Chapter 12:

Minga of the Sun: Communication for Life

(Excerpt from Part Three: Praxis in Latin America)

In Chapter 12, Maria Ilse Andrade shares the experience of Colombia’s Júraco groups in running Minga of the Sun, a project that grew out of the establishment of neighbourhood communication collectives to become open workshop spaces for children and youth to learn about and use media. The children create micro-programmes that are broadcast on community stations. In the process, they develop a range of communication skills and at the same time animate a space of dialogue among other children and youth and with the wider community about their lives, rights and the natural environment.

More information: www.col.org/LearningWithCM

COL’s Healthy Communities programme: www.col.org/HealthyCommunities
Under the open sky, by a tree, on the street, inside the home of one of the participating kids, next to the local stream, at the soccer field or at the street corner, “Small Explorers” hold workshops and weekly meetings. They are part of the children’s collective at the Minga del Sol (Minga of the Sun) communication school, part of the Corporación Júraco, a Colombian organisation made up mostly of youth leaders who aim to promote the rights of youth, girls and boys of their regions through the use of multi-media communication.

Minga of the Sun uses a process that promotes spaces for child, youth and community training, participation and expression using communication. These non-formal educational spaces help the participants explore their creative capacity as citizens so that they can feel and become empowered in the public world through the practice of their rights.

The Minga of the Sun school was established in 2005 by the members of Júraco in an effort to replicate their experience and to strengthen the community participation of children and youth. The idea emerged from the formation of communication collectives in different neighbourhoods of the city of Neiva, capital of Huila Department, in the south of Colombia. Children and youth in the collectives had been trained in different types of media production, including print, audiovisual and especially radio. In the context of these communication collectives, media became pedagogical tools that the children and youth used to: narrate their personal histories; invent stories (for example, about water and rainbows); create fables, giving life to imaginary characters; and record and share their parents’ and grandparents’ stories about the environment and natural surroundings, their livelihoods and past ways of life.

10 Minga is a regional word meaning a gathering to work in a common purpose.
The children’s collective at the Minga del Sol communication school in Colombia works to promote the rights of youth through the use of a range of creative approaches, including writing and interviewing for radio broadcast.
The children and youth of Minga of the Sun have found in mass media, especially in radio, a way to express their thoughts, worries, dreams and feelings. They narrate and record them in micro-radio programmes that are later transmitted by the community radio stations in their region. They share them in child and youth groups, through the school's blog and by presenting them during special event days in their neighbourhoods. The audience includes their families, friends and neighbours who, in many cases, play starring roles in the stories.

In the end, it is their peers who are their main audience. Through dialogue, producers and audience alike share knowledge and life experience. Everyone’s voice is important.

Júraco does not operate a radio station of its own, but rather works with the community and school radios of Huila Department, and adopts other strategies to disseminate the programmes, for example radio-forums in the neighbourhood and community meetings, which have the added benefit of face-to-face interaction and immediate feedback. Parents have played a key role in the development of the school: accompanying the process and supporting proposed activities, they have assumed important commitments and participated in a range of activities.

Public speaking, taking pictures and telling stories allow the participants of the Minga of the Sun school to develop communication skills. They learn to listen and to be critical and purposeful. Mainly, however, they discover how to relate to people who are different from them in age, gender and the way they see life. The programme provides the participants with an opportunity to learn from others, to experiment and to share what they know.

The children and youth of the collectives not only learn about media and their own special interests. They also have the opportunity to: get to know each other and share as friends; decide on the organisation and activities of their collectives; express their ideas and doubts; take decisions; and, if necessary, continue with or change proposed directions.

Workshops, walks, journalism, games, crafts, dance, poetry and theatre are all some of the strategies used by facilitators and instructors to help participants reflect on the importance of knowing ourselves as communicators, beings who are able to feel and create, to express dreams, needs and desires. Self-discovery is one of the guiding principles of the school programme. This is well illustrated by Angie Dussán, a 14-year-old youth collective participant, through a monologue that she produced for the radio. It becomes evident that after exploring the language of radio, she finds both her voice and value in her words.
“I’m Angie. The truth is that some people don’t understand me and some people don’t like the way I am. I don’t understand why they get into my life, why they mind what I do with my life. They don’t know why I am like this. When I was a little girl I didn’t have very good things to say, but I am glad to be like this. I am natural. I am sincere and I don’t pretend to be what I am not.”

The radio has allowed participants like Angie not only to express their thoughts but also to find — in the mixture of music, words, ambient sounds and silences that they themselves assemble — a way to listen to their community and talk about their territory. Madeleine Yáñez, a facilitator who co-ordinates environmental issues in the school and who has also been involved in the protection of water sources in her city since she was a secondary school student, relates her experience in the following way:

“I think that, through the radio, people are made aware of the importance of conserving natural wealth and the biodiversity of species. [The radio] is an instrument that allows one to show the reality, for example of what is happening in our rivers because of pollution.”

Girls, boys and youths, with their microphones and recorders in hand, find the opportunity to investigate and explore their territory, to approach adults in order to probe their knowledge and in turn to share their own.

“I think the programmes the children produce are interesting because, from their own point of view, [the programmes] make us all think about the importance of taking care of the environment here, in our neighbourhood,” said Luz Moreno, a community member, after listening to Exploring the Jabonera Glen, a radio programme based on an ecological walk around a neighbourhood glen.

Fifteen-year-old Carlos recognises the benefit for some of his friends who participate in the process. “You can see they have fun,” he says. “And I like listening to the radio programmes created — they are short, entertaining ... and real.”

Minga of the Sun’s task has not been easy. In its six years of work, the school has faced many difficulties, including the scarcity of funds for operations and the lack of adequate space to carry out some of its activities. Beyond these challenges lie the social, economic and political conflicts of the context in which the school operates: poverty, violence, forced displacement, and lack of public services — all of which affect the families and neighbours with whom the school works.
Despite these problems, the school survives. It is the sum of the wills, hopes and convictions of people who believe that it is possible to change local realities through dialogue, communication and learning, and to promote the active participation of those who have been made invisible for so long. To the proponents of Minga of the Sun, it is worthwhile to go looking for happiness in everyday things, to celebrate life, and to believe in the value of diversity in the world and in the embrace and the smiles that linger in the magical charm of the radio.

Maria Ilse Andrade Soriano is a social communicator and journalist. Since her youth she has shown her passion for community work and youth leadership in different domains such as theatre, school governance and social organisation. Her connection with Corporación Júraco, which she has chaired since 2003, has encouraged work on the promotion and exercise of children and youth rights. As a trainer and director, she has participated in radio productions that give visibility to citizens’ actions and recount traditional stories on topics such as human rights, participation, sexual health and the environment. Email: zapaticosverdes@gmail.com, mariailse.anso@gmail.com

Corporación Júraco is a youth organisation operating in Colombia’s southern region. It runs community-based participatory communication processes and programmes primarily for children and young farmers.

For further reference, see:

- Minga del Sol blog – http://escuelamingadelsol.blogspot.com
- Angie’s story (audio) – www.goear.com/listen/54e1f94/yo-soy-angie-angie-dussan