

# Method to Transform an Existing Program

## The Marillac Center: A Project on the Path of Transformation

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*Do not meddle in my affairs! Leave me alone! I only came here because my sister forced me to come but now I am leaving! I am fine and I do not need anyone's help!*



Those were the first words that Teresa spoke when she arrived at the Marillac Center three years ago. We looked at her and had no idea what to do or say... she began to scratch her arms and continued to do so until they bled... her anxiety betrayed her.

Teresa was the third child in a dysfunctional, violent family that lived in extreme poverty. Her parents were illiterate and treated her badly because she was always *disobedient and arrogant*. When she was six years old, she was given to an aunt. For several years she lived with her aunt and “uncle” and several cousins who mistreated and abused her. At the age of nine she was forced to work in order to help provide for her “new family”. She became a domestic worker and endured new humiliations, yet was expected to be grateful for this opportunity to work. The abandonment by her mother had a more profound effect on her than the scoldings, the lack of attention and hunger.

She escaped her situation and lived on the streets. As a result she became pregnant... then with the father of her child she returned to her parent's house where she was received with insults and reproaches which she endured because she had no other place to live. Her parents allowed her, her “boyfriend” and her



five year old child to live with them. They were given a room that was made of cardboard and some sheets of zinc. To support herself she collected iron scraps which she then sold.



When we first met Teresa she was in terrible condition, both physically and mentally... undernourished, extremely nervous and dirty. Someone had had compassion on her and brought her to a mental health clinic where she was erroneously

diagnosed as an epileptic and a schizophrenic. She was prescribed drugs which had a terrible effect on her: she would bang her head against the wall and had attempted suicide.



Little by little she began to trust us and allowed us to bring her to the psychiatric department of the Central Hospital in the city. There she underwent a series of tests; she was taken off her medications and a new treatment was begun that enabled her to avoid panic attacks (her only emotional disorder). Very soon we realized that Teresa was not insane

but rather was a very realistic and intelligent woman who nonetheless had some serious problems and deep-seated resentments. As her treatment continued, her general condition improved and she began to realize that she had to do her part in order to move forward. She began to take steps to better her situation. We realized that it was urgent to formulate a more holistic plan which would not only provide for Teresa but which would also take into consideration and all the members of her family.

We proposed helping them by utilizing the principles of systemic change which in turn enabled us to provide for various fundamental aspects of their life: health, hygiene, nutrition, housing, work, respect for their human rights, education. It was necessary to provide them with elements in order to empower them.



Teresa received personalized, on-going attention at the Marillac Center. The psychological treatment was of particular importance because it enabled her to heal (at least partially) some of the wounds



that were caused by her parent's abandonment and the constant humiliations and mistreatment she had suffered as a child. Actually Teresa was very interested in participating in the different workshops on violence, self-esteem, effective communication, parenting skills. She was able to complete her primary and secondary education at the National Institute for

Adult Education (INEA) which operates at the Marillac Center. She now has two official diplomas which are indispensable in order to obtain work.

She is now a member of the Marillac promoters and is one of our most enthusiastic collaborators. She is a good mother and is concerned about the health and nutrition as well as the education of her son who is in his second year of primary school. Her panic attacks are controlled even though at times she fears that they will return. Without any hesitation Teresa affirms: *My life has changed since I came to the Marillac Center... above all else I have begun to believe that yes, I can change.*



She realizes that true change depends on her and therefore she is responsible for change. Now Teresa has dreams and hopes. She is happy because she feels she is useful though at times she weakens when she has to confront problems, especially financial problems that affect her family. Yet even in those situations she has learned how to look for alternatives and thus is able to give direction to her life. She is confident that she will achieve economic stability that will allow her to continue the education of her son so that he is able to take his place in society.

For us, Teresa is a good example of what can be achieved through the application of the principles of systemic change... what can be achieved when people who live in situations of poverty are affirmed as capable of transforming their situation.

### **Some history: the context**

The story of Teresa would never have been told in this manner when we first began to work at the Marillac Center.

The Marillac Center is a Vincentian Center, coordinated by the volunteers of the AIC and is located in the midst of the marginalized community of San Luis Potosí, Mexico. For more than twenty years the center has engaged in various activities on behalf of the community.

In the beginning the Center was directed by young men and women who offered primary and secondary education through INEA, carpentry workshops and spiritual formation. A little later, women began to come to the center and soon ministry with women became our primary objective. We formulated a new plan that we called **empowerment of women**. Aware of the importance of their participation we assigned them small tasks, such as opening the Center, setting-up different areas of the Center, distributing flyers, etc. We organized a series of classes: crafts, hairdressing, sewing, baking, catechetics. These activities that were part of our initial plan were not related, however, to one another and had no impact on the lives of the women. These activities were not planned with the women, did not satisfy any of their real felt needs and their participation was a myth.

The number of teachers increased because we mistakenly thought that if we offered more classes, we would be able to change the lives of these women. Often, without even being aware of it, we fell into a common error: we used the same mental model that caused the very problems we were attempting to resolve. In this regard Albert Einstein said: *"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. We have to think with a new mind"*.

The women were immersed in a cycle of poverty, violence and discrimination that was very difficult to break. Yet it was necessary to break the cycle and take steps in the direction of transformation.



## Process toward transformation

I am going to attempt to illustrate the process that was followed in transforming the Marillac center and I will refer to two related sources:

- The principles of the *strategies for systemic change*, as identified and suggested by the International Commission (these principles will be highlighted in bold and italics in the text).
- The steps taken in order to obtain the transformation of projects as explained by Margaret Posig, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup> who refers to a process that she calls “the heart of change” and that was first proposed by J.P. Kotter and D.S. Cohen. This process is guided by a very specific methodology that is developed in different stages, all of which are important.

At each stage I will mention the new activities that we put in place as a result of this process of change.

The process began with an analysis of the actual reality of the women and their surroundings.

**§. *Start with a serious analysis of the local reality, flowing from concrete data, and tailor all projects to this reality.***

This analysis was done with the participation of the women from the community. Very soon we became aware of problems that we had not noticed before and which created difficulties and obstacles for empowering women:

- Because women were frequently the victims of various forms of violence which they endured in silence, they were unable to achieve a full life, unable to influence in a positive manner the education of their children, and furthermore unable to experience themselves as empowered.
- The women endured this situation because they were embarrassed to admit that their dignity was being threatened and destroyed. Fear was a constant in their lives and the lack of affect was an evident result of this fear and also increased their own suffering.
- There was a gap between the psychological problems that the women had to confront (especially those women who were most

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<sup>1</sup>MARGARET POSIG, PH.D., *Saint Vincent de Paul as a Leader of Change: The Key Roles of a Higher Purpose and Empowerment*, Vincentian Heritage, Volume 23-25, Number 2; Volume 26, Number 1, 2005, pp. 27-41.

poor), and the symptoms that they evidenced by their chronic state of depression, their fear and their anxiety. No consideration was given to these matters even though they required immediate attention.

- These women and their spouses were immersed in a vicious cycle of violence that was perpetuated by their children's violence (repetition of behavior).
- Among young people these acts of violence were reproduced in their relationships and thus reinforced the submission of yet another generation of women. This was done through different forms of psychological violence, for example, jealousy, and eventually psychological violence became physical violence.

We were unaware that these situation of violence were at the root of so many problems and that if we wanted to empower women we would have to break this cycle. This meant that we had to confront a difficult challenge... resistance to change. This same challenge also had to be addressed by some members of the administrative team of the Marillac Center.

When I was invited to become a member of the Commission that was promoting systemic change, we began to envision a new path. The strategies to achieve said change in the life of those living in poverty gave us new insights and new methods to bring about this change.

These strategies, based on mission, were very important in order to achieve change and therefore they formed the doctrinal foundation that sustained the project (these principles can be applied to any project that Vincentians throughout the world might be engaged in). We began to internalize these strategies with deep conviction:

**§. To consider poverty not just as the inevitable result of circumstances, but as the product of unjust structures that can be changed, and focus on actions that will break the cycle of poverty.**

**§. To design projects, creative approaches, policies and guidelines that flow from our Christian and Vincentian values and mission.**

**§. To evangelize and inculturate our Christian and Vincentian charism and values while maintaining a profound respect for the local culture.**

## Steps that led to the process of change

### 1. *Affirming the need for change*

It is true that the majority of people do not want to change. Awareness of the need for change does not occur overnight. It is easy to believe that our project is the best... we are very pleased with the things we do and when we look at the beneficiaries of our services we are convinced that these individuals need us, love us and are very grateful for all that we do for them. *Our project is the best!*

People will feel more committed to change if said change goes to the heart of the matter. The first challenge was to change behavior... and this change can be achieved if we allow people to see how the reality of their situation influences their feelings. Finally the whole administrative team had to become convinced of the fact that change was indispensable. The suffering of so many women touched us profoundly and impelled us to attempt, together with the women, to change the situation.

We no longer offered most of the classes that we had established and we initiated new activities and services which resulted in the following project: ***social co-responsibility and education for a world without violence. A point of encounter for women and children.***



### 2. *Creation of a transformative vision*

The first step in creating a new vision was the creation of a Listening Center where the women could freely express themselves in an environment of trust, care, and respect. Members of the AIC took on responsibility for this center and we proposed:

**§. *To listen carefully and seek to understand the needs and aspirations of the poor, creating an atmosphere of respect and mutual confidence and fostering self-esteem among the people.***

Based on the primary needs that the women expressed, we decided to promote programs and activities that would assist people in becoming autonomous and that would attack the root causes of poverty and violence. Therefore it was indispensable:

**§. *To have a holistic vision, addressing a series of basic human needs – individual and social, spiritual and physical, especially jobs, health care, housing, education, spiritual growth – with an integral approach toward prevention and sustainable development.***

A clear vision, shared by all those who participate in the program, was necessary in order to channel our efforts toward change, thus enabling people to see a possible “future”. When people desire transformation they ought to have effective strategies to achieve strategic changes. We were all convinced that if we discovered and attacked the root causes of poverty, we would be able to achieve effective transformation.

A holistic vision ought to include different subsystems that affect and impact the lives of the people being served. Without these subsystems it would have been impossible to provide a culture of gender equality and eradicate violence. Convinced of this fact we included in the project all those persons who were related to these women, that is, their spouses, children (both small children and adolescents), neighbors and other members of the community.

The new mission that resulted from our analysis was the following: *In the future (in five to ten years) fifty percent of those who will have participated in the global process created by the Marillac Center (especially women) will be living a dignified, healthy life where there is no violence... they will have transformed their lives and the life of their family and will have also transformed their surroundings. They will have access to opportunities and different sources of work and in this way they will have achieved empowerment. Many unjust situations related to poverty will be transformed and we will be able to impact public policy with regard to gender equality.*

In order to make this mission a reality, it was necessary:



**§. *To involve the poor themselves, including the young and women, at all stages: identification of needs, planning, implementation, evaluation and revision.***

It was also necessary to take further steps in this process of change.

### **3. Creation of a team of advisors**



In accord with this new vision the team needed the ability to respond to the detected needs in order to promote transformation. In order to achieve the desired impact it was indispensable to focus on the integration, formation and training of those persons responsible for the project. The elements that were highlighted as being important were credibility,

capacity, relationships, reputation, formal authority. We took and continue to take the necessary steps in order:

**§. *To educate, train, and offer spiritual formation to all participants in the project.***

Aware of this reality we formed a new work team that was able to respond to people's needs. The new team included psychologists, a lawyer, an expert in medications, a social worker and, from the very beginning, women from the community. All of these persons were convinced of the need:

**§. *To promote learning processes and to work toward forming effective multiplying agents and visionary leaders in the local community, servant-leaders inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul.***



The team dedicated a significant amount of time to the process of planning. A good system of strategic planning (which was part of a workshop on Institutional Strengthening in which all of the members of the administrative team participated) gave rise to a new infrastructure of change and led to a better work model.

Together with the women we decided on some fundamental changes. Different areas of the Center were restructured and we asked people to take responsibility for each area. We also initiated some new activities:

- **In the area of social work:** we detected and were attentive to individual and community problems and advised families in extreme poverty;
- **In the psychological area:** we offered individual and group and family counseling; served as mediators between spouses.



**In the area of education:** we provided education in the defense of human rights; legal counseling; workshops dealing with the prevention of violence against women, adolescents and children; parenting workshops; workshops on self-esteem and how to write an autobiography.

- **INEA Center:** primary and secondary education was offered to adults, adolescents and children; scholarships were made available for single teenage mothers thus enabling them to continue their studies. Different opportunities were offered to young people who were involved in drugs and gangs; summer camps were made available for children and extra-curricular activities were initiated for children.



**In the area of health and nutrition:** health brigades (medical and dental care, blood pressure, weight control); fire prevention and prevention of accidents in the home. Establishment of food banks where provisions were sold at a low cost; nutritional formation; workshops in preventive health care for young people; supportive programs for adolescents (yoga and aerobics classes, promotion of sports).

- **In the area of work skills:** computer classes; workshops in self-esteem and leadership; budget management.



#### ***4. Communicate the vision in order for it to be accepted***

Sensitizing all levels of society and the formulation of a shared vision was fundamental because without support, it would have been impossible to continue this project. To communicate the vision, leaders were needed. The leaders were instructors who listened and shared information (according to the needs of the people). Without communication it would have been impossible for team members to commit themselves.

***§. To construct a shared vision with diverse stakeholders: poor communities, interested individuals, donors, churches, governments, the private sector, unions, the media, international organizations and networks and more.***

The creation of networks, based on social co-responsibility, made it possible to engage in the present work at the Marillac Center. We would never have been able to implement the majority of the activities that we are actually doing unless we...

***§. Promoted social co-responsibility and networking, sensitizing society at all levels – local, national and international – about changing the unjust conditions that affect the lives of the poor.***



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A simple heart-felt message is indispensable in order to develop understanding, commitment and the necessary energy that is needed to achieve one's vision. The leaders should be models whose behavior can be imitated... again this is necessary in order to make the vision a reality and in order to be able to communicate this vision to others.



In order to make our vision known to others we engaged in several events that allowed people to become aware of our Center and the reasons for its existence. At the same time we were able to motivate various sectors of society to combat violence (this was the primary focus of our project). We used different means of communication, but especially the

radio, and we distributed posters and flyers that contained simple messages that appealed to people's heart. The members of the team acted as authentic leaders and were able to motivate others through their example.

In this area the leadership workshops were of particular importance... ten women were formed as multiplying agents of the plan and as community agents concerned about the eradication of violence.

### ***5. Empower others to act in accord with our vision***

We proposed empowering women, making them responsible for and giving them authority to implement the vision. Through understanding and affirmation we instilled in them self-confidence. We were convinced that commitment to achieving the goal and the participation of persons who are poor were keys to empowerment and also demanded that the leaders communicate information. Besides sharing information in meetings, we transmitted information through informational bulletins and a newspaper that appeared as a mural.



We committed ourselves to the formation of community leaders and we assigned them responsibilities. A young woman became responsible for receiving the participants and another for supervising the logistical aspects of the Center. We formed a group of women so that they would become multiplying agents and in the future they would be able to lead the

workshops and give the presentations and thus spread the culture of non-violence. This has not been an easy task. At times it seemed to be much easier to do the work myself rather than form others to do this work. Nevertheless one of our specific objectives was:

***§. To promote learning processes and to work toward forming effective multiplying agents and visionary leaders in the local community, servant-leaders inspired by Saint Vincent de Paul.***



We empowered women through our leadership workshops and delegated certain tasks and responsibilities to them, demonstrating our confidence in them and promoting their own sense of self-esteem.

## ***6. Creation of short-term goals***

A long-term goal can be divided into goals that can be achieved in less time. Small victories create confidence and every step toward change should be celebrated. We established long-term and short-term goals for the Center, formulated a plan and a calendar that outlined the work that would be necessary in order to achieve these goals.

The creation of a wide network of collaborators on behalf of the women was one of our primary goals. We became part of a vast network that involved the public and private sector and that ultimately allowed us to engage in the many different activities that we are able to continue to offer at the Center. This has not been a static network but one that has experienced on-going growth and that has allowed us to offer new opportunities for formation to the members of the coordinating team.

The total reconstruction of the Center was another important goal in order to provide quality services to people... this was accomplished thanks to the support that we received from the government. The re-inauguration of the Center, an event that involved the participation of individuals from diverse sectors of the community and individuals who had responsibility for community decisions, was the starting point for our new project. The next goal was furnishing the Center and much of the equipment was donated by individuals/institutions who shared our vision.



The workshops on self-esteem were very valuable in attracting other women to participate... women who were often afraid of being able to carry out the tasks that had been requested of them. Another important goal was that of redesigning our policies and strategies, so that the participation of women was included in every aspect of the project.

***§. Implement coherent strategies, starting modestly, delegating tasks and responsibilities, and providing quality services respectful of human dignity.***

The realization that every systemic change project begins with the implementation of small steps toward change gave us the strength to commit ourselves to the process of change.

## **7. *Do not grow weak***

On different occasions we felt overwhelmed with problems, especially the lack of financial resources as the number of participants at the center increased. We have a clear vision and this has enabled us to be creative in seeking to resolve our problems. Saint Vincent stated that love is inventive unto infinity... and we have attempted to be faithful to these words. In place of the traditional requests that are extended to donors, we undertook two projects to collect funds. One was the printing of a “Calendar with a social significance” – here we were able to obtain various businesses who advertised their logo in the calendar which was widely distributed throughout different communities. Another creative idea was the sale of the CD, *Coincidir* (Coincide), which was recorded by two children who gave us the gift of their voices. Both projects were well received in the community and were financially profitable. In addition, these projects involved many persons in a process of social co-responsibility.



The process of systemic change is not easy. Frequently one will encounter obstacles and problems as one undertakes this journey. As we have struggled, our problems have become challenges. The courage of the women at the Marillac Center has encouraged us to continue to move forward and has strengthened us to walk with these women on the road of transformation. For us, and for many of the women, the workshop on conflict resolution was very important because it provided us with tools to create an environment of peace and thus continue our journey.

## **8. *The institutionalization of new methods, policies and strategies***

A “new culture” that produces good results should not be “frozen” in time but should be continually nourished and institutionalized as an ever-present strategy, as an indispensable policy for action. Clear examples of these policies and strategies have been adapted as indispensable components of the project and we have already referred to these above, for example, participation of people who are poor, listening to the aspirations and desires of people, use of a global vision when

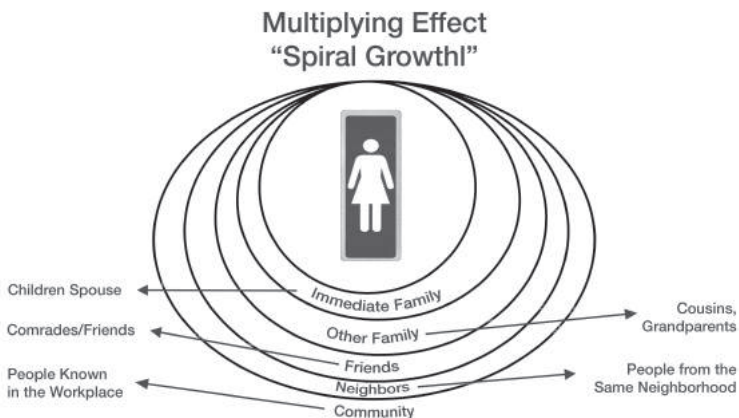
interpreting problems, creation of networks of collaboration, the prevention of violence (the primary objective of the project), evaluation.

Aware of the fact that success must involve on-going evaluation, we engaged in various forms of evaluation: evaluation at the end of each activity; evaluation when a short-term goal was achieved; etc. On the activities calendar, evaluation had a fundamental place. These evaluations were done with the participation of those people involved in the program and with the coordinating team. In order to verify the attainment of various objectives, measurable indicators were established which could be reviewed during the evaluation process. We also included in the process of evaluation (at least sometimes) those institutions that supported our project. We believe that our methodology with regard to work should allow us:

**§. To systematize, institutionalize and evaluate the project and its procedures, describing measurable indicators and results.**

### How do we view the future of the project?

Women are the best multiplying agents because they can have a greater influence on their family, their friends and neighbors. ***“Change a woman and you will change the world!”***. With this conviction we prepared a group of women to become facilitators of the workshops and the various presentations... women who would be able to duplicate the project in neighboring areas.





One of the objectives that we hoped to obtain was that the women who participated in the initial project would be able to direct a similar project in the future. This required accompaniment of the administrative team and further formation by some experts in the field of pedagogy.

We have studied the multiplying effect of the project and can now state that the pilot project can be duplicated, completely or in part, and adapted to different situations.

The women, (in the family setting as well as the community setting), are now the multipliers of a culture of non-violence, respect and dignity. We support them by providing them with formation through workshops in the areas of self-esteem, effective communication, prevention of violence, as well as self-help groups and psychological therapy.

This process of formation has allowed us

**§. *To construct structural and institutional models, where communities can identify their resources and needs, make informed decisions, and exchange information and effective strategies within the community and among various communities.***

Among our objectives we wanted to provide a system to the work that we have engaged in and to the methodology that we have utilized. This would enable us to publish didactic material that would facilitate the replication of this project in different settings. More than 80% of the present Vincentian Centers in Mexico work with women and the Marillac model could be useful in bettering the services offered by these various agencies.

As the result of an evaluation in which the women participated, we decided to initiate two new projects:

- **Project – Healthy nutrition for everyone:** this project has begun with the support of the International Commission for promoting Systemic Change. Our analysis of the reality made us aware of the high percentage of families in the community who are malnourished... this is a negative factor which prevents people from achieving a profound change in their life. The project consists of using a solar dehydrator in order to preserve highly nutritional foods. We have provided formation to women in this process and other techniques for preserving food.







**Project – Happy children, children of peace:** this is an after school project that is composed of a children's choir, theatre groups, scouts and a multi-media educational program that provides children with an initial education in music and mathematics (ProSofia de Eduspark). The primary objective of this project is to foster the socialization of the children and share with them a culture of non-violence, respect and collaboration.

Our greatest concern about the future is that we will not be able to achieve financial independence. The nutritional program referred to above envisions the sale of dehydrated foods in school and school cooperatives (this would not only enable us to finance the center but would also provide work for women). One of the strategies of systemic change is very clear in this regard:

***§. To make the project self-sustaining by guaranteeing that it will have the human and economic resources needed for it to last.***

## Conclusion

When people commit themselves to the process of change, new needs arise and, as a result, new areas of intervention also arise. During the last stage of our Marillac Project we attempted to create a new infrastructure for change and for implementing the process of systemic change. This change would not only modify some aspects of the present reality but would also change the structures and modify the whole system that affected the life of so many women and whole families... people who had been unable to find happiness because of violence.

If we want to move toward transformation then the first step is to work with a new mentality and broaden our perspectives, in other words, we have to begin to transform ourselves. Only in this manner can we contribute to the transformation of others. If we want to transform our projects we have to become servant-leaders in the image of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac; we have to satisfy not only the needs of others but we must also form and strengthen these women and men who live in situations of poverty so that they themselves accept the responsibility of being leaders. New values, new forms of behavior, new attitudes as well as a greater awareness of our Christian and Vin-

centian identity ought to be internalized by all those who participate in our projects.

As I conclude this article I want to express some personal feelings. The Vincentian Family and the Commission for the Promotion of Systemic Change has given me new strength to live and proclaim my faith and to defend the rights of those who are marginalized in society. I firmly believe that at the very heart of change is this sense of clothing ourselves with a prophetic attitude, a courageous and decided attitude to defend the rights of the poor and to do this through proclamation and denunciation.

The poor, especially women, have given me the encouragement and the necessary emotional support that has kept my hope alive, my hope of achieving, with other women, a better, more complete life... a life where peace and dignity and happiness reign... a life in accord with gospel values. I hope never to deceive these women.

Translated from Spanish by CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M.