

Decolonial, South-led and Indigenous-focused approaches: the SBC in the Latin America and the Caribbean from the cradle to the world

Cássia Ayres & Markel Méndez (LACRO) in collaboration with Marco Prates (UNICEF Brazil), Andrea de la Torre (UNICEF Colombia) and Jair Vega (Uninorte)

The vibrant history of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is made up of social struggles that date back to colonial times. Social Science scholars have attempted to understand the ancient wisdom held by Indigenous communities and the resilience of farmers and Afro descendants to uncover what 'development' means to them. These dynamic communities have derived meaning from their traditions and experiences to overcome structural challenges, constructing a unique theory of knowledge around decolonial development that the rest of the world can learn from.

There have been remarkable movements in the region that have made strides in securing fundamental rights, such as land ownership and the preservation of territories. These movements also centre on the assertion of social and cultural identities and the demand for acknowledgment as citizens entitled to benefits from their countries' public policies. The indigenous populations in LAC draw on ancestral wisdom, particularly guided by the concept of *buen vivir* or good living. This concept is rooted in the ancient Sumak Kawsay, an indigenous principle promoting living in harmony with nature in order to achieve wellbeing for all. These movements also incorporate a Global South-led emphasis on addressing power imbalances through 'critical consciousness', a concept that focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world and taking action against the oppressive elements in life.

Social Science scholars have been studying perspectives on social change in LAC over the last 60 years. Shaped by the integration of Indigenous ideas and values, our study on Latin American Perspectives of Social Change contributed to a more locally and culturally informed social and behaviour change (SBC) approach to social transformations from the perspectives of unique cultures, citizens, and communities.

Indigenous changemakers in Brazil

Roraima is the northernmost indigenous state in Brazil. The city of Pacaraima, located in Roraima, lies on the border with Venezuela, and has received more than 400 migrants per day this year. Today, Brazil hosts over a half million Venezuelans. Approximately 28 per cent are children and adolescents, who are particularly exposed to diseases, violence, abuse and exploitation throughout their journey and in temporary shelters. Since 2018, UNICEF Brazil has been working to guarantee the rights of Venezuelan children and adolescents as part of its emergency and humanitarian response programme. Through the Community Mobilization with Adolescent Participation Strategy (CMAPS) programme, UNICEF has been able to listen to young

and indigenous people and bring them into the co-creation process, giving them a voice in shaping solutions that affect them.

CMAPS relies on volunteers between 18 and 24 years old. These volunteers receive a tablet and a small grant for mobile data, allowing them to act as problem-solvers in their communities, contributing to increasing the quality of life and services for people.

One of the volunteers, Adonis Suarez, is a social listener and popular communicator in Sorocaima, where he is from. In his role, Adonis establishes open dialogues with leaders, parents, caregivers and young people and children, listening to their needs to gain their trust and share information and advice about positive parenting and ways to improve child health, among other topics.

Passionate about preventing violence against children and the stigma and discrimination migrants face, Adonis uses his own experiences to connect with the children he works with: *“What moves me the most is the ability I must change the mentality and the behaviour of the people I interact with. In my talks with other young people, I talk a lot about xenophobia, homophobia as a migrant. As I continue having these challenges myself, I want to be a light showing other young people the way to be themselves”*, he says.

Created to help access communities at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, CMAPS soon became a network that aims to develop the community mobilisation, communication, leadership, human and child rights, and monitoring and evaluation skills of young volunteers.

As Adonis finishes his role as mobilizer, he is handing over to Joana Tomas, 24, a young indigenous woman from the Taurepang ethnic group who has already completed her first month, leading a WASH community campaign – “Comunidad Limpia, todos saludables” – to enable healthy environments through community participation in the Taurepang language.

Not understanding the local language excludes indigenous populations crossing the border and trying to adjust to life in Brazil. *“I love when young people participate in my sessions, but we have to respect their origins, cultural traditions and ways of expressing themselves. They are indigenous, so am I and I am glad I can do it”* says Joana.

Reshaping HCD in Bolivia

In Bolivia, local SBC staff and implementing partners are reshaping the Human-Centred Design (HCD) methodology, which is traditionally rooted in Global North and Western perspectives. Seeking to understand and apply local perspectives and cultural practices to drive social and behavioural change, they are incorporating local modalities of appropriation among indigenous populations, including Guaranis and Quechua.

Last May, UNICEF LACRO and Innocenti facilitated a workshop in Camiri, in the Bolivian “El Chaco” region, for a group of 26 participants that included counterparts and implementing partners from Guaraní Indigenous groups. During this workshop,

participants began adapting their mentalities, favouring immunisation by considering their worldviews, and their ancient cosmovision.

Incorporating indigenous traditional games and socio-drama, as well as building on a dialogue between Western medicine and indigenous traditions bred innovation. Additionally, recognising the oral heritage over the written one in some of these locations created new dynamics, such as using songs taught by elders. In the case of the indigenous communities in Bolivia, the incorporation of music has been crucial. They have created prototypes integrating musical groups singing about vaccines and proposing installing spaces near health centres for live music.

Building on the success of that first experience, the HCD methodology was implemented in four more Health and Community Networks in Bolivia: La Paz, Santa Cruz, El Chaco and Sacaca.

As a result, the participants started to transform the view of control and decision centred on the design, towards strengthening the vision of the participants and the incorporation of their autonomous decisions.

Valuing the knowledge of indigenous populations and the South-led approach are nurturing our ways of practising social and behaviour change. New pathways are making it possible to deconstruct concepts or topics that have historically been imposed by Western thinkers or by the power imbalances in relations in specific social contexts.

Latin American decolonial thinking teaches us the importance of recognising unique knowledge and experiences, and finding or creating decolonial methodological strategies and practical means. Adonis, Joana and the indigenous communities have been doing exactly this – embedding their cultural realities in the scope of programing from the LAC region to the world.

The Decolonial Strategy to Respond to COVID 19 in the Colombian Amazon

In terms of access to information, the department of Amazonas does not have any media managed by indigenous communities, capable of producing and disseminating information in their own languages. Although Spanish is the official language in the country, there are more than 80 indigenous languages and, in the Amazon, many people, children and the elderly, do not speak Spanish.

The challenge has been how to find an effective UNICEF response in *emergency communication during COVID-19*. *In principle, a decolonial paradigm was not intentionally sought, for the Colombian team the important thing was to reach the most remote regions with significant information.* In total, there were 1,103 municipalities in 32 departments, of which 578 of these municipalities did not produce local news.

With the support of indigenous organizations such as the Ticuna, Murui and Yagua Community, the Nimaira Indigenous Foundation, the Ka+ Jana Uai School of Indigenous

Communication and the Wise Grandmothers and Grandfathers, Young People, and Women, the UNICEF Colombia Team has worked on a four-pillar strategy:

- 1- *Training in audiovisual and radio production for indigenous communicators, adults and young people, to promote local production of information.*
- 2- *Production, adaptation, and dissemination of information on care behaviors to indigenous communities through face-to-face community dialogues, led by ethnic authorities.*
- 3- *Visibility of the health situation of indigenous communities through the production and dissemination of information on social networks.*
- 4- *Implementation of Accountability Mechanisms to the Affected Population, to ensure the relevance and clarity of the information disclosed.*

Among the main lessons learned from this decolonial experience working with indigenous communities in the Colombian Amazon, we highlight:

- i. Talking to people and identifying needs from the territory.
- ii. Know and work with traditional authorities and their own political forms.
- iii. Supporting processes within existing communities and avoiding creating new ones.
- iv. Recognize the costs and limitations of the territory.
- v. Provide technical training to local, community, and ethnic organizations.
- vi. Promote on-site accompaniment for the implementation of projects.

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