



Advocacy Case Study: Transforming Indigenous Girls' Lives in Guatemala



Adolescent girls participating in the "Rights in Action" campaign in Concepción Chiquirichapa, Guatemala

Background

Guatemala's population is among the fastest growing and most ethnically diverse in Latin America – nearly half of the country's 14.7 million inhabitants belong to an indigenous Mayan ethnic group. The majority of indigenous Guatemalans live in extreme poverty and have limited access to education, healthcare, and even basic services such as water and sanitation (Dries-Daffner, 2007). In addition to tremendous economic and social challenges, Guatemalans struggle with pervasive violence and the scars left by the country's 36-year civil war, which ended in 1996.

Two of the areas hardest-hit by the civil war are the indigenous towns of Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá, located in Guatemala's Western highland region in the Department of Quetzaltenango. This region is predominantly Mam-speaking and among the poorest in Guatemala, where only 14% of rural indigenous girls complete primary school (Hallman, 2007) and 1% of the population has attained a university education (UNDP, 2010). Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá suffered mass displacement and violence as a result of the civil war, and recently struggled with a severe shortage of potatoes, their primary cash crop. The deepened poverty that resulted has caused mass migration to Mexico and the United States, leaving behind disintegrated families led primarily by female heads of household.

This case study examines how the Let Girls Lead's Adolescent Girls' Advocacy & Leadership Initiative partnered with the Association for Research, Development and Education (IDEI) to empower adolescent girls in Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá to lead the development and rehabilitation of their communities. IDEI's success demonstrates the importance of advocacy to address grassroots community needs and to empower marginalized populations to participate in the democratic process, in addition to highlighting the potential for adolescent girls to become community leaders and advocates for their own needs.

ABOUT LET GIRLS LEAD

Let Girls Lead is building a global movement of Champions who empower girls to attend school, stay healthy, escape poverty, and overcome violence. Let Girls Lead empowers girls and their allies to lead social change through advocacy, education, storytelling, economic empowerment, and strategic partnerships. Since 2009, Let Girls Lead's proven model has contributed to improved health, education, livelihoods, and rights for more than 3 million girls through the passage of national laws, implementation of programs, and distribution of funds to ensure access to quality healthcare, education, and economic opportunity.

For more information please visit: www.letgirlslead.org

Empowering Girls to Advocate for Themselves

Founded in 1994, IDEI works throughout the Western Highlands of Guatemala on health, education, research and infrastructure projects, using strategies grounded in community participation, gender equity, human rights, and cultural respect. In 2009, IDEI staff member Juany García Perez became a Fellow of the Adolescent Girls' Advocacy & Leadership Initiative, and was awarded AGALI funding to launch a pilot project to create girl-friendly public policies in Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá. In partnership with AGALI, the IDEI team worked with adolescent girls during the year-long project to advocate with local authorities for policies that promoted adolescent girls' health, education, and development.

Rather than advocating for girls and young women, IDEI staff built girls' capacity to raise their own voices and advocate directly with government decision-makers for increased funding for girl-friendly policies. As a result of this pilot initiative, both town mayors approved and signed the policies developed by IDEI and the girl advocates. Further, the mayor of Concepción allocated 0.5% percent of the total yearly municipal budget to open a Municipal Office of Childhood and Adolescence. These successes represent major advocacy accomplishments, especially because they were designed and led by indigenous adolescent girls and because IDEI did not have previous experience advocating for the budget increases needed to ensure successful policy implementation at the local level.



“The major issue with adolescents on a national level is that there are no real spaces for youth to have any decision-making power. IDEI offered a real space for us to participate.”

--Yessenia Chanax, 19 year old youth advocate and Technical Assistant to the AGALI-IDEI Project

Girls in San Miguel Sigüilá participating in the “I dream” contest sponsored by the AGALI project

Even before partnering with AGALI, IDEI was deeply committed to empowering girls and youth as protagonists in their own development. One of IDEI's organizational principles is “mediating pedagogy”, in which the educator works with participants to analyze their community's needs and develop solutions to the problems they identify. Using this methodology, IDEI has participated in a variety of national youth development initiatives, including the planning and implementation of the national Guatemalan Youth Parliament. Ten percent of the girls who participated in IDEI's advocacy project were already part of the organization's ongoing youth leadership programs and the Guatemalan Youth Parliament prior to becoming involved in the advocacy initiative. By combining the principals of mediating pedagogy and youth leadership with advocacy capacity building and tools from AGALI, IDEI created an innovative new model for successful advocacy led by adolescent girls.

Prioritizing Girls' Needs

With support from AGALI, IDEI has taken a multi-faceted approach to developing and implementing public policies that actively engage girls, including training and empowering girls to advocate for their own needs, educating local leaders and key decision-makers about the many issues faced by indigenous girls, and using print and radio media as a community awareness-building tool.

The first stage of IDEI's democratic participation project empowered 40 adolescent girls and young women in Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá to advocate for the approval and implementation of girl-friendly municipal public policies. These public policies ensure that local government addresses girls' unique needs in the areas of health, education, HIV prevention, and culturally-relevant family violence prevention.

"Using our methodology, we see a 13 year old who speaks very clearly about what a public policy is, why it's important and how it affects her."

*--Janet Ikeda,
IDEI Executive Director*

- 1) An adolescent girl speaking at a municipal meeting in Concepción Chiquirichapa
- 2) AGALI project participants marching on International Women's Day in San Miguel Sigüilá



When Juany became an AGALI Fellow, she began using tools she learned in the AGALI program to build upon IDEI's existing work with adolescent girls. Employing her new advocacy skills, Juany encouraged IDEI's adolescent girl participants to plan and implement an advocacy strategy. Unlike the majority of advocacy initiatives, the girls themselves led all aspects of their own advocacy campaign, from inviting other organizations and government institutions to become allies to meeting directly with local authorities and municipal mayors to present and defend the proposed public policies. The girls decided they would advocate with the municipal governments of Concepción Chiquirichapa and San Miguel Sigüilá to promote the integrated development of adolescent girls in health, education, HIV, and domestic violence prevention through the participation of girls and young women in government policy decisions. They also decided to convince the mayors of both towns to allocate 0.5% of the municipal budget to ensure the implementation of girl-friendly public policies.

When IDEI initiated its AGALI-funded advocacy strategy, adolescent girls in both municipalities worked together to plan general municipal assembly meetings and public forums to garner public and stakeholder support. Participants included representatives from the various municipal sub-commissions, town mayors and their staff, and traditional community authorities. The girls created several commissions to involve all segments of the communities in the advocacy initiative, including: the Protection Commission, which organized talks with parents about violence prevention and the legal process in cases of family violence; the Participation Commission, which provided information about peer counseling, organized youth mural painting projects, and ensured direct youth participation in the advocacy process; and the Health Commission, which conducted bilingual radio programming in Mam and Spanish to provide young people and their parents with information about sexuality, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and teenage pregnancy. IDEI ensured that print and radio media representatives covered the girls' major events to promote local and national awareness of the initiative.

“The groups of girls and adolescents are the fundamental pillars that breathe life into the decrees, laws and conventions because they are ultimately the beneficiaries and they best know their own needs and reality. They lend credibility to the implementation of public policy that arises from a truly felt need that is expressed directly by the beneficiary population.”

--Juany García Perez, 2009 AGALI Fellow

Advocacy Success for Girls

One of the greatest successes of IDEI's work has been to attain the proposed 0.5% municipal budget allocation to ensure girl-friendly public policy implementation in Concepción Chiquirichapa. In collaboration with IDEI, the local government has used this new funding to establish the Municipal Office of Childhood and Adolescence, which provides adolescent girls, their parents, and the community with a range of support services. The first phase of the project achieved municipal approval for the budgetary allocation in Concepción, and the second phase has seen the establishment and staffing of the office, where several girl-focused projects are already underway. These projects include classes for parents, self-help and peer counseling for adolescents, legal accompaniment in cases of rape and intra-family violence, community sensitization on human rights, and the increased participation of girls and adolescents in the democratic process.

Another significant achievement of IDEI's advocacy initiative has been the election of two adolescent girls as members of the Municipal Board of Directors of the Municipal Commission of Children and Youth. While young people had been members of the Commission in the past, no girls had ever held leadership positions on the Board of Directors. Both girls who were voted onto the Board of Directors were leaders in the girls' groups that spearheaded IDEI's advocacy initiative. They are the first girls in Guatemala to be elected to serve on a town Board of Directors.

Challenges

While IDEI has had great success in the municipality of Concepción Chiquirichapa, advocacy has been more challenging in San Miguel Sigüilá, an ultra-conservative community that is much less receptive to implementing girl-friendly public policies. Local authorities justify their unwillingness to implement girl-friendly policies by arguing that improvements in the municipality's infrastructure are for the benefit of all youth who inevitably use the newly built roads or parks for recreation. In addition, San Miguel manages a smaller budget than Concepción and municipal authorities there contend that other priorities in the town take precedence in the face of such limited resources.

To address these challenges, IDEI's network of 50 girls in San Miguel has taken several actions to build public support for the organization's advocacy efforts. Their actions have included staging a public march in support of the proposed public policy in San Miguel and meeting with the local authorities, Community Development Councils, and the Municipal Development Councils, as well as utilizing organizational influence in the community to reach out to the mayor. Although municipal authorities did not approve increased budgetary allocations in San Miguel, these strategies convinced the mayor to sign the public policies developed by IDEI into law, and to assigned personnel to follow up on their implementation.

Lessons Learned

Through the implementation of this innovative project, AGALI and IDEI have demonstrated the central value of adolescent girls' leadership in the advocacy process. Engaging girls at all stages of their advocacy campaign proved to be a highly effective strategy when approaching government officials, traditional leaders, and the media. By leveraging AGALI tools and IDEI's participatory methodology, the girl leaders were able to highlight and advocate for the largely unacknowledged needs of adolescent girls in both municipalities.

In addition, convening a broad base of allies, including NGO's, community-based organizations and government institutions has been invaluable to the success of the initiative in both municipalities. These allies include the Ministry of Health and the local Health Center, the Ministry of Education, and the national Social Welfare Department. In Concepción, the alliance with the Municipal Office of Women has been particularly important due to shared policy concerns between that office and the new Office of Childhood and Adolescence, which was established in Concepción as a result of IDEI's successful budgetary advocacy. Engaging local schools has also proven an effective way to build support and disseminate the new public policies to both students and their parents.

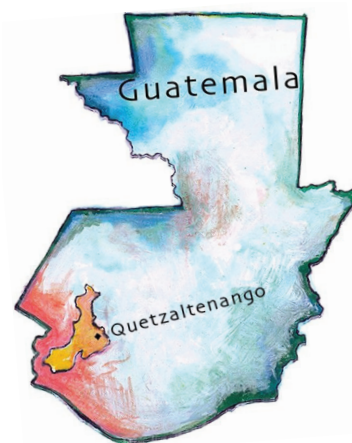
Finally, the political mapping and advocacy strategy planning tools that Juany Garcia Perez learned as an AGALI Fellow have proven central to IDEI's planning process. One of the initial phases of advocacy planning is the analysis of potential allies and opponents, a tactic that helped IDEI garner the public support necessary to achieve success. In addition, Juany cites the community consultations as a major key to the advocacy success, enabling the girls to identify the issues facing their communities and develop girl-friendly solutions. IDEI utilized these direct community consultations along with other municipal-level diagnostic tools to establish a critical baseline from which to advocate for the public policies that address the needs of adolescent girls.

Looking Ahead

Building on the success of their girl-led advocacy strategy, IDEI has begun to work in neighboring municipalities to implement similar advocacy initiatives. With support from AGALI, IDEI acquired additional funding to monitor implementation of the initial strategy, while expanding the advocacy initiative to the two neighboring municipalities of San Martín Sacatepéquez and Santa Cruz Cajolá. IDEI has already begun empowering groups of adolescent girls in those two new municipalities while advocating for the effective implementation of the established public policies in Concepción. IDEI continues to advocate with the municipal authorities in San Miguel Sigüilá to ensure that they follow Concepción's lead and allocate the necessary budgets to implement girl-friendly policies there.

In collaboration with AGALI, IDEI has worked to guarantee that the new public policies developed continue to be implemented after the September, 2011 national elections. To ensure that policymakers remained committed to implementing these new policies following the election, IDEI and the girl advocates in participating towns held media roundtables with potential mayoral candidates to discuss their positions on public policies affecting adolescent girls. After the elections, IDEI worked with the newly-elected officials to ensure their support for the implementation of girl-friendly policies.

Most importantly, IDEI continues to empower indigenous girls to play an active role in shaping their communities, advocating for their own needs, and speaking out on issues that affect them. Through the implementation of advocacy strategies that allow marginalized adolescent girls to engage effectively with local authorities, IDEI and AGALI are demonstrating that the power to create a more peaceful and equitable society rests in the hands of Guatemala's adolescent girls.



Works Cited

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