

Creating Change, Creating Opportunities

Promising Practices in Youth Enterprise Development for At-Risk and Gang- Involved Youth

Wendy-Ann Rowe, Richard Jones and Katharine Andrade
August 2011

ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT
CASE STUDY



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A. Background

History shows direct links between societies with large numbers of young people and political and social violence, especially when employment prospects are limited. Many countries that face a surge in the number of youth entering the labor market struggle to provide sufficient job opportunities to meet the growing demand. In Central America, 50% of the population is under the age of 18, with many youth completing only a 5th grade education. Young people, especially males, are sometimes drawn toward violence and illegal activities once they find themselves out of school and out of work.

Over the past three years, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in partnership with YouthBuild International (YBI) has been implementing an integrated program called *Jóvenes Constructores de Centroamerica (JCC)*. The effort supports enterprise development and employment opportunities for youth in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. CRS and YBI have enlisted the support of seven local NGOs¹ to provide services to a broad spectrum of youth who are at risk of becoming involved in gangs or other criminal activities. The focus of the interventions is geared at drawing young people away from risky activities through programs that include: 1) education and skills training through coordination with vocational training institutions; 2) community asset building by focusing on developing work experience, discipline and preparedness, and providing positive and “constructive” images of youth; 3) life skills development with a focus on conflict resolution and restorative justice that allow young people to build and restore positive relationships in environments plagued by violence and; 4) employability and enterprise development through alliances with private sector businesses to generate employment opportunities or support in developing small enterprises. The program offers a comprehensive, holistic, and integrated approach that focuses on the personal, social, academic, leadership and economic skills of the youth involved.

1. CRS partners include: El Salvador–Fundacion De desarrollo Juvenil and Fundacion–Quetzacoatl. In Guatemala, Puente Belice and fundacion CEIPA. In Honduras, Caritas Comayagua and Nicaragua Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular(Cantera). In 2010, Asociación Fe y Alegria began implementing Jóvenes Constructores in El Salvador as part of an expansion with support from USAID.

While creating links to formal employment has been one of the goals of the project, a number of challenges have arisen, particularly in linking at-risk and former gang-involved youth to private sector entities. These include:

- Stigma attached to youth based on their communities of residence.
- Lack of trust among employers if youth have been involved in criminal activities.
- Challenges in youth acclimating to a corporate culture.

Most of the young people targeted by this project earn an income by running their own businesses in the informal sector. CRS, YBI and its local partners are supporting their needs in a variety of promising ways. This case study will focus on some of these promising approaches and highlight important lessons that have been gleaned through exercises conducted by CRS and its partner staff on how to strengthen the trainings offered to youth.

B. Creating Enterprise Development Opportunities for Youth

In each of the countries where CRS, YBI and its partners have been working, national and municipal governments have sought to implement programs to reintegrate at-risk and gang-involved youth into society. Some of these initiatives have focused on improving self-esteem and supporting employment generation. However, many of the programs preclude the involvement of youth from communities plagued by violence. Additionally, given the challenges of linking youth to employment opportunities particularly through the private sector, one of the goals of the *Jóvenes Constructores* Project has been to support young people in the creation of their own businesses or self-employment strategies.

The enterprise development program for youth comprises several key steps designed to ensure the success of youth participants. Each of these phases—along with promising approaches that are supporting the capacity of youth to sustain their enterprises—will be discussed in detail. They include:

- The induction phase
- Enterprise development training
- The development of business and investment plans
- Accessing finance
- Follow-up through an accompaniment approach

1. Targeting At-Risk Youth—The Induction Phase

Prior to the start of the project, CRS and its local partners worked within specific municipalities to identify poor neighborhoods with gang presence and activity. A series of rapid appraisals were conducted following which each implementing partner was encouraged to facilitate community events to publicize the project and inform youth and their families of admission requirements. Interested young people were then encouraged to submit applications to the local partner organization.

The basic requisites to enter the program were:

- Youth age 15-25 (verified by birth certificate)
- Income level (priority given to poorest families; <\$2/day)
- Residence in target neighborhoods
- Grade level completion of at least 3rd grade (can read and write)
- Currently unemployed and out of school
- Willingness to participate in community projects
- Willingness to study, work, participate in the entire program and follow rules
- At risk, gang-involved or vulnerable

Once youth are selected and enter the program, their induction begins with a series of reflection exercises referred to as the five challenges. The purposes of these five challenges are to ensure the commitment of the youth in the project.

1. **The family challenge.** Parents are invited to the center to participate in the orientation with the goal of strengthening family ties between the parents, the students and the institution, and ensure that there is a strong commitment from the youth as well as their families in completing the course.
2. **The individual/personal challenge.** In this phase youth are required to reflect and internalize the commitment needed to be part of the program. A staff psychologist/counselor helps the youth with personal exploration that covers:
 - Who they are and how they view themselves.
 - Their perception of how others view them.
 - What they want to accomplish in their lives.

The program is designed to affirm that the students are capable of accomplishing their goals and seeks to reinforce this awareness at different levels of their training. Once youth enter the program, they acquire key life skills training, which focuses on the eight keys to excellence² that guide young people toward a positive future full of confidence, motivation, creativity, team work, leadership and valuable life principles and enterprise development. The eight keys are:

- Integrity — match behavior with values.
- Failure Leads to Success — learn from mistakes.
- Speak With Good Purpose — speak honestly and kindly.
- This Is It! — make the most of every moment.

2. See www.8keys.org. Many YouthBuild programs in the US have adopted this program.

- Commitment — make your dreams happen.
- Ownership — take responsibility for actions.
- Flexibility — be willing to do things differently.
- Balance — live you best life.

These are critical competencies needed for success in employment or entrepreneurship. The program develops these through daily practice, reflection groups, skits, and role playing.

3. **The community challenge.** The model utilizes community-based construction projects to facilitate the acquisition of critical leadership, job preparation, basic education, and technical skills training competencies. During the course of their participation, young people create permanent community assets. Some examples of these community projects include building community centers, rehabilitating parks, restoring school infrastructure and repairing computer centers.

Youth map their community and, based on the needs they identify and propose a service project—something tangible that will daily reinforce, to them and their community, how they have benefitted the neighborhood. Youth meet with community and municipal leaders—including police, with whom they may have a troubled history—to discuss the project and solicit in-kind support. Young people take on full responsibility for the community project and must continually practice good stress and conflict management, work well as a team, demonstrate leadership and discipline, and solve problems effectively. These life skills are almost entirely new for many youth. The key for the young people to incorporate the skills into their daily life is to have repeated opportunities to put them into practice and turn them into habits.

The community challenge highlights the importance of youth assuming leadership in their community by emphasizing the positive roles they can play. This challenge is important because it:

- Encourages youth to contribute to the development of their community.

- Helps them to see themselves as productive and active participants of their communities.
- Demonstrates the importance of management and leadership for youth and the role they can play in their communities.
- Shows that small actions in the community can influence change.
- Illustrates ways that young people can better relate to each other.
- Emphasizes the importance of meeting with other youth through formation once they have established their business.
- Emphasizes the importance of making links to the municipalities.



Silverlight for CRS

Nellis, a 23-year-old graduate of the Fe Y Alegria vocational training site in Santa Ana, El Salvador, initially heard about the project through two staff members who came to her community to promote the program. She decided to apply to the course and chose to learn bread making.

Nellis expressed her appreciation for the training and compared the skills and knowledge she received for her new business with the community challenge aspect of the project. Her community challenge was to build a community center with other members of her cohort. She said “at first I was nervous and ashamed to be making cement but overcame these feelings. When it came time to make and sell my bread in the market I was no longer embarrassed . . . this exercise taught me that anything you put your heart to do you can accomplish.”

When she needed to venture out on her own in developing her business it was this experience that convinced her that she had the skills to accomplish her goals. Nellis is the first of her family to own her own business.

These skills—communication, problem solving, planning, leadership and community service—all are part of social entrepreneurship. These same skills are useful in business entrepreneurship and the program makes these links through daily reflections with youth so that they can recognize all the skills they have developed through community service and building community assets.

4. **The work challenge.** The work challenge focuses on getting young people prepared for the workplace. This includes supporting them in the creation of CVs, preparing them for interviews, educating them on proper work attire and how to interact with co-workers.
5. **The business challenge.** The business challenge seeks to stimulate the entrepreneurial skills of the youth by engaging them in a series of exercises that are intended to expose them to various aspects of starting and managing a business. One approach used in this challenge is referred to as the “create your own business” or CREA which will be discussed in more detail below.



YouthBuild program in Los Atlantias community in San Salvador, El Salvador. Many youths of high risk communities have the opportunity to learn different abilities in the YouthBuild Program. Silverlight for CRS

At the end of the induction, a commitment letter is signed by the young people and they are enrolled in the program. This entitles them to move to the next phase which entails the actual enterprise development and vocational training. Upon completion of the full training program, staff organize a graduation ceremony to which the parents and other community leaders are invited.

Promising Practice during the Induction—Create Your Own Business or CREA

This model is introduced to youth at the induction phase to determine whether they have the interest or desire to enter the program. The CREA exercise generally takes a week to complete. The premise behind the model is to test the entrepreneurial skills of the youth by exposing them to a hands-

on, low cost, and low risk business venture. The youth are encouraged to conduct a market analysis in their area, and with an investment of \$5 they are asked to purchase inputs to create a product and sell it in the local market place. They are given the option to set up an individual business or enter into a partnership with up to three other youth. They are encouraged to track their expenses and income using a simple tracking sheet which also allows them to calculate profit. During the exercise, they have to figure out how to package, price and sell their products. They usually select business ventures that are easy and a part of their everyday lives already. They may sell mangos with chili and lime juice, sandwiches, hot dogs, pastries, or handmade jewelry.

For youth that are working in a group, they inevitably learn to share tasks and responsibilities. They often work with peers they have only just met. The interaction through group CREAs results in the development of important communication and team building skills.

During the CREA exercise youth participants are given an opportunity to reflect upon:

- How they felt about the exercise.
- The biggest challenges they experienced through the process.
- Whether they liked the process of initiating a business.
- Whether they feel prepared to take the next step.

At the end of the challenge, those who earned a profit will share the money with other members. Youth learn that they have skills that they never knew existed. They are encouraged to take a measured risk, learn from their failures and successes, talk with people and move beyond their comfort zones, stretching their abilities and creativity. More importantly they all have a chance to see themselves as entrepreneurs, not just for business ventures but in other aspects of their lives as well. For some, this little taste is all they need to get them going with self-employment options. It is at this phase that many determine whether they wish to proceed with the course.

Important Lessons Learned for Youth Induction

- One of CRS' partners, *Fe Y Alegria* in Santa Ana, made the decision that for its most recent cohort of students they would require that the students invest in their own CREA experiences rather than giving them the \$5 investment. From this experiment the staff observed that the youth were more willing to take risks with their own funds and initiated more creative enterprises than when the funds were handed to them. The partner staff felt they were more cautious about using the capital given by the project and had a greater sense of ownership of the process when they used their own funds.
- In Usulután, the youth, working in groups, were loaned \$20 during the CREA exercise and had to repay the \$20. Every group involved was able to repay the \$20 no-interest loan, and most made a modest profit. For many this was their first experience in receiving and managing a loan, which was important in that it introduced them to different types of financial services (such as use of personal savings or external loans in establishing their CREA) while they received their vocational training. At the same time, youth learned to manage risk by starting small, gaining confidence and learning from their errors.
- Another important lesson learned under the CREA were the benefits of exposing all youth participants in the training program to the model irrespective of whether they continued on the enterprise development, employment, or continuing studies track. Program staff highlighted that the CREA provided an important indicator in determining whether youth demonstrated an entrepreneurial spirit, commitment and drive which were essential to completing the training program.
- In order for the project to support youth entrepreneurial skills, CRS and its partners have found that it is essential for staff to have similar experiences and trainings. To that end, CRS has had almost all program staff in El Salvador trained in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTD) certified Empretec model to develop intrapreneurial³ and entrepreneurial skills and capabilities. Through this

3. Generally defined as behaving like an entrepreneur but within a larger organization.

training, staff had to set up and put into practice a business venture in one week while participating in the rigorous 56 hour week long training. Staff members then work with young people to replicate what they themselves learned and implemented.

- Having the youth hear the experiences of successful business entrepreneurs was an important motivating factor as they participated in the enterprise development training. In the past cohort youth highlighted that one of the memorable events was hearing from successful entrepreneurs about their businesses. In addition to the testimonies of these entrepreneurs, one of the important next steps being considered is to link potential youth entrepreneurs with business mentors through local rotary clubs or national business associations.
- Reinforcing entrepreneurial skills through daily practices of the eight keys of excellence helped youth to integrate and practice these skills so that they felt they were not just ideas or principles but habits that could serve them well.

2. Supporting Youth Enterprises Through Enterprise Development Training

The program is designed to support the vocational training needs of youth as well as build the capacity to manage day-to-day operations of their own enterprises. This entails providing youth with essential skills needed to manage a business. Some of the topics covered in enterprise development training are:

- How to conduct a market survey or analysis
- Use of sales technologies
- Quality assurance of goods and services
- Understanding the types of inputs and materials needed
- Operating a business
- How to manage human resources

- Development of work policies (rules and norms)
- Financial analysis and creation of an investment plan
- Determining production costs
- Making sales projections
- Creating a cash flow statement
- How to determine profitability

These competencies make a critical difference for youth as they plan for their future. All youth in the program must develop a life plan with specific goals. During the six-month training youth make daily, weekly and monthly goals and learn how to assess their own progress, learn from failure, trouble shoot and persevere.

Promising Practice—Linking Youth to Local Entrepreneurs

One approach that the program has been exploring is that of linking youth entrepreneurs (during and after the training) with businesses owners that are looking to expand their sales distribution channels.

There is one initiative underway where a local business in El Salvador, Sabor Amigo, has been providing inputs (condiments and spices) and training to:

- Assist young people to prepare quality dishes;
- Supply them with low-cost condiments to use in their recipes;



Carmen Aida de Paz Ruano is taking cooking lessons at Fe y Alegría Soyapango, a partner of CRS. Carmen had a series of problems with her family. She escaped her home and then found her way to a better path at Fe y Alegría where she is preparing to be a chef. Silverlight for CRS

- Calculate and track profit;
- Define marketing strategies;
- Provide them with \$30 in seed capital to start their own sales ventures; and
- Link youth suppliers to youth enterprises to create value chains.

Over three Friday mornings, a group of 25 youth learned different recipes (fried chicken, soy hamburgers, chili dogs, and sausage). That same afternoon they took on the challenge of selling the food they had made that morning. Then they discussed costs and marketing approaches. In addition to developing their own enterprises, some youth will become local distributors of their brand of condiments. After the training ended, participants had the option of continuing the partnership with *Sabor Amigo* or returning the seed capital and seeking a different opportunity. Those that continue, will be trained in making the buns or bread for these products, given that many of the final products are prepared foods, such as hamburgers, chili dogs, sausages, or fried chicken.

The benefits of this relationship are three-fold. First, the youth are taught culinary skills by *Sabor Amigo* and are shown how to prepare and cost their food items for sale. This supports their eventual businesses. Second, *Sabor Amigo* invites the interested youth to become distributors of their products. Third, the youth now understand what is needed to create a successful business. This initiative, while still in its early developmental stage, has allowed some youth to receive training from *Sabor Amigo* in the use of their condiments and on how to run a successful microenterprise.

Important Lessons for Enterprise Development Training

1. Tapping into market information through market assessments and analysis has been critical in informing the type of trainings offered to youth for enterprise development. The partners were conducting some assessments and had a dynamic approach whereby the trainings offered were being informed by local private sector organizations needs and government assessments. The partners felt that having this perspective was essential in ensuring that the youth were being trained in marketable skills.

2. Periodic evaluations of the quality of each segment of enterprise development training are needed to ensure that the youth are retaining what they are learning. The trainings offered to youth need to be youth friendly and accessible at their level of understanding. Some of the youth in El Salvador expressed difficulties in applying the skills they learned during the training once they were on their own and trying to manage their business affairs. They said they needed simplified tools for bookkeeping their business expenses, for example. In Nicaragua, youth reported that robust accompaniment and coaching (visits and evaluations at least every 15 days) were the keys to their success in management.
3. Based on the experience with Sabor Amigo, the project is very interested in linking youth with businesses to support their engagement in distribution channels or micro-franchises. Both these approaches hold promise in that they could help bridge the gap between local private sector business owners and youth that are unable to fit easily into formal employment opportunities. In order for the model to be successful, however, a number of significant barriers will need to be overcome. Some of the tangible steps that would need to be taken are:
 - Establish relationships with committed businesses and entrepreneurs that understand the challenges of at-risk and former gang-involved youth and have a vision to work with this them.
 - Work to dispel negative perceptions and the lack of trust that are often associated with this target group. Business owners will need to establish strong trust relationships as the youth will inevitably represent the brand of the business owner as a franchise owner or distributor.
 - Secure relationships with businesses that are willing to provide training and technical support to the youth as they become formal distributors or micro-franchise owners.

3. Planning for the Future—Business Plan Development

Once youth have been engaged in the enterprise training, they are encouraged to develop business plans. The intention was that CRS, YBI, the local implementing partners and microenterprise training partners in the alliance would all have modules for developing small business plans and training. The purpose of developing the business plans was to help the young people access seed capital to establish their businesses once they graduated from the training.

Promising Practices in Business Plan Creation

The process of business plan creation has been more systematic in Nicaragua than in other JCC countries. In Nicaragua each youth must write, present and defend a business plan in front of a committee composed of CRS staff, partner staff, and the course instructor. Youth reported that the plan is an essential part of their business and is heavily relied upon.

In Nicaragua the partners developed a simple concept for the business plan using some key principles of marketing:

- Place: where will you locate your business
- Product: what is your product, how will you sell, package etc.
- Price: what is the cost of your product and what will you earn
- Publicity: what is your market and how will you promote it.

In El Salvador, youth defend their business plan before a committee consisting of the local partner, a business professor and an entrepreneur. The committee will make comments and recommend for seed capital or revision. The purpose of the committee is not to reject the efforts but to assist young people to assume responsibility, take the plan seriously and to help them use the plan to develop a viable business.

Important Lessons for Business Plan Development

1. Youth interviewed in El Salvador had created business plans with the assistance of a consultant to access seed capital. Once they received the seed capital, however, very few if any of the graduates used the business

plans to support their business activities. The business plans should be viewed as a management tool for youth to help inform the financial needs of their businesses as they forecast growth opportunities and as such should be simple and easy to use.

2. The business plan should be developed to leverage additional financing from other sources and not just as a means of accessing the seed capital or grant from the project. As CRS and its partners explore potential linkages between local microfinance service providers and interested youth, the business planning process could help to lend legitimacy to the youth as they negotiate for financing.
3. In addition to the development of business plans, the youth interviewed expressed the need for simple book keeping templates to help keep daily records of their businesses. This information is critical in informing the business plans regarding how much finance is needed to support their business activities.



*Photo and story by
CRS El Salvador staff*

Gerald Amador Rivas, 20, started a small business repairing cell phones and selling accessories upon completing the program 18 months ago and receiving \$250 of seed capital based on his business plan. He runs the business from his parent's house in Nicaragua and earns close to \$300 per month.

“Having a small business has allowed me to earn my own money, to be independent, to help my family and to know that I can do it. It has changed my life. Defending the business plan was hard but the plan helped me to figure out how and when to grow my business.”

4. Financing for Business Startup—Sourcing Seed Capital

To date very few microfinance institutions or banks in the countries where the JCCA project is operating are offering financial services for youth. In El Salvador only a few youth are able to access loans from CRS' partner MFI

Enlace for business purposes and for short-term English language courses to support potential jobs in call centers. Enlace's criteria for engaging youth is to target youth whose parents or grandparents are currently clients of the institution. The youth portfolio for lending within Enlace however is still very nascent.

Given the challenges in accessing financial services, CRS and its partners have been offering seed capital, while project funding permits it, to help youth establish their own businesses. The criteria to qualify for the SEED capital include:

- Successful participation in the CREA.
- The development of a the business or investment plan.
- Delegation of a family member as a co-signer.
- Liquidation of funds (approximately \$200 on average) received within three days and a request to provide financial reports and receipts to the partner.
- Assurance that the investment will be used as specified in the investment plan and in agreement with supporting signatures from:
 - The administrative assistant
 - Project coordinators
 - The family member
 - The youth involved
- Demonstrate whether or not they were earning money from their businesses.

Promising Practice—Microfinance Knowledge and Solutions

Savings and Internal Lending Activities

One opportunity that the program wishes to pursue is the introduction of savings and internal lending activities to youth as they are participating in their enterprise development training. Many youth are unable to access financial services through traditional lending institutions due to their

inability to meet the necessary age and collateral requirements. However there is often a need for financial services to support small scale IGAs and household consumption needs. The introduction of savings and internal lending activities while youth are participating in the training could be an ideal complement to some of the other skills they are receiving. Informal savings groups can help them learn practical skills in financial management, provide a source for accessing small amounts of capital when needed, and reinforce positive habits for saving and investing in the future. CRS currently has experience offering savings and internal lending programming to children and youth but the approach has not yet overlapped with youth participants in the enterprise development projects.

Gabriela and Maria, two participants from the program, decided to save \$187 of their own funds throughout their training to help support the growth of their cosmetology businesses. They were aware that they may be eligible for seed capital from the project once they had graduated and had successful business plans but decided to save that money in the event that they needed to repay the \$200 seed capital. Both young women used their own savings to pay for additional training to improve their skills and help grow their businesses.

Links to Microfinance institutions

Helping young people access financial services is a challenge, particularly as many youth are unable to meet the necessary collateral requirement that qualifies them for a loan. In El Salvador, CRS has been partnering with Enlace, a longstanding microfinance institution partner, to develop and offer financial services to youth. To date, Enlace has provided loans to 1,500 young people and has facilitated the organization of an additional 4,000 youth into savings groups.

Important Lessons for Improving Youth Access to Business Finance

- With the exception of the seed capital provided by the program, it was not clear that the students or graduates knew of other financial mechanisms from which they could access funds for their businesses.

The training site provides an ideal platform for the provision of financial literacy training to teach the youth about basic principles of budgeting and personal financial management, including current spending, saving, and borrowing behaviors; creating goals for saving and budgeting through the development of a weekly/monthly budget; understanding the importance of saving; and understanding what financial services exist, including an overview on various financial instruments, eligibility requirements, and the pros and cons of using each.

- The training site also provides an ideal environment where young people can participate in savings and internal lending groups. The activities of saving and responsibly borrowing can in turn help prepare them to become better credit clients.

Ronald Ernesto Flores is 17 years old.

He is in eleventh grade and already has his own business selling hot dogs, which is netting him a profit of \$200 per month. “I started my business in December of 2010 after joining a savings group in my community.

My grandmother is a borrower with ENLACE and they taught us how to organize savings groups. In December

I decided to start a business selling hot dogs because I like to cook, so I got permission from my school to sell my hot dogs there and then I took out a loan from ENLACE. Since I am a minor, my Mom cosigned for the loan, which was for \$50 to buy startup materials. As of April of this year, I paid off the loan and took out another loan for \$150. I use the profits to help my parents pay for my studies.



Vivian Ibania Schurer/CRS

5. Accompaniment and Monitoring

The most common reason that micro-enterprises fail is that youth have difficult socioeconomic circumstances. They often face challenges in managing their businesses, including troubleshooting problems in operating their businesses or using their business funds to cover their basic needs. Monitoring and accompaniment are essential for youth once they have graduated from the program. In the programs in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala, accompaniment begins as soon as training ends, and visits from promoters can be once every week or two weeks, depending on need. Every fifteen days youth meet with micro-enterprise officers to discuss issues that may arise. Bi-weekly meetings among several entrepreneurs have also been held in Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala to share experiences, problems and best practices. Young entrepreneurs say these meetings help keep them motivated, connected and continuously learning.

Important lessons for Accompaniment and Monitoring

1. The incubation period is critical to supporting nascent enterprises. In Honduras, the youth start the businesses while still in the enterprise development training program and have at least one year of follow up. In Nicaragua, follow up also lasts for at least one year.
2. It helps to have the same mentors following up with the youth. This cultivates a relationship of trust which is important for youth entrepreneurs. Also, having practical experience and being able to provide practical advice was viewed as more important than having strong theoretical background. Many of the civil society organizations do not have the practical experience. Often it is the more experienced entrepreneurs who have provided the practical guidance that has been most valued.
3. Monitoring is both technical and motivational. Technical monitoring includes reviewing the business, helping youth as they mull over business decisions, and providing troubleshooting support as youth experience challenges. These monitoring visits also provide an important opportunity to encourage youth that helps to motivate them in their endeavors.

C. Conclusions

These are only a few of the lessons learned from the *Jóvenes Constructores de Centroamerica (JCC)* project over the past three years. As the project has progressed, CRS and its partners have worked diligently to ensure that youth receive skills that are relevant and responsive to market demands. Working with target groups composed of at risk and gang-involved youth has presented specific challenges that require creative solutions in building confidence, life skills, hands-on training, and important links with business entrepreneurs, the private sector and municipalities in ensuring the success of youth participants. CRS and its partners have realized that youth engagement requires a comprehensive approach in preparing them for formal employment or enterprise development. The approaches applied to date have yielded many successes. However, project staff believe that the future success of this project will be contingent on periodic modifications to the program design in order to continue to respond to the needs of the participants.





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