
SUPPORTING A CULTURE OF NON-VIOLENCE

Bolivia: Towards a Culture of Nonviolence



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List of Abbreviations

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| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| PADEM | Support for Local Democracy Programme |
| POA | Annual Operational Plan |
| SDC | Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation |
| SLIM | Municipal Integral Legal Service |
| VIO | Vice Ministry for Equal Opportunities |

1. Background

The “Best of Me for You” is a project that was proposed by concerned citizens who sought to prevent and eradicate violence against women in Quillacollo city in Cochabamba province, Bolivia. The initiative received technical and financial support from the SDC project “Towards a Culture of Nonviolence”, which was developed under the Civic Culture Program and implemented by PADEM (Support for Local Democracy Program) in partnership with Training and Civil Rights members of the Civic Culture Program. The Civic Culture Program initiated a national competition called “Beware of Violence”, to promote the development, implementation and dissemination of initiatives that contribute to joint action between civil society and local government, to prevent and reduce violence against women at municipal level. The competition is open to municipal government and civil society, and it is broadcasted on various media. It receives around 100 proposals from both urban and rural municipalities every year. From those it selects around 30 proposals, which are supported financially with USD 500-1000 and technically, i.e. through training, information on good practices and innovations and communication support.

The project promotes the prevention and reduction of violence against women at municipal level, through the involvement of civil society and local governments in District 5 of the Municipality of Quillacollo. The Municipality of Quillacollo has over 200'000 inhabitants and is composed of several districts, with only one Municipal Integral Legal Service (SLIM). Consequently, the demand for SLIM services exceeds its technical and logistical capacity. Due to the absence of a decentralised SLIM in District 5, i.e. “down town” of Quillacollo, many women were excluded from the government programme against violence.

Concerned citizens in District 5 of Quillacollo city initiated the project when they noticed the high rates of violence against women and increasing femicide in the city (Quillacollo is the second most violent city in Bolivia), and the absence of a decentralised public institution that could provide information and care for victims of violence. First, they sought to bring together and train various civil society actors and local authorities and create a network. In 2010, 36 elected neighbourhood leaders of the civic watch-committee, school boards, police, health facilities, NGOs, shelter for victims, private universities, and local government of District 5 joined forces through the creation of a network. They enhanced their skill and expertise on the issue, including general awareness raising of the public to gain support for the initiative. In 2011, the network was consolidated and worked out a plan of joint action. This plan was then submitted to next year’s competition “Beware of Violence” in 2011, when it was selected again, and received another USD 500 for implementing its action plan.

This time the network decided to strengthen and promote advocacy activities. A key activity was a march of citizens – called the “Long March of Unity” – to advocate for the support of more men regarding the concerns of the network. The result was that 36 male leaders decided to participate in the activities of the network. Another substantial outcome was the creation of a municipal integral legal service (SLIM) in District 5. The network requested the main authority of the municipal government to include the construction of the building in the municipal budget through a petition, which was successful. USD 43800 were budgeted for the building with all the requirements to address the prevention of violence and dealing with consequences of violence (psychological, legal, psycho-social).

In conclusion, the network is highly relevant because it achieved the construction and creation of this service in its own zone, giving citizens, men and women, the ability to make complaints and receive care and information on family and domestic violence.

2. Context and Power Analysis

Decentralisation in Bolivia

Bolivia is an ethnically diverse country with a turbulent political history. Over 60 percent of its 9 million citizens are indigenous peoples - the largest such percentage in Latin America. They latter have historically been exploited by elites. The history and these differences have polarised the country, as is reflected by the 2005 election: Evo Morales' Movement toward Socialism (MAS) polled twice as high in the highlands than in the lowlands, i.e. got 64 percent of the vote in the former and 31 percent in the latter.¹ Decentralisation was introduced in the mid-1990s, when the Popular Participation Law ("Ley de Participacion Popular") was passed and 311 elected municipal governments were created – this number was later increased to 337. As a consequence, municipalities received direct fiscal transfers, and mechanisms for citizens to be included in planning and oversight were introduced. Under Morales, a new structure was introduced for sub-national autonomies, granting varying levels of political and economic autonomy to the regions, municipalities and indigenous communities.²

In the current structure, local governments are autonomous bodies, whose powers have been decentralised from national to local level. The local executive (mayor, senior officers, directors and technical staff responsible for implementation) is a key actor in the local government. Its role is to implement municipal policies as planned in the Municipal Operational Plan and to implement Municipal laws. The municipal council consist of a supervisory body of public administration and the municipal executive (mayor). It also has the capacity to legislate or propose laws. It is composed of about 11 representatives, depending on the size and spatial organisation of each municipality. Both the mayor and the councillors are elected in democratic elections every 5 years. In Quillacollo 7 of the 11 council members are women.

Effectiveness of Services

According to World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators of 2010, Bolivia has low ratings for all indicators, i.e. under 50/100. Especially the rule of law and regulatory quality has decreased significantly since 2002³. This is also the case for the legal services promoted by Law 1674 against family and domestic violence, which should be implemented in all 339 municipalities. The role of these so-called SLIMs is to prevent violence against women and raise awareness, offering free services for legal and psychosocial assistance to victims, and accompany victims if they decide to take the case to justice. To date, only 174 of such centres exist and many of them cannot fulfil their mandate, as they lack specialists, funds, materials, logistical support, etc. There are cases where the SLIMs levy fees for their services, as citizens do not know that the services are supposed to be free and due to the mentioned lack funds. Similarly, the Health Centres are obliged to give medical attention to victims of physical and/or sexual violence, including offering forensic certification free of charge. Again, sometimes these are emitted at a cost. Another bottleneck is the judicial sector, where often the aggressor is favoured over the victim, justifying violence against the victims or encouraging reconciliation.

There are a number of gaps and contradictions in the law that make implementing it difficult. However, the persisting violence against women, the tendency to declare such behaviour as normal and the ensuing impunity, has lead to the formulation of appropriate procedures that protect the integrity and liberty of women in the new Penal Code. Despite this, not much has happened since 1993, when a study confirmed weaknesses in these areas. Organisations working on the rights of women in Bolivia are putting pressure on the government to create special women procurators and include their role in the Law of the Public Ministry, which would help to address the problem.

¹ Seth Kaplan, 2012. Fixing fragile states; Chapter on Bolivia: Building Representative Institutions in a Divided Country.

² Miguel Centellas, 2010, Bolivias Radical Decentralisation in „Americas“ quarterly, issue „Healthcare. Consulted on internet (4.09.2012)

³ The Worldbank [good governance indicators](#) by Kaufmann consulted online (4.09.2012)at:

An additional complementary law is being promoted to include more preventive measures, to clarify the limits of reconciliation, and to establish norms that protect Bolivian women, not only in the family but also in the areas of education, labour, health, public institutions, media and the community so that the Law becomes more integrated.

However, at national level, the Vice-Ministry for Equal Opportunities (VIO) does not have enough resources to fulfil its mandate, let alone assist in the management and appropriation of norms or implement actions focusing on poverty of indigenous women, their sub-ordinate position and the related violence they face. In addition, the high turnover of staff in this institution, its limited decision-making power and the lack of resources (human and financial), are other obstacles that block the fulfilment of its mandate to the detriment of Bolivian women.

Legitimacy

As they are key actors in the process of decentralisation, municipalities are the guarantors of human rights. Mechanisms for citizen representation in institutionalised spaces were created through the formation of territorial or neighbourhood organisations, which participate in municipal decision-making and accountability processes. In addition, the Watch Committee (Comite de Vigilancia) was created, a body elected by residents – men and women – whose role is to represent citizens' demands and proposals, as well as to control and monitor the implementation of agreements made between citizens and the government in the Annual Operating Plan. These participatory and consensus mechanisms allow citizens to exercise their rights and duties, to express agreement, and take on responsibility, but also to question their authorities. The municipality is now one of the most democratic institutions in Bolivia, with improved credibility and public confidence.

Authority

The national context is characterised by a high level of social conflict between rulers and institutions on the one hand, and on the other hand social organisations (police, health sector, lowland social organisations, miners, cooperatives, pensioners, people with disabilities, etc.) opposing government policies or programmes, e.g. the highway through protected and indigenous lands⁴. This situation is reflected in periodic road blocks and marches that, despite the usual high degree of mobilisation and tension, often do not alter normal development of planned activities. However, there is more than one form of conflict resolution. Conflicts are also negotiated between the parties as a way to ease the tension and generate calm.

Women's Rights

"The Panos Institute reports that gender violence causes more death and disability in Bolivia among women aged 15–44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, or war. Around 50 percent of woman from a variety of living circumstances throughout the country have admitted to being subject to physical abuse or intimidation in their lifetime. The vast majority of these threats come from within the family, thus keeping women from reporting the aggressions. Data about violence against women is unclear due to cultural restrictions. However, it is easy to see that the majority of women living in Bolivia today will directly or indirectly face sexual or physical abuse during their lives".⁵

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issue recently requested Latin American governments to intensify their efforts to stop violence against women, girls, teenagers and young indigenous, as being the poorest often they are the principal victims of this form of violence.⁶ It was recommended that they strengthen institutions and indigenous organisations, as well as promote integrated policies against discrimination and violence.

Even though the municipalities in Bolivia are providing space for rights, in the case of women, this is still a challenge for power relations. Currently, the discourse of the dominant party around human

⁴ For more information see the [BBC news summaries](#) (consulted 29/08/2012)

⁵ Foundation for Sustainable Development [Website](#) (consulted 29/08/2012)

⁶ For more see the [website](#) of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (consulted 11/5/2012)

rights is associated with the colonial past, linking ideas of inclusion and non-discrimination to the past exclusion and discrimination of indigenous groups – a discussion that has been taken over by many local governments and organisations. In the same discourse, collective rights are favoured over individual rights, which may pose a risk to the full exercise of the rights of women. In particular, the right to enjoy a dignified life free of violence are in opposition to practices in many communities of indigenous identity where some forms of violence are acceptable.

In 1995, the Law against Domestic Violence (Law 1674) was enacted, along with its Regulatory Decree. Both legal instruments oblige the promotion of national policies to prevent and eradicate violence against women, including the obligation for the provision of municipal integral legal services (SLIM) to provide information on rights of women, problems of violence, and legal, psychological and social services for victims. While the creation of such services is mandatory for municipal governments, only 174 (out of 339) created this institution, because many municipalities lack the resources to provide the services.

The Municipality of Quillacollo, has over 200,000 inhabitants and is composed of several districts. There is only one Municipal Integral Legal Service, for which demand exceeds technical and logistical capacities. Therefore, the absence of a decentralised SLIM in the down town of Quillacollo municipality (District 5) excluded many women from the government protection against violence. Here lies the relevance of the network that achieved the construction and creation of this service in its own zone, giving citizens – men and women – the ability to make complaints and receive care and information on family and domestic violence.

3. Participation and Accountability

Space for Participation

The Network itself takes a very participatory approach. It has divided the various tasks and responsibilities among its members. The deputy-mayor helps the communities by contributing material and advocating for support towards the activities of the network at the Municipal level. The local NGO Wiñay develops training courses, keeps the members up to date and raises awareness of the communities on the issue of violence against women. The representative of the school board works on prevention and the coordination of preventive actions with students and teachers at primary and secondary schools. The responsible of the refuge centre coordinates with the police concerning the care and protection of victims. The person responsible for health works on getting free of charge services in cases of physical and/or sexual violence and coordinates health related activities within the network.

The network meets every two months in the meeting hall of the deputy-mayor to evaluate the work plan. The directorate of the network is renewed every two years and the members are responsible for the monitoring of the implementation, the communication with the members, and internal decision-making.

The network also participates as one of many decision-makers in the participatory planning process of the municipality. This is an institutionalised space in all municipalities to ensure participation of citizens and social accountability, going beyond the existing political tensions within the municipality. The network manages to put forward its demands and proposals thanks to the support of the 36 leaders of the zone (neighbourhoods) who are part of the network.

The municipality of Quillacollo gave the network the responsibility to ensure quality and warmth in the service delivery. The network was also invited to participate in the contracting of specialised personnel in each of the required areas (legal, psychological and social). It also acts as a Watchdog, on how these services are implemented.

In fact, the network now goes beyond the topic of violence against women and promotes political participation of women in the 36 neighbourhoods. It is also promoting gender-sensitive planning in the district. To this effect, a strategy is being elaborated to approach the municipal council members,

through training and common agenda building, to formulate actions and proposals that are gender-sensitive for the Annual Operational Plan of the Municipality.

Accountability

In terms of accountability, the watch-committee, which is part of the network is an important institution. The committee is composed of 36 neighbourhood representatives from District 5. They are elected by the citizens, and their role is to hold the municipal government accountable for the use of public resources and to represent demands and proposals from citizens. The committee ensures that the Municipality complies with the promises made regarding the budgeting of activities to fight against violence.

Since the beginning of the program, exchange events were held at national level with the participation of the Deputy Minister for Equal Opportunities. The latter actively participated in establishing a coordination link with the local level to obtain feedback on national public policies on this issue.

From the initiatives and experiences developed, PADEM designed guidelines for strengthening SLIM and networks, that have been approved and then published by the Ministry of Autonomy (responsible for municipal development) and Justice (which has jurisdiction on the issue of violence against women). PADEM also supported partnership building between NGOs (local and international) and other cooperation agencies, to achieve joint and complementary actions.

The “Best of Me for You” initiative was awarded three times in a row as one of the best proposals in this national competition and contributes to the implementation of the Law at local level.

4. Analysis and Main Lessons Learnt

In order to make power relations more inclusive and pro-poor, understanding more about these power issues and where to engage is key. The power cube, as a framework for analysing the spaces, places and forms of power and their interrelationship and will guide the assessment in this chapter.

Regarding relevant **places**, the initiative started at local level, by citizens, and the activities of the network are at a very local level, working on concrete issues. However, there are a number of links that have been made to the national level, e.g. through the PADEM programme, when it launched a national competition and also through the Ministry. The case-study seems to show that the local initiatives are influencing national level, by including the Deputy Ministry in strategic moments and through the development of guidelines. There does not appear to be a global link, but since the project is in its infancy, this could still be established at a later stage. As the power cube claims that the most effective transformational change happens if all levels are addressed, this could be a recommendation for the future of the project.

The **spaces** created through the network are both claimed and invited. Initially, citizens claimed the space, by bringing up the issue, handing in a proposal to the national competition, and setting up the network. By inviting all relevant stakeholders to participate, spaces in various “spheres” were claimed, thus creating opportunities for dialogue where previously this had been difficult. Due to the legitimacy the network has gained, it is now invited by local government to participate in formal spaces of municipal planning and decision-making. It is foreseen that the network will participate in the formulation of the 2013 municipal operational plan so that the network can advocate for the allocation of sufficient resources (equipment, human resources, finances) for the functioning of the recently created SLIM. The network is an open space, which tries to incorporate all relevant actors to be part of the initiative so that can truly represent the population in the elaboration and implementation of municipal policies. The network is recognised by civil society and local authorities because it functions democratically and horizontally. Since its establishment, it searches to represent in transparent way the needs and proposals of the population with regard to violence. It has avoided being influenced by party politics in its actions. Thus it has successfully balanced

various interests, by including non-political actors, such as a university, teachers, the Church, NGOs and professional women activists, e.g. the coordinator of the network. The constant efforts of the coordinator of the network to be impartial and inclusive has also contributed to the functioning and legitimacy of the network.

Regarding forms of **power**, Bolivia has decentralised government structures. The structures provide space for the inclusion of citizens through representation in the councils and through the watch-committee, which monitors the implementation of the municipal plans. The mayor, councils and watch-committees are all elected. Interestingly, in Quillacollo, women hold the majority in the council. However, there is clearly also hidden power. Council members of the dominant party have tried to influence and even change the formal structures in Quillacollo, when they tried to oust the mayor (who is from another party) shortly after he was elected – and claim the seat for their own party. Despite these power struggles, the local authority has continued to incorporate thanks to the support from the population that elected him. The SLIM was constructed as agreed. There are also clearly invisible powers, which lead to the discrimination of women. Unequal gender relations are made acceptable by claiming they are part of culture and traditional practices. Violence against women is accepted as part of tradition and is difficult to put on the agenda. Men initially questioned the actions of the network due to their conservative and patriarchal attitudes. However, through awareness raising targeted at men and by getting their buy in through “the march of men for men”, the network was accepted. It is imperative, that, apart from offering quality services to women, work on the causes of violence and prevention continues. For this reason, the network develops training activities and updates / informs its staff to pay attention in an integral manner in a gender perspective, to not only look at violence but also the elimination of the practice, and its abusive power and patriarchy that underlies it.

Some main lessons learnt in this case are the importance of:

- **Common values:** The issue of gender violence can only be resolved if one shares a value system based on human rights. If this is achieved, the topic becomes a reason for unity and mobilisation.
- **Shared responsibility between citizens and local authorities:** Shared responsibility is essential to achieve agreements, generate proposals and gain access to local resources, as well as contribute to municipal governance.
- **Informed civil society:** If civil society is informed and awareness is raised on the issue and on rights, this can create a process of civic mobilisation, with concrete proposals, which can influence the formulation and implementation of municipal policies - even if initially the issue is not seen as priority for the public agenda by local authorities.
- **Involvement of strategic allies:** The inclusion of men as allies is fundamental, as violence against women is a problem of both men and women. Also, if this is not done, no real transformational change can be achieved. Inclusion of influential stakeholders also proved crucial. The participation of the local leaders was crucial to gain approval for the use of terrain for the construction of Municipal Integral legal service. Other actors, such as the police, the justice sector, and other government officials are also important to cut the cycle of violence.
- **Right type of support:** Ownership and sustainability were created by supporting the initiative with training, capacity building, workshops and field visits, rather than through financial means. This meant that the money-trap was avoided, that could have created dependencies. Also nobody had more power due to access to funds than others, so the power was shared equally among all stakeholders. The necessary funds were sought from the Government, who, in the end, also has the responsibility for the implementation of the SLIMs as per legislation.
- **Training as an entry point.** Training and awareness raising were used as entry points, not as a goal in itself. It was deemed necessary to have a common understanding of the issue and appears that this helped to elaborate common objectives and agendas.

5. Concluding Remarks

The case study shows how initiatives of citizens can have positive results and transcend political differences with only a little project support. Very limited funds were offered directly to the network. The focus was on capacity building, i.e. strengthening ownership and sustainability. Focusing on common objectives helped to keep the network going and continue the work for which it had been created. Political forces and power struggles in the formal structures pose a risk for the continuation, but so far this has been mitigated. Because the network also consists of non-political members, it has gained the legitimacy of citizens. That the network is high-jacked by political interests is still perceived as a risk, but this is unlikely to happen as long as the network remains multi-stakeholder, and focused on clear objectives. The greatest risk is the constant of change of local authorities by parties in the councils. This could hamper and even paralyse the planned activities, such as those for the functioning of the SLIM.

The network appears to have achieved a kind of “sharing power” mechanism which transcends politics. It has accomplished this by including different stakeholders from both government and civil society, through a participatory approach and transparency within the functioning of the network. Apart from highlighting the importance of having a transparent and democratic working mode, this suggests that the leadership style is very important to bring members together and focus on the common objective.

Finally, the national competition which supported the initiative is an interesting mechanism that could be replicated in other countries. The competition focuses on a clear topic and offers interesting possibilities for civil society to collaborate with local government. The fact that the competition is repeated every year, allows for continuation of initiatives and support. Regarding replication of the network, it is not clear if and how it could be replicated in other municipalities, as it is based on the initiative of citizens and the ownership is likely to be weak if initiated by external actors. Perhaps, if the idea were to be promoted and shared, interested and concerned citizens in other municipalities would take up the issue and ask for support from the network and/or through the national competition.

6. References

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