

ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR AFROCOLOMBIAN WOMEN DISPLACED BY POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC VIOLENCE

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Abstract

The Colombian government and some nongovernmental organizations (NGO) are interested in helping women who have been victims of forced displacement, by the violence in Colombia, to develop entrepreneurial activities that will help them to improve family income and in that way reinsert them in the social tissue. These institutions were not ready to provide the required training and for that reason they contacted the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at Universidad Icesi to design and implement a programme specifically oriented to the women. This article describes the process, the variables, the difficulties, the activities, the learned lessons and some results when a specific program for Afro-Colombian women was implemented. The experience confirms Gibb's idea that there are unique solutions in entrepreneurship education and that every programme designers have to carefully consider the characteristics of the population to be covered and the conditions of the environment.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship, NGO, social tissue, institutions and difficulties*

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1. Introduction

Through the years the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2009), has been supporting entrepreneurship for economic development: Business entrepreneurs drive and shape innovation, they speed up structural changes in the economy, and they introduce new competition, thereby contributing to productivity. For this reason, many institutions around the world have developed different approaches to developing entrepreneurial competences for different groups.

However, most of those approaches had been oriented to the University level programmes and in some cases to the elementary and secondary schools. In many cases those development, which had been quite successful in those levels have been transferred directly to different populations, to different cultures, to different level of resources, without the required adjustment, and the results have not been quite good. This is perhaps why Gibb (2007) suggests that “entrepreneurship can play a significant role in a range of very different environments in societies across the world, within and between countries and cultures, but that for it to do so will demand a reappraisal of the conventional paradigm”.

The Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at Universidad Icesi was approached by the Colombian Ministry of Culture to develop a special programme for Afro-Colombian women in situations of forced displacement caused by economic and political violence in Colombia.

This article presents the process of designing and executing the programme, and in that sense it is more a description of a particular application process in a very special environment, more than a traditional research paper.

2. Environment

The conflict in Colombia during the last forty to fifty years has generated not only a tremendous social upheaval but has also led to thousands of people dead, maimed, abducted, and generated one of the worst crises of forced displacement and disappearances in the world. During this process, various actors have been involved: drug traffickers, guerrilla movements, paramilitary groups, political groups and economic groups (Salazar, 2010). One of the worst consequences of violence in Colombia, by the aforementioned forces, has been the forced displacement of people. The best estimate, done by some governmental agencies, is that around three and a half million people, representing about eight thousand families had been displaced by 2009 (Social Action, 2011). But, beyond the transfer of persons from one place to another, this process involves people being uprooted, becoming fearful and intimidated, living without any hope for the future. But in addition to all these negative factors, the displaced people became nomadic, and when finally they arrive at the misery belts of cities or small towns, they cannot find jobs that allow them to generate income for their families. To make things worse, all the rest of the society views them with mistrust and misunderstanding.

These problems affect the country's poorest people and the minority groups. In the southwest of the country, the two minority groups most affected have been people of African descent and the Native Indians. In the states of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Nariño, the effect of displacement of Afro-Colombians has been very significant, increasing the levels of poverty and causing them all kinds of social, psychological and cultural problems, beyond their traditional marginal status.

Violence has another special effect: most of the dead are male. This generates another family problem: suddenly the mothers become the heads of households and have to perform all functions, including being the main source of income for the family while still fulfilling all their traditional responsibilities.

Government has a deep interest in helping these families to become self-sufficient, as a means of strengthening the social fabric in every region and reintegrating the displaced families into normal life. In addition, some groups of African descendants, who have achieved some levels of development, have created some networks and some NGOs to help these families.

2.1 The Challenge

The Ministry of Culture and Red Kambiri approached the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at the Universidad Icesi, to design and implement a pilot programme aimed at developing the entrepreneurial spirit of a group of Afro-Colombians living in Buenaventura, Guapi, and Tumaco y Quibdo, in order to help them to create new economic activity, increase their income and improve their families' social standing.

Even though the Centre has wide experience in entrepreneurship development for different social groups, including women, this project brought many new challenges and required, as will be shown later in the paper, many adjustments and new educational developments.

Following Gibb (2007), the Centre started the process taking into account the characteristics and needs of the social group in the design and execution of the project. It became necessary for the Centre to leave the narrow academic context and some of its traditional educational procedures, to start a completely new process, adapted to the needs of the selected women's population, to enable them to deal appropriately with context and reality.

2.2 The Development

The process was developed by a continuous interaction among the Government (providing resources and leadership), Kambiri's Network (providing the knowledge about the populations) and the group of lecturers from the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at Universidad Icesi (providing the knowledge about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education).

Unfortunately, before the Centre embarked on the project, some decisions had been taken by the Ministry of Culture and Kambiri's Network that, as will be shown later, created some difficulties in the project. The initial idea that the Ministry and Kambiri's Network had was to train the women in business plan development, because, as in many other places, there was a confusion between "entrepreneurial education" and "business plan development". The Centre was able to show them that there were some other elements that were very important for the entrepreneurial development of these women, and the Centres had information about its 13 entrepreneurial competences (Varela, 2008), its educational model (Varela-Bedoya, 2006), and about the process that should be followed to be able to provide these women with knowledge and action for the development of their entrepreneurial activities.

The initial objective was then changed to develop a programme based on the specific characteristics of the target groups, that will enable them to successfully undertake a business project, and the skills and motivation necessary carry it out. Therefore it was considered necessary to build and strengthen their entrepreneurial competences, to develop basic business skills and give them training in the techniques for creating and managing a new business.

The Ministry and Kambiri's Network did provide a profile of the general situation of the women, in terms of socio-economic conditions, level of development and level of education, plus the support system they could count on. With those basics and its knowledge and experience, the Centre went to work on the design of all the elements of the project, from the formation stage to the business implementation and evaluations stages.

When that initial design was presented to the Ministry with its financial implications, their funding limitations forced the Centre to adjust the project, reducing some elements and identifying some ways to optimize the resources.

After series of interactions and designs the group arrived at the "ideal solution", which was a proposal that would allow the new women entrepreneurs to have clear and precise ideas about: when, how, where, with whom and how to start their new businesses and how to design, start and pursue their entrepreneurial careers. The programme was designed to provide them skills and abilities necessary to become a factor of economic and social

development in their communities, enable them to improve their income, distribute value and hopefully create jobs in their community, and change their self-perceptions and limitations.

The Centre decided that the opportunity to interact with the communities in these cities and inside these populations should also be used to help the educational system. Thus a special programme for elementary and middle high school teachers was designed but all the cost for that programme was covered by the Centre, as a social contribution to the development of the country.

Finally a programme which included the following stages was put in place:

1. An educational programme to train the women in the basic elements of being an entrepreneur. It included the development of entrepreneurial competences, the development of some business skills and some approaches to the development of a business plan. All the elements to feel, behave and live as an entrepreneur were extremely important in the design of the program, to ensure that participants will self-identify and act as entrepreneurs, taking into account their own context and experiences. But also the idea was to provide participants with a vision and a process to facilitate their enterprise creation process and with the basic administrative elements that allow them to not only start their business but to provide a basis for the survival and growth of their entrepreneurial initiative.
2. Technical assistance for the different entrepreneurial initiatives, to provide the women's entrepreneur with the basic technology they may require in their business. The technical assistance was to be provided once the educational program had been concluded and the areas of work of the entrepreneurial initiatives defined.
3. Delivery of resources to start the enterprises. These resources will be provided by the Ministry through Kambiri's Network.
4. Training coordinators, to provide assistance to the new initiatives for six months.
5. Assistance and support to the entrepreneurs by the coordinators in each city.

As mentioned previously there was an additional phase aimed at elementary and secondary school teachers to make them aware of some pedagogical elements that would allow them to include entrepreneurship education in schools, hoping thereby that in the long run, they would be able to provide basic training for the children of these displaced families.

For the development of academic material, the Centre used three major strategies: the materials developed by other entities on the subjects we want to cover, at the national and international level; the developments the Centre had done previously on women's entrepreneur training (Varela *et al.*, 2007); the experience accumulated by the Centre in its 25 years on entrepreneurial education (Varela, 2008); but all of them adapted to the specific women's characteristics,

These three sources of information were integrated by the academic team to define the content of the programme, the visual support material (presentations), and the materials to develop the classes.

2.3 The Execution

The design of the programme was based in four groups, each one with about 20-25 women, in the cities of Quibdó, Guapi, Buenaventura and Tumaco. All the logistics were planned

for that supposed reality, but when the execution started several very significant changes were found:

- a. The level of compromise of the groups was quite different from city to city, which made it necessary in some cities to work with groups bigger than expected (Tumaco and Guapi) and with very small groups in other cities(Buenaventura and Quibdó)
- b. The educational level was significantly lower than originally indicated by the Ministry and Kambiri. Some of the participants were not even able to read or write, and though some of them were very willing to work in entrepreneurial projects, they did not have any previous experience. This caused a very significant heterogeneity in the classes and made the formation process quite difficult.
- c. The women came from different NGOs, and with different expectations, which created subgroups inside the programme and did not allow the development of strong networks among them.
- d. The entrepreneurial groups, in some cases, had been defined quite arbitrarily by the NGOs that invited them to the programme. As we found later this factor was quite negative in the development of the projects.
- e. The local coordinators in some of the cities were not fully committed. Some of them expected remuneration for their work while the Ministry and Kambiri expected social contribution from them.
- f. Local facilities in the cities were quite limited, thus a procedure to work out those limitations was always in place by the lecturers and the technical experts that provided the technical assistance

The educational programme included a total of 32 hours. Teachers planned to travel weekly to the cities for four weeks to develop the training programme, but in several cases it was necessary to space the classes at intervals of two or three weeks because we had to adapt to dates where populations had special events already scheduled, and in other cases to allow for the advancement and assimilation of concepts by participants.

All these new conditions did not allow the application of the static design the Cent had created, and forced many adjustments in the process, not only in the objectives to be reached, but also in the methodology used, the materials in class, the presentations and the language level, which had to be adapted to the level of the participants. The contents of training had to be adapted by each teacher, according to the population characteristics and business orientation of the specific group. Some words and concepts that are traditionally used in entrepreneurship training had to be changed for simpler words; the examples had to be taken from their local environment and not from the city environment.

Teachers and advisers had to accommodate all their activities to adverse circumstances (delay in flights, very hot rooms, not poor hotels, etc.). However, the goodwill and feeling of social responsibility were so high that everyone accepted the difficulties with equanimity. The feeling that those women, who had had extremely hard experiences were investing their times and effort to attend the programme, created in the lecturers and the advisors a very special commitment.

Finally, much of the effort was oriented to motivating them toward entrepreneurship, to develop their self-confidence in their capacities, to acknowledge the importance of the opportunity the government and those NGOs were providing for them, to use the

entrepreneurial values in all the activities they do, and to learn some basic ideas about the creation and operation of business. There was neither time nor previous knowledge, to get involved with the business plan methodology as traditionally considered. Rather, the methodology was based on active learning, using the women's own entrepreneurial initiatives to explain the different ideas about business development.

As indicated earlier, one of the main problems the project had was the formation of the entrepreneurial teams. The Ministry and Kambiri had formed some teams using parameters that socially valid: women living in the same area, or working with the same NGO, or having the same type of business; they, however, did not take into account other important elements in associability such as: confidence, capacity to work in teams, unity of purposes, knowledge between the members. In many cases the lecturers and the advisors had to spend much time to solve group conflicts.

In the formation process, with the help of the lecturers, 23 entrepreneurial initiatives were analyzed and developed to the level of a "business opportunity", and some basic budget and financial projections were made. All these opportunities were contextualized with the entrepreneurial teams and with the advisors that were going to provide technical assistance, so that they would know beforehand what was required in the technical and managerial side, and to help identify the members that did not fit well in the entrepreneurial teams.

The plan to provide some training to elementary and middle high school teachers also became problematic, especially in terms of logistics to get them to attend the seminar. The local coordinators were not active enough in promoting the activities. However, the teachers who attended were quite eager to learn about the new educational perspectives and were willing to use them in their classrooms.

The resource distribution stage was another problematic because it was, as indicated earlier, predefined by Kambiri and the Ministry, and they did not consider the results of the analysis done in each project. Lots of complaints came at this stage, and some of the teams did not get enough financing to really start their activities. Resources were given in kind, mainly in raw materials, some equipment and furniture, and some of the projects did not receive working capital.

At the stage of technical consultancies, the Centre identified professionals that were very well trained in the four sectors into which all the business initiatives fell: folklore, crafts, food and traditional medicine. Each of the experts travelled to each city to meet with the entrepreneurial teams that were working in their specialty sector. This work allowed the advisor to provide recommendations in the most problematic areas and also identify the level of implementation of the initiatives. This technical assistance was provided about one month after the assignment of resources and even at that time, two of the 23 initiatives were not operational. The technical advisors also presented an improvement plan for each one of the initiatives to be followed for the local coordinator in the subsequent stage: that of support.

The last step of the process, done by the Centre, was the training of the coordinators that would follow up the process. The coordinators were involved in all the earlier stages, and had been selected by Kambiri. However, as indicated, not all of them had the same level of commitment to the project, thus their effectiveness of their participation varied. But in order

to have somebody that could provide support to the women entrepreneurs, a training program was designed and executed for them at Universidad Icesi, providing them the main elements to help the entrepreneurial initiatives and the women entrepreneurs to be successful. They received all the documentation that was developed by the lecturers and the technical advisors for each one of the initiatives, and they had the responsibility for the next six months to provide support and guidance to the women entrepreneurs.

2.4 Lessons Learned

The development of a project of this complexity undoubtedly provided many lessons, which may now look very obvious; the reality is that usually in most traditional projects you do not find so many elements that force you to change your structure and your design in such a significant way.

Among the main lessons learnt, it is important to mention the following ones:

- i. All the planning, as important as it is, and as required as it is, should make for flexibility, because the process is subject to many variables that change very easily, especially when the basic data about the participants is not fully and clearly specified. As institutions, we should not design a proposal, until we really get to know the participants, their needs and expectations.
- ii. This case exemplifies the importance of local solutions, in terms of basing the conceptual and methodological development on the people as well as adapting resources and knowledge to their local situations, because they have to make the required adjustments. In developing countries, it is necessary to learn that education is not something to franchise like consumer goods, and to search for local solutions in areas where cultural, social or political matters have a significant influence.
- iii. The principles of “active learning” are very useful in entrepreneurship development, because the educational process can easily be tailored to specific participants; the participants can also help in the development of the educational process, making it more adaptable to their needs.
- iv. Entrepreneurial education is for the people and not for the techniques or tools. It is more important to strengthen a person’s values and attitudes than to give them a specific managerial tool. It is necessary to remember that in the first place they are persons, and then they are entrepreneurs, and education has to keep that order.
- v. The formation model, focusing on the women entrepreneurs and especially on their entrepreneurial career plan, rather than on business plans, provides a more comprehensive development of their entrepreneurial potential. The development of an entrepreneurial spirit and of their role as entrepreneurs, will be with them throughout their lives, and will go beyond their economic activities.
- vi. The model of entrepreneurial development, based on entrepreneurial competences, that was developed for university students can be adapted quite successfully to groups with a completely different academic training, but it requires a lot of flexibility from the lecturers.
- vii. The support system for this type of entrepreneurial programme has to be very well established, because the people involved required a lot of support to be able to succeed. Personal, entrepreneurial, managerial, technical and financial assistance are necessary conditions to the success of such programmes. The support system should be as geographically and culturally close as possible.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

For future projects of this kind the following recommendations may be considered:

- a. All the pre- project phases: promotion, development of the proposals, design of the project, should be based in a detailed analysis of the characteristics and expectation of the participants, which many times are quite different from the perception that government or NGOs may have.
- b. Even though in most of the cases the homogeneity concept is not possible, it is very important to get populations with at least basic literacy skills and some entrepreneurial intentionality, to make possible the advancement in the entrepreneurial process.
- c. People who do not satisfy the previous conditions should undergo some other formation and training activities before they get into entrepreneurial training.
- d. The process of selecting business ideas or business opportunities should be based on the experiences and knowledge that the participants have, and not predefined by the sponsors or the implementing institution. Flexibility and independence in these matters are fundamental principles for this kind of programme.
- e. Entrepreneurial teams should be formed by the potential entrepreneurs and not by the organizers or by the sponsors. In the process, they should consider the needs of the entrepreneurial initiative, the affinity that the members may have for the project, the free association concept, their knowledge, their personal feelings about the initiative and some logistic conditions.
- f. It is very important to involve knowledgeable local people in all the phases of the development of the project, so that they can benefit from the teachings of the experts, and be able to replicate the programmes, to generate a wider coverage within the community. This should be a requirement for projects like these, to make that the knowledge stay in the city and not go with the consultant. This will provide independence for the region and also the possibility of expanding the action of the project.
- g. The financial resources should come after the entrepreneurial training has been completed, and the needs of every initiative are relatively defined, in order to ensure that the resources are allocated in the appropriate way. The financial resource should cover fixed assets and working capital.
- h. The assistance, consulting and mentoring work needs to be a continuous process, not only during the development phase, but also in the implementation of the entrepreneurial initiatives. This activity should be done at the local level; it is therefore necessary to develop local capacity in such projects. One interesting possibility is to get local university students in their internship or social service semester to provide the support that the new entrepreneurs need. Another possibility is to develop a group of business people and executives that become godfathers and godmothers of the nascent entrepreneurs providing not only advice and support but also opening doors with different entities and reaffirming their role as entrepreneurs.
- i. To be successful, entrepreneurial education requires the design of unique programmes with specific characteristics depending on the environment and the characteristics of the participants. And for people with limited education level (in many cases without writing and reading skills), or people in situations of extreme poverty, displacement and violence, the programmes must have more details, more flexibility and stronger support systems.

- j. This program that was very well received and evaluated by the participants can be easily adapted and transferred to other developing countries and cultures, but adjustments will have to be made to incorporate local elements.
- k. The integration of government, NGOs and the University for the development of this type of programmes is a very positive alliance, when each one provides its best capabilities and allows the others to do the same.

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