

Belize

Belize Family Life Association



Empowering young people in Belize

The Member Association in Belize has empowered young people by supporting involvement in the Youth Advocacy Movement

The Belize Family Life Association’s (BFLA) youth programme has positively changed the lives of young people, including in Belize City where this review took place. Young people volunteer through the Youth Advocacy Movement (YAM). To maintain membership in YAM, young people have to complete 30 hours of community service work per year and attend YAM meetings. To become a certified member of YAM – which means being able to conduct outreach activities – young members have to complete 60 hours of training in personal development, advocacy, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and leadership.

Education rates in Belize are extremely low, leaving many young people without skills for employment. Family life was reported to be less than stable, with a lack of parental guidance or support from fathers. Gangs in Belize City are common and many young people turn to them seeking male role models, friends, and something to do with their time.

BFLA offers young Belizeans a rare opportunity to develop skills and engage in meaningful work. Young volunteers reported a number of positive changes to their lives since becoming YAM members, all of which have contributed to their empowerment.

Volunteering with BFLA has led to personality development, increased knowledge about SRHR, and the acquisition of leadership skills among the volunteers. For many, it has offered an escape from an alternative life of gang involvement and given young people in Belize City a strong sense of purpose.



For the future, there’s no doubt about it: volunteering will be part of my life. I want to share my expertise no matter what I do, whether I am a garbage person or prime minister, whatever, volunteering will always be part of my life.

16-year-old female



She thought it was something great to give to the country, because it’s really lacking in our country. In Belize, it’s rare that people actually volunteer in this aspect, like SRH or any rights of young people.

16-year-old female

Positive changes

Positive personality changes

Being a part of YAM has changed young volunteers' personalities for the better, which they recognize and value immensely. YAM members are encouraged to participate and take on leadership roles, and they are offered various training opportunities, all of which make them more outgoing and confident. The existing members make an effort to include the new members, and the group's fun atmosphere puts the shy members at ease.

Being part of the dynamic youth group gives the members experience working and interacting with people from diverse backgrounds and with varying opinions and ideas. This has opened the minds of many young people and given them appreciation and compassion for others.

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Volunteering for BFLA has definitely impacted my life. I guess I am more open and less shy than I was before. I was very introverted but now I am more confident, talking to other people and speaking in front of a group.

16-year-old female

Becoming young leaders

Young people highly value the leadership skills that they have gained, which instil confidence, maturity and a sense of responsibility in them. Being a leader also equips them for their future in terms of careers, and many feel empowered that they can apply their leadership skills to achieve their future ambitions.

Being seen as a role model is another positive change in their lives; it gives them a stronger sense of self-worth. One young female said, "There are so many negative influences in my neighbourhood; I really believe that being an example to others has a huge importance in this sense."

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She feels it's important at her age to learn the things that YAM teaches, especially in Belize where people are very sexually active and don't know much about SRH. It's important to know more about that - you are never too young to learn this stuff.

14-year-old female

Learning and sharing SRH knowledge

Members of YAM learn about sexual and reproductive health (SRH), information that is not readily available among young Belizeans. They see its importance in equipping them to make informed and healthy decisions.

However, being able to teach others about SRH was seen as just as important – if not more so – to many of the young people. They value being able to share this information with others, and making a positive impact on others' lives and ability to make good decisions about their SRH.

Giving back to the community

Volunteering was not a driving factor for most young volunteers to join YAM, but it eventually became one of the most important aspects. Volunteering is important to them because they are able to give back to the community and help change people's lives for the better. They also feel that it makes them better people and has given them compassion and empathy. For some, it is a way to express their gratitude for the way they have been treated and helped by others.

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Of course, knowledge about SRHR, HIV and AIDS – protecting myself and being safe – I'll keep with me, but what I'll take with me in my job and future is leadership skills and being a positive role model in my community wherever I go.

19-year-old male

Feeling part of something

For many young people, being a part of YAM has given them something meaningful to do and a sense of purpose. YAM is a safe space where young people can escape gang life to learn, gain leadership skills, find role models, become role models, make friends, have fun, and do something meaningful with their time such as volunteer. For young people in Belize, these are invaluable opportunities.

Young volunteers told stories of how they joined YAM because they had nothing else to do, and in the process discovered the benefits of being in the group and of volunteering their time. For example, one 18-year-old male joined because he had dropped out of secondary school and 'had nothing to do at the time'. His involvement gave him the confidence to become a role model for other 'lost' youth.

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When she counsels other youth, they take her as a role model and try to [follow] in her footsteps. She felt happy that she can make other people feel that they have a chance in life. She's like, 'just because you come from a poor family doesn't mean you can't educate other people'.

18-year-old female

Confidence about the future

All of the volunteers involved in this review believe that volunteering with YAM will impact positively on their futures. They feel empowered to pursue their ambitions with the confidence that they are employable. For many, having new skills to put on their résumés is extremely valuable and a motivating factor for being active in the group. Others now have a clear idea about what they want to do in terms of a career.

The YAM volunteers are seen as skilled candidates for work among potential employers. Feedback from governmental and non-governmental organizations suggests that former YAM members enter entry-level positions with more skills and professionalism than young people who have not participated in YAM.

Lessons

- ✓ The clarity and confidence that young people get at BFLA is extremely valuable, particularly given the overall lack of development opportunities for youth in Belize. None of the volunteers mentioned pursuing a career in SRH; however, their experience at BFLA has equipped them with skills and experience to pursue other careers. This reinforces the importance of YAM as so much more than just a source of SRH information. Similarly, young volunteers appreciate that they will be able to take their volunteering experience with them. They see themselves continuing to volunteer in their futures, whether for BLFA or in a completely different field.
- ✓ Volunteering can be difficult for young people in school who have to juggle school work with participation in YAM activities. The group, therefore, has organized a number of its activities to occur in the summer.
- ✓ Participating in outreach activities can be difficult for those who live in Belize City's dangerous, gang-ridden neighbourhoods. Gang territories dictate where young people can and cannot go. Young people are associated with the gangs in their neighbourhoods; therefore, going to other neighbourhoods is dangerous for them. Young people from these areas also find it more difficult than others to participate in BLFA activities that happen in the early evening because their parents want them to be at home by a certain time.

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He sees himself [in the future] as a counsellor or a coach, giving back to the future generation. A coach volunteers time as a father figure, and he didn't have one so he'd like to give that to others. Or a counsellor because he believes if people in the gangs were taught, they would have saved themselves from making bad choices.

17-year-old male

Belize

Country context*

Population (millions), 2010	0.31
Births attended by skilled health personnel (%), 2011	95
Maternal mortality ratio (deaths of women per 100,000 live births), 2011	53
Contraceptive prevalence rate, women aged 15-49 (%), 2011	55

Context for young people*

HIV prevalence among young people (aged 15-24) (%), 2011	11
% of youth who have a comprehensive knowledge of HIV, 2011	43
% of women aged 15-19 who have had children, 2011	18

* UNFPA (nd) The Caribbean: Country Profile - Belize. Available at: <http://caribbean.unfpa.org/public/cache/offonce/Home/Countries/Belize;sessionid=48F8DD522190E3C52FD8916DA7F20E67jahia01> [Accessed 22 November 2013].



This case study is one of a series of qualitative reviews called "IPPF Changing Lives" which capture the stories of IPPF's beneficiaries and clients from around the world. A rapid PEER (participatory ethnographic evaluation and research) approach was used to train project beneficiaries to interview people in their social network. These voices provide us with powerful testimonies on lives changed (and, in some cases, lives saved) and illustrate how IPPF is making a difference. To learn more about this methodology, see <http://www.options.co.uk/peer>.



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