

FieldNotes

Volume 2

NUMBER 11

DECEMBER 2007



Promoting Active Youth Citizenship

Imagine young volunteers in Turkey teaching disadvantaged children the joys of art... Brazilian youth mentoring low-income children in how to read... Nigerian students equipping their peers with computer skills... and young people in Hungary restoring a public park.

Each of these examples is part of a larger story of young people playing an active role in contributing to their communities. Each has emerged from a global youth development initiative of the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and Nokia. Launched in 2000, the initiative equips young people with the knowledge and skills they need to participate as active citizens — now and in the future.

Why the focus on youth civic engagement? “Healthy communities begin with everyone playing a role in civic life,” says Martin

Sandelin, Vice President of CSR and Community Involvement at Nokia. “In light of today’s social and environmental challenges, it’s more important than ever before to prepare young people to assume active roles in society. We’ve seen the positive results these programs can have on young people, on those they serve, and the communities where they live. Everyone can benefit.”

Studies have shown that youth who volunteer are more apt to be actively engaged in their communities as adults. According to an Outcomes Measurement Study conducted by Brandeis University of the IYF-Nokia supported volunteer programs, 72 percent of participating youth continued their involvement in volunteer projects after completing the program, with a significant percentage of youth reporting improved performance in school.

TWENTY REASONS WHY YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Young people who become engaged in their communities:

1. Learn to relate to volunteering and community service in a positive way.
2. Tend to do better in school as a result.
3. Are less likely to feel socially excluded.
4. Are far more likely to vote and participate in volunteer activities in the future.
5. Are more apt to avoid negative influences in their environment (e.g., substance abuse, crime).
6. Connect in positive ways with parents, schools, and the wider community.
7. Develop essential life skills (e.g., confidence, goal setting, decision-making, and teamwork) that prepare them for their roles as adults.
8. Learn valuable workplace and career skills (e.g., effective communication, planning, project management, and budgeting).
9. Associate citizenship with carrying responsibilities as well as rights.
10. View their community and their role in society in more positive ways.

Communities where young people are supported in playing an active role, benefit from:

11. The energy and optimism of youth.
12. A more engaged citizenry as youth volunteers grow into civic-minded adults.
13. Young people who feel a greater sense of belonging.
14. Innovative solutions to social and environmental challenges.
15. Youth who gain practical knowledge and problem-solving abilities through learning by doing.
16. Valuing youth as assets — not as problems to be solved.
17. Understanding youth perspectives on a range of issues.
18. Greater numbers of youth who participate in service activities launched by their peers.
19. Youth who are equipped with the core life skills (e.g., communication, planning, decision-making, and responsibility) that employers need.
20. Developing the leadership potential of youth.

Captured here are the experiences of IYF partners in Argentina, Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Each reflects on why youth civic engagement is important and how to deliver effective programs. Included are insights on how to train youth volunteers and promote an ethic of civic action among young people.

Nurturing a Culture of Active Youth Citizenship

In countries with a limited tradition of volunteerism, IYF partners are working to transform public perceptions of the benefits of engaging youth in contributing to their communities. This is especially true in Eastern and Central European countries where the legacy of the past continues to exert a negative influence on people's attitudes toward volunteering.

“The word ‘volunteer’ has a different meaning in the Czech Republic,” says Anna Kačabová, Programme Manager at the Civil Society Development Foundation (NROS). “Under communism, we had ‘working Saturdays’ when everyone had to go to the forest and clean it whether they wanted to or not,” she recalls.

Through its support of youth-led volunteer projects, NROS is helping to change entrenched beliefs. “Supporting young people in implementing projects in their communities is the best way to demonstrate that volunteerism is good,” Kačabová explains. Since 2002, NROS has implemented the *Připoj Se* program which provides training and financial support to young volunteers, ages 16 to 24. To date, the program has reached more than 3,300 young people, whose efforts have benefited over 150,000 community members.

Rather than preach the merits of volunteerism, NROS hosts forums and media events that allow youth volunteers to demonstrate first-hand their creativity and impact within communities. In the fall of 2007, for example, NROS sponsored a festival showcasing the youth-led projects it supports. Held at a baroque castle northeast of Prague, the festival attracted nearly 5,000 people. In addition to examples of youth-led projects, the festival featured top bands and entertainment. Together, these activities communicated the message that volunteering is not only beneficial to the community, but can be fun and engender a strong sense of community spirit.

In Hungary, the *Make a Connection-Kapcsolódj be!* program also works to influence public attitudes toward civic engagement. Carried out by the Foundation for Democratic Youth (DIA), a national NGO, the program provides youth, ages 14 to 25, with small grants and training to implement volunteer projects. Since the program's launch in 2003, regional coordinators have visited schools and briefed teachers, principals, and students on the opportunities available through *Kapcsolódj be!* In classes, program staff offer “civic minutes” — talks whereby they describe the benefits and opportunities of volunteering.



■ In the Czech Republic, *Připoj Se* participants launched a canine therapy program benefiting hospital patients.

In 2006, DIA seized an opportunity to generate national and international visibility for its activities through serving as the National Coordinating Committee of Global Youth Service Day (GYSD) in Hungary. Carried out in more than 120 countries, GYSD celebrates and mobilizes young people to contribute to their communities. Annual GYSD events organized in Hungary have generated

“ We don’t just talk about believing in young people, we do it. ”

— Hamori Zoltan, Programme Manager, Foundation for Democratic Youth, Hungary

significant interest in and support for youth volunteerism. “It changed how people think of volunteerism and youngsters,” says Hamori Zoltan, DIA Programme Manager. “Several million people were able to see the difference young people could make.”

Politicians, too, began to take note of young people’s potential and contributions. In the city of Tatabanya, a DIA-supported youth group took steps to renovate a local playground. Community members got excited and joined the effort. Before long, the local government stepped in and launched a three-year program to upgrade all local playgrounds to comply with European Union standards.

Still, the road has not been easy. Parents, explains Zoltan, have trouble understanding why their children should commit their time and energy for free. Many parents prefer that their children focus on getting good grades in school. Making the case that young people learn concrete skills through public service has been a challenge for DIA. Often, what changes parents’ attitudes is seeing their children develop practical skills they can use in pursuing their future career interests.

YOUTH AS SOCIAL INNOVATORS

Young people possess the ability to look at old problems in new ways — offering innovative solutions to social and environmental challenges. For example:

- In Belgium, young hip-hop artists engaged in the Future Smile program (see page 5) created a music CD devoted to the theme of global warming. The cover of the CD was made entirely of recycled materials, with a portion of sales donated to support local environmental initiatives.
- In the Czech Republic, a *Připoj Se* participant mobilized her peers to develop a ‘canine therapy’ program. Accompanied by trained dogs, the youth bring cheer to hospital patients and offer a welcome reprieve from their daily routine. The project was so successful that it attracted the support of local businesses. Another youth group in Prague built a skateboarding park, where young people could pursue their hobby in a safe environment. The park ended legal violations against young people who formerly practiced the sport in public spaces.
- In Poland, young participants in the Make a Connection program received support to establish a pottery studio in their community, where young and old alike exercise their creativity. In the absence of productive leisure activities, the studio provides local youth with a safe, supportive space to connect to each other — and their talents.
- In Thailand, students addressed the issue of excessive noise in their community by bringing together motorcyclists, law enforcement officials, and mechanics to refit bikes and reinforce traffic laws.

Teaching Life and Citizenship Skills

Engaging young people in their communities offers a potent means of teaching life skills — from confidence to effective communication, from problem-solving to teamwork. A key benefit of civic engagement is that it offers young people a chance to ‘learn by doing.’

Says DIA’s Zoltan, “It’s very important that young people do what they feel is important. We don’t prescribe.” The sixty youth projects that DIA currently supports are involved in a range of activities — from producing TV shows to organizing medieval festivals.

The type of experiential learning offered through *Kapcsolódj bel* stands in sharp contrast to the authoritarian teaching styles most participants experience at school. Classes are based on teachers lecturing and students memorizing facts. “When youngsters are able to experience what they are learning, it motivates them,” says Zoltan.

Indeed, according to the Outcomes Measurement Study conducted by Brandeis, 61% of respondents reported that the Hungary program contributed to their being more productive in school. By instilling a more engaged, as opposed to passive, approach to learning, the program prepares young people to play a more pro-active role in pursuing their long-term goals and contributing to the future of their nation.

Promoting Social Inclusion

Within low-income communities, youth who become involved in volunteer activities are less likely to succumb to feelings of alienation and social exclusion. In Argentina, for example, the *Posta Joven* program builds social capital through creating linkages between youth, schools, and municipal authorities.

The program, which is being implemented by Fundación Sostenibilidad,

Educación, and Solidaridad (SES), reaches out to disadvantaged youth, ages 17 to 24, growing up in poor communities in four regions of the country. It begins by identifying promising young leaders and training them in life and leadership skills. These youth then provide art and communications workshops to their younger peers. Youth groups are also eligible to receive small grants to support their community service projects.

“Our approach is to treat the entire context the youth are in — engaging youth, community networks, and when possible, linking with schools and municipal authorities,” says Rolando Kandel, Program Director, Fundación SES.



■ Participants in the *Posta Joven* program in Argentina nurture civic pride through painting murals that celebrate local history and culture.



Part of what makes the program unique is the focus on the arts and communications — topics of interest to youth through which they are able to express themselves and contribute to society. In Bariloche, in south-central Argentina, program participants created a 24-hour radio show that allows them to explore community issues from a youth perspective. In another disadvantaged community in

Buenos Aires, a youth group painted murals on public spaces that celebrate the area’s history and culture.

“What’s most important is that the youth feel productive,” says Kandel. “They’re not just recipients of services,

they are creating something for the good of the community. Our biggest achievement is that youth have gained skills to view themselves, their community, and their futures in a more positive light.”

Training and Supporting Youth Volunteers

Young people are capable of developing innovative and lasting solutions to community needs; yet they often require additional knowledge and skills to achieve their social change visions. IYF partners provide training and technical assistance to youth volunteer groups in a range of areas from project management and fundraising to how to develop a budget and

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— Rolando Kandel, Program Director, Fundación SES, Argentina

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE AS ACTIVE CITIZENS: QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

In developing youth citizenship programs, consider the following:

- *What is the current environment related to youth volunteerism in your country? What barriers, if any, exist and how might you address them?*
- *What resources/services are available to young volunteers now? What gaps do you seek to fill?*
- *What should be the geographic scope of your program? If your goal is to implement a multi-regional or national program, what organizations might serve as local implementing partners?*
- *What are the training needs of those youth you seek to engage? In addition to formal training, how will you go about providing on-going technical support and trouble-shooting to youth groups?*
- *Do you have a public outreach and media strategy in place for publicizing your program to potential youth groups and to sensitize adults as to the importance of your efforts?*
- *How will you go about screening/selecting young people to your program? Bear in mind that forming a selection committee of diverse stakeholders can help build goodwill and networks for your program.*
- *How do you seek to engage the wider community in the success of your program? What skills might youth need to develop in order to effectively cooperate with adults?*
- *Have you considered how you might involve donors to your program in its implementation? IYF partners have engaged Nokia employees as judges who review youth project proposals and as mentors/informal advisors to youth groups carrying out volunteer projects.*
- *Is it necessary to offer grant support to youth-led volunteer projects, and if so, what amount is appropriate within your country context?*
- *How do you intend to monitor/evaluate youth groups—both in terms of the success of their activities and in terms of your broader program goals?*
- *Have you considered ways of maintaining alumni engagement in your program, and monitoring the long-term impact of the program on “graduates?”*

“For us, the most important thing is that young people learn to think in systemic ways. They learn not to buy the cheapest t-shirt but the one that’s fair trade. They think through how to reuse and recycle materials.”

— *Christine Castille, Program Manager,
Foundation for Future Generations, Belgium*

conduct media outreach. Life skills development is a key focus — equipping young people to effectively plan and implement service projects.

In Hungary, the *Kapscolòdj be!* program emphasizes the importance of young people working together as a team, among other topics. “When they’re in groups they have to make decisions, they have to learn to cooperate with others,” says DIA’s Zoltan. “This is how we go about teaching how a democracy works.” Trainings are offered on weekends and are carried out at the local and national level. Program participants choose those training needs they wish to address and receive ongoing technical support from the program’s regional coordinators.

In Belgium, the Future Smile program equips volunteer youth groups with the knowledge and skills to incorporate sustainable development thinking into their work. “Training is at the core of what we offer young people,” says Christine Castille, Program Manager at the Foundation for Future Generations, which is implementing the program.

Prior to being selected, youth groups are required to outline in their proposal how they intend to contribute to the “3Ps:” Planet, People, and Profit. In other words, projects need to articulate their environmental, social, and economic benefits to society. Once selected, participants attend a weekend training. The training focuses on 12 themes designed to strengthen their project’s sustainability, including responsible consumption, team-building, ecological principles, budgeting, communications, and civic engagement. On the last day, participants engage in a ‘speed dating’ exercise, in which they have ten minutes to discuss their projects with experts in fair trade, economics, the environment, and other areas.

“For us, the most important thing is that young people learn to think in systemic ways,” says Castille. “They learn not to buy the cheapest t-shirt but the one that’s fair trade. They think through how to reuse and recycle materials.” In the process, youth develop

life skills in critical thinking and problem solving. While Belgium has a tradition of volunteering, it's mostly focused on short-term engagements (e.g., assisting in a fundraising drive). Through its efforts, Future Smile deepens young people's involvement through a more holistic, long-term approach.

Sustaining Youth-led Service to Communities

To what extent do young volunteers continue their service work after participating in a formal program? According to the Brandeis study, more than 70 percent of youth engaged in IYF-Nokia supported volunteer programs continued their service work after "graduating." In several countries, active alumni groups have formed.

In the Czech Republic, for example, the *Alumnik Klub* formed in 2004 has 29 members. While some members are continuing the projects they launched through the program, the club has also initiated new service activities. In 2005, club members raised funds to hold a weeklong meeting with their peers involved in similar Nokia-supported programs in Hungary, Poland, and Russia. The group also raised financial support from the Vodafone Foundation and EU Youth Programme to deepen their skills and provide training services to other youth volunteer groups. In early 2008, the group plans to travel to Nigeria with support from the IYF-Nokia initiative to share their experiences with young leaders there.

LESSONS LEARNED

IYF partners cite the following "lessons learned" in promoting and strengthening youth civic engagement:

- *Creating a culture that supports youth-led volunteer activities takes time.* Adults' attitudes toward young people's capabilities and societal attitudes toward volunteerism vary from country to country. IYF partners have found that the best way to 'make the case' for youth-led social change is through providing media and other platforms where young people can demonstrate their impact in the community, the skills they have developed, and their enthusiasm for making a difference.
- *Publicizing volunteer project opportunities to targeted youth requires detailed planning and networking with schools, community-based organizations, the media, and others to "get the word out."* Unsuccessful outreach can result in too few youth applying to your program. Over-publicizing a program places an extra burden on staff responsible for reviewing project proposals and results in an inordinate number of youth being rejected. IYF partners have had to strike the proper balance in promoting their programs, often after experimenting with what proves most effective over time.
- *Many of those youth drawn to leading volunteer projects have already developed a number of those key life skills country programs seek to enhance.* In such cases, it's important to equip young leaders with the skills they need to motivate and recruit their peers, especially those youth who would not ordinarily volunteer.

Additional Resources

Publications

Benton Foundation. (2001). *Youth Activism and Global Engagement*. www.youthmovements.org/guide

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W.K. Kellogg Foundation. (2000). *Youth in Community, Youth in Citizenship: Weaving in a Future Tense. Insights from the Field*. www.youthmovements.org/guide

Web Sites:

Civil Society Development Foundation, www.nros.cz

Foundation for Democratic Youth, www.i-dia.org

Foundation for Future Generations, www.foundationfuturegenerations.org

Forum for Youth Investment, www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Fundación Sostenibilidad, Educación, and Solidaridad, www.fundses.org.ar

Global Youth Service Day, www.gysd.net

Search Institute, www.search-institute.org

This publication was made possible through a global youth development initiative of Nokia and the International Youth Foundation. For further information, please visit www.iyfnet.org or www.nokia.com/communityinvolvement, or contact Ami Thakkar at athakkar@iyfnet.org.

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