

Reading, Writing and Reuniting: A Youth-Run Adult Literacy Campaign in El Salvador

EcoViva 2011 Program Description

Organizational Background

EcoViva's mission is to work in partnership and solidarity with low-income communities in Central America organized to achieve environmental sustainability, economic self-sufficiency, social justice, and peace. For nearly 15 years, EcoViva – known previously as the Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America– has focused on supporting community development and peace in rural El Salvador. Our organization was inspired by the work of Father Checho Alas, a Salvadoran priest who was forced into exile during the civil war for his work ministering to the poor. While in the United States, Checho recruited people of many faiths to come together to support the poor of Central America. He returned to El Salvador during the negotiation of the Peace Accords in 1992, bringing a group of volunteers with him. Together they accompanied refugees returning on foot from Nicaragua, Honduras and Panama and resettling on abandoned lands in the Bay of Jiquilisco region.

In 1996, these volunteers formed the Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America (FSSCA) as a permanent means to support the refugees' own efforts towards rebuilding rural society. Over time, the FSSCA formed a strong alliance with a group of communities and helped it found its own Salvadoran nonprofit organization, the Mangrove Association. When gang violence began to plague the communities in the late 1990s, FSSCA brought in peacemakers from Mennonite and other Christian traditions to help teach conflict resolution skills. In 1998, local communities declared the area a Zone of Peace. Checho and local leaders brought together feuding youth to talk through their problems and negotiated a gang truce that remains in effect today.

Today, the Mangrove Association and EcoViva support locally-led development programs engaging over 100 coastal villages in and near the Bay of Jiquilisco Biosphere Reserve. EcoViva provides both financial and technical support to the Mangrove Association, and builds strategic alliances with universities and international institutions to help local communities meet their goals. The following are just a few of the results of our partnership with local communities in El Salvador:

- 13,670 local residents now have access to clean drinking water;
- 125 local farmers have been trained as sustainable agriculture promoters;
- 4,735 acres of mangrove forest are now protected by community patrols;
- 650,000 endangered sea turtles have been hatched and released in the last six years;
- 75 local fishermen and women work to protect and monitor local fisheries and restore fish habitat;
- 460 composting toilets and 550 wood-saving stoves have been built by villagers and volunteers to decrease environmental degradation and life-threatening illnesses;
- 76 communities are equipped with an Early Warning System for disaster response; and
- Over 500 youth have participated in gang prevention programs using art, theater and radio.

Youth Literacy Campaign

Population Served and Needs Addressed

There are two key populations served by this program: rural adults who lack basic literacy, and rural youth who lack opportunities for meaningful involvement in their communities. Subsisting in a stagnant rural economy, thousands of families in the province of Usulután and Bay of Jiquilisco region eke out an existence in farming,

fishing and day labor. Nearly 45% of these rural households live in poverty, while a third of these families suffer from extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$1 a day.

This program addresses two critical problems faced by rural Salvadoran families: adult illiteracy and youth alienation. A land of vast inequality, El Salvador has never provided opportunity for the majority of its people to receive adequate education. According to statistics from the UN Development Program, the average adult in rural El Salvador has had only 4 years of basic schooling. Approximately 27% of adults, or 59,000 people, in the province of Usulután are functionally illiterate, one of the highest rates in El Salvador, and the majority of these are women, according to the 2007 National Census. Greater literacy leads to a more engaged and educated population, able to lead a more dignified life by becoming active participants in processes of social renewal. As the United Nations notes, “Literacy is not just about reading and writing; it is about respect, opportunity and development.”

At the same time, young people lack opportunities for positive engagement with their elders, often falling instead under the influence of youth gangs or migrating northward to look for work. The social fabric holding together the communities, already torn by civil war, is further frayed by the lack of positive local opportunities for youth to be productive, respected members of their communities. Many of the best and brightest turn toward emigration to increase opportunities for personal development, yet fewer than ten percent will successfully continue their education after settling in their destination country.

In striving to enable the potential of young people among a traditionally underserved rural population, La Coordinadora promotes opportunities for personal growth, education, leadership and service that facilitate the active involvement of youth in their communities.

Youth Empowerment Program

The Youth Empowerment Program supported by EcoViva originated in 2001 in the Bay of Jiquilisco, when local leaders negotiated a gang truce which still remains in force today. In return for their participation in the truce, our founder Chencho Alas worked with the gang members to initiate a number of youth-centered initiatives, including a tattoo removal program, a soccer league and the Rays of Light Youth Project. This visual arts class continues to this day, and former youth participants work with over 25 children and young adults each week.

In 2004, EcoViva (the called the FSSCA) initiated a 5-year partnership with ArtCorps, an international organization which promotes youth empowerment and community service through artistic expression. Building on the Rays of Light Youth Project, resident volunteers from ArtCorps engaged aspiring youth leadership through community theater, storytelling and visual art. Driven by youthful creativity, these mediums helped communities dialogue about the violence and injustices they witnessed during and after the civil war, an important step in healing a fragmented and alienated rural society. In 2008, Tania Molina, a Salvadoran artist and teacher, took the reins of this program, transforming it into a servant leadership project called the Center for Popular Education and Expressive Arts (CEPAE).

Over the last two years, CEPAE has been training a core group of 60 youth leaders ages 15 to 24. With the active consent of their parents, the youth attend a residential training program one weekend per month. This training program exposes young participants to dynamic and creative techniques that foster participation and reflection on difficult issues, and youth learn how to employ peer education techniques to motivate their friends, family and communities. The program also prepares them in highly practical skills such as computer literacy and project management. In 2010, when Tropical Storm Agatha flooded local communities, 18 youth leaders provided critical monitoring and information to ensure that the most vulnerable families in the Bay of Jiquilisco region received the help and supplies they needed during the emergency.

As the project has grown, it has received recognition and expressions of interest from other youth organizations throughout El Salvador. The Foundation of Christian Base Communities has contracted youth leaders from CEPAE to provide peer education to church youth groups from across the country. Most recently, when the Ministry of Education prepared to launch a nationwide literacy campaign, officials tapped CEPAE to head the campaign in the municipality of Jiquilisco.

Youth Supporting Literacy

Under this new literacy campaign, our local partner organization will train and support 60 youth leaders from the CEPAE program to promote and supervise literacy training in the municipality of Jiquilisco. This program uses an innovative approach to reach thousands of residents through a network of youth volunteers leading community workshops, radio programming, and dynamic mentoring sessions.

During this initial phase of the campaign, youth leaders will be trained to engage their peers in techniques of literacy education, brought to life by an interactive curriculum called “Yes, I Can!” This curriculum uses a series of easy-to-follow audio and video lessons, and dynamic discussions and group work guided by simple lesson plans. Recognized by UNESCO, “Yes, I Can!” has been adopted by the El Salvadoran Ministry of Education as an approach which has proven successful in other countries. In addition to teaching basic letters and numbers, the curriculum enlivens literacy skills through an open dialogue on civic engagement, violence prevention, and human rights.

The Ministry of Education will provide this curriculum free of charge to each participating student, and support two staff positions to coordinate this program. Local municipal government together with EcoViva general support funds will cover other staff positions and some initial training and staff transportation costs, or approximately 40% of the Year 1 budget. The program used these initial funds to launch in July 2010.

EcoViva is now seeking additional funding for Year 1 to ensure that the program is able to train a sufficient number volunteer literacy tutors from remote communities most in need. Educational outreach through community radio and public events will also increase region-wide participation throughout the campaign, targeting public schools, local government offices, community leadership, and the general public. Our goal is to have 190 literacy circles running in Jiquilisco by the end of 2011 with a total of 1,750 participants.

Measures of Success

Evaluation of this first phase will address the successful recruitment of youth leadership and effective volunteer tutors, who will increase literacy levels and proficiency among the targeted number of participating adult students. The writing and reading ability of students will be assessed for improvements throughout the 200-hour curriculum, and volunteer tutors will collaborate with their peer youth leaders to address any ongoing issues that might impede progress. Likewise, adult students will evaluate the curriculum and effectiveness of the literacy circles, in order to increase the overall effectiveness of the program. Currently, surveys are being compiled to assess illiteracy rates throughout communities in the Bay of Jiquilisco region. This information will provide an important baseline to assess the programs overall success in specifically targeting an illiterate adult population, throughout the 4-year literacy campaign.

Project Expense Budget Timeframe: October 2010 – Sept 2011	Description	Total Cost	Amount To Raise*	Amount Secured
Step 1: Project Planning and Management				
Personnel	Project Director	\$8,000.00	\$4,000.00	\$4,000.00
Municipal and Departmental Committee meetings	Transportation	\$240.00	\$160.00	\$80.00
Monthly province-wide planning meetings	Bus fare, food and office supplies for meetings	\$700.00	\$700.00	
Training on project planning for 60 promoters	Bus fare and food for 60 people	\$720.00		\$720.00
SUBTOTAL PROJECT PLANNING		\$9,660.00	\$4,860.00	\$4,800.00
Step 2: Recruitment and Mobilization				
Coordination and training meetings with educational institutions, village councils and local organizations throughout the department of Usulután	Communication and transportation to meetings	\$1,550.00	\$875.00	\$675.00
Community-wide meetings about the program	Transportation and sound system	\$1,200.00		\$1,200.00
SUBTOTAL PARTICIPATION		\$2,750.00	\$875.00	\$1,875.00
Step 3: Training and Teaching Activities				
Curriculum packets for volunteers and students	Books, A/V and manuals	in kind donation		in kind donation
Monthly 3-day training on teaching methodology for 60 promoters	Bus fare, food, lodging for 60 promoters	\$6,120.00	\$5,040.00	\$1,080.00
SUBTOTAL TRAINING & TEACHING		\$6,120.00	\$5,040.00	\$1,080.00
TOTAL		\$18,530	\$10,775*	\$7,755

*How we will raise it: \$5,000 SG Foundation, \$4,000 GlobalGiving.com, \$1,775 Individual Donors