

# Youth Leadership and Civic Engagement

## ▶▶ Building social capital ▶▶

Sustainable development occurs when investments are strategic and relevant to both the needs and capacities of local communities. Investing in young people is the starting point for YMCA programs throughout the world.

YMCAs see young people as assets that produce valuable social returns. When families, communities and institutions invest in the character, civic skills and leadership development of these young people, everyone benefits. When youths are seen as part of the solution, young people's creativity, values and energy can stimulate positive change in the community.

YMCAs invest in the vast untapped potential of young people, empowering them to define and develop their own solutions to social problems. YMCA studies have found that young people are motivated to seek representation, responsibility and accountability within their communities.

“Providing opportunities for young people to be involved in nurturing relationships, to develop life skills, to contribute to their communities and to be part of a group enhances their self-esteem and future success.”

Search Institute study on the impact of youth development programs

## ▶▶ Early assets ▶▶

Asset building begins in the early stages of YMCA members' lives. After-school and weekend programs for youths ages 9-14 focus on building character and life skills through activities centered on self-esteem, family relationships, peer pressure, conflict resolution and health education. These programs provide early opportunities for young people to build core strengths and develop supportive relationships.

Service-learning involves young people in community development initiatives such as peer-to-peer HIV prevention education, environmental conservation and the revitalization of community parks. It also fosters reflection on the role of young people in community development.

*It is easier to think that young people are doing something wrong, like vandalizing something in the community, than to think that young people can do something good. So many people find it strange that we, young people, are ready to come and work for free.*

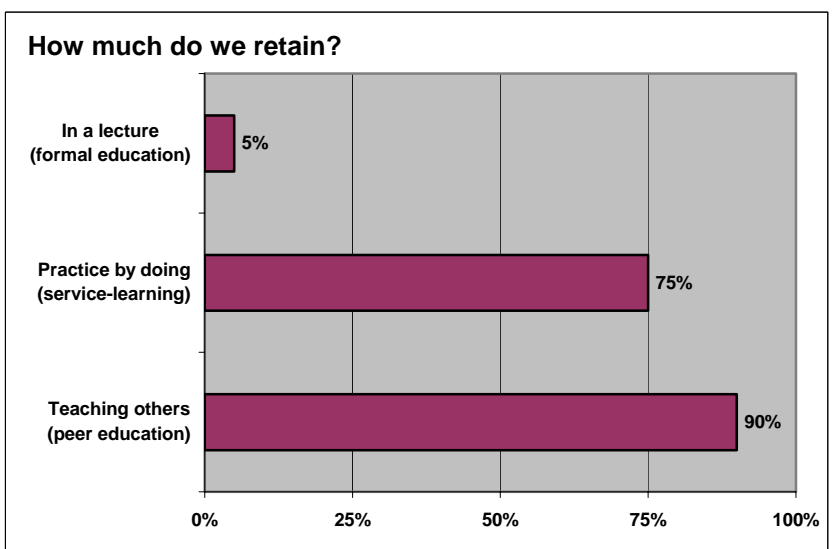
Marcelo (Uruguay)

Through service-learning, YMCAs strengthen young people's leadership skills, civic responsibility and a commitment to volunteering, while ultimately building stronger local communities.

Peer education is one of the most effective service-learning methods led by youths, enabling young people to play a positive and significant role in social change through the design and delivery of youth-friendly messages.

## ▶▶ Service-learning in practice ▶▶

Under the leadership of the Gender Committee, a group made up of both male and female volunteers, the YMCA of **Senegal** is engaging young people in service-learning at a women's prison near the capital of Dakar. Hundreds of women are housed at the Rufisque Women's Prison, a place where communal sleeping



Source: National Training Laboratories

quarters have no electricity and inmates share one toilet. YMCA youth volunteers visit the inmates twice a week to offer support and provide a range of critical services: information and education on reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and personal hygiene; child health information and referral for the numerous women with infants in the prison; marketing for handicrafts made in the prison; and information on social re-integration and post-prison employment.

*When we started investigating service-learning initiatives, we thought about prison outreach because no one ever thinks about prisoners. They are part of our community, yet we know nothing about them. The majority of the women are very young. They were incarcerated for trying to make a living - illegally.*

*We were very anxious about our first visit, but that anxiety soon ended. Now it is like visiting our sisters. We thought we would be serving them. Yet when we leave, we realize they have brought us joy.*

Solange Badiaky, YMCA Gender Committee, Senegal

The YMCA of Senegal, founded in 1982, is strongly committed to youth civic engagement and service-learning. In addition to their contribution to community development through service-learning initiatives, more than 1000 youth volunteers are substantially involved in YMCA program development and implementation, as well as YMCA governance.



YMCA Ukraine UN Model Program

### ► Growth and community development through service-learning ►

In **Russia**, **Belarus**, and the **Ukraine**, YMCAs are combining life skills and service-learning programs with urgently needed efforts to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic. YMCAs are also addressing the need to strengthen ethnic and religious co-existence. The shift from totalitarian governance to participatory democracy in these countries has been accompanied by enormous social challenges, economic upheaval, growing poverty, weakened social cohesion, and the collapse of vital educational and social services. Whether it is caring for people living with HIV or jointly addressing environmental crises, YMCAs are creating opportunities for young people to bring about social change.

#### The YMCAs of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine

##### **The setting:**

- Skyrocketing rates of HIV transmission, drug abuse, prostitution and violence
- Millions of young people excluded from the formal education system
- Center of the global trafficking trade in women and girls (replacing Thailand and the Philippines)
- Harassment from police and government authorities, and severe discrimination in the job market for minority ethnic groups
- Popular sentiment against minority faiths followed by a consequent rise in acts of vandalism, intimidation and violence

##### **The goals:**

Through diversity education, training and community service initiatives, YMCAs assist young people to:

- Grow personally by building self-esteem and self-reliance
- Build character based on the core YMCA values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility
- Develop skills in speaking, organizing and networking
- Become visible leaders in community service initiatives
- Prevent drug and alcohol abuse

##### **The outcome:**

Young people from Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine are involved in youth-led education and community service programs promoting civic participation, volunteering, and ethnic and religious co-existence. The YMCA Program Festivals, an experiential training methodology pioneered by YMCA youth leaders, offers dynamic workshops, artistic and dramatic presentations, group and service work, and daily reflection. They build strong youth leadership to expand, shape and lead YMCA initiatives throughout the region.

Service-learning is a flexible method that responds to the needs of the community and participants

### ▶▶ Nurturing healthy lifestyles ▶▶

Service-learning has an enduring impact on individuals. Studies have found that the values and developmental assets that young people build in YMCA programs both in the United States and around the world increase their educational and economic opportunities, and nurture a life-long commitment to civic responsibility. Youths who participate in YMCA volunteer service and after-school initiatives are:

- ▲ 2 times more likely to stay in school, pursue university studies and secure jobs
- ▼ 3 times less likely to engage in high risk activities such as unsafe sex, prostitution, drugs and crime

YMCAs have learned that youth development initiatives work when programs are designed with relationship-building in mind, and when there is a focus on hands-on learning opportunities. In addition, programs are successful when youths are engaged in decision-making and leadership skills during every step of the process.

The assets-building approach of YMCA life skills, leadership and service-learning captures these lessons and creates the building blocks for holistic youth development.

### ▶▶ Vitalizing citizenship through civic engagement ▶▶

Citizenship practices are developed early. YMCAs have consistently recognized that the most direct pathway to future participation is supporting young people in finding meaningful opportunities.

Just as young people are key players in YMCA decision making processes, leadership and program design, they should also be involved in the leadership of their communities and countries. As key stakeholders, young people need to be a part of the decision- and policy-making issues that affect their lives and communities.

\ Civic Engagement: \

- a person’s capacity to work with others to affect common interests;
- to see oneself as a stakeholder in public life;
- to value the mechanisms for democratic decision-making; and
- to believe that individuals have a responsibility to contribute to their communities

YMCA programs around the world are helping young people build the attitudes, skills and behaviors needed to revitalize active citizenship and civic engagement.

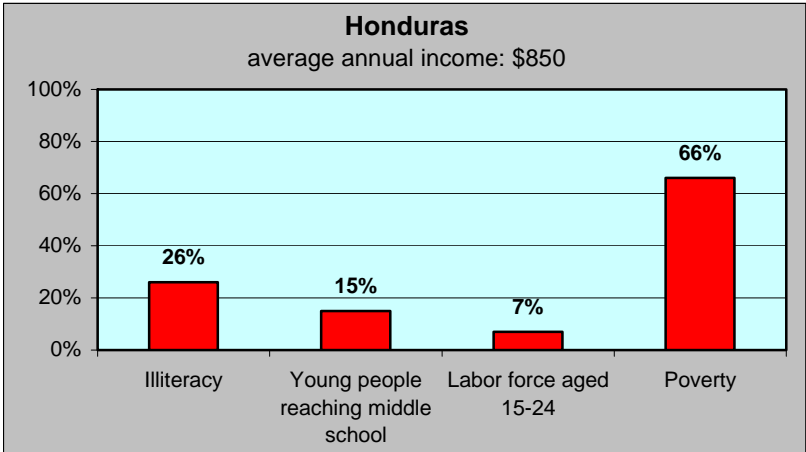
### ▶▶ Youth-led social action ▶▶

YMCA civic engagement initiatives help young people learn important civic skills and develop a sense of personal and collective efficacy that is a significant determinant of future civic and political activity.

Young people contribute significantly to civil society when given meaningful opportunities at an early age. YMCAs specialize in increasing young people’s motivation, opportunities and ability to participate in civic life by including youths in public issues that matter to them.

### ▶▶ Civic engagement in practice ▶▶

**Honduras** is an example of how YMCA programs are vitalizing civic life and



developing young civic participants. Recognizing that young people were not taking part in local government processes, state institutions or programs, the government turned to the YMCA of Honduras to help engage hundreds of youth in civic action.

## The YMCA of Honduras

### *The setting:*

- One of the poorest countries in Latin America
- Highest concentration of HIV/AIDS in Central America
- Less than 16% of young people reach middle school
- High levels of youth violence
- Long history of military rule
- Popular sentiment that democracy has failed to deliver

### *The goals:*

- Promote active participation strategies through an understanding of youth rights and responsibilities
- Foster values of education, and individual and community self-esteem and dignity
- Nurture creative spirit and protagonist youth roles
- Support the development of analytical skills and critical inquiry
- Cultivate the development of a positive national identity and an understanding of local and national socioeconomic realities
- Foster an understanding of culture, tolerance, diversity and democratic practice
- Promote opportunities for expression, dialogue, debate and negotiation

### *The outcome:*

The YMCA of Honduras is playing a leading role in mobilizing and engaging thousands of youth in government, advocacy, environment, literacy, health and HIV/AIDS outreach, and popular education. Programs reach 18,000 youth, with the direct involvement of more than 1,600 youth volunteers and leaders. The YMCA-led National Youth Forum is engaging young people in governance and advocacy at local, municipal and national levels. Significant outcomes include the introduction by the government of the *Holistic Youth Development Law* and the *Citizen Contract for Youth*.



*YMCA youth volunteer using recreation techniques to mobilize a rural community near Taulabe, Honduras.*

## ►► Shaping their communities ►►

Addressing the challenges facing their communities enables young people to personally experience the power of living in a democratic society. Young people make up more than 50% of the total population in many of the countries where YMCAs work. It makes sense that young people play a role in shaping the communities in which they live.

With World Service support, the **YMCA of Ecuador** has implemented a program entitled “Volunteers for Social Development.” Young people are empowered and trained through popular education methodologies and community civic action.

The **YMCA of Liberia** is a national leader in rehabilitating former child combatants. YMCAs run primary schools, youth employment and psychosocial counseling services to reintegrate youths traumatized by war back into society. With support from YMCA and United Nations partners, YMCAs currently reach 50,000 young people. YMCAs are also playing a lead role in educating youth voters for the upcoming 2005 elections.

The YMCA commitment to strengthening civic engagement is a crucial element in building young people’s life skills and characters, and nurturing youth leaders for stronger communities.

**Ask us about...**

- The Y Volunteer Corp in Vanadzor, Armenia
- YMCA of the USA Civic Engagement Initiative
- YMCA of Zambia's Youth Parliament
- The 2003 Program Festival in Prague

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To achieve our common goals in youth leadership and civic engagement, the YMCA of the USA partners with national YMCA movements in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the Middle East. YMCAs work jointly with local communities, local and national governments, faith-based organizations and NGOs, the private sector, and the international donor community.

**The YMCA has collaborated with:**

Committee for Democratization of Information and Technology • Pew Charitable Trusts • Search Institute • United States Agency for International Development • Youth Service America and United Nations Development Program