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Building Local Capacity to Identify Barriers to Paternal Engagement and Increase Awareness of Child Malnutrition in Rural Guatemala



Introduction: Guatemala has the highest prevalence of child malnutrition in Latin America with nearly 50% of children experiencing chronic malnutrition. In the Palajunoj Valley (PV), consisting of ten rural communities in Quetzaltenango, barriers to paternal engagement have not been extensively explored. Collaborating with local NGO Primeros Pasos (PP), this project aimed to build capacity through the creation of a sustainable ethics committee and training PP staff in conducting interviews. These strategies will allow for a multisite mixed-methods pilot study to assess barriers to nutrition and promote public health awareness among fathers in PV.

Methods: A grant proposal was submitted and selected to fund this project. A study protocol, consent form, eligibility survey, and in-depth interview guide were developed for IRB review. Guatemalan researchers and healthcare professionals were contacted regarding organizing an ethics committee for PP to review the proposed pilot study. On-site engagement at PP was conducted between May-June 2023 to identify strategic partners and facilitate health education workshops for community members. Additionally, the researcher engaged in an intensive K'iche' language program from June-July 2023 to better understand the communities within PV and their relationship with nutrition and health.

Results: Partnering with a local consultant, a sustainable ethics committee for PP was established and approved by Vanderbilt's IRB. PP staff were trained in IRB protocols and conducting in-depth interviews with fathers. Five health education workshops regarding diabetes prevention and breastfeeding awareness were implemented for over 30 mothers in PV.

Conclusions: Despite context-specific barriers that can delay ethical review, receiving local ethical approval for projects outside the United States is essential to global health. Integrating intercultural humility is necessary when navigating multifactorial stakeholders in various countries. Overall, actively involving the community of focus at each stage of the research process is imperative for advancing health equity.