

Los Niños Son el Futuro: Empowering Women to Bring Peace through Children's Health  
Ecuador  
Grinnell College  
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## Section I

As interns at the Centro de Salud in 2013 we witnessed high rates of malnutrition affecting children ages 0-5 years. Statistics provided by local physicians as well as the Ministerio De Salud Publica (at the national level) confirmed our suspicions. Thus, our overarching project goal was to decrease infant and child malnutrition in the community of Puerto Lopez by strengthening the existing, but underdeveloped, mothers' club.

Other than the Davis grant, no outside fundraising efforts contributed to our project.

To this end, we set out to conduct house to house surveys to gather information about any barriers that prevent mothers from attending the club, as well as mother's breastfeeding and normal feeding habits. We found that vast majority has had no schooling past elementary school and could not properly identify foods rich in protein, calcium, iron or other essential micro and macronutrients. We also took the heights and weights of the children in each house and when compiled with additional data collected from nearby nurseries, an obvious trend of about 4 in 10 children were underweight and under normal height, evidence of the malnutrition prevalent in this region. After surveying for 2-3 weeks, we began to hold charlas (open and informal gatherings common in Ecuadorian culture) to discuss our findings, educate the community about proper nutrition, and reestablish the mothers' club.

We had discovered that the mothers' club that existed previously recently had disbanded, and instead all mothers come to the clinic on Wednesday mornings simply for required infant vaccinations. Thus, we spoke to the head nurse Hungria about re-starting the club and re-building the community among the mothers. The staff was in agreement. However, we realized the cultural mindset of the mothers was the hindering factor of the club's success. The coastal people of Ecuador have a reputation for being laid back. They seemed to not be proactive about their health, and although malnutrition is a significant chronic problem, they appeared to have very little motivation to combat it. This was evident as mothers and family members were given multiple invitations to charlas after participating in surveys, but very few showed up. We had to resort to multiple radio announcements advertising free fruits and vegetables and additional free gifts to increase audiences. Additionally, most workshops were repeated multiple times due to attendee's inability to show up in at the time specified.

Upon these realizations we altered our initial project goals. Instead of placing club leadership in the hands of mothers, we agreed it should be the responsibility of the resident obstetrician to continue the monthly charlas. The resident must also collect height and weight of all children whose mothers attend to monitor the club's effectiveness. These data will be reported regularly to Anam and Matthew. To ensure sustainability, the responsibility will be handed on to future resident obstetricians as they cycle through, as part of the curriculum during their time at the Centro. All of this has been detailed in a document that we wrote and had signed by the head nurse and director of the Centro. Additionally, the clinic staff advised us that incentives play a major role in the attendance of all clubs and charlas. Therefore, we equipped the Centro with the tools and gifts they need to keep the mothers coming to club meetings and to further ensure club sustainability. Gift packets were assembled by us and labeled for the convenience of the obstetricians, to give to mothers who attend regularly. At our final charla, we had the resident prepare and deliver the material. Club attendance consisted of about

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40 mothers who signed a document pledging to regularly attend and actively participate in club meetings.

The measures described above will ensure the club will be more sustainable and effective than the club that existed previously. The leadership role of the resident, the legal "compromiso" that details the responsibility of club facilitation and maintenance, and the collecting of data to monitor the club's effectiveness, all contribute to that. We are also aware that gift giving is not a practical goal to maintain for years to come. Hence, we have agreed with the clinic that in the coming months they must continue to provide such incentives for attendance, but also continue our work towards a change of mindset in the club to shift mothers' dependence from external gifts to slowly taking charge of their health.

## **Section II**

In our project, we considered peace a multifaceted concept and we can define peace in various ways. Peace is the alleviation from structural violence created by malnourishment in Pto. Lopez. It is also the ability and freedom of mothers to become active participants in their health and in the health of young children in the community. Peace forms an environment where these young children can successfully grow and become empowered by their good health to lead Pto. Lopez and their country. In the short-term, our project symbolizes this concept as we strengthened the mothers' club and re-constructed a community between the medical staff and the mothers. Our early life intervention in the form of community outreach and education in the club empowers young mothers to claim agency of their health and the health of their children. For the long-term, we hope to see a shift in the mothers' mindset from wanting free gifts to wanting to raise healthy children, and consistent participation in their club. We have also spoken to the resident about implementing the charlas and workshops in a nearby, more remote region. By extending the educational resources and awareness to communities beyond Pto. Lopez, we hope to improve the larger population's nutritional habits and overall health.

This project has taught us a lot about the difficulty of community work in a cross cultural setting. In the US, statistics and warnings about the rates and effects of malnutrition among infants would be one of the most powerful ways to motivate individuals to be proactive for their children's health. In Pto. Lopez, a more instant form of reward was needed, such as fruit bags and baby clothes, to spark an interest and restart the mothers' club. At times it felt like we were trying to help a people that didn't want to be helped. The need was obvious, yet despite so much effort, the people were often unresponsive. In the US, most individuals are very concerned with the well-being of their children, and parenting and nursing support groups are popular ways to gain knowledge about raising a child. It takes time and communication to learn about new cultural perspectives and how to be effective with people of a different mindset. Our work helped us learn how to think on our feet and go beyond our proposal to implement the most effective solutions and create a sustainable impact.

This project was important because it provided a resource for young mothers to become equipped to alleviate child malnutrition so their children can get a better start to life. We learned that although a population may not be aware of a problem, it is important to try to educate them and leave them with the tools to instill a greater peace in that area (Matthew Miller).

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Anam holding a baby after a vaccination meeting



Matthew and Anam with some mothers after speaking to them about malnutrition