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EDUCATION, A PATHWAY TO SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Preparation for the AIC Assembly 2013

Training Booklet n° 20



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Contents

<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>AIC and Education.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Going into more detail on the concepts behind the current Operational Guidelines.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>The 2011-2013 Operational Guidelines in our projects... </i>	<i>14</i>
<i>The AIC Operational Guidelines and their relationship with the Systemic Change method.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>The Lera Project: Education and Systemic Change.....</i>	<i>18</i>

INTRODUCTION

Laurence de la Brosse

AIC 2011-2013 WORKING TOGETHER

Education: A Two-Way Process:

- 1. To identify and value skills and potential.*
- 2. To encourage interdependence.*
- 3. To promote co-creativity.*

Supported by AIC Training:

- 1. Spiritual, ethical and Vincentian.*
- 2. In techniques, particularly in communication and visibility.*

Being part of AIC means we enter into a process, that of our Operational Guidelines: as 200,000 AIC volunteers all over the world, we can share our experiences, reflect together and determine the Operational Guidelines (O.G.).

The International Assembly in Madrid in 2011 put education at the heart of the 2011-2013 Guidelines. The aim of this booklet is to help us understand them better in order to apply them to our projects.

At the next International Assembly in 2013 we need to evaluate the situation. We have spoken of qualitative evaluation. This is a question of getting up to date regarding what new elements “education” has brought to our projects, for the people who participate in them and for us as AIC volunteers.

(This is different to a quantitative evaluation which would require us to measure, with figures, the number of education projects we have implemented in the last two years).

Let us go forward with confidence and enthusiasm along this path of education, reminding ourselves of Saint Vincent's outlook: "His calmness drew the attention of others. Saint Vincent was conscious that he was accomplishing God's work: *"Things concerning God happen by themselves and true wisdom consists in following Providence step by step"*. Saint Vincent followed Providence obediently and this is why he was slow to launch himself into things. But as soon as he felt the signs of God's will in a task, he was dedicated, firm and unwavering". (L. Mezzadri, *"Saint Vincent and the Charisma of Charity"*, Rome, 2002).

AIC AND EDUCATION

Father Eli Chaves

« No one educates others, no one educates himself alone, people educate themselves together through the intermediary of the world ».

« He who teaches learns while teaching, and he who learns teaches while learning ». (Paulo Freire)

In preparation for the next AIC International Assembly in Bangkok (in March 2013), we invite all the volunteers to study in greater detail and evaluate how the Operational Guidelines from the Assembly that took place in El Escorial (Spain) in 2011 have been introduced and implemented.

Education was picked up on at the last AIC Assembly as a fundamental tool for working in partnership with people living in poverty. Education must be present and a driving force behind all of AIC's charitable action in order to promote Systemic Change and the establishment of a fairer and more united society. We are well aware that education alone cannot generate social change, but without the former, the latter cannot occur. Education leading to the construction of a life of solidarity and justice must be an "education practised freely". This necessitates a new understanding and a new method of education which goes beyond and casts off the traditional educational model.

Throughout history, education has been predominantly understood and practised in a way that is obviously very vertical. The person being educated is a receptacle for knowledge, a sort of "recipient" where we "deposit" a piece

of knowledge; the teacher is the one who speaks, knows and chooses the subjects to be covered. The teacher imposes the rules, the objectives and his or her conception of the world upon the pupil. The **role** of the person being educated is to accept everything passively, to adapt themselves to an established order which has been created through a **process** that eliminates **creativity** and **critical thinking** and prohibits **dialogue**. It's a form of education which runs from "top to bottom", which imposes or reproduces the dominant social, economic and cultural model and establishes an authoritarian relationship of domination.

Free education is a type of education which respects the liberty, autonomy and knowledge of the people being educated. This form of education aims to be more humane, the pupil is not the object but the subject of the educational process. The human being can only truly be understood if we put him or her in a historical context, in a concrete reality. The fundamental **objective** of education is the **thoughtful organisation of knowledge**. Providing people with the means that allow them to liberate themselves with a true vision of reality means they can develop a critical mind when faced with real life situations. Education needs to lead the person to discover and become aware of his or her personal reality and historical background, as well as to have a critical opinion on this reality and the power to transform it.

A new pedagogical method establishing dialogue, reciprocity, communion and liberation is currently necessary:

Education as a liberating process rests on the concept of the human being in his or her historical context. The human being doesn't just evolve in the world, but with it, through reflection and action. The human being must understand the world; he or she must act so as to transform it, to make it more humane and free. One must understand the meaning

of one's own existence in order to become a true person. To gain this awareness, it is essential to have a critical mind which can put one's existence and that of one's fellow humans into their context. This step generates awareness and action, it allows the individual to establish themselves and become fulfilled in their own reality.

If those being educated become aware of their true condition, they can take on their historical reality and transform it as they become fulfilled. It is a question of striving "to always be more", to make every aspect of the person more humane. **An educational project does not consist in a passive and vertical transmission of knowledge but in implementing a concrete action and transforming reality.** When thought and action change reality, they are also sources of knowledge and creation.

This process develops through dialogue which allows interaction between the learner, the teacher and their reality. Human beings cannot become fulfilled in silence but through discussion, thought and action. Dialogue implies a meeting between people to transform the world. This is why such dialogue becomes an essential requirement. Dialogue is what allows education to truly exist and it is necessary for a person to develop themselves. It allows the learners to stimulate and nurture their critical minds so that they become aware of the meaning of **analysis** and the power of **training** and gain an **understanding** of reality.

The teacher and the pupils learn together when they establish a dialogue in which there is an educational process. The dynamic of the dialogue breaks the passivity of the person being educated, establishes interdependence between the teacher and the pupil and transforms the teacher into a "problem solver". This is a person who assists reflection and who encourages creativity and critical thinking in the learner. Dialogue also allows for a **reciprocal exchange**

by identifying and valuing the competencies and potential of all involved, encouraging interdependence and promoting co-creativity.

Education must go beyond the old notion of teacher-learner by being based on a concept that brings together the two extremes into one continuous line. In this way, each person is simultaneously “the teacher and the learner”. With his or her deep faith in human beings, in their power to create and transform reality, the teacher must accompany the people that he or she educates.

“Only authoritarian educators deny the solidarity between the act of teaching and the act of being taught by those one is teaching” (Paulo Freire). Human life only has meaning in communion. The teacher’s thoughts only have authenticity through the authenticity of the thoughts of the people he or she is educating; they are all influenced by reality. As such the teacher is no longer only someone who educates, but also someone who is educated by the learner, as a result of the dialogue that exists during the educational process. **The teacher and the pupil become in turn the pupil and the teacher.** As a result, both become central subjects in the process and are mutually fulfilled.

For Vincentian AIC volunteers faced with the excluded and marginalised classes, **education as a pathway to freedom, advancement, liberation and becoming more humane** consists of training people so that they can be at the source of their own progress, by acting in a creative and genuine manner to encourage a fairer world on all levels and by striving to achieve this through the fruit of their own efforts.

Education needs to call into question the exclusion in the world. How? By creating favourable conditions for learning, by training marginalised and vulnerable people so that they become active agents of social transformation and

by getting them to understand that they too create justice, solidarity, culture, etc.

The content of educational programmes must come from the cultural and social sphere of excluded people. It is important that they learn to develop themselves through their own daily lifestyle, their own personal experiences and values (often reduced to nothing by the dominant culture), through new forces and appropriate means for active participation in the **construction** of the common good, namely a new, fair and united world and finally, in the **construction** of the “civilisation of love”.

“Every educational setting can be a place of openness to the transcendent and to others; a place of dialogue, cohesiveness and attentive listening, where young people feel appreciated for their personal abilities and inner riches, and can learn to esteem their brothers and sisters. May young people be taught to savour the joy which comes from the daily exercise of charity and compassion towards others and from taking an active part in the building of a more humane and fraternal society.” (Message from His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1st January 2012).

GOING INTO MORE DETAIL ON THE CONCEPTS BEHIND THE CURRENT OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

When we talk about Operational Guidelines (O.G.), we understand that this means the guidelines for action which we propose in order to align the common work of all AIC volunteers.

Drawing up the Operational Guidelines to apply during the four years following the International Assemblies with all the delegates was an excellent idea established in 1990 at the Assembly in Assisi. The idea has remained effective to this day in bringing together the different service criteria across the body of volunteers.

Over the years, the Operational Guidelines have evolved to adapt to the present-day world. We have been through different stages:

- **First stage:** From assistance to participation.
- **Second stage:** From participation to self-help and solidarity.
- **Third stage:** From self-help to co-responsibility and empowerment, strengthening our commitment to respond to poverty among women (cf. AIC Basic Document).

Continuing on this path and convinced that education is the best means to eradicate poverty, the AIC International Assembly in March 2011 in El Escorial, Spain chose the

theme “**Education, a pathway to build together**”. We were invited to go beyond the usual definition of education with which we are all familiar. In doing so, we realised that education must teach people in order that they can become fulfilled and achieve their full potential. This has to be a two-way process between the teacher and the pupil, who benefits from the former’s experience. This gave rise to a new Operational Guideline:

“Education, a reciprocal exchange”

➤ **Fourth stage:** From co-responsibility to co-education.

Saint Vincent and Education

When we speak of education as the holistic development of a person, we should remember that Saint Vincent, using the vocabulary of the 17th century, asked us to “*accompany physically and spiritually*” those around us with “*affectionate and effective*” love. Saint Vincent discovered that **education** is one of the most valuable tools in “*giving dignity to the poor*”.

It is equally important to note that Saint Vincent, through his personal experience, discovered that **the poor are our school** – irreplaceable for learning about life and work. “*The poor are our lords and masters*”. With them, we learn how to respond to the calls of charity and justice. Through the difficult life of the poor, we are called to discover, learn and put into practice God’s knowledge so that we can then develop educational work.

The Importance of Systemic Change

Systemic Change is very important when we are talking about education because it refers to a total change in all aspects of human life (spiritual, physical, emotional, religious, etc.) and

it teaches us to give a response to all these needs without isolating them in doing so.

As a result, **education is an important tool in promoting Systemic Change.**

This current Operational Guideline leads us to make important changes:

- 1. Change the relationship between teachers and learners, between volunteers and beneficiaries.** Education is not a one-way process; these relationships need to be seen within a systemic whole, in terms of reciprocity, and never forgetting that a vulnerable person also has something to give. It's a two-way path; there must always be an exchange.
- 2. Radically change our way of thinking about poverty.** We are invited to look at education not as an act to “fill in the gaps or pass on knowledge” but rather in terms of “**identifying and developing each person's own unique potential**”. When we help someone in need, we need to change our way of perceiving them; we shouldn't just see what they lack but also their unique qualities and how we can help them to develop these.
- 3. Change our perception of justice.** Making this connection when faced with poverty implies a different concept of justice. We therefore speak of **contributive justice**, whereby we see the person living in poverty **as an agent with something to contribute to the common good**. It is naturally necessary to redistribute wealth and in order to go further still, we need to meet essential needs. However the issue of poverty is linked to an important subject which is none other than the plan of society that we wish to implement. In this plan, the person living in poverty is not just someone lacking resources but very much **a social agent who has the**

right to participate in a common project, making use of his or her own unique competencies.

A symbolic but nevertheless very important change concerns **using new language**, remembering that words that are powerful because they communicate the attitudes that need to be adopted.

Speaking about education and poverty and adopting this systemic approach prompts us to apply “*Three changes to education*”.

a) From the point of view of relationships, it is necessary to **move from independence to interdependence and reciprocity.**

We need to create relationships with others and become interdependent beings: “I have something to offer and the other person has something to offer me”.

*There is a link with the Biblical notion of **ALLIANCE** which implies reciprocity, the capability to take risks together and co-responsibility.*

b) **Change the way we think about needs.** We need to invert the notion of “needs” and be able to say to people “**I need you and your competencies** so that we can **build something together**”. The best way of assisting them is to integrate them into the community and to help them understand that we need them.

*There is a link with another Biblical concept: **PROMISE**. Promise is not an objective in itself, **promise puts us on the right track**; it's the **motivation** which allows us to surpass ourselves every day.*

c) **Base ourselves on a new form of evaluation.** Evaluation isn't just about noticing that someone that had needs no longer has them; Systemic Change encourages us to appreciate what we have learnt from each other while

we were together. In the word “evaluation”, we hear “**give value to**”, which involves looking to see whether there is something **new**, something that was not hoped for which gives the person added value. It is to define a person by his or her ability to create.

*There is a link with a third Biblical concept: **CREATION**.*

We can all be co-creators because we all have something unique to bring to the plan for society.

To summarise:

In practical terms, we invite you to work on **education as a reciprocal change**:

- Identify and value the competencies and potential of everyone.
- Encourage interdependence: “You have something that I need, perhaps I have something that can help you”.
- Promote co-creativity: “If we focus our competencies and capabilities, we can commit to building a fairer world”.

To achieve this, it will be necessary to strengthen AIC training:

1. *Spiritual, ethical and Vincentian.*
2. *In techniques, particularly in communication and visibility.*

THE 2011-2013 OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES IN OUR PROJECTS

At the next International Assembly of Delegates in March 2013, we will make a qualitative evaluation of how the Operational Guidelines have been adopted in our work with people living in poverty.

How will we do this? Working uniquely in groups, we will attempt to give an answer to some delicate questions which will help us to reflect together:

Questions for reflection:

1. In your AIC group or at a local or national level, how have you understood and reacted to this proposition to promote “Education”, in accordance with the Operational Guidelines created by the Assembly in El Escorial?
2. In our group of volunteers: Let’s reflect on what kind of relationship we have with the people living in poverty that we help? What have we learnt from these reflections?
3. In your AIC group or at a local or national level, what positive or negative experiences have you had and what difficulties have you encountered in putting this proposition of education into practice and in applying the O.G.?
4. What initiatives, activities or projects can we suggest to AIC volunteers in order to apply this proposition to our local reality? At the same time, how can we ensure that the people whom we help feel they are co-creators in the project of building a fairer society?

THE AIC OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SYSTEMIC CHANGE METHOD

“With people living in poverty, Systemic Change goes well beyond the act of giving food, clothes and a shelter or even meeting their most urgent needs. It allows people to get involved and personally identify the primary causes of their poverty. In this way, we can create strategies which include political involvement to modify the structures which prevent them from getting out of poverty. To create Systemic Change, it is necessary to change behaviours”.

The Systemic Change method allows us to work in a well-organised, efficient, holistic and transformational way and not just conventionally or by offering assistance. It looks to transform reality and the causes at the origin of poverty by considering the person living in poverty as a subject and not an object.

In order to be able to change the systems and the causes at the origin of poverty, education on all levels is of vital importance.

Education that takes place in reciprocity, encouraging interdependence and promoting co-creativity, leads to a complete change in all aspects of human life (spiritual, physical, social, political, emotional, religious, etc.) and teaches us to meet all these needs without isolating them in doing so.

As a result we should consider education as an extremely useful tool in order to encourage Systemic Change in our communities.

AIC's Approach to Systemic Change

When evaluating projects implemented by volunteers that aim to fight poverty, AIC realised that some actions had a real and positive impact on the lives of beneficiaries. Others by contrast did not manage to change the lives of marginalised people. Faced with this reality, we ask ourselves: Which projects create changes in the lives of the person living in poverty? For what reasons do some projects have lots of success? What strategies have been put in place subsequently? For more than four years, the answers to these questions have encouraged AIC to “think systemically”, both in our grassroots work and in the way we organise ourselves.

AIC is indeed part of a complex system where numerous elements work continuously together to achieve the principal objective: “Against poverty and its causes, acting together”.

The international AIC network always wants to build bridges between volunteers from different countries and increase the number of encounters and exchanges of experiences concerning the fight against poverty. At a local level, volunteers set up grassroots projects which aim especially to create links and rebuild the social tissue for disadvantaged people.

This is why the systemic approach began to be applied quickly, since the method is very pertinent to AIC, both on an institutional level and in the local groups' projects.

However, the systemic approach mainly concerns the local groups. It allows for greater involvement from participants, whether they are volunteers or beneficiaries.

The international network needs to have confidence in the standards given by the local groups as they are the ones that know the local reality because they are active in their community. As for the volunteers, they need to put the beneficiaries at the centre of the process, always being sure to take into account the capabilities of each person.

Here people find their place in the projects, which leads us to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What have I learnt from him or her?
- What strengths and experiences must he or she have developed in order to face up to poverty?

At the last International Assembly, AIC defined its priorities in order to align the work of volunteers over the next two years. Education was chosen as a key theme in the fight against poverty and more specifically poverty affecting women. AIC refers to education as a process which allows a person to develop his or her personal qualities in order to achieve the objective of change.

This is in short a very systemic approach which highlights how Systemic Change is present in the form of a force which drives and breathes life into our actions across the organisation.

THE LERA PROJECT: EDUCATION AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Project to Educate Young Girls in Lera, Cameroon.

Winner of the Jean Delva Prize 2011

Title of the Project: “Secondary and Higher Education of 25 Girls from Underprivileged Families in Lera”.

Location and Context: Lera, Cameroon, a region in the extreme north: the irregular rainfall comes within a 3 month period. The region suffers from severe and recurring droughts.

Target Public: 25 poor unmarried girls from a rural background deprived of a secondary education and any future other than early marriage and submission.

General Objective: To improve the status of women by training local leaders through education.

Specific Objectives:

- Support for secondary and higher education (or professional training) for young girls, chosen according to their ability and commitment, to enable them to achieve autonomy and choice in life.
- Ongoing education about life and love.
- Raising awareness about the rights and responsibilities of married women.

Activities:

- Develop and cultivate a community union field with the parents, the volunteers, the Brothers of the

Mission, Mother Célestine from Lara, her management committee and the support of the local Bishop.

- Volunteer parents and the beneficiaries will work there. The profit from the crops will finance the scholarships.
- Regular evaluation meetings with the volunteers, the young girls and the parents.
- Training and awareness-raising meetings.

The expected income is 3000€, which will cover the school fees and the progressive acquisition of the field.

How have the O.G. been applied in this project?

The project highlights that education is an essential element in achieving autonomy and empowerment. It is moreover a means of fighting against violence towards women.

Here it's not about obtaining scholarships but rather involving numerous parties (the girls, parents, community, school), encouraging interdependence and helping them understand that we need everyone – volunteers, beneficiaries and everyone else involved in the project, in order to build a new future.



By bringing together our competencies, it is possible to train young girls to be leaders in their community and be able to contribute to the evolution of their culture, helping in this way to start creating a fairer society.

International Association of Charities
AIC aisbl

An essentially feminine association, operating on a global level with 200,000 volunteers in 52 countries.

Founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in 1617 to fight against all forms of poverty and injustice and to give women an active and recognised social role, in a spirit of solidarity.

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