

# Responding to what young people need: Challenges for a comprehensive sexual health program in Central America



EXPERIENCES FROM FINANCIAL COOPERATION

## ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
BCC	Behavioral Change Communication
CID	Centros Integrales de Desarrollo
CSW	Commercial Sex Workers
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
KfW	Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Non- Governmental Organization
PASMO	Pan American Social Marketing Organization
STI	Sexually Transmitted Infections
ToT	Training of Trainers
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

## SUMMARY

KfW German Development Bank has funded a Social Marketing Program in Central America since 2003. The first phase of this program was financed with 4.6 Million Euros until 2006. The second phase (ending in April 2011) amounts to 3 Million Euros. Recipient of the funds is the Central American Bank for Economic Integration BCI (Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica) which assigned the implementation of the program to the Panamerican Social Marketing Organisation PASMO.

A new youth strategy has now been developed and implemented during the second phase of program implementation in order to respond to various challenges that young people are facing in their sexual life and health. The strategy is part of a social marketing concept and encompasses an expanded youth target audience, including adolescents between 13 and 17 years and young adults between 18 and 24 years. It covers an internet platform of a virtual “Club en Conexión”; the use of mass media,



including a radio program; an interpersonal communication component with peer educators; improved supply of and access to

affordable quality condoms for youth; and working with and through youth oriented NGOs.

PASMO's strategy is implemented in the four Central American countries Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua in alliance and compliance with the national strategic HIV and AIDS plans of each country. The Social Marketing Organization is also promoting a national condom strategy and acting as a technical consultant for quality standards of condom supply and for an advanced segmentation in condom strategies including youth as a specific target population. The combination of different social marketing tools and its adaptation to the needs and interests of young people has resulted as an effective strategy. PASMO's methodology is now adopted by a number of NGOs and even within governmental institutions in Central America. Like this, many new youth populations from different regional areas and cultural backgrounds have been reached.

However, some challenges remain: barriers to access condoms still need to be further reduced for adolescents, and training materials and methods should be differentiated by sexes, age groups and ethnic backgrounds. As a lesson learnt, program designers need to better understand the sexual culture of young people in the different national and cultural contexts. The way forward is to make young people protagonists of their own concerns.

## The Context

The sexual health of young people in Central America is faced with high rates of teenage pregnancy and an increased risk of being infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI).

Several factors are contributing to this situation like early sexual debut, reported high levels of multiple partners among young people, serial and short lasting sexual relations, low condom use, un-treated STIs, sexual abuse of children and adolescents, stigmatization and discrimination of HIV positive people and of socially non-conformal sexual behaviors. Furthermore, communication between adolescents and adults is difficult: communication between parents and young people about sexual life and health is almost non-existent. Conservative groups in all four countries hamper sexual education for adolescents and young people. Teachers are reluctant to include sexual education in classes, negating the reality of young people's sexual life.

Research on sexual behavior in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua (Samandari/Speizer, 2010) showed that disadvantageous educational and socio-economic factors are also determinant for sexual behavior of youth: Adolescents with at least secondary education and adolescents from high socio-economic denomination were less likely to have early sexual debuts than those from lower socio-economic brackets and with lower or no education.

Ethnic background conditions also influence the risks for sexual health: Young people of ethnic minorities are often more disadvantaged and affected by HIV. According to different reports, particularly the Garinagü in Honduras are more likely to be HIV positive than the rest of the population.

Sexual behavioral determinants also translate into high fertility rates: Young women between 15 and 19 years have higher fertility rates in Central American countries compared to their cohorts in the rest of Latin America: it amounts to 137 births per 1,000 women in Honduras, 119 in Nicaragua, 114 in Guatemala and 104 in El Salvador, while the average in Latin America is 75 births per 1,000 women of this age group. (Samandari/ Speizer, 2010). In addition, adolescents' fertility rates remain high even though total fertility rates declined modestly in these Central American countries. On the positive side, ever-use of modern contraceptive methods has significantly increased among adolescents in this region.



An explanation on why increased contraceptive use in adolescents has not translated into delayed first births might be related to contraceptive failure, including incorrect use of condoms. The lack of youth friendly services, low quality of and difficult access to existing health services contribute to contraceptive failure rates. In addition, reluctant attitudes of condom distributors to serve adolescents and youth also limit the accessibility of condoms for young people.

## RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES:

### A YOUTH STRATEGY WITHIN A SOCIAL MARKETING PROGRAM

The Pan American Social Marketing Organization (PASMO) is responding to these challenges by applying its youth strategy within a social marketing concept.

PASMO started to implement a social marketing program in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua with the support of the KfW German Development Bank in 2004. The concept incorporates a total marketing approach (TMA) which is not only commercializing its own brands but also promoting generic condom use. During the first phase of implementation, youth was only one of several target populations and PASMO's strategy was concentrated on high risk populations like men who have sex with men (MSM) and commercial sex workers (CSW).

After having implemented the first phase, PASMO came to the conclusion that youth generally remain an underserved audience in Central America and that there is much overlap of impoverished youth with activities that put young people at most risk for HIV and STI. Thus, the primary target audience of the KfW funded program during the second phase became youth, with MSM and CSW as a secondary audience.

PASMO redefined its communication strategies and messages to meet the specific needs of young people as detected by

researches and other program experiences. The social marketing organization expanded the strategy to reach different age groups of youth, including adolescents between 13 and 17 years and young adults between 18 and 24 years. The new strategy aims at increasing the coordination with and to work through youth-oriented Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), addressing audience specific needs. More efforts were planned to encompass youth from poor socio-economic denomination, reaching them with positive messages. Thus, the primary target audience of the KfW funded program was redirected to adolescents and youth of low and medium economic status from urban and sub-urban areas.

The objectives of the new youth strategy are:

- Increase condom use
- Increase knowledge and risk perception of HIV and STI, including sexual and reproductive health
- Impact on social norms that influence on health behavior
- Increase access to products and services of sexual and reproductive health (condoms, voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) and family planning methods).

### A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



PASMO wants to reach youth by a comprehensive approach, adopting classic social marketing tools to the interests and needs of young people.

Originally, PASMO established youth clubs where young people could meet and use the internet. These spaces were closed down in 2009 because of low coverage and high costs as well as due to security problems. As an alternative, a virtual "Club en Conexión" was created. Activities promoted through this webpage were linked to other components of the strategy like the radio program "Radio en Conexión" and interpersonal communication activities. In addition, a youth friendly concept of condom promotion and supply was started. In order to reach a larger number of young people, many activities were implemented at schools and in coalitions and cooperation with partners of the private and public educational and health sector, but also with and through youth oriented NGOs.



The focus of implementation was defined on a continuous basis through training processes, information received by adolescents and youth, strategies for

negotiation of sexual relations and condom use, and changes in young people's lives as a result of being involved in the project.

## Components of the Approach

### Interpersonal Communication through peer educators

Peer group interventions are powerful in reaching young people's interests. As implemented by young people for young people, they meet interests of youth and are based on their way of communication. Thus, PASMO decided to use peer education as a main pillar of interpersonal communication within the youth strategy. Selected youth leaders are trained twice a year in the thematic areas of HIV/STI, use of condoms and contraceptives, drugs and their consequences, the meaning of relationships and getting sexually engaged, self-esteem, domestic violence, human rights, stigma and discrimination. Peer educators replicate the interpersonal communication activities in schools covering low income areas, with religious groups and at community level. 1,956 peer educators were graduated between August 2008 and September 2010 in the four countries where the program is implemented. These peer educators reached 269,574 contacts.

Many adolescents and young people have learnt for the first time in their life about sexual health and where to go for assistance. The peer education activities also include the demonstration of condom use with wooden dildos, whereby the audience is involved. This has helped to overcome the myths related to condom use and to reduce condom breakage related to a lack of practice.



However, when implemented at schools, resistance from parents and teachers has

created problems in some cases, particularly when religion plays an important role. Therefore, PASMO tries to include them in the process of the training which is even more challenging with parents who are often reluctant to attend meetings. Parents' involvement has turned out to be less difficult in El Salvador where their assistance in regular meetings at school is obligatory and PASMO uses these meetings as a school for parents. In addition, teachers of natural sciences are actively involved in the training process. They follow up the replication of peer educators after PASMO has finished supervision. Students who participated in the training process and who replicated the educational activities for one year receive a certificate attesting their participation in civil services. After finishing school, many of the trained students continue as volunteers for special events.

The program in Honduras similarly started a school for parents and teachers, in coordination with several schools and educational institutions, in order to involve as many parents and teachers as possible. The experience showed that resistance from adults decreased significantly. In Guatemala, PASMO provided interactive training sessions with parents and teachers on youth's sexual and reproductive health in response to a new family planning law. The programs in Guatemala and Honduras also implement educational activities with religious organizations.

Nevertheless, similar interventions in different social and cultural backgrounds are accepted differently: Whereas peer educators in Guatemala were allowed to demonstrate the correct use of condoms with dildos in catholic schools, this practice is more difficult to be carried out in Honduras and El Salvador - even though influence of conservative groups is generally strong in all countries. It seems that restrictions are directly linked to personal attitudes of school directors and responsible teachers. However,



in those places where activities could be successfully implemented, school directors in several countries reported that adolescent pregnancies were reduced after the interventions of peer educators: In a public school in Honduras adolescent pregnancies declined from four to one within one year.

PASMO also achieved to implement the peer education approach with out-of-school youth at high social risk. In Guatemala, the program cooperates with the NGO TRASCIENDE in downtown Guatemala City. TRASCIENDE is running a center where Hip-Hop culture constitutes an alternative to the life in gangs ("para no andar en malas cosas"). Approximately 500 young people visit the Hip-Hop Center weekly; 220 are registered as trainees. The center offers a safe place to meet in an unsafe environment. PASMO trains some of the continuous visitors as peer educators for other young people visiting the Hip-Hop center.

All tools used for interpersonal

## Radio en Conexión

Radio is generally known as being a powerful media reaching young people when it meets listeners' styles and habits. PASMO is making use of this potential through "Radio en Conexión" produced by young people for young people.

"Radio en Conexión" is transmitted weekly. It is designed and managed by a network of youth communicators who were trained in different skills necessary for producing a radio program. These young people decide

communication activities are based on a training manual that includes a large part of theoretical information, role-plays like how to resist peer pressure to initiate sexual relations, and how to purchase condoms and lubricants. Some of the training sessions, thus, are very sophisticated for being used by peer educators without continuous external support and will now be adapted for an easier use.



Gender is included as one of the topics related to sexual relationships and violence, but it is not yet established as a cross cutting issue throughout the whole process. The training is organized in gender mixed groups and not based on gender differentiated procedures. However, as gender training is about to be included into PASMO's institutional development, it is expected that training materials will be adapted to be more gender sensitive.

about the topics of each production which are not only related to sexual health but also include themes like friendship, relationship, love, jealousy etc. The total number of incoming call-cellphone messages during a three month period (between July and September 2010) amounts to 1,306 in Honduras and 99 in Guatemala.

The radio program started first in Guatemala and Honduras and has recently been adopted in El Salvador. In Honduras, the



program is produced and transmitted in two different places, in Tegucigalpa and in San Pedro Sula. The format used resembles a radio journal and includes a lot of discussions. In Honduras, the production is influenced by popular radio shows with a lot of music of young people's taste.



Listeners' acceptance is measured by the number of calls received, and by messages left at the website and sent by mobile phones. The programs in Honduras receive currently between 150 and 200 calls per transmission, reaching also from neighboring countries.

The high popularity of this program design compared to the other formats applied in

### **'Club en Conexión' as a virtual platform**

The website was created to support the networking of the youth program and to extend it through a virtual platform. It permits use either as a registered member or as a guest visitor, and is addressed to different levels of audience: it addresses Members and coordinators of the Club en Conexión on an internal level, Central/Latin American youth in general as well as organizations working with youth and reproductive and sexual health. In November 2010, 852 active members were registered in the section "Connect with your friends".

The webpage apparently meets young people's taste. The acceptance of the website is continuously registered through the number of visitors: it increased from 556 in January 2010 to 8925 in September 2010. The website seems to be a positive virtual alternative for adolescents living in a violent physical environment where it turns out more and more difficult to meet outside of their homes. Particularly many adolescents use the social network offered by the webpage: 89 % of the users are between 15 and 18 years and visit the internet platform at least once per week. Forums and blogs are updated weekly, and the website is updated

Guatemala shows that the use of popular language combined with a significant part of music attracts a lot of young audience.



"Radio en Conexión" has contributed significantly to breaking the taboo of condom use among adolescents and young people. The fact that teenagers of both sexes are openly discussing sexual relationships and condom use helps to increase its social acceptance. It also contributes to a more realistic understanding of young people's sexual life and health. The radio programs made by youth for youth are thus filling a gap in sexual education.

once a month. As updating and administration are more costly and time consuming as foreseen, a staff member of PASMO is operating it instead of volunteers as originally planned.

150 visitors on average per week are currently registered to be opening the platform, sending monthly approximately 40 comments. The most visited section of the webpage is the condom promotion campaign "Tienes-Pidelo". The graphical design of the



webpage is oriented to Japanese illustration models (Mangas) and adopted to regional physical aspects of Central America. The personalities represent different life styles



and physical and ethnical characteristics. The presentation of the home page gives the



impression to be in a street of a Central American city. The different sections to be visited by the users appear like facades of buildings, each one with a unique style. The topics of the website are similar to those from the training materials. They address five subjects: (1) Club en Conexión, (2) Family Planning and Contraceptives, (3) Drugs/Alcohol and their effects, (4) STI and prevention methods, and (5) HIV and prevention methods. Different interactive interpersonal communication methodologies like cards and games were digitalized and can be downloaded. (1-2-3 Saludable, Mitos y Realidades, El Reto). The virtual games

contributed to the fact that 21% of all users visited the website between 45 minutes and one hour, whereas the time spent on a web-page is normally much shorter. Educational and interactive elements were placed throughout the different sections of the website to ensure that visitors are engaged by communicating and interacting as well as receiving information while navigating through the site. Programs transmitted by “Radio en Conexión” can also be downloaded from the website. One section invites the user to send comments and opinions to the coordinators of Club en Conexión in each country. Moreover, it is possible to be directly linked to different websites of PASMO and other institutions as well as to general platforms like facebook and other forums for blogs and chats.

Unfortunately, many adolescents and young people from poor households reached by the program do not have regular access to the internet and therefore, they do not even know the virtual “Club en Conexión”. PASMO in El Salvador now tries to overcome this limitation: they bring office laptops to the youth activities, demonstrating the webpage, and thereby generating curiosity for a later visit to internet cafés.

### Supply and accessibility of condoms for young people

In 2009, PASMO decided to emphasize the behavioral determinant of availability in order to motivate a larger number of young people to use condoms as a healthy and preventive behavior. The basic concept was formulated

highly exposed to messages and advertisements through several simultaneously working channels (TV, radio, internet, outdoor advertising, etc).

The generic campaign “Tienes? Pídelo!” is not linked to a specific condom brand and supports the total marketing approach. It is focused on involving a larger number of non-traditional outlets and is based on an agreement between the participating shop owners or employees and PASMO to support the campaign. Shop owners received training and sales materials that identify the shop as a place that supports condom purchasing.

Results from TRaC studies (Tracking Results Continuously) showed that condom use of sexually active young people with any partner increased by 50 % between 2005 and 2007 (average of the four countries where the program is implemented).

It turned out that mainly young people older than 18 years are reached by this concept. Especially petrol stations seem to be most adequate to reach young people, as well as supermarkets. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for adolescents and youth under 16 years to get condoms. Particularly



as “always have condoms with you”. The proposed concept for transmitting this message considered that young people are

pharmacists and small shop owners seem to be reluctant to sell condoms to adolescents. In addition, adolescents asking for condoms at health units where condoms are distributed free of charge, are not treated as welcomed by staff. Specifically for girls it is very difficult to obtain condoms, as sellers and health staff make them feel ashamed because they show their disapproval about early sexual relationships. Moreover, youth friendly services are often not established at health units, and where they exist, they are not known by young people. In addition, health staff is not prepared to deal with adolescents and youth.

PASMO is now starting a new family planning program targeted to young adults between the age of 18 to 30 years. This should support filling the mentioned gap. Even though the target population is not



adolescents, PASMO aims to coordinate the new family planning project, which is financed by an US American anonymous donor, with the activities of 'Club en Conexión'.

### Working in alliance and through youth oriented NGOs

The current coverage of the youth program has been extended through the coordination with other NGOs. PASMO is now working in the four countries with 32 partners, such as local organizations, NGOs and Faith Based Organizations. More adolescents, youth at high risk and young people from rural areas could be reached through alliances and more activities could be implemented during the second phase: 531,293 contacts were reached until September 2010 compared to 236,914 during the first phase. Also, the number of activities increased more than 50 %, by following the strategy of alliances.



In Honduras, PASMO is working with boy scouts, religious organizations and catholic parishes. They also achieved to coordinate activities with the youth program of the Ministry of Health. In Guatemala, PASMO works in alliance with faith based organizations reaching adolescents through

religious leaders. The program has even achieved to implement condom demonstrations in schools, where pupils are not allowed to have condoms with them. PASMO Guatemala is also collaborating with the HIV program of the national University in Guatemala City, where PASMO volunteers and staff implement monthly information events, including condom demonstrations ('kioskos informativos').

In El Salvador, PASMO has succeeded to coordinate with governmental community centers where peer training is now implemented in public youth centers (CID - Centros Integrales de Desarrollo). Each center is frequented by about 500 young people daily. Like this, PASMO is reaching many young people in new communities, including youth in school and out-of-school. The youth centers are established in coordination with the GTZ regional youth program and UNFPA.

The program in El Salvador is also using sports activities for preventive events: PASMO is promoting a popular soccer club and in exchange, PASMO is using the club's activities for their prevention campaigns, e.g. by putting information kiosks in Sports Arenas. In addition, PASMO has started implementing specific activities for young MSM in coordination with NGOs that are specifically targeting MSM.

The youth program in Nicaragua also coordinates with municipalities (Consejo del Poder Ciudadano) to reach out-of-school youth. The Nicaraguan program is currently



working mostly through other youth oriented NGOs. Supervision and follow-up of activities are jointly implemented by the NGOs and PASMO. Furthermore, it is planned to select 40 peer educators who already replicated the methodology for one year and to train them

as councilors for youth friendly services in coordination with UNICEF. These 40 youth councilors will represent a platform of the associated NGOs.

## Conclusions

Adolescents and young people in Central America have their sexual debuts at a very early age, generally without any knowledge of the consequences and risks related to it. Although the importance of youth projects is recognized, the implementation of comprehensive interventions is under-represented in the different countries of the region. PASMO is contributing to filling this gap.



PASMO's strategy to reach youth has proved to be relevant, effective and efficient. The interventions fit to the priorities of the countries where the program is implemented, demonstrating their *relevance* through the close links with the national strategic HIV and AIDS plans. PASMO is acting as a technical consultant for quality standards of condom supply and promoting national condom strategies with an advanced segmentation, including youth as a specific target population. In Nicaragua and Honduras, PASMO, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, has even taken leadership to define and implement national condom strategies with a sustainable policy for quality condom supply. The objective of this initiative is to coordinate efforts and to strengthen the total market approach through the participation of public and private organizations that are currently distributing condoms.

PASMO is recognized as an important partner also because of the effectiveness of the Social Marketing Strategy, combining Behavioral Change Communication with condom supply. It is acknowledged by the

governmental and non-governmental organizations that the promotion campaigns have contributed significantly to make condoms more acceptable.



In order to increase the *efficiency* of the approach, PASMO started to offer its services to youth oriented NGOs, advantaging their specific experience and access to different target populations. Through these alliances a variety of young people from different backgrounds like Garinagii, Mayas, religious youth etc. are reached, who otherwise cannot be easily accessed. Furthermore, direct interventions would be much more cost-intensive.

PASMO has also contributed to the efforts of sexual education in different countries, offering spaces for a dialogue between health institutions, educational staff at school level and young people and adolescents. An inter-institutional dialogue has started between the public and non-governmental levels. Activities at schools are important because no other institutional organization reaches as many adolescents and young people. Therefore, peer education should remain one of the main pillars of the program, starting at an early age even before adolescents begin with their sexual life.

## LESSONS LEARNT

Young people are still seeking what is right and what is wrong concerning their sexual behavior. Therefore, it is more useful to speak about behavioral development instead of behavioral change as indicated in several opportunities related to the discussion about sexual health and youth. Program designers need to understand better what are the dominant sexual meanings, sexual identities and sexual cultures of young people in the different national and cultural contexts. They need to have more knowledge about the way girls and boys, young women and men understand themselves sexually. Sexual culture is a concept and sexual behavior is a part of it and not just a simple activity. It is shaped in an interactive way and sexual identity is closely related to gender identity. Therefore, the background of male norms and related gender domination in sexual relationships need to be addressed as well. Concepts need to consider more gender identity and the personal experiences of young men and women in sexual and emotional relationships. Thus, working with a gender sensitive peer-education approach is the right way to go.



In this spirit, group dynamics should consider where it is more convenient to discuss topics with the same sex and where the methodology requires learning with and from

the other sex. Methods should be differentiated for different age groups, considering also ethnic backgrounds: Adolescents under 14 years need other methods than youth older than 14 years. Garinagü youth might need a different approach than young Maya. Studies are needed to understand better the needs of different ethnic population groups.

The high acceptance of the radio program shows that this mass medium should be increasingly used for sexual education. As radio reaches more young people of poor households than the internet, it is an appropriate entertainment medium for young people of low income sectors, provided that it meets their taste and the way how they communicate.

Involving more new formats of entertainment like TV soap-operas and other formats of effective edutainment productions could help reach more young people from different backgrounds, specifically like young Mayas and Garinagüs. The stories should reflect real life situations of the young people addressed, offering positive but realistic identification for their own life model and their sexual identities. Particularly gender related HIV prevention messages can be addressed by edutainment approaches.

In addition, barriers to access condoms for adolescents and young people still need to be reduced. This applies particularly to girls and young women who at the same time need to learn how to negotiate conditions of sexual relationships, including condom use and family planning methods. Furthermore, condom distributors and sellers need to be trained on how to deal specifically with adolescents and youth. Coordination with public health services needs to be strengthened and health staff should be trained for these purposes as planned for the new family planning component that PASMO is starting now, targeting young women between 18 and 30 years.

Strategies are more powerful and appropriate to the needs and interests of young people when they are designed and implemented by youth or together with youth. Therefore, young people of different cultural backgrounds and age groups need to be involved from the beginning in the planning, validation, implementation, supervision and monitoring of all activities.



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Palmengartenstrasse 5-9, 60325 Frankfurt am Main, Germany  
Phone +49 7431-4260, Fax +49 69 7431-3363  
info@kfw.de, www.kfw.de

Edited by  
KfW Entwicklungsbank

Author  
Irmela Riedlberger

Photos  
Irmela Riedlberger

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