

## **TREATMENT for “DISRUPTION: Can 20 million women upend a continent?”**

A Skylight Film - submitted February 12, 2013

Our film tells the story of a band of young activist Latin American economists based in Bogotá, Colombia, that has set out to change the face of Latin America by challenging accepted notions of how to eradicate poverty and inequality. Their organization, Fundación Capital, is guided by the idea that the poor can save and build assets, use tablet computers and custom apps to educate themselves, and gain access to capital through crowdfunding and mobile banking. Outraged by what they consider to be scandalous economic inequality in the midst of an economic boom sweeping the continent, they want to take these innovative ideas to scale. In order to achieve this our activist economists have partnered with women living in poverty who are the recipients of massive anti-poverty programs created in Latin America over the past decade, known as CCTs (Conditional Cash Transfers), sent to millions of women throughout the continent every month. At the heart of our film are the struggles and determination of our activist economists who work with, and learn from, impoverished women to figure out how to bring their innovative ideas to fruition: eureka moments, skepticism, failures and breakthroughs. When it works, the results are breathtaking, seeing the women emerge from the isolation of poverty into financial and social inclusion, becoming politically active community leaders and entrepreneurs.

What drives Fundación Capital’s mission is the imbalance of the Latin American economic landscape: despite being a continent of nations on the rise, the income distribution remains the most unequal of any continent. Tens of millions of people live in grinding poverty in appalling housing, marginalized, dying of illness and malnutrition, suffering shamefully high childbirth mortality rates, even as massive wealth flows into the pockets of the economic elite and global corporations. A new generation of progressive political leaders has taken on the monumental task of confronting economic injustice at the structural level, seeking to alter entrenched structures of wealth extraction that have been in place since the days of the conquistadors.

Brazil led the charge in South America by introducing what has become one of the most popular methods of combating poverty in the region: redistributing wealth through Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs). These programs now benefit some 110 million people in the region, and they focus on women heads of households as recipients funneling small monthly stipends to mothers living under the poverty line. In exchange, the women agree to basic conditions - to keep their children in school until they turn 16, and to take them to health clinics on a regular basis starting at birth. The policy is based on studies suggesting that women are much more likely than men to spend added income on children and the family rather than on personal consumption, an observation that women participants have strongly endorsed. Upon accepting the stipend, each woman becomes the de facto supervisor of her family’s compliance with the educational, health and other conditions of the CCT program. She also makes decisions about where to spend the new income. This inevitably changes the power dynamics within families in male-dominated cultures, often leading to tensions, but just as often leading to newfound respect for the role of women in the family.

In order to make feasible the delivery of funds to millions of mothers, governments have had to work with banks to funnel the payments to individual bank accounts opened for each mother, in effect giving IDs, bank accounts and debit cards for the first time to marginalized women who had never set foot in a bank before nor had a path to financial inclusion. This network of bank accounts created by the CCT programs, now reaching tens of millions of women living in poverty, got the attention of our band of young activists who saw an opportunity to use these new networks of CCTs to implement their audacious idea: what if we encourage the women to open savings accounts, build assets, and teach them financial literacy? What if the mothers are not treated simply as delivery vehicles for funds that benefit their children, but also learn to achieve and sustain financial stability? Because if mothers are not empowered beyond this role, what will happen to them if (or when) the CCTs stop coming?

At Fundación Capital they have shown that when women in poverty learn to save and build assets, use advanced technologies to educate themselves and start businesses, do mobile banking with cellphones, and have access to capital through crowdfunding, it has a transformative, empowering effect, making them active social and political participants in society.

This topic is of great relevance today because Latin America is coming forward as an innovator of new methods of social change to achieve economic justice on a mass scale, a story virtually unknown in the U.S. But other nations are taking notice and CCT programs are being adopted by the governments of India, Pakistan and several African countries. We feel that CCTs and the innovations developed by our young activists at Fundación Capital should be known and considered here in the U.S., where we have a widening economic inequality gap and 49 million people living in poverty. The stories in our film will show how existing government anti-poverty programs can be used as platforms for unique social innovation and financial inclusion that incorporates women as economic engines of society, not only in Latin America but potentially throughout the world.

At Skylight we are uniquely suited to make this film because we have 30 years of experience making films about human and economic rights in Latin America as well as in the U.S. As Producer, I feel a need to make this film because I grew up in South America in a time when the continent was dominated by dictatorships. I saw the tanks roll out during the military coup in Brazil and saw students rounded up in Argentina as they called for a more just society, followed by the long but successful campaigns for justice by the human rights movement, and the subsequent continental shift to democracy. The next step is to achieve economic justice, and DISRUPTION shows a possible path toward that goal.

### **STORY SUMMARY**

Our story takes place in South America, the continent with the world's largest economic inequality gap, where hundreds of millions of people live in dire circumstances despite national economies being on the rise. And the poorest of the poor are the women:

- In a parched bean field in the “sertão” desert of northeast Brazil **Maria Gonçalves** explains how she has been “destroyed” by poverty.

- By a lake in the Peruvian Andes we see **Cirila Quillahuaman** and her family of subsistence farmers threshing lima beans, pitchforking the dried plants up in the air.
- In dense slums of displaced people surrounding the sparkling tourist mecca of Cartagena, Colombia, **Agripina Perea** struggles to feed her hungry children.
- In her dilapidated house in the pastoral hills of central Colombia, **Edith Suarez** dreams of raising chickens to supplement her meager income.

It is the plight of women like these, multiplied by millions, that set a band of young activist economists in Latin America on a journey to develop new ideas that confront what they call “the scandal of inequality” on their continent. They formed Fundación Capital, and we meet them in their modern bustling office in downtown Bogotá, the epicenter of their anti-poverty lab:

- **Yves Moury**, founder of Fundación Capital, an outspoken Belgian ex-pat with big ambitions. He assembled 30 of the best and brightest young economists from across Latin America in what he describes as “a caring conspiracy” to disrupt the status quo and end poverty on their continent.
- **Any Benitez** was recently recruited by Yves into the “conspiracy.” A feisty Colombian powerhouse, she believes that women need to grab the reins of political and economic power to change society.
- **Franz Gomez**, co-founder of Fundación Capital, grew up in poverty in Bolivia. Learned Marxist economics in La Paz, and free market economics at Notre Dame. His dream is “a continent where no one goes barefoot and all can have at least 2 meals a day.”

Determined to eradicate poverty in their world, our band of activist economists is on the verge of a major anti-poverty breakthrough; to empower millions of women to realize their full potential as economic engines of society, enabling them to become fully included, active citizens. How this breakthrough came about in a world of machismo and endemic poverty is the story of **DISRUPTION**.

We travel back to the 1990’s: Latin America is emerging from decades of dictatorships, and is reeling from the failure of neoliberal austerity programs that increased economic inequity. Yves Moury, international economist, is convinced that teaching financial literacy to impoverished women will empower them, but he needs a place to prove his theory. The Peruvian government is willing to collaborate, and he joins with Peruvian “co-conspirator” Carolina Trivelli to start the Puno-Cuzco Pilot Project that teaches rural Andean women how to use the financial system to their advantage. Major obstacles stand in the way, not the least of which is, as Yves tells us, “At that time no one believed that poor women could save.” But the women in his pilot program prove everyone wrong. We meet **Cirila Quillahuaman** in her village on the edges of ancient Inca ruins. She tells us that the women in her community had been like

“sleeping beauties” and have been awakened by the program. Not only did they open savings accounts, save money, and start businesses, but Cirila has been elected as city councilwoman, pressing her local government to expand the pilot program. She is now running for mayor, and we see her traveling all over her district speaking to gatherings of women, awakening more “sleeping beauties” every day. Based on this success Yves proposes a similar program for Colombian women, but suffers a setback when top government officials turn him down saying “it would jeopardize the Colombian family structure.”

Meanwhile Any Benitez is working with campesino organizations in the Colombian countryside. By 2008 government ministers have changed and Any is asked to look at the Peruvian model and start a program like the one Yves unsuccessfully pitched a few years earlier. Based in the slums of Cartagena, the “Woman Savers” program she designed combines Yves’ Peruvian experience with Any’s insistence that issues of gender rights and political power be included. Banks don’t want to cooperate, and husbands are in open rebellion, but Any and the women persevere. The results are phenomenal. Women save individually and then save collectively starting businesses together. This is where we meet Agripina again, who now has an open air lunch spot under a lemon tree, and we walk the streets with the Recycling Women of Cartagena pushing their carts, collecting plastics and paper to pack in their warehouse, the city’s first neighborhood recycling operation. Both enterprises are going strong, and Any proves that her application of Yves’ ideas could clearly change the lives of women in poverty. But now she and Yves both face a major hurdle; these pilot programs require financial incentives and many trainers, thus are too costly to ever be applied on a national basis. “What is the use,” asks Yves, “if these programs can’t be massively scaled?”

Yves asks his team, “What tools can we design to make massive peer-to-peer teaching a reality amongst poorly educated women?” We go to a group of women in an Andean village using illustrated flip-books designed to teach themselves, and we see that something is very wrong. The effort is not working. The women don’t understand why they should save, and seem unable to absorb the information being taught. Is financial inclusion on a mass scale just a dream?

It is now 2012 and closer to home Yves convinces Any to join the “conspiracy” for the next push. The flip-books were abandoned after the Peruvian failure and the team has designed a custom self-teaching app called Colombia LISTA, for tablet computers. But will tablet computers be relevant to impoverished semi-literate women? It’s an audacious idea. Any heads out to Cómbita, a remote town where thousands of women are receiving CCT payments (see description of CCTs in Project Topic section above). She gives the tablets to women like Edith Suarez (who we met at the beginning of our story) who have been chosen as community leaders by their peers, with the directive to each train 15 other women in 3 months.

Three months later the Fundación Capital team goes back to check. Yves exclaims “It was like scoring a goal from mid-field.” Every one of the women had far surpassed their goal, some educating more than 60 others. We return to Edith Suarez, who was illiterate and learned to read using the tablet, and has now been inspired to start a chicken business with the other women in her group, a project they will pitch to the mayor. She tells us “It’s like having a professor in the tablet.”

We're with Yves at meetings with bankers and Ministers convincing them to invest in the new project. It combines training programs on tablet computers with everything they have learned in the old Puno-Cuzco Project and in Woman Savers, and from the flip-book setback in Peru. It's replicable and adaptable to different cultural contexts. It works. They are ready to take it to scale.

Armed with the confidence of this incredible success Yves goes back to the Colombian Government and the project gets the green light to go national. If millions of poor women across the continent emerge as full financial and political citizens, will this disrupt the present social order and dismantle the structural causes of social and economic inequity? Will it be a quiet revolution? Could 20 million empowered women upend a continent?