YWORLD™
We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities.

YMCA Global Service-Learning

Youth development through community leadership

Young people can make significant contributions to society when families, institutions and communities invest in their character, civic skills and leadership development. When youth are seen as part of the solution, their creativity, values and energy stimulate positive change.

The YMCA is focused on developing the untapped potential of young people and empowering them to define, build and deliver their own solutions to social problems. YMCAs around the world view service-learning opportunities as critical to youth development. Service-learning involves young people engaging in community development initiatives, such as peer-to-peer HIV prevention education, environmental conservation or the revitalization of community parks and safe spaces.

Through service-learning, the YMCA builds young people's leadership skills, their civic responsibility and their commitment to volunteering – while young people build stronger local communities. When young people are actively involved and affecting change in their surroundings, it fosters reflection on the role of young people in community development. YMCA studies have found that young people are interested in and motivated to seek representation, responsibility and accountability within their communities.

Service-learning has an enduring impact on individuals

Studies have found that the values and developmental assets young people build in YMCA programs, in the United States and around the world, increase their educational and economic opportunities and nurture a life-long commitment to civic responsibility. Youth who participate in YMCA volunteer service and after-school initiatives are:

- Two times more likely to stay in school, pursue university studies and secure jobs
- Three times less likely to engage in high risk activities such as unsafe sex, prostitution, drugs and crime

Developmental Assets in Young People

YMCAs provide young people with the support and experiences they need to become healthy, caring and competent adults. **Developmental assets are the essential building blocks for human development** and the YMCA is focused on delivering a holistic, systematic approach to improving lives by comprehensively and consistently integrating asset building.

Asset building in the YMCA is introduced to the youngest members and follows a continuum through youth and young adulthood. Afterschool and weekend YMCA programs geared to 9-14 year-olds for example, focus on building character and life skills through activities which incorporate relevant, age-appropriate themes such as self-esteem, family relationships, peer pressure, conflict resolution and health education. These life skills programs provide early opportunities for young people to build core strengths and develop supportive relationships.

The YMCA has learned that youth development initiatives are successful when programs are designed with relationship building in mind, when there is a focus on hands-on learning opportunities, and when youth are engaged in decision-making and leadership during every step of the process. In addition, peer-to-peer education is one of the most effective youth-led service-learning methods, enabling young people to play a positive and significant role in social change through the design and delivery of youth-friendly messages.

Youth-led social action

Citizenship engagement and practices are developed early. The YMCA has consistently recognized that the most direct pathway to adult participation in civic society is to offer young people the access and opportunities to play a role in community service. YMCA civic engagement initiatives help young people learn important civic skills and develop a sense of personal and collective efficacy that is a significant determinant of future civic and political activity. Fostering civic attitudes, skills, and behaviors in young people is not only a forward-looking strategy but it also offers societal benefits as youth have the drive and creativity to impact their surroundings.

The YMCA specializes in increasing young people's motivation, opportunities and ability to participate in civic life by connecting their participation to public issues that matter to them. Just as young people around the world are key players in YMCA decision-making, leadership and program design, they should also be involved in the leadership and stewardship of their communities and countries. As key stakeholders, young people need to be a part of the decision- and policy-making that impact their lives and communities.

Shaping communities: YMCA youth service-learning and civic engagement programs around the world

Becoming actively involved in addressing the challenges facing their communities enables young people to personally experience the power of living in a democratic society. Young people make up more than 50 percent of the total population in many of the countries where YMCAs work. It is only right that young people play a role in shaping the realities that they live.

The YMCA commitment to strengthening civic engagement is a crucial element in the continuum of support that includes building young people's life skills and character and nurturing youth leaders for stronger communities today and tomorrow. Below are a few examples of the innovative youth service-learning programs that are taking place at YMCAs around the world.

The **YMCA of Senegal**, founded in 1982, is strongly committed to youth civic engagement and service-learning. In addition to their contribution to community development through service-learning initiatives, the more than 1,000 youth volunteers are substantively involved in YMCA program development and implementation, as well as YMCA governance.

Under the leadership of the YMCA's Gender Committee, made up of both male and female volunteers, the YMCA of Senegal is engaging young people in service-learning at a women's prison near the capital of Dakar. Hundreds of women are housed at the Rufisque Women's Prison, where communal sleeping quarters have no electricity and inmates share one toilet. YMCA youth volunteers visit the inmates bi-weekly to offer support and provide a range of critical services including: information/education on reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, and personal hygiene; pediatric nutrition/development information and referrals for the many women who have their infants with them at the prison; marketing assistance for the promotion and distribution of prisoner-made handicrafts; and training on social re-integration and post-prison employment. Learn more about the YMCA of Senegal at www.africaymca.org.

The **YMCA of Liberia** is a national leader in youth civic education and engagement programs, reaching more than 5,000 youth and young adults each year throughout the country. The programs are extremely important in a country where young people were the principal victims of violence and exploitation in a brutal civil war that lasted almost 20 years. The YMCA programs help young people learn about peace and reconciliation, contribute to civil society and participate in the newly emerging Liberian democracy.

The YMCA currently runs youth and government programs where young people learn the principles and practices of democratic governance. As part of the process, the YMCA organizes question and answer sessions between youth and government officials at the municipal and national levels. This provides young people with the opportunity to learn about government policy and decision making and to advocate for increased governmental support for critical youth education, employment and health priorities. The YMCA organized several important meetings with high ranking leaders in the Liberian government over the past few years.

The YMCA also runs local radio stations in remote rural areas to provide young people with the opportunity to discuss peace, reconciliation and economic development in their communities. The radio programs in some cities provide former youth combatants in the civil war the opportunity to reintegrate into society through dialogue and employment. The talk show and call-in programs address important youth health, education, recreation and employment concerns in the community and are very popular with teenagers and young adults. Learn more about the YMCA of Liberia at www.ymca.org.lr.

The **YMCA of Honduras** is playing a leading role in mobilizing and engaging thousands of youth in government, advocacy, environment, literacy, health and HIV/AIDS outreach, and popular education. Programs reach 8,000 youth, with the direct involvement of more than 2,100 youth volunteers and leaders.

The YMCA of Honduras is an example of how YMCA programs are energizing civic life and developing young civic actors. Recognizing that young people were not participating in local governmental processes or participating in state institutions and programs, the government turned to the YMCA of Honduras for help. The YMCA-led National Youth Forum is engaging young people in governance and advocacy at local, municipal, and national levels. Significant outcomes include the introduction by the government of the *Holistic Youth Development Law* and the *Citizen Contract for Youth*.

The YMCA of Honduras governance structure is a leading example of young civic action-the average age of the Board of Directors is 26, and the average age of staff is 28.

The **YMCAs in Russia**, **Belarus** and the **Ukraine**, are combining life skills and service-learning programs with urgently needed efforts to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic and strengthen ethnic and religious co-existence. The shift from totalitarian governance to participatory democracy in these countries has been accompanied by enormous social challenges, economic upheaval, growing poverty, weakened social cohesion, and the collapse of vital educational and social services. Whether it is caring for people living with HIV or jointly addressing environmental crises, the YMCA is creating opportunities for young people to affect social change.

Since 1997, the **YMCA of Uruguay** has offered the **Voluntariado Social** program with the aim of strengthening the civic engagement activities of young people. Young adults (ages 18 to 30) participate in a four-month training focusing on community outreach and community organizing. After the training, volunteers are placed with local nonprofits in Uruguay or with YMCA community development programs. Voluntariado Social engages 50 young people per year. The YMCA of Uruguay collaborates with a network of nonprofit organizations and does a follow-up of participants' progress. The program is open to all and receives support from UNESCO (United Nations agency). Learn more about YMCA work in Uruguay at www.acj-ymca.org.

To learn more about YMCA World Service-funded programs around the world or to make a donation, visit www.ymca.net/worldservice.