

Innovations in Peacebuilding

Building a Future for At-Risk Youth



24-year-old Ernesto Pineda is one of more than 400 youth to have completed the training since the program began in March 2010.

Pineda was hired from a pool of 50 candidates by El Salvador's largest telephone company as a sales representative. He now earns more than \$1,000 per month.
—Photo by CRS Staff

“I learned how to work in any sort of labor environment, interview skills, how to talk in public, how to ‘sell’ myself in less than one minute in a job interview.”

—Ernesto Pineda

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Youth unemployment is a critical problem in Central America. Nearly half the population is under 18 and most young people only make it to 5th grade. Whenever there are a lot of young people out of school and out of work, the possibilities for violence go up tenfold. Young people are most likely to be among the victims and perpetrators of violence. The lack of opportunities and violence are factors that push young people to emigrate. Finding pathways for young people to lead healthy and productive lives is critical to reducing violence, contributing to economic recovery and creating alternatives to migration.

CRS Approach

Catholic Relief Services takes a holistic approach that combines training, community service with concrete opportunities for livelihoods. The model integrates four areas:

- 1. Life Skills and Basic Education**
Forming self esteem, conflict resolution, leadership, teamwork, communication skills in addition to basic competency in math and reading.

- 2. Workforce and Enterprise Development**
Promoting certified training in *over please*



At the heart of the Youth Builders El Salvador are community construction projects, which encourage participants to work as a team to gain work experience and learn discipline while creating a more positive image of youth with their communities. —Photo by CRS Staff

“Having a small business has allowed me to earn my own money, to be independent, to help my family and to know that I can do it. It has changed my life”

—Gerald Amador Rivas



Gerald Amador Rivas, 20, started a small business repairing cell phones and selling accessories upon completing the program 18 months ago and receiving \$250 of seed capital. He runs the business from his parent’s house in Nicaragua and earns close to \$300 per month.

—Photo by CRS Staff



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sectors with a proven market demand that provide youth with the hard skills they need to enter the modern workforce as well as innovative enterprise development training, seed capital and mentoring for youth entrepreneurs.

3. **Community Service**

Building community infrastructure or providing community service that fosters practical work experience, fosters civic participation, leadership teamwork and creates a positive image of youth in the community.

4. **Employment Services**

Providing job-seeking skills and microenterprise training, job placement assistance, seed capital and mentoring for youth entrepreneurs.

Once youth have completed training and community services, they are placed in internships and jobs through alliances with private sector businesses in the region, such as Vidals Salons, UPS, and cellular telephone companies like Digicel and Tigo. Youth enterprise development services in each country also provide young people with the skills, information, seed capital and guidance they need to start an income-generating enterprise. This program was adapted by CRS and local partners for Central America based on a model developed in Harlem by YouthBuild USA.

Innovation

By combining community service with workforce and enterprise development at-risk and gang involved youth in the poorest and most violent neighborhoods can have the power to change the direction of their lives and that of their communities.

The life skills and vocational training provide the soft and hard proficiencies employers seek. Internships and private sector relationships keep the program responsive to labor market demand and create opportunities for youth to gain experience. Community projects give youth the opportunity to lead, develop teamwork and contribute to

their community. Youth enterprise development services, including training and seed capital, create alternatives to the limited job market. This holistic approach has proven to create transformational, life-changing experiences that help young people develop healthy productive lives and livelihoods. This integral but flexible model meets the needs of each individual while at the same time creates a standard model that is replicable and scalable.

Scale and Impact

With financial support from USAID, Firstgreen Foundation, Nokia and the InterAmerican Development Bank, CRS has achieved the following in two years:

- 1,000 youth graduated from the program in four countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.
- 55% employed or generating income through microenterprises.
- 30% returned to school.
- 40% of all participants are young women.
- 35% of participants have been gang involved.

Looking Ahead

The program seeks to reach an additional 10,000 youth in the next three years in Central America. CRS expects to expand and adapt the model to the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Jamaica.



Youth Builders also provides at risk youth vocational training to help them land a job. —Photo by CRS Staff

