

Thirty Successful Experiences of Redistribution, Reduction,
Recognition, Remuneration and Representation in Care Work

Piña Palmera, Oaxaca, Mexico



Piña Palmera, Oaxaca, Mexico

Country and/or location of implementation: San Pedro Pochutla, Oaxaca, Mexico

Instances and/or legal framework responsible for its implementation: Centro de Atención Infantil Piña Palmera A.C, a civil society organization.

The Piña Palmera A.C. Children's Care Center (Centro de Atención Infantil Piña Palmera A.C.) is a civil society organization that works with, by and for people with disabilities (hereafter PWDs) since its foundation, carrying out work from a social perspective with a focus on human rights. It was founded in 1984 by Frank Douglas (1932–1986), a traditional American doctor, after detecting the lack of care and rehabilitation options for children with disabilities on the coast of Oaxaca, in addition to the limited possibilities for their families to respond to these needs. The first action was to build a shelter for disabled and/or abandoned children. In February 1989, they legally constituted a Civil Association. The strategy they currently implement is known as Rehabilitation Based On and With the Community (RBECC in Spanish) (Piña Palmera, n.d.).

Piña Palmera's aim has always been to work with people with disabilities and, in particular, people with disabilities in rural and indigenous communities. Throughout its history, Piña Palmera has promoted and accompanied comprehensive processes of inclusion, rehabilitation, and empowerment with over five thousand people with disabilities and their families, mostly belonging to indigenous peoples of the Sierra Sur, Coast, and Isthmus of Oaxaca. This is an experience of provisioning community care and attention services for people with disabilities and their families in a rural and indigenous context. It is important to mention that, in more than three decades of uninterrupted work, Piña Palmera "progressively moved from a welfare proposal to an approach to disability committed to justice and social inclusion and especially focused on the community" (Mexican Center for Philanthropy, 2011).

This strategy leads to the generation of a collective work process that involves the PWD themselves, their families, education workers, local authorities and leaders, service providers, students, etc. All of them integrated in a process that goes from the rehabilitation of persons with disabilities to the sharing of problems and solutions devised among family members to create better living conditions for all, demanding the fulfillment of their rights before the corresponding authorities. (Mexican Center for Philanthropy, 2011).

When Piña Palmera was founded, Frank Douglas's intention was to create a home for people with disabilities. That is how Malena (35), José (37), Francisco (died in 2016), and Alfredo (died in 2017) arrived. For various reasons, their families were unable to take care of them, and they came to live in Piña. Over time and with the transformation and evolution of Piña Palmera, this has changed, and they are not at present receiving people in this way (Piña Palmera, n.d.-a).

The interventions and services currently provided by the organization are as follows:

Activities in the communities

To launch the strategy in a community, the need must be brought forward by a family member, a teacher, a student, authority figures, etc. The follow-up team makes a visit to the community to assess the conditions in which the PWDs find themselves, existing services (hospitals, schools, etc.), communication routes, transportation, local culture, local economy, sources of work, etc. Meetings are held to assess the conditions of the community and the interest of the local authority and families in the strategy. Sensitization and awareness-raising workshops are conducted with local authorities, medical and educational personnel, community representatives, etc. In these workshops, participants experience different disabilities through simulation exercises, and then reflect on the experience in order to trigger a change of attitude.

Additionally, the monitoring team conducts training of local promoters and/or people with disabilities and their families periodically and permanently (every two weeks or month). This training is carried out in the community in a public, uncomplicated place chosen by the participants themselves. The families are responsible for arranging with the authorities support for the Community-Based Inclusion (CBI) follow-up team that visits the community (e.g. the provisioning of food and fuel). The most important thing is the community's involvement in the strategy and ownership when following up on the activities.

Socialization is enacted with participants in the communities through play and recreational activities. This activity includes everyone, regardless of age and disability, as well as their families. Local materials and topics related to their context

are used. This activity becomes a space for informal education that promotes participation from each person, based on the recognition of differences as a product of coexistence itself.

Along with the rehabilitation and inclusion process of each PWD, there are the so-called empowerment groups of mothers, fathers and/or family members that promote knowledge of rights, as well as the empowerment of PWDs, mainly based on the exchange of daily life experiences, i.e. they learn from each other, support each other, and organize activities that arise during the course of community work. This activity is moderated by a person from the follow-up team, by the group members themselves, or by a PWD involved in the process (Piña Palmera, n.d.-a).

"The follow-up team accompanies families and/or promoters throughout the rehabilitation and inclusion process. For this reason, additional visits are made to homes and schools, and meetings are held with the authorities and other community actors" (Piña Palmera, n.d.-a). It is important to mention that this strategy is self-evaluated periodically by the community as a group.

Local promoters and the follow-up team

These are people from the community who are already receiving training or have already undergone training on the topic of disability and inclusion; it can be a PWD, family members of the PWD, teachers, people who are part of the local authority, or any other interested person. The mothers of the PWDs or other family members are the ones who mostly perform or assume the role of local promoters. With the accompaniment provided by the follow-up team, they motivate other PWDs and families to participate. They share their own experiences of inclusive processes with PWDs, their families, and community actors, like teachers, parents of children without disabilities in the community, and with authorities. In some communities, they participate in local radio, where they share their experiences to motivate others to initiate a rehabilitation and inclusion process (Piña Palmera, n.d.-d).

Temporary training and independent living

The option is available for a PWD with any disability, of any age, and their family, to attend Piña Palmera's facilities for training for a period of time. The goal is for the PWD and their family to learn or enhance skills (socialization, communication, orientation, mobility, or movement) for daily life, which they can develop

within their family and social environment with a follow-up plan. The training is delivered in the company of a PWD who has undergone a rehabilitation and inclusion process, who can share their experience, learning, strategies, and challenges (Piña Palmera, n.d.-b).

Self-support and independent living

Piña Palmera promotes actions that support the personal or familial economy of people with disabilities who participate in community activities. To this end, productive workshops and activities are organized with the purpose of promoting, from comprehensive rehabilitation processes, actions for independent living and economic support based on their living contexts.¹¹

To learn more about Piña Palmera's work, three coordinators from the organization were interviewed: Flavia Anau, Reynaldo Vázquez and Patricia Matías. First, they were asked about the main obstacles and challenges in the implementation of their work. F. Anau mentions that the care received by PWDs is provided by the family, and within the family, by women. This overburdens women and mothers who, in turn, can only provide very basic care: occasional assistance with hygiene and feeding. Families do not have the capacity to provide comprehensive care for the PWD. The second challenge they face is a lack of recognition for the importance of this care work for this particular population by government institutions (F. Anau, personal communication, June 28, 2021).

R. Vázquez mentions that the work they do at Piña Palmera provides a break from the continuous care tasks that are performed in the family setting, since they work with the people who are cared for on a shift system. Likewise, the activities are not limited only to feeding and hygiene, but extend to other types of tasks, like workshops, socialization, inclusion activities, hydrotherapy and other forms of entertainment and care (R. Vázquez, personal communication, June 28, 2021).

They mention that another serious problem that constitutes a real challenge is the economic sustainability of the organization. F. Anau says no one wants to pay for the necessary care for PWDs, and states they do not receive financial support from any Mexican governmental institution. Their main sources of fund-

¹¹ To learn more about the production workshops and products for sale, visit: <https://www.pina-palmera.org/rbc/autosustentabilidad-vida-independiente/>

ing are donations from national and international foundations, particularly from human rights organizations.

They also point out that, in addition to the conditions already mentioned regarding the geographic space where they work (rural and indigenous areas), the economy of the communities is quite precarious. They explain that most of the men who work in agricultural labor travel to other productive areas of Mexico, such as Sinaloa, or even migrate to the United States in search of better employment and salary opportunities. This migratory phenomenon significantly affects the care arrangements of the families left behind in the rural, indigenous area. When the father and mother of a PWD have to migrate, care is left, in most cases, to the grandmothers in the family environment.

Working in coordination with local authorities also poses a problem. They state that the main obstacle is the lack of knowledge local authorities have regarding the problems of PWDs, and that every three years these authorities change. They expressed their tiredness at having to re-establish—every three years, from scratch—contact and understanding with each new political administration. They also mention that there is a danger of losing independence and transparency in the case of working with government agencies because they risk being subjected to certain demands in exchange for support. They state that they feel penalized for not accepting any kind of conditioning from political groups and local authorities in the region.

Piña Palmera's position towards government agencies is to demand compliance with the authorities' responsibilities in terms of defending and guaranteeing the rights of PWDs. Although success in these matters has been limited, they recognize that they have made some progress, for instance, in the area of accessibility.

Importantly, Piña Palmera employs two complementary approaches in addition to the Community-Based Rehabilitation approach: gender and environmental sustainability. As mentioned, Piña Palmera has a space for reflection known as potentiation groups, which include the families of PWDs, though it is mostly women who attend these groups to discuss different aspects of their lives within the family and the community: domestic violence, excessive domestic workloads, lack of resources, etc. During the interview, they mention that the COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected the mental health of women and mothers in the community. School closures meant that families took on the role of educators without considering most of them did not have the intellectual resources necessary to support the educational development

of their sons and daughters. This situation posed a real challenge, since the level of frustration experienced by women and mothers who could not successfully assist in their children's education during the pandemic led, in many cases, to child abuse.

Reinaldo also mentions a series of activities designed with a socio-environmental approach: composting, the installation and use of solar panels, waste separation, rainwater collection, construction of alternative housing with materials like plastics and waste, and more. He adds that the organization actively participates in certain causes to defend environmental conservation. For example, they demonstrated against the construction of a gas station in the area, which would have seriously affected the adjacent beach.

As for replicating the work done by Piña Palmera in Oaxaca, Flavia comments that other organizations have been able to draw on the organization's constituent elements, such as the intercultural and gender focus, to incorporate it into other community interventions. However, she warns that the processes of adaptation and replicability are limited, because they depend on the specific characteristics of their target communities. She further notes that Piña Palmera is in continuous transformation and that the people who provide services today have been trained and educated in this same organization. They recognize the process of learning, change, and adaptation to the new demands and requirements of the community environment.

As a final message, Flavia calls on all people to open their minds to more holistic practices and actions in order to see the individual, with all their requirements and different contexts, ensuring a practical life for PWDs.

Thirty years after its foundation, Piña Palmera is recognized in Latin America as an example of a community-based organization that aims to train and strengthen social subjects so they may be capable of confronting the discriminatory dynamics associated with conceptions of normality that dominate the imagination when confronted with disability. Its success is due to a long and productive dialogue between all the actors involved: between laymen and experts; between indigenous, mixed race, and foreign individuals; between people with and without disabilities; between visitors and hosts; and between science and social practices surrounding disability. (García Vázquez, 2014).

For more information, visit www.pinapalmera.org