
THE ROLE OF THE PROMOTER: TRANSFORMING WOMEN TO TRANSFORM COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: In Mexico about 45% of the population lives in poverty and is significantly more concentrated in rural communities than in cities and towns. There are a lot of on-going efforts from government and private institutions to improve the situation. One private organization that is having success in the center of Mexico is the NGO Mexico Tierra de Amaranto. Their success model is based on leveraging the strong nutritional properties of an ancient grain called amaranth and high levels of training investment to develop local women as community promoters. There are many success stories of which the case of Margarita Dominguez Marcial (Mago) is a great example.

Keywords: Amaranth, Mexican Women, Nutrition, Rural Communities

Discussion: According to the CONEVAL (Mexican National Council for the Evaluation of the Social Development Policies), 45.5% of the population in Mexico lives in poverty, which are about 53.3 million people. Poverty is measure not only by the income but also includes access to food, health, social security, education, housing quality, and housing basic services. The population in Mexico is 110 million and about 27 million people live in rural communities (less than 2500 residents), with 61.6% poverty (10.9 million in moderate poverty and 5.8 million in extreme poverty).

Chiteje de Garabato and El Varal in the municipality of Amealco de Bonfil (State of Queretaro) are two good examples of rural communities. 1675 people inhabit Chiteje de Garabato. According to the 2010 census, there were 336 houses, 2 houses had one computer, and 25 had a washing machine and 266 had one television. There were 200 illiterate people and 549 had an incomplete education. Adjacent to Chiteje is El Varal, with 600 inhabitants and about 70 illiterate people and the average years of school is 4.85.

One of the people living in El Varal is Margarita Dominguez Marcial. People call her Mago. In Mexico is the nickname for Margarita but in Spanish also means magician and that is exactly what she does with her charismatic personality and transforming power. Mago has convinced more than 60 women in her community to plant amaranth in their backyards. She teaches cooking with amaranth. She delivers workshops on values and benefits of the amaranth. She is member of the organizing committee of community events. She is organizing women in the community to plant amaranth not only for their consumption but also for commercial purposes. She works with the primary school teachers to show the kids how to plant amaranth in the school grounds. She likes to read, teach, share her knowledge, and travel.

But what makes these facts extremely interesting and a great achievement? Mago is well below the education average for the community. Her family was really poor and she only finished two years of primary school. Some other facts about Mago are that she is married to Marcelo Bernabe and that they have four sons and one daughter. They also have 12 grandchildren, eight girls and four boys.

So what is different about Mago? What sets her apart from millions of women living in rural communities, with very low levels of education, poor economic, health and nutrition conditions; and low probabilities to change their situation?

You may call it luck or destiny. The fact is that Mago was identified and selected as a promoter for the NGO Mexico Tierra de Amaranto (Mexico Land of Amaranth). I will later discuss in more detail the objectives and strategy of this non-profit organization.

The amaranth is an ancient grain and was an important food crop in the golden time of the Aztecs. On the arrival of the Spanish conquerors they noticed that the grain was mixed with the blood of the sacrificed people and offered to their Gods. They decided to prohibit planting it, cutting the hands of anybody disobeying the order. Because of this reason, corn developed as the main crop in Mexico and very little development for the amaranth. Nonetheless, amaranth did not disappeared completely and today while still a relatively small production, the grain is well known by its strong nutritional and healthy properties.

Mago had heard that the amaranth was nutritious but she had never seen it. Her mother got sick and the doctor recommended that she be given puffed amaranth grain. That was her first encounter with the grain and decided to start using it with honey and lemon with her children. She noticed that it help them when they were coughing because of a cold. This way she got really interested in amaranth but did not know much about it.

One day, she was invited by another woman in the community to attend a training session about amaranth planting. Mexico Tierra de Amaranto had arrived to El Varal and Chiteje de Garabato and they were recruiting women to start the program in those communities. She attended the training and received seed to start her own backyard. She followed the instructions and to her surprise the plant developed very well and started to use plant as a vegetable in her cooking.

She was invited to another workshop where she met the founder of Mexico Tierra de Amaranto and some other staff. At the end of the session she was invited to become a promoter. She had a lot of doubts. Her low level of education, she was not sure her husband would agree, she was not sure she could take all those responsibilities. After talking with her husband and other friends and family she decided to accept. She believed in amaranth and this was such a big opportunity to learn more and help other people in the community to plant the amaranth.

At the end, her limitations were not a restriction and today Mago is considered one of the best promoters for Mexico Tierra de Amaranto. Her community has been selected to do research on the benefits of amaranth when included in the diet of growing children. This research will gather the scientific facts about nutritional and health benefits to children. The amaranth for the program will be grown in the community and all participants will get an economic benefit.

It is clear that investing in women in rural communities has a tremendous potential and Mago is a live example of the wonderful benefits.

So now, I will focus on the NGO, its objectives and method of operation. Mary Delano founded Mexico Tierra de Amaranto about 10 years ago. Its mission is to be a nonprofit organization that works with integrity, social responsibility and commitment, looking to spread amaranth knowledge and use as a strategy to improve nutrition, health and living conditions of rural communities generating a culture of development and sustainability involving different sectors of society.

Its vision is to make Mexico Land of Amaranth a phrase that represents pride, responsibility and care for this ancient grain that will unite the world to create a healthier and more prosperous society. Mexico will be recognized worldwide for achieving a food culture that improves nutrition, health and sustainability and generating growth opportunities and development. All Mexicans will recognize amaranth as the strategic grain painting with color our fields and filling it with strength.

Its objectives are:

1. Rescue, enhance and disseminate the culture of amaranth in Mexico.

2. Promote the cultivation of amaranth backyard.
3. Promote, train and organize productive projects as commercial crops, bakeries, etc.
4. Link to scientific research institutions in the country with the fieldwork.
5. Integrate industry, government, health sector and social organizations to join forces and actions.

The development model of Mexico Tierra de Amaranto has various components that include, promotion in communities, food excellence program, productive projects, Cooking with Amaranth Diploma, Water Tanks program, amaranth commercialization, and events.

The focus of this paper is on the promotion in communities and I want to discuss why the model if Mexico Land of Amaranth is so successful. Developing new promoters is a process that requires significant time and resources. It all starts with identifying women who demonstrate passion for the amaranth, leadership in the community, energy, and willingness to learn. In average a promoter in development receives about two hundred and forty hours of training. It includes the topics of leadership, self-awareness, teamwork, work organization, values, cooking techniques, amaranth planting techniques and backyard supervision.

This large investment on human development is what makes Mexico Tierra de Amaranto different than other social programs. What the promoters learn does not only help in achieving the NGO objectives but also has a big spill over effect on other aspects of the life of the promoters. It helps them to be better in educating their children, they improve the nutrition of their families, better prepared to stop home violence, they learn how to take advantage of other social programs, become community leaders, improve family economic situation and many others. Mago has gone to the process. She is not anymore part of the large group of poor and illiterate woman in Mexico. Of course, she is not rich; she and her family still have a lot of unfulfilled needs. However, she has become a leader who is helping transform the lives of many people in her community. Mago and the other many developed promoters are definitely a right step in developing a model that could improve the situation of millions of people in rural communities.

Mexico Tierra de Amaranto continues to refine the model with still a lot of resource limitations. But there is clearly acceleration, more people and institutions are recognizing the power of the model and are contributing with money and know-how. The NGO is still very far from achieving its vision but for sure is in the right direction.

Conclusion: There are many efforts to reduce poverty, malnutrition and education in rural communities in Mexico. The effectiveness of these

programs varies greatly in how sustainable the results are. There are no magic answers but one factor for success is clear, any successful program requires large investment in people. Giving them the skills and

training that will modify behaviors and open possibilities. When this investment is focused on women there return is significantly higher.

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