



PHOTO: EFREN RAMIREZ CEUB

Teaching Laboratory at the Odontology Faculty of the San Francisco Xavier de Chuquisaca University. Young students, soon to be dentists, practicing with patients, using recently acquired equipment.

Bolivia: meeting challenges to build a future

The poorest country in South America has to deal with low rates of income, employment and productivity, but education can play a vital role in development.

BY DAMELYS DELGADO

Between the Andes and the Amazon is located one of the eight most biodiverse countries in the world: Bolivia, a country with several of “the mosts”, like the world’s highest navigable lake, Lake Titicaca; the largest salt deposit in the world, the Salara de Uyni; the second largest natural gas reserves in South America and around 50 percent of world reserves of lithium. In addition, the administrative capital, La Paz, is the world’s highest, with an elevation of 3,650 m above sea level.

But despite being rich in natural resources, Bolivia, a land-locked country with a population of 10 million people, is one of the poorest and most economically segregated countries in South America, with a 65 percent poverty rate. Sixty percent of its diverse population is younger than 25. Bolivian youth need to be trained in the expertise required to develop the country’s resources.

Education is a key factor in tackling poverty. It is also one of the most effective instruments for addressing inequalities.

All governments worldwide are deeply aware of this need, and the Bolivian authorities in 2003, launched an education strategy to transform the academic system and to foster greater enrolment of youth in higher education.

In 2006, with the Bolivian President Evo Morales as a witness, financial support by OFID for the National Universities Rehabilitation and Modernization Project was signed in Vienna to provide infrastructure and equipment at nine national universities located in the Departments of Santa Cruz, El Beni, Tarija, Potosí, La Paz, Chuquisaca, Pando, Cochabamba and Oruro.

With a strong social scope

According to the Bolivian Education Strategy, the national public universities in the System of the Bolivian Universities (SUB) defined an investment program to rehabilitate and modernize the universities' infrastructure aligned with the needs of the country.

Mr. Romulo Martinez, Operations Officer-in-charge of the Bolivian projects explained that the SUB's Executive Com-

mittee of the Bolivian Universities (CEUB) submitted to the government feasibility proposals and a request for financing of the nine universities participating in the project. The proposal included a program for the institutional strengthening of each, with specific plans for infrastructure and equipment refurbishment, benefiting more than 240,000 students and an academic community estimated at about 7,400 lecturers. "All the universities were under pressure to cope with growing enrolment demand by that time," Martinez said. "OFID met with each one of them during appraisal to identify the most pressing needs".

Mr. Martinez added: "This is a *sui generis* project since it was the first time the autonomous universities in Bolivia were directly negotiating external financing, enabled by the introduction in 2006, of a new direct hydrocarbon tax specifically assigned to the higher education sector. OFID alone agreed to solely co-finance, with contributions from each participating university covering up to 52.6 percent of the total cost, estimated to be US\$23 million, while OFID assistance

totalled US\$10.7 million, equivalent to 47.7 percent of the investment."

OFID has supported development in Bolivia since 1979, for a total of over US\$100 million as of July 2011, through private sector, public sector and grants financing for projects in transport, agriculture & agro-Industry, health, water supply, energy and education, among others.

The rehabilitation and modernization project at the universities encompassed several components, such as campus infrastructure expansion works, construction of teaching and library modules, modernization of audiovisual facilities, information technology and communication systems hardware and software overhauling, and the procurement of laboratory equipment and state of the art pedagogic kits. The improvements in each university throughout Bolivia is expected to help the universities improve the conditions of the nation's higher education system, in order to prepare thousands of youngsters to fill a productive and creative role in their country's that, according to the 2010 Human Development Report of the UNDP, ranks 95th out of 169 in human development. ■

