



USAID | GUATEMALA
DEL PUEBLO DE LOS ESTADOS
UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA

TOS: Case Study

Sustainable Youth Outreach Centers Protect Lives

Keeping youth off the streets and out of the clutches of gang recruiters is the name of the game

Challenge

Statistics show that this is a bad time to be young and living in some Central American countries because of the proliferation of gangs, high-levels of crime, extra-judicial killings, and the escalating percentage of youth homicides.

Parents in high-crime *barrios* (neighborhoods) fear for their own safety and that of their children. They must be ever vigilant against petty thievery and gang members who actively recruit their young children, often at nine or ten years old.

The recent USAID-funded Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment discovered that youth fleeing gang life are hiding in institutions including churches or with non-profit organizations. USAID/Guatemala's Youth Alliance Program has been working in some of Guatemala City's most violent *barrios* to keep vulnerable youth away from crime and gangs. This work coupled with study results convinced staff that a new approach was needed to help neighborhoods reclaim their streets, their children, their lives.

Initiative

USAID's Program works in neighborhoods with a high concentration of at-risk youth. In 2005, the Program assessed the neighborhoods where it works for active organizations or youth programs. Finding none, the Program opened three new youth outreach centers in partnership with three different churches. One of the three centers is located where the notorious *Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)* gang controls the neighborhood. Another center was formerly the favorite dumping site for dismembered bodies, and the third center is in a town where two rival gangs demobilized and turned to the church for help.

The centers are cost-effective. The initial USAID investment of \$16,000 per center covers equipment, training of volunteer trainers in micro-enterprise, and six months of salary for the coordinator. Micro-enterprises that the centers run generate funds for operating expenses. The church-owned and managed centers are sustainable and continue to leverage support from community members and other volunteers long after the Program is over.

Results

The faith-based partnership concept is not new. What's new here is the level of community-based volunteerism. In less than two months, the three centers logged over 2,000 volunteer hours from 90 volunteers. Today, eight youths spend six hours a day working to prepare 25 hot lunches which they sell at the public market and meet the demand for nutritious food at reasonable prices. Former gang member and volunteer, Samuel Flores, helps these youth learn how to manage a business, follow hygienic practices and develop skills that will stimulate personal growth and awareness.

The Alliance has discovered that, even in a society where volunteerism is not part of the “culture,” everyday citizens are willing to work to solve serious problems that seem intractable to international cooperation agencies and to the national and local governments. Guatemala’s youths are the present and the future--communities and political leaders are learning that volunteers make all the difference.

Composite of photos of youth leaders and participants in crime prevention activities in Guatemala. Credit: USAID/Creative Associates International, Inc.2006



Young women marimba players at the inauguration of Youth Outreach Center called “For my Neighborhood” in Ciudad del Sol, Villa Nueva, Guatemala on September 8, 2006.JGarzón.USAID/2006

"Our company is based in this neighborhood. We now have four former gang members on staff and we require that they give volunteer time to the Youth Center because we know they can help prevent youngsters from following the path they once took into gangs." Human Resources staff