

**JESSICA JENNIFER COHEN FOUNDATION  
FINAL REPORT  
ZOE SCHLAG**

A little less than a year ago I stepped off of a 22-hour-long bus ride from Buenos Aires, to be greeted by biting cold mountain air and my new boss. I had spent the past three months between graduation and the start of my Princeton in Latin America fellowship preparing myself as best as I could for my year ahead: I skyped with my future boss in order to determine what kinds of needs the organization had that my specific skills set could fill; I sought project design advice from an advisor at my university who supports students working on human capital development initiatives all around the world and I immersed myself in the study of business Spanish. I had several expectations for what this year of work and life in a new country and new language would be, I had plans for how I would fit into the organization and what I would contribute, so as I stepped off of the bus, I was ready to hit the ground running.

Day one was my first lesson in community-based human capital development projects. Although I was ambitious and anxious to get started on what I saw to be my ‘work,’ my boss insisted upon a slow transition period. He insisted that I spend at least the first few weeks observing the organization, getting acquainted with its philosophy and model of change and forming relationships with the other employees, the organization’s clients and the community. So, my entire first month was spent immersing and integrating myself into the organization. Now looking back, I am able to recognize that this first stage is in fact as much ‘work’ as project implementation, because it is paramount to getting cooperation and enthusiasm for any human development project. My first lesson turned out to be one of the most valuable that I have taken from this fellowship experience: working in the field of human capital development is fundamentally based upon empathy and trust, both of which require investing time and effort into cultivating a human connection, an objective that is every bit as important as project planning and implementation.

In addition to this crucial lesson, spending a month integrating myself into the organization and community provided me with an important understanding of my organization’s work that I never could have learned from its mission statement or theory of change. When working with a community-based organization, it is essential to understand the historical and cultural nuances that have led the present context to evolve. As one of my clients described to me, Bariloche is a city with two faces. There is the lower city, well developed to support the tourism industry that drives the city, and then there is the upper city—an entirely different reality. The upper city is characterized by precariously constructed houses, oftentimes without gas or electricity—a problem that is magnified significantly by the harsh Patagonian winters. Understanding this reality, that the socio-economic inequality faced by many of my clients is manifested not only in terms of resources and access to public services, but also visually and geographically, was also crucial to my ability to build the relationships that would allow me to move forward in my work over the next several months.

Although my boss and I had tentatively planned that the majority of my work would be carried out with the “Por Un Mañana” program, an initiative to equip marginalized youth with the skills and knowledge necessary to find dignified work, when I arrived in Bariloche, one of the secondary projects that I would be working on, PETISOS, had an immediate and specific need for my skills set. Dedicated to eradicating child labor and promoting children’s rights on an international level, PETISOS originated one of Fundación Gente Nueva’s programs in 2002. Over the past ten years, the initiative has evolved into an organization that works in the field with child laborers, intervening with the children and their families, as well as advocating on a community, regional and national level for changes in legislation in support of children’s rights. Over the past year, I found myself involved in three main projects with PETISOS: Las Hormigas, a microenterprise initiative employing the mothers of child laborers, a microcredit program offering small loans to entrepreneurs in the neighborhoods where we work and the design and writing of a social impact assessment to track and measure the organization’s impact over the past ten years.

### **Las Hormigas**



The PETISOS model of change to promote, protect and reclaim children’s rights uses a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach centered on direct intervention, legal support and advocacy. Although they have long recognized that child labor is a socially and culturally entrenched problem, their early interventions primarily focused on the children. When I arrived, PETISOS was in a moment of transition, looking to scale its impact by directly intervening with the parents of child laborers and community members

as well in order to address the socio-economic realities that lay at the root of the problem as a preemptive solution to work in conjunction with our interventions with the children.

In late September, I began planning PETISOS' first microenterprise group, *Las Hormigas*, alongside another PETISOS employee. Our original idea was to create a microenterprise that would employ the mothers of child laborers that would produce and sell products made from recycled goods. One of the reasons we chose to use recycled goods is because 'trash' has been a major defining factor in the lives of our clients. The majority of the child laborers that PETISOS works with worked in the city's trash dump in the past, searching for materials that could be reused or sold. As such, 'trash' has historically represented a violation of their children's rights. We hoped to reshape this notion to one where our clients viewed trash from a positive perspective, so as to encourage environmentally responsible practices in sustainability.

To start, we recruited participants from the two neighborhoods where PETISOS has community centers, sending out personal invitations to mothers who had shown a strong interest in our work and a desire to participate. In the first month, we focused on building group solidarity, defining ourselves as a group and developing our product line. It was especially important to us that the mothers be active agents in defining the initiative that they were to make up, so we supported them to be the ones that ultimately defined and articulated their identity and mission. By December, they had defined themselves as "a group of women, entrepreneurs and mothers who have joined together to produce and sell products made from recycled and reused materials. Our group is made up of women coming from two neighborhoods in the city of Bariloche: *2 de Abril* and *Virgen Misionera*. Our goal is to generate economic income and additionally to educate the public about the value of materials we normally refer to as 'trash.'" Our first product was the Eco-Wallet, a wallet made from recycled milk cartons and in February, we released our second product, grocery bags and purses made from recycled dog food bags. In order to realize this production, we partnered with several local businesses: a café that donated a weekly supply of milk cartons to be repurposed into wallets and a pet store which collected used pet food bags that we mobilized the community to return when resupplying. This model is a sustainable and integrative one because allows the microenterprise to function at very low-cost production levels and simultaneously involves the community at large in a social justice initiative. By the time I finished up my work with *Las Hormigas*, the women had taken much of the responsibility of the microenterprise onto themselves, managing a Facebook page to take orders, taking sewing classes gain the skills to expand the product line, and looking into distribution locations.

### **El Banco Popular de la Buena Fé**



Expanding upon PETISOS' desire to work with the families of the children, increasing familiar income and therefore addressing some of the root problems that forced their children to work in the first place, my second main project was to assist PETISOS with its inaugural foray into microcredit. We partnered with the Banco Popular de la Buena Fé (BPBF), a microcredit institution in Argentina that partners with community-organizations to serve as hosts for its microcredit program. This proved to be a highly efficient method of offering microcredit opportunities to a new neighborhood because the BPBF provided an already established lending system and trainings in microcredit while we, the community organization, provided the longstanding relationship and dependable presence in the community to ensure that it would not lose momentum or fail.

Following the BPBF model, we recruited and trained five 'promoters' who would serve as the personal liaisons for each group of five entrepreneurs taking out loans. Selecting five dependable promoters was absolutely crucial—as a fellow bringing knowledge and experience from another culture and country, I was acutely aware that I would have to contribute in a *sustainable* way, given that I would be leaving once my fellowship ended. That being said, when selecting and training the five promoters, we focused on creating a team that would be able to run the program independently after an initial startup period. From the very outset, the promoters understood that while we would provide the training and tools, they would be responsible for sustaining the initiative. Between January and May, the promoters made loans to fifty entrepreneurs, with a diverse array of enterprises, including bakers, artisanal products and carpentry. The greatest challenged we faced was educating the entrepreneurs about running an enterprise and financial literacy. Although many of the entrepreneurs already had the skills to produce a product or offer a service, most did not know how to manage the finances of a small business. While our promoters

are trained in supporting the entrepreneurs as they face these challenges, the entrepreneurs face many constraints that complicate the situation and their ability to become financial literate, such as another job or childcare.

The first loans that PETISOS made are due to be paid back in full at the end of July, so this second round of loans will be the first test of the program's sustainability, as they will be administered entirely by the promoters that we first trained.

### **Social Impact Assessment**

In addition to my work 'in the field,' my third main responsibility throughout my fellowship was the design, implementation and writing of a social impact assessment. My organization gave me this task from the outset because I was especially suited to comment on the organization's impact over the past ten years in a way that the other employees were not. In addition to bringing a knowledge of social entrepreneurship and community-based projects from another culture, I also brought fresh eyes. Social impact assessments are often carried out or designed with the assistance of third parties because it is at times difficult to be objective about a project's success or failure when one has been involved since the initial stages. Given that I was the first long-term fellow and social impact assessments must be carried out over an extended period of time, I presented a unique opportunity for PETISOS to have someone evaluate their programs.

After consulting with my director about her objectives for the assessment, I had to do quite a bit of research on social impact assessments. I reached out to several international organizations working in the field, including the Global Impact Investing Network, the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, Ashoka, and a specialist at Planned Parenthood. Collaborating with these institutions provided me with a tremendous amount of insight into the field, introducing me—and subsequently PETISOS—to Theory of Change models and measuring outcomes. In my collaboration with the Global Impact Investing Network, the organization responsible for producing a universal set of indicators to measure impact, I found that measurement indicators for human rights has not yet been defined in the field of impact reporting. Although this meant that I did not have many guidelines for my project, it also presents the opportunity to contribute to a hole in the field.

The final report that I ended up writing for PETISOS includes several sections, broken down into organizational, internal, financial and social impact categories. The first three categories were the easiest to produce information for because they are highly objective. The fourth presented my greatest challenge while at PETISOS, because measuring changes in human rights is quite difficult when our focus is both preventative and restorative. Essentially, I had to find a way to measure *what would the reality be in Bariloche if PETISOS did not exist?* Because this is quite subjective, I chose to report on both objective and subjective results. For instance, I included statistics about children's progress in our afterschool workshops as measured by a social worker, assessing their ability to interact with others, value their own work, etc., then comparing those results on a year by year basis, or depending on that child's degree of participation. What I found is

that generally, as the children become more involved in PETISOS' programs (i.e. attending more workshops), their self-esteem and ability to cooperate increases. Another equally as important aspect of measuring social impact, however, was through storytelling. For example, one of the first children that PETISOS rescued from the trash dump and successfully placed back in school is now a functional and contributing community member and has a family that he can provide for—but beyond that, he is employed by PETISOS. What I found while carrying out this social impact assessment is that these stories are perhaps the most telling of an organization's impact upon a community, but don't necessarily come out in the numbers or statistics of surveys.

### **Next Steps and Reflections**

As I mentioned, one of the most important things that I always tried to keep in mind while designing and implementing projects at PETISOS was sustainability. Knowing that my fellowship would eventually come to an end, it was important for me that the projects I was working on would persist even after my departure. That being said, we focused on putting in place sustainability measures that would ensure their endurance. With *Las Hormigas*, the last few months have largely focused upon shifting responsibility of the group toward the mothers. While there is still a project coordinator that oversees the initiative, the group designated specific individuals to serve as treasurer, oversee order intake, etc. The microcredit program, in part due to the model developed by BPBF, already has those safeguards with the promoters. These individuals receive a salary in order to run the program, and while PETISOS remains the host organization, the five promoters are responsible for its progress. Lastly, the social impact assessment's sustainability is most important. In order to be most effective, it must be carried out regularly at predefined intervals. Upon my departure, I left the organization with a written report to serve as a template for future years' subsequent reports. Although it will likely change in form, it should serve as a baseline for us to be able to measure our progress five, ten, fifteen years in the future.

Reflecting on the past year and my fellowship, I am incredibly grateful for the personal and professional experiences I have gained. However, I can't help but wonder what *my* impact on the organization has been. In fact, in the last month when I was working on my social impact report quite intensively, I found myself asking this question several times over. I never expected to get a concrete answer—or even a tangible one, at that. However, on my last day in Bariloche, as my boss drove me to the bus station one last time, she unintentionally gave me the answer to the question I had been wondering about. Since its outset, PETISOS has organized its work around five main tenets. As we pulled into the bus terminal, my boss turned to me and said, “Zoe, I want you to know something. The work that you have done this year—it has given us a *sixth* tenet. It's something we can never let fall by the wayside.”