



CARIBBEAN CIVIL SOCIETY SHOWCASE SERIES

Showcasing projects and programmes supported by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project and aiming to strengthen rights-based responses to HIV in the populations most vulnerable to HIV

Youth for Change:

A skills building and empowerment programme for marginalised youth



Members of rival gangs have come together through FURJUG to denounce violence in their communities. Photo: Fran Afonso

In the Dominican Republic, Youth for Change is operated by **Fundación Red de Jóvenes Unidos de Guachupita (FURJUG)** – “The Network of United Youth of Guachupita”. FURJUG is recognised as one of the few youth-led organisations in the Dominican Republic that has access to youth in gangs in some of the country’s poorest neighbourhoods.

CONTEXT

Gauchupita, La Ciénega, Los Guandules, Villa María, and Villas Agrícolas are among Santo Domingo's poorest neighbourhoods (barrios) and each of them is home to hundreds of youth made vulnerable by lack of education and job opportunities, broken families, alcohol and drug use, and temptations to criminal activity.

High unemployment is a major long-term development challenge for the Dominican Republic. For many young people, particularly young people from barrios, this means that finding full-time jobs in the formal economy is very difficult or impossible, and many rely on odd jobs in the informal sector. Gangs give them something to do with their time and opportunities to earn money through activities that are often illegal. Young people cite family problems, including domestic violence and abuse, and lack of intervention by any social services as another reason gangs appeal to them. Alcohol and drug use also help to pass time, and some youth become involved in using and selling marijuana, cocaine and crack cocaine.

For many young people, there is stigma attached to living in poor communities with a reputation for violence, delinquency, crime, and cholera outbreaks. Negative media coverage of these neighbourhoods does not help, and young people say their employability is lessened when their home address is in one of these stigmatised barrios.

Funding for education in the Dominican Republic has been one of the lowest in Latin America for many years. Schools are overcrowded and use rote learning methods that fail to engage young people. Teachers are often absent so student absenteeism and drop-out is high. As the curriculum is heavily influenced by values of the Catholic church, young people receive none of the sexual health education they need in school to make safe and informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

A two-year long civil society-led campaign calling for increased national spending on education from 2 to 4 percent of the country's gross domestic product won commitment from the Dominican government in late 2012.

For both young women and men from poor communities, high risk for HIV and STIs and unwanted teenage pregnancy are often at the bottom of their list of problems. Exchanging sex for money or clothes is just one way they manage the day-to-day reality of poverty, with benefit not only for themselves, but for their families.

PROJECT GOAL

Reduce young people's risk for STIs/HIV and early pregnancy in four of Santo Domingo's poorest barrios.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

FURJUG identified ten youth leaders from four barrios. The youth leaders then trained twenty young people as peer educators in each of the four neighbourhoods as health promoters, training a total of eighty young people during a three-day training programme.

Over eight months, team leaders and peers then went into communities and facilitated a range of activities with young people. These included graffiti days where youth created murals with positive messages; movie nights where they discussed social issues prompted by a film; talks about sexual and reproductive health; skills and self-esteem building workshops, and meetings with staff of neighbourhood-based health facilities to promote delivery of youth-friendly services. FURJUG also collaborated in a Dominican-Haitian Fellowship Festival and a national break-dance contest called Dominican Battle 2012.



Unemployment is a major problem for young people from Santo Domingo's poorest barrios. Photo: Fran Afonso

INITIAL RESULTS

The leadership of the youth founders of FURJUG was central to its success. Coming from the barrios themselves, they were able to identify what activities would interest youth and were able to support them to use the language and activities of their own subcultures, such as graffiti and break-dancing, to create positive messages and art. For many young people, this was the first time they had used their time to do something positive for their community and had taken centre stage. It was also the first time they had seen education as something they could enjoy. This in itself was self-esteem building and empowering and built bonds between young people who had previously belonged to rival gangs. Working together they found that their common marginalisation was a unifying factor.

FURJUG reached nearly 1500 young people across

four barrios with HIV and STI prevention messages. They also participated in a number of meetings with other youth groups who hoped the project could be extended to cover them.

CHALLENGES

Over the course of the project, FURJUG worked with healthcare providers to promote youth-friendly services for all youth. While some healthcare providers were enthusiastic collaborators with the project, others were not so involved, and there is need for much more leadership and training from the government to make sure young people receive judgment-free and professional services.



For many young people this was the first time they had used their time to do something positive for their community. Photo: Fran Afonso

THE WAY AHEAD

It is yet to be seen whether the Dominican government will maintain its commitment to investing 4 percent of the GDP in education and, if it does, whether this will impact the prospects of young people in the Dominican Republic's poorest communities. There is an urgent need for programmes that build self-esteem among youth, support them to make healthy decisions, and protect them against STIs/HIV and early pregnancy.

Groups like FURJUG turn the negative stereotypes of young people from barrios on their head and find sub-culturally appropriate ways to engage young people. This is something no government programme can do. Yet in the long-term civil society organisations cannot possibly be expected to

address the failures of the system. There must be greater investment from the State and international donors in all aspects – education, healthcare, and social services – and the State must find innovative ways to get more young people from barrios into employment. When that urgently needed investment does happen, youth-led groups like FURJUG must be supported to take leadership in the design of programmes for their community.

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This series describes projects and programmes given technical and financial support by the CVC/COIN Vulnerabilised Groups Project, a sub-recipient of a Pan Caribbean Partnership against HIV and AIDS (PANCAP) grant provided by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Each report aims to highlight the contribution of Caribbean civil society organisations in responding to HIV and AIDS in vulnerable populations and presents promising programmes for scale-up by Caribbean states. For more information about CVC/COIN's Vulnerabilised Groups Project visit www.focusright.org