

Article

## “Providing a Roof That Allows One to Dream of a Better Life”: A Case Study of Working with Families in Extreme Poverty

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a case study of a youth organisation working with families in extreme poverty and lack of adequate housing in Chile and Mexico. It initially describes the considerable structural changes that relate to the emergence of the organisation, and then discusses how across context case study research that draws from the interpretivist interactionist tradition was employed. In the main body it presents interventions that aim to provide families with temporary accommodation, social support, education, micro-credit opportunities, and legal support. The paper aims to contribute to a discussion concerning wider insights to be gained from context-specific approaches in working with families. The article highlights the need for policy and practice that approaches families as complex, dynamic and context specific entities that are re-configured through their networks and interpersonal interactions, and are subject to particular plays of power relations. Furthermore, it argues for practice that fosters family agency that is based on recognition of strengths, emotional and cognitive aspects of decision making as well as nurturing of hope.

**Keywords:** youth participation; families in extreme poverty; community development; Latin America; across context case studies

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### 1. Introduction

A small settlement at the outskirts of Santiago was bustling with life on a Saturday morning in November 2013. It took a long bus-ride and a fifteen min walk from the nearest community to arrive there. The settlement was surrounded by hills on the one side and a small river-rubbish pit to the south. Thirty families were living there in basic housing, sharing electricity and water facilities. The one-room

dwellings were made by wooden and plastic material, with earthen floors. Towards the centre of the settlement houses were made with more robust cement material and the alleys were less muddy and wide enough to fit a car. In most cases a number of generations cohabit together. Walking around the community, younger men are training their horses and a family is preparing bread in a wood-burning oven to sell in the nearby town with their vending bicycle. A number of volunteers arrive together in a car and scatter around the settlement, after a few minutes it becomes clear that they are looking for the families they work with and especially the children they are tutoring. Other volunteers are heading to the community centre where they will interact with pre-school children, while others are tutoring children in public as there is lack of space in the family house. On the way to the community centre of the settlement is an enclosure with animals, representing the support provided to a community member through micro-credit opportunities. The owner guides us around the enclosure with immense pride as this is the first opportunity she ever had to secure an income for her family. This activity within the settlement was initiated and supported by Techo. Techo was established in Chile in 1997 (initially known as Un Techo para Chile), as a non-profit, youth-run organisation, and draws its funding by individual donations, grants, and corporate support. Its mission is to work with communities and families in extreme poverty who live in “the most excluded slums of the continent”. A focus on poverty reduction in the region of Latin America reflects both a global antipoverty consensus as it trickled down in the agenda of international organisations, national and subnational policy making bodies as well as the stark reality of poverty in the region exacerbated by the marketization of public life and globalisation. As poverty was a reality in the wider region of Latin America, the organisation had by 2013 expanded into 19 countries and attracts a large amount of young volunteers. The objectives of the organisation involve the promotion of community development within slums throughout the Latin American continent, fostering social awareness and action regarding poverty, as well as advocacy for the recognition of the human rights of the excluded families. The joint work in communities between families and volunteers is designed to evolve in three levels: insertion in the slums to assess the type and the extent of needed support; joint work to identify priority interventions such as house building, educational assistance for children, micro-credit projects, basic skills training, and small business projects; and implementation of long term interventions that aim to create sustainable development within communities.

This article will first locate the emergence of the organisation within rising alternatives in working against poverty within the Chilean and the broader Latin American context. Then it will continue by presenting the story narrated by the volunteers regarding how they work together with families to set goals and initiate action, in order to contribute to a discussion regarding the rationale underpinning policy and practice in working with marginalised families.

## **2. Setting the Context: Emerging Alternatives in Addressing Poverty**

The aim of this brief first part is to highlight the connections between the context and the organisation itself. The emergence of the organisation can be understood within the considerable structural changes that have taken place in the Latin American context over the last decades, such as the growing importance of market oriented policies and the re-establishment of democracy. The project was established in 1997 in Chile as a youth-led organisation aiming to directly contribute to the elimination of poverty through provision of temporary housing and social support. As poverty was a

reality in the wider region of Latin America, the organisation had by 2013 expanded into 19 countries and attracts a large amount of young volunteers. While poverty has traditionally been present in the Latin American region, social inequalities have been exacerbated after the introduction of economic policies which signalled a tendency for the dismantling of the welfare state, privatisation of the economy, and “concerted efforts to roll back existing guarantees to social protection in the name of a larger role for the market, families and communities” ([1], pp. 59–60).

Although declining the average rate of poverty in the Latin American region has remained above 40% throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, with 18.6% of poor people being indigents and living with less than a dollar per day between 2003 and 2005 [2]. Poverty in Chile reflected the above percentages in the 1980s and 1990s, while since the 2000s this rate has been decreasing due to state targeted poverty reduction projects [3], and an economy functioning on the basis of basic service provision and export-led growth [4]. However, inequalities remain high, and isolation and marginalisation remains a reality for parts of the popular sector [2,4–7]. For Jenson [2] the limits of the market oriented model and the failure of efforts to counteract them such as the economic adjustment policies opened up space for the emergence of a new set of converging policy objectives in the mid-1990s. These new principles consist of a social investment perspective which instead of proposing particular policies “describes a specific logic for fighting poverty” ([1], p. 60), and supports policy initiatives that promote learning for the creation of human capital. Within such a perspective work with families becomes child-centred and many Latin American countries start following strategies to deal with high levels of poverty that endorse social protection based on cash transfers to mothers, conditional to certain behaviours related to children’s schooling, health and care of children [1,8,9]. For Fiszbein [10] there was a shift towards two separate and parallel systems of policies which involved on the one hand social insurance that reaches formal sector workers, and social assistance on the other hand that targets the very poor. Such policy shifts have succeeded in addressing some of the limitations of the “truncated” system [11], but still privilege the middle class while protection for the poor is scarcely resourced. Sections of the population, especially those working in the informal sector and those lacking adequate housing, have limited access to systems of social protection and depend upon support provided from nongovernmental organisations.

A second key development that describes the context within which the organisation has emerged relates to shifting expressions of citizenship and the transition to democracy. The 1990s marked Chile’s transition to democracy, which allowed for a number of organisations (private and public institutions) to start addressing individually, and in partnership, the issues of poverty [5]. A number of organisations and partnerships focused on housing. Housing problems involved both inadequate housing such as poorly constructed buildings, improper material, and precarious conditions, as well as a lack of basic accommodation for segments of the population. According to Finn ([5], p. 187), discussions between public and private institutions aimed to “move beyond critique of state policy to development of concrete alternatives that focused on poor communities not as ‘problems’ but as units of solution”.

For a number of commentators such efforts to work against social inequalities were restrained within the boundaries created by the new understandings of citizenship, prevalent in the region by the mid-1990s. Dagnino [12], for example, states that the legacy of neoliberal policies in Latin America was a re-conceptualisation of citizenship as individual participation in the labour market and a new understanding of families as responsible for creating their own opportunities in order to foster the wellbeing of their members. Commenting on the Chilean context in particular Rakodi [4] argues that

the individualistic ethos of Chile's model of democracy, its liberalised economy, and spatial segmentation weakened collective organisation. Therefore, a previously active civil society against authoritarian rule has retreated to quietism. Similarly, the poor are powerless to "make any effective claims on the political system" ([4], p. 255). However undeniable those developments might be, a different type of commentary, offered by Bennet [13], allows us to approach the context and the particular organisation from different analytical angle. Bennett explores (albeit in a North American context) the impact of market oriented policies and globalisation on the possibilities and expressions of social action, especially among younger generations. Where others see passivity and decreased collective organisation he describes a shift towards more reflective and personalised forms of engagement whereby citizenship is exercised on the principles of self-actualisation, choice of lifestyle, and personal values. Bennett's emerging "personalised politics", far from being expressed through voting or engagement in party politics and unions, are evident in people's choices (especially young people's choices) to get involved in causes that they personally deem important, be it the environment, social justice, or poverty eradication. Therefore, the emergence and practice of this organisation is understood in this article as a reflection of a shift towards more personalised and action-focused politics among young people, facilitated also by a general acknowledgment in the region of poverty as social inequality, rather than as an inevitable result of economic development.

### 3. Methodology

The research employed an interpretative interactionist methodological approach [14] which seeks to make the connections between individual discourses and policy or material conditions. This approach combines an interpretive emphasis on individual meaning-making, and an interest in situating the significance of such meaning within specific contexts. Furthermore, its focus on critically interpreting the process under investigation and linking it with the purpose of the study, allows us to define the boundaries of what and where is to be studied, and what constitutes the units of analysis. This study aimed to explore meaning making processes within work with families in extreme poverty. More specifically, the research questions focused on: (a) What notions of family did the participants employ? (b) How was poverty and need conceptualized? (c) What "working with families" meant on a practical (daily-weekly) basis? (d) What was the aim of their action and how was this linked to their own social experience? and (e) How did decision making occur in terms of priorities and methods of work (different levels of planning and decision making)?

The boundaries of the cases and the choices of the units of analysis were established on the basis of the above purpose and research questions. Techo's work is representative of a prominent tendency in Latin America in the 1990s to develop housing related projects as a part of a process of reducing poverty. While the organisation started working in the Chilean context (as it has been described earlier in this article), its work has soon expanded to other Latin American countries. This was possible because of commonalities regarding the extent of poverty and cultural similarities, such as common language. This study includes instances of Techo's work from both the Chilean and the Mexican context. Using data from both countries allowed this study to gain more information about processes and spaces enabled by the same organisation in different contexts. Therefore, employment of across-context case studies was a strategy that aimed to conceptualise common characteristics regarding processes or events, and to simultaneously embed these common characteristics in the particular context and time in

which they were developed ([15], p. 69); thus allowing the production of concrete and context-dependent knowledge [16]. The data was collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with 25 volunteers, and revision of relevant documentation (the organization's own publications and research, volunteer and staff interviews to newspapers/magazines, and websites) in Chile and Mexico. However, the study involved volunteers from a wider range of countries in the region (seven in total), who were living and working in these two countries when the interviews took place.

Working with families to combat poverty has its own temporality formed by processes, agendas and strategies—described in the introduction of this article—that shaped the fields of possibilities for action against poverty. This temporal character is affected by macro power relations, which create cultural meanings in regard to the scope and resources of working with excluded families. The effects of such power became obvious in the language the participants used to represent themselves and their work. Thus, the aim of interpretation was to make the connections between these discourses and the individual/personal interpretations regarding how they chose to engage with their organization and work with the families. The process of interpretation involved grasping both the unity and the structuring elements of the processes present in participants' interpretations. The process of interpretation in interpretive interactionist research starts at a very early stage, when the phenomenon under investigation, research questions and instances are defined. Obtained data are extracted from their context and dissected into their constituent elements (“bracketing” stage). This involves approaching participants' interpretations as text to be coded and analyzed through keeping memos regarding emerging patterns, overlaps, and connections. The identified elements are reclassified and brought together into a totality (“constructing” stage) to explore how they relate to each other and to the issue of the investigation while at a final stage they are located back to the social world and in the context in which they occurred (“contextualising” stage) ([14], pp. 70–89).

The structuring elements or categories devised through this process (which encompassed the different dimensions of the accounts of the participants) referred to two general areas: (a) personal learning and values (personal commentary on social conditions) and the ability to work towards social change; and (b) perceptions of poverty, poor families and their capacity to act as social actors. The relationships between these different structuring elements in the data were teased out on the basis of the following questions: (a) How individual motivation to participate related to particular citizenship values as well as perceptions of the role of poverty in family lives; and (b) How such perceptions gave rise to particular approaches in getting involved with families and how these affected the quality of interactions. For example, the data was interrogated to explore how a perception of social change as “bringing hope back” related to “communication and decision making processes” when working with families; how perceptions of poverty as “inability to claim rights” related to descriptions of “family involvement in the implementation of projects”; or poverty as a “multidimensional process” related to “priority areas for intervention”; and finally how views of the organisation as “new and still in process of learning” talked about the ways in which “feedback from families” was negotiated.

In interpretive interactionism it is important that processes are interpreted through the stated actions and the language used by the research participants. This brings attention to key issues which fashion processes of interpretation such as the history, power, emotionality, and beliefs concerning the knowledge ([14], p. 49) not only of the participants, but of the researcher too. Micro-power relations affect each aspect of the research and manifest themselves not only in the world/reality/process that is

studied, but also at the level of the researcher gaining access [17], as qualitative methods are both “material and interpretive practices” which “do not stand outside politics and cultural criticism” [14]. An interpretive emphasis on meanings and experience rejects the idea of a distanced, impartial, and “freed from personal history” researcher. In practice this means that while the researcher ensures objectivity and rigor when conducting the fieldwork and analyzing the data, at the same time he/she recognizes the need to respectfully communicate with the participants, in order to immerse in the ways they construct their activities and their meanings. The socio-historical identity of the researcher herself as “European”, “female” and “academic” had to be negotiated and fears about the possibility of “evaluation by an external actor” had to be discussed. Therefore the presentation of this study reflects a conscious effort to balance both a constructive approach to the personal accounts of the participants that allows positive aspects of their work to arise, and at the same time to maintain a critical distance. Moreover, an interpretive emphasis on meanings and experience requires that the outcomes of policy initiatives or interventions are judged from the point of view of those most involved. Due to its time constraints this project focused mostly on the perspective of the young volunteers. While interaction with families occurred during participant observation the main body of the data consists of the accounts of volunteers. Thus, it cannot be argued that the results represent all involved actors, but they focus on those actors that intend to deliver a service.

#### **4. Assisting Families to Overcome Poverty**

In the interviews the volunteers described the initiation of interventions to occur when community leaders or members approaching the organisation asking for assistance either because they have heard about its work, or have witnessed it in neighbouring communities. At the first stage a group of young volunteers visits the community to map the circumstances and to assess the type of necessary interventions. This happens in collaboration with the community members who provide their input in regular meetings with the volunteers and by participating in assemblies (asambleas). In these meetings the volunteers initiate a dialogue with the community, present their work, and identify both their possibilities to support the community as well as the limitations of their intervention. During this process volunteers identify the strengths of the community, the extent of existing support from government agencies and other non-governmental organisations, their willingness and ability to be involved in future projects (for example high mobility between communities prevents interventions as it is not deemed to have a potential for long-term cooperation), and also existing infrastructure. Also in these meetings are identified members of the community who would be willing to assume leadership, and would act as a bridge between the life in the community and the volunteers that represent the organisation. Assemblies provide a base for the initiation of dialogue between the volunteers and the members of the community to identify areas of priority for intervention and improvement of the community life.

Meetings with the families take place after decisions are made as to who is to be assisted—according to the demands of resource management—in order to explain the rationale of the decision-making and to maintain a degree of cooperation with the families on a different level beyond the provision of transitional housing.

In line with an organisational principle to act on an urgent basis, the first stage of interventions involves the construction of transitional housing (semi-assembled wooden constructions that are

assembled by the volunteers). The choice of families to receive the temporary housing occurs on the basis of a needs assessment regarding the quality of existing accommodation, income, type/existence of work, dependent members, lack of assistance from state agencies or other organizations. Needs are assessed by the volunteers through a questionnaire (adapted to the reality of each country), meetings with the families that wish to be assisted, and assessment of the material conditions of their existing housing.

There was no apparent focus in the interviews with the volunteers in both countries on interventions that privileged specific age groups. Furthermore, there was not a focus on children alone, nor on the role of the parents solely as carers. Indeed, the participants resisted describing particular forms or family structures for intervention, and referred to it as an extended network that supports its individual members. The process of support was rather seen as beneficial to all members of a family. While no families that express an interest are refused help, there was recognition that sometimes single parent families were prioritised as they met the financial criteria for assistance. Similarly, an increased number of children or vulnerable children increased families' eligibility for support on the basis of income criteria. Families were described in the accounts of the volunteers as being responsible to provide a safe environment for its members such as stability and secure routine. Adequate housing was deemed essential for accomplishing this mission. Only after having secured decent and safe accommodation were families seen as able to focus more effectively in securing the means to get out of poverty. Social exclusion, economic hardship, and poverty were cited as affecting the skills and the ability of the families to provide support for their members. The volunteers allowed some degree of control for their partners during the process by permitting them space to define their concept of family and to represent their reality of family life. In this way they recognised the particular factors that shaped the experience, and constrained the agency of families.

There was a focus on families as a space that needs to be assisted and sufficiently resourced in order to deal with the needs of its individual members. Discourses that either construct poor families as either responsible for their poverty or as undeserving, and dichotomies between "deserving *versus* undeserving poor" were notably absent in the volunteer accounts. An organisational commitment to empowering families and working in partnership was affirmed in the efforts, narrated by the volunteers in the interviews, to promote family participation in the second stage of the intervention: the process of construction of the transitional housing. Families were described as having clear responsibilities during the process of the actual construction to get involved though participation in the actual construction of their house, preparation of the land for the placement of the house, and preparation of food for those involved. Such participation, and a small contribution from the families to the cost of the house was seen by the volunteers as an opportunity for the families to demonstrate their commitment to the project and to this partnership. As one of the volunteers put it: "We aim at facilitating processes for all members of the community... (we aim) for this to be a participative space, where they are central actors...we don't want them to think this is something we are doing for them" [18] (Interviewee 6). In some instances, however, experience of abject poverty renders families unable to fulfil their side of the partnership, especially the responsibility regarding their financial contribution. In the accounts of volunteers from Mexico such barriers were overcome by allowing the families to contribute in any ways/means available to them: "now we have a sewing machine in the office that was given to us by a family when we built a house for them...last year our office was full of walnuts families had given us as a payment" (Interviewee 17). This practice draws on a long-term tradition in the Mexican society

that involves the exchange of material goods or services in the place of monetary exchange (trueque). This was also possible due to the ability of the volunteers to secure the necessary resources (construction material and money) through cooperation with community and business donations in the context of social responsibility (corporate responsibility). Furthermore, this strategy allowed families with a form of agency that recognised the financial barrier to participation and enabled involvement in the project by building on existing strengths and assets.

There was a clear tendency among the volunteers interviewed to highlight that the organisation was currently undergoing a shift in its priorities and practices. In this new strategy housing is not the sole expression of interventions, but also the establishment of long-term partnership with communities and families. In concrete terms the principles of creating lasting cooperation with the community and implementing “social interventions” are materialised through educational support for children, micro-credit opportunities, support with legal issues and advocacy regarding the fulfilment of rights. Accordingly, the implementation of such interventions is achieved through the establishment of a common space in the community which acts as a point of meeting between community and volunteers, as well as a physical reminder of the commitment of the two parts to maintain cooperation. This shift towards more social interventions was discussed alongside the recognition that poverty is a multidimensional experience, and as such needs multiple responses. This stage of work was presented as having evolved when important conceptual shifts took place within the organisation as a direct consequence of engagement with the families and communities, demarcating thus a progressive understanding of poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. In the volunteer accounts this is described as a process of adapting organisational processes. This adaptation followed a realisation of the multitude of the factors affecting the lives of the poorest sections of the population, and of the limits of emergency interventions in fighting poverty. Furthermore, families were approached as part of their communities and support involves mobilising all community members: “we work with the community as well to make it all a community process...members of the community or neighbours who want they participate and they say: ‘this a first step in making this community a better place’” (Interviewee 8). Therefore, fostering family agency and change was presented to occur through a process of building on the existing relationships and strengths in the community.

The construction of houses and the long-term interventions were seen by the volunteers as a process of learning for both volunteers and families, and as a way to dismantle misconceptions that characterize both sides of divided societies. Regarding the volunteers, divisions expressed in semantic constructions such as “wealthy-deprived” or “rich-poor” are the base through which they are invited to appreciate the effects of poverty, the extent of social inequalities, and their own social position. This occurs through seminar work that takes place in parallel to the construction and the long term interventions, and aims to provide a conceptual frame to the work undertaken and to challenge misconceptions regarding the roots/effects of poverty. In these meetings the teachings of the prominent thinkers of popular education in the region—especially Freire—are used to demonstrate how problems are socially constructed and deeply rooted in the relations of power, inequality, and division within the socio-historical context of Latin America. The new volunteers are immersed by the more experienced volunteers in the principles and practice of popular education and community development, and are invited to think about how they can put them into practice in the particular contexts in which they work.

The volunteers approached the process of construction as educational also for those accepting the assistance in the sense that this experience enlarges their perspective of the possibility of a better life. This is seen to evolve in two ways: firstly by giving them the message that the rest of society cares for them, and secondly by showing them that poverty is not happening to them because they deserve it or are defective in some way in comparison to others. As one volunteers stated: “they see we are not that different and worthy for being well off...they see we are normal people” (Interviewee 4).

Therefore, the work of the volunteers was not only understood as building upon existing relationships within communities to deliver support for the families. Additionally, creating relationships between volunteers and families was seen as an essential part of the process, and of mutual benefit.

Discourses that hold families responsible for their misfortunes were approached as an outdated form of citizenship, characteristic of older generations. Volunteer work was framed as an effort to challenge such divisive language and understandings, described as pertinent in the Latin American context. Some volunteers engaged with such concepts in an effort to exhibit their understanding and empathy “the families have lost their hope...you have to bring hope back...you get angry sometimes...you get sad...you say: “why am I working with you?”...but that’s their way to show their poverty...the drugs, the violence...to show they are not happy with their lives” (Interviewee 9).

The above comment echoes the narratives of liberation theology where hopelessness is directly linked to powerlessness [18]. Hope in anti-oppressive practice is to be restored through bringing together people who suffer similar forms of oppression and to help them to understand the roots of their oppression, re-discover confidence, and reclaim a sense of dignity. Similar narratives are evident when volunteers discuss the impact they wish to achieve within the communities. In many accounts the desired “impact” of working within communities was framed around families becoming more able to recognise their own strengths and capable of assessing their vulnerability. The language employed, both in the interviews and the volunteer meetings and workshops, resembled a form of Freiran popular education, where vulnerable families are seen as creators of change themselves through new knowledge, dialogue, analysis, and participatory methodologies [19]. This process of “autoreconocimiento” (self-recognition), as one volunteer called it, includes families and communities understanding who they are, the particular elements of their identity and how these exacerbate their vulnerability as to: “be motivated to do something and not see us as an organisation which does the work for them...and also (to generate) the empathy needed on a collective level” (Interviewee 7). Thus, processes within the community, described in the above stages, were seen by the volunteers as a way to break down the divisions between social classes in the Latin American context. They were seen as a form of popular education that highlights the importance of investing time in allowing people to reach their own analysis of their social reality through prioritizing “the process by which the poor come to understand that poverty and oppression is not their fault nor is it inevitable” ([20], p. 268). This educational process allows the families to understand the factors of their vulnerability, and enables the emergence of possibilities for a better life.

## **5. Insights: Strengths and Complexities in Working with Families**

The examples and processes discussed, although initially designed as community rather than family interventions, bear important insights regarding work with families with complex needs.

*The first set of insights* relates to conceptualisations of family structures. Family was described in broad terms, and was understood as a group of interdependent individuals with shared needs and interests. While risk or problematic behaviour was recognised as part of the daily experience of families, the attention was placed on the socio-political inequalities that were perceived to impact directly on families' ability to support their members. Changes in family behaviour were expected not as direct result of the short-term intervention, but as the outcome of a long-standing process that empowers families to overcome structural inequalities. There were no proposed family structures or forms: by avoiding pre-determining family forms and by defining family structure and relationships the way its members understood them, the volunteers allowed flexibility for recognition of the complexity of daily family life. This generated space for establishing more meaningful partnership with the families and enhanced their ability to better address the issues arising within particular families. Thus, the volunteers in the narration of their practices allowed for the redefining of family as an enabling and contextual network.

This contradicts a wider policy shift towards more child-centred models of practice that has also become increasingly relevant within organisations and public bodies in the Latin American context. In this model support becomes conditional upon certain behaviours regarding children's health and education, it is delivered within nuclear family structures, and the role of parents (especially mothers) is constructed as one of caretakers [1,8,9]. This often can lead to a pathologising of families who are unable to handle risk, and increase their children's capabilities for the future [8,21–23]. It also has the potential to privilege professional or expert-led intervention, which strips family of the ability to make decisions regarding the wellbeing of its members. The approach to family identified within this study resemble what Hughes [24] (commenting on the UK context) calls "whole family approaches" in that it tends to conceptualise family widely, favours work with "naturally occurring family structures", and encourages multi-agency work for family empowerment. However, instead of a democratisation of decision making and a "relocation of rights and responsibilities" discourse—as in "whole family" approaches—the volunteers employed a social justice discourse that is looking mainly outside family for the causes and solutions to family poverty. This first set of insights contributes to a discussion about how to maintain an interest in children's needs, without losing sight of the family as a system reshaped through its networks and interpersonal interactions.

*The second set of insights refers* to the Techo approach of working with families. The volunteers perceived their work with families as a process of mutual learning. An attitude of increasing awareness, generating collaboration, and seeing families as partners generates practices of co-creation rather than expertise-led interventions. This stems from particular forms of social solidarity and social analysis that is not based on a "zero-sum" conception of power relations. Thus, interventions are not designed to revert to binary oppositions between "powerful" and "privileged" volunteers with "powerless" and "disadvantaged" families. Practices in the local context are rather understood as creating a common space for the cultivation of mutual understanding. Seeing families as partners also promotes family agency that is based on strengths and recognition of what is possible in the future.

Recognition of such family agency also benefits more effective practice as it allows joint assessment of when, whether, and how far solutions lie within families themselves, or in the socio-political context that impacts family lives and family's ability to sustain the wellbeing of its members. It also leads to developing alternative strategies such as increasing family capital and extending networks. The extension

of networks was demonstrated in the examples discussed above, where family support “in its widest sense becomes the basis from which other work proceeds” ([25], p. 115) in the broader community. Involving community in the work with families, through provision of space and participation in events and assemblies, shows a particular interest in connecting (often separated/excluded) families with their micro-communities and the broader communities. This also can promote community responsibility for the families and especially for making sure the rights of the children within these families are secured by minimising the effect of structural barriers.

An important insight arising from the volunteer accounts relates to their focus on restoring hope and optimism against existing hopelessness and fatalism. This discussion of hope and fatalism demonstrates the importance of feelings in family agency. Such an acknowledgement of family and its members as social actors able to make decisions in both cognitive and emotional ways, introduces a different dimension in the exercise of agency beyond cognitive evaluation. In this type of agency, emotions act as “intelligent responses to objective circumstances” ([26], p. 2) and as “commentaries on our situations” ([26], p. 7). Volunteers appeared in the examples to support projective elements of agency by allowing families to assess and reconfigure their hopes and think about future alternatives. Working with families can act as terrain that enables family members to think about where they want to be or can be in the future, what possibilities of “manoeuvrability” are possible within existing structures, and to correspondingly engage in the partnership [27]. This is well exemplified in the experience of the director of Mexico’s office when she narrates in a journal interview about her first experience of constructing houses in the south of Chile: “When we finished building I burst into tears because I thought the house we built was better than what they had before but it wasn’t sufficient for them, and I said to the lady (for whom the house was being built for): ‘this can’t be the house of your dreams’ and she responded: ‘no it is not the house of my dreams but it is a roof that allows me to dream’” ([28], p. 10).

This projective element of agency involves the ability of families to distance themselves from their current experience, to generate alternative schemas, and to identify future possibilities for action taking into account family hopes, fears, and desires. It includes the capacity to construct the relevant narratives and to propose solutions on existing problems. It is in the last potential to propose solutions for action in the present that the value of projectivity lies: it is not the future outcomes on their own that are important, but also the socio-cultural processes generated when people engage in imagining the future, talk about it, and make commitments to these aims by altering behaviour in the here and now. Therefore, family working and fostering of agency through recognition of emotion, promotion of hope, and projective thinking is a point for reflection regarding current policy dominated by a tendency to privilege clear and routinised (technical/rational) forms of interventions. While a future focus is prevalent in current policy—and especially within policies focusing on strengthening family through child-focused initiatives—it stems from an interest to prevent risk and create social capital rather than an interest in exploring families’ “social capacity to act, alone or with others, upon boundaries that shape one’s fields of action” [29].

*The final set of insights* relates to the limits regarding work with families described in this article. Local power relations within communities undeniably affect the outcome of interventions and challenge romantic versions of community work that assume members of the community as transcending existing relations of inequality and working for the benefit of all members. Families choose to enter partnerships

after assessment regarding access to resources, understandings of power, politics, and self-interest. Furthermore, families that experience multiple disadvantages often lack the skills, knowledge, and confidence to take part in community events and even more in decision-making processes. For Cornwall and Coelho ([30], p. 13) actors within communities might be encouraged to enter partnerships and spaces for participation, but as they may lack the skills to communicate their wishes, it is left to the mediators to represent them and as such this process bears the risks that the mediators or representatives might “amplify the voice” and “purify the knowledge” ([31], p. 146) of the participants by employing their own interpretations and means of communication. Even when families are engaged in partnerships, there is the potential for the creation of “empty spaces” [32] where structures are established in the community and are (despite their name) filled with participating community members but they lack the ability to deliver about social change due to existing power dynamics. Such power dynamics are expressed through existing tensions, and unequal access to services and support. For example, volunteers in Mexico discussed how decision making regarding the allocation of transitional housing for families in the community was based on the “hard data” provided by the residents when they administered their questionnaire. When decisions were challenged by the residents the volunteers attributed it to the computer: “we tell them it’s not us...it’s the computer...we insert their answers in the computer and the computer makes the decision”. By seeking to invest their decisions with “scientific respectability” the volunteers attempted to manage tensions within communities regarding existing competition among families for scarce resources. This example fits well within arguments that challenge idealistic views of community as a site of radical transformation and free from unequal power relations. Power inequalities are also expressed through spatial segregation within slums themselves and affect the ability of families to take part and build partnerships. In the micro-community described at the beginning of this paper, for example, families that participate in partnership with volunteers tended to concentrate in the centre of the slum while those with less involvement are located towards the geographical margins of the camp.

The examples discussed highlight the importance of working with families as whole and as members of existing networks. At the same time, however, they generate thinking about how particular sections of the community and members of families may not be included in the process. Relevant here is a concern about the impact of such interventions on the weakest or silenced members of the families themselves such as children and women. Critiques concerned with issues of intra-familial resource distribution would assert that while fighting family poverty is important, it will not necessarily deal with issues of child poverty and lack of voice, or rights within the family structure [25]. Thus, while interventions may improve the wellbeing of family as a group their impact may be uneven for different family members, especially children and women. In this way, the dilemma and challenge for practice becomes how to strike a balance between considering family as a whole and at the same time retain an interest in the least heard voices within the family context itself.

The last three points highlight the strengths and complexities of such approaches and contribute to a discussion that underlines how families need to be understood as complex, dynamic, and context specific entities that are re-configured through their networks and interpersonal interactions, and subject to particular plays of power relations.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This article provided an example of working with families which comes from a nongovernmental and youth-run organisation in the Latin American context. Most literature is focusing on families and their role to protect children from risks and to create future opportunities. The very nature of the organisation meant that approaches to working with families were not devised in tandem to formal government policies but according to the organisational priority of reducing poverty. This has given volunteers the flexibility to work and adapt their practices to what was working better with families and as such the approaches described here are the result of interaction and joint work with families. At the same time, organisational shift towards more long-term educational and social in nature interventions reflects the paradigm shift in the region from a focus on policies that construct poverty and work with poor families in terms of emergency relief to a human capital perspective. These paradigm shifts have major impacts on the strategies adopted regarding family interventions and especially where the attention is to be placed. The process that the volunteers described as a “shift” is to be located within a broader context of an effort to both retain a language and approach inspired by the theoretical innovations of social justice and transformative visions of learning pertinent to the region, and at the same time to incorporate projective thinking regarding the scope of social justice. Recognition that emergency housing for families addresses a particular family issue, but it may not alleviate other aspects of their vulnerability, led to a wider conceptualisation of poverty as multidimensional and reconfigured the aim and breadth of interventions to include a variety of issues beyond the lack of material necessities.

The aim of this article is not to suggest that this is a better or more efficient approach to work with families. As this is a highly contextualised example that reflects the socio-political shifts of the particular region, its applicability to other contexts is questionable. However, the examples in this article can be useful and can contribute to a discussion with regard to the rationale underpinning policy and practice in working with marginalised families. In particular to a discussion about how families and disadvantage is constructed, and also how routinised professional expertise and bureaucratization may interfere in processes and may create resistance among service users. In many of its aspects this approach reflects the basis of what Hughes [24] calls whole family approaches, in that it shares characteristics such as an empowerment intention, promotion of networks of support, wider conception of family, and family-led decision making. Despite cooperating with state agencies this project still functions in the margins of the state in the sense that it works with those left out of the official system of support or other NGO assistance. It, therefore, enjoys a degree of freedom or ability to innovate, and adapt methods in practice and in cooperation with those assisted.

As the policy context of Latin America (and elsewhere) becomes increasingly more child focused, with an interest in breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty through early childhood programmes and education [33], it is of increased value to reflect on broader approaches like the one described in this article. Such broad approaches to working with families need further investigation to assess how to develop and sustain interventions that take into account the strengths of the family, and take on board the interest of all its members. From a development perspective Amartya Sen ([34], pp. 76–77), while he recognises the importance of a holistic approach in family work, he calls for analytical distinction and empirical differentiations which highlight the role of investing in children in

particular, as “the whole might be more than the sum total of its parts, but we have to be quite clear as to what the parts are before we appraise the whole”. Nevertheless, the flexibility and the ability within the organisation to contextualise practice to the particularities of each different country, is a good starting point for reflection.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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