

Cultural Mediators Program: The Necessary Indigenous School

Maria do Carmo Barcellos

Challenges

The current development models being implemented in the Amazon disregard the traditional knowledge of the indigenous people and jeopardize indigenous territories. Illegal and predatory practices, such as logging, mining, cattle grazing and commercial hunting and fishing in the Amazon region are part of such large threats. Indigenous territories are the ideal targets for these predatory activities considering the fragility of indigenous people's cultures once they integrate with the surrounding society.

Indigenous School and Autonomy

The indigenous school is a privileged institutional space, the only State institution present in all communities in remote locations. The indigenous school works with young people at a particularly important stage of their development. These schools need to bring on board, for its daily practice, the local contents and, in the case of the indigenous teachers, it must find practical ways to implement a dialogue between the knowledge of western science and that of traditional wisdom. Indigenous families value education and what is taught in the schools can spread throughout the community.

In this perspective, the Cultural Mediators Program (PMC for its Portuguese acronym) aims to build capacity of the indigenous schools to teach territorial governance through cultural mediation (dialogue between knowledge bases). School-age children, the upcoming leaders of their territories, need to be prepared for their future territorial governance challenges, considering the violent pressure these territories are and will continue to experience.

Therefore, the program, following a vision of the future, aims at preparing young children to be knowledgeable of, and critically reflect on the reality of their territories, with their strengths and risks, looking for solutions fostering their physical, cultural and economic integrity. It also aims at training teachers to effectively be able to provide instruction about a knowledge dialogue and the construction of a curriculum, taking on board the intercultural and interdisciplinary facets, embedding territorial governance contents, especially in the fields of natural and human sciences with cross-cutting training projects.

Open Paths in Latin America

The PMC has been implemented by Forest Trends' Communities and Territorial Governance Initiative in indigenous territories in Brazil. They have been developed as pilot initiatives in Colombia, in the districts of Caqueta, Guainia and Amazonas by OPIAC (Colombian Amazon indigenous peoples National Organization, by its Spanish acronym) and in Mexico in the Chiapas



region, by Pronatura Sur. During the second semester of 2015 these initiatives started to exchange ideas and experiences and in 2018 they met in San Cristobal de Las Casas in order to systematize the training process of cultural mediators, trying to strengthen the Program, exchange experiences and lay the path for the future. The results of this gathering were written materials that rebuild the experiences and teachings of each initiative and suggests by consensus a future course for the PMC.

Hence, once the context of each country has been considered, the PMC's main objective is to develop actions aimed at building capacity in these indigenous schools so that children and young people can protect their territories (the territory being understood with a holistic approach) and address the future challenges of territorial governance.

The following are specific actions aimed at achieving that PMC goal:

Fostering the training of teachers to act in the classroom in the field of cultural mediation on themes and contents with a territorial governance approach that promotes a dialogue of knowledge in the thematic lines of climate change, forests and territorial governance;

Promoting the creation of pedagogical support materials enhancing the traditional perception and knowledge of topics related to climate change, forests and territorial governance to be used in the classroom, and make the teaching-learning process easier for indigenous school-age children and the young;

Fostering the development of specific methodologies, adapted to the holistic view and social and cultural dynamics of each indigenous people, taking maximum advantage of the pedagogical materials thus produced from workshops addressing specific methodologies for each indigenous people.

Looking for a partnership and an active participation of the governmental agencies responsible for indigenous education in schools, at a local, state and national level, aiming at institutionalizing the inclusion in the curriculum of the basic school program of the indigenous schools (using Political and Pedagogical Projects - PPPs as per the Brazilian acronym) and similar processes of the topics and contents used in the teacher training process as well as the materials produced during that process.

Strengthening the links between similar experiences

Thus, the PMC organized various meetings in Brazil to introduce the Program and has secured its integration with the indigenous school systems of five different municipalities: Cacoal, Pimenta Bueno, Ji Paraná, Espigão D'Oeste and Alta Floresta, and State coordination (Porto Velho). The program organized three workshops for 35 indigenous teachers coming from 8

different peoples and seven different territories of the State of Rondonia: Zoró (Zoró people), Igarapé Lourdes (peoples Arara and Gavião), Roosevelt (Cinta Larga people), Sete de Setembro (Paiter Suruí people), Rio São Pedro (Aikanã-Kwazá people), Rio Mequéns (Sakirabiar people), Rio Branco (remaining 9 indigenous peoples). A handbook was published to train indigenous teachers to the topics at hand, also to be used in secondary schools with an activity book. PMC also published seven books serving as specific pedagogic support for seven different indigenous people, aimed at being used inside the classroom, and two booklets for the Katukina and Yawanawa schools in the state of Acre. The Program is presently working on the creation of a pedagogic game. The publications are being distributed with the assistance of the community and methodological workshops throughout the various schools of the different territories with the participation of the regional coordination office of the indigenous schooling education (CREs as per the Brazilian acronym). For maximizing the use of such materials to approach the first grades of primary school and the involvement of the community in the school processes, all the indigenous and non-indigenous teachers directly involved in those schools are also participating in these processes.

Three workshops were organized in Colombia with local authorities to link the PMC and the PEC (Community educational project) in Caqueta, Guainia and Amazonas. For each region, specific didactic materials were published based on the ancestral and oral tradition on territorial balance and conservation. Even a “travelling notebook” was produced for the Azicatch territory where 22 communities were represented.

A diagnosis was carried out in Mexico with various community leaders. One of the results was the need to develop a link between the community and the school. To do so, four dynamic workshops were organized in which teachers would experience activities and develop ways of replicating them in the workshop to be able to use them in school classrooms afterwards.

Prospects

The PMC intends to train 80 indigenous teachers over the coming three years to act as cultural mediators in eight indigenous territories of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, replicating the cultural mediator training process in other settings and broadening the scope to different educational levels with monitoring and follow-up activities along the way. It will seek to foster the exchange of local, territorial and national cultural mediators during a Latin American Meeting of Cultural Facilitators. The idea is to widely disseminate a systematic approach as part of a strategy to create an impact on public policies. It will try to bring awareness to other governmental agencies linked to indigenous education in meetings scheduled to introduce the PMC and the documents it produces and its cost. Since indigenous teachers are paid by the state, the Cultural Mediators Program only needs to invest in their training and in innovative didactic or pedagogical materials. It will also advocate for planning interactive actions aimed at empowering the teachers so they can contribute in the construction of political-pedagogical projects to be introduced in indigenous schools as well as during routine meetings between



teachers and other political-pedagogical actors. The PMC will take part and promote the launch of didactic material in high profile national and international events.

Regarding quantitative results, these will be measured by (a) the number of teachers trained who are capable of fostering an intercultural dialogue in the classroom using the material produced, (b) the number of schools who actually use this material and whose PPPs include the proposal, (c) the quantity (and quality) of material published and used and (d) the number of pupils involved in the program.

In qualitative terms it is expected that when the children and teenagers involved become responsible for making decisions on the fate of their territories they will be prepared to do so in full awareness and thus make the right decisions. In the short run throughout the schooling processes, these young people will be having a positive impact in their communities, making sure that overall indigenous families respect and value the work carried out by the schools.