YouthBuild International and the Bernard van Leer Foundation began in 2011 to explore ways to work together. This article explains how YouthBuild’s programmes engage unemployed young people in building infrastructure, and the potential of the YouthBuild model to further the Foundation’s goal of improving young children’s health through improving their physical environments.

The seed for the creation of the YouthBuild programme model was sown in East Harlem, New York in 1978 and began, as all YouthBuild programmes begin, with a question posed to young people by a caring adult: ‘What would you do to improve your community if you had the resources you needed to put your ideas for improvement into action?’ The young people had an answer that was both simple and profound: ‘We would rebuild abandoned buildings to create homes for homeless people and take back empty buildings from drug dealers.’

At the time, over 300 abandoned buildings blighted the East Harlem landscape, while thousands of idle teenagers and hundreds of homeless people roamed the streets. The young people’s answer provided an obvious solution to all three tragic problems. Why not train and employ out-of-school, unemployed young people to rebuild the buildings, creating affordable housing for the homeless?

YouthBuild is grounded in the philosophy that given the right context – that is, an environment filled with respect; a caring community; a positive peer group; a valued role in the neighbourhood; an opportunity to develop skills, high standards of self-discipline and performance; and the means for future education and employment – young adults with troubled pasts can transform themselves into productive citizens with viable futures.

The YouthBuild programme design consists of five components: education, technical skills training, leadership development, counselling support and placement of graduates (placement in jobs, self-employment, or continuing education or training opportunities). These five components, though distinct in their focus and outcomes, are experienced by students as integrated and working in unison to comprehensively address the livelihood needs and aspirations of young people while addressing critical community development challenges.

During the 6- to 12-month full-time YouthBuild programme, young people spend half of their time learning construction skills by building or rehabilitating community infrastructure, such as housing, schools, health clinics and playgrounds; the other half of their time is spent in a YouthBuild classroom advancing their basic education skills towards a recognised academic credential. The students are part of a mini-community of adults and young people committed to each other’s success and to improving the conditions of their neighbourhoods. The YouthBuild experience provides a vehicle for soft and technical skills training, applied learning and leadership development, and is a highly effective and comprehensive introduction to the world of work.

In the USA, YouthBuild supports a network of 273 independent programmes in 45 states, engaging 10,000 young people on an annual basis. Since 1994, more than 110,000 YouthBuild students have produced over 21,000 units of low-income housing.

International work: contexts and consequences

The YouthBuild model is being adapted for implementation by local NGOs, government and private sector partners in 13 countries – which include industrialised nations, emerging economies, developing countries, and locations recovering from natural disasters, violent conflict, and political unrest. Since 2007, over 7000 young people have enrolled in 56 YouthBuild programme sites outside the USA. The consistent features of the YouthBuild implementation contexts include:

- large numbers of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 who are not connected to formal education or opportunities for safe, productive employment
- most livelihood opportunities for young people being in the informal sector because there is a significant
mismatch between the numbers of young people needing jobs and the numbers of jobs that will be generated by the formal economy
• destroyed, dilapidated, or insufficient stocks of community infrastructure that need to be built or rebuilt
• employment and training systems that are not reaching or retaining marginalised young people, or are providing training that is not aligned with the demands of the private sector
• high degrees of community unrest, manifested through conflict or violence, that require the input and leadership of local young people in order to be resolved
• locally led and effective NGO, government, private sector, and development-finance partners with a commitment to reach disconnected young people, and prepare them for and introduce them to positive livelihood opportunities.

Working on construction sites provides all the participants with the opportunity to make critical contributions, creating practical, relevant, and inspiring forums for young people to work together on common projects, building tangible skills and mutual understanding with their peers. This shared construction experience has been shown to effectively bridge divides among young people from different economic classes, ethnic groups, religious backgrounds and from groups, such as rival gangs, who have long-standing conflicts.

The YouthBuild experience gives the young people a direct, tangible experience of how their individual actions can make a real, visible difference in the world around them. Construction activities take place in the local communities where the young people, their peers and their families live. As a result, the community at large also starts to view young people as active leaders, taking responsibility for the development of their own lives and the life of their communities.

For example, YouthBuild students in Rio de Janeiro have designed plans for the redevelopment of favelas; in post-earthquake Haiti, YouthBuild students are constructing 12 training centres for young people to prepare them to rebuild houses, community centres and health clinics; in El Salvador, formerly gang-involved and gang-vulnerable young people helped to design and construct a community centre; in north-east Bosnia, Serbian, Bosniak, and Croatian young people worked side by side to upgrade homes, parks and playgrounds; in Mexico, YouthBuild students at 21 locations in Ciudad Juárez have rebuilt public spaces and playgrounds, providing community gathering spaces in a city that experienced unprecedented levels of violence; and in South Africa, YouthBuild students built 119 units of affordable housing for residents of the Ivory Park informal settlement.

The words of one YouthBuild graduate, Natalia, testify to the transformative power of the programme on participants and communities alike:

‘The YouthBuild model can change the often negative perceptions of young people in the community, and provide alternative role models for young children which could help inspire them to pursue paths of non-violence.’
The potential for impacts on young children
YouthBuild students are also, of course, brothers, sisters, spouses, young parents, and members of multiple community, social, religious and political groups. The impact of the YouthBuild experience has been shown to have powerful ripple effects in these other life spheres, hence the interest of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the YouthBuild model as a potentially cost-effective and scalable way to pursue the goal of improving young children’s health through improving their physical environments. There are five main hypotheses for how YouthBuild programmes could have an impact on young children.
1 Given that many YouthBuild participants are new parents – up to 70% in some programmes – by providing them with a pathway to sustainable livelihoods, the YouthBuild intervention positions young people to improve their self-esteem and bring additional resources to their families, which could translate into direct positive effects on the health and learning outcomes of their children.

2 As YouthBuild programmes also offer an alternative to gang activity, they may help to reduce the incidence of violence affecting young children along with other members of the community. YouthBuild students exercise leadership to interrupt cycles of violence experienced by families from generation to generation and, by extension, to reduce the numbers of young people who are turning to violence as a result of their own experience of violence as children.

3 The community assets which YouthBuild participants build can have a directly positive impact on the health and safety of young children, if they are built to child-friendly specifications.

4 According to social disorganisation theory, improvements in the built environment can help to reduce violence and improve mental health outcomes within the community – including, potentially, among children – by creating a greater sense of order. The physical manifestation of economic poverty includes abandoned, dilapidated or destroyed physical infrastructure and lack of green spaces. YouthBuild students create safe, well-kept and organised spaces where people gather for learning, work, fellowship, or recreation.

5 Finally, the YouthBuild model can change the often negative perceptions of young people in the community, and provide alternative role models for young children which could help inspire them to pursue paths of non-violence. In particular, siblings of YouthBuild students are shaped by the experience of seeing their brothers and sisters take steps to transform their lives and create permanent community assets that stand as a visible legacy of their commitment to serve others.

YouthBuild and the Bernard van Leer Foundation are currently looking at the viability of implementing adapted YouthBuild programmes to test these hypotheses in Iquitos/Belen, Peru. The organisations are also working on an evaluation protocol to identify the impact of YouthBuild programmes currently operating in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro on the lives of young people, children and families and on the design and construction of local infrastructure.

Challenges and future directions
The comprehensive YouthBuild programme design is complex and can succeed only if the five components of the design – education, technical skills training, leadership development, counselling support and placement of graduates – are experienced by young people as consistent and well integrated. This in turn requires the programme design to leverage the experience and resources of stakeholder partners from a wide cross-section of the NGO, government, business and development finance sectors.

Effectively mobilising and directing the resources of these stakeholders is often challenging and can be managed only through regular communication with each partner, and through planning processes designed to refocus the collective will of all partners on the central outcome objectives of the programme. The executive leadership of a YouthBuild programme must therefore combine a fundamental belief in the potential of all young people to learn, lead, and contribute to their communities, with an entrepreneurial approach to building support for the programme and sustaining

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its presence in local communities. Strong programme outcomes directly correlate to the longevity of the director’s experience, as he or she accumulates knowledge and experience while running the programme over several cycles.

The most consistent among the challenges for YouthBuild programmes is how best to secure placements for young people in jobs, internships, self-employment or continuing education upon graduation. This most critical point of transition – when young people leave the safe, supportive environment of YouthBuild, and must navigate often chaotic livelihood environments – has proven difficult to manage towards consistent success. Even those young people who are successfully placed in productive employment upon graduation often find it difficult to retain those first placements and must draw on their YouthBuild learning and graduate support network to manage their next transition.

Four interventions have proven key in addressing this placement challenge. The focus on placement must begin from day one of the programme, with staff focused on building relationships with employers that can lead to internships or jobs; skills training must be demand-driven and include hands-on work experience; follow-up support services should be an integral part of the programme design for at least 6 months after graduation; and organised alumni networks of YouthBuild graduates must be nurtured to provide a powerful peer network of support and resource.

As the YouthBuild programme model is applied in different locations around the world, several consistent areas of adaptation have begun to emerge. First, the community assets that young people are creating have diversified well beyond housing to include community centres, schools, health clinics, orphanages, playgrounds and sustainable ‘green’ infrastructure, reflecting the priorities for community infrastructure building based on local needs. Second, youth lending and adapted business development support services are being offered as part of a self-employment training pathway in YouthBuild programmes in settings where there is a mismatch between formal sector employment and the number of young people needing employment, and where the majority of livelihood opportunities can be found in the informal economic sector. Finally, there is a broad variation in the length of the programme, based on the education and training needs of the young people, the unique developmental challenges they bring into the programme, and the economic pressures they face to earn incomes to support their families. For example, YouthBuild programmes that serve only young women are being designed for implementation in several countries where the unique challenges facing them require a highly customised set of adaptations.

We know that the world’s 1.5 billion young people between the ages of 12 and 24 represent a vast reservoir of vision and leadership that must be mobilised in order to solve many of the world’s most challenging problems. According to UN Habitat estimates, by 2030 as many as 60% of urban residents will be under 18 years of age – a generation that is just now starting to be born to today’s young adults (Brookins et al., 2012). YouthBuild firmly believes that all of today’s young people have the potential for a lifetime of productivity and good parental role modelling, if only they can access the necessary support, encouragement, guidance and training to assemble sustainable livelihoods.

Reference

Note
For more information about YouthBuild International, visit www.youthbuildinternational.org