

In Solidarity with Latin America

*To the Spanish society which, through its
purchasing of ONCE's lottery games, contributes to
building a more just world.*

Table of Contents

- **Prelude.**
- **Chapter I. Brief Overview of Disability in Latin America.**
 - Excluded Within the Excluded.
 - An Associative Movement in Progress.
 - Regulatory Framework.
 - Communication Channels between Spain and Latin America.
- **Chapter II. FOAL: An X-Ray of the Driving Force for Change in Latin America.**
 - Purposes and Objectives.
 - Scope of Action.
 - . Education.
 - . Labour Inclusion: Vocational Training and Employment.
 - . Support for the Strengthening of Organizations.
 - . Other Objectives.
 - FOAL's Principles and Values.
- **Chapter III. FOAL's Organizational Structure.**
 - Statutes.
 - Board of Trustees.
 - . Powers of the Board of Trustees.
 - . Organizational Chart.
 - Permanent Commission.
 - Financial System.
- **Chapter IV. Building Up Alliances.**
 - Agreement among MEC, OEI and FOAL.
 - Agreement among AECID, ONCE, ONCE Foundation, CERMI and FOAL.
 - Walking Hand in Hand with OISS.
 - Alliance with CERMI.
 - Synergies with ULAC.
 - FOAL and the SOFT Centres.
 - Coalition with Milton Perkins.
 - Collaboration with Caritas, Spain.
 - Links with The Red Cross.
 - Under the Auspices of UNESCO and UNICEF.

- **Chapter V. Achievements as a Result of an Effort: Educational Resources Centres and the AGORA Programme (Part I).**
 - Project Selection Criteria.
 - Educational Resources Centres.
 - . Objectives.
 - . Staff, Resources and Infrastructure.
 - . The Managua CRECI: an Example.
 - . Some Final Considerations.
 - The AGORA Programme
 - . Context and Background.
 - . New Technologies as Allies.
 - . Nature of an Integral Programme.
 - . Services Provided by the AGORA Programme.
 - . Coordination and Follow-Up.
 - . Beneficiaries.

- **Chapter VI. Achievements as a Result of an Effort: Co-financing of Projects and Strengthening of the Associative Movement (Part II).**
 - Strengthening of the Associative Movement.
 - Other Action Areas.

- **Chapter VII. ONCE: the Original Driving Force.**
 - The Values of a Unique Institution.

- **Chapter VIII. In Solidarity with the World.**
 - ONCE and the European Union.
 - . The Balkans Project.
 - . ONCE's Influence in Portugal.
 - ONCE's Impact in Africa.
 - . Refugee Camps in Tinduf, Algeria.
 - . Assistance in Morocco.
 - . Support for Equatorial Guinea.
 - . Compromise with the Portuguese-speaking Countries.
 - . Other Projects.
 - Haiti's Cry.

Prelude

Very often, behind an acronym and along with the meaning represented by each initial, one can find a history of intense work. This history may be rich in projected dreams. It may also include a number of projects, some of them already completed, some in progress; some that never took off, and some whose profiles may not be outlined fully but which already constitute impending projects.

Acronyms refer us to an institution which has had its results. It is those very achievements that manage to transmit to the collective imaginary the meaning of those initials. This is the case of the ONCE Foundation for Solidarity with Blind People in Latin America (FOAL).

When those four letters are pronounced, "FOAL", they awake on the listener concepts associated with this Foundation (born 15 years ago) such as solidarity; sustainability; cooperation; equality; inclusion; effort, etc.

For all the above, this book wishes to contribute in some way to consolidate the significance of FOAL's work in our historical memory, which represents a huge task in itself but which also concerns us. Our historical memory is sometimes fragile and can be overwhelmed with better publicised happenings. FOAL however, has made possible that many children, teenagers and adults in Latin America have a more dignified and more complete life. In sum, it is a life more in accordance with their human rights.

Fifteen years ago, when FOAL was just four initials charged with purposes but with no results yet, there were people who thought that our attempt was just a pipe-dream. Today, fifteen years later, ONCE and FOAL are proud of having been able to contribute to enhance the development of thousands of blind people in many countries, and proud of having also received in return vital and invaluable human knowledge and experiences.

In times of crisis, efforts must double because there are fewer resources available. However, FOAL is used to persevere in areas where, unfortunately, the situation of

crisis is permanent. Poverty certainly hurts when it refers to the lack of financial resources. But when poverty equals the infringement of every person's inherent rights, it becomes a fierce poverty. And this is precisely the type of poverty that FOAL fights against every day, transforming this world in which we live in a more comfortable and amicable place; a world which becomes more just, which belongs to all of us: a world without exclusion.

Hence, the following pages constitute a succinct but heartfelt homage that describes the vicissitudes this Foundation has gone through, and whose rationale behind its existence is the unavoidable compromise of ONCE with development cooperation, a compromise which is only possible thanks to the solidarity of the Spanish society and to the work of our lottery ticket sellers.

Chapter I. Brief Overview of Disability in Latin America.

When we talk about disability, we are referring to a defined reality that is present in 10% of the World population. This estimate has been provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), and it is based on the figures obtained when analysing the percentage of disabilities acquired through illness, trauma, malnutrition, genetics and so on. The WHO established a set of categories that could cause disability.

According to the same source, probably more than 25% of the total population of Latin America has a disability. We are talking about at least 50 million people, of which around 80% live under the poverty threshold (according to the World Bank). If we consider that a family has an average of three members, the figure that illustrates the percentage of Latin American people experiencing both extreme poverty and disability reaches a total figure of 150 million.

Taking into account the 2002 study carried out by the WHO and entitled, 'Health in the Americas', three main causes of disability have been identified in Latin America:

- Health-related causes (congenital anomalies; chronic illnesses; malignant tumors; infectious illnesses; nutritional deficiencies and parasitism, as well as problems related to the development of the foetus and to giving birth).
- Environmental causes (mainly pollution caused by the use of pesticides and insecticides in agriculture).
- Other causes (in particular, violence and the lack of accident prevention mechanisms in the workplace, as well as disorders in mental health caused by armed conflicts, along with the devastating effects of anti-personnel landmines).

Excluded Within the Excluded.

Nowadays, nobody doubts that poverty and disability conforms to a binary set whose elements feed on each other. Poverty generates and accentuates the effects of disability, while the presence of a disability prompts poverty. Therefore, governments

have to break this loop by introducing a cross-cutting disability factor in all their policies, as well as in their human and social development plans.

Although Latin American countries have a compromise with their national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), people with disabilities, who are excluded within the excluded, are usually left outside these policies which, in most cases, do not include either penalising or rigorous follow-up mechanisms.

Thus, people with disabilities in Latin America remain outside the decision-making processes that have an impact on their quality of life. Not only that, their human rights are not respected either. The International Disability Rights Monitor (IDRM) has identified different social contexts in which disability is a clear cause for discrimination. These areas are:

Communication: Only 40% of countries have a version of their political constitution in an alternative format. Few governments contemplate the possibility of adapting their national communication systems to make them more inclusive, in contrast to countries such as Chile, Panama or Costa Rica. The case of Brazil stands out in this regard, as it has a telephony system adapted for deaf people that covers 70% of the country's territory, although this constitutes an exceptional case.

Education: Although, as in so many other areas, there is a lack of specific data that takes into account the issue of disability, it is known as a general rule that children with disabilities are excluded from the educational system.

Access to education varies according to the type and degree of disability. Often, mainstream schools do not accept students with severe disabilities and when they do, the education of those who are accepted is usually limited due to the lack of qualified human and didactic resources.

Employment: Despite the huge effort carried out by many countries to promote labour inclusion and the hiring of people with disabilities, one of the biggest problems for this sector of society continues to be the extremely high unemployment rate, which is close to 70%, being even higher in the case of women with disabilities. The reasons for such a dramatic unemployment percentage can be found in the lack of

qualifications, accessibility and planning for universal design (it is not of much use, for instance, that the workplace is adapted if the means of transport to its location is not accessible). Another reason for this extremely high unemployment rate is the unfair distribution of the Latin American economy.

Health Services: In most regions, access to the health system depends on working status, which means that given the disproportioned unemployment rates among people with disabilities, health insurance is also restricted for this group. Furthermore, public health systems are deficient for people with disabilities, as they do not have resources regarding specific services or technical aids.

Private medical insurance is not a solution either. On the one hand, there are very few people with disabilities who could afford it. On the other hand, insurance companies usually reject people with disabilities as clients. At the same time, there are hardly any health professionals qualified to assist people with disabilities, and those few who are available, work for services that employ rehabilitation systems that consider disability as a medical problem and not from a global and integral perspective.

Housing: Throughout almost all of Latin America, people with disabilities live with their families. Independent living constitutes a privilege and an exception, rather than a fundamental right. This is due firstly to the complexities derived from the multiple existing barriers and obstacles when accessing education and employment. Secondly, it is due to the lack of planning with regard to the percentage of housing facilities (public or private) that include universal design criteria.

Institutionalization: Although it constitutes a flagrant infringement of basic human and ethical principles, many people with disabilities are confined to centres against their will. This initial infringement of their rights can give way to further violations, as these people will be more vulnerable to abuse and violence. For example, while the laws contemplate the possibility of refusing psychiatric treatment, the opinions of people with a psychosocial disability are hardly taken into account in practice when applying this clause.

Some countries are starting to become aware of the undermining of their dignity that this situation generates. In this regard, they have introduced initiatives to deinstitutionalize people with disabilities, although it is still a trend and therefore it is a practice that has not been rooted or extended yet.

Accessibility: As in many other aspects, most countries have laws that require compliance with a set of minimum levels of accessibility for buildings. These requirements may just apply to newly built buildings or just be simply ignored in a systematic way. Even public infrastructure does not comply with these basic accessibility requirements established by law.

As a consequence of all the above, and despite the fact that Latin American countries are willing to work so that accessibility is not only an element to be included in the beginning of the production processes but it becomes a real parameter, as well as in the existing spaces and services, the reality is that it constitutes more a verbal compromise than an assumed responsibility.

AN ASSOCIATIVE MOVEMENT IN PROGRESS

Given the general economic and social characteristics of the Latin American subcontinent, many of its countries are beginning to experience a deep progress (in all areas but particularly in the economic context). However, the starting point is terrible for people with disabilities in many cases.

Gradually, an associative network has begun to be knitted. Although its structural framework is fragile and its trajectory brief, a sense of belonging to a specific group has settled in. This awareness of the collective is essential to articulate an operative and strong associative movement. That reality has facilitated the setting up of Iberoamerican disability networks. Up to this date, there are four operating networks:

- Iberoamerican Intergovernmental Technical Cooperation Network, which focuses on the development of policies for the care of seniors and people with

disabilities (RIICOTEC). It was founded as a result of the Chile Declaration in 1993.

- Iberoamerican Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of People with Disabilities and their Families (RIADIS), founded in Bolivia in 2001, under the auspices of the IMSERSO (Spanish Institute for Older Persons and Social Services, which also includes people in a situation of dependency).
- Iberoamerican Network of Organizations of People with Physical Disabilities (RED), established in the Dominican Republic in 2001, with the support of the Spanish Confederation of Physically and Organically Disabled People (COCEMFE) and the IMSERSO.
- Iberoamerican Network of Intergovernmental Cooperation for the Education of People with Special Educational Needs (RIINEE), founded in 2004 by the ministries and secretariats of education of the Iberoamerican countries, with the objective of contributing to the development of education for people with special educational needs, as a means to achieve their educational integration, their social inclusion and the improvement of their quality of life.

With regard to people with visual disabilities, the Latin American Union of the Blind (ULAC) was founded in 1985 with the support of the Spanish National Organization of the Blind (ONCE). ULAC constitutes an international non-governmental and non-profit organization. It gathers together organizations for and of the blind from 19 Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries in Latin America. Its main objective is to achieve through its unity the complete strengthening of the institutions for and of people with visual disabilities that conform to it, as well as the full integration of people with visual disabilities in Latin America and in society.

Along with disability organizations, which are growing in number and which are increasingly focusing on collective work, each Latin American country has an official body dedicated to disability.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK.

The Latin American regulatory framework concerning people with disabilities seriously fluctuates from one country to another. Disability legislation in Latin America is characterised by its dispersion, its excessive proliferation and its systematic lack of compliance. Although the different countries' disposition is positive and in many cases they have even developed a regulatory base which effective future legislation would be built upon, the reality is that the very few existing laws, directives and sanctions are not taken into account in practice.

Nevertheless, the associative movement whose main objective is to strengthen itself until it reaches the necessary density as to have an impact on those decision-making bodies, has an unalienable start point in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from which other treaties were articulated. The treaties listed below were also decisive for their direct or indirect implication with the issue of disability and were ratified by Latin America:

- International Agreement on Civil and Political Rights (1966).
- International Agreement on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965).
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence against Women (1979).
- Convention against Torture, Cruel Sentences and Inhumane Treatment (1984).
- Convention on the Rights of Children (1989).

We should mention in particular the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, approved in 2006 and which has become the main legal body that structures the new social model for these people. This UN Convention identifies people with disabilities as subjects by right and not as mere objects of those rights. This new conception represents a complete shift from classic parameters based on concepts such as charity and compassion (and so close to a

third one, paternalism). These parameters were built also on an obsolete paradigm where an assistive, rehabilitating and medical approach was applied.

The UN Convention clarifies at last the content of these human rights as they are applied to people with disabilities, providing an integral reference point for internal laws and policies in each country. One of this text's greatest achievements is that it promotes mechanisms to control the advances of countries in this subject, providing evaluation standards as well as an outlined frame for international cooperation.

The ratification of these international agreements shows a will to rectify the flagrant infringement of human rights that people with disabilities have experienced throughout history. It is necessary, however, that the compromise to eliminate barriers is real, whether these barriers are tangible or not. It is also necessary that countries really work to build a more just and inclusive society.

The efficacy of those efforts will also depend on the capacity of Latin American countries to go deeper and incorporate the disability perspective into a wider discourse and in a cross-cutting manner, as it is being experimented with other groups at risk of being exposed to a situation of greater vulnerability such as women and children.

Furthermore, the different Latin American governments will have to carry out studies (the more detailed the better) to describe in detail the reality of disability, get to know it well and then be able to propose adjusted and efficient solutions and answers, as in this way we can contribute indirectly to knock down stereotypes that diminish and interfere with the social and labour inclusion of this group.

Finally, Latin American governments have to promote a constant and, whenever possible, productive dialogue with the associative movement so that a set of interested interactive parties can be established. Nothing for people with disabilities without people with disabilities.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS BETWEEN SPAIN AND LATINAMERICA.

The link between Spain and Latin America is extremely well-known by everybody, as is illustrated through historical discourse. However, we would like to highlight that in the last century, cooperation links have been further reinforced and the dialogue between equals has gradually become a very common and productive practice. Out of the bilateral meetings carried out, those which stand out as most productive are: **'Encounter in Democracy'** (held in 1983 with the participation of more than 100 high political, cultural, economic and scientific representatives from both sides of the ocean, gathered together through the Institute of Iberoamerican Cooperation (ICI), a stem of what later would become the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (AECID).

Similarly, the meeting of former Latin American democratic presidents, held in the Guadalupe Monastery of Extremadura, was also crucial. In the Guadalupe Declaration, named after such an event, there was an explicit and bounding compromise to consolidate an Iberoamerican community of nations and to promote education, culture and science, as well as supporting the different peace processes in Latin America.

Thus, the Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State and Government originated there, a summit which is recognised as an observing body by the United Nations and with a similar status to those of the European Union; the African Union; the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Holy See and the Red Cross.

The 13th Edition of this summit, held in Bolivia under the motto, 'Social Inclusion as Driving Force behind the Development of the Iberoamerican Community', concluded with the Santa Cruz de la Sierra Declaration. After the petition by Spain, it also declared 2004 as the **Iberoamerican Year of People with Disabilities**.

This reality constituted a point of inflection in Latin America regarding the concept of disability. On the one hand, the associative movement had to face, for the first time,

the challenge of using the opportunity provided to them in a way that its actions would have long-term consequences. To this end, it had to articulate itself, have a dialogue and draw together in the same direction, leaving aside any style considerations. Indeed, it managed to do so.

On the other hand, Latin American public authorities, administrations and governments saw disability as something systematic and not punctual. In this manner, those who had not done so before, understood now that the demands of disabled people organizations did not happen out of the blue or because of the influence of some visionaries. They constituted no more and no less than a matter of rights and, more specifically, a human rights issue.

In 2004, the Iberoamerican Year of People with Disabilities, important developments were achieved. The first of these achievements was a very strong sense of social awareness regarding inclusion through activities that would promote the advocacy of rights and equal opportunities. A quick evaluation of this achievement would show four clear results in this respect:

- Effective advances were promoted with regard to public policies for the improvement of the life conditions of people with disabilities and their families, with a particular focus on those who are living in poverty.
- A more solid awareness of the social dimension of disability was consolidated at the national, regional and local levels through the carrying out of studies, censuses, surveys, reports, etc.
- Certain dynamics were established regarding the inclusion of the disability issue and the disability perspective within the debate and writing-up of this regulation.
- The setting-up of organizations dedicated to people with disabilities was encouraged in those regions or areas in which no associative network was present, while consolidating the already existing ones.

2004, the Iberoamerican Year of People with Disabilities, showed that a participatory democracy required new public policies on the subject of people with disabilities to

be developed, taking into account their own input, through their most representative organizations in all phases of the decision-making process: elaboration; enquiry; approval; implementation; follow-up and evaluation.

Another essential milestone in order to understand the huge compromise of the different Iberoamerican countries with people with disabilities was the XXII Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State and Government, held in the Spanish city of Cádiz in November 2012 and under the motto, 'A Renewed Relationship in the bi-centenary of the Cádiz Constitution'.

At this Summit, **the year 2013 was proclaimed as the Iberoamerican Year for the Labour Inclusion of People with Disabilities**. This proposal was jointly put forward by Ecuador and Spain, echoing a suggestion presented by ONCE through FOAL (its Foundation for Latin America) and by CERMI (the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities).

During this summit, the different state leaders recognised the need for strengthening public policies, initiatives and efforts to ensure the full and effective labour inclusion of people with disabilities, as well as the promotion of growth policies and the projection and the encouragement of small and medium-sized enterprises.

The summit championed for 2013 to become a move forward without return, from which labour inclusion can be an effective reality. As expressed in the official release, "not only labour inclusion guarantees their social integration. Its positive economic and social impacts are also extended to the whole community, enabling to take advantage of a valuable human capital, which promotes social cohesion and reactivates the economy of the Iberoamerican countries".

For this reason, the state leaders present at the summit made a compromise "to promote inclusive growth policies with equity and based on decent work". They also made a compromise to take the necessary measures to eliminate the institutional barriers caused by the invisibility of people with disabilities within their respective legislations.

Taking into account the Agreement 159 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the professional re-adaptation and the employment of people with disabilities, they also remembered the right to work of people with disabilities on an equal opportunity basis regarding gender.

These political leaders called for the private sector to gain awareness about the potential that people with disabilities have, and to eradicate all prejudices and stereotypes that, not only are old-fashioned, but which have also become obsolete in the 21st century.

The proclamation of 2013 as the Iberoamerican Year for the Labour Inclusion of People with Disabilities, constitutes a unique opportunity to show the direction that public policies and civil society's actions must take in order to incorporate people with disabilities into the labour market.

* * *

Up to now, there is no doubt that disability is a pluralistic social and personal reality in Latin America. However, there are still challenges left. For instance, there is a percentage of people that experiences particularly excruciating levels of exclusion and suffer discrimination factors within specific groups. These must become an urgent priority within public policies.

Among these specifically vulnerable groups we can mention women with disabilities; indigenous people with disabilities; immigrants or people belonging to an ethnic minority or with a different sexual orientation; people with multiple disabilities; children with disabilities; people with disabilities who cannot represent themselves; people who live in rural areas; and people who have a stigma associated with mental illness.

The achievement of a complete equal status for people with disabilities in comparison to the rest of people, as well as their full social emancipation in Latin America, will depend on the interested parties' clear awareness that they must take control of their lives and design their own future.

Within a social context, this awareness is expressed through the joint work and the unified action that the associative network represents, which is essential for the advancement with regard to the rights of people with disabilities.

FOAL, set up thanks to ONCE's conviction that it is possible to have a different, more just, more inclusive and more efficient world, began working in Latin America to make the reality described here change day by day. FOAL started its work also with the firm belief that the moment will come when people with disabilities will definitely own their lives, be citizens with full rights and have an education that will make them capable of performing a job that provides them both with financial and personal independence.

Chapter II. FOAL: An X-Ray of the Driving Force for Change in Latin America.

The collaboration between the Spanish National Organization of the Blind (ONCE) and Latin America was an established objective almost since this organization's first steps during the first half of the 20th Century. While the joint work was punctual, it was always productive. This collaborative work was manifested through book donations (both in Braille and audio format) of specific bibliographical materials; through the donation of technological tools; through the coverage of expenses implied in the participation of Latin American professionals in relevant world congresses, as well as through its support to numerous blindness prevention campaigns, lest we not forget that 80% of world blindness could be avoided (according to data produced by the World Health Organization).

However, we would have to wait until the 1980s before identifying common systematic and periodical working objectives. In 1984, ONCE's General Advisory Board set up the Fund for Cooperation with Iberoamerica, in order to formalize the allocation of aid to people with visual disabilities in Latin America. This economic catalyst facilitated the carrying out of multiple activities, with the main objective of improving the quality of life of this sector of the population. In particular, it allowed for the sponsoring of cooperation programmes in the areas of welfare and assistance to blind people and people with severe visual impairments. The initial budget for this was 15 million pesetas.

ONCE's compromise with Latin America continued to grow though. Thus, the budget for the institutional fund for cooperation gradually increased to 100 million pesetas (almost 1 million U.S Dollars), along with the magnitude and significance of the projects it sponsored. However, the subsequent strong devaluation experienced by the Spanish currency in 1994, translated into a notorious loss of purchasing power for this fund. Aware of the impact that this could have on the initiatives developed in different countries, ONCE increased again its financial allocation to this fund to 1 million US dollars.

In the beginning, the programmes and initiatives sponsored by the fund were characterised by their assistive dimension. Nevertheless, the paradigm shift that took place within Spanish society and which was encouraged and assumed by ONCE, would modify, not only the action parameters in Latin America, but also the conceptualization of disability itself.

Within an irreversible and historical process that had its pauses but which continued to be convincing, the response that public powers gave to disability was a response based on a welfare model. With such a model, disability was understood as a medical problem, where people with disabilities were considered as mere beneficiaries of rights. This model however experienced a substantial shift towards becoming a model based upon rights, through which disability would be seen now as part of the richness of reality from an integral perspective, and where people with disabilities would become subjects with rights.

Taking into account this new paradigm, the ONCE Foundation for Solidarity with Blind People in Latin America (FOAL) was founded in 1998, in order to establish fluent and long-lasting communication vessels, which would channel the most urgent needs that emerged on the other side of the ocean. FOAL would represent a Foundation ready to work in a sisterly manner with its Latin American counterparts, while respecting at the same time each country's idiosyncrasies and particularities.

Hence, FOAL articulates itself as a new stable and fertile meeting point, which promotes, facilitates and encourages cooperation projects and action policies that improve the life conditions of people with visual disabilities and therefore, those of people with disabilities in general in Latin America. Nevertheless, it keeps the same identity features that characterised ONCE's previous collaboration with Latin America, those being: stability; continuity; work; honesty; generosity; participation and progress.

PURPOSES AND OBJECTIVES

FOAL's purpose is as precise as it is effective: to promote the improvement of the life conditions of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, thus contributing to their enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms from an equality perspective. This represents a substantial investment on repairing through international development cooperation the citizenship deficit being dragged by people with visual disabilities.

Therefore, FOAL's main beneficiaries are blind and partially sighted people in Latin America. Job creation, the improvement of access to education and educational development constitute its immediate contributions, carried out through training programmes and professional training, as well as through labour promotion and inclusion programmes.

FOAL's actions are based on a human rights model, particularly since the approval of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2006. Its direct or indirect actions are channelled through associations representing people with disabilities in Latin America, and its work enables the attainment of personal autonomy; full social inclusion; equal opportunities and no discrimination, as well as the minimising of the impact of blindness or visual disabilities.

Its annual budget is approximately 1.5 million Euros, to which the direct or indirect contributions by the European Commission; the different Latin American governments; the Spanish autonomous communities, local companies or entities and private individuals should be added.

The always cross-cutting work carried out by FOAL in Latin America is channelled through different actions:

- Technical assistance for the execution of programmes and projects.
- Direct or indirect participation in the managing of activities, centres and programmes.

- Collaboration in activities with other entities which carry out coinciding or complementary actions to those performed by FOAL.
- Qualified interlocution recognized officially by public administrations in order to promote the objectives proposed in its statutes.
- Concession of subsidies to similar institutions and allocation of financial aid.

FOAL participates actively in the 19 countries that make up the Latin American Union of the Blind (ULAC): Argentina; Bolivia; Brazil; Chile; Colombia; Costa Rica; Cuba; Ecuador; El Salvador; Guatemala; Honduras; Mexico; Nicaragua; Panama; Paraguay; Peru; Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela.

SCOPE OF ACTION

FOAL's actions aim at achieving the personal autonomy and independence of people with visual disabilities, the empowerment of the associative network and the involvement of the different public administrations, so that the projects it participates in are not just circumstantial and become structural. To this end, FOAL has mainly focused its work on three major areas:

Education

Today more than ever, education can constitute a privilege. Within an increasingly more specialised world, we must guarantee education in all its stages and on an equal opportunity basis. It is for this reason that education constitutes one of FOAL's areas of action.

Thanks to its joint work with public administrations such as the Spanish Ministry for Education and its Latin American counterparts, FOAL promotes and stimulates quality education that ensures this right for Latin American children, through the setting up of Educational Resources Centres and through the suitable training of professionals dealing with the specific needs of students with visual disabilities.

In relation to projects on access to culture and the promotion of reading, more than 2,000 people have been beneficiaries of some of the actions developed by FOAL. This is an area the Foundation is particularly sensitive about. Subsequently, it

backed up the demand put forward by the World Blind Union (WBU) on the 20th of December 1993, in which they urged states “to provide quality didactic materials to students with disabilities and to foresee long-term training for teaching and support staff”.

Taking into account the UN Standard Rules for the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (which contain 22 guidelines related to this population sector), FOAL believes that measures should be implemented in Latin America with the objectives of training teaching professionals in Braille, developing accompanying methods (how to produce tactile materials) and repairing technical devices.

Also, FOAL supports the negotiations that WBU and other non-governmental Organizations are advocating for before the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a specialized agency within the UN system, in order to ensure the access to reading and printed texts of works published by organizations of people with visual disabilities in which ULAC and ONCE participate.

Labour Inclusion: Vocational Training and Employment

If education constitutes a basic right, putting the acquired knowledge into practice through the execution of a job is also every person’s right, especially in those situations where people find themselves unprotected in the social context, as it happens in the case of people with disabilities.

Nobody is unaware of the fact that employment is the base upon which many vital aspects for the individual rest. For example, financial independence is key to achieve personal autonomy. Aware of this challenge, FOAL tries to achieve, in this context, the most adequate professional training for each profile, attempting also to make jobs suitable for the people with disabilities that perform them.

To this end, this Foundation developed an ambitious project called the ÁGORA programme (Aulas of Occupational Management of the Latin American Region), in order to incorporate people with visual disabilities into the Latin American productive network through consulting units, training and labour mediation. These units act as delegations and focus on the specificities of each region. Their responsibility is to

identify people with visual disabilities with a legal working age; to give training courses and workshops; to provide professional and employment-related advice, and to get internships to incorporate this population sector into the labour market.

AGORA's lines of action are to improve the employability of people with visual disabilities; to fight against poverty; to combat gender inequality and to invest in facilitating the capacity building and the access to employment of those people with more difficulties, such as people over 45.

Each person who benefits from the services provided by AGORA is interviewed in depth. Then, a personalised work itinerary is developed, which includes relevant training, learning and support actions. In many cases, the process leads to a work placement emerging from the actual offers generated within the project.

Due to the significant and numerous synergies it prompts, AGORA's role as intermediary between public and private entities offering employment opportunities within the region constitutes one of its most interesting features. This allows for the generation of a dynamic job bank, which is managed according to the needs and skills of its beneficiaries.

In those cases where no candidate is suitable for the job placement being offered, a training course would be given so that the person could learn how to carry out tasks and use the tools characterising the company offering the vacancy.

Finally, AGORA's technicians make sure that the job placement is adapted to the needs of a worker with a visual disability, so that he or she is able to execute it with the maximum level of performance.

Another characteristic of this project is that self-employment is encouraged as a means of social sustainability, and as an example to show that business capacity (whatever the scale may be) is not incompatible with a visual disability. Hence, all the different phases within this working model are backed up: from its beginning (with a business study and design) to the process of searching for finance and including supervising mechanisms during its initial phase.

AGORA's inherent aspiration is to extend its scope of implementation so that the help it provides reaches the largest possible number of beneficiaries, and it is also developed in a wider variety of countries within this region.

Support for the Strengthening of Organizations

FOAL's last purpose is to establish mechanisms that could be self-managed by Latin American Organizations of people with visual disabilities in the future. In other words; to lay the bases so that the experience provides them with a diligent and efficient autonomy and the capacity to be influential.

To this end, FOAL promotes the setting up, the strengthening and the consolidation of the associative network in those countries where it is present. FOAL's intense work both with the Latin American Union of the Blind and with different regional and local associations, allows for the stimulation of a collective conscience which is rooted and is germinating.

The deeper the involvement of the associative network in all contexts and levels related to disability is, the more stable developments will be, not being therefore subjected to once-off whims.

FOAL contributes, along with Latin American associations of blind people, to advocate for their human rights. To this end, it trains their executive staff and their basic members to enable people with visual disabilities to be present in those places where decisions which concern them are made, putting in practice the motto of the UN CRPD: "Nothing for people with disabilities without people with disabilities".

Other Objectives

Although improving access to education, promoting training, labour inclusion and the articulation of a strong associative network constitute its priority working areas, FOAL has made compromises on many other issues:

- Integral rehabilitation.
- Personal autonomy.

- Universal accessibility and design for all.
- Promotion of R+D+I (Research, Development and Innovation) in the fields of blindness, visual disability and tiftotechnology (an Assistive Technology that applies all technological knowledge available to blind people or people with low vision).
- Promotion and distribution of accessible bibliographical resources, along with technical resources and basic tools that enable the education of blind or partially sighted people.
- Encouragement of cultural development and sports practice as indispensable and efficient tools for social inclusion.

FOAL'S PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

Every organization reflects on its statutes a code of ethics in which its principles and values are described in detail. In FOAL's case, they are as follows:

- **Respect for the person's inherent dignity** in general, and of people suffering from blindness or low vision in particular. It understands the concept of "dignity" from a philosophical and from a rights perspective. It is an inherent value to every human being to be rational and be provided with freedom and with a creative power, as people can shape and improve their lives through decision-making and through the exercise of their freedom.
- **Personal autonomy and independence.** Only from decision-making initiatives executed freely and without any pressure, urgency or coercion (as mild as these may be), a person can achieve a full development, which includes the concept of "being wrong" as part of the inalienable right of being.
- **No discrimination** with regard to segregation whose criteria may infringe on human rights in some way. Nobody or nothing can exclude on the bases of ethnic origin; nationality; gender; age; religion; language; health conditions; economic status; disability; political ideas, civil status or anything that prevents the recognition or the exercise of human rights.

- **Full participation and inclusion** of blind and partially sighted people in society.
- **Respect for difference** and for the acceptance of visual disability as just another feature of diversity and of the human condition.
- **Equal opportunities** in all areas of life both personal and work-related, as a form of social justice, where a system is socially just when everybody has the same opportunities to access social welfare and enjoys equal political and civil rights.
- Promotion of **Design for All** and **Universal Accessibility** as requirements that must be fulfilled by the different environments, processes, goods, products and services, as well as by instruments, tools and devices in order for them to be understandable, usable and workable by all people under safety and comfortable conditions and in the most natural and autonomous way possible.
- **Gender equality** as a reality that guarantees a sustainable development.
- Integration and support of all those measures that focus on the **inclusion of blind women** and women with visual disabilities, and which underpin their role as subjects with rights.
- **Respect for the development of skills of children** with visual disabilities while preserving their identity.

These values are applied through a set of actions characterised by the principles of good governance, transparency and excellence in the action criteria and procedures, in the definition of its working priorities, in the employment of its resources and in the communication of its results.

When applying the above mentioned values and principles to the work that FOAL has been carrying out in Latin America, this can only be understood from the perspective of its very strong links with this subcontinent. It is not and has never been the intention at all to implement ONCE's model through FOAL in Latin America. The objective is a much wider, productive and interesting one. It is about putting ONCE's experience, trajectory and resources at the service of organizations of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, in order for them to be consolidated, be able to manage their own projects and become politically influential entities.

Thus, FOAL provides enough tools, financial and human resources to encourage projects in different areas of the Latin American geography, while receiving at the same time an enormous reward in the form of knowledge, experience and participation in the transformation of a hostile reality into a more friendly and humane one.

* * *

Despite the human, economic and material efforts of those parties involved within FOAL's structure, there are many obstacles and problems that must be faced every day. In the same way that people with visual disabilities have to overcome barriers both trivial and some almost insuperable on a daily basis, FOAL also has to persevere throughout its development process against multiple technical, human and administrative difficulties, which are solved with diligence and always building bridges so that the best possible result is obtained.

The times of crisis that the planet is being faced with cannot become a burden that slows down progress. Social and cooperation policies, now more than ever, have to be crucial axes in all countries in order to avoid that the excluded ones, the ones who have always dragged a citizenship deficit throughout history, pay now also the consequences of a recession in which they played no role whatsoever.

FOAL has continued to promote active cooperation policies with governments, with people with visual disabilities and with representative entities in Latin America. In this way, it has favoured the consolidation of the associative movement by creating thousands of work placements and formative actions.

Some of the recognition awards given to FOAL back up the work carried out and confirm that FOAL is advancing in the right direction. This is the case, for example, of the 2012 Asicom award, given to ONCE by the Iberoamerican Association of Communication and the University of Oviedo for its work with people with visual disabilities in Latin America. Another example is illustrated by the decisive contribution made by ONCE and FOAL to the final designation of 2013 as the Iberoamerican Year for the Labour Inclusion of People with Disabilities.

- Three honorary Vice Presidents:
 - HRH Infanta Margarita de Borbón y Borbón dos Sicilias
 - The very honorable Mr. Mario Alberto Nobre Lopes (President of the Mario Soares Foundation, (a distinguished Portuguese institution which promotes cooperation))
 - The very honorable Mr. Adolfo Suárez González, duke of Suárez
 - The very honorable Mr. Óscar Arias Sánchez (President of the Óscar Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Development)
- Trustees:
 - President
 - Executive Vice President
 - Secretary
 - Board members
- General Director
- Associate General Director

Permanent Commission

It is composed by the person acting as first executive vice president, a board member from the board of trustees and member of the delegation appointed by ONCE, the person holding the secretariat of the board of trustees and the person acting as general director of the Foundation. It meets at least once a month and its main competencies are:

- To approve proposals on plans, programmes and generic or specific actions that imply a cost higher than the amount authorized by the managing bodies; to raise relevant proposals at the board of trustees.
- To ratify FOAL's budgetary estimate and the proposal of its settlement report.
- To inform about the proposals raised at the board of trustees regarding the appointment and cease of managing staff at the Foundation.
- To decide the compensation and legal systems applicable to the Foundation's managing staff.
- To certify the hiring of staff and to establish their working conditions.
- To authorise the allocation of goods and services.

- To produce relevant working papers to which any member of the board of trustees may be ascribed.
- To make decisions on any issue or matter that may be urgent, subject to later ratification by the board of trustees.

FINANCIAL SYSTEM

FOAL's patrimony is made up of all sort of goods, rights and obligations, which are subject to economic evaluation and which may be part of its initial resources (its permanent resources), or which may have been acquired later. In order to fulfill its commitments, FOAL has different financial sources:

- The returns from the initial patrimony.
- Any kind of economic contributions transferred to the Foundation by ONCE or by a third party.
- Subsidies awarded by the state, the autonomous communities or any other public or private entity, in benefit of inventory.

The results derived from the economic activities approved by the board of trustees.

- The dues or compensations satisfied, in any case, by their beneficiaries, according to the criteria established by the permanent commission.

On an annual basis and within the first three months of the year, the person that exercises the competencies of the presidency, as proposed by the permanent commission, will formulate the annual accounts, which are subject to approval by the board of trustees.

Chapter IV. Building Up Alliances.

The effectiveness of an organization can be measured from many perspectives. One of them is its capacity to establish alliances with other institutions through agreements, pacts and any other sort of collaboration mechanisms which enable the achievement of its tasks.

In FOAL's case, due to its predisposition towards a common understanding and its commitment with solidarity, there have been many synergies that have helped the Foundation to speed up its commitments and obtained from them the maximum benefit throughout the years, thus providing people with visual disabilities (the rationale behind its existence) with the help required as soon as possible and in the best conditions.

FOAL's open and dynamic predisposition has consolidated fluent relations with multiple and significant bodies within Latin America such as the Iberoamerican General Secretariat (SEGIB), founded in 2003 by the Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State and Government as a permanent body for the institutional and technical support of the Iberoamerican conference.

Four generic working areas remain open within SEGIB, those being; the political, the economic, the social and the cultural. Also, it promotes multilateral and horizontal cooperation within the framework of the Iberoamerican conference, in order to strengthen the Iberoamerican identity through actions in the fields of culture, science and education, contributing in this way to the achievement of the millennium development goals in the region.

SEGIB carries out the follow-up, the assessment and the dissemination of the summits' cooperation programmes, which are ascribed initiatives and projects that ensure their quality, their results and their sustainability. Not in vane then, SEGIB is a member of FOAL's board of trustees.

Some of the most important bonds consolidated by FOAL are those which serve as pillars for its collaboration with MEC, previously known as the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science, and with the Organization of Iberoamerican States (OEI) in order to carry out educational cooperation projects and programmes which may be of interest.

The Organization of Iberoamerican States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI), is an intergovernmental cooperation body established in 1985 and headquartered in Madrid.

It promotes cooperation, exchange, development, diffusion and communication among its member countries in the fields of education, science, technology and culture. It also advocates for the promotion of the Spanish and the Portuguese languages.

The agreement among MEC, OEI and FOAL, which came into force in 2006 and whose validity is indefinite, regulates the competencies of all entities involved.

Thus, MEC compromises:

- To promote and establish relations with the ministries of education in countries of the Iberoamerican region, in order for them to participate in relevant educational cooperation actions within the framework of the Iberoamerican Intergovernmental Technical Cooperation Network for the Education of People with Special Educational Needs (RIINEE).
- To carry out the educational follow-up of the actions taken.
- To support with experts and with technical assistance the actions derived from this educational cooperation initiative.
- To propose to the Follow-Up Commission the projects included in its programme that coincide with the objectives of educational cooperation.

Accordingly, the organization of Iberoamerican states is obliged:

- To execute or collaborate from a technical point of view in the development of the projects that are formalised to carry out the educational cooperation actions.

- To carry out the purchasing, reception and follow-up of the materials and equipments related to goods and services, according to what is established by OEI's procedural and managing regulations.
- To propose the projects included in its programme which are in accordance with the objective of educational cooperation contemplated in this tripartite agreement to the Follow-Up Commission.
- To present before the Follow-Up Commission a report justifying the administration and management of the funds transferred to OEI for the execution of projects, accompanied by an expenses report for the previous year.

Finally, FOAL's obligations under this agreement are:

- To provide educational resource centres and centres producing specific didactic materials for blind students with the necessary equipment for their functioning, while advising the ministries of education of different countries about their implementation and development.
- To improve the qualifications of the professionals appointed by each ministry for the implementation of centres producing didactic materials, as well as to participate in the training of the teaching staff who work with blind students within an inclusive education system through FOAL's educational resources network.
- To propose to the Follow-Up Commission those projects which agree with the ultimate purpose of educational cooperation.
- To provide the Follow-Up Commission with the technical evaluation reports regarding the impact of their actions.

At the same time, this agreement contemplates the possibility that any of the stake parties can, with all other parties' consent, collaborate with as many bodies, administrations, public or private entities and institutions as they may consider suitable, in order to achieve educational cooperation.

Gradually, some countries started to annex themselves to this agreement as national entities and beyond their adhesion to OEI. Countries which annex themselves to this agreement through their respective ministries of education, are engaged in an

inclusive education model, attempting with this cooperation agreement to articulate an effective response for all parties involved in the education of people with visual disabilities (experts in this field, parents, main-stream education teaching staff, students). To this end, these countries assign part of their national budgets and human resources, designing from the very beginning their own model which is adjusted to each country's reality and, therefore, to their particular educational systems.

In this same context and as collaboration framework, FOAL signed an agreement in 2011 with the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), which is attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation; the Spanish National Organization of the Blind (ONCE); the ONCE Foundation for the Cooperation and Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities, and the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities (CERMI).

The purpose of this agreement among **AECID, ONCE, ONCE Foundation, CERMI and FOAL** is to contribute to the social inclusion of people with disabilities, and to the achievement of a sustainable human development. To this end, these five entities agree: to promote cooperation and collaboration with organizations of blind and partially-sighted people in those countries which are included within the AECID's area of competence; to promote the employment, capacity-building and professional training of people with disabilities; to include the principle of universal accessibility in AECID's management and structure; to encourage the inclusion of disability as a cross-cutting issue in development cooperation policies, programmes and projects, and to promote the strengthening and cohesion of disability social movements from a human rights perspective.

Therefore, the ONCE Foundation agrees to:

- To promote universal accessibility in AECID's main premises and services (both physical and virtual), as well as in its procedures, services and benefits made available to the public.
- To facilitate access to employment for people with disabilities at AECID, by studying and proposing the adaptation of rules that regulate the selection

processes for their entry, as well as paying attention and improving the working conditions and aids for civil servants with disabilities or who have relatives with disabilities ascribed to it.

- To encourage the implementation of social clauses from AECID's own actions regarding administrative hiring, according to current legislation and in favour of labour inclusion and accessibility for people with disabilities.
- To inform and offer support, within ONCE Foundation's frame of competencies in relation to professional training, employment and accessibility to the children and relatives of civil servants and staff members working at AECID, as well as to the actual AECID personnel in case of a recently acquired disability.
- To promote actions with the objective for AECID to incorporate the issue of assistance for people with disabilities and their families in a cross-cutting manner and as a singled-out social group within the policies, programmes and actions it may promote and develop.
- To organize an annual training activity at AECID training centres, which will be ceded for this purpose, taking into account the availability within their programmes and the conditions outlined in the annual collaboration plans.

In accordance with this agreement, FOAL will be responsible for:

- Setting up a framework programme of collaboration for the execution of development cooperation programmes and projects with blind and partially-sighted people. It will include performing technical assistance actions in centres belonging to member countries in Latin America and within the framework of the objectives established by the current cooperation plan with AECID.
- Promoting collaboration between FOAL and the different AECID technical offices present in Latin America, in order to carry out national and/or regional action programmes in the fields of education, labour inclusion and institutional reinforcement, with a timeframe for each programme of between 3 and 5 years.

- To organize an annual training activity at the AECID training centres present in Latin America, which will be ceded to this end, taking into account the availability within their programme schedules and the conditions outlined in the annual collaboration plans.

Similarly, the role given to CERMI is:

- To contribute to the diffusion of a human rights approach towards disability and the fight against poverty, and to encourage the inclusion of such issues within Spanish policies and strategies on international development co-operation.
- To promote the strengthening and cohesion of social movements articulated around the issue of disability in those areas of the world where Spanish development cooperation is implemented.
- To stimulate the assimilation of International development cooperation strategies focusing on the human and social development of people with disabilities and their families within the Spanish disability associative network,.
- To carry out a study analysing the significance of disability in Spanish development cooperation policies, with an aim to improve the effectiveness of future actions and contribute then to promote the respect of the human rights of people with disabilities through such actions.
- To carry out actions for the promotion and the assistance of people with disabilities and their families as a cross-cutting axis of its international developmental co-operation strategies, policies and programmes.
- To host a forum to reflect and gain awareness about the inclusion of disability and the introduction of the universal accessibility principle within the development cooperation policies and strategies of the agency and other Spanish operators.

Finally, AECID will:

- Channel the participation of ONCE and its Foundation, FOAL and CERMI in the contents of the regulatory and programmatic initiatives promoted by this

agency and which are affected by this agreement, so that the social sector of disability can make contributions and suggestions that improve such content from the perspective of people with disabilities.

- Promote the presence of ONCE and its Foundation, FOAL and CERMI, which represent people with disabilities and their families, in AECID's participation and consultation bodies and forums that may exist at present or might exist in the future, and which have a connection with this population sector, its interests and demands.

A Coordinating and Follow-Up Commission, composed by two representatives from each signing entity will meet at least twice a year to coordinate the activities required for the execution of this agreement of unlimited duration.

WALKING HAND IN HAND WITH OISS

While its origins date from further back, the Iberoamerican Social Security Organization (OISS) was set up in 1954. It is a specialised international body of a technical nature, which promotes the social and economic welfare of the Iberoamerican countries, as well as those countries linked to them through the Spanish and Portuguese languages. It does so through the coordination, exchange and use of mutual experiences in the areas of social security in particular and within the wider context of social protection in general.

In 1999, FOAL signed a collaboration agreement with OISS to promote the exchange of technical support. According to this agreement, both parties agreed:

- To collaborate in technical support and assistance activities through initiatives that will enable the advancement in the development of joint projects. It also refers to the collaboration in the diffusion of knowledge, in particular that related to the internationalisation of social security. This knowledge involves the adequate modification of their managing institutions, as well as research and any other activity that is relevant for their respective objectives and purposes in general terms, and those which aim at improving the social security of people with disabilities in particular.

- To exchange publications on social, labour or economic issues which may be produced as a result of their respective actions.

The activities contemplated by the agreement can be materialised through courses, studies, experts' trips, technical visits, seminars and international colloquia.

With an initial life span of two years, the agreement is automatically renewed at the end of each natural year.

ALLIANCE WITH CERMI

One of FOAL's strongest relations is that kept with the Spanish Committee of Representatives of People with Disabilities (CERMI), which constitutes a platform for the representation, advocacy and action for the more than 3.8 million Spanish people with disabilities and their families.

It is made up of the main national organizations of people with disabilities; several entities adhered of sartorial action, and a large group of regional platforms. CERMI gathers together more than 7,000 associations and entities.

In April 2008, FOAL, CERMI and the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) signed a collaboration agreement to elaborate and publish a study on the issue of disability within the educational systems of the Iberoamerican countries. This study gave way to a book entitled 'People with Disabilities and Access to Educational Services in Latin America', which was coordinated by Pillar Samiego García.

This study, along with other previous and posterior works focusing on learning about the reality of disability in Latin America is crucial, as the more we are aware of the particularities, needs and features of the social sector for which we work, the more specific and useful the proposals we can develop to improve their quality of life will be.

In addition to this agreement, the relationship between FOAL and CERMI is very fluent and symbiotic.

SYNERGIES WITH ULAC

If there is an institution with which FOAL intrinsically shares a sisterly relationship, it would be the Latin American Blind Union (ULAC). It was established in 1985 and it is composed by organizations for and of people with visual disabilities in Latin America. Its purpose is to promote the strengthening of the institutions that make up this organization, as well as the full inclusion of all people with disabilities in Latin America.

FOAL and ULAC both share the objective of reinforcing the associative movement of blind people in their respective countries, as it constitutes a legitimate and necessary tool to actively advocate for the human rights of this sector of the population.

In 2004, FOAL and ULAC ratified a four-year collaboration agreement, which could be renewed indefinitely.

On subscribing to this agreement, ULAC compromises itself to elaborate a strategic plan of action. This must include the criteria and the necessary organizational and economic compromises that result from their implementation in both the definition of its objectives and of its functioning. An example of this is outlined below:

- Good governance, transparency and excellence constitute basic action principles within its action and procedural criteria; in the definition of its working priorities; in the employment of its resources, and in the communication of its results.
- ULAC will encourage within its governing bodies a functional, small-sized and professionalised executive structure, so that this enables the union to fulfill its acquired compromises.
- It will develop actions with the aim of achieving a stronger financial autonomy and, above all, a wider participation of the public and private sectors in the

countries it intervenes, generating in this way synergies to obtain economic resources to finance its budget through external co-financing sources .

- It will promote contributions from its own resources, which will come from ULAC's member organizations and collaborating partners or sponsors.
- It will encourage the full incorporation, the democratic participation and a degree of compromise among all the countries that make up the Latin American region, and whose associations are part of ULAC. In this way, it will facilitate therefore their integration and representation within its bodies.
- It will promote the strengthening of national organizations through the continuous standardisation and updating of training courses in administration and management, prompting subsequently the responsible and democratic participation of members in their respective organizations.
- It will encourage statutory reforms within national organizations based on the changes and needs experienced by people with visual disabilities, simplifying organizational complexities whenever possible and incorporating professionalism, responsibility and dedication criteria in order to gradually facilitate more efficient definitions and distributions of tasks. Also, it will have to act in favour of a progressive renewal through an orderly rotation of all senior posts, making possible the incorporation of young people and creating awareness about the need for the inclusion of women in training and employment. At the same time, it will reinforce their rights not only by being able to elect representatives but also by being themselves elected. ULAC must do all this while supporting the necessary statutory reforms in order to implement the principles of non-discrimination and equality between men and women.
- To promote a policy of effective service provision for national institutions by both elaborating and presenting projects for one or several countries, such as the encouragement of the better use of the variety of services available in each state for the benefit of blind people in Latin America.
- The relationship between ULAC and FOAL will be reinforced, while respecting both institutions' autonomy and independence when complying with their respective objectives.
- FOAL will be mentioned in all joint actions.

At the same time, FOAL consolidates its compromise to provide ULAC with financial support and political advice.

FOAL AND THE SOFT CENTRES

In 2007, the Latin American Blind Union (ULAC) launched the SOFT project (Tiflotechnological Optimization and Assistance Service), in order to improve the use of technological tools adapted specifically for people with visual disabilities. To this end, a consortium of entities was set up to enable the launching of centres providing technical support, capacity-building, maintenance and repair of tiflological equipment. Their purpose is to provide services gradually cover the needs of the Latin American region.

These technical support and repair centres try to solve the stagnation and underuse of existing equipments in the region, which is due to a capacity-building deficit; to the lack of technical advice regarding their use and maintenance, and to the different difficulties in both repairing them and getting spare parts. These centres offer an integral work in the achievement of a better use of tiflological equipment.

FOAL, in its efforts to improve the education of people with visual disabilities, is linked to and participates dynamically in this project. These centres constitute a means of technical support and aid in the maintenance of equipment, which FOAL provides these educational resource centres with in order to assist people with visual disabilities.

COALITION WITH HILTON PERKINS

Founded in 1829, Perkins School for the Blind is a centre with a worldwide reputation for its excellence in the teaching of blind people, people suffering from deaf-blindness and people with multiple disabilities. Some internationally renowned students have attended this school such as the female activist Helen Keller and her teacher Anne Sullivan.

Perkins' main mission is to help people with disabilities acquire a greater degree of independence. Through the development of their knowledge, their skills and their

self-esteem, students learn to live, work and get along in the most independent way possible.

In 1989, Perkins established the integral international Hilton Perkins Programme with the support of the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, in order to promote and consolidate the education of blind and partially-sighted children. Hilton Perkins' primary focus is to develop skills at the local, regional and national levels to establish sustainable and independent educational services.

An institution of this nature is bound to share a common understanding with FOAL, as they have similar aims and purposes. For this reason, even prior to the setting up of FOAL, both institutions had got together since 1990, unifying their efforts to achieve the greater educational, labour and social inclusion of deafblind people in Latin America.

Some of the joint actions developed throughout that time have given way to:

- The training of professionals working in educational programmes for students with visual disabilities and additional needs (including those with deafblindness) at the Interamerican University of Costa Rica; the Mackenzie University of Sao Paulo in Brazil; the Metropolitan University of Education Science in Santiago of Chile, and at the Dr. Domingo Cabred Higher Institute for Educational Psychology and Special Education in Argentina.
- Numerous encounters among parents of deafblind people and people with multiple disabilities in different places within the Latin American geography. Their aims would be to establish links among families; to identify leaders among parents; to promote self-determination and empowerment, as well as to encourage the development of joint networks both through the parents associations to which they belong, and among them in a direct and independent manner.
- The establishment or consolidation of early-intervention educational services through the supply of economic, logistic and material support to institutions

such as the Eva Lindstedt Centre in Sao Paolo (Brazil), and the Manuel Rocca Rehabilitation Hospital in Buenos Aires.

- Training for preparing staff to work in early-intervention services for children suffering from deafblindness or with multiple disabilities that are associated with visual disabilities.
- Meetings of different associations working to improve the quality of life of deafblind people.
- The sponsoring of some people's participation in forums of interest such as the Deafblind International World Conference and the World Federation of the Deafblind International Conference.
- Different consultancy areas: early intervention, transition to adult life or the sensory integration of deaf-blind people.
- Programmes on the transition to adult life of this population sector.
- The production and distribution of bibliographical materials both in Spanish and Portuguese.
- The call for scholarship applications to the Masters in Multiple Disability and Deafblindness.
- The training of staff in low vision and sensory integration, with the objective of producing functional strategies to facilitate visual communication in their development.
- The production of useful goods such as rocking chairs and posture pants.
- Specific educational programmes for children with visual disabilities and neurological damage.
- The launching of specific resource centres such as the Multiple Disability, Deafblindness or Visual Disability ADEFVAV resource centre in Sao Paolo (Brazil).
- Regional capacity-building programmes.
- The development of didactic materials on games and toys that may stimulate the use of sight.
- Training courses in cortical vision.
- Training courses in Management and advocacy of family rights.

COLLABORATION WITH CARITAS SPAIN

Founded in 1957, Caritas Spain is a humanitarian organization attached to the Catholic Church. It is operated through 68 Caritas diocesan offices and 3 institutions (the Saint Vincent de Paul Association, the Spanish Confederation of Religious - CONFER-, and the Spanish Federation of Social and Health Religious).

It has around 60,000 volunteers all over Spain, approximately 4,000 staff members and more than 160,000 members that sponsor it financially (60% of its funds come from private sources, being private donations its main source of income).

The services provided by Caritas Spain are distributed into three major areas: humanitarian aid, development cooperation and social services.

In 2012, FOAL and Caritas Spain signed an agreement for the execution of the AGORA programme in Bolivia to improve the labour inclusion of people with visual disabilities through advisory actions, capacity-building and labour insertion.

The above mentioned agreement, which has a foreseen duration of two years, details FOAL's and Caritas Spain's financial contributions so that the Bolivian Pastoral Social Caritas carries out and develops the AGORA programme with the technical support of the National Federation of the Blind in Bolivia (FENACIEBO) and the Bolivian Institute for Blindness (IBC).

LINKS WITH THE RED CROSS

In order to be able to improve the quality of life of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, FOAL tries to involve all actors in the area that may contribute to this purpose with their action capacity, their efficacy and implementation. This is the case, for example, of Red Cross Spain, with whom FOAL signed a collaboration frame agreement to identify, formulate, execute and evaluate actions focusing on the training and labour inclusion of blind people in Central America.

Furthermore, aware of the devastating effects of the continuous natural disasters to which certain Latin American regions are exposed, FOAL has offered all its resources to combat their consequences.

To guarantee the effectiveness of a joint action, this action will be stipulated through agreements that will be specific for each action. In them, each institution's compromises will be determined, as well as their degrees of responsibility in the managing of such compromises, which might relate to tasks linked to the administration of funds; to the execution of the materials and contents, or to both aspects simultaneously.

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF UNESCO AND UNICEF

One of the actions with biggest impact and where FOAL participates in is the Education for All Children with Visual Impairment (EFA-VI). This campaign was initiated by the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), along with the World Blind Union (WBU) and backed up by UNESCO and UNICEF.

This campaign, which started in 2006, addresses children with visual disabilities in developing countries, where just about 10% of children have access to education.

The EFA-VI campaign contemplates the following UN Millennium Development Goals:

- To achieve primary education on a universal scale.
- To promote gender equality and women's autonomy.
- To set up international development associations.

In this regard, it has identified 7 working areas:

- To improve awareness about the right to education of people with visual disabilities.
- To implement systems to evaluate and identify children with visual disabilities.
- To facilitate access to early-intervention and low vision services.
- To provide human and financial resources in order to develop quality educational Programmes.

- To incorporate parents into the educational processes of children with visual disabilities.
- To produce educational and bibliographical resources for people with visual disabilities, as well as for the educational community as a whole, including educational professionals, mobility experts, rehabilitation professionals, parents and others.

FOAL's work within the Global EFA-VI campaign is linked to the cooperation agreement signed in 2006 with the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and the Organization of Iberoamerican States (OEI). The actions under the auspices of FOAL and framed within this campaign are divided into:

- Courses in early intervention, awareness, screening and low vision.
- Supply of didactic materials for students with visual disabilities.
- Elaboration of self-learning guides for teaching staff.
- Services focusing on the production of bibliographical materials (in Braille, tactile and audio formats), on early intervention and on visual stimulation.

Since 2008, FOAL has supported the actions taken within the EFA-VI campaign in all those countries in which they have been implemented, without any exception.

Chapter V. Achievements as Result of an Effort (Part I): Educational Resource Centres and the AGORA Programme.

When the tangible results of a specific effort are enumerated, analysed, examined and shared, only the fruits of the tree, that is, the visible and external aspects are taken into account. Behind these results, however, there are a number of intangible factors, which are difficult to quantify and value, but without which such fruits would have never existed. They are in fact the roots of the tree.

We could apply this metaphor to FOAL, whose branches and fruits, that is, its specific results will be analysed below. We will do such analysis without forgetting that the projection of each of these results is much bigger than what it seems, as there are huge doses of excitement, human resources, interconnected chains and favours impossible to quantify and/or mention, although all of them are crucial for the achievement of the final result.

The fruits from its three action areas concur within the enormous list of results obtained through FOAL's work:

- Projects carried out in collaboration with public and private institutions.
- Actions addressing the strengthening of the Latin American associative network of people with visual disabilities.
- Opening and permanent co-financing of local projects.

All these aspects are surrounded by inalienable and cross-cutting objectives in each of its actions, such as gender equality and the encouragement and implementation of new technologies.

PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA

Most projects promoted by FOAL in collaboration with the different Latin American associations and entities are the result of a process that sometimes simply starts with two lines in an e-mail, which is being sent from any Latin American region to FOAL's technical office, headquartered in Madrid.

That schematic idea being proposed, that concise request for materials, that unpolished idea, that message in a bottle activates FOAL's apparatus. Once the request for collaboration is received, whatever its nature and its degree of specificity, FOAL's technicians analyse it in depth. The specific need is thus outlined in detail and examined from a wide perspective; its viability is studied and sometimes the proposal is even modified in order to optimise the number of people that could potentially benefit from it.

To this end, the communication with the people responsible for the association requesting collaboration is constant. Nobody knows better than them and with more accuracy their deficiencies, their strengths and their needs.

At this particular stage, FOAL carries out, above all, the important task of identifying resources and training regarding the provision of services. It does so by widening their overall scope to make every project financially viable.

Having experience in how to start up a project, solving and overcoming vicissitudes and knowing what the real options are with regard to resources both economic or of any other nature, constitutes an added value that is indirectly materialised through the enrichment of an area, while contributing at the same time to the strengthening and independence of the associative movement.

In relation to financing, along with its response to each project with a particular economic contribution, FOAL also seeks the involvement of other entities such as the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID). FOAL participates in its calls for projects with different initiatives, in the same way it also participates every time a public administration allocates economic aid for initiatives related to development cooperation. This is the case, for instance, of the autonomous communities of Madrid and Andalusia, which have given subsidies to some of the proposals raised by FOAL.

Once the project is completely outlined and approved, supervision by FOAL is constant, accompanying Latin American entities throughout the whole process and supervising everything including bureaucratic and management aspects. Even at the

start of the project, collaboration remains a constant feature in time. Indeed, one of FOAL's purposes is to promote initiatives which are not one-off projects but which constitute efficient and sustainable proposals.

The project selection criteria that have been developed thanks to FOAL's management during its 15 years of existence are based on the principles of impartiality and non-discrimination; gender equality, and inclusion within the community. There are 8 issues that are taken into account in this regard:

- Project's economic and material viability.
- Number of people that will benefit from it.
- Focus on the assistance to people belonging to groups with a higher risk of vulnerability.
- Public and/or private co-responsibility in the material and financial execution of the project.
- Experience working with other international cooperation entities.
- Competencies and responsibilities in the execution of the project.
- Transfer rate of results to the beneficiaries of the project.

At the same time, FOAL's contribution to the different projects may adopt any of the following actions in its manner of execution:

- Providing technical assistance for the execution of programmes and projects.
- Participation in the direct or indirect Management of activities, programmes or centres.
- Participation in the development of activities with other entities which carry out programmes or activities that coincide or which are complementary to those run by the Foundation.
- Qualified interlocution with public administrations regarding the organization of civil society, so that it promotes the improvement of the quality of life of people with visual disabilities.
- Allocation of subsidies for institutions.

- Allocation of financial aid through different methods.

THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Life has never been easy for children with visual disabilities, particularly in less developed countries. In such countries, along with the lack of social, medical, administrative and governmental structures, there are also prejudices and obsolete stereotypes regarding disability.

However, September 2000 represented a departure point. It signified a global gain of awareness that would affect this reality and many others. It was then that UN member countries ratified the Millennium Declaration, which includes 8 inalienable development goals:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- Achieve universal primary education.
- Promote gender equality and empower women.
- Reduce child mortality.
- Improve maternal health.
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.
- Ensure environmental sustainability.
- Develop a global partnership for development.

FOAL, whose rationale is to work in order to achieve the full social and labour inclusion of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, wanted to adhere itself to these purposes and decided to work in order to eradicate the lack of compulsory education in this region.

The concept of poverty can be understood not only in economic terms but also from the perspective of the absence or the breaching of rights, being education one of those rights. Poverty constitutes the main obstacle for the achievement of this objective, as less than 10% of Latin American children with visual disabilities are in school.

For all these reasons, FOAL began to develop an ambitious project that would:

- Favour the educational inclusion of children with visual disabilities.
- Promote equal opportunities when accessing training through the use of Braille and other adapted services.
- Train professionals in the use of tiftotechnological tools.
- Guarantee basic materials for students with disabilities in the specialised centres, as well as educational resources for inclusive education.

This is the genesis of FOAL's inclusive education programme for people with visual disabilities. It is based on the implementation and development of educational resource centres throughout the entire region. While these centres are adapted to the students' needs and are provided with the necessary materials and resources for their training, they also allow for the follow-up of each student's educational curriculum in the case of children.

Taking into account their open nature to the community, educational resource centres participate and carry out joint actions with different organizations and institutions within the public and private sectors, in order to improve the educational, social and labour conditions of people with visual disabilities.

The setting up of these centres is possible thanks to the agreement of indefinite duration signed by FOAL in 2006 with the Ministry of Education and Science and the OEI.

These centres' aims are; to provide students with visual disabilities with specific material; to train the professionals who work with them in specific areas related to disability, and to create units of bibliographical production so that the student can have the materials in the specific reading and writing system he or she may require.

Objectives

While each educational resource centre is organised according to the particularities and possibilities of the countries where they are located, they all keep a harmonious balance, which can be summarised in the following nine purposes:

- To support and promote resource centres as well as centres for the production of materials for blind people.
- To collaborate in the training and capacity-building of teaching staff working with blind and visually impaired students within an inclusive educational system.
- To participate in those initiatives that facilitate inclusive education.
- To enable people in Latin America to access education, training and information.
- To train the centre's teaching staff in the use of bibliographical materials which are specifically produced for people with visual disabilities; to train them also in the use of equipments and technologies that allow the production of texts in Braille, tactile and audio formats.
- To disseminate their knowledge of different applications and tiftotechnological devices that facilitate the access to communication and information technologies for people with visual disabilities.
- To increase the possibilities of social, educational and labour inclusion, as well as to promote the individual, family and social development of people with visual disabilities, thus contributing to the improvement of their quality of life.
- To articulate social networks and dynamics that stimulate and promote the social participation of this population sector.
- To develop actions that respond to the needs of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, as well as those of their organizations and of the communities where they live and participate.

Along with their educational tasks at all levels, these educational centres also have many other functions due to the particularities of the areas where they are located. These additional functions may be of great significance for the development of the associative network of people with visual disabilities in particular, and of people with disabilities in general. For example, these centres:

- Become a **means of communication** between the different administrations and this population sector. The lack of channels for joint work between the

different governments (from national to local level) and the disability associative movement prevents any advancement from happening, as small as that may be. This is why educational resource centres constitute both a physical space and a referential point for interlocution, as they make visible something that, prior to their implementation, represented a vague reality.

- Guarantee the **right to vote** in an independent and anonymous manner. The Latin American reality, still in the first phase of its effervescent progress, has not yet suitable structures that guarantee equal opportunities or the full exercise of fundamental rights. These educational resource centres can also contribute to eradicate this situation by, for example, offering their premises and their resources during elections, whatever their nature. This would guarantee then the possibility of exercising their right to vote for people with disabilities, so that they are able to participate in an effective manner in the configuration of their own political reality.
- Identify **toxic medicines and products**. There is very little access to the health system within rural areas in Latin America and, in many places, the health system is so limited that it becomes obsolete. This is why is crucial that people with visual disabilities who may need to take medication regularly, are able to go to a place where they are informed about the most suitable drugs for their symptoms; the expiring date of such products, and the suitability of other alternative treatments.
- Carry out the transcription of **exams and materials for public entry examinations**, access to higher studies or work placements. Often, where there is a will to facilitate inclusion and make things easier for people with visual disabilities, there is however a lack of resources. That is why, whenever it is possible, educational resource centres can adapt the essential materials that might intervene in any stage of the educational process, as well as in the process of access to employment.

- Based on all aspects mentioned above, educational resource centres can also edit **manuals** of different kinds for those places where it is possible to find people with visual disabilities among their students and/or workers, such as internal or formative manuals, private school handbooks, manuals for private or public institutions, etc.
- Contribute in an efficient manner and in first motion to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, which are promoted by the UN, and particularly that related to the achievement of **universal primary education**.

Staff, Resources and Infrastructures

When fulfilling fundamental tasks such as advising, training and producing educational materials, the role of technicians is essential. This is why, as well as familiarising themselves with the people they work and their specific educational needs, they must also be able to use and know perfectly the adapted applications that the centre makes available to its users, so that they enable the users' participation and access to information.

Educational resource centres must have staff with the following profiles:

- a) Service coordinator/ financial and administrative manager. This person will be responsible for the functioning of the centre and its staff. He or she will make sure that quality, effective and efficient educational resources are produced. He or she will deal with the service applications and their filing. He or she will be the interlocutor with publishing houses; will deal with the requests of supplies; will lead the centre's human team, distributing the different tasks and establishing a balance of work duties. He or she will collaborate with the General Director for Special Education within the relevant Ministry of Education, and will stipulate the centre's priorities.
- b) Training and pedagogic assessment technician. This person will cover the capacity-building needs of the educational community within the field of visual disabilities. He or she will try to acquire new bibliographical resources and

whenever possible, will make new professional contacts that will help to obtain such resources. Due to his or her direct and continuous contact with students and teaching staff within the centre, this person will be the ideal means to channel claims, suggestions, proposals and needs that may contribute to improve the centre.

c) Production technicians. They are in charge of producing didactic materials for the centre. They will carry out additional tasks, depending on the work load available and on each individual's capacity:

- Bookbinding of adapted texts.
- Elaboration of tactile sheets.
- Transcription and adaptation of texts to be printed in Braille.
- Elaboration and production of texts in audio format.
- Correction of materials, mainly in Braille and tactile formats.
- Constant and fluent communication with the centre's coordinator. Support in the administrative tasks that may be assigned to them (writing-up of production reports, lists of required supplies, technical incident reports, etc.).

d) Maintenance technician. This person is in charge of keeping the computer and production equipment in good health. In the case that they are specific members of staff within the centre, they may occasionally carry out functions as production technician, or even serve as support staff when the circumstances require so.

Along with the specialised staff, educational resource centres require a minimum amount of technical infrastructure:

- Complete computer sets (printers, Internet access, scanner, CD recorder, etc.).
- *Up to date software* that optimises the performance of different devices (antivirus, Braille transcription programmes, graphic design programmes, etc.).

- Tiflotechnical adaptations which guarantee that every worker with a visual disability in the centre carries out his or her tasks (screen readers, character magnification software, adapted Web browser, etc.).
- Specific equipments for the actual functioning of the centre (cutting machine, photocopy machine, Perkins machines, Thermoform and Zy-Fuse ovens, necessary to produce didactic tactile materials, etc.).
- Perishable materials or supplies (Braille paper, Thermoform paper, Zy-Fuse, material to do molds or adapted miniature replica, etc.).

The Educational Resource Centre for the Blind in Managua: An Example.

Any initiative that may contribute to improve the quality of life of people can be outlined in detail but, if this is not translated into a practical reality, if this idea is just left on paper, then it will mean a waste of time and the spoiling of many dreams. FOAL has defined the objectives, functions and purposes of the educational resource centres, leaving also a margin for improvisation required by any institution which is subjected to the unforeseen vicissitudes of every day routine. However, the most important thing is that FOAL has developed a tool to improve the quality of life of people with visual disabilities in Latin America and has put it into practice. We can examine a particular example to illustrate this and see the results obtained by these centres, which have been able to improve the reality of thousands of people.

The Educational Resource Centre for the Blind of Managua (CRECI) was inaugurated in 2007. Its aim is to provide students with the necessary educational materials to access the educational curriculum as any other student. Furthermore, it can also receive requests for bibliographical material in Braille, tactile or audio formats from blind organizations of Nicaragua, the Solidez Foundation, the Louis Braille Library, the Centre for Documentation and Libraries within the Department of Special Education of the Ministry of Education in Nicaragua (MINED), as well as from some local authorities such as those of Managua and Matagalpa.

They framed their objectives within three areas of action: To strengthen institutional capacity by providing a quality educational response to students with visual disabilities, so that they can be fully incorporated into society and within the country's productive life; to reinforce teaching staff's competencies through capacity-building

and through providing them with educational materials so that they cover with efficiency the needs of students with visual disabilities, and to accompany teaching staff of special and regular schools throughout the educational process.

Some Final Considerations

The very few reports carried out on the progress of the educational process for people with disabilities in general and of people with visual disabilities in particular in Latin America, indicate that the situation has improved.

Nevertheless, the scattering of data, the full and detailed breakdown of each country's population and the loose employment of definitions, prevent us from obtaining specific figures that show the real qualitative and quantitative levels of such improvement.

Without being more specific, the truth is that the situation of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, in general, is better than a few decades ago. Without doubt, FOAL's contribution has been and will continue to be crucial. At the same time, the ministries of education of the different Latin American countries have gained awareness regarding the need to keep alive this joint effort.

For this reason, FOAL's purpose is to persevere in this line of creation and consolidation of educational resource centres, so that the daily work continues to assure everybody's access to education, as it is established in the UN Declaration of the Millennium Development Goals.

However, the success of a full inclusive education cannot be explained or assured just with opening the doors of the educational centres to people with disabilities (even though this constitutes a triumph in itself). Other determining factors must be taken into account, analysed and contemplated in this process:

- Families' interest in their sons or daughters studying in a mainstream centre.
- Teaching staff's compromise within a mainstream education centre when training students with special educational needs.

- Fellow students' capacity of integration and understanding of disability as part of human nature.
- Degree of adjustment and development of a child with a disability, which is so linked to his or her self-esteem and level of autonomy.
- Type of support the child has within and outside the school.
- Family and economic resources.

Through the employment projects developed by FOAL in Latin America, we have identified that around 70% of people enrolled in labour insertion programmes have not received more than 9 years of training in total, which is not enough both in the case of a person with a disability and in that of a person without a disability.

For this reason, a good educational base that works through all elements in a cross-cutting manner will help to minimise the economic, psychological and social difficulties that may be present during the transition to adulthood of people with visual disabilities, providing them with the necessary skills to face their new life stage.

In this way, the educational resource centres promoted by FOAL set up a valid and unique example for their specificities in the world, having proved throughout the years that their firm resolution to improve the education of thousands of children and adults with visual disabilities is indeed possible.

THE AGORA PROGRAMME

Taking into account the serious limitations that people with visual disabilities have to face in the educational context, it is not surprising that the employment situation facing them is also arid and even devastating. They do not have many alternatives. In general, they are limited to manual jobs with very low wages, which do not allow them to be independent or to have full autonomy and, what is even worse, without much opportunity for professional development.

The main barriers regarding the labour inclusion of people with disabilities in general can be summarised in four aspects:

- The concept of “a worker with a disability” does not exist within the business imaginary. It constitutes a non-existent reality, and without visibility there is no possibility of transforming this situation.
- When there is an opportunity to hire a worker with a disability, employers activate a set of mental prejudices. One of the most damaging prejudices in this regard is the thought that a person with a disability will cause them all sorts of problems.
- Employers defend themselves by saying that it should be governments which would have to set example with regard to the hiring of people with disabilities, and that they should be called upon later to provide them with imposing benefits for those who hire them.
- The lack of education and skills among people with disabilities.

FOAL is aware of such a dark reality, although it also knows how to change it. This would be done by following mainly two lines of action: By contributing to improve access to training for people with visual disabilities, and by providing them with skills so that they are capable of performing specific tasks; through promoting awareness among employers regarding their social responsibility, as social and labour inclusion represents an issue concerning not only governments but society as a whole, and through opening their eyes to disability by showing to them that a worker with a disability is as profitable, disciplined and capable as any other.

When a person with a disability gets a job, the person improves his or her situation as an individual and becomes closer to being a citizen with full rights. Moreover, society gains awareness about the fact that disability is part of human diversity and, therefore, part of a polyhedral reality. FOAL fully works to achieve a society in which people with disabilities are contributors. To this end, it has developed, among other actions, an interesting and productive project called AGORA.

In Greek civilization, the term “AGORA” refers to the squares within their polis or state-cities, which even nowadays and after more than 2,000 years, continues to be a referent in terms of rights and democracy.

The “AGORA”, an open and noble space, became the centre of social, cultural and economic activity for the Greeks. In the same manner, the project initiated by FOAL as the “AGORA programme” takes this term’s Hellenic origins as the medullar structure of its ultimate objective: The full social inclusion of people with visual disabilities in Latin America.

The acronym “AGORA” stands for Classrooms of Occupational Management in the Latin American Region. These classrooms were created with the specific objective of improving the employability of people with visual disabilities in Latin America, by carrying out orientation actions, capacity building and labour insertion, as well as mentoring to promote the development of micro business ventures.

To this end, professional guidance, social and labour skills workshops and occupational training and labour mediation are offered in each AGORA classroom.

As a general rule, the AGORA programmes developed by FOAL are structured in modules. In this way, they can be carried out in full or partially, depending on both the beneficiaries’ capacities and the conditions and opportunities of the labour market in each of the areas of influence. Thus, the intent is to personalise actions as much as possible in the areas of training and labour insertion according to the person’s particular skills and his or her immediate environment.

From a different point of view, the work carried out in these classrooms and promoted by FOAL also enables them to fight against poverty; to promote gender equality in the participation of clients; to strengthen the associative networks, while carrying out capacity-building, as well as empowering and promoting the access to employment of people over 45.

Like the Greek AGORA, FOAL's AGORA programme intends to participate actively in the construction of a more inclusive and harmonious reality. In sum; a more just reality.

Context and Background

The reduction of poverty (understood as the lack of opportunities and options of a person to enjoy a respectful standard of life), constitutes one of the Millennium Development Goals ratified by the United Nations. As we have seen previously, FOAL adhered itself to these goals by assimilating them as their own. Furthermore, the following of these guidelines is an essential requirement within the European Union's policy for the co-financing of NGO projects.

More specifically, and contextualising the situation of people with disabilities, the World Health Organization (WHO) states that this social group constitutes approximately 10% of the total population and, according to the World Bank, it represents 20% of the poorest people in the world. Therefore, disability is a cause and an effect of poverty. There is additional data from the UN: 82% of people with visual disabilities in developing countries live under the poverty threshold. These figures can be even higher in regions where war, open or hidden conflicts or natural disasters prevent us from obtaining any census or quantitative data.

This illustrates a regrettable situation: People with disabilities are discriminated against worldwide and hence, they are excluded from social, economic and political life within their respective communities. This complete discrimination constitutes one of the key causes of the high poverty rates among this population sector in the most economically depressed countries.

Sometimes, the situation is so extreme that for thousands of people with disabilities who live by chance (we must not forget) in developing countries, finding themselves among the most excluded has such profound implications that they become a matter of life or death.

No international body is unaware of this reality. In fact, the European Commission issued a Guidance Note on Disability and Development in June 2004 which states, among other things, that “if the interests of people with disabilities are not recognised, it will not be possible to achieve the essential objective of eradicating poverty in developing countries. It will not be possible either to promote the human rights of people with disabilities or their participation in society”. It concludes with a substantial reflection: “to mitigate poverty in a sustainable manner, it is necessary to approach the issue of disability”.

Traditionally, issues related to people with disabilities were always dealt with from a medical perspective and with condescending connotations, which made this concept closer to charity rather than rights, being in this way subjected to the individual interpretation of government representatives.

In this way, a common factor throughout Latin America is the fact that both the nature of the policies addressing people with disabilities and the aids received by international and cooperation organizations, are based on the provision of isolated medical or welfare services. These services have very little to do with the new rights approach to disability, according to which people with disabilities are subjects with rights who can decide for themselves, as their fellow citizens do. Thus, the services and aids whose objective is to improve the quality of life of this social group, should stimulate their participation in society as citizens under equal conditions in comparison to everybody else. Most importantly, they should promote their participation on an equal opportunity bases, so that all kinds of discrimination and the low levels of training and social exclusion are eradicated

Fortunately, those traditional approaches are changing in recent decades, and new ways of understanding disability are being adopted based on human rights and people with disabilities own ideas (“Nothing for us without us”), while at the same

time understanding that the disabling factor is not disability but how society is organised.

In this sense, the AGORA Programme contributes to the fulfilment of the global objective to combat poverty and to improve the quality of life of the most vulnerable groups through the strengthening of their capacity for indigenous development, and through the generation of options that enable people with visual disabilities to be subjects in their own development and not passive objects of charity or donations.

Currently, the situation in many of the Latin American regions is quite adverse. Despite the great amount of laws and regulations that deal with the issue of disability, the measures that guarantee the basic fundamental rights required to ensure the dignity of people with disabilities are costly, and therefore are relegated by governments themselves. Nevertheless, it would be unfair not to mention the fact that thanks to institutions such as FOAL, an improvement has taken place regarding access to education, access to public spaces, as well as access to health and social security systems which, while insufficient, demonstrate that it is both required and possible to advocate for social inclusion.

Through the actions defined within the AGORA programme, the fundamental needs of people with visual disabilities in Latin America are paid attention to. These people have generally very few resources and find themselves in a situation of almost total exclusion within the labour market, due to the following factors:

- Absence of resource provision for specific assistance at the national, regional and local levels. As a result, there is a lack of suitable rehabilitation, education and training.
- Extreme poverty conditions that affect people with visual disabilities and their families, which constitute an obstacle for their adequate rehabilitation, education and capacity-building. The very few resources available are used to cover basic needs, and the lack of knowledge regarding the specific needs deriving from blindness, prevents parents and tutors from bringing their children to specialised centres.

- Circumstances of isolation that make difficult the access to information regarding centres, associations and the existing possibilities in the fields of rehabilitation, education and training.
- Social prejudices, according to which blindness is sometimes understood as a stigma, particularly in rural areas.
- Lack of strength of the associative network, which makes difficult the implementation of adequate support projects in education, rehabilitation and capacity-building.
- Physical barriers and barriers imposed by social prejudices, which impede access to education and employment.

The combination of these factors explains how Latin American people with visual disabilities often have to face precarious life conditions or circumstances, making their professional and personal development more difficult.

FOAL works to cover this social sector's educational and employment needs, as it is the only sustainable way through which they can have a respectful opportunity for economic independence and social integration. FOAL does so by taking into account the polyhedral nature of the concept of poverty which, as the UN defines, represents "an integral concept that includes economic, social, political and cultural aspects".

New Technologies as Allies

One of the difficulties identified both through FOAL's experience and through the actual reality of people with visual disabilities, is the digital gap. The ICTs or Information and Communication Technologies have a major role nowadays and they constitute new ways of inclusion in contexts that were unthinkable before. ICTs constitute tools that overcome the restrictions characterising disabilities (such as screen readers, which enable blind people to access textual information available on the internet). Of course, this implies the adaptation of equipment, so that new technologies are also accessible.

Along with the accessibility of new technologies, it is also essential that people with visual disabilities receive adequate training in how to use such technologies, so that

they can obtain from them the maximum performance. Hence, once computer equipments are adapted, their access to information will be guaranteed. This access will enable them to acquire better qualifications and have the possibility of accessing job vacancies that were inaccessible before for this population sector.

All this without prejudice to other qualities and aptitudes that those people may have individually and as a social group, and even promoting those more developed and/or recently acquired ones due to their disability.

Nature of an Integral Programme

As it was described earlier, the AGORA programme aims at improving resources for the employability of blind and partially-sighted people through training, capacity-building and support for labour insertion, as well as through the reinforcement of institutions and organizations of people with visual disabilities.

To this end, a number of actions have been designed in each of the geographical areas where the programme is being implemented. These actions are based on the successful experience of labour inclusion of people with visual disabilities being carried out by ONCE, while respecting and integrating the peculiarities and contributions of each region.

In order to implement the services provided by the AGORA programme, adapted spaces are used where computer equipment with tiftotechnical software can be found. In these premises it is possible to:

- Facilitate the access and use of Information and Communication Technologies for people with visual disabilities.
- Train people with visual disabilities in the use of ICTs.
- Disseminate knowledge about the different tiftotechnical applications and devices that enable the access to ICTs by people with visual disabilities.
- Increase the possibilities of educational, labour and social inclusion among this population sector, as well as favour their personal, family and social development, raising thus their quality of life.

- Reduce the digital gap, which has a particular impact on people with visual disabilities.
- Developed actions that respond to the needs of people with visual disabilities, of their organizations and of the communities in which they live.

At the same time, each centre (from their fixed or mobile headquarters) has developed an activities agenda that includes the following proposals:

- Training functions: technological literacy and training for the enhancement of employability.
- Labour orientation and insertion, as well as search for employment.
- Employment of resources.

These activities are managed by staff specifically hired to this effect and who are part of the AGORA programme's headquarters in that country, and from where the different services are provided to people with visual disabilities. This team is usually composed by:

- A coordinator from the AGORA programme, who will be responsible for the coordination of all activities in the classrooms; for their economic management, and for the relationships with other institutions.
- Training technicians, who will guarantee the development of the planned training actions; measure the budgetary and pedagogic quality standards; verify the balance between contents and knowledge to cover a particular job vacancy, as well as the use of didactic methodologies and activities suited to each occasion.
- Labour insertion technicians, who will assume different tasks from advising clients on the use of services and their labour insertion itinerary, to their follow-up and update, as well as making visits to companies to inform them about services, capture possible job offers, etc.

This managing team is also complemented by administrative staff, who helps with everyday tasks.

Although the AGORA programme has, at least, a physical office within its territorial scope, it aims to assist and reach the whole country where it has been established. To this end, the necessary adjustments and relevant changes are carried out for each particular area, with the objective of reaching the largest number of beneficiaries with visual disabilities.

Services Provided by the AGORA Programme

The formative offer provided through the AGORA programme to people with visual disabilities, is defined according to the very interests of their beneficiaries, as well as by the local demand for work force. Nevertheless, given the capacity of the population and the job opportunities available in each region, special attention is paid to occupational training in several productive fields.

The services provided by the AGORA programme to its users are four:

** Professional orientation:*

1. Occupational interview with the user.
2. Occupational diagnosis.
3. Personalised employment plan.

**Improvement of his or her employability through:*

1. Social and labour skills workshop:
 - Motivation workshop.
 - Active job search workshop.
 - Basic social skills and interview workshop.
2. Occupational training:
 - Basic occupational training.
 - Training in the management of micro business ventures.
 - On-line training:
 - Formal education courses.

** Labour mediation.*

** Micro Business ventures.*

Finally, in order to assess the labour environments susceptible of providing work placements for people with visual disabilities in each region, a sufficient level of education and training must be achieved. Thus, the AGORA programme also carries out à la carte or individualised formative and capacity-building actions, according to the needs identified within their respective country's labour market.

Coordination and Follow-Up

With regard to the management of the AGORA programme, there is a **Coordinating and Follow-Up Committee**, where both FOAL and local partners are present.

Within the AGORA programme, FOAL works in coordination with local public and private partners, always seeking that the relevant governmental authorities in the area of education and employment are one of the partners in the programme. This has the aim to enable the implementation of public policies on the education and labour insertion of this social sector. The most relevant organizations of people with visual disabilities in the country participate as natural members, which may be those that gather the largest number of people with visual disabilities or those institutions providing services to this population sector.

This committee supervises the programme's **Technical Management Unit**, which is made up of the programme's general coordinator and technicians from the partner Organizations. It meets regularly and it promotes new alternatives for generating employment for people with visual disabilities within the target areas where the programme's actions are implemented. Also, and in order to expand the programme's benefits and empower this group at national level, it strengthens the relationships among the institutions involved by promoting their reinforcement and cohesion as far as it is possible.

Along with the Coordinating and Follow-Up Committee and the Technical Management Unit, which supervise all actions developed within the programme, the follow-up and evaluation system is complemented by an analysis of such actions

carried out with the beneficiaries regarding the actions taken jointly with companies, and with a rigorous control of the budgetary implementation. This is executed through the provision of such activities and expenses reports, which are sent regularly by local partners to FOAL. This enables an in-depth evaluation of the programme during its implementation.

Simultaneously, a methodological approach based on the development of a main plan is put forward, which will be the basic management document of the programme. In it, the global actions' definition and scope are clearly identified. Moreover, FOAL's database will be used as a managing, follow-up and evaluation tool.

In order to execute the follow-up system, different types of indicators have been established:

Process indicators: they provide information about the different phases, the design of the administrative management and the control of the programme's actions (quality of the services, adjustment to needs, etc.).

- Result indicators: they show the direct and immediate effects of the programme, and they refer both to physical people (beneficiaries of training and workshops) and actions deriving from them (contacts with companies, offers, interviews carried out by beneficiaries, etc.).
- Impact indicators: they relate to the ultimate consequences of the programme such as self-employment initiatives (whose sustainability is superior to a year); work placements obtained through actions for the improvement of employability, etc.

Finally, a national and local communication and dissemination plan is elaborated and executed within the above mentioned execution plan, for which purpose a dissemination strategy has been designed.

The ultimate mission of this communication and dissemination plan is to attract the particular interest of authorities and entities in the area, which will contribute greatly to both the multiplication of its effects and its potential future implementation in other countries and regions. Furthermore, the media projection derived from the communication and dissemination plan will be key to prompt organizations' active involvement in it.

The possibility that this programme is transferable to other regions depends on both its management from the very beginning by the local counterparts, and the possibility of having the involvement as well as human and physical resources of participating organizations. If we understand the programme's managing system in this way then, we will reinforce its interrelations, consolidating their continuity from a temporal and geographical perspective.

Beneficiaries

In relation to the final selection of direct beneficiaries for the programme's actions, such selection is carried out by the local partners, taking into account a number of requirements that, although they don't have an excluding nature, would favour the selection of a user if it was necessary. For example:

- People with visual disabilities whose disability is legally certified by their country's current certification system.
- Economic resources.
- Special attention is paid to people from rural areas, aging people who have been forgotten by cooperation projects, as the biggest support programmes have been always focused on big cities.

Moreover, within the selection of people that may be beneficiaries of such actions, special attention is paid to the inclusion of women and people over 45 (of which around 60% are women). In this manner, we try to reduce their degree of multiple discrimination on the basis of disability, gender and age as much as possible.

This search to guarantee a balanced access of men and women considers as essential requirement that the individual gender percentage is never superior to 60%

and inferior to 40%. Nevertheless, and always within these limits, the participation of women in activities is always promoted, facing subsequently the multiple discrimination experienced by them because of their disability and/or their gender.

Chapter VI. Achievements as a Result of an Effort (Part II): Co-Financing of Projects and Strengthening of the Associative Network.

In addition to its own two initiatives, its inclusive education programme with the educational resource centres and the AGORA programme, which cover the two crucial contexts for the person's development, training and employment, the ONCE Foundation for Solidarity with Blind People in Latin America keeps other means of collaboration open with different entities that have the same aims: to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities by involving the largest possible number of associations and governments, while respecting the particularities of each model.

Despite the fact that one of its priorities is sustainability in time, FOAL has participated in those isolated projects and initiatives in which it has considered its presence necessary due to their relevance and potential projection. It has also pursued joint initiatives with several institutions by promoting a transparent and organised planning, which always ensures the success of a project.

The involvement and guidance of FOAL's technical office's professionals, as well as their knowledge about the integral attention to the needs expressed by Latin American blind people, enable them to work with different institutions in the elaboration of projects. These have varied greatly in themes and scope throughout the years.

STRENGTHENING OF THE ASSOCIATIVE MOVEMENT

FOAL's strategy is not really about implementing the Spanish model at all in Latin America. In fact, its rationale is to contribute to the development of joint work; to put its knowledge and resources at their service to prompt a real and effective improvement of the rights of people with visual disabilities. For this, however, FOAL is aware that it is necessary to have a strong and consolidated associative movement, with a structure that allows for an efficient and quick response to the most urgent needs. Hence, FOAL identifies the creation of a solid and cohesive associative network as a priority objective.

FOAL knows that the better organized the associative movement is, the bigger its capacity to intervene will be regarding the policies that contribute to improve the rights of people with visual disabilities and subsequently, the improvement of their quality of life. Thus, it proposes initiatives (even legislative) and solutions, prompting their participation in full within all life contexts.

In this regard, FOAL has a symbiotic and collaborative relationship with the Latin American Blind Union. ULAC constitutes an international organization representing and advocating for the interests of people with visual disabilities, and signifying therefore a catalyst for the whole associative network. These two institutions join efforts to make the disability social sector more able, more efficient and operational. The activities and initiatives committed to the strengthening of the movement are:

- * Joint work for the unification of the tiflological movement in the Latin American countries, promoting the emergence and development of organizations for and of the blind at the national level.
- * Stimulation of equal opportunities and full participation, in order to achieve the integral development of people with visual disabilities.
- * Encourage self-esteem and self-trust among people with visual disabilities, and promote the development of their personalities and their personal fulfilment so that they can be protagonists within their own communities.
- * To promote the adoption and compliance with legislation that eliminates all kinds of discrimination such as active/passive discrimination, and which may contribute to achieve equal opportunities and social integration.
- * To constantly advocate for the respect and defence of the human rights of people with visual disabilities.

At the same time, FOAL has developed a coordination and implementation policy to strengthen and consolidate existing blind organizations within the Latin American subcontinent, through the unification and democratisation of these processes in such a way that the democratic renewal of leaders is guaranteed by taking into account cross-cutting and gender equality criteria.

We can only ensure a structure capable of giving an answer to the multiple challenges facing disability by combating the atomization of the associative movement and by implementing democratic processes within its structure. In this regard, this can be achieved through five lines of action:

- To incorporate qualified members that represent all geographical and thematic areas into its representative and functioning bodies, thus promoting the effective presence of women and young people as a cross-cutting action axis within all its policies; to set up a suitably trained management team which executes those actions effectively, guaranteeing and facilitating the objectives established by the actual entity.
- To enable professionals and to identify a suitable interlocutor among the different national, regional and local institutions that may be directly or indirectly interested in disability.
- To identify inalienable objectives and to develop an action programme.
- To design and implement communication campaigns that broadcast the activities, services and benefits being provided by entities, as well as the very reality of disability in itself, contributing in this way to raise a greater awareness among the population in general.

Other Action Areas

In addition to the main initiatives developed by FOAL itself and those developed by other entities (mainly the open and permanent co-financing of projects, and the strengthening of the associative network), FOAL's activity includes additional fields of action:

- Integral rehabilitation.
- Personal autonomy.
- Accessibility and universal design.
- Tiflotechnology and R+D+I.
- Cultural and sports development.

To this end, for example, FOAL focuses on the improvement of the integral rehabilitation services provided by the Organizations it collaborates with. It

distributes to previously prepared entities software that complements the training of people with visual disabilities, such as the Braille Music Editor (for composing songs with multiple tracks as well as using and playing scores), or Lambda (mathematical language editor). It keeps up to date the agreements of collaboration with ONCE's Bibliographical Services regarding the delivery of Braille files to Latin American institutions capable of printing in this format and supported by FOAL, as well as the delivery of didactic materials in thermoform format to educational institutions. Moreover, a space dedicated to the diffusion of magazines produced by ONCE's Bibliographical Services has been affiliated within FOAL's Web portal, from where their audio and Braille versions can be downloaded.

Other projects promoted by FOAL in order to implement the categories above mentioned date back to its first steps in Latin America, such as **the initiative of setting up new peripheral units for bibliographical production**, which gave way to the current educational resource centres. Thanks to those peripheral units, a larger number of blind children accessing text books and school materials was guaranteed, as one of the main obstacles for inclusive education is precisely the lack of adapted documents and materials throughout the region.

FOAL promotes the Braille system as the reading and writing code for blind students within their educational and personal autonomy processes. However, one of the difficulties implied in their learning process is the great geographical dispersion of students with visual disabilities, particularly those who live in rural areas. It is difficult to make materials available to them and to the professionals trained in Braille.

To sort out this situation, FOAL created different Braille production units in many schools and Organizations of people with visual disabilities, so that there is a referential centre for each region that supplies books in Braille for the educational community. To this end, FOAL has provided these units with a Braille industrial printer. In order to guarantee the correct functioning of these sets of equipment, several agreements have been signed with the schools where they are located, according to which they commit themselves to make the necessary materials available to students within their respective regions, giving priority to those students enrolled in main-stream centres.

Given the importance of keeping these machines up to date, and taking into account the lack of resources, training courses are given on how to print texts in Braille and on the handling and repairing of printers; on the elaboration of tactile sheets; on the editing of audio-books and documentation in Lecto Text formats (which enable the conversion of text into synthetic voice) and DAISY (Audio Digital Information System).

This training has been carried out in the different branches of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), and in Spain, having the beneficiaries in greater need of this support been previously nominated by organizations of people with visual disabilities.

In this way, the project's sustainability and continuity are guaranteed, as knowledge is transmitted to local organizations by enabling them to have the equipment and to disseminate such knowledge to other people.

The peripheral bibliographical production units are complemented by supplying libraries, museums and other centres with the necessary technological equipment so that the information being provided by them is also produced in accessible formats. Finally, FOAL distributes different works of world literature among some centres thanks to the donations carried out by ONCE and as a start point for future popular libraries.

Chapter VII. ONCE: the First Motor.

The expression “First Motor” was coined by Saint Thomas Aquinas. He used it to refer to the origin of all causes. We use it to refer to FOAL’s ultimate cause, its constant and tireless work, which has managed to involve thousands of people who have made a gesture, a dealing, proposed an idea, sorted out a problem, mediated, made donations or who have dedicated themselves to FOAL’s cause with their time, economic or material resources. None of this would have been possible without that First Motor called ONCE.

The Spanish National Organization of the Blind constitutes a strange entity in itself and an unusual organization from its very origins. It was founded on the 13th of December of 1938, coinciding with the festivity of Saint Lucia, that signifies “light for the world”, and which became thereafter this institution’s patron.

Prior to the creation of ONCE, the situation of blind and partially-sighted people was a situation of complete misery. It is sufficient to review some literary texts of that time to realise how miserable their reality was. However, blind people have always been characterised for their fighting and self-improving spirit. Hence, from 1903 onwards, blind people started to sell raffle tickets on the streets and in little and unorthodox squares.

This formula, which was initiated in Alicante, was extended to the rest of Spain quickly. By 1930, these raffle tickets of the blind were sold in all regions within the country. Gradually, they were able to organize themselves with the intention of setting up a Spanish Federation of the Blind, which would establish the lottery ticket draw in a more canonical way. This allowed for the sponsoring of different activities and projects to improve the quality of life of blind people in Spain.

It is certainly peculiar and unheard of that, in the middle of the Civil War, when the national sector was almost fully defined as the guiding force in the country, they would approve a decree that made official the constitution of the Spanish National Organization of the Blind.

The rationale behind the creation of ONCE was to provide blind people with an entity that could be managed by them, and which would establish the coupon as a source of sustenance that could compensate the lack of public assistance blind people were suffering from. For the first time in history, this represented a systematic and organized attempt to claim back their stolen dignity.

By the 1950s, coupon sales had not only settled in but had consolidated. Nevertheless, not all were successes and achievements. There were also serious steps back in the fight to achieve equality of rights. For example, in 1959, an order from the Ministry for Employment excluded ONCE's workers from social insurances, a fact that did not change until 1991. Nothing however could prevent this entity from continuing its fight to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities. If the path to follow was rocky, it would walk on anyway.

In the 1980s, ONCE began a process of transformation whose benefits are evident to this date. To start with, its internal democratisation process, which guaranteed the decisive and full participation of all its members when electing its representatives.

The second challenge was to recover its financial stability to be able to respond to its members' technical, human and material needs. To this end, ONCE persevered in its negotiations with public powers, which had as a result the integration of all ONCE workers within the social security system. Furthermore, it gave way to a normalisation of the request for public assistance aids granted to employers and other operators who created employment for people with disabilities. Finally, a similar status to that of other non-profit organizations that work for the achievement of the common good was achieved.

And this is how ONCE has come to be what it is today; by facing vicissitudes, by creating employment even in those moments when the blows of the crisis became most fierce, and by training hundreds of thousands of people to enable them to perform a job increasingly more and more dignified.

THE VALUES OF A UNIQUE INSTITUTION

Throughout the many decades since it was set up, ONCE has consolidated its own idiosyncrasy and culture, which is based on a set of values.

Without doubt, the first of those values **is its fighting and self-improving spirit**. If something has made possible that people with visual disabilities enjoy a high degree of autonomy and welfare nowadays, that is ONCE's refusal to give up and its lack of despondency. Thanks to that, blind people have done their best to get trained and work, shaping in that way their own destiny.

We can also highlight the value of independence. Until recently, the concept of disability was associated with a fatalist degree of guardianship, constant supervision and an inevitable degree of submission (as small as this might be). Blind people have however systematically rebelled themselves against that reality because a different reality was possible, a reality where self-management, self-government and institutional independence did not constitute a dream but something that could come true.

Along with this great value of independence, it is necessary to mention another one, closely related to the latter, which is its autonomy, mainly with regard to its capacity to manoeuvre, manage and self-govern itself as people. The bridles of life must be personal and non-transferrable. For this reason, ONCE has transmitted to its members the invaluable possibility of being autonomous and decide for themselves. To this end, it has always provided its members with all the resources, Tools and mechanisms that would facilitate their full personal development, the full enjoyment of their capacities, and the genuine exercise of their rights.

Another great value for ONCE is its capacity to work as a team and to carry out joint efforts. It is not easy to do team work and to apply joint criteria, prioritising the achievement of a common good against personal whims, and conjugating at the same time Kant's "be and must-be". However, ONCE was aware from the very beginning that it would only become strong and capable by bringing the institution and therefore all its members together.

An entity like ONCE could have shut itself up, without even looking out its organization walls. In contrast to this, it decided to assimilate one of the noblest values as its own: the value of solidarity. It is an entity of and for the blind. It is an organization of the blind because all its members (around 70,000) have visual disabilities in their various degrees. It is also an organization for the blind, which means that its activity focuses on its own members. However, this has never prevented it (even from its very constitution) from developing a structural policy of solidarity with those people with additional disabilities other than blindness or visual disabilities. It has particularly shown its solidarity towards these people through their incorporation to the labour market as ONCE workers, mainly as lottery ticket sellers.

In the 1980s, the coupon experienced a sensational success, which ONCE took advantage of to display strategies that allowed the organization to share its experiences and its human, material and economic resources, so that the whole associative movement had the opportunity to set itself up and contribute to its own future. It was in this way that another value, also closely related to solidarity, was developed: the value of brotherliness.

The value of brotherliness materialised itself in a tangible and obvious manner in 1988, when the ONCE Foundation for Cooperation and Social Integration of People with Disabilities was founded. It was set up with two objectives: The training and employment of people with disabilities. Taking into account both aims, it would be possible then to enjoy an independent life from an economically autonomous perspective.

Furthermore, this brotherliness constituted the bases of another institution that, like the ONCE Foundation, would focus on the most noble of purposes. We are, of course, referring to FOAL.

The contribution to the generation of country wealth, this understood as the creation of employment for people with disabilities, constitutes another of the values characterising ONCE. This entity quickly realized that the coupon could not and should not be the only financing source, thus investing strongly and unreservedly on the creation of employment for people with and without disabilities.

All the values above mentioned: Its fighting and self-improving spirit; its independence; its autonomy; its team work and solidarity, as well as its brotherliness and its contribution to the generation of wealth have been conferred to FOAL from the very beginning, as proof of the success that it has been experiencing throughout the years with vocation and effort. FOAL represents for ONCE an investment for the future, a tool at the service of all people with visual disabilities in Latin America. Similarly to Spanish blind people then, who have finally become their own owners and who do not tremble when demanding their rights, Latin American blind people will, sooner rather than later, also enjoy a future that is already becoming their present.

FOAL has achieved many successes throughout its history. Some of them, the most tangible ones, have been reflected within these pages. There is however a long way to go yet in order to achieve a more just society. The Latin American associative network is gaining awareness of itself, which constitutes an essential premise to liberate itself from ostracism, prejudices, indifference and abandonment. FOAL has actively participated in that process of gaining awareness.

At the same time, the training of people with disabilities in Latin America nowadays is still very poor, insufficient and, in many cases, non-existent. However, FOAL has been demonstrating the capabilities of people with visual disabilities for years. It is enough with a bit of disposition and some aids that may adapt the resources available to us to obtain a high rate of performance from them. FOAL has infused through its work the idea that the training of people with visual disabilities is not so much an expense as it is an investment for the future. Gradually, that approach is also transforming the actual reality of those people.

Finally, we should highlight the fact that FOAL has eagerly collaborated in the employment of people with disabilities in specific centres, in ordinary companies and also in self-employed projects of people with disabilities. Who said fear? The most difficult barriers are the ones that we set ourselves up against.

FOAL has eradicated stereotypes. It has not tried to convince anybody. It has just shown how things can be done in a different way. Subsequently, politicians, business men and civil society have been able to approach disability in a more honest, humane and real way, moving away from charitable and paternalistic attitudes.

As subjects with rights, people with disabilities are neither asking for charity nor do they raise their voices so that their whims come true. They demand to be full-right citizens, nothing more and nothing less than that.

A day will come when FOAL will remember the dark times as they become a thing of the past. In the meantime though, its support and collaboration with Latin America continues to develop steadily, tirelessly, beautifully and productively. A step forward that would have been impossible to take without that first motor represented by ONCE.

Chapter VIII. In Solidarity with the World.

75 years after its establishment, ONCE has extended its solidarity beyond its national frontiers. Its constant and daily effort to achieve a greater and more real social inclusion of people with visual disabilities; its firm and convincing advocacy for inclusive employment and social economy, and its dauntless work to build a more just world, have all made ONCE into a unique icon.

ONCE could have withdrawn itself and stayed at home. It could have been satisfied with the objectives achieved. It could have remain stagnant and become a mediocre organization stuck in its ways. On the contrary, ONCE has decided to be adventurous and achieve for those in greater need, what it has been fighting for throughout the years for its own members, that is: The respect and active advocacy of their rights as people.

For this reason, ONCE decided to widen up its activities as much as possible, becoming in that way a sort of citizen of the world. In this regard, it has nowadays an active role in 25 countries, along with our EU neighbours. In addition to participating in educational and employment programs in 19 Latin American countries, it also intervenes dynamically in the EU decision-making process. ONCE is a member and a sponsor of the World Blind Union. It is present in the European Disability Forum, and it is a member of and contributes to the work of the UN Committee of Experts on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Its presence and activism are alive in many other forums which, although perhaps with less media impact, have an extremely significant human focus.

The model of social inclusion promoted by ONCE and its Foundation is spreading all over the world by working to achieve the full autonomy of people with disabilities and to guarantee their visibility, while adapting itself to the particular social and cultural features of each country. In other words: ONCE and its Foundation never impose their model. Instead, they make proposals and mold themselves to the specific circumstances in a useful and adaptable manner.

ONCE AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

While ONCE and its Foundation's first irruption in the European institutions dates back to a much earlier time, it began happening in a systematic and organized manner in 2000. ONCE's stronger presence in the European institutions was motivated by its conviction that employment (and subsequently prior training also) constitutes the best and more efficient means for the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Hence, this is why ONCE and the ONCE Foundation did not want to miss the opportunity of sharing their valuable knowledge and experience so that the European Disability Strategy, which frames its proposals and binds itself to the so-called EU2020 Strategy, and whose purpose is the achievement of intelligent, sustainable and integrating growth, would make pioneering initiatives proposed and implemented by ONCE and its Foundation at the time as its own.

In fact, we must point out that ONCE and its Foundation have been working for 15 years now so that all EU directives take people with disabilities into account. In this regard, significant advancements have been achieved in the contexts of transport accessibility; access to culture; accessibility, and educational and labour inclusion.

The participation of ONCE and its Foundation in the new European Disability Strategy (2010-2020), which shows a commitment to make the European Union a geographical space for all, has been fruitful, as productive has been also their decisive and effective contribution so that structural funds continue to generate in all countries employment, training and accessibility initiatives similar to those carried out in Spain.

Thus, different European Commissioners have visited Spain to know at first hand the particular way of functioning of ONCE and its Foundation, which is exemplary with regard to the management of structural funds when generating employment initiatives for people with disabilities.

ONCE's COOPERATION IN EUROPE

In addition to their participation in the different spheres of multiple European bodies, ONCE and its Foundation work hand in hand with other European disability organizations, proposing initiatives and promoting campaigns relentlessly. They carry out two specific projects within European territory: one in the Balkans and another in Portugal.

The Balkans Project

ONCE has developed an initiative known as the Balkans Project, with the purpose of implementing in this area an inclusive education system from which as many children with disabilities as possible may benefit.

The dreadful war conflicts that devastated this eastern European region undermined the social conditions of the population. ONCE knew at first hand the real situation in the region, as it had sent there a group of collaborators, who were professionals from ONCE's Educational Resource Centre in Barcelona. This was also possible to the support of the International Relations Department within ONCE's General Council, which had been collaborating with schools for children with visual disabilities in Sarajevo, Derventa, Belgrade and Tirana since 2003.

During this time and in collaboration with the Spanish military and the Spanish Red Cross, the collaborators linked to ONCE and its Foundation have contributed to guarantee the right to education and the right to culture of people with disabilities, as they look after the needs of children with visual disabilities and provide students with the necessary tools to produce text books in Braille.

Furthermore, the systematization of mobility training with white canes has been promoted among children and blind adults in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In addition, the collaboration with the NGO MestrexBosnia has facilitated an effective communication with mainstream school teachers, who are finding an increasing number of children with visual disabilities among their students. This fact makes the principle of inclusive education come true.

Public and private institutions have got involved in this project which, while it continues to look after and respond to the needs of students with visual disabilities, has also had an unforgettable and inclusive impact on Bosnia, Serbia, Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria and Moldavia.

ONCE's Influence in Portugal

While Portugal constitutes a developed country which keeps a brotherly relationship with Spain as part of the Iberian Peninsula, it has been a recipient of ONCE and its Foundation's solidarity for more than a decade through their collaboration agreement with the Portuguese Association of Blind and Partially-Sighted (ACAPO), thanks to which our Portuguese neighbours have received technical assistance, and have had access to a certain number of vacancies at ONCE's University School of Physiotherapy, as well as in English language immersion courses for secondary school children in summer camps. Moreover, they have received financial support for training projects, as well as being recipients of donations of specific materials for blind people.

One of the joint actions with a greater projection in recent years has been the International Seminar on Self-Advocacy of Visually Impaired People in the 21st Century, held in Lisbon in October 2012 at the senate room of the assembly of the Republic of Portugal. The objective of the event, which was attended by important political figures as well as multiple representatives of the international associative movement of people with visual disabilities, was to promote a debate on the different models of assimilation of self-advocacy by people with visual disabilities, and on the provision of services through the different organizations, where ONCE represented a constant example to follow.

ONCE's Impact in Africa

With certain exceptions, cooperation actions carried out by ONCE and its Foundation in Africa have been developed in collaboration with different NGOs, which have their own infrastructure in that area. Among them, there are some projects that must be highlighted due to their special significance.

Saharan Refugee Camps in Tinduf (Algeria).

This represents the most emblematic initiative displayed by ONCE in the African continent, as it has enabled the development of 5 schools for blind children, one for each camp (Smara, Auserd, Aaiún, 27th of February, and Dajla). They look after all the aspects that come together in the effective education of children: food; transport; facilities; specific and ordinary materials; teaching staff wages; teaching staff training, access to the information society through tflotechnology and so on.

This reality has become an actual oasis within a hostile environment such as the Sahara Desert, having no comparison with any other developing country in terms of the level of education achieved.

In a few years, blind children have gone from being isolated from the educational system and from their communities, to having a higher educational level than the average student without a disability, thus enjoying a genuine social inclusion. ONCE supports and sponsors the work of its professionals, who year after year since this adventure began in 2003, visit these camps to carry out the training of their local teachers and to make available the donations of specific materials for their education such as reading and writing materials in Braille; low vision materials or those specific materials needed for training.

This project's peculiarities make it into a paradigm in the context of international development cooperation. The joint actions, the coordination and the complementarity of the institutions, as well as the joint responsibility of the local authorities are criteria that are fulfilled and which are part of the International principles that all good cooperation projects must include.

Assistance in Morocco

The results of our relationship with this neighbouring country have been as productive as discontinuous has been our communication. The most systematic work took place when a delegation from the special education resource centre of Tetuan visited the educational resource centre of Seville in order to know at first hand the educational model used by ONCE and its Foundation.

Furthermore, in collaboration with the ADELIAS Foundation, an educational *kit* containing special materials was donated to satisfy the needs of 50 blind children that were being looked after at the educational centre available in the city of Nador and within its scope of influence.

Also, and along with the Instituto Cervantes of Tetuan, ONCE and its Foundation have provided all necessary human and material resources to enable blind people to learn the Spanish language in those countries with training centres, providing them with text books in Braille, with reading and writing materials and with access to tiftotechnology.

Support for Equatorial Guinea

Despite the fact that Spanish cooperation work in this former colony is extremely constant, collaboration has been difficult in the context of blindness, due to the lack of local interlocutors. However, it was only a few years ago when the National Organization of Blind People of Equatorial Guinea (ONCIGE), to whom ONCE has offered help for the assistance of people with low vision, as well as for rehabilitation and training programs for their members.

In addition, the classrooms for learning Braille and accessing tiftotechnology that ONCE had set up in Malabo have had their first social results among blind people in the country, thanks to ONCE's donation of both basic specialised materials and high-technology items.

Compromise with Portuguese-Speaking Countries

The former Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Santo Tomé and Príncipe (Guinea Bissau), are the poorest countries within the African continent and subsequently, of the world. Moreover, they are quite detached from the African Blind Union due to the fact that their official language is Portuguese and the union is monopolised by English-speaking countries.

ONCE collaborates with these countries through ACAPO, which is the Portuguese Association of Blind and Partially-Sighted. Usually, this cooperation work is channel through the development of training programs in personal autonomy; reading and

writing, and tflotechnology, where ACAPO acts as facilitator of the assistance being offered.

Other Projects

Africa is a vast continent. Its more than 30 million square kilometres are a proof of it. However, ONCE is gradually sowing its seeds in different places, and those seeds are growing bit by bit.

Thus, ONCE has also collaborated with the Agua de Coco Foundation in **Madagascar**, working on the education of children who have been exploited in the salt quarries. A school for blind children has been opened there, thanks to the resources provided by ONCE. They have set up the Malagasi Gospel Choir, that includes many blind children in its formation, and which had the opportunity to do a tour of Spain.

In **Cameroon**, it has been possible to open up a school for blind children in an extremely poor area with the support of the NGO BERUDEP. With regard to the **Chad region**, a lot of computer equipment was donated through the NGO AICP-Pandora, along with the necessary guidance and specific complementary materials. The North of **Uganda** also received ONCE's support through the NGO África Directo to improve the conditions of blind girls in a boarding school.

Finally, 500 solar filters were donated in collaboration with Red Cross Andalucía for blind albino people in African countries, where they go through their everyday lives trying to overcome the stigma of superstition, that is: Being considered as evil beings.

Haiti's Cry

Perhaps some of us still remember the terrible images of Haiti on different media on that 12th of January of 2010, when an earthquake with its epicenter in Puerto Príncipe and with a magnitude of 7.2 took place in the Haitian capital. More than 300,000 people died and a similar number was injured in different degrees, while

more than 1.5 million Haitians were left homeless. It represented one of the most terrible humanitarian catastrophes in history.

It did not take long for ONCE and its Foundation to react to this disaster. Only a week later and thanks to an awareness campaign among its members and workers, more than 120,000 Euro were raised. In addition, a donation of ortoprothetic items worth 60,000 Euro was carried out through the Fundosa Group (ONCE's Business division), which was made available to the Red Cross for its immediate delivery.

However, it was not only an expeditious delivery of financial help. Since then, ONCE and its Foundation have worked with the Haitian Society for Friends of Blind People (SHAA), whose acronym reflects the society's name in its original French language. During that same year, four projects were implemented through FOAL:

- An educational programme (with the delivery of styluses, slates, abacuses, Perkins machines, Braille paper, Impacto-texto printers, Braille displays, school writing books, geometrical games and Brailin dolls).
- A rehabilitation programme (which included the provision of canes of different types and lengths, repair equipment, talking watches and CCTVs).
- An entertainment and leisure programme (with *goalball* and *showdown balls*, Ludo, Tic-Tac-Toe and chess).
- A programme for the refurbishment of offices (computers, printers, tables and chairs, portable dividers and other office furniture).

Since that terrible month of January in 2010, ONCE and its Foundation are doing their best so that people with visual disabilities in Haiti go back to normality and are able to enjoy a greater degree of autonomy, thanks to the generosity of all its members. To this end, SHAA's educational programmes have been restored; its rehabilitation programme has been initiated again and expanded; a leisure and sports programme for people with visual disabilities has been established; the women's and senior's movements have been reactivated within SHAA, and a program of psycho-social assistance for workers and members of the organization who may be traumatized by the effects of the earthquake has been developed.

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ONCE's solidarity goes beyond maps, frontiers, limits, obstacles, races, languages, creeds, etc. Wherever its work is needed, there it goes. ONCE and its Foundation are aware of the importance and necessity of getting together, not for the simple fact of being beside someone but, as the Spanish philosopher Donoso Cortés says, to do things together. There is no greater enjoyment than sharing our enjoyment, and the enjoyment of our rights is the greatest enjoyment that a person can have.

For this reason, ONCE, The Spanish National Organization of the Blind, which after 75 years of tireless work has achieved a more dignified life for its members, will not rest until each and every one of all people with disabilities in general and with visual disabilities in particular see their human rights, systematically breached in the past, restored at once. Wherever they may be, they will not be alone.