



Project: Community Ambassadors (*Embajadores Comunitarios* in Spanish)

Country where the project will take place: Venezuela

Nominating University: International House at the University of Chicago

Designated project leader: Astrid Johana Garcia Espinel, home country: Venezuela

Gunshots or fireworks? This is a common question in a place like Petare (Venezuela) and learning how to tell the difference between those sounds is an important skill to survive. Petare is known for its high crime rate, gang violence, and high rate of school dropout. Just in 2020, 63% of the total homicides in the country occurred in three villages: Petare, El Valle and Sucre (Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, 2020). Nevertheless, it is also a brave community with people like “Community Ambassadors,” young leaders who keep studying and challenge stereotypes. I believe the most vulnerable communities should not be synonyms with violence, drugs or crime, but with resilience and peace.

Community Ambassadors is a youth empowerment program that seeks to promote peace through violence prevention in low-income communities in Venezuela. They work with students from 12 to 18 years old who are at risk of school dropout and provide them complementary education focused on honing skills in diplomacy, negotiation, critical thinking, public speaking, writing, and research. Then, they participate in Model United Nations debates with private and high-income schools where they play the role of ambassadors from different countries and attempt to solve real world issues such as gender equality, human rights, climate action, social development, and more.

Participating in these discussions where they simulate being a member of the United Nations is a tool to keep them away from violence and fear and help them to become agents of change in their communities. They develop socioemotional skills, their attitudes of prejudice towards other social classes decrease, and their sense of collaboration, self-esteem, and social responsibility towards their communities increase.

After 14 years, Community Ambassadors has impacted the lives of over 1,100 children, and I have the privilege of being one of them. When I was 15 years old, I was in the first cohort of participants in this project and after three years assisting different debates, this NGO gave me a special opportunity to travel to the UN headquarters in New York to represent my country in a debate where I won “best delegate.” For me, that was not the most important award. A few months before that trip, my family and my neighbors lost our homes, food supplies and belongings due to catastrophic flooding. We had to rebuild our lives in a shelter in Caracas, Venezuela. It was also the same time that I started studying journalism in college thanks to a scholarship. These contrasting experiences made me realize that I had already won the best award possible: I became resilient and a positive reference for younger generations from my community. I finished my studies and moved from that shelter to Washington DC where I worked at the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and I was a Global Shaper of the World Economic Forum. Then, I had the opportunity to continue my studies at the University of Chicago in the Harris School of Public Policy.

My commitment is to work so more young people have the same opportunities that I had, children succeed at school, and they never have to learn how to differentiate gunshots from fireworks. Unfortunately, despite all our efforts, violence and poverty in these communities has deepened significantly especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19. That's why I want to extend the reach of the organization and empower their lines of work.

This year, we expect to scale-up the impact working with an additional 100 students from four schools (Fe y Alegría María Inmaculada, Escuela Técnica Popular Don Bosco, UEP Corazón de María, and Instituto Mano Amiga) in partnership with “Universidad Metropolitana,” one of the leading academic institutions in the country, where undergraduate students volunteer by teaching our beneficiaries all the necessary skills



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and knowledge to participate in the Model United Nations debates. One of the central purposes is to develop more partnerships to reach more beneficiaries and create a small computer lab that provides a structured learning environment and reduces equity gaps. This will become a powerful tool that will be available not only for current beneficiaries but also future participants.

The program is sustainable by having careful planning and monitoring to ensure it is meeting its goals and being adaptable and responsive to changes in the community. For instance, we involve community members and stakeholders in the design and implementation of the program. Great partnerships are key for the project development, particularly with the universities. Every college student who wants to graduate is required to get community service hours. Our relationship with the universities allows the program to have volunteers from different careers. Hence, it is a win-win relationship; since universities need a place where their students can do their Community Service, while Community Ambassadors will train them to become facilitators. Most of the time, they decide to keep working with the organization after they have completed their service. Similarly, beneficiaries who finish the program then become tutors to train future generations.

Additionally, Community Ambassadors is designing a business model to provide public speaking and negotiation classes targeting private schools that also participate in Model United Nations debates and businesses that need to train their employees with these core skills.

Goal:

Implement a three-month training program (from May to July), focused on diplomacy, negotiation, critical thinking, public speaking, soft skills, and socio-emotional skills; aimed to reach 100 young people (additional from current beneficiaries) from vulnerable communities in Caracas, Venezuela.

Activities

1. Weekly training: deliver 8 face-to-face training sessions, lasting three hours each.
2. Participation in Model UN debates: Assist 8 Model UN debates, with 12 students and 4 facilitators per event.
3. Create a small computer lab: Repair old computers, and purchase tables so participants have the tools to research and study in groups.
4. Interview assessment at the beginning and at the end of the project.
5. Closing ceremony.

Outcome indicators

- Number of participants in the training sessions and debates.
- Number of awards and recognition in the debates.

Impact indicators

- Rosenberg self-esteem scale
- Schwarzer and Jerusalem self-efficacy scale
- Connor Davidson resilience scale
- Locus of control (Levenson)
- Scale of Attitudes towards risk behaviors