

# On a Mission to Save Ecuador

A NONPROFIT IN THE LARGEST CITY OF THE SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY STAYS ONE STEP AHEAD OF THE PANDEMIC

by Diane Goettel



**F**undación VIHDA was founded in June, 2006, for a very simple reason: Ecuador seemed to be on the verge of an explosion of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The year before Fundación VIHDA was founded, UNICEF published a report indicating that Ecuador's infection rates were comparable to those of Africa and the Caribbean fifteen years earlier. Without intervention, it looked as if Ecuador was headed for a future with infection rates similar to those regions of today. Fundación VIHDA began with the goal of avoiding this terrible fate.

Before we get into who is behind Fundación VIHDA and their plans for the future, I want to simply look at what they've done so far because their accomplishments just in the past three years are incredible. Let's just start with the numbers: Fundación VIHDA has counseled and administered over 92,000 HIV tests and counting. Of those tests, they have detected 420 positive cases. Furthermore, their average of detected cases per month has increased from twelve per month in 2007 to fifteen per month during 2009 so far. Every single person who has been tested by Fundación VIHDA and received a positive

result has received ARV therapy. Wow. Just wow. Fundación VIHDA might not be changing the entire world. They may not have found a cure that will wipe out HIV completely. However, the people at this organization

have most certainly rerouted the fate of an entire country.

When I spoke with Humberto Mata, one of the founders, about the great success that the organization has already experienced, he humbly responded, "Sometimes we ourselves can't believe it." I asked if there was a key to his success, something that could be replicated by other organizations in other parts of the world. When trying to achieve great things through a nonprofit organization, Mata explained, it is important to "run your organization with the heart of a nonprofit, but the head of a business, and that means focusing on delivering results."

The intersections of a few cultural traits create particular problems for organizations in Ecuador who are working to stop the spread of AIDS. One of these issues is the culture of machismo in the heterosexual community, which includes a tolerance for men having extramarital affairs, inadequate use of safe sex measures, and the attitude that men display about their health. For example, of all of the women who have been tested positive by the foundation, only about half of their husbands have come in for testing. Another cultural hurdle is the Catholic Church. There are a number of churches that still proclaim that any form of contraception is unholy. Others, however, have recognized the importance of safe-sex practices.

One of the key focuses at Fundación VIHDA is pregnant women.

**Top:** Maximiliano Novoa (center), executive director of Fundación VIHDA; Dr. Claudia Zambrano (second from right), VIHDA's psychologist; Roxana Ruiz (far left), VIHDA's lab technician; Dr. Mercedes Ortiz (second from left) from the Maternity Hospital; and hospital staff in the Maternity Hospital in Guayaquil  
**Left:** VIHDA helps train staff of a sister organization that works with micro-loans and housing for low-income women in how to do pre-test and post-test counseling and take rapid HIV tests.

Because the founders saw a particular need in this population, they have devoted a huge amount of effort to fighting vertical transmission. In order to understand how successful they have



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been already, let's turn again to the numbers. Just as every person who has been detected as positive by Fundación VIHDA has received antiretroviral medicine, so has every baby who has been born to an HIV-positive mother. Additionally, every pregnant woman with HIV who has undergone the treatment offered by the organization has given birth to an HIV-negative baby. The babies remain under treatment and observation until they are eighteen months-old. So far, for those women and babies who undergo the complete course of treatment as administered by the organization, Fundación VIHDA has a 100-percent success rate of helping women who are HIV-positive have babies who are HIV-negative. Again: wow.

One of the reasons that Fundación VIHDA has been able to have such a major impact on Ecuador is that it is strategically located in Guayaquil, the country's largest city. Furthermore, their work is mostly conducted in the largest maternity hospital in the country where approximately twenty percent of all of the country's births take place.

Of course, the organization still faces many challenges. While they have a 100-percent success rate of helping HIV-positive women to deliver HIV-negative babies, this statistic only accounts for those women and babies who complete Fundación VIHDA's program in its entirety. One of the biggest challenges to success is simply getting women to take their medicine consistently and showing up for treatment and the birth itself.

The good people at Fundación VIHDA recognize that, to truly beat this pandemic, a holistic approach is necessary. That is why their maternity work is only one of four major efforts that they are putting forth. The foundation is also currently working to promote education and communication about HIV by working with mass media in the country to disseminate information. They are also providing social assistance to people who are living with HIV and AIDS by rewarding low-income women with baskets of highly nutritious food when they keep their appointments and their children's appointments.

The most recent effort that Fundación VIHDA has put forth is the establishment

of a day clinic which opened in July of this year. The day clinic has three completely equipped doctor's offices, one lab room for testing, and a fifty-seat auditorium that they are going to use for training events.

While the HIV/AIDS crisis in Ecuador has certainly not been unequivocally avoided, the work that Fundación VIHDA has done has at least improved the circumstances within the country. When I spoke with Humberto Mata, he said, "We're still putting out fires." One major problem, he told me, is that doctors who take care of upper-class patients often do not administer HIV tests for fear of offending their clients. This is just one example of the many "fires" that Fundación VIHDA is working to put out.

Despite the many challenges that they have to face, the people of Fundación VIHDA are hopeful. It's clear from the numbers alone that they have good reason to be hopeful.

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At an open house for 2008's World AIDS Day on the outskirts of Guayaquil, where most of the residents are low-income families, the organization conducted health training at the neighborhood's health centers and a contest with prizes was held where everyone who attended voted which health center explained better their chosen topics.



Last September, Dr. Mercedes Ortiz (center, in purple) celebrates with hospital staff, mothers, Fundación VIHDA staff, and many of the baby “graduates” of the Vertical Transmission Prevention Program at Maternity Hospital Sotomayor.