In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), youth represent 40 percent of the working age population but face unemployment rates three times higher than adults. Barriers to youth employment include low educational attainment and a lack of relevant skills for the workplace. The region’s youth that are neither working nor in school or training are at higher risk for risky or delinquent behaviors and are less able to break out of poverty and reach their full potential to contribute to society. Workforce readiness programs that provide high-quality training, career counselling, and job placement services are needed to prepare underserved youth to find and succeed in jobs.

IYF’s 25 years of experience in LAC demonstrates that when proper investments are made to improve the availability and quality of employability services for youth, their chances of securing decent work increase. A seminal program, entra21, implemented with the Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) of the IDB from 2001 to 2011 validated approaches to provide good employability services for disadvantaged youth in the region and reached 137,000 youth in 21 countries. IYF initiatives in LAC draw on this experience—and a strong network of 75 local youth-serving institutions—to provide vulnerable young people with technical and life skills training aligned to employers’ needs, along with career and job placement support. IYF’s proven success informed the creation of NEO, a region-wide alliance of public, private, and nonprofit partners in 11 countries with the IDB/MIF to provide innovative solutions to youth employability challenges.

IYF’s EquipYouth program provided 2,700 young people in Latin American with technical and life skills training; 68% of them found jobs with the program’s help. A company spokeswoman from Cantol S.A., a metallurgical company in Peru that hired some of the program graduates, noted that the benefits have been mutual: “At first, our aim was to support a project to help youth in need, but we later realized that many of the young people had a great deal to offer our company.”
Through partnerships with public sector development agencies, multinational companies and local implementers, IYF addresses critical skills gaps in LAC by offering market-relevant training and job placement support to youth, while working with local government to improve their alignment with youth and labor market needs. Current program approaches include:

**Second chance opportunities for vulnerable youth** provide technical and socio-emotional skills training, internships, career guidance and job placement support for young people neither studying nor working, or otherwise facing economic or social disadvantages. By improving these youths’ employment prospects, we help set them on a path toward a more productive and secure future. In Mexico and the Caribbean, IYF programs focus on youth at-risk of being pulled into violence or delinquent behavior.

**Training programs for jobs in specific sectors** are designed in partnership with major companies to prepare young people for entry-level jobs in certain market sectors. Initiatives have focused on industrial sector skills with Caterpillar, customer service skills with Walmart, and hospitality-related skills for young employees at Hilton. IYF adapts curricula such as its flagship life skills program, Passport to Success®, to build the types of skills a sector seeks.

**Aligning education systems with the labor market** involves engaging in dialogue with workforce training systems to identify the causes of the mismatch between what they offer and what local employers require. IYF helps establish multi-sectoral working groups, identify skills and training gaps, design curriculum upgrades, and put in place mechanisms for ongoing dialogue between employers and training systems. With support from USAID and PepsiCo, IYF is working in Mexico with technical education providers to better align training with local labor markets, offer career guidance, and improve students’ access to relevant information on job opportunities.

**Forging multi-stakeholder alliances** at the local and national level helps ensure ownership and relevance of youth employability solutions. New Employment Opportunities (NEO), a region-wide initiative led by IYF and the IDB/MIF, is working to close the gap between youth skills and employer demand for a qualified workforce in 11 countries. The initiative provides high-impact, market-relevant training and employment services for one million of the region’s disadvantaged youth, through alliances of government, private sector, educational, and nonprofit entities.

**Promoting young social entrepreneurs** through fellowships and networking support, in collaboration with local universities, YouthActionNet® encourages young leaders to take their innovative solutions to societal problems to the next level. IYF has supported fellows directly and through nine local leadership institutes that have reached over 500 young social entrepreneurs across the LAC region.