



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Supporting Positive Youth Development in the Americas

by Mark Feierstein
Photographs courtesy USAID

Carefully folding paper into shapes with his feet, Victor Pereira creates origami and considers what his next painting will look like. Victor, one of six children from a household in the *favelas*, or slums, of Rio de Janeiro, was born with an incurable condition that has left him without use of his hands and arms. Thanks to USAID's Enter Jovem Plus skills training program, he now uses his feet to pursue his dual passions of designing and painting on the computer. Today he wants to attend university and eventually get a job.

Young people like Victor all across Latin America and the Caribbean are eager to continue their studies and enter the workforce. But as youth unemployment increases to as high as three times that of adults in some countries, many young people feel they have no future, that they lack the job skills needed to fill the available vacancies.

Youth in the Americas

Pernicious joblessness among the region's youth has direct costs for economic development: lost revenues; costly social services; higher crime rates; and wasted potential. USAID is doing its part to support positive youth development by partnering with regional governments and the private sector to offer a combination of expanded educational opportunities, demand-driven skills training, and apprenticeships to youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

One such initiative is the network of USAID-supported ¡Supérate! Centers in El Salvador, whose training programs supplement the public education of high-performing students from economically depressed communities. Created by the Fundación Sagrada Palomo in 2004 with a mission of "Transforming Lives Through Education," the majority of the centers' graduates go on to higher education or competitive jobs in the call center industry. More than 1,300 students have already graduated from these centers, which are sponsored and operated by local private sector companies and foundations. Currently there are seven centers operating in El

Salvador and one in Panama. The plan is to replicate the model in across Central America.

The program's laser-like focus on high academic performance, English language fluency, and computer skills is opening doors for participants like fourteen-year-old Esdras Nchemías López. In June 2011, López represented El Salvador in the annual Microsoft Office Worldwide Competition, which featured 228,000 participants—ages 13 to 22—from 57 countries. "In the eighth grade I applied to study in the ADOC ¡Supérate! Center, and thank God I was accepted. Had it not been for this program, I would not have had the computer skills that I needed to achieve this triumph for my country," declared a joyous López.

The ¡Supérate! model targets high-achieving students from poor backgrounds, but USAID's Education for Success targets youth from poor and isolated communities on the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast who may or may not be in school. These youth are considered vulnerable to the influence of drug trafficking and other illicit activities in their areas. Tutoring in English, vocational training, comprehensive life skills, and

educational scholarships are just some of the resources available to participants.

Teachers like Ms. Idania Cayasso from the Pearl Lagoon community welcome the initiative. "The monitoring and tutoring activities carried out by Education for Success has kept our spirits high and helped us work with not just the few students that have scholarships, but with all our students," she says.

Of course, stand-alone programs will not significantly improve prospects for Latin American and Caribbean youth. So USAID counts on support from national and municipal governments. In El Salvador, USAID worked closely with local governments to draft municipal crime prevention plans.

USAID has been pivotal in creating partnerships with the region's dynamic private sector. "Public-private partnerships are the right path to transform this country," says Chevron Brazil's Lia Blower. "The partnership we have with USAID is based on a common goal. We work together, and we build our strategies together."

One such partnership is the *Mais Unidos* group. Created in 2006 by the US Government and more than 100 US companies operating in Brazil, *Mais Unidos* seeks to advance the country's social and economic development through public and private partnerships. Today, the group supports the Enter Jovem Plus program, which offers youth from tough communities in Brazil's northeast and Rio de Janeiro training in high-demand job skills including English, computing, and customer service.

Some Enter Jovem Plus graduates credit the program with giving them a new lease on life. Twenty-one-year-old Andréia Oliveira dos Santos, who now teaches at Enter Jovem Plus Rio and was recently accepted to a public university, is one of these graduates. The youngest of fifteen children from the Rio *favelas*, Andréia became a mother at the tender age of fifteen. "My family is very proud. I was very honored to have been given the



Opposite: Youth Movement against Violence in Guatemala prepare for one of their outreach campaigns to promote the importance of violence prevention. Left: Students involved in the Enter Jovem Plus attend a forum aimed at increasing job market access for disadvantaged youth in Brazil



Left: Students at White Marl Primary and Junior High School in St. Catherine, Jamaica showed an upward trend in their performance on the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT), thanks in part to the online practice tests initiated by USAID-Community Empowerment and Transformation (COMET) Project and the e-learning company GoGSAT. Below: Working on national, regional, and local levels in Peru, USAID-sponsored programs that provide technical assistance have enhanced the quality of education in rural public schools

opportunity to become an educator in a project that has helped me to be reborn," she says. "Enter Jovem Plus gave me the opportunity to be a new Andréia."

But disadvantaged youth are not the only ones who benefit. "The main advantage of hiring Enter Jovem Plus graduates is that they come with a very high level of education and are especially distinguished in customer service," says Breno Acioli of the Carrefour supermarket chain in Recife. "Of all the students that we have hired so far, we haven't had to fire a single one."

The Jamaican business community is hoping for similar results through the USAID-supported Youth Upliftment Through Employment program, launched in March 2011. The program, which provides skills training and counseling to more than 800 poor youth, had its genesis in the May 2010 clashes between predominantly young supporters of a local drug boss and Jamaican security forces. The violence, which left 80 people dead and businesses shuttered, was a clarion call to the private sector to do more to engage and prepare the island's poor and disenfranchised youth.

Youth involvement in crime and associated violence is not unique to Jamaica. Latin American and Caribbean youth are increasingly caught in the cross-hairs of the region's deteriorating security situation, as both perpetrators and victims. The United Nations reports that youth homicide in Latin America is double that of Africa and 36 times that of developed countries.

Through the Obama Administration's regional security initiatives for Central America and the Caribbean, USAID is

creating safe spaces for youth living in acutely violent communities. First opened in 2006, "Por Mi Barrio" ("For my neighborhood") Outreach Centers are now located in some of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. They provide youth like Gabriela Benítez from the San Juan Chamelcón community in Honduras with a peaceful place to study, use the computer, learn English, or play sports. When asked what the center means for neighborhood kids, she replies simply: "The Outreach Center is our refuge."

Residents embrace and protect the centers because they are co-owners. Typically, a church or local government donates the space, the community provides volunteers, and USAID pays for basic operational materials and start-up salaries. After six months, the community assumes the management of the center, allowing USAID to channel its resources to opening other centers in surrounding communities.

Broad community support has helped establish zones of calm around some

centers. "Before the Outreach Center there were two options for youth: the 18th Street gang and the Salvatrucha gang. It was hostile before and no one went out to play. Now they do," explains Carlos Rivera, Coordinator for the Santa Ana Center in El Salvador.

And in San Salvador's Barrio Lourdes, young residents are thrilled it is peaceful enough for the local Outreach Center to keep its cyber café and games room open until 10 pm, something that was unthinkable when the center first opened a year ago.

These safe havens are also fostering community unity. When youth from Honduras' San Juan Chamelcón Outreach Center organized "Por mi Barrio" weekend soccer matches, the entire neighborhood started coming out to cheer them on. Today the matches have such broad support that games are being played in former no-go areas previously considered gang territory.

The US Government's regional security initiatives are also helping build trust between youth, their communities, and





law enforcement through community policing. "We can now talk openly to the police without fear for the first time in years," commented a community leader from Kingston's Tivoli neighborhood on the one-year anniversary of the violent uprising there.

Latin American and Caribbean youth are by no means passive recipients of USAID's assistance. Through youth-led movements like Armando Paz and the

Youth Movement against Violence, they are making their voices heard in the dialogue about policies and programs for at-risk youth.

To be sure, the challenges facing poor and disenchanted youth in Latin America and the Caribbean cannot and should not be solved by USAID alone. They are but one piece of a much broader effort by other US Government agencies, donors, multilateral organizations, and host

country counterparts to create more peaceful and prosperous societies. Too many youth in the region have already lost their lives, lost loved ones, or given up on youthful hopes and dreams. Now is the time to empower and prepare brave young people like Victor, Esdras, Andréia, and Gabriela to make their mark on their countries and the world. ✦

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Above: US First Lady Michelle Obama visiting a ¡Supérate! center in San Salvador, El Salvador this past spring. Left: YUTE participants attend a workforce training skills program in Kingston, Jamaica