

YOUTH EDUCATION PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY OF INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO EDUCATION IN CIUDAD DELGADO, EL SALVADOR

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INTRODUCTION

The research study on Innovative Approaches to Community Development in Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador was funded and led by the Conflict and Development Foundation (CDF) in collaboration with Shelter the Homeless International (SHIP). The overall objective of this program was to identify innovative development initiatives that are promoting peace and stability in communities coping with post-conflict challenges. The particular focus of this case study is to identify a program that is promoting peace and preventing youth from participating in violent or illicit activities, such as gang activities that are one of the most visible signs of violence and conflict in El Salvador today.

This program focused on the identification of an innovative approach to education specifically related to youth and rural livelihoods in the small community of El Pino in Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador. This initiative is part of the HESN Match Project supported by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation and conducted by the Center on Conflict and Development (ConDev) at Texas A&M University. The HESN Match Project promotes focused research on conflict in El Salvador, a priority country that from 1979-1992 suffered one of the most intense civil wars in contemporary Latin American history. This research project supported an individual researcher, Jana Stohler, conducting an internship program in Ciudad Delgado from May-July, 2014. Besides completed two case studies on innovative approaches to development, the researcher also collected data on drivers of conflict in the community, to better understand the conflict dynamics.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Ciudad Delgado is a fragile and conflict-affected community in El Salvador in which lack of quality educational opportunities for youth is prevalent. This project aimed to study two innovative approaches to development being implemented by a non-profit organization, Shelter the Homeless International (SHIP) in Ciudad Delgado, El Salvador. Like in many other small impoverished communities of El Salvador, children and youth are joining gangs, and youth-related violence is a serious problem. Local youth need opportunities to study in a safe environment in order to become productive members of their society.

Education in El Salvador

Although the World Bank reports that the El Salvador poverty rate was at 28.9% in 2013, in SHIP's neighborhood of El Pino, Ciudad Delgado, that figure is doubtless at 100%. This impacts every family and every child and their educational opportunities. While the public school system is available to all children, it's not equal across all parts of the country, and Ciudad Delgado is no exception. Public school is available to all children and, for the most part, it is free. However, these impoverished families must pay at least \$50 to enroll their children, as well as pay for uniforms, supplies, and school lunches, and often the funds just are not available for education. Parents are not required to send their children to school.

School System

All students in the public school system from kindergarten through ninth grade go to school, January through November, Monday through Friday for half days only. School times vary, but all public school students go only half days. They study the same basic curriculum as American students, including mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, and languages.

After ninth grade, students have the option to focus their education on a specific area. After they complete the twelfth grade, they can go to university for further education in their specialized fields. If they change their minds and do not want to study further in that area, they are required to start over in their university education and take specific classes to prepare for their chosen new course of study.

SHIP Educational Program for Orphans

SHIP built a new orphanage in Ciudad Delgado in 2012. The children at the orphanage at SHIP's headquarters currently are enrolled in a private Christian school, and they have been attending the same school for many, many years. Their tuition is being paid by another group that helps the orphanage. SHIP currently is providing shelter for the orphanage and a monthly stipend for food or other needs that might arise. Five of the older orphanage kids are attending the university, and SHIP is sponsoring them.

SHIP's Innovative Educational Program for the Neighborhood

In 2012, one year after SHIP completed construction of their facility in El Pino, they initiated an innovative educational program for children living in the community. SHIP initially sponsored six children to attend the same private school as the orphanage children. The second year of SHIP's sponsorship, parents and children were interviewed by SHIP's president Robert Horton for potential acceptance to SHIP's scholarship program. Before admittance into this private school, the children were tested and went through an interview to ensure that they would be able to succeed in the school and for grade placement. For the children to be admitted to SHIP's program, parents had to agree to participate in their child's education. Twenty-three children were accepted, and they now attend a private Baptist school that offers a smaller classroom size and a more challenging curriculum. They are in a safe environment and learn in an environment created for the best outcome available for the children.

Children study English, mathematics, science, social studies, physical education, and languages. This new school is challenging, and the children have a large amount of homework every night, much of which is project-focused, to further advance their studies. The program also requires parental involvement.

To keep their sponsorship, SHIP requires that the children come to the SHIP tutoring center every afternoon for help with homework and to receive extra assistance, as needed. Three tutors are available most days to work with all age groups. Instruction starts with the younger children, and the older students arrive later in the day, which allows each tutor to devote time individually.

The mothers are also required to participate in this program. Some mothers come every day, particularly the mothers of the kindergarten children, and spend time working with their children on their schoolwork. However, it was discovered that not many of these mothers could read or write and were unable to help their children. So, the kindergartners come every Friday and work with their mothers as they both learn to read and write. Because their children are being offered scholarships, mothers help out around the facility by cleaning and by keeping school supplies and books organized.

OBSERVATIONS

- These children are able to learn and grow in this safe environment. With access to the tutors after school, the children are able to learn things fully and work through any problems they may be encountering.
- Many of these children were behind in their studies and struggling at the start of the school year. Through SHIP's help and the provision of the tutors and after-school learning sessions, the children are slowly catching up and their grades are improving.
- The children have flourished with encouragement and a safe environment. In the short time I have been here, I have found that a little praise of the children goes a long way. They run to the tutoring sessions and are quick to share their good grades to gain praise.
- The president of SHIP's NGO in El Salvador comes every week to visit with the tutors and develop relationships with the people here. Time is set aside once a month to praise the students, to award prizes and encouragement for good work, and to recognize their accomplishments. The children, who had little hope prior to SHIP's scholarships, are thriving, due in large part to the individual attention and recognition they are given.

CONCLUSION

SHIP's innovative educational program consists of:

- Provision of a safe educational environment within a fragile community
- Provision of scholarships for students to attend private school
- Provision of private tutors and coordination of after-school learning sessions
- Parental involvement
- Motivation, individual attention, and recognition

FOLLOW-UP:

CDF/ConDev will work with SHIP to develop an ITA Concept Note and/or a student-led proposal for the BigIdeas program, based on the need for innovative educational technologies to assist with youth education. CDF/ConDev will explore ways to collaborate with USAID's Youth and Workforce Development Team and the program on Youth Education in Crisis and Conflict-Affected Environments.