

MEASURING OUTCOMES IN PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE ACQUIRE LIFE SKILLS:

Lessons and Challenges from the Nokia-IYF Global Youth Development Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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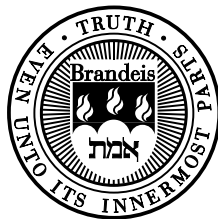
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Knowledge Advancing Social Justice



INTRODUCTION

This report describes a 20-month pilot outcomes study conducted by Brandeis University's Center for Youth and Communities (Waltham, MA, U.S.) of a global youth development initiative funded by the Nokia Corporation (Nokia) and managed by the International Youth Foundation (IYF).¹ This executive summary outlines the study's methodology, key findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Most youth development programs attempt to build young people's life skills in one way or another. Hardly a youth program exists that does not promote competencies such as decision-making, teamwork, respect for diversity, and communication skills. However, very little is known about whether life skills can be strengthened and whether life skills programs can make a difference in young people's ability to realize their potential.

The opportunity to address this knowledge deficit was a primary aim of Nokia and IYF in commissioning this outcomes measurement study. Nokia is committed to ensuring that the social programs it supports produce proven results. It was therefore important to measure and understand the impact of the initiative on young lives.

The study, based on surveys of 3,500 youth in 13 countries, revealed that the programs produced meaningful and positive improvements in a variety of life skills and other youth outcomes. Furthermore, it demonstrated that these changes can be documented and measured as part of a monitoring effort managed by implementing organizations.

GOALS OF THE INITIATIVE

Launched in 2000, the Nokia-IYF Initiative promotes the positive development of young people through nurturing 12 key life skills.² Within each country, programs implemented by IYF's partners (local nongovernmental organizations, NGOs), target a subset of such skills depending on locally identified needs.

Educators, employers, and policymakers increasingly emphasize the importance of life skills development in today's rapidly changing world. Whether youth are looking to excel at school, succeed in the workplace, contribute to their community, establish and maintain relationships, practice healthy behaviors, or enhance their own and others' development, life skills are vital assets. The Nokia-IYF Initiative is dedicated to ensuring that more of today's young people are able to develop the essential life skills they need to realize their potential.

Those programs receiving support from the Nokia-IYF Initiative (see Appendix 1) serve a mix of young people — some who are at risk of poor performance in school or facing other challenges, and others who are talented youth leaders. Each program uses different approaches, but all seek to help young people acquire needed life skills.

THE PILOT OUTCOMES MEASUREMENT SYSTEM

Four years into the Initiative, Nokia and IYF decided to seek answers to some key questions such as: Are youth doing better for having participated in the programs? Do their life skills change? Are there improvements in volunteerism, jobs, and education? Do youth feel and act more connected to others and to community institutions? Do young people attribute changes in their lives to their experiences in the programs? How do participants rate their program experiences?

1 The International Youth Foundation (IYF) is a global non-profit organization dedicated to preparing young people to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. Currently operating in 70 countries, IYF collaborates with corporations, governments, and civil society organizations to strengthen and expand proven programs that enable young people to succeed and prosper. For further information, visit: www.iyfnet.org

2 The Initiative's 12 life skills are communication, conflict resolution, contribution, cooperation, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision-making, empathy, managing emotions, respect, responsibility, and self-confidence.

In the past, the programs' main outcomes documentation activity was to conduct focus groups and surveys with small groups of youth. Nokia and IYF agreed they needed a more systematic outcomes documentation effort. As a result, the Brandeis team, working with IYF, Nokia, and IYF's country partners, designed and pilot tested an outcomes measurement system (OMS).

The OMS had three parts. First, 11 programs participated in a prospective study, administering surveys to youth at three points as they move through a program — at baseline, at program completion (or after finishing the main parts of the program), and several months after completion of or further involvement in the program.³ Seven programs administered a single retrospective survey to young people who had already completed the program or had been in the program for a long period. Two programs participated in an in-depth study, which involved learning through visits, deeper analysis of context, and special efforts such as interviews with managers about program implementation.

This synthesis report describes in detail these three types of studies, highlights some of the key results, and offers conclusions about the findings and methods used for measuring life skills and other youth outcomes.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MEASUREMENT OF OUTCOMES

Overall, the pilot OMS findings showed that all programs produced some, and often many, positive outcomes for youth — in life skills and in other outcomes such as greater community engagement, better school performance, improved employability, and more positive attitudes about the future and their ability to achieve personal goals. Key findings include:

- Ninety-five percent of young people surveyed in 12 countries said they had experienced an increase in key life skills targeted through the Initiative. Cooperation, self-confidence, and creative thinking were the three skills that youth cited most frequently as showing improvement as a result of their participation in the program.
- In programs emphasizing youth volunteerism, 72% of youth continued their involvement in volunteer projects after completing the program.
- In many of the countries studied, youth reported positive educational outcomes after participating in the program. In nine countries, an average of 43% of students reported getting better grades; in ten countries, an average of 50% of students reported working harder in school. Additionally, in 11 countries, an average of 66% of youth reported that they now think they can reach a higher level of education. Again most attribute this change to their participation in the program.
- In all of the countries studied, many youth felt more confident about their future after participating in local programs. For example, in ten of the countries, an average of 74% of participants said their project was “excellent” or “very good” at helping them to prepare for a better life, while 66% said that it was “excellent” or “very good” at giving them confidence to deal with challenging situations.
- Another finding relates to young people's reflections on their program experience. The OMS study gave youth many opportunities to reflect on the quality of the programs and whether they would recommend them to others. Respondents generally rated the programs excellent or very good — an important finding since other research suggests that youth tend to answer such questions with integrity. Good ratings generally persist or improve as participants complete, or spend more time in a program.

³ Some programs consider participants “active” for many months or even years. As a result, due to the study's brief duration, completion and follow-up survey respondents were sometimes individuals who were still identified as active participants (although they had completed either the bulk of program activities or what programs considered the most influential early activities).

PROGRAM-SPECIFIC LIFE SKILLS FINDINGS

Looking closer at the program-specific data, one finds a more complex picture due to differences in type of youth targeted, local contexts, and in the two approaches described below used to measure life skills changes.

The most conservative approach used to analyze survey responses, the Index method, compares participant responses to life skills-related statements at the time they begin the program (baseline survey) and at a later point when they have completed, or been through a substantial part of, the program. Average changes in the Index are then assessed to see if changes in the participant population are statistically significant at the two points in time.

Programs serving more advantaged youth (e.g. in the Czech Republic and Hungary) tended to show no significant life skills gains using the Index method. Conversely, programs serving more disadvantaged youth (e.g. those in Mexico, Russia, Brazil and Peru) showed positive life skills changes using the Index method. In these programs, a majority of youth respondents benefited, regardless of age, gender, project location, in-school compared to out-of-school status, and other characteristics.

The second approach, the Attribution method, assessed the extent to which youth believe that their program participation has helped them to improve their life skills. Attribution method findings were very positive. Most respondents attributed at least some improvement in life skills to their project participation, regardless of their degree of social advantage or disadvantage coming into the programs.

Findings were generally consistent between the two methods. That is, when and where life skills improve according to the Index method, they also improve according to the Attribution method.

- **Argentina:** Most respondents (70% to 81%) rate four out of four key program aspects as excellent or very good. 87% said the program changed their ideas for the future and helped them address at least one life challenge (e.g. becoming more able to deal with difficult situations).
- **Brazil:** Respondents showed statistically significant gains in contribution and responsibility. Overall, using an average of scores for all 12 life skills assessed, 58% of respondents had increased life skill scores. More than half say that participation greatly improved at least one life skill; nearly all say it changed their ideas for the future. Nearly half now work harder in school, do more community service, and aspire to obtaining more education.
- **Czech Republic:** Over two thirds of respondents rated the program highly and said that, because of it, they work harder in school and participate in more community service projects. More than 80% attribute a positive program effect on at least one skill. One third are doing more service now than before the project; 24% are working harder in school; 17% are practicing more leadership; and 42% of program completers volunteer on average 23 hours a month, even while transitioning into school and other activities. Although life skills did not improve according to the most conservative life skills measurement, 32% to 56% of respondents attribute “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of improvement in a range of life skills to their participation in the program.
- **Hungary:** 61% of respondents indicate that the program has made them more productive in school; 64% to 82% rate aspects of program experience highly. Although life skills did not improve according to the most conservative life skills measurement, 38% to 78% of respondents attribute “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of improvement in a range of life skills to their participation in the program.

- **Mexico:** In the latest phase of the program, respondents' life skills (12 out of 12) improved by statistically significant margins using the most conservative life skills measurement. In contrast, a comparison group in one location showed no significant changes using the same surveys in the same period. In addition, many program participants reported that they were now working harder in school (76%) and providing more leadership in school or community (55%) than before participating in the program. Overall, 68% of respondents had increased life skill scores.
- **Peru:** Respondents' life skills improved by statistically significant margins for 7 of 12 life skills using the most conservative means of measuring life skills and did so for most subgroups of respondents (e.g., by gender). Overall, 97% of respondents had increased life skill scores using an average of the 12 individual life skill scores. Respondents rated the program highly; 71% now volunteer an average of 7 hours a month; 74% report they are working harder in school now than before their involvement in the program; and 64% to 67% say they are more actively engaged in service and leadership development.
- **Philippines:** Respondents credited their program participation with helping them to feel more connected to work, education, community, healthy behaviors, and indigenous culture. For example, 91% were volunteering after completing the program, while few were volunteering before; 20% to 34% were in school or had received an education credential after completing the program, while 100% were out of school before the program. Other behaviors, such as substance abuse, also changed in a positive direction after program participation.
- **Poland:** Although life skills did not improve when comparing life skills scores at baseline and exit (using the most conservative measurement technique), 56% to 84% of respondents attribute "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of improvement in a range of life skills to their participation in the program, with the highest rating for working in a group. Forty-nine percent of program completers reported that they were volunteering in the post-program period, averaging 23 hours per month.
- **Russia:** The participants, mostly disadvantaged youth, rated program experiences very highly, and 11 of the 12 measured life skills improved by statistically significant margins, using the most conservative method. These results hold for various subgroups of respondents, including those defined by gender and age. Overall, 81% of respondents had increased average life skill scores. A second method confirmed these positive results. Program completers — more than half — were volunteering an average of 19 hours monthly and credit the program with influencing this outcome.
- **South Africa:** None of the 12 life skills measured showed improvement from baseline to exit, but this is likely due to the respondents' status as university graduates who enter the project seeking vocational assistance but may already possess mature life skills. Still, from 73% to 98% attribute a "great deal" or "quite a bit" of program effect on a series of life and work skills. This mostly employment focused program found that half of former participants were looking for work. Many of the job seekers have been seeking employment for a long time, reflecting economic conditions. In another survey, 83% report making the transition from being unemployed before the program to being employed for pay 1-4 years after completion.
- **Thailand:** Respondents scored highest on four life skills: respect for self and others, creative thinking, managing conflict, and self-confidence. The respondents positively assess the program's role in helping them improve these skills and improve themselves: for example, more than 80% gave high marks to the program for helping them learn to listen and respond to others' suggestions. Half the respondents were more often assisting others and working harder in school than before, while one quarter were now using fewer unhealthy substances.

- **Turkey:** Respondents rate the program highly; for example, 79% rate program activities and content as “excellent” or “good” and these ratings persist as participants spend longer in the program or completed it. None of the 12 life skills changed according to the most conservative measurement, but 67% to 87% of respondents attribute “a great deal” or “quite a bit” of program effect on a series of life skills. Program completers who volunteer do so an average of 14 hours monthly and attribute changes in volunteering to the program; 90% feel they will do more voluntary work and provide more leadership; and nearly all believe that the program influenced these new competencies. Among respondents who had either completed the program or been in it a long time, 68% indicated it was “completely” or “mostly” true the program had given them skills to deal with difficult situations.
- **U.S.:** Most students in this program were now expressing themselves more through art and knew more about the creative process than before. No life skills ratings changed significantly from baseline to exit; however, respondents attributed positive effects on life skills to the program, especially self-confidence, cooperation, and respect for others. About half the students felt the program had “quite a lot” of effect on these skills. Overall, 50% of respondents had increased average life skill scores. Many indicated they were learning more in their classes than before, were doing better in their schoolwork, and were absent less often; with 26% to 38% saying that the program played a positive role in these changes. From 77% to 88% of respondents said they were now taking on more leadership roles, expected to reach higher levels of education, and expected to get better

CONCLUSIONS

The OMS pilot study shows that life skills can indeed be measured. While the process is not without challenges, the effort does promote project quality and accountability. It also helps partners engaged in the Initiative to become “learning organizations,” using the information from the pilot measurement initiative to reflect on program models, quality, implementation, and long-term goals.

- Overall, the data collected by Brandeis suggest a harmony between the outcomes a program intends to produce and what actually happened. All programs intended to improve life skills, and all had at least modest success in at least a few life skills. More specifically, community service programs increase the number of people volunteering as well as the amount of time they spend volunteering; employment programs produce noteworthy employment outcomes; arts programs produce changes in arts-based life skills; and community programs influence community leadership skills.
- Groups that come from “stressed” environments (measured by respondent reports on the economic level and safety of their communities) and individuals with lower levels of core competencies in reading, writing, and working with numbers experience the greatest life skills outcomes. Those who are “at risk” in terms of these characteristics are more likely to experience positive life skills outcomes. This association, while not proving “cause and effect,” is worth considering. Stemming from this finding, a recommendation would be to target interventions on those needing the most help.
- Programs of short duration and low intensity appear to do less well in improving life skills, at least compared to other programs. Determining what is low and high dosage and intensity depends on various factors such as program purpose and youth profile.
- Evidence from this and other research efforts suggests that integrating life skills development into the school system and focusing on 10-13 year olds as they transition to secondary education can be a good way to invest development funds.

- It may not make sense to measure life skills changes among mature participants who may already possess these skills at program entry. It could be more useful to focus instead on other outcomes (e.g. in community service programs, measurement could focus more on leadership, sustained volunteering, and extent of volunteering). If the programs want to continue to emphasize improvements in life skills, they may want to consider recruiting youth who have had fewer opportunities to develop their life and leadership skills.
- The OMS pilot encountered challenges in measuring hard-to-measure concepts such as life skills in programs that have different contexts, serve different types of youth and use different strategies. A demonstration program with a more standardized program model across multiple sites and would allow for more meaningful comparisons across projects.
- Baseline surveys can inform program managers, planners, and donors about a program's reach and ability to target well. Data about the youth entering a program can be used as to check participation projections and to make programmatic improvements relating to recruitment, outreach, curriculum planning, program content, etc.

For a complete copy of the Brandeis study report, please contact: Ami Thakkar, Program Director, International Youth Foundation, e-mail: athakkar@iyfnet.org. To contact the researchers, please direct inquiries to Andrew Hahn, Professor, Brandeis University, e-mail: ahahn@brandeis.edu.

APPENDIX 1

ARGENTINA

Program: *Posta Jóven*

Launched: 2004

Projected reach: 5,400 young people, ages 17 to 24

Focus: Young people receive leadership training and carry out plans for addressing urgent local challenges. In the process, they gain communication, consensus building, and project management skills.

BRAZIL

Program: *Mudando a História*

Launched: 2001

Projected reach: 39,900 children, ages 2 to 10, and youth ages 14 to 24

Focus: Trains young people to serve as reading mentors, who then teach disadvantaged children the joys of reading and learning.

CHILE

Program: *Conéctate*

Launched: 2005

Projected reach: 550 youth, ages 18 to 25

Focus: Provides vocational and life skills training and job placement services to disadvantaged youth in Santiago and the Bio Bio region.

COLOMBIA

Program: *Conéctate*

Launched: 2005

Projected reach: 475 youth, ages 16 to 21

Focus: Equips disadvantaged youth with training in information technology skills, while developing their self-esteem, creative and critical thinking, communications skills, and responsibility.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Program: *Make a Connection - Pripoj se*

Launched: 2002

Projected reach: 1,200 youth ages 16 to 24

Focus: Provides small grants to youth groups to carry out volunteer projects, while also providing training in project management, budget planning, and fundraising.

FINLAND

Program: *Zest*

Launched: 2003

Projected reach: 80,000 young people, ages 13 to 15

Focus: High profile individuals, including athletes, visit schools, giving talks on life skills. Youth have access to life skills tools on a special program website, and teachers are equipped with lesson plans for follow-up teaching.

HUNGARY

Program: *Kapcsolodj be*

Launched: 2002

Projected reach: 2,855 youth, ages 14 to 20

Focus: Youth receive training and small grants to develop volunteer projects. Participants develop valuable life skills while contributing to their communities.

MEXICO

Program: *Camara! Ahí nos vemos!*

Launched: 2001

Projected reach: 4,250 young people ages 10 to 24

Focus: Coaches young adults to work with children in producing short documentary films in which they reflect on life and challenges in their communities.

NETHERLANDS

Program: *Youth Press Agencies*

Launched: 2005

Projected reach: 600 young people, ages 12 to 16

Focus: Young people develop key life skills such as creativity, communication, and analytical thinking through producing media projects.

NIGERIA

Program: *Leadership for Health*

Launched: 2005

Reach: 3,500 youth, ages 17 to 30

Focus: Develops leadership and life skills among youth who are trained to run HIV/AIDS-focused initiatives.

PERU

Program: *De Calle a Calle*

Launched: 2003

Projected reach: 900 youth, ages 16 to 20, 180 parents

Focus: Provides life skills education and volunteer opportunities to youth growing up in three of Lima's poorest communities, while transforming public perceptions of young people's capabilities.

POLAND

Program: *Przylacz sie!*

Launched: 2001

Projected reach: 2,400 young people, ages 16 to 22

Focus: Provides small grants to young people to launch volunteer projects. Participants acquire life skills and experience that enhance their job prospects, while making a difference in their communities.

RUSSIA

Program: *Make a Connection*

Launched: 2004

Projected reach: 5,000 young people ages 15 to 25

Focus: Encourages a volunteer spirit among Russian youth through providing training and support to launch community projects.

SOUTH AFRICA

Program: *Make a Connection*

Launched: 2000

Projected reach: 24,600 youth

Focus: Equips unemployed college graduates with essential life skills to secure jobs or pursue self-employment. Participants improve their interpersonal relations and self-confidence, while developing problem-solving and computer skills.

THAILAND

Program: *Make a Connection*

Launched: 2003

Projected reach: 2,500 young people, ages 10 to 25; 5,700 teachers, parents, and community leaders

Focus: Provides young people with life skills education and training to carry out volunteer projects in their communities.

TURKEY

Program: *Dreams Workshop*

Launched: 2003

Projected reach: 32,660 children, ages 7 to 16, and adolescents, ages 16 to 26

Focus: Supports the positive development of disadvantaged young people in Turkey through training teenage volunteers to help educate children.

UNITED KINGDOM

Program: *Life Routes*

Launched: 2001

Projected reach: 18,500 young people, ages 11 to 16; 350 teachers and program practitioners

Focus: Development of a life skills curriculum now being used in over 600 schools. Through the curriculum, students develop their emotional literacy, ability to relate to others, and connection to the greater community.

UNITED STATES

Program: *Make a Connection Thru Art*

Launched: 2004

Projected reach: 1,270 young people, ages 11 to 13

Focus: Enables young people to express themselves, and their views on the world, through art. In the process, they gain critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills.

VENEZUELA

Program: *Conéctate*

Launched: 2005

Projected reach: 500 youth, ages 18 to 29

Focus: Trains youth in information technology skills and enhances their employability through developing interpersonal, teamwork, communication, and creative thinking skills.