

***Supporting the Inclusion of “Invisible” Children and Youth with Disabilities  
and their Families in Rural El Salvador***

***Summary of Scientific Report***

***Submitted by***

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In rural El Salvador, people with disabilities are often “invisible”, that is, they rarely leave home, attend school, or participate in village life. This project was designed to investigate the needs of individuals with disabilities who live in economically impoverished, rural villages as well as to identify and implement ways to promote their participation in day-to-day village life. The study was carried out within a grass-roots community development framework. We sought voices of families, community members and local leaders to identify barriers to participation; to design, and implement activities that promote inclusion; and to understand the impact of these activities on individuals, communities and families.

The follow-up data presented in this scientific report was based qualitative interviews with 15 individuals with disabilities or their families; focus groups which included individuals with disabilities as well as facilitators and other community members; working groups during Encuentro II, and observations during home visits and community events. Transcripts and field notes were coded using an inductive, constant comparison process. Four overarching themes were identified, as well as several sub-themes associated with two of the overarching themes.

The themes and subthemes included:

- Individual Benefits
- Community Benefits
  - Community Awareness: “Now we See Them”
  - Developing Practical Skills
  - Physical Changes
  - Participation and Contribution
- Barriers to Participation
  - Barriers at the Intersection of Age, Mobility and Community Accessibility
  - Previous Experiences

- Family Barriers: Isolation, Priorities and Fears
- Recommendations for the Future

**Conclusions.** These findings suggest to the need to develop and implement practical, community-based strategies for promoting acceptance and inclusion of persons with disabilities in the community. In the villages in which we implemented these interventions, substantial progress was made in ways that promoted social and education inclusion. Local strategies such as the *Circuitos de Amigos* program were especially important in a country where resources are so limited and the impact of poverty was so pervasive. Similarly, these findings argue for the importance of local training and public awareness activities to disseminate information about rights.

Finally, although the changes that were achieved suggest the importance of community-based strategies for achieving more inclusive environments in these contexts, it is true that some of the barriers could not be addressed with the limited funds available to this project. This suggest the ongoing need for larger, macrosystem interventions (e.g., building roads, and establishing transportation systems) in addition to developing strategies in collaboration with local stakeholders who are grounded in local community contexts to assure maximum participation of individuals with disabilities in the educational and social life of their communities.