trying to find solutions by themselves — not being part of the problem, but part of the solution. Sometimes it frightens me what we are doing with them, because they have so many hopes and expectations. We all know how disappointing and oppressive society, and the whole political and economic system, can be. We need to learn more about what happens to the children, and we also need to know more about the volunteer support given by grown-ups at the alternative spaces. These people

have been very helpful, organizing and speaking the same language with the kids. But many problems stand in the way of following up on what they all become and where they go.

Michael: What has been the role of UNICEF in all of this?

María: I was in charge of the planning process and the interaction with UNICEF for the project, and I was used to working with people from international environmental organizations, which are very fixed and strict. When you talk about an empowerment process that takes years, they tend to say, “You’re crazy, I want input, output, outcomes.” When I talked with UNICEF people, they were different. For example, the UNICEF director in Ecuador asked me how we were going to monitor and evaluate the project. I said, “Well, we haven’t thought about that yet, because we have to discuss it with the kids and see what they’re doing. This has to be a long-term process, and we’re focusing more on processes right now and political attitude-changing.” He accepted that. Mainstream funding organizations usually don’t like to hear this vague stuff.

Michael: Does UNICEF support many of these kinds of children’s programs?

María: In UNICEF, about 84% of the money goes to sectoral programs — immunization, breast feeding, oral rehydration programs, and so on — basically, to save lives. This is very important, obviously. But I believe more in community development. People in the field in UNICEF also believe that is the way to go, but only 16% of UNICEF money goes to it. We very much hope that the new director of UNICEF will move in that direction. It’s a good opportunity to stop being so patronizing, in that paternalistic North/South way, and to start recognizing that communities and especially children can do a lot themselves to make healthy change.

I don’t want to be prescriptive, but I believe that the only way to go is to work collaboratively in constructing self-reliant, politically critical and self-reflecting children and neighborhoods, especially among subaltern social sectors and communities.