

Supporting the activities of Association Centro Virgen Niña Epdb in Bolivia to assist the most disadvantaged

Beneficiary: Association Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb

Location: Bolivia, South America

Grant Cycle: 2021 - 2024

Type of Grant: three-year program support

Human Welfare & Rights

The Association Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb is a non-profit Catholic organisation founded in 1993 by Sister Grazia Micaelli and a group of Bolivian lay people committed to the people of the city of El Alto, La Paz, Bolivia. The association focuses on the social, educational and health care of children with physical and cognitive disabilities, as well as children in the community who are economically and socially disadvantaged.

The Virgen Niña Centre in El Alto helps around 1000 people annually. These include children and young people with disabilities, as well as single mothers and elderly people with no support. The activities are designed and carried out by a multidisciplinary team of professionals from the fields of general medicine, dentistry, speech therapy, behavioural therapy for people with autism, physiotherapy, psychomotor skills, nutrition, social assistance, psychology, occupational therapy and nursing. A team of specialist educators provides individual support to each beneficiary. The activities of the Virgen Niña Centre are carried out in the knowledge that people with disabilities and their families need protection and support in order to fully exercise their rights on an equal footing. The Centre has formed alliances with the Ministry of Education. Bolivia is a country characterised by significant socio-economic inequalities, with a slow reduction in extreme poverty despite the implementation of socio-economic policies in recent years. The Municipality of El Alto has become the second most populous city in the country and a large percentage of the population lacks basic services, such as adequate sanitation,

education and access to healthcare. A significant percentage of El Alto's population is made up of children, adolescents and adults with mild to severe disabilities. The State does not have accurate census of disabilities among children and adolescents. The project of the Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb Association was created to respond to the needs of this most marginalised and discriminated population, which has very few opportunities for social development. The Centre provides a physical space where a range of services are made available to the local community, including:

The **Special Education Center** operational since 1993 with the objective of providing support to children with special educational needs and/or disabilities. This is achieved through the implementation of individual educational programs, as outlined by the Curriculum of the Ministry of Education. The work is centred on fostering personal and social independence and is accompanied by rehabilitative therapies that are designed to facilitate the comprehensive development of the child. Where possible, this is achieved through the inclusion of the child in pre-school and primary education levels in public schools.

The **Child Development Center** was created in 2002 and provides education for children aged six months to five years from disadvantaged families. The Centre helps children grow and learn before they start school. The programmes are designed for each child, including education, food, healthcare and hygiene.

The **Inclusive Initial Educational Unit** has been developed based on the experience gained with

the Child Development programme and is currently working on inclusion in 20 public and private educational units in both the city of El Alto and the city of La Paz, where more than 60 children with autism, Down Syndrome and physical disabilities are already included in the regular system.

Health and therapeutic support from the multidisciplinary team: this programme provides multidisciplinary assistance to boys and girls from the educational area of the Centre's other programs. A team of professionals reinforces the work of Virgen Niña by providing assistance to the community and promptly reporting health problems to hospital care centres.

Charitable social assistance to provide fresh and dry food to more than 600 people, including malnourished children, families in extreme poverty, women and men with disabilities, and single women with children. In addition to the food, all these beneficiaries receive orientation and healthcare. An important issue addressed by this program is the care of the elderly within families. In the city of El Alto there is a high rate of abandonment of the elderly. The Centre aims to solve some of the most serious problems of this sector of the population, made up of 80 families in extreme poverty and with an average of 5 members each. There are 125 elderly people in a state of total abandonment.

The Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation (NaEPF) has been supporting the activities of Sister Grazia Micaelli and the Association Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb in Bolivia since 2005. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the NaEPF stood by the Center and awarded an extraordinary emergency grant to help cope with the pandemic emergency in El Alto. In 2021, the NaEPF helped the Center to rebuild its infrastructure after the damage caused by severe weather conditions and renewed its program support to continue its activities in El Alto.