



# Working with Community

## Report on a visit to Susila Dharma projects in Colombia



View from a rooftop in Ciudad Bolivar, outside of Bogota.

**F**ROM FEBRUARY 22 TO MARCH 7, Virginia Thomas, Executive Director of Susila Dharma International (SDI) visited seven Subud projects and Susila Dharma Colombia:

- Fundación Semillas de Amor y Fe (FSAF) in Florida Blanca outside Bucaramanga;
- Semillitas Pre-School, Nuestra Senora de Fatima School, and ICDP at Fundación Amanecer in the Quindio;
- Centro Comunitario Guía de un Nuevo Amanecer in Ciudad Bolivar on the outskirts of Bogotá
- Fundación Amor in Soacha;
- Fundación El Refugio in Bogotá.

In a country suffering from 50 years of armed conflict, violence, and widespread displacement and poverty, it is fascinating to see how Subud members approach community building and re-building. Building strong local partnerships, promoting community participation and empowerment are key factors for achieving sustainable organizations and results.

### **FSAF BEGINS A DIALOGUE ABOUT COMMUNITY SELF-MANAGEMENT**

On February 22, 2007 Virginia travelled with members of the SD Colombia team from Bogotá to Bucaramanga to meet with Dorothy Ramirez, Erasmo Cornejo, Margarita Delgado and Karnain, founders and active members of the Fundación Semillas de Amor y Fe (FSAF). FSAF was created about seven years ago by members of the Bucaramanga Subud group to provide education, psycho-social support and income generating activities to a community of displaced families fleeing Colombia's long-standing armed conflict.

### **Challenges to the FSAF**

In late 2005, a massive landslide destroyed the community's encampment on a steep hillside in Bucaramanga. Since then, the local government has relocated the 300 families, providing low-cost housing in an expensive suburb of Bucaramanga. FSAF moved its school to continue to attend to the community, but now has much higher operating



Subud Bucaramanga, founders of the Fundación Semillas de Amor y Fe.



SD Colombia and FSAF teams visit the community of Gonzalez-Chaparro, established after the landslide of 2005.

costs in its new location. The purpose of the meeting was to help FSAF plan its way forward and look for solutions to its budget shortfall.

The first step was to visit the community, which is some five hundred meters down the road from the school buildings. The families' new homes are tiny, two or three-room dwellings in which families with between five and nine children, and sometimes even grandchildren, sleep, eat and study. The streets are full of children. According to the project team some families have less than \$130 per month to feed, clothe and educate these large families. FSAF provides a higher quality education—including special methods to facilitate reading and writing at an early age, small class sizes, a fulltime social worker, music, physical education and a nutritional programme—at a lower cost than surrounding schools. But the very quality of the programme coupled with higher rents have meant that students' fees and the money donated by a handful of child-sponsors (padrinos) are no longer sufficient to cover FSAF's running costs.

### **SD Colombia plays a supportive role**

SD Colombia has brought a lot of skill and experience to assist the project, including Marcela Moreno, the SD Colombia Chair, Manuel Cuellar, a professional accountant, Consuela Hernández, a community development specialist, and Irina Montejo, a management consultant. With the project team SD Colombia began to review the

programmes that FSAF offered and to help restructure the budget in line their activities. Consuela, with 17 years of experience in community mobilisation and development in Ciudad Bolivar on the outskirts of Bogotá, led a workshop for parents on Community Self-Management.

Consuela explained that she came from a community that 17 years ago began to take its destiny in hand. "We, like you, were squatters—our community centre was created by out of nothing by displaced people. Now our families have healthcare, housing, education, and pre-schools. Our kids have all the things they need."

"Self management means 'one-self' and 'taking action and responsibility.'" Consuela explained its principles as: taking decisions by consensus, reflecting the views of all community members; linking decisions to practical actions; making strategic alliances and agreements on behalf of the community; solidarity within the community; working together with local institutions and government; engaging in an on-going process of learning and capacity-building. "17 years ago some professional women came to train us. I was not a professional but I so much wanted to learn. Now I run a large Community Centre... It shows that we can do anything if we are willing to learn."

After the presentation the mothers broke out into groups. They were asked to discuss and answer three



Consuela Hernandez (back) and Marcela Moreno (front left) of SD Colombia lead a workshop for parents on Community Self-Management.



Mothers from the community discuss their priorities for the FSAF.

questions: What is the significance of the FSAF for each of us? For what do you pray for FSAF? What actions are you willing to take on its behalf?

The mothers expressed deep gratitude to FSAF for providing a highly affordable education for their children. They pray for a new and better building for housing the school. Yet there was little practical discussion of what they were willing to do as community members to ensure the survival of FSAF. According to Consuela, “We cannot expect them to take this on overnight. They have to be brought to the understanding that they have a role and responsibility in the survival of this school.”

### Charting a way forward together

For years FSAF ran the school with low costs and strong local support from friends, family and Subud members in Bucaramanga. But, while the cost of operating the project jumped dramatically in 2006 and 2007, funds from the community have been diminishing. Though they are ready to start to explore new relationships and alliances with local institutions, the project team does not want to compromise the high quality of education, love, caring and psycho-social support to the families.

As the weekend ended all the parties involved renewed their commitment to work together to support the project through this challenging transition. SD Colombia has committed itself to help re-structure the budgeting and financial

reporting, to try to identify national funds and in-kind contributions, to provide feedback on future funding proposals, and, perhaps most importantly, to share their experiences in working with community and build strategic alliances and partnerships for successful community development (for two examples, see article of Centro Comunitario Guía de un Nuevo Amanecer and Fundación Amor, below); SDI has committed itself to continue to inform the Subud community about the needs of the project, encourage FSAF to provide written proposals that document its objectives and methods in working with the community and to give feedback and assistance in promoting these, to transfer funds sufficient to help pay down an operating deficit from 2006, and to support a study tour that would permit the FSAF team to benefit from lessons learned by other Subud projects in Colombia that work in the area of education and community development.

But the project still needs a great deal of support if it is to cover its operating costs and continue to receive families and educate children every day. FSAF runs a child-sponsorship programme (Plan Padrinos) that costs only \$40 USD per month to nourish and educate a child and provide psycho-social support to the family. FSAF estimates that



SD Colombia, FSAF and SDI work on a new budget late into the night. From left to right: Virginia Thomas (SDI), Margarita Delgado (FSAF), Marcela Moreno (SDC), Helene Munoz (FSAF), Erasmo Cornejo (FSAF), Consuela Hernandez (SDC), Irina Montejo (SDC), Dorothy Ramirez (FSAF) and Manuel Cuellar (SD Colombia).

with only 40 padrinos worldwide, its operating costs could be fully met.

## FUNDACIÓN AMANECER REACHES OUT TO THE EMBERA CHAMI

Two years ago mothers from the Embera Chami indigenous community, about 10 kilometres from the Amanecer Subud Centre in rural Quindio and the poorest community in the region, arrived with



Embera children from the area.

a request: “Please take our children”.

Slowly but surely over the years Amanecer has been building its skills and reputation as a centre for childcare, child development, and education in the area. Since the Subud World Congress in 1993, many people have come and gone from Amanecer, but what has endured and grown are three social-educational programs that are now finding a new vision and focus for working together: the Semillitas Programme continues to provide a pre-school supported by Colombia’s Family Welfare agency (ICBF); The Colegio provides basic primary education to children of the area; and ICDP Colombia’s main training team is based at Amanecer, and has increasingly been doing local outreach to parents and educators.

According to the Embera Chami mothers, their children are not learning Spanish or other subjects that they will need to go on to secondary education and to get jobs. Their daughters are also under pressure, from around age 12, to leave school to start bringing an income to the community.

Without an education, the options for indigenous youth are extremely limited—some turn to begging, selling in the street, early marriage, or prostitution. The Embera Chami mothers want something better for their children, even if the community leaders use threats and intimidation to discourage them from looking outside the community.

When the mothers first approached Amanecer about taking their children they were frightened, but determined: “The Chief manipulates the community for his own benefit. He had told them not to come here, and that he would practice black magic on those who sent their children to us. They were afraid that they would die or, worse, that their children would die,” said Chayatun Valencia, a community worker who has played a central role in the development of the social projects at Amanecer.

Last year, the Semillitas pre-school programme



Fundacion Amanecer proposes a programme of family-centered activities and inclusive education to address the needs of local Embera Chami families.

and the Colegio began accepting the Embera Chami children despite uncertainties about how the children would integrate. “But everything has gone well, and these children are eager to learn...The only thing holding us back from accepting more children is the cost and our limited capacity for transportation. We urgently need to up-grade our minibus, so



From left to right: Chayatun Valencia (ICDP), Amata Aristizabal (Semillitas), Chandra Betancourt (Colegio), Brianna Silva Thomas, and Rossana Silva (Director of Fundacion Amanecer).

that we can get more children from the area to and from school at Amanecer,” says Rossana Silva, Administrator of the Fundación Amanecer.

The mothers from the Embera Chamicomunity have also received ICDP training at Amanecer: “Through working with the mothers, we understand better the needs of

the community. We need to be strengthening the family as a unit, not just educating the children. The mothers want literacy training, in order to be able to help in their children’s education. The fathers need job training and income generating opportunities. The best thing for the children is if we help their parents build their skills,” said Chandra Betancourt

Working with the Embera Chami families has generated a common vision for the three projects that are working to develop a holistic programme for Family Empowerment and Inclusive Education. The new programme consists of:

- Facilitating pre-school and primary school attendance for 20 Embera Chami families;
- Developing pre-school and primary curriculum and activities based on principles of inclusive education which fully recognise and value the languages, cultures and traditions of the different communities served;
- Address the multiple factors that can lead to learning difficulties for the Embera Chami students, such as poor nutrition and the need for special support in learning in Spanish as a second language;

- Providing ICDP and literacy training for mothers from the Embera Chami community;
- Training of one or two Embera Chami mothers to become involved in operating the pre-school and primary school, in order to transfer skills and share their knowledge of Embera culture with the children;
- Begin to work with the fathers and community leadership—to provide skills training and micro-enterprise development.

In order to achieve this, Fundación Amanecer needs financial support to increase its operating capacity so that it can receive more Embera Chami children whose families are too poor to pay the regular attendance fee in its Semillitas pre-school. These children will eventually feed into the Colegio. But most urgently, the Fundación needs to upgrade its small and failing minibus that covers great distances every day to pick up and return rural children to their homes. The current vehicle is continuously breaking down and a new vehicle (\$US 10,000) is urgently needed if Fundación Amanecer is to be able to help meet the needs of the Embera Chami people.

## CENTRO COMUNITARIO GUÍA DE UN NUEVO AMANECER SHARES ITS EXPERIENCE



Centro Comunitario Guia de un Nuevo Amanecer welcome our visit and shares its rich experience.

Ciudad Bolivar exists on the outskirts of Bogotá. It was born of the progressive waves of forced displacement that, with its longstanding civil war, are a fact of life in Colombia. Due to the violence and social tensions it is not an easy place to live or work. Subud members



Children fill the classrooms at a community centre in Ciudad Bolívar.

felt that I should not travel there on my own. However, Ciudad Bolívar is an amazing example of community solidarity and resilience. This solidarity is not based on a long shared history as it might be in the countryside, but on the need of people from many different parts of Colombia to re-build their lives and sense of community out of nothing.

Consuela Hernández is a recent Subud member, but an experienced community development worker. She has worked for 17 years to develop and strengthen community self-management processes in Ciudad Bolívar, where she also lives and where she raised her own family. In addition to her job as Director of the Centro Comunitario, she is a



Consuela Hernandez explains: "Money is the least important thing - this centre had money but no plan, now there is nothing happening here".

dedicated member of the SD Colombia team, ready to share her knowledge with other Subud projects.

Consuela took me on an educational tour of the Centro Comunitario (Community Centre) she helped to build and to her other community projects in Ciudad Bolívar. Among other things, the Centro Comunitario is home to several pre-school and day care classrooms which are attended by 78 children. Another 130 children participate in activities associated with the Centre. Over the years its various programmes have served the children, youth, women and senior citizens of the area, providing cultural and recreational activities, healthcare, and housing. "When this area was first occupied there were no medical services. One of our first activities 17 years ago was to train 70 women to be community health workers in order



The Centro Comunitario already owns one building but are hoping to buy the one next door to convert into a much-needed vocational training centre.

to provide maternal and preventive healthcare" said Consuela. The Centro Comunitario has recently been working with government funds to build or upgrade 190 low cost housing units.

"The key is knowing where you want to go—once you have that clear, the money to do the work comes. We started without anything in this neighbourhood—but we motivated people in the community to get involved and to take practical actions. People often think big, but aren't willing to commit themselves or take action!"

After showing me the impressive community centre, she took me to three other vibrant community projects in childcare and education run by other powerful women leaders from the community. Then, we stopped in front of a beautifully constructed but abandoned building “People often say that if we only had money, everything would be fine—but I want to prove to you that this isn’t true. This community group had hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding—a beautiful building and lots of staff—but they didn’t know where they wanted to go. The whole thing collapsed. So really, money is the last of one’s worries. When you have done your work with the community and you have a shared vision, local commitment, and a clear plan, then the money comes. That is my experience, and this place proves it.”

Now the Centro Comunitario knows where it wants to go. It is ready to address the needs of youth and women in the area for vocational training and employment. “We need to create productive enterprises if we are to address the core needs of the community—working with Susila Dharma has taught me how important it is to think about enterprises.” The Centro Comunitario is seeking support for a project to buy the building next door and convert it into a vocational training and entrepreneurship centre for Ciudad Bolivar. The total cost is for the building, furnishings, and equipment is about \$100,000; but they already have two local foundations interested. They are hoping that Susila Dharma will be ready to support the community in this important step.

### **FUNDACIÓN AMOR FORMS PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES WITH OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY**

Fundación Amor has come a long way since its financial crisis of a few years ago, when a high debt load and the withdrawal of several donors left it close to bankruptcy. “The situation here has really improved,” says Sebastian de los Rios, Fundación Amor’s co-founder and director, “I am no longer worried about the future of Amor—on the contrary, the future looks brighter for us than it ever has”.



Colegio Amor’s classrooms are packed with youth eager to learn accounting skills.

This remarkable turnaround has come after years of Subud donors and Susila Dharma national committees around the world providing a high proportion of Amor’s operating costs. In the late 90’s it became clear that Subud support would not be sufficient to sustain the school for ever. But, because of the amount of support that Amor had been receiving, Fundación Amor had not seen the necessity of building strong, long-term local partnerships and community ownership. The crisis at Amor was a wake-up call, not only for the Fundación itself but for the Subud and SD community: we need to develop our projects in a manner that empowers and responds to local communities and realities or else our efforts will not be sustainable.

How has Amor done this? “We have succeeded in building a good relationship with the state. First



Adults from Soacha line up at the gate of Colegio Amor, waiting their turn to start their training programmes.



Adult learners and professional instructors from SENA use Amor's equipment which was once reserved only for children.

with the municipality of Soacha, which is now providing 100 scholarships for students who don't have the means. If we hadn't gotten support from the state, we could not have continued. Education is a right, and now we are selling services to the state to help it meet its obligations to children."

What caused this change in the attitude of the municipality? "It is the same political class as before, but they are under more pressure now to conform to norms of good governance. We have the example of strong civic governments in Bogotá and Medellín that have cleaned up municipal administration. People in Colombia expect more now from their municipal governments and if they don't get what they want, the government will be kicked out"

Sebastian says the academic level of the school has also improved from a few years ago, although the school is not at the top in terms of national test scores. "Other schools teach to the exams, we do not. The important thing for us is the holistic competence and development of our students—in terms of the head, the heart, the soul, and the spirit."

One of the most important steps has been the strong partnership developed with the national vocational training service of Colombia, SENA, that offers over 100 different trade and professional programmes and accreditations. While Amor continues to offer primary and secondary classes in

the morning, in the afternoon and evening it opens its doors to parents and adults of the community. Through this strategic alliance, SENA now provides highly specialised teachers and recognised professional accreditations, while Amor provides the classroom space, equipment and administration. "It is a perfect match because our focus was always on preparation for the world of employment and enterprise, but now along with children we see the adults lining up to get training." said Sebastian.

At the gate you could see adults waiting to come in and start their classes using the same equipment food processing equipment purchased years ago for the children. Yet it somehow makes so much more sense to educate adults than children to run enterprises—because they really need jobs and have the life experience and maturity that are often prerequisites for being a successful entrepreneur.

As is so often true in our Subud lives, all these positive developments came only after a lot of pain, soul searching and nearly giving up hope. "I had to come to the point where I lowered my head and asked for help. I understood that I couldn't do it on my own. I turned to my Subud brothers because I really needed the guidance of the latihan, and they didn't let me down. And then everything changed. I understood that I needed to find partners in the community," said Sebastian "We had to go through a big crisis before we were ready to change. ... Before,



Sebastian de los Rios, Director of Fundacion Amor, and a senior instructor from Colegio Amor proudly show us around the school.

we were not very open to the community, but now we have become a real centre for the community. It is open to them and they feel like it is their place. We never wanted before to get involved with politics—it was somehow dirty—but eventually I understood that I needed to support people and institutions with common goals.”

After everything that Sebastian has been through, he recognises that he has a lot to share with other SD projects. “This is a good time for us at Amor to offer our help to other projects, so they don’t need to go through what we have been through!”

### FUNDACIÓN EL REFUGIO IS MOVING FORWARD

Nury Bonilla has been struggling over the past few years to keep Fundación El Refugio alive. Now it looks as if things are getting brighter. El Refugio had been operating an impressive programme designed to address the needs of youth at risk of becoming involved with armed violence, criminal activity, or drug abuse. It provided them with psycho-social support, while they learned the art of silversmithing. The project gave rise to a dedicated group of young people called “Jovenes Orfebres” or “Youth Smiths” who continue to work together and promote their art collectively.

At the time of my visit, Fundación El Refugio was in negotiations with the International Organisation



Beautiful, original jewellery designed by youth of Fundación El Refugio.



Nury Bonilla and two young silversmiths hard at work at Fundación El Refugio.

for Migration (IOM) to provide a programme to train former child soldiers who have recently been demobilised from Colombia’s armed groups. This is an important but very challenging proposition, not only for El Refugio, but also for Colombian society as a whole. The successful demobilisation and social re-integration of former combatants, particularly former child soldiers, is one of Colombia’s most important hopes for long-term peace. Given the experience of El Refugio in working with at-risk youth, they are among only a handful of groups who can offer child soldiers the psycho-social support and technical skills that they need to re-build their lives.

While awaiting a reply from IOM, El Refugio is carrying on by putting together paying workshops to teach jewellery making and silver smithing to the general public. They also continue promoting the art of their Youth Smiths group. “Youth Smiths has made a lot of progress in marketing our fair-trade, socially positive products. We are selling by catalogue and by using samples, and obtaining fixed sales and new contacts. Youth Smiths is making enough money to be self-sustaining, administratively and operationally. This allows us to exist as an entity and continue to grow, and is a way of promoting our prevention activities for vulnerable and at-risk young people.” said Nury Bonilla, founder and leader of the Fundación.

The programme needs a small amount of support to:

- Set up a website, the costs of which are coming down because the “Redexpo” programme has given them a space in its domain. However, design and financial inputs are needed to develop and maintain this web space;
- Finance attendance at important trade fairs and send jewellery samples to traders and festival organizers;
- Set up a small sales outlet in the area, which would be a very good place to sell, as around two thousand people per day pass in front of their building, downstairs from their workshop.

## SUSILA DHARMA COLOMBIA HAS A LOT TO CELEBRATE!

Susila Dharma Colombia celebrated its first birthday since it was officially registered in February 2006. This has very active year. SD Colombia has invested in its own learning and getting itself tooled up to assist projects in a number areas, including accounting, NGO management, community development, training and much more. The Susila Dharma Colombia team is made of about 10 professionals all ready to share their time and skills with the numerous social and educational projects of Subud members in Colombia.

Due to the fact that there are so many strong projects in Colombia, the role of the national Susila Dharma Committee was not very well understood for many years; but, under the leadership of Marcela Moreno and her team, SD Colombia is now a model for the rest of the SD world, having defined its role clearly as providing support and encouragement to the Subud members in Colombia to start new SD initiatives and assistance to help build and strengthen existing projects. They also understand the importance of providing kedjiwaan support to project leaders, not just sound technical advice. In Bucaramanga, it was very encouraging to see how effectively and lovingly the SD Colombia team supported the project, giving training, assisting in



From left to right: Manuel Cuellar, Irina Montejo, Consula Hernandez and Marcela Moreno represent SD Colombia at a recent visit to assist FSAF in Bucaramanga.

planning, making helpful suggestions, encouraging the latihan, and leading testing. They helped the project re-establish balance between the heart, the mind, and the inner guidance that is the essence and promise of our Subud projects. Happy Birthday SD Colombia!

*To learn more about all of the projects described in this report, please contact Marcela Moreno, Chair of Susila Dharma Colombia [susiladharmacolombia@yahoo.com](mailto:susiladharmacolombia@yahoo.com) or Virginia Thomas [virginia@susiladharma.org](mailto:virginia@susiladharma.org). Project proposals will be posted on [http://www.susiladharma.org/secure/members\\_requests.html](http://www.susiladharma.org/secure/members_requests.html). This publication was written by Virginia Thomas and produced by the International SD Network Office. You can find out more about the work of Susila Dharma at [www.susiladharma.org](http://www.susiladharma.org) and reach us by email at [info@susiladharma.org](mailto:info@susiladharma.org)*