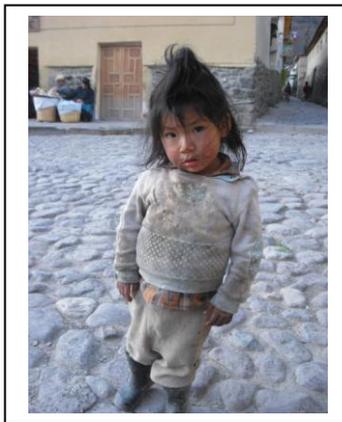


An Enlightening and Rewarding Visit

During our holidays to Peru in August 2013, I had the chance to get a personal impression of the humanitarian work of the children organization I help fund. Accompanied by [Plan Peru](#) we met the child I sponsor and his family together with my 8 year old son and my cousin visiting from the States and saw firsthand how my sponsoring helps to change lives.

I decided to become a sponsor of a child with the global children organization Plan 4 years ago and chose to support a community in Peru. I am half Peruvian with strong emotional ties to the country: my mother and my son are Peruvian, and I have strong bonds and very close relationships with my Peruvian family there. Since my childhood I always had the desire to do something for the children in this wonderful country. Then finally as adult I took action, looked around at a few organizations and decided Plan was for me and I was for them.

I learned that Plan is one of the world's oldest and largest children's development organizations empowering communities to overcome poverty and champion child rights.



They help children to help them get registered and get a birth certificate, receive education by building schools, training teachers and having centers for early child stimulation. In addition they provide healthcare and hygiene education, they help protect from diseases through immunizations programs, to have a clean, safe source of drinking water in their community, receive proper healthcare from community health centers and break the cycle of poverty through small loans and skills training for families. All this seemed very right to me for the creation of sustainable change.

With the visit of Fabian, the child I sponsor, in his community I had the opportunity to witness a lot of that and learn about their life circumstances. What I really like about the Plan concept is they help people to help themselves with their child-centered work embracing the community as integral to the solution of changing the cycle of poverty.

This was my chance to reach out and take action. I like how the money doesn't just go to one child but is helping the whole community. It fosters a sense of humanity and compassion and the idea that all people are important. The personal contact with my sponsored 'god-son' allowed me to feel and see the impact my donation had. For me it the commitment to accountability and ethical practices is also important, and adhering to strong and comprehensive standards (Plan is recognized as one of the lead non-governmental organizations in Germany, also in the U.S. setting higher standards of accountability creating trust and transparency).

Peru, newly classified by the World Bank as an “upper-middle-income economy,” is racing to prosperity, and it is currently one of the most dynamic economies in Latin America, ranking eighth out of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world (Source: World Bank), but the gap between rural and urban areas remains large and inequality persists. A big percentage of Peru’s total population live in conditions of poverty. A massive migration to urban centers is a result of lack of opportunities for people outside the big cities. You can easily see this when travelling south, north or east outside the city. According to government statistics, less than a third of the Peruvian population now lives below the national poverty line, compared with around half in the early 2000s. Nevertheless, about 8 million people remain poor. Today, three out of four Peruvians reside in and around urban areas (Source: Rural Poverty Portal).



Peru is experiencing an economic growth recently, though there has been little improvement in the lives of the poorest people. Many live in massive mass settlements, lacking many times even the most basic needs.

As sponsor of a child you receive regular updates about your sponsored children’s progress, and keep in touch by writing letters and receiving letters back. So in my home Fabian is a well known “member of our family” and it was clear that one day I wanted to visit him. During our annual leave holiday now in Peru, we finally made reality our visit to Fabian, his family and his community.

During our visit we first went to the Plan project office in the Lima close to the airport. It was an almost two hour drive on a Monday early morning with all the crazy traffic in Lima being the capital and largest city of Peru with a population over 9 Mio.

There we met the office manager who showed us around and introduced us to everyone in the office. I was very impressed about the detailed knowledge Plan had of so many children in Plan schemes which included the area in which they were working, and also about family circumstances. It was impressive to see with which due diligence every children’s file is catalogued, processed online, noting every contact with the particular child, and having the children’s files for new joiners, those who receive letters from their sponsors and so on.



After this visit we left to travel for an hour and a half direction north east of Lima via the Pan American Highway North with Mayra, the Plan community facilitator of the community where Fabian lives. So while we were driving the Panaméricana into the huge slum communities, this tremendous mass settlements stood out as they are basically the landscape.



Lima lies in a dusty desert coastline between the Pacific Ocean and the foothills of the Andes. It was August, so winter time and the city was overcast, as always, in this thick grey blanket of cloud. Most of the time Lima sits in a pronounced haze during this time. This winter was said to be the most intense in the last 30 years with 12 degrees and a humidity of nearly 100 percent. The cold humidity literally seeps into your bones. The rain in the wintertime doesn't fall hard, but when it does it gets everything wet.

Arriving to these mass settlements, large panels proclaim Plan's presence in the community.



Our first stop was to visit a Plan project engaging in income-generating activity by creating opportunity for knitters providing a sustainable living to the women in the factory "Awaj Makis". A group of women presented their work and vision. Through their commitment they were able to grow their business. These items can be bought through the Plan Shop in Germany among other.



Next on the agenda meetings with community members, like one of the community leaders, a community volunteer, a community family, and mothers in the project of early child development were planned.

We first now headed to meet one of the community leaders and one of the community volunteers who work hand in hand with the community facilitators of Plan.

This community volunteers play an important role as they are people with social commitment demonstrating solidarity and community support to see change in their community. They help the realization of projects that are financed by Plan. I learned that this is a challenging work as not all people in the community are open to change because of doubts, ignorance and skepticism. That is why their work is so important, informing the families and supporting the participation of families at the gatherings including the coordination with their leadership and other institutions for the community work.



Plan coordinates with the members of the community and local authorities. This work includes establishing working relationships to identify the rights which primarily affect childhood and planning of the development of the community helping families to become more self-sufficient.

Plan facilitates processes in the community which are participatory in democratic and consensus style for the participatory formulation of the community development plan, so that the members of the community direct their own projects. They then receive the support they need to implement projects which bring positive and sustainable change in the life of their children and adolescents.

We were in the middle of this mass settlement called 23 de Septiembre. To reach this place our taxi crawled up dirt roads past hundreds of these improvised dwellings built into the rocky hillside on steepest mud streets with walls of salvaged wood, mud, scrap metal and plastic or concrete if the family can afford it. Many of the houses still do not have running water and some also lacked access to electricity.

It was important for Plan to get us together and be able to share our cultures and experiences.

I had the opportunity to ask the community leader many questions and he was very keen to give a lot of insight and demonstrate the achievements with Plan. He explained how the community works to outline their needs, plan and work with Plan including the local authorities. He explained that many of these people have migrated from the Andes mountains to find work in Lima, without success. For this reason, there is widespread poverty in the peripheral areas of Lima. It was also interesting to hear that through the work with Plan their community was able do lots of improvements. It is very important that the

families get informed and participate in the different projects that are there. It also appeared very clear that leadership is invested in the prosperity of the community.

The leader assembles the community to discuss and listens to the voice of the community members. All members of the community have the opportunity to participate in decisions and developments. Here it starts. Here for example, water or electricity projects are discussed and presented to Plan and local authorities. Members of the community have the chance to change their situation if they are given the opportunity, and if they participate actively.

The work of Plan means conveying the vision and the fundamental belief that if given the opportunity, change could happen. This combined with a strong community leadership and involvement of the community families brings change for the better. And exactly this was the impression I had after my visit and talking to the community leaders and community members part of Plan.



Another fact that was evident is that the community always is grateful for sponsor donations because they generate new opportunities for development for the children and adolescents of the area.

We then went in the direction of Fabian's house, we walked up the steep dry hill. His house is small and is constructed in bricks, which is not to be taken for granted in this area.



What really struck me was that they really were awaiting us, "the grand visit". We were invited into their house, their living area. As we sat talking, we were accompanied by the community volunteer and her little daughter to inquisitively view the "strangers" who appeared in their midst. Being there gave a very real sense to the people of the community of the sponsors from abroad and what Plan was promoting.

We first gave Fabian and his sister their present, and after that Fabian's mother showed us all her family picture albums. The children were all shy, but then after 5 minutes, shyness was gone and Fabian was playing and running around the house and outside with my son. One thing that struck me was joy in the children's face and the sense of pride, it was fantastic to see. And that was something my son the day after talked about how happy their faces were even if they have so little!



Fabian's father joined us later and told us that he finished work earlier so he could join us. He sells fruits and other merchandise on the street. Fabian's parents told us that we were the first non-Peruvians they had ever talked to other than seeing on television.

Fabian's mother served a meal of chicken, rice, salad, yucca and a cup of tea. We were so overwhelmed as we did not expect this, and Mayra confirmed that this was not common practice.

We were so thankful for the wonderful meal and chatted throughout, learning about the family and what they do. Fabian's father asked a lot of questions and was so interested to hear from "our" world, our work and education for children. Through our conversation we learned that he is a hard working man, who tries all to bring his family further. They used to live a very simple house, but thieves broke in. I could not believe this would happen in that kind of poor community! So he decided to build this small brick house they are now living in and worked 7 days a week to make this happen. Now he works 6 days a week. He also talked and asked a lot about education. His dream is that his children can speak a lot of languages and create new opportunities in life. I could only encourage him to tell his children to study hard at school and that his wish was a very good one. His story was really touching.



My impression was that at the individual family level, life is by no means easy, living in these areas is fundamentally hard. These poor neighborhoods stand in stark contrast with the more affluent wealthy suburban neighborhoods of Lima like Miraflores. When you are here and a first time visitor, you could easily believe that nothing is wrong here. Though to appreciate Lima I think one must truly appreciate all of its complexities and the active steps the nation and NGOs like Plan are trying to make to create social justice and equity amongst all the Peruvian people.

At the end we visited a project which Plan and Kusi Warma are jointly developing together and collaborating on. The objective of this project is to teach parents and children that minors younger than 5 receive better care and protection for an optimal development. They showed us the new building Plan had helped to build and also the resources provided by them to the school. This newly constructed building houses projects of early childhood stimulation, good treatment during pregnancy and nutrition (from 0-5 years). What goes without saying for us - but is not in poor communities - that early childhood is a fundamental stage in the growth and development of all human beings. And that inequity begins at this junction in development, if children are malnourished during early development, they are systematically more disadvantaged than other children and this perpetuates the cycle of inequality.

Growth and development are interdependent, and the most critical stage occurs between conception and the first years of life. This is the period when the brain is formed and develops at its fastest rate. If the adequate development of the brain is altered during this period, it will produce consequences that affect the child throughout his or her life ([Source: UNICEF Executive Summary: Situation of Children in Peru](#)).

So this is what this project is about and young mothers and expectant mothers learn. Plan and Kusi Warma go from door to door and try to speak to them and bring them to come to the center so they learn and apply with their little ones.

Not all women follow the call because of initial skepticism, lack of education and other circumstances. There is so much effort behind this and so much to do to try to convey the message to all.



We then had a short presentation of one of the young mothers who took on the role of promoting early development in her community. We took photographs of all the children who seemed so amazed by us.

After all these impressions, information and meeting all this people, learning about their stories and what still needs to be done, I can only say, the work an organization like Plan is doing, is so meaningful and important. Education, sanitation and water, electricity and health services are all critical for achieving the continued well-being of citizens in these communities. It is about bringing opportunity and

future sustained development to the inhabitants. It's about giving some of the world's poorest children the chance to realize their full potential and to be a participant on the journey out of poverty, the journey of one child mirrors that of the entire community. I do really share this vision of a better world for children, who are the most vulnerable in society.

We think, overall, the community enjoyed our visit as much as we did. They all made us feel very welcome. And there wasn't a time that my cousin, my son and I didn't feel entirely safe and well guided.

If a sponsor ever has the opportunity to visit their sponsored child, I would 100 percent recommend it - it is such an amazing experience. Not only meeting the child you have been sponsoring for years but to see what affect an organization like Plan has on the local community and how they are improving people's lives.

The impression I gained being there is that witnessing a visit is not only important to the sponsored child, his family, and other community members, but it also made me feel more connected to the cause and feel better inside. A visit can really help fuel a child's and a parent's imagination and ambition showing them that someone far away in another country cares. You have contact with the community through the child, and the letters and photos make it more personal. You can actually see the difference you are making.

All of us, my son, my cousin and I have gained an experience from this that money can't buy. See how our support is helping to transform their lives and the lives of those around them and helping them to change their lives for the better – it's an enlightening and rewarding experience that really matters.

To have been able to visit Fabian and his family in their own home, to meet them in person, to see where they live, and to learn firsthand something of their daily lives has strengthened my connection. And, as a mother I also believe this is a meaningful way to educate our own children about how other human beings live in real terms and help those children at the same time.

I would recommend it to anyone.

I know I will be back.

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