

# Three-year support to the Association Centro Virgen Niña Epdb in El Alto, Bolivia

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 Church 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 Association's statutory objectives include activities that benefit around 1000 people annually. This includes children and adolescents with disabilities, as well as single mothers and elderly people without support. The activities are planned and implemented by a multidisciplinary team of professionals in the fields of general medicine, dentistry, speech therapy, behavioural therapy for those with autism, physiotherapy, psychomotor skills, nutrition, social assistance, psychology, occupational therapy and nursing care. A specialist pedagogical team carries out individual monitoring of each beneficiary. The activities of the Virgen Niña Center are conducted with the knowledge that people with disabilities and their families must receive protection and assistance in order to fully exercise their rights on equal terms. The Center has formed alliances with the Ministry of Education, strengthening the methodology of educational inclusion in the School of Special Education and in the Nursery School.

Bolivia is a country with profound inequalities, where the reduction of extreme poverty still occurs very slowly, despite the implementation, in recent years, of socio-economic policies aimed at improving the level of poverty in the country. The Municipality of El Alto has become the second most populated city in the country and a large percentage of the population lacks basic services, such as adequate sanitation, education and access to health-care. A rather considerable percentage of El Alto's population is made up of children, youth and adults with mild to severe disabilities. The State does not have a precise census of disabilities in children and adolescents. Like adults, children with serious and very serious disabilities also have access to a monthly bonus of around 36 dollars, a sum that does little or nothing to provide substantive medical care or cover the cost of food and does even less to provide for specific medical care necessary for an acceptable quality of life. The project of the Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb Association was created with the aim of responding to the needs of this most marginalised and discriminated population who are afforded very few opportunities for social development. The Center provides a physical space where food, medical care, rehabilitation and spiritual healing are provided to the people who make up this community.

The initiatives carried out by the Center are governed by the principles of social and educational inclusion, in accordance with the Declaration of Human Rights, which establishes that all people have the same rights and must be respected and valued in their individuality. As part of the general project, the Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb Association implements the following specific projects:

The Special Education Center has been operating since 1993 with the aim of supporting children with special educational needs and/or disabilities

by providing individual educational programs as indicated by the Curriculum of the Ministry of Education. This work focuses on personal and social independence and is accompanied by rehabilitative therapies centred on the integral development of the child and, if possible, on his inclusion in pre-school and primary education levels in public schools.

The Child Development Center was created in 2002. The Center has an educational and spiritual function and is aimed at girls and boys from six months to five years of age who come from disadvantaged families, single-parent families and families that have been broken up for economic reasons. The Centre's work program focuses on the integral growth of children, before entering the public education system, so that they can develop all their abilities. The programs are designed specifically and individually for each child, both in regard to education and daily care (food products, health-care and hygiene).

Inclusive Initial Educational Unit arises out of the experience gained with the Child Development program since 2002. The Center works 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 Syndrome, Down Syndrome and physical disabilities are already included in the regular system.

Health and therapeutic assistance by the multidisciplinary team: Through this program, multidisciplinary assistance is provided to boys and girls from the educational area of the Center's other programs. A team of professionals strengthens Virgen Niña's activity by providing assistance to the community and promptly reporting health problems to hospital care centres.

Charitable social assistance: As a response to the extreme poverty and marginalisation experienced by a significant percentage of the population of the city of El Alto, this service is organised to help supply fresh and dry food supplies to more than 600 people, including malnourished children, families in conditions of extreme poverty, women and men with disabilities, and single women with children. All these beneficiaries, receive orientation and healthcare in addition to receiving food. An important issue that is addressed with this program is the valorisation and care of the elderly within families. In the city of El Alto there is a high rate of abandonment of the elderly. The Centre's activities are aimed at solving some of the most serious problems within 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. Eighty percent of the families assisted by the Center are separated families, single mothers and in some cases single fathers who remain responsible for their children. Through the entire staff's commitment, the Center has achieved real-life changes, always seeking not to just provide welfare assistance, but to insist on training for the change of mentality that makes it possible for many families, women and older adults to live with dignity even in poverty.

The **Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation** has supported Sister Grazia Micaelli and Association Centro Virgen Niña-Epdb activities in Bolivia since 2005. Even during COVID-19, 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 Foundation aided the Center in restoring its infrastructure following the damage caused by severe weather conditions and provided another three-year program support to continue its activities in El Alto.