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Entrepreneurship development program for afrocolombian women displaced by political and economical violence

by Rodrigo Varela Villegas and Ana Carolina Martinez Romero

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 program specifically oriented to them. This article describes the process, the variables, the difficulties, the activities, the learned lessons and some results when a specific program for afrocolombian women was implemented. The experience confirms Gibb idea that there is not unique solutions in entrepreneurship education and that every program has to consider very carefully the characteristics of the population to be covered and the conditions of the environment.

Introduction

Through the years the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2009), has been supporting the importance of 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”.

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Many institutions around the world have developed different approaches to develop entrepreneurial competences for different groups.

However, most of the development had been oriented to the University level programs and in some cases to the elementary and secondary schools. In many cases those development, which had been quite successful in those level, have been transfer directly to different populations, to different cultures, to different level of resources, without the required adjustment, and the results have not been quite good.

Gibb (2007) presented a paper discussing the idea “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 Center for Entrepreneurship Development at Universidad Icesi was approached by the Ministry of Culture, in Colombia in order to develop a very special program for Afro-Colombian women in situations of forced displacement caused by economic and political violence in Colombia.

This article presents the process of design and execution of the program, 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.

Environment

The conflict in Colombia, during the last forty to fifty years has generated not only a tremendous social conflict but also thousands of dead, maimed, abducted, and one of the worst crisis of forced displacement and disappearances in the world.

During this process, various actors have been involved: drug traffickers, guerilla 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, social action (2011), is that around three and a half million people, representing about eight thousand families were in displacement in 2009. But, beyond the transfer of persons from one place to another, this process could be described as exile and uprooting, which include the suffering of fear, intimidation, lack of future perspectives and all kind of negative personal attitudes and beliefs in their personal future. But in addition to all these negative factors, they became nomadic in different states and finally they arrive to the misery belts of cities or small towns, where they can't find a job that allow them to make a family income for their development. To make things worse, all the rest of the society views them with mistrust and misunderstanding.

The negative effects have been suffered by the country's poorest people, and the minority groups. In the southwest of the country, the two minority groups more affected has been the African descent and the Native Indians. In the states of Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Cauca and Nariño, the effect of displacement of African descent has been very significant, increasing the levels of poverty and bringing all kind of social, psychological and cultural problems, beyond its traditional marginal status.

Violence has another special effect: most of the dead are males, which generate another family problems, because suddenly the mothers becomes the household's head and has to cover all functions, including being the main source of income for the family whereas keeping all the traditional responsibilities they have in it.

Government has a deep interest in helping these families to become self sufficient, as a process to improve the social tissue in every region and to reintegrate them to normal life. On the other hand, some groups of African descendant, who have achieved some levels of development, have created some networks and some NGO's to help these families.

The Challenge

The Ministry of Culture and the Red Kambiri approached the Center for Entrepreneurship Development at the Universidad Icesi, to design and implement of a pilot program aimed at developing the entrepreneurial spirit of a group of afro

descendants, living in Buenaventura, Guapi, Tumaco y Quibdo, that should allow them to create new economic activity, increase their income and improve their families social level .

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

Taking in consideration Gibb's ideas (2007), the Center started the process taking into account the characteristic and needs of the social group in the design and executions of the project. Very quickly the Center has 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.

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 professors from the Center for Entrepreneurship Development at Universidad Icesi (providing the knowledge about entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial education) .

Unfortunately, when the Center entered the project some previous 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 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 Center was able to explain them that there were some other elements that were very important for the entrepreneurial development of these women, and the Center started to talk about its 13 entrepreneurial competences(Varela (2008)), it's 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 activity.

The initial objective was changed to develop a program based on the specific characteristics of the human groups, that will allow them to successfully undertake a business project, and for that purpose they must acquire the skills and motivation necessary to decide on its implementation and to 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 did provide a profile of the general situation of the women, in terms of socio-economical conditions, level of development and

level of education, plus the support system they could count on . With those basis and the knowledge and experience of the Center, it went to work in the design of the project, including all kind of elements for the project, not only in the formation stage, but also in the business implementation and in the evaluations stages.

When that initial design was presented including the budget it requires , the limitations of the resources that the Ministry could provide, forced the Center to adjust the project, reducing some elements and identifying some ways to optimize the resources. This changed some of the original logistics that had been designed in the marble tow it academically and financially, to the needs of the Ministry and Kambiri´s.

After many exchanges and designs the group arrived to the "ideal solution", which was a proposal that would allow these new women´s entrepreneur 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. It should provide the 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 Center decided that the opportunity to interact with the communities in these cities and inside these populations should be used to help also the educational system. Thus a special program for elementary and middle high school

teachers was designed but all the cost for that program was covered by the Center, as a social contribution to the development of the country.

Finally a program which included the following stages was in place:

1. An educational program 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 identified, recognize 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 basis for the survival and growth of their entrepreneurial initiative.
2. Technical assistance to the different entrepreneurial initiatives, to provide the women's entrepreneur with the basic technology they may required in their business. The technical assistance will be provided once the educational program has been concluded and the areas of work of the entrepreneurial initiatives be defined.
3. Delivery of resources to start the enterprises. These resources will be provided by the Ministry through Kambiri's.

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 will be able to provide a basic training to the children of these populations.

For the development of academic material, the Center used three major strategies: the materials developed by other entities, on the subjects we want to cover, at national and international level; the developments the Center has done previously on women´s entrepreneur training,(Varela et al (2007)); the experience accumulated by the Center 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 program, the visual support material (presentations), and the materials to develop the classes.

The Execution

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

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

1. The level of compromise of the groups was quite different from city to city, which brought in some cases the need in some cities to work with groups bigger than expected(Tumaco and Guapi) and with very small groups in other cities (Buenaventura and Quibdó)
2. The educational level was significantly lower than the one originally indicated by the Ministry and Kambiri. Some of the participants were not even able to read or write, and some of them had very much willingness to work in entrepreneurial projects, but they did not have any previous experience on that. This brought a very significant heterogeneity in the classes and made quite difficult the formation process.
3. The women came from different NGO's, and with different expectative, which created subgroups inside the program and did not allow a good development of networks among them.
4. The entrepreneurial groups, in some cases, had been defined quite arbitrary by the NGO's that invited them to the program. As we found later this factor was quite negative in the development of the projects.
5. The local coordinators, in some of the cities were not fully com. Some of them were expecting remuneration for their work and the Ministry and Kambiri were expecting social contribution from them.

6. Local facilities in the cities were quite limited, thus a procedure to work out those limitations was always in place by the professors and by the technical experts that provided the technical assistance

The educational program included a total of 32 hours. Teachers planned to travel weekly to the cities, for four weeks to develop the training program, 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 have 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 Center 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 has to be adapted to the level of the people. 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 traditional to entrepreneurship had to be changed for more simple 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 very good hotels, etc) , however the challenge and the social responsibility was so high, that everyone

accepted the difficulties with very good spirit. The feeling that those women, which had extremely hard experiences were investing their times and effort to attend the program, created in the professors and the advisors a very special compromise.

Finally, much of the effort was oriented to motivate them toward entrepreneurship, to develop their self-confidence in their capacities, to acknowledge the importance of the opportunity the government and those NGO's are providing 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 no time, neither previous knowledge, to get involved with Business Plan methodology as traditionally considered.

All the methodology was based on active learning, using their own entrepreneurial initiatives to explain the different ideas about business development.

As indicated earlier, one of the main problems the project had was the construction of the entrepreneurial teams, because the Ministry and specially Kambiri did it using some rules that socially sounded very well: women living in the same area, or working with the same NGO, or having the same type of business, but did not take into account other important elements in associability as: confidence, capacity to work in teams, unity of purposes, knowledge between the members. In many cases the professors and the advisors had to invest lots of time to solve group conflicts.

In the formation process, with the help of the professors, 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 socialized with the entrepreneurial teams, with the advisors that were going to provide technical assistance, so that they will know beforehand what was required in the technical and managerial side, and also which one were the members that did not fit well in the entrepreneurial teams.

The process to provide some training to the elementary and middle high school had also difficulties, 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 ones who attended were quite eager to learn about the new educational perspectives and were willing to get it to their classrooms.

The resource distribution stage was quite problematic to the process, because it was, as indicated earlier, predefined by Kambiri and the Ministry, and it did not consider the results of the analysis done in each project. Lots of complains came from this process, and some of the initiatives did not get enough financing to really start their activities. Resources were given in kind, mainly represented in raw materials, some equipments and furniture, and some of the project did receive working capital.

In the stage of technical consultancies, the Center identified professional that were very well trained in the four sectors that cover practically all the business

initiatives: Folklore, Crafts, Food and Traditional Medicine. Each one of the experts travelled to each one of the cities to meet with the entrepreneurial teams that were working in its 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 done about one month later that the assignment of resources and 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 following stage of support.

The last step of the process, done by the Center, was the training of the coordinators that would accompany the process. The coordinators were involved in all the earlier stages, and they have been selected by Kambiri. However, as indicated, not all of them had the same level of compromise with the project, thus their effective participation changed from one to another. 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 professors 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.

Lessons Learned

The development of a project of this complexity undoubtedly gave many lessons, that even though they may look very obvious; the reality is that usually in most of the 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:

- All the planning, as important as it is , and as required as it is, should be ready 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.
- This case exemplifies very much the importance of local solutions, in terms of making the conceptual and methodological development based on people, resources and knowledge adapted to the local situations, because they are the ones that will be able to provide the required adjustments. In the developing countries it is necessary to learn that education is not something to franchise as consumer goods, and that we should search for local solutions in areas where cultural, social or political matters have a significant influence.
- The use of the principles of "active learning" is very useful in entrepreneurship development, because it allows to adjust very easily the orientation of the educational process, and also it allows that the participants help in the development of the educational process and in that way it makes more adaptable the process to their needs

- Entrepreneurial education is for the people and not for the techniques or tools .It is more important to strength the person values and attitudes than to give them a specific managerial tool. It's necessary to remember that in the first place they are persons, and then they are entrepreneurs, and education has to keep that order.
- The formation model focusing on women entrepreneurs and especially in entrepreneurial career plan, rather than in business plans, provides a more comprehensive development of the entrepreneurial potential. The empowerment in entrepreneurial spirit and in their role as entrepreneurs, will be with them throughout their lives, and will go beyond their economic activities.
- The model of entrepreneurial development, based in entrepreneurial competences, that was developed for university students can be adapted quite successfully to groups with a completely different academic training, but it requires lots of flexibility from the professors.
- The support system for this type of entrepreneurial program has to be very well established, because these persons required lots of orientation and support to be able to succeed. The personal, the entrepreneurial, the managerial, the technical and the financial assistance are necessary conditions to the success of the program. The support system should be as close geographically and culturally as possible.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For future projects of this kind it is important to consider the following recommendations:

1. 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 NGO´s may have.
2. Even though in most of the cases the homogeneity concept is not possible, it is very important to get populations at least with a basic level of education(read and write) , with a minimum of entrepreneurial intentionality, to make possible the advancement in the entrepreneurial process.
3. For the people that do not fulfill the previous elements, some other formation and training activities should be design before they get into entrepreneurial training.
4. The process of selecting business ideas or business opportunities should be based on the experiences and knowledge that the participants had, and not predefined by the sponsors or the implementing institution. Flexibility and independence in these matters are fundamental principles for this kind of program.
5. The processes of formation of entrepreneurial teams must be made by the potential entrepreneurs and not by the organizers or by the sponsors. It should consider the needs of the entrepreneurial initiative, the synergy that the member may have for the project, the free association concept, the

knowledge, the personal feelings about the initiative and some logistical conditions.

6. It is very important to involve very clever local people, in all the development of the project, so that they can benefit from the teachings of the experts, but at the same time be able to replicate the programs, to generate a wider coverage among the community. This should be a requirement for projects like these, to allow that the knowledge stay in the city and does not go with the consultant. This will provide independence for the region and also the possibility of expanding the action of the project.
7. The financial resources should come after the entrepreneurial training has been done, and the needs for every initiative are relatively defined, to assure that the resources had been allocated in the appropriate way. The financial resource should cover, not only fix assets, but also working capital.
8. The assistance, consulting and mentoring work needs to be a continuous process, not only through the development, but also in the implementation of the entrepreneurial initiatives. This activity should be done at the local level, thus it is necessary to develop local capacity inside projects like this one. One interesting possibility is to link local university students who are doing their internship semester or its social service semester to provide the support entrepreneurs need. Another possibility is to develop a group of business people and executives that become godfathers of the nascent entrepreneurs providing not only advice and support but also opening doors with different entities and reaffirming its role as entrepreneurs .

9. To be successful, entrepreneurial education requires, designing unique programs with specific characteristics depending on the environment and the characteristics of the participants. And for people with low educational level (in many cases without writing and reading skills), extreme poverty, displacement and violence situations, the programs must have more details, more flexibility and stronger support systems.
10. This program that was very well received and evaluated by the participants can be easily adapted and transferred to other countries in our level of development and cultural surroundings, but adjustments will have to be done to consider local elements.
11. The integration of government, NGO's and the University for the development of this type of programs is a very positive alliance, when each one provides its best capabilities and allows the others to do the same.

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