

## Project Summary

# Promoting Youth Empowerment: Lessons from Neo Juventud in Ecuador



### Introduction

As part of the LIFT-UP Initiative<sup>i</sup>, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, CARE Ecuador explored the impact of *Neo Juventud*, a comprehensive development program tailored for young men and women<sup>ii</sup> in Palmar, a rural and impoverished area of Ecuador. The study sought to understand the *Neo Juventud* model and explore if and how it promoted the empowerment of youth, particularly as related to their understanding of sexual and reproductive health.

The findings suggest that participants in *Neo Juventud* were more empowered compared to local youth not involved in the program. While further research is needed, these findings can serve as important support for the promotion of more effective health and development programs targeting youth.

### Background

#### Context

Despite improvements in recent decades, youth in Ecuador still face many structural and social barriers to improved health and development. Rates of poverty are high<sup>iii</sup> and are disproportionately higher for rural populations. In addition, rates of pregnancy are increasing among Ecuadorian youth, representing the highest fertility among Andean countries. For example, 12.5 percent of adolescents aged 15 to 18 and over 50 percent of young women 19 to 24 are mothers. These pregnancies are particularly concentrated among young women and girls with the least financial resources and education. These statistics are especially alarming as young mothers



face a higher risk of complications with pregnancy and delivery, and are up to five times more likely to die from pregnancy related causes<sup>iv</sup>.

In the last decade, the government of Ecuador has made efforts to promote the healthy development of youth. In 2008, Ecuador approved a new constitution, which not only guarantees the rights of children, but, for the first time in its history, also recognizes that youth (between 18 and 29 years old) are strategic actors in the country's development. The government has also identified a reduction in adolescent pregnancy as a specific target. In support of this goal, the National Development Plan calls for reducing adolescent pregnancy by 25 percent by 2013, and the Law of Free Maternal and Infant Healthcare increases access to care by making all maternal and reproductive health services free. Finally, the National Plan for Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy explicitly aims to reduce this phenomenon and recognizes the social and cultural forces that affect adolescent pregnancy. Despite this progressive policy framework, systematic barriers

undermine youth development and propagate inequalities among Ecuadorian youth.

### *Empowerment*

Empowerment of youth has been identified as an important factor in promoting better sexual, reproductive and maternal health (SRMH) decisions<sup>v</sup>. CARE is interested in identifying best practices for empowering young women, a high risk group for maternal mortality, as a strategy for reducing maternal deaths. Working with men and boys is also critical to transforming attitudes about gender that undermine the well-being of all people. Engaging men and boys and mobilizing communities to take action are critical strategies to overcoming entrenched attitudes and achieving better maternal health outcomes. With this backdrop in mind, between 2002 and 2010, CARE Ecuador provided technical and financial support to help establish *Neo Juventud* as a strategy for empowering youth and improving health<sup>vi</sup>.

#### **Neo Juventud mission**

*Provide youth with the opportunity to participate in educational activities in order to ensure that these future adults develop tools to improve their quality of life and promote progress in their communities.*

*Neo Juventud* grew out of a 2003 community meeting of over 100 youth from Palmar at which they discussed the challenges facing their community, which included unemployment, drug use, teenage pregnancy and HIV. *Neo Juventud* was established to provide a structure and space for youth to implement their ideas for individual and community change.

*Neo Juventud* is supported by the Catholic Church, CARE Ecuador and several other partners<sup>vii</sup>. The activities are designed by the youth themselves, and are based on their expressed needs. In addition, youth are frequently the implementers and organizers of events and activities. *Neo Juventud* has received support from various sexual and

reproductive health/HIV-AIDS projects; therefore, as part of its health programming, it offers presentations on issues such as maternal health, HIV-AIDS and human rights. With the help of CARE and other partner organizations, *Neo Juventud* obtained a community center that includes a computer area, bakery, gymnasium and arts and crafts workshop, as well as space for meetings, recreation, workshops and events.

#### **Key Program Components<sup>viii</sup>**

**Educational workshops on sexual and reproductive health and personal development:** Youth both participate in and facilitate workshops on various topics, including SRH, HIV, self-esteem and relationships. Youth also provide trainings on some of these topics to their fellow community members.

**Professional development activities:** *Neo Juventud* youth gain work experience in a variety of places: cybercafés, gymnasiums, art studios and galleries, bakeries, chicken and quail egg production facilities, and community banks.

**Community service:** *Neo Juventud* serves as a community center for environmental protection activities, including the reforestation of mangrove trees and beach cleaning.

**Dynamic program framework:** *Neo Juventud* uses a dynamic model that changes to reflect the interests of the participating youth.

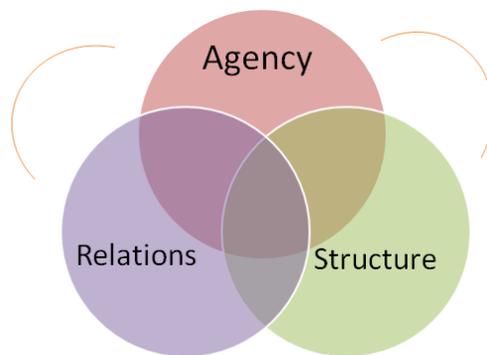
#### **Project Study**

Using a variety of methods for analysis, the LIFT-UP study sought to answer the following questions:

***Does addressing young people's needs through a comprehensive personal development intervention promote their self-reported and demonstrated empowerment? And if so, how?***

A study on empowerment required the selection of indicators that reflected youth empowerment and were measurable in the study context. Using CARE’s Empowerment Framework (See Box 1) as a starting point, as well as existing literature on youth empowerment<sup>ix</sup>, the project team identified empowerment indicators that directly related to the *Neo Juventud* intervention strategy, thus permitting investigators to link program participation to youth empowerment (see Table 1). In addition, individual responses from groups of questions related to knowledge, abilities, self-esteem, structure and relationships were aggregated to create an overall global empowerment indicator.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 84 youth between 14 and 24<sup>x</sup> years old – 43 youth who participated in *Neo Juventud* and live in the study area and 43 that live in the study area only and had similar characteristics. Within each group, 29 young men and 14 young women were interviewed. Young men make up a majority of *Neo Juventud* participants; therefore more males than females were available to participate in the



Box 1: CARE's Empowerment Framework

study. Data were analyzed through transcript analysis and coding responses based on main themes. Quantitative methods, such as bivariate regression, were used to determine statistical significance and evaluate the association between participation in *Neo Juventud* and empowerment. In addition, interviews were held with parents and other community members familiar with the *Neo Juventud* program in order to triangulate the results.

TABLE 1: Empowerment Indicators

Elements of Empowerment		Indicators
<p><b>AGENCY</b></p> <p>Related to actions, choices, and resources of individuals and groups when they take action.</p>	Knowledge	<p>Knowledge related to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contraception</li> <li>• Transmission of HIV-AIDS</li> <li>• Women’s rights</li> <li>• Antenatal and delivery services</li> </ul>
	Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New skills for communicating sexual and reproductive health with intimate partner</li> <li>• New skills for communicating with parents</li> </ul>
	Self-Esteem	<p>Greater demonstration of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-confidence</li> <li>• Values and goals</li> <li>• Self-esteem</li> </ul>
<p><b>STRUCTURE</b></p> <p>Represents the generally accepted ideas, institutions and “rules of the game” that constitute norms.</p>		<p>Perceives that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The clinic provides culturally appropriate and high quality services</li> <li>• Adolescent-friendly spaces and activities are effective</li> </ul>
<p><b>RELATIONSHIPS</b></p> <p>Describes the quality of social interactions through which empowerment is mediated; the social channels through which changes in power relationships flow.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better communication with parents</li> <li>• Improved capacity to negotiate with a partner</li> <li>• Better interpersonal relationships</li> </ul>

## Lessons

The LIFT-UP study found statistically significant relationships between participation in *Neo Juventud* and empowerment, as measured by the global empowerment indicator and a number of individual empowerment indicators (See Table 2). For example, 86 percent of program participants reported high self-esteem, compared to 35 percent of the youth who were not a part of the *Neo Juventud* program (See Table 2). Additionally, *Neo Juventud* participants displayed greater knowledge of SRMH issues than the comparison group, specifically about critical SRMH topics such as women’s rights, HIV transmission and pregnancy prevention. These findings highlight that *Neo Juventud* youth were not only more empowered than the comparison group at a general level, but also across multiple dimensions of empowerment. Moreover, 97 percent of participants attributed some or all of their knowledge to participation in *Neo Juventud* and nearly 100 percent felt their self-esteem had increased partly or fully as a result of their participation in the program.

The statistical findings are supported by qualitative data, not only from youth, but also from their parents and local community members. Qualitative data show that *Neo Juventud* had a positive influence on youth, particularly on their aspirations for the future and on continuing their education. This could have important implications because education is recognized as a crucial factor in promoting empowerment and is linked to improvements in SRMH outcomes.

Youth indicated that participating in the educational workshops improved their knowledge about rights and sexual health, and instilled positive values and behaviors. This included communicating openly and honestly about sexual health topics, expressing desires and needs, and knowing what behaviors and attitudes are socially appropriate. In particular, the responses suggest that *Neo Juventud* provided access to new information that was not available from other sources.

**TABLE 2: Results for Empowerment Indicators**

Empowerment Indicators	<i>Neo Juventud</i>	Comparison Group
<b>Agency</b>		
General Knowledge (scale) <sup>†</sup>	11.9 ± 3.5	7.7 ± 2.9
Ability to say “no” when she or he does not want to have sex <sup>§</sup>	86%	67%
High self-esteem <sup>†</sup>	86%	35%
<b>Structure</b>		
Development of new professional skills (workshops) <sup>§</sup>	72%	46%
<b>Relationships</b>		
Perceived high degree of trust with parents <sup>†</sup>	95%	65%
<b>Global Empowerment Indicator (scale)<sup>†</sup></b>	<b>3.2 ± 0.6</b>	<b>2.0 ± 0.8</b>

† - p<.0001

§ - p<.01

*“Neo changed the way I think. Before, I didn’t trust myself. Now, even other people trust me.”*  
-Neo Juventud, Female, 22

*“Right now, I talk with my girlfriend about a lot of things. Before I was afraid to talk about sex, but now I make decisions together with my girl. Neo helped me a lot. I know about rights, as does my girlfriend, and we talk now as equals.”*  
-Neo Juventud, Male, 20

*“They help us to not pressure ourselves into having children and instead focus on our studies.”*  
-Neo Juventud, Female, 24

*“My mother and I have a better relationship now because I am more active and I am in group activities and I have to be more responsible as a leader. My mother sees this and trusts me more.”*  
-Neo Juventud, Female, 24

YOUNG PEOPLE’S VOICES

*Neo Juventud* youth also seem to be changing their perceptions about traditional gender roles and equality. This is especially noteworthy in a culture with rigid gender roles, especially for men, that are frequently inculcated in younger generations by parents and grandparents. To begin to address and challenge these pervasive cultural norms is a difficult process and demonstrates the power of the *Neo Juventud* program.

Finally, parents and members of the community stated that *Neo Juventud* youth demonstrated behaviors and attitudes that were much more positive than other youth in the community. Likewise, they pointed out that youth that had participated in *Neo Juventud* demonstrated more responsibility, concern for the community, and knowledge about their health.

## Conclusions

The findings suggest that by addressing the needs of young men and women through a comprehensive youth development intervention, *Neo Juventud* promotes their empowerment. While linkages with improved health outcomes were identified, additional research is needed to quantify these further. The elements of *Neo Juventud* identified by participants as having the greatest impact include: being designed and implemented by youth; participation in the health and personal development educational workshops; engagement in community service activities; the promotion of goal setting and access to an alternative, safe space for socializing.

## Recommendations

Key considerations when developing youth-related policies and programs include:

- Prioritize comprehensive, adaptive intervention models for youth development;
- Allow youth to be active stakeholders in their own development and to formulate and implement intervention activities;
- When feasible, utilize strategies that bring together male and female youth to address issues related to empowerment and gender equality;
- Promote educational workshops on issues relevant to youth – such as drug-use, alcohol-abuse, pregnancy prevention, STIs and HIV-AIDS, and personal and community values;
- Create safe spaces for healthy social interaction (free of drugs and alcohol); and
- Provide opportunities for youth to develop new professional skills and to get involved in activities that support the broader community.

***A special thank you to current and former CARE Ecuador staff including Belen Cordovez, Fausto Patiño, Shannah Metz, Marika Johansson, Anna Ulbrich and Anna Steeves who supported development of this program brief.***



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<sup>i</sup> Leveraging Information from the Field to Transform US Policy (LIFT UP) is a two-year initiative aimed at scaling up the impact of CARE's advocacy for more effective and adequately resourced international health and development programs through the collection, analysis and systematization of best practices from the field

<sup>ii</sup> Study participants included males and females between the ages of 14 and 24, which includes both adolescents, defined by the World Health Organizations as ages 10-19, and young adults. For simplicity, the study uses the term "youth" to encompass both groups.

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- <sup>iii</sup> In 2001, in Ecuador, it was estimated that over 60% of adolescents aged 15-18 and 58% of youth aged 19-24 lived in poverty.
- <sup>iv</sup> WHO, McIntyre, P., Williams, G., Peattie, S., Williams, A. (2002). Adolescent Friendly Health Services: An Agenda for Change. Retrieved November 28, 2011. [http://www.who.int/child\\_adolescent\\_health/documents/fch\\_cah\\_02\\_14/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/child_adolescent_health/documents/fch_cah_02_14/en/index.html)
- <sup>v</sup> Hsu, H et al. (2010). Exploring the Effect of Sexual Empowerment on Sexual Decision Making in Female Adolescents. *Journal of Nursing Research*. Vol. 18, Issue 1. p 44-52.; M. Green and A. Levack, (2010). Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations, Report commissioned by USAID's Interagency Working Group on Gender. International Planned Parenthood Federation. (2010).; Men-streaming in sexual and reproductive health and HIV: A toolkit for policy development and advocacy. Retrieved November 28 2011. Retrieved November 28, 2011. <http://www.traviswarrington.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IPPF-Men-streaming-gender-in-sexual-2010.pdf>;
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- <sup>vi</sup> From 2002 -2005, CARE implemented the VIDA SRH project with funding from the European Union to provide SRH education, comprehensive care and HIV/AIDS prevention tailored to youth. UNIVIDA, funded by the European Commission and implemented from 2006-2010, built on this foundation.
- <sup>vii</sup> Partners include: Peace Corps, Paro Group, Community Solution Foundation, and the Palmar community.
- <sup>viii</sup> Documentation of the program model was based on interviews with key program staff, community members and parents of youth involved, as well as project documents.
- <sup>ix</sup> Chinman, M.J., & Linney, J.A. (1998). Toward a model of adolescent empowerment: Theoretical and empirical evidence. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 18(4), 393-413.
- R. Lakin & A. Mahoney (2006). Empowering youth to change their world: Identifying key components of a community service program to promote positive development. *Journal of School Psychology*, 44 (6), 513-531.
- <sup>x</sup> As of 2010, *Neo Juventud* has over 200 participants, ranging in age from three years old to adults over 29. This investigation focused only on the intervention activities targeting youth aged 14 to 24, who form the majority of program participants.