

# entra21NOTES

10 Years of Promoting Youth Employability 2001-2011

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## Youth Building Peace: A Case Study from El Salvador

Violence is the public face of El Salvador; the prism through which this small Central American country is perceived by the international news media. Much of the violence has its roots in the country's civil war which began in late 1970's, and lasted more than twelve years, causing 75,000 deaths and the disappearance of thousands of persons.

Needless to say, Salvadoran youth are inextricably tied to this culture of violence as both victims and aggressors. Yet despite a persistent average of twelve murders per day, there are signs of hope in this country. For one Salvadoran non-governmental organization (NGO), Quetzalcóatl, the way to approach the problem of youth who have been immersed in a culture of violence is to end violent relations and create positive alternatives. This case study presents some of the key elements of this methodology from the perspective of the youth who have participated in the **entra21** project.

The **entra21** Project Quetzalcóatl implemented between 2008 and 2010, is the result of a fusion of a methodology validated by IYF to improve the employability of youth with that of Quetzalcóatl and YouthBuild International which focuses on personal, social and occupational development of youth through community service—specifically the construction/repair of community assets. Under **entra21**, Quetzalcóatl supported 46 youth over a six-month period to increase their job skills through individual and group support sessions, technical and/or entrepreneurship training, community service, and assistance with job placement or to establish a microenterprise.

The majority of youth in the project were former gang members. This case study focuses on the stories of two youth who participated in the **entra21** project. One is a young woman who had connections to a gang and the other had no connection to the local gangs but his life was impacted nonetheless.

**Quetzalcóatl Staff Member:** *"Before **entra21** we had no experience with training or job placement. With the help of IYF, we built a training center. We learned to relate to employers."*



Connecting Disadvantaged Youth  
with Quality Employment

Founded in 1990, The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. The **entra21** program was launched by IYF in 2001, with support from the Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF) of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to increase the employability of youth at risk in Latin America and the Caribbean. To learn more, visit [www.iyfnet.org](http://www.iyfnet.org)

Beneficiary Profile at Baseline	
Average Age	63% less than 20 years old / 37% 20 years or older
Gender	17% female / 83% male
Education	85% without secondary school education (majority of whom had dropped out)
Background	90% connected to gangs
Length and Content of each Training	
Length of Time	5 – 6 months
Areas of Technical Training	Gastronomy / Basic computer applications / Construction / Repair and Maintenance of PCs
Results – Six Months after Graduation	
Employment Rate	18% versus 0% at baseline

Since 2003, Quetzalcóatl has worked with a neighborhood in the city of San Salvador called Los Condominios Atlanta that covers two square kilometers and has a population of 7,500. For more than 25 years neighborhood groups involved in criminal activities and the control of territory had been active in Atlanta. Tensions among them increased to the point where, at the beginning of 2000, the neighborhood was divided geographically into “those living above” and “those living below” - and anyone who crossed this divide was considered an enemy and subject to attack. It was in this context that Quetzalcóatl began working with the youth and eventually rivalry between the two gangs began to lessen as their leaders died or were imprisoned. Five years after Quetzalcóatl started working in the neighborhood, the **entra21** project began its training youth who had been from the two rival groups.

### Two Stories of Hope

Cintia is a friendly 22-year-old who projects self-confidence. Raised in Condominios Atlanta, she is now a senior in high school and dreams of going to the university next year. She wants to study communications, or possibly law or civil engineering. Two years ago when she entered the **entra21** project, her life was very different.

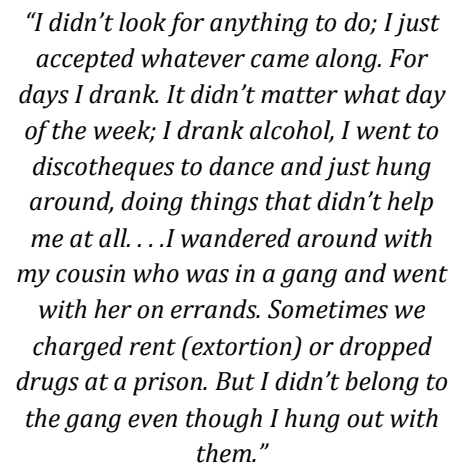
*“I got up (in the morning) with no idea of what to do. I didn’t have any plans or anything to do. I walked around lost, smoking marihuana, more and more, I was getting very lost,” she said, her tear-swollen eyes showing the pain of those days.*



Since infancy, Cintia's family life was difficult. Her father never acknowledged her as his daughter and her mother lived with another man. Due to a host of family problems Cintia and her two brothers moved in with their grandmother who was able to care for Cintia and her siblings with money sent by a relative who lived in the United States. Cintia's grandmother died in 2009.

Cintia became pregnant when she was 17. Because of complications during pregnancy she had to have complete rest, and, as a result, stopped attending classes during her first year of high school. After the baby was born she lived with her boyfriend for almost three years during which time he mistreated her. By this time, Cintia was abusing drugs and alcohol.

At this point, by court-order, Cintia's daughter was placed in the custody of the father. Because of her drug habit, she was unemployed and had no means of supporting a child. Cintia recalls this as the lowest point in her life.



*"I didn't look for anything to do; I just accepted whatever came along. For days I drank. It didn't matter what day of the week; I drank alcohol, I went to discotheques to dance and just hung around, doing things that didn't help me at all. . . .I wandered around with my cousin who was in a gang and went with her on errands. Sometimes we charged rent (extortion) or dropped drugs at a prison. But I didn't belong to the gang even though I hung out with them."*

According to Cintia, getting involved with Quetzalcóatl gave her the support she needed to break her connection with the gangs, stop using drugs and alcohol, and begin realizing her dreams of improving her life.

Nineteen-year-old Coco never belonged to a criminal group or a gang although he lived in the Condominios Atlanta his entire life. He was trapped in his own world, a spectator of all that was going on around him, including the violence that affected people in the neighborhood. He went to school and was afraid to go out - afraid he would be forced to join a gang. ". . . Just walking around with my friends I felt that suddenly something (bad) could happen or be done to me. I just didn't feel good walking around outside," he said.

When Coco joined the **entra21** project he was shy and quiet and had a hard time relating to others. He spent most of his time taking care of his two younger sisters and the house while his mother worked as a maid. He did not know his father. His life revolved around going to school and his family.

After participating in the project, he feels his life is moving ahead and he has new opportunities. *"For my future, I want to finish my studies and get my high school degree. I want to move forward, get a profession and never go backwards. I'd most like to become an automobile mechanic; I've always liked that."* Last year Coco had to leave school when his grandmother died but plans to earn his bachillerato degree in the future.

*"There are schools that won't accept you if you are over-age. They say that high school students have to be between 16 and 18 years old, and I'll soon be 20. Some institutions won't give me the opportunity, so I'm thinking about getting my degree at night school and see if later I can specialize in some area to continue studying."*

## **The Methodology of Quetzalcóatl**

According to Quetzalcóatl, the methodologies used by many organizations and programs in El Salvador to address social violence have not been effective. This is due, in part, to their methodologies not being participatory or failing to take into account the realities of the youth involved. They also tend to be developed by adults without exploring the interests and expectations of the youth being targeted. Quetzalcóatl's experience has shown that to be effective, it is important to focus on a future-oriented process that helps youth define a new life plan and identify personal and social resources they can tap to reach their objectives.

After working with youth in violent situations for eleven years, Quetzalcóatl has learned many lessons which may be useful to other organizations interested in redirecting the energies, aspirations and relationships of young people who have been involved in gang life or whose lives have been affected by the violence around them. We highlight some of these key lessons and best practices here:

- Give youth a reason to abandon gang life so they can make a commitment to rebuilding their relationships and lives. Their motivation may stem from a desire to create (or rebuild) a family, a traumatic experience in jail, the loss of close friends, and/or exhaustion. For Cintia it was a desire to recover her child who had been removed from her care by court order that motivated her to give up drugs, alcohol and her gang association. In Quetzalcóatl's experience, the loss of a young person's closest link with the gang or the disintegration of the gang structure are very common precipitating factors which lead to a decision to leave gang life and begin a new lifestyle with new goals.
- Focus on the personal development of the youth. Help youth look honestly at their lives, and become more aware of their relationships, history, present and future. As youth begin to re-evaluate themselves, it is important for each youth to define a new path in life and identify the resources they need to reach their personal goals.
- Ensure each youth feels he/she is being heard, and not being judged for what he/she did or failed to do. This is essential to create the conditions needed to establish an effective process of redefining one's identity and personal goals. If the project cannot create a "safe space" and build confidence between project staff and youth, it is impossible for a young person to begin a process of social reintegration and self-improvement.

- Provide youth with positive role models. These youth need new points of reference such as a social promoter, a teacher and other members of the community who provide real life examples of how to manage conflict, communicate with others, and take responsibility. In this regard, Quetzalcóatl staff was critical.
  - Recognize that youth learn by doing, not by simply listening to presentations. This is especially true for young people who have been out of school for many years. It is important to include time for youth to practice skills taught through workshops. Community service proved very effective in helping youth learn construction skills and how to work in a group.
  - Find ways to tap into young peoples' values and abilities as potential resources for their personal and social transformation. One example of a value that can be tapped is youth's sense of loyalty and commitment—both of which are very common among youth who have been gang-involved. Quetzalcóatl learned how to convert attitudes and behaviors that previously were used for negative ends into something positive. To help youth re-direct these values and behaviors it is necessary to work closely with each youth, understand their daily challenges and fears and provide support as they redefine their goals and habits. It is a slow process and not necessarily a lineal path.
  - Project managers need to build a relationship with the former gang leaders as in all likelihood they still command respect among youth and have innate leadership skills that can be beneficial to the process. *"Leadership is part of a person and you have to know how to use it,"* says a Quetzalcóatl staff member. For the **entra21** project, for example, a former leader of one of the gangs was able to motivate youth to participate in a project and even helped by teaching others how to repair motorcycles.
- "The Project is not (was not) for not just for youth in a violent situation or connected to a gang. It is not for active gang members. It is for youth in a critical moment who have felt the need to change their way of life."*  
**Quetzalcóatl Social Worker**
- Quetzalcóatl Social Promoter:**  
*"We are responsible for strengthening values such as solidarity, commitment and loyalty that are present in groups such as gangs. When applied in a project such as **entra21** these resources are critical for moving towards breaking the isolation and self-isolation in which (the youth) find themselves."*
- Creating new habits or attitudes requires a high degree of flexibility, on the one hand, and clear agreements, on the other. From the beginning, when inviting youth to be part of a structured project such as **entra21**, expectations and rules need to be clear and accepted. Youth from violent contexts are not used to following routines and their time is largely unstructured. Therefore, it is important to understand their old habits, figure out how to work around them, and negotiate new rules. For example, Quetzalcóatl had to negotiate the training schedule with each youth. Typically, youth enrolled in **entra21** projects spend 5 to 6 hours a day learning new skills, whereas in



the case of Condominios Atlanta, four hours of class was the maximum amount time youth could tolerate. According to Cintia:

- Identify those youth who were not actively involved in violent or criminal groups. They can serve as guiding lights for other youth who are trying to build a new group identity. Quetzalcóatl's social promoters who were recruited from Atlanta, for example, served this purpose as did youth such as Coco who had no criminal past.
- Recognize that youth in a violent context and involved in gangs are part of a torn social fabric due to a combination of personal, family or community factors. Establishing new relations is fundamental for creating individual and group change and needs to be part of an project—even with an employability focus. Quetzalcóatl used community service projects, adapting the YouthBuild methodology, to support the rebuilding of community relationships. Seeing youth active in something tangible and beneficial such as the repair of the basketball court and construction of a meeting space helped create new perceptions and relations with the mayor, the community council, the police, and other adults.

*"At first, it was difficult. I wasn't working and attending class all day or sometimes all afternoon was hard. But I had the support of my daughter's grandmother. She helped me with money. Later, when she saw that I had changed, she asked me and I told her and she said it was okay and that I shouldn't worry and should keep studying, that she would help me. That also helped me to continue and not quit the project."*

**Cintia**

**A member of the Board of Directors of Condominios Atlanta:**

*"Some (youth) have many family problems. The majority live with just their mother and sometimes don't pay attention to adults, but I no longer see them walking around getting into trouble. Those who were very arrogant and wanted to take over an area have changed and today even do favors for neighbors, doing masonry work such as fixing a wall or repairing something or painting houses."*

**From Each Experience Lived, a Lesson Learned**

Projects like **entra21** need to have realistic expectations about what they can do to help youth who have been exposed to gang life and violence achieve in terms of turning their lives around. As Quetzalcóatl's experience shows projects can provide youth from violent contexts with new alternatives, but first, the young person has to decide to change his/her life. Quetzalcóatl has learned it cannot control how and when a young person makes that shift but it has gained experience in how to relate with these youth and to gauge when they are ready to look for new alternatives.

Nor is the process of rebuilding a life after being controlled by gangs or violent groups lineal. Quetzalcóatl advises other projects to negotiate an agreement with each youth where rules

and objectives are spelled out. When a youth is unable to live up to any part of the agreement, Quetzalcóatl restarts the negotiation, focusing on what a youth can commit to so youth can see small successes. If, on the other hand, a youth thinks he or she is ready to make changes in their behavior or relationships but in practice is unable to do so, Quetzalcóatl advises others to recognize the problem and talk with the youth about waiting until he or she is ready to take advantage of an opportunity like **entra21** or YouthBuild.

From **entra21**, Quetzalcóatl learned that equipping youth with work skills and helping them transition into the world of work is a longer-term process. Under **entra21** it was assumed six months would be sufficient to train youth and help them take a first step toward finishing the education or getting a job. In reality Quetzalcóatl had to accompany such youth for an average nine months and this



does not include the three years prior to **entra21** Quetzalcóatl had invested in getting to know youth in the community and building their trust. Had Quetzalcóatl not established credibility with gang leaders and members, the implementation of a project like **entra21** would have been hard to imagine.

Another lesson the **entra21** project brought home was the importance of understanding the needs of each youth while trying to adhere to a similar program model. This proved quite challenging since the needs of a youth who had been in the gangs for years are different from one who had little to no direct involvement in gang life. Quetzalcóatl negotiated different arrangements with certain youth who had been out of school for many years and were not free to move around the city. Instead of taking classes in a vocational training center outside of Atlanta, for example, one gang leader concentrated on developing his knowledge of masonry by working in the community under the supervision of Quetzalcóatl.

**Quetzalcóatl Social Worker:** *"It is very difficult to support youth in violent situations, create habits, new attitudes and new ways of thinking and create a new image in the eyes of the community. It doesn't occur overnight. It is complicated and takes time but though a structured program like this you can continue supporting and believing that with the attitude and ability that youth develop in this process it will be enough of a spark to enable a young person to develop other attitudes and skills."*

### Real Results, One Youth at a Time

After participating in **entra21**, the majority of youth feel better prepared to make decisions about life and work. Based on contact Quetzalcóatl has had with the project graduates a year after they graduated, it estimates between 40 and 45% are working.

*"What I have learned is that you never should go backwards. Sometimes one falls back because of the things you don't have. On the contrary, you have to fight harder to always move forward because in life there are always tests and obstacles that make you fall but you have to pick yourself up and move forward."* **Cintia**

Looking at where Coco and Cintia are today, we have reason to be hopeful.

Coco's world has expanded beyond his family and circle of friends. Currently he participates in a government program in which he works in different activities that help to improve other communities outside of Condominios Atlanta. He has made new friends and established new relations with people outside of Atlanta. He plans to get his high school diploma next year and to specialize in automobile mechanics.

Cintia has custody of her 4 year old daughter. Having witnessed the change in her behavior and life style, the judge expunged her record for drug and alcohol consumption. She is in her last year of high school. Having earned the respect of her daughter's grandmother, she has someone to help her pay for her studies and care of her daughter. Next year Cintia plans to enter the university.