



en breve



February 2004 No. 62

A regular series of notes highlighting recent lessons emerging from the operational and analytical program of the World Bank's Latin America and Caribbean Region

VOICES OF THE GIRLS: CROSSING THE BARRIERS BETWEEN YOUTH, GENDER AND POVERTY

Sandra Cesilini, Lisandro Martin and Caroline Aberg

Background

The primary strategic goal of the World Bank's Civil Society Team for Latin America and the Caribbean is to promote inclusive governance. Governance is understood as "...the sum of the many ways that individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs... It is a continuing process through which conflicting actions may be taken... It includes formal institutions and regimes empowered to enforce compliance, as well as informal arrangements that people and institutions perceive to be in their interest."¹ The inclusion of a wide range of social actors in the public debate and the promotion of inclusive civic participation is vital to this strategy. Capacity building, aimed at the most vulnerable actors is an essential prerequisite.



Social exclusion of youth is a critical problem in the Southern Cone countries of Latin America. In the case of Argentina, 15 percent of youth do not study, do not work and are not heads of households.² The gender issue complicates this, raising concerns which range from the lack of sexual education and premature pregnancy to domestic violence and trafficking. In Paraguay, 28.4 percent of all young women, compared to only 5.7 percent of the young men, neither work nor study. The literacy rate of poor young men is 5 percent higher than for young women. Further, only half as many women as men between the ages of 20 and 24, attend university.³

The World Bank has implemented several initiatives across Latin America to address the exclusion of youth. For example, the World Bank Small Grants Program has been held in the Southern Cone countries since 1998 with the aim of strengthening the civic engagement of excluded groups. For the past two years, the focus has been on youth. In addition, the PROFAM program (Integral Development of the Family) has contained a number of subprojects aimed at young women with an emphasis on family planning and sexual education.

The "New Voices", or *Voces Nuevas*, program in Lima, Perú, has been one of the most successful initiatives in the Region. It started two years ago as a direct response to a teenager who questioned why

the World Bank did not have any projects involving youth. Youth between 18 and 25 years of age, already active in their communities, were selected to form a youth consultative group (*Grupo Consultivo Juvenil*) with the aim being to bring young people's perspectives to the attention of the World Bank. The socially-conscious and active members of the *Grupo Consultivo Juvenil* received hands-on experience in development and at the same time acted as strategic allies contributing with opinions and recommendations to help the World Bank design and implement projects aimed at youth. The "New Voices" program is currently being replicated in five different

provinces in Perú (Cuzco, Cajamarca, Iquitos, Lima and Piura) as well as in Ecuador and Venezuela.

The “New Voices” initiative in the case of the Southern Cone countries not only seeks to encapsulate the problem of the exclusion of youth, but also to help overcome the gender barrier, which remains considerable across the Region.

Listening to Development Priorities from the Ground: The Objectives of the ‘Voices of the Girls’

The World Bank believes that promoting the inclusion of young women in society is a fundamental step towards democratic and inclusive governance. To this end, the World Bank, in partnership with *Juventud Que Se Mueve* –a Paraguayan network of NGOs managed by young people– has developed the “Voices of the Girls” initiative to further educate and engage with young women on key policy issues.

The first event of the Southern Cone ‘Voices of the Girls’ initiative took place in the city of Jesus María, Córdoba, Argentina, from 19-20 August 2004. The event brought together young women from Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay to discuss their ideas about how to address their pressing development issues and future priorities.



The event was carried out within the framework of the National Congress of Common Civic Values, organized by the Foundation *iDEAS* – an NGO that supports youth programs in the province of Córdoba, Argentina and is sponsored by the Argentinean Government. The event included the active participation of national and provincial authorities, donor foundations (such as Avina), international agencies, and a range of non-governmental organizations working in development. Several activities supported by the World Bank were carried out simultaneously during the Congress, including the 2004 Small Grants Program Award Ceremony and the launch of the Development Marketplace. This provided an excellent environment for dialogue and networking.

Approximately 100 young women between the ages of 14 and 29 attended the event. The participants were either members or beneficiaries of the award-winning grants to civil society organizations under the Southern Cone Small

Grant Program 2004. According to questionnaires completed by all participants before attending the event, only half of the female respondents were completing or had completed secondary education. A few were enrolled in higher education.. It was further noted that the majority of the young women were unemployed, and only half were actively looking for employment. Most of the employed only worked between 8 and 15 hours weekly. Half of the young women did not possess any medical insurance. Few of the participants had heard about, let alone understood, the activities of the World Bank.

The initiative had two main goals:

- to generate a space for dialogue related to youth and poverty, and ideas for addressing those issues.
- to promote the development of networks to improve the cooperation among grassroots and international organizations, the private sector and governmental institutions working with young women facing poverty.

Activities of the ‘Voices of the Girls’

Specific activities carried out under ‘Voices of the Girls’ included a number of workshops. After each of the participants had presented themselves, they were divided into groups. Each group made a presentation using artistic expression (see photo, above) reflecting the reality of being a young woman in Latin America and suggesting what can be done to improve prospects for the future. Finally, conclusions were drawn and discussed with senior representatives from the Bank, including the Country Director, who heard directly from the girls’ suggestions on how the Bank could further improve their welfare. The participants expressed their concern that women often lack solidarity amongst themselves, which they argued is a trigger that enhances *machismo*. They explained that it is vital, in order to improve the situation of females, to actively include men in the programs. It is not possible to work with only one side of the problem; change has to occur on both sides.

Two concrete outcomes of the event were, (i) a commitment to work towards participation in the next Congress of Values and (ii) a new round of Voices of the Girls. Participants also agreed to continue virtual group discussions.

Lessons Learned

The exclusion of young women throughout the Southern Cone means they have no say in debates and decisions on issues which directly affect their lives. However, when vulnerable groups are given the opportunity to share their views in a candid and responsive environment, they show significant willingness to participate and express great understanding of the development dilemmas they face. As one of the participants stated: “For the first time in my life, I feel that my views are being listened to and that I can affect my own future”.

Women who never before had the chance of being heard were provided a safe and supportive atmosphere that encouraged them to speak up and speak out. The opportunity to share their views seemed to encourage them to develop self-respect and confidence. In this sense, the pilot initiative was a success, and can also be considered a positive example of how increased awareness among young women can raise their expectations on what can be achieved. The activities carried out also made it possible for women without direct access to Government or private institutions to receive information about development.

As observed throughout the event, identification of common views and experiences by the young women bred a sense of unity among many of the participants. This unity provided the impetus for the formation of networks and discussions on how to expand their capabilities and affect their futures. These networks would be coordinated by local grassroots organizations (Civil Society Organizations, CSOs) that would act as liaison between the girls. At the same time, the young girls themselves recognized their lack of influence, if they do not cooperate with formal non-governmental organizations and other institutions from both the public and private spheres. Specifically, many of the girls stated that they held a subordinated status within their communities, with no opportunity to express opinions about their own development, nor about marital life, future choices or sexual relations. They unanimously recognized that their participation in CSOs empowers them.

The positive outcome of the event in the Southern Cone, as well as similar events carried out in other countries such as

in Peru and Brazil, suggests that the Southern Cone pilot initiative can be replicated elsewhere. Important lessons were learned that should be shared with other countries.

- In order to successfully promote more inclusive governance, it is important that the World Bank consult directly on the ground with the groups that we seek to include, in order to understand their key development barriers.
- By directly engaging and uniting the group that we seek to include - in this case poor and vulnerable young females - we help to lay the basis for the creation of networks and collective action by this excluded group, which improves their self esteem and interest in engaging in community institutions that in turn help expand their own choices.

- The opinions of the young participants regarding public policy issues are often related to community level issues rather than youth-specific problems. Therefore, these meetings serve as a catalyst to gain consciousness of their own particularities as a vulnerable group. In the case of this initiative, it has contributed to the outlining of a common agenda for young women as a distinctive group, complementing the broader community agenda.



- Problems and issues, such as adolescent maternity, reproductive health and domestic violence, directly impact young women, and it was suggested that these

issues be addressed in the World Bank’s portfolio. It is important to understand these issues within the specific community context of vulnerable populations in order to tackle their core dynamic. For example, early pregnancy was identified by some of the young women as “a method to gain a better position within the community, at least for doing less demanding jobs”.

- The lack of knowledge about World Bank’s operations could be reduced by building partnerships with young leaders at the community level. Making use of Youth contexts and other outreach initiatives targeted at youth, the Bank could disseminate basic information nation-wide about its goals and operations. As some girls pointed out during the initiative: “How can I know anything about the World Bank if I never heard of it. Now that I know it exists, I want to know more”.

Looking Ahead

The lessons learned can potentially be taken into consideration and included in future World Bank supported programs. Given the success of the pilot event, similar initiatives will hopefully be supported and replicated in other parts of the world. In the Southern Cone, another two-day event of “Voices of the Girls” will be held in 2005 as a follow-up.

The problems facing youth are also at the centre of the Southern Cone Development Marketplace; an initiative supported by the World Bank that will take place in 2005. The initiative provides a platform for creative thinking and innovative practice in development through two components: i) a contest featuring innovative projects aimed at strengthening civic values among young people, and ii) a knowledge forum bringing together actors from different spheres of society to generate a debate about the development agenda for youth in the region. The goal is to strengthen young people in the Southern Cone in their ability and commitment to contribute to the development of their communities. Furthermore, the aim is to build partnerships and coalitions among actors that recognize the need to support the education of youth in common civic values. Both activities culminate in a two-day event in Buenos Aires in late May 2005, when the selected finalists in the contest will present their projects in an exhibition and share knowledge and experiences.

The problems facing youth are highly significant in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay. Understanding the challenges faced by underprivileged poor youth is imperative to improving our common future. As World Bank President James D. Wolfensohn stated in September 2004, “One thing is certain: old solutions to old problems will not work. Greater effort, in the form of research and resources, must be invested in better understanding the hopes and aspirations of young people.”

Notes

¹ The independent Commission on Global Governance

² National Direction of Youth of Argentina, December 2003

³ General Department of Statistics in Paraguay, 2003

Note produced in collaboration with Daniela Urfeig and Teresa Carlsson

About the Authors

Sandra Cesilini is a Senior Social Development and Civil Society Specialist. Lisandro Martin is a Junior Professional Associate and Caroline Aberg is a Consultant. All are based in the World Bank’s Buenos Aires Office.

Visit *Youthink*, the Bank’s new website focused on youth issues in development

<http://youthink.worldbank.org/>



WHY THE YOUTH FOCUS?

**“Young people are the Future.
They are also the Present”**

—World Bank President James Wolfensohn

The majority of the world’s people are under the age of 25, with a disproportionate number living in the world’s poorest countries.

To change this imbalance, the world needs your input, your understanding, your involvement. Together, we face many challenges, including finding and ensuring fair distribution of resources to:

- Reduce poverty
- Improve nutrition
- Increase access to schools and other education opportunities
- Strengthen youth organizations
- Promote youth participation and representation in government & civil service
- Improve health education
- Increase employment opportunities
- Decrease national and regional conflicts
- Decrease risky behavior like drug abuse that can lead to an increase in the number of HIV infected people

The World Bank will work in an integrated way to meet the challenges of young people in developing countries. This means not only working in the area of health and education, but also in areas like agriculture, business development and the reform of the justice system to make sure that views of and challenges for young people are included when decisions are made.