



# IMPACT EVALUATION OF ACER'S YOUTH MONITOR PROGRAM

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2007

### Preface:

The Impact Evaluation for the Youth Monitor Program (YMP) was commissioned by the Associação de Apoio à Criança em Risco (ACER) in association with Royal Roads University MA Candidate Fiona Athie. As the completion of the Impact Evaluation was in accordance with the completion of a University required field placement, the Evaluation was conducted without funding, and on a voluntary basis.

The team identifying evaluation criteria, interview candidates and questions, comprised of Veruska Galdini, Pedagogical Coordinator for ACER, and Roger Itokazu, Program Coordinator, with the input of Ary, Raquel and Rose (educators) Jonathan (Secretary General) and Evandro (Facilitator and ex-monitor). During the course of the evaluation, all information was reported to Veruska Galdini, although once the evaluation was completed the process and results were both answerable to the program participants and their families.

The resource budget was limited as the primary evaluator was working on a volunteer basis, however, the time budget allocated was 22 hours a week for Fiona Athie, including approximately two hours a week of meetings or input from other staff members.

Although no conflicts of interest arose, the evaluation was planned with the intent of mitigating said conflicts, and staff, participants and other stakeholders were invited to join the process at every stage.

### Description of the Program and Context:

The Program's goal is to provide its participants with personal development and professional experience within the leadership context. The goal for the organization is to involve a Youth Monitor in every area of activity in order to help professionals in each area to develop, design and monitor relevant activities, workshops and programs. The program format is similar to that of professional internship and expects the same levels of commitment and responsibility from its participants as would be expected in formal employment. Each Monitor receives a small monthly stipend for the duration of the program. There are currently 23 Youth Monitors (YMs) working in 6 program areas, including the community library, the Youth Agent program and in administration.

Within ACER's mandate of "rescuing the dignity of children and adolescents by means of social change" the YMP provides its participants with perhaps their final opportunity to actively change themselves and their surroundings within the support system provided by the organization. By taking on leadership roles they can learn and develop their own capacities, and take these skills either back into the community or onwards into the job market. Moreover by teaching self reliance, initiative and responsibility, the participants find themselves better situated and more confident in their search for professional placements.

As the program has not yet reached maturity, the involvement of stakeholders (in this case the staff, the YMs and the program participants being monitored) is still extremely high. From the program's inception, the program participants have been required to

attend and participate in monthly general meetings as well as bi-monthly program development meetings. Each Youth Monitor completes program evaluations twice during the course of their participation and is actively encouraged and expected to provide constructive feedback throughout the course of their involvement.

The community ACER serves is low-income and low-education, with high levels of social exclusion, violence and illicit activity. The participation in the selection process favors participants with the highest need, and therefore those who are at the greatest risk, but is based on performance throughout the process, which includes both individual and group interviews.

Although the scope of the program is still limited to few participants, the goal is to provide this high risk group with the capacities needed to break personal, familial and/or community cycles of instability, marginalization and violence. By placing the participants in positions of authority, the program also has a high capacity for sustainability and replication within the community.

#### Evaluation Criteria and Questions:

##### Governance and Management:

As the program is still in the development stage, and in great part due to the extremely high rate of participant involvement at all levels, stakeholder participation, user accountability and legitimacy have all been easily incorporated into the daily workings of the program. The current frameworks which ensure the good governance of the program although sufficient for the current size of the program, will have to be renegotiated if and when the program increases in scope.

In terms of organizational and logistical accountability, all parties are aware of and understand the scope and responsibility of all roles and tasks. YMs have their rights and responsibilities presented to them in the form of a contract that both the program participants and coordinators sign and keep on file. The coordinator and educator roles for all programs include the same general rights and responsibilities, however educators' responsibilities become somewhat fluid when in conjunction with the facilitators, as they work together on any issues that develop with their respective charges.

The program is built in such a way as to ensure no gender disparity between participants: there is always equal numbers of male and female participants. In terms of racial equality, there is no specific race-based target audience, since the majority of program users are an ethnic mix. The only social criteria that makes one candidate more viable than another is their individual level of financial need; a needier candidate will be chosen over their competition.

The program is also built on the idea that a candidate that has already received personal benefit from a leadership or community building program will be more likely to be retain the information and move forward with it than a candidate whose first experience is also their last one. At this stage there is less likelihood of the individual internalizing the life change and making it an integral part of their way of life. Candidates with no previous ACER experience are still eligible to apply for consideration to the 4 of the 6 Youth Monitor areas (for library and Youth Agent monitors, experience is required),

however candidates with previous experience are more likely to fulfill the requirements and do better on the interviews than their counterparts with little or no experience. No effort is made however, to balance a tendency towards selecting YMs with previous program experience, over new candidates.

#### Relevance:

The demographic directly served by the current program includes youth 17-22 who live in the Eldorado region. Youth in this area are particularly likely to be resorting to the illicit job market in order to bring additional income to their home, and are often expected to be able to provide and care for needy members of their family including younger siblings, and family that's ill, in jail or elderly. Moreover within this age group there is an inordinately high level of teen pregnancy meaning that it is not unusual for the number of infants and children to grow faster than the number of wage earners in the same family.

Capacity to find a job with a constant salary or a long term contract is difficult and often the youth who participate in the program have had little or no socialization for the workplace, meaning even on the occasions that they find and are given a placement, they are often let go during the 'probation period' due to personality clashes, irresponsible attitudes, or inappropriate behavior. This same set of life skills such as punctuality, respect and propriety also makes this demographic ineligible for the few formal vocational courses available in the area. So far as is known, ACER is the only organization offering institutionalized and professionally supported program dealing with the pre-vocational stage of personal and social development in the area.

Participation in the YMP provides a forum in which the youth can learn the social dynamics of the workplace and the life skills necessary to flourish as an adult. Since all YMs participate in mapping their progress and identifying their goals, the program allows for mistakes that would have cost them positions in other programs providing they acknowledge and commit to learning from them. In effect the YMP provides its participants with the tools they need to retain and make the most of any future position they obtain.

The program works at the individual level although the impacts at the family, group and community level are often great. As the age group in question is often in a position of great influence within their family circles, both as sources of income and as caregivers, the opportunity for repetition and multiplication within the household is great. Moreover, due to experience in leadership and mediation, they can become influential within their own peer group (class mates, work mates). Although time limitations made it difficult to interview teachers or bosses working directly with the program participants to determine if there had been any change in the group dynamics, many YMs made reference to this group social change themselves. As such although the program does not directly work beyond the bounds of individual growth and development, it has the capacity to influence a much greater segment of the community through informal replication.

The program focuses on the development of individual capacity in a group setting and toward group goals, so the program objective is to provide a forum where each individual can develop their own capacities and fulfill their own potential. As such, the

educators and facilitators work together with the participant to identify what personal goals they want to work towards in any given time period. The benefit of the current process is that the expectations and level of responsibility placed on each participant is relevant to their individual capacity and interest, and as such there is documented validity to the expectation that individual objectives be achieved.

#### Efficiency:

The YMP has managed to identify the best use of resources in order to achieve maximum program results. From before the program's inception there has been an understanding that expecting responsibility and commitment from youth, in very clearly articulated and defined circumstances increased trust, reliability and self confidence in the youth in question. As such the creation of a program where the youth have clearly defined and responsibilities allows for a more effective use of resources. As an example, the work that would take two professionals a month to complete in the library can be done in the same time and for the same cost by six YMs who have the added benefit of an activity and all the personal and professional support the program provides. Moreover their participation ensures the relevance and viability and sustainability of the program as their family and peers are encouraged to participate and use the services offered by ACER.

Although this sustainability is difficult to quantify, every current or past Youth Monitor interviewed has discussed the long term impact of their participation on their family and friends. Several mentioned that it would be impossible to leave behind what they had learnt during the YMP, particularly in terms of responsibility, organization, and setting personal goals. As they see the program as in effect 'raising' them, they see the capacities that they developed during the course of the program as "who they are now". Moreover, it is not unusual for there to be a string of YMs in one family, in part of course because the younger participants received more encouragement to participate by their older siblings. More importantly however, the benefit of having a positive role model in the house meant that often these younger siblings were more likely to perform better in the group and individual interviews.

As the YMs have become an intrinsic part of the services offered by ACER, it would be prohibitively expensive to try and downsize the program without negatively affecting the other services. Moreover costs for the program have been calculated such that attempts at cutting down costs within the program (fewer man hours invested by educators, fewer facilitators, lowering the stipend for the participants) would undermine the effectiveness of the program without cutting any significant costs. The one area where there is the potential for more efficiency is in the use of time by the educators and facilitators. None of the professional staff have an idea of the time spent on the YMP, and doing a one month analysis of time spent on group and individual meetings, writing reports and discussing cases specifically associated with the YMP would help determine if the use of time could be organized more efficiently. That being said, the fluidity in the use of time has allowed both educators and facilitators to react to and successfully deal with the series of unexpected situations that arise on a daily basis among their cases, while still maintaining the current quality of support.

#### Sustainability:

As mentioned earlier, the impact of the program on its participants and their immediate sphere of influence has been shown through testimonials to be significantly sustainable. The program itself however is constantly under financial risk due to the lack of program specific funding. Other services such as the library or the Youth Agent program have been adopted by specific organizations or institutions who provide sponsorship in the form of scholarships, building costs, or bursaries and ensure the continued success of the activities. The YMP however is financed out of ACERs general operating budget, meaning that fluctuations in funding come at the expense of the organization as a whole. There are numerous examples of staff members whose pay has been up to months late due to lack of funds which in return makes sustainable staffing more difficult in the long run. If the program had specific funding any fluctuations in finances would be given with enough notice to be able to mitigate its impact, and could in theory provide the organization the time it needed to find new or interim donors. Moreover, the same budgeting crisis would not have the same impact on the day to day finances such as the food budget, since there would be more flexibility within the general budget to accommodate it.

#### Explanation of Methodology Used:

The data sources used in this study fell into three categories: program data collection and compilation from the primary documents, notes and reports written on the program since its inception; personal testimonials obtained through interviews; and statistical data from several government sources and databases. All data gathered is from primary sources, although program policy has been highly influenced by published academic works.

As each year there are less than 25 participants and often it is difficult to communicate with former participants, both the target and control interview groups were chosen based on their fulfillment of a series of qualified intended to be representative of the range of experiences faced by program candidates. During a meeting with the evaluation team, 12 young people were unanimously identified as fulfilling at least one of the aforementioned criteria. In total the interview sample would include equal participation by both genders, current and past monitors, and a control group of non-monitors of the same sex, age and personal circumstances for each.

Over the course of the interview process it became clear that it would be impossible to track down and arrange interview times for the youth identified, so a second meeting was arranged in which all current and recent YMs fulfilling any of the criteria were identified, and all participants who made themselves available were interviewed. As such accessing a control criteria became extremely difficult and the interview questions were changed to include discussion on their peers, their families, and particularly their parents or care givers when they were the same age in order to determine if any cycles of violence, risk or abuse had been broken through participation.

Each of the programs original creators was also interviewed, as were the program facilitators, only two of whom had participated as YMs themselves.

The criteria for interview subjects included

- Someone with ONLY Youth Monitor experience in ACER

- Someone who is the family unit's primary care giver
- Someone who experienced a drastic change over the course of the program
- Someone who was nominated for participation in the program
- One participant from each area of the program

As the current YMs had only been in the program for two months at the time of the interviews it was decided to contact and interview only past participants but with an attempt at interviewing Monitors from each year of the program's existence. That said the interview participants included the following:

- 11 past participants
- 5 past participants who currently work for ACER as staff
- 6 males
- 5 females

All pre-determined interview criteria was met.

### Information Sources and Gathering Procedures

Interview questions were identified by the evaluation team in consultation with relevant staff members and former participants. Two sets of questions were identified, one set for staff that focuses on the program goals and the development process, and a second set for the participants that focus on day-to-day circumstances, capacities and relationships. The questions identified are as follows:

Staff:

- a definition and explanation of each area included in the YMP as well as an explanation of the YMs involvement and responsibilities. Must include:
  - description of the program as a whole
  - program objectives
  - stag definitions and responsibilities
  - participant definition
  - work description for participants including rights and requirements
  - selection process
  - evaluation process both for the program and participant
  - finances: where do they come from, how are they spent
- How did the concept of the program come about? Why was it discussed? How was it discussed?
- What was the program intended to provide its participants, what did they want to happen? What opportunities and capacities does the program provide?
- Who was the original team? What were their responsibilities? What was the original job description?
- What were the major talking points when the program originated? Were there disagreements? What about? What was the final word?
- When did the discussion of 'vocational' vs. 'personal development' start? What was the outcome of the discussion?

- What was the first year of the program like? What was the most difficult aspect of that first year? What changes were suggested? Why? Have they happened? Why? How else has the program changed since its inception?

Participant interviews were worded in such a way as to allow the participant to tell their own story in their own words. Once the participant had discussed their experiences, any missing information was then asked for directly. The areas of focus to be covered in participant interviews are as follows:

#### Professional/Vocational:

- Does the participant perceive work or courses as a right? Do they perceive themselves as having potential to get a placement? Do they have ambition for themselves? Are the ambitions if any realistic? Does the participant have the capacity to understand and fight for their rights?
- Does the participant actively research placements? Does the participant actively attempt to obtain placements? Is the participant qualified for the placements that he or she is looking for?
- Does the participant distinguish between a placement, a good placement and an ideal placement?

#### Family:

- Has the participant's attitude to their family/siblings changed? Do they spend time with their siblings voluntarily or for fun?
- Do the participants teach or share their capacities with their family or peers? Do the participants' siblings see them as role models?
- Do the participants have a better relationship with their families? Is it easier to live peacefully together?
- Have they broken any generational cycles of violence, abuse, unemployment etc.

#### Personal Indicators:

- What are the participant's plans for the future? Does this include family planning? What has the participant done to move towards these goals?
- What skills have the participants learnt that they use in every-day life? (Patience, tolerance, initiative etc.)
- Has the participant's relationship towards authority figures (bosses, teachers, parents, police) changed?
- Does the participant understand the importance of balance, leisure/personal time?
- Does the participant have curiosity and interest in new experiences/learning?
- Does the participant explore and move in other communities or territories?
- How does the participant view health and personal care?
- Does the participant have interest and/or involvement in collective issues (elections, team work etc.)

#### Intervention Logic as Related to Findings

The YMP's was constructed somewhat organically. Jonathan Hannay identified a need amongst the youth that made up his case load for some sort of constructive activity, particularly between programs or after an individual had outgrown programs. His idea

to set individuals to help out around the organization either taking documents between the administrative building and the community center, filing, answering phones or helping in the library showed great promise, and when funding arose for a professional to monitor the Youth Agents program, the funding was divided into stipends, and the paid and contracted Youth Monitor position was created. Its development has continued in much the same way, identifying a community or individual an inherent need in the organization and trying to find a way to target as many needs at one go as possible.

With the YMP, there was already an understanding that the longer a child or young person is exposed to the consistent support and guidance provided by this or any other program, the lesser the likelihood that the individual will revert back to their pre-program behavior patterns. As such there was an interest in extending the capacity for supporting this demographic as long as possible, while still fulfilling the mandate. As such the combination of a very real organizational need for added administrative support was provided for while allowing ACER's social support to continue past the mandated age range. Although the original program plan called for the YMP to be a vocational program, resource limitations meant that the program could not provide the supervision or training necessary to be certifiable. As such the program shifted its focus away from job-specific training, to 'know how', life skills and capacity building program.

Although there is a limited capacity for participants and a high level of interest in the program, the interview process which is open to all interested parties provides a series of skills and discussions that serve as a learning experience to those candidates that do not make the cut. At the end of the three step selection process, candidates are asked how they think they did, if they wanted to explain any of their actions, comments or behaviors and if they wish they had done anything differently. The interviewer will also offer feedback as to the candidate's performance in the process if they accept, and are offered the chance to return and re-apply for one of the other areas of the program.

The areas as they currently stand include 6 library monitors, 2 administrative monitors, 6 youth agent monitors, and one capoeira monitor. Each YM is asked to sign a contract at the beginning of the program defining what shifts they are expected to work, the expectations, the job description and the terms of the contract, as well as their rights and what they can expect in return both in terms of support, as well as in terms of capacities and attributes they will learn. Both the candidate and the coordinator sign the contract, promising that the rights and responsibilities on both sides will be met. Activities for monitors include a monthly program report, civil society and rights workshops and classes, outings, and monthly and bi-monthly meetings, as well as their delegated responsibilities as determined at the program planning meeting at the beginning of the year. Outputs for the participants depend on the area each monitor works in, and changes year to year, but is explicitly laid out and followed up on by both the educators and facilitators.

The educators' function in the YMP aims to address two needs in the participants; ongoing social, physical, psychological support and guidance, and the development of life skills needed in the adult world, either in the job market or as a parent or guardian. These needs have been specifically defined by the children themselves under the guidance of the educators who understand the added pressures inherent in a transitional

age group, and the frustrations that several young people experienced attempting to complete this transition without support.

Where the educators serve to provide as personal and emotional guides for the participants, the facilitators provide program specific guidance and help the YMs find solutions to programming problems. Together the educators and facilitators provide a support system that allows the YMs to make mistakes and correct them without negative repercussions to themselves or to the other program participants.

The intervention itself includes several follow ups throughout the course of the program where the educators and YM's together set personal and behavioral goals (handing reports in on time, practicing spelling and handwriting outside of work hours, researching three potential courses they would like to attend) and evaluating how well the previous goals have been achieved.

#### Intervention Logic:

Several academic publications have suggested the implementation of conflict and violence prevention strategies in association with vocational or professional training for at risk youth. Policy papers put forward by the Pan American Health Organization and the Journal of Pan-American Public Health have long suggested that violence and poverty amongst youth are often associated with feelings of helplessness and stress associated with chronic unemployment or perceived hopelessness. As such programs that allow for capacity building and visible choices break down psychological and social barriers that can drive youth to violence out of despair. As a former YM, Fernando explained: "It's bad to have nothing to do, because all sorts of things come to your head: to rob, to kill... (the program) is important because it takes kids off the streets and keeps them busy with interesting stuff" (my translation). In a community where five years ago the homicide rate per capita was almost 18 times that of New York at its worst, helping youth choose non-violent ways to respond to conflict, frustration or despair is vital.

Moreover, several studies throughout Latin America have shown that delinquency is severely reduced when a misbehaving individual is surrounded by well-behaved peers than when surrounded by other misbehaving youth. In the same way, by enforcing standards of behavior and respect, antisocial tendencies and actions are discouraged and hopefully in the long term, successfully curbed.

A study conducted on Brazilian career programs for adolescents at risk by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul has also explained the benefits of capacity based vocational programming that focuses on capacities, potential and personal resources (in other words providing an acknowledgement of options, alternatives and hope, rather than difficulties and limitations) as a means of providing more holistic and sustainable vocational development. In much the same way, as the expectations and objectives of the YMP are individually identified, designed and evaluated, individuals are able to achieve their personal potential without having to concern themselves with what stage their peers are at. Moreover, as the program is designed to provide skills through experience (education through work) rather than as a means to an end (education for work), participants gain confidence in their new skills and are able to apply these skills in a variety of areas.

### Comments and Suggestions:

Several points have arisen over the course of this study that could help direct future policy decisions with regards to the program.

**Program Selection:** Many of the YMs admitted that they had entered the program expecting it to be a formalized vocational training scheme that would train them specifically for the work force, or a job itself where personal development was of secondary importance. In discussing the selection process with both staff and participants, it also emerged that the program definition is not explicitly explained to potential candidates until they have already been chosen to participate. Although this has the benefit of ensuring that people who would not normally apply for the program do, thus expanding the range of participants and the reach of the outputs, this also has the unfortunate capacity to create instability within the program. When a participant's expectations of what the program will afford them or what the level of commitment to it is inaccurate, disillusioned participants may resign, or in some cases worse, remain but undermine the team dynamics, by not following through on commitments, disrupting meetings, or arguing with their peers. A clear definition of the program at some point during the selection process could allow for an individual to remove themselves from the process before having committed too much time to it, and may help prevent some conflict over the course of the year.

**Mandate:** Although the program does fulfill the objectives as explained to me by both the staff and participants of the program, as well as the objectives as defined in the ACER mandate, there is no documented program specific mandate, guidelines or explicit objectives. Including these would make it significantly easier to find program specific funding, raise interest in the program at the local, national and international levels, and clearly explain program objectives to participants. Moreover, it would serve as an excellent point of reference for all or any long term policy changes, ensuring the purpose and function of the program remains on track.

**Communication:** The YMP does an excellent job of ensuring the open cycle of feedback between the staff and participants, ensuring two way evaluations of the program, the individual and the staff. These evaluations provide a forum where discussions on the subject of goals and objectives as well as expectations and responsibilities can occur, allowing for all parties in the YMP to act on any grievances or disillusionments before they become a point of contention between the interested parties. Considering three of the four main areas deal directly with the greater community (library users, Youth Agents, and capoeira students) it would be quite useful for the community itself to do an annual evaluation of the YMP and it's the YMs in general in order to make sure that the expectations of the community are met within reason. For instance, there has been no evaluation if the YM to Youth Agent ratio fulfill their needs in terms of administrative support, or if there are any unidentified conflicts between these two groups. In much the same way, there has been no evaluation by the library users to see if the programs or support being provided by the library YMs is fulfilling community expectations.

**Efficiency:** As discussed earlier the flexibility that undefined schedules afford both educators and facilitators allows the program to offer the participants support when they

most need it. That said, a formal account of hours worked on the program by both parties could provide potential donors with a better understanding of where their money would go, as well as increasing communication between staff as to availability for meetings, discussions or projects.

Program development: Two points have been suggested by many of the YMs interviewed and could if implemented extend the scope and impact of the program with limited cost. The first suggestion that has come up continuously is the use of a specific library or administration monitor who would work entirely in the area of computing and information technology. This monitor would research and teach the use of basic computer programs (excel, power point, word, outlook) as well as internet research skills, the use of online encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses etc. providing the library users with research skills necessary to excel in school, research and apply for positions, and help them secure a placement in the formal job market.

The second suggestion was for the graduating YMs. Several mentioned the emotional shock and dismay of having gone from an extremely supportive and communal environment to finding themselves alone once more and without the support network they had become emotionally dependent on. One comment that arose on several occasions, was that after having had an amazing growth experience with the program and feeling they had a lot of skills to offer, having difficulties communicating these skills and capacities in such a way as to secure a placement, either in a course, class or job. It would be beneficial for time to be spent with each Youth Monitor in the last month or so to 'debrief' them in their experiences and explain what they might experience in the month or so after they leave ACER. If possible, it might be feasible to find a donor who would fund a formalized vocational institution or careers councilor to spend an hour or so with each Youth Monitor explaining how to translate their experiences onto their resumes or in an interview situation. This would require finding financing for 25 hours of formalized vocational support once a year.

### Conclusions:

The research collected throughout the course of this study finds that through the Youth Monitor program, ACER provides youth of the Eldorado and Diadema area with the life skills and personal capacities that are currently missing in other educational and vocational programs available in the region. The capacities obtained throughout the course of the activity allow participants to take advantage of what opportunities are available to them both professionally and educationally, and provide them with the social, mediation and negotiation skills necessary to fully function in the home and in the work place. Moreover, the new opportunities afforded them due to the socialization provided by the program affords its participants a full understanding of the choices available to them in life, and makes it easier for individuals to break cycles of risk, abuse and violence within their own lives. Quantitative and testimonial findings show that the services the program provides are relevant and sustainable, as well as provided in the most efficient and cost effective manner. Moreover, demand for the program is growing due to community acceptance and the extremely high number of formally employed former participants.