

NETWORK MEMBER: PROYECTO SURCOS



A Pathway to Health in Argentina - Building Trust, Securing Rights.

Proyecto Surcos ('Furrows Project') is an interdisciplinary group working in Community Health in Argentina. It promotes healthier living conditions from the resources of each community it serves, through the exchange of knowledge and skills. It has developed a health rights program to empower members of the Guaraní M'bya tribe.

Founded 1999

www.proyectosurcos.org



Surcos workers with the Guaraní M'byá community in Misiones State, in north east Argentina.

The Argentinian province of Misiones is a finger of jungle in the north-east of the country surrounded on three sides by Paraguay and southern Brazil. It takes its name from the 17th century Jesuit missions established in the region that provided the indigenous Guarani people with a modicum of protection from the slavery and exploitation of the plantation economy. The 1986 Robert De Niro film *The Mission* is based loosely on local history.

Today in Misiones, 900 people of the Guaraní M'bya community live in villages in the county of San Pedro – one of the most impoverished and underdeveloped places in Argentina. Since 2010 the national health promotion NGO, Proyecto Surcos, has been working to improve the community's health outcomes. "Surcos started working with

the Guaraní M'bya community addressing health issues, but soon it became clear that basic human rights were not being respected," says Alejandra Sánchez Cabezas, director of Surcos. "In order to improve the health conditions of the population it became necessary to design actions to work on legal empowerment."

Alejandra says in the village of Tekoá Arandú, one of Surcos' project sites, the widespread lack of information about native people's rights reinforced the community's isolation from the labor market and its exclusion from institutional decision-making. Together this limited the community's ability to improve living conditions or have a say in how to tackle their health issues.

A significant issue is that the Guaraní M'bya has seen decades of negative impacts on their

capacity to survive using local resources. They are a community whose life practices revolve around the harmonious integration with the ecosystem from which they obtain subsistence products. In particular, progressive deforestation together with constant displacement from their traditional has led to the progressive decline of their living conditions.

To this day, the Guaraní M'bya community has limited means for earning a living - their livelihoods are based on producing and selling handicrafts such as woodwork and basketwork, and the sale of local plants. "For many community members, direct and indirect cash transfers represent their main income source, which often times come tied to clientelistic practices that perpetuate their dependence on local political figures" says Alejandra. "These limit the Guaraní M'bya's potential to organize themselves, and hinders their development."

One of the first things Surcos had to establish was trust – the community has been subject to several failed interventions and tends to distrust new organizations. Surcos conducted a series of group meetings with the objective of creating awareness about the rights and legal norms that are available to the Guaraní M'bya community. Argentina's national and local legislation establish special rights for native communities, in particular in regard to their land and cultural heritage.

The meetings sought to build up the knowledge of participants and create a non-hierarchical, empowering exchange of information, thereby strengthening the confidence and assertiveness of the participants.

"Legal awareness among the Guaraní M'bya community was understood as the first step towards the effective exercise of their rights," says Alejandra. "These actions were part of a larger project which was being conducted in the county of San Pedro, with the objective of strengthening the response of institutional and communal networks to local health issues. This intervention received

the support of key local stakeholders including the Municipality of San Pedro, health authorities, the Provincial Hospital, women's cooperatives and local radio. Surcos also intervened to ensure inclusion of Guaraní M'byá's representatives in local decision-making."

As a result of the project, the Guaraní M'byá joined the local roundtable of community stakeholders as part of the National Program "Healthy Counties and Communities" run by the National Ministry of Health. There, the representatives from Guaraní M'byá community participated, introducing matters relevant to their villages, and were recognized as equals alongside representatives from the European-descended population. Similarly, the Tekoá Arandú village participated in the local Health Fair organized by Surcos alongside other creole communities of the county. This represented a landmark in their integration in the institutional life of the County of San Pedro.

"Before Proyecto Surcos, many NGOs came to help us," says Santiago, first chief of the Guaraní M'Byá community. "But as easily as they give something to us, when they depart they strip it away. But Proyecto gave us something nobody can take away from us: knowing our rights. Now, I teach other indigenous chiefs what I've learned from them".



Argentina's Misiones province is deep in the heart of Latin America - bounded on three sides by southern Brazil and Paraguay.

Key Lessons

- 1 Recognize the importance of getting a range of diverse stakeholders involved, beyond the community you are working with, in order that a project can have greater reach, impact and sustainability. It required allies to ensure the empowerment and repositioning of the Guaraní M'bya in the wider local community.
- 2 Working with actors from the health sector and the municipal government was especially important. The participation of the local government was essential, because they are in charge of providing multiple services and have the capacity to grant symbolic and formal legitimacy to the demands of various groups. Their recognition represented an important landmark for the Guaraní M'bya community.
- 3 In terms of the resources employed, it was important to design and utilize bilingual audiovisual materials to help develop these activities - the use of the community's own language protects its identity, strengthens its integration and acknowledges its existence and legacy.



Members of the Guaraní M'Byá community in Misiones.