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WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY (EMPLEANDO FUTUROS) HONDURAS

ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

In 2016, Banyan Global was contracted by USAID to implement the Workforce Development (WFD) Activity in Honduras. The WFD Activity, later named *Empleando Futuros* is a five-year activity (2016—2021) targeting at-risk youth living in seven Honduran municipalities that are severely affected by violence, crime, and irregular migration: Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma, Tela, La Ceiba, Villanueva, and La Lima. Through a series of integrated trainings on life skills and basic labor competences, as well as psycho-social interventions, the activity supports workforce development with the purpose of increasing income-generating opportunities and mitigating the risk of youth being victims and perpetrators of violence.

KEY FINDINGS

DESIGN AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Empleando Futuros explicitly included Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as one of its core components, namely in the form of life skills training, mentorship, and counseling. Through these elements, the activity aims to improve basic competencies of youth such as personal development, communication, work habits, leadership, work readiness, and entrepreneurship. The activity is also designed to enhance the youth's resilience and employability by helping them understand and properly deal with conflictive and risky situations, develop life plans and begin careers which further reduces their exposure to illegal activities and violence.

Empleando Futuros has undertaken a formal contextualization process, taking into account the community situations, target youth characteristics, and market needs in its programming. On the one hand, the activity consulted diverse stakeholders to identify and prioritize abilities and skills that align with the local context and to the needs of the labor market. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Human Resources representatives of potential employers were conducted to understand their desired qualities and characteristics when screening and evaluating potential job candidates. Some workshops have also been organized where facilitators discuss their experiences and lessons learned, which help the activity modify its design and implementation accordingly. Simultaneously, the activity has adopted a methodology that integrates education and training in youth's actual everyday lives. Instead of delivering educational content in classroom settings, the activity enables youth to experience the concepts in real life scenarios and apply it to their daily lives.

BEST PRACTICES

- *Empleando Futuros* employs a comprehensive training model to prepare youth for the labor market by strengthening their technical and emotional competencies.
- *Empleando Futuros* relies on the expertise and network of local implementing organizations who have the flexibility to adapt activity design based on their capacity and provide specific responses to the needs of different beneficiary groups.
- *Empleando Futuros* adopted a grassroots approach by recruiting facilitators directly from the community who served as role models and were committed to affecting community-level change.
- *Empleando Futuros* actively incorporates training contents into the living space of the youth to improve their real life applicability.
- Empowerment of local organizations and activity staff through comprehensive trainings has enhanced the capacity of communities to continue implementation of SEL skills and approaches when the activity ends.

“Talking to youth about conflict resolution, about the different types of leadership in a classroom, where you are comfortable, where there is coffee and air conditioning is not the same as when they have to face conflict at a soccer stadium, during a match, where there are youths drinking and the police are provoking them... We went with them to the stadium and, at the stadium, we put into practice precisely those concepts that were taught to them in a controlled environment so that they could experience them in that open environment.” – Technical Coordinator

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex (LGBTI) youth, youth with disabilities, youth from ethnic minorities (Afro-Honduras), and youth from high-crime communities were identified as the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in this activity, and often face discrimination in their community. *Empleando Futuros* focuses on providing equitable access to these groups, and at the same time uses life skills training and other resources to foster a more inclusive and respectful space for them. The activity uses an array of trainings and workshops on gender diversity, inclusive language, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, and cultural perceptions of masculinity to sensitize activity staff and encourage gender-inclusive approaches. Besides, the activity has also established a Social Inclusion Committee to identify and provide extra support to youth with mental health or disability needs, such as referral services, counseling, and mentorship, with the intent to increase their likelihood of obtaining employment.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MEASUREMENT

Four main entry points were used to incorporate SEL into the *Empleando Futuros* activity: teaching and learning materials, facilitator training, community engagement, and local partnership. These entry points have been particularly useful for activity staff to reach out to the community, build trust among different stakeholders, identify potential beneficiaries, and make youth more comfortable to participate in and commit to the activity process. For example, *Empleando Futuros* relies on the networks and expertise of local partner organizations, who have prior experience working with the community and specific youth groups.

“One of the elements on which we based our work was the fact that we had already worked with this population. So, in one way or another, we had already developed some kind of relationship with them, and at the same time, we had already helped them develop some basic life skills.” –Organization Director

Additionally, the activity has recruited facilitators directly from the community, some of whom are beneficiaries of previous USAID projects, while some others are members of sports clubs (*barras deportivas*) who are well-known among youth. Although they were not professional teachers, they became well positioned to fulfill the role after the training and have since, demonstrated a strong commitment to bringing positive changes in their own communities. By transferring materials, skills and methodologies to local partners and building capacity of local activity staff, *Empleando Futuros* gradually equips communities to independently and effectively carry on the activity’s approaches and activities beyond the activity’s period of performance.

In terms of assessment, the project launched a small-scale pilot impact evaluation in 2017 and a mixed-methods performance evaluation in 2018. The two evaluations adopted formative assessment tools including Violence-Involved Persons Risk Assessment (VIP-RA), Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews to collect data on the quality of WFD service provision and youth participants’ risk of violence and employability change, to inform activity design and implementation. The VIP-RA tool has been used to assess the level of risk that youth face at different stages of implementation. However, *Empleando Futuro*’s measurement plan does not include tools or indicators that specifically evaluate SEL outcomes. To circumvent this limitation in measurement, individual implementing partners have developed their own instruments to assess progress.

“We never knew if what was done or not done was, according to that measurement tool, effective or not. So, we had our own progress templates...what we had were community teams of three people, one in charge of professional skills, another in charge of mentorship, and a third one in charge of life skills, who led the group through this process of discovering their own skills and abilities. And in the end, we got an assessment shortlist of those three people. Those three people sat together to assess each youth separately and to see what progress they had made from the beginning of the activity until that point in time and to decide if they were ready or not to move to the technical training phase for the job.”

– Project Manager

So far, the activity has received positive feedback from participating youth, their families, the community, as well as private companies. For one thing, *Empleando Futuros* reduces the stigma associated with marginalized youth and provides a more affirmative and enabling space for their growth and development. The activity also enables youth to develop self-management skills, become resilient, and take responsibility for their life decisions. In line with the project objective of training 7,500 at-risk youth and placing 3,750 at-risk youth into the job market, as of March 2020, through comprehensive workforce readiness services provided by *Empleando Futuros*, 4,896 youth have received over 186 hours of training and 3,124 have successfully landed a job or have been reintegrated into the formal education system.

LIMITATIONS

Some limitations were also identified during the course of activity implementation.

First, due to resource constraints, the activity was unable to engage parents and caregivers to the desired extent. Although youth are exposed to SEL concepts through training activities, they are unable to implement and sustain behavioral changes at home. Since parents are unaware of activity objectives and training content, youth’s behavior change efforts are oftentimes not supported by their parents, which hinders sustainability of these changes.

Second, the activity has experienced some unexpected events during its implementation, including contractual changes, redirection of funds, and delays of in-person activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was limited flexibility in the project timeline to account for these unforeseen events. Moreover, these challenges have especially thwarted the behavioral and soft skill development process, which typically requires substantial time investment to observe measurable changes.