

It's the middle of April, 3pm on a Friday. We are in the community of Cumbas Conde on the southern flanks of Mt. Cotacachi. The sun is blazing, the wind is blowing dust through the hot dry air, we have been here since 7am, and we are weary. María Josefina invites us to sit down on a woven mat in the shade of her front patio. She knows that we have come to ask her about the program, and she has been waiting for us with boiled corn and potatoes.

"I thought maybe you weren't coming, that you had decided to skip me", she jests, as she begins to serve us.

"Neeever! That's simply impossible!", we reply smiling.

We've come prepared with demographic, socio-economic, infrastructural and agricultural surveys, as well as an exhausting list of qualitative questions about her perceptions of the program. As with the other parents we have surveyed, we want to understand the life context in which her family lives, and in which the scholarship contributes to their wellbeing. We also want to know how she uses the money, how it helps, and how she thinks we can improve the program.

We organize ourselves – backpacks, surveys and recorder – among the heaping bowls of corn and potatoes that she has placed before us. She sits down opposite us on the mat, and her three youngest children approach timidly and sit beside her, shooting us curious glances and shy smiles when not otherwise hiding their faces. They are three girls: Isabel, age 12; Marleny, age 10; and Jisela, age 7.

As we settle in and begin to peel the skin back from our potatoes, she starts to speak:

"You know, I am really thankful for the scholarship because I am alone now. My husband died five years ago and I have my children and I am the only person to support them. I am alone to support them, and more than anything, this scholarship helps me because without it, my son would not be studying."

Her son is David. He is 16 years old; handsome, respectful, articulate, quiet but sociable. He has been in the program for 3 years and he is undeniably an Eco-Club favorite. Having just returned home from school, he now joins us.

"Hoooooola David! Qué tal?" we ask.

"Todo bien" he replies, shy but smiling.

"Hey, when do you graduate?"

"In three more years" he says.

"And then what?"

We watch his eyes dim and his smile fade as he replies, “I would like to go university, if only it were possible, but it isn’t.” He shrugs and looks down.

We change the subject. “Are you coming to the planning meeting for the soccer tournament on Sunday? You know we need you there, right?”

His smile returns, “Yeah, I know, and I’ll be there”, he says.

After an hour we have advanced through the bulk of the interview, and the girls, Isabel, Marleny, and Jisela, are no longer so shy around us. They are playing hand-games and tugging and poking one another quietly alongside their mother, stopping occasionally to listen in on the conversation and to see if we are watching them. The girls are listening when their mother tells us that they will not go to high school.

“I’m worried because I am alone and the only thing that I can do to make money is weave bracelets. Because I don’t have any other forms of work and I don’t have more income, it is difficult for me to put my kids through school. I don’t think that I am going to be able to send my girls to high school. Even now, the scholarship does not cover all of my son’s expenses and I have to help him so that he doesn’t lose it, but supporting him with the little that I have means that there is nothing left for the rest.”

Although they listen, the girls are too young to understand what it means that they will not go to high school. But their mother, having never studied herself, knows quite well, and for the first time since the interview began, her adept hands have left the bracelets that she has been weaving in order to brush away the tears that she can no longer hold back.

“I never went to school at all”, she says, “but on Monday a literacy brigade is coming, and I have signed up for classes. They are going from house to house and I hope to learn a little. Not being able to read I feel like I don’t have a mind, like I am just a machine with limbs, a body that works but doesn’t know how to think.”

The bracelets, which now lay in a loose pile in her lap, are those she makes to generate income for her family. Given that her girls are still young, she works at home and makes bracelets in-between child-rearing, cooking, cleaning and growing food for her family on a small plot. Her exact job is to tie the ends of the bracelets, and she is paid 80 cents for every 12 bracelets that she ties. Given her ability to tie quickly, she is able to get through about 1,200 bracelets a month, providing her with roughly \$80 dollars of income. This, combined with the \$50 dollar monthly Solidarity Bond that she receives from the government, gives her a total of \$130 dollars a month on which to support her family of five. As part of the survey, we closely calculate her monthly expenses, including water, electricity, food, education, health and transportation, among others. These total exactly \$131 dollars a month.

As the interview continues, she resumes her work on the bracelets, and Isabel, Marleny and Jisela go back to playing. Without the opportunity to attend high school, the girls will start working at age 12 or 13, most likely as maids in neighboring cities, or more locally in agriculture where their pay will be less than that of men: \$8 dollars a day instead of \$10. The girls will also be at higher risk of teen pregnancy, single motherhood and domestic violence. Thanks to the support of our generous donors, their brother's future is brighter. He too will be limited by lack of university studies, but he will have many more opportunities than his sisters because as a result of the scholarship program he WILL finish high school.

We finish the last of our corn and potatoes, pack up our bags and stand to leave. Giggling, the girls pull each other down the path in order to be able to give us a long farewell from the road. Before we follow them, we shake hands with David, and then his mother. As we exchange our thanks, she grips my hand just a little bit longer, and a little bit tighter. Thus holding my attention she assures me:

“I want very much for David to finish high school, and I am happy and grateful for the support that you are giving me. God willing, he WILL finish high school, and as long as he has the support of the scholarship, I, as his mother, will make every sacrifice possible to see him through.”