

Obra Program: Innovation Grants

Impact and Lessons Learned

Obra is a two-year USAID-supported initiative that promotes collaborative strategies to ensure youth at risk gain increased access to services and programs they need to learn, work and lead. The program was developed in response to U.S. President Obama's 2009 Summit of the Americas call for renewed and strengthened partnerships that offer greater opportunities among the region's youth. Obra facilitated the creation of three sub-regional partnerships, with hubs in Jamaica, Guatemala and Peru.

To accomplish its goals, Obra sought to **mobilize** partners, resources and knowledge; **advocate** around major issues facing youth in the Latin America and Caribbean region; and **innovate** by investing in and building upon promising practices through Innovation Grants.

What are Innovation Grants?

Obra Innovation Grants, aimed at providing direct services in education, skills-building and employability to at least 1,000 youth at risk, were designed to validate and generate lessons learned in the field. Seven grants totaling \$360,000 were awarded: 6 grants of \$40,000 each supported projects in Jamaica and Peru; and a \$120,000 grant in Guatemala.

What was the process?

A request for proposals was released in August 2010 for Obra partners in Jamaica and Peru. [Guatemala partners elected to have a single larger grant, with broad collaboration among members.] A 1:1 leverage was required from local sources, and grantees were encouraged to be creative in forming alliances and experimenting with new approaches. Projects were approved by October 2010, and the one-year grants began shortly thereafter.

What were the innovations?

The World Bank describes innovation as finding new ways of “doing different things, and doing things differently.” For Obra, this translated into applying new or improved approaches or technologies or adapting approaches to different circumstances such as geographic location or population group; building new sets of institutional alliances; or increasing partner and youth access to markets, opportunities and influence. The table on the back page provides a brief description of each sub grant (and the type of innovation involved) on the left, and project results on the right.

Innovation Grant Outcomes

As a result of these Innovation Grants, some 1,511 youth were trained in the seven projects—with a total of \$532,000 leveraged in cash and in-kind contributions, significantly exceeding targets. All youth received job skills and/or life skills training, including how to use violence prevention strategies. Youth attitudes and optimism improved, with 95% of respondents avowing they could achieve goals they set, a 14% improvement over baseline. Their sense of “connectedness” improved as well, as youth reported they could depend on others when trouble arises (83% to 89%) and that they have an adult in their life they could turn to for help (80% to 89%). Furthermore, their awareness of healthy outlets in their community—such as sports, culture and religious activities—rose 10% to 84%. And finally, 6% more participating youth were employed in formal jobs than when the project started.

Lessons learned

A number of interesting lessons coalesced around how best to work with youth highly at risk, i.e., those growing up in violent neighborhoods, and those who have already made poor choices such as dropping out of school and/or joining gangs. As a rule, the more “at risk” a young person—having multiple risk factors, or one which is acute—the more support and resources will be needed.

Outreach and Engagement of At-Risk Youth Takes Time Youth at risk take longer to develop the confidence that a program can offer them something of value. It also takes time for such youth to engage with the project in the first place. All Innovation Grants, especially those working in the most violent neighborhoods of Kingston, Jamaica (AYF and CF) needed more time to build trust and establish communications between staff and youth. Among good practices: ensure youth and their families buy into the program early on; involve them in program design and key project decisions; and assist youth in “strengthening their voice” and expressing their ideas.

Offer safe spaces, connect with youth, provide relevant support It is important to provide a safe, healthy and productive environment where youth “connect” with adults, trainers, mentors and staff who are trained to work with this demographic. RedNAJ’s experience in Peru is invaluable in terms of building trusting relationships with youth as they leave the juvenile justice system, with strong youth-adult relationships forged and continually strengthened. Similarly, Grupo Ceiba’s and Alianza Joven’s work in Guatemala underscores the need for organizations to establish themselves as legitimate actors in local communities in order to be able to form relationships with ex-gang members, and accompany them as they chart a new course in life. Experience also shows that positive and continuous communication must be maintained, and clear expectations established, e.g. requiring regular attendance, and abiding by rules/norms. Furthermore, culturally-relevant methods must be used in order to connect with youth and help them learn. Visual arts, technology, games, sports and other means of capturing youths’ imagination are essential, e.g. AYF’s use of music, video and dance, and IPAE’s exploration of games and community service days. Finally, stipends for transportation and food must be considered in order to enable consistent participation in training.

Skills-building is Key to Success Programs must continually gauge whether youth are learning the critical skills they need. Given the fragile environments they live in, youth at risk need additional life skills training to ensure that behavior change takes place and resilience is built. Conflict management was an essential component in all seven projects, and remedial programs were key for some youth to gain basic literacy and numeracy skills as they started training.

Engage Government and the Private Sector Youth at risk remain a low priority for governments in the LAC region, and continued advocacy is needed to increase attention and resources. Also, deepening engagement with the private sector can be a game-changer in terms of connecting youth with internships and jobs, and also in influencing government programs to become more relevant. This was emphasized by PSOJ’s leadership in both *Obra* and the YUTE Program for youth highly at risk in Jamaica as well as Rise’s joint effort with Sandals. When businesses collaborate to contribute ideas, time and resources, programs are more successful.

<p>Area Youth Foundation (Jamaica) explored collective production of music videos as a technique for life skills training and team building for youth highly at risk in Kingston’s violent neighborhoods; and provided job skills and entrepreneurial training in ornamental fish farming. <i>(Innovative approach and increased access to entrepreneurial opportunities)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 110 youth trained • 2 music videos produced • 91% of youth showed greater optimism about life • By the end of the project, 25 youth had started businesses, 26 were working, and 50 are continuing education and skills-building
<p>Children First (Jamaica) strengthened its approach to training and placing “unattached” youth in quality jobs by offering new vocational skills trainings and enhancing linkages with businesses to open up new internship and job opportunities for youth highly at risk. <i>(Working deep within violent communities, increased alliances with businesses)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 79 youth trained in life skills, violence prevention, videography, cosmetology; 74 completed training; 66 placed in internships; 18 obtained employment; 10 received additional education support • Over 90% of youth were satisfied with the training • One television documentary and one video produced
<p>Rise Life Management Services (Jamaica) teamed up with Junior Achievement and Sandals Foundation to train youth, form five new youth-led businesses (JA Company Challenge) and increase access to hotel shops for selling products these businesses produced. <i>(Innovative partnership structure and increased market opportunities)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 youth received job skills training in customer service, data entry, welding; 20 did internships, 7 placed in jobs • 110 youth trained as entrepreneurs; 5 companies formed • 2 youth entrepreneurs awarded small grants and attended JA Next Generation Conference in Canada, won awards
<p>Interpeace (Guatemala), Grupo Ceiba, Alianza Joven and Ministry of Education introduced new technical and life skills (including conflict resolution) training to the highly effective Escuelas Abiertas (EA) program which serves over 250,000 youth weekly, thus improving its programming model. <i>(New approach to improving the EA model, and broad alliance structure)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 864 youth trained in computer skills, computer repair, conflict prevention, along with psychosocial support • Manual on “12 Strategies for the Prevention of Youth Violence” completed and used in training • Youth participated in forum with Presidential candidates to discuss youth issues and how they relate to national priorities.
<p>EnseñaPeru and RedNAJ adapted an out-of-school conflict resolution model for high school students in order to align in-school and out-of-school approaches to working with youth at risk in violent neighborhoods of Lima. <i>(Applying a methodology to a different environment, formed interesting alliance structure)</i></p>	<p>EnseñaPeru</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 89 youth trained in leadership and life skills • 100% of graduates increased capabilities and self-esteem • One conflict resolution manual adapted for the classroom
<p>Instituto Peruano para Accion Epresarial (Peru), Coherencia and SASE provided combined entrepreneurial and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) training for high school students. <i>(Integrating two methodologies and establishing a unique alliance structure)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 73 youth trained in entrepreneurship and CSR • 31 volunteer entrepreneurship advisors trained • 42 entrepreneurship plans created • Youth participants discuss project on local radio program
<p>Red Jesuita para la Inclusión de la Infancia y la Juventud (RedNAJ) (Peru) strengthened second-chance education and employment services to highly at-risk Peruvian youth, including those coming out of the juvenile justice system. <i>(Deepened its approach to working with youth who are most at risk in Peru)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 156 youth received life skills and employability training, along with psychosocial support • Strengthened institutional support among youth groups, police, Ministry of the Interior, municipalities, fire company and local hospital • Completed 4 adult workshops attended by 287 parents