

## **Case Study: Area Youth Foundation**

Partner: Area Youth Foundation

Location: Kingston, Jamaica

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### **Introduction**

The Area Youth Foundation (AYF) is a non-governmental organisation established in 1997. AYF's method is to harness the artistic disciplines of drama, music and dance as tools to facilitate personal development and impart useful skills. In this way, young people learn to explore the issues that affect their lives, propose solutions, share insights and through their performances and the messages in their music, inspire and motivate their peers.

AYF's programmes are designed to:

- Reinforce self-worth for inner city youth, provide them with the skills to deal with conflict constructively, encourage them to lead healthy lifestyles and enhance opportunities for employment.
- Carry out cultural development programmes in socially excluded communities for violence prevention and to promote social cohesion.

Jamaica has a per capita income of £920 per annum, the third lowest in the region, and 25 per cent of the population lives on less than £1.50 a day. According to a United Nations report, Jamaica's homicide rate, at around 1,500 annually, is four times that of the rest of the world. Contemporary inter-community rivalries and violent confrontations have their roots in a history of slavery, political partisanship, poverty and drug trafficking. The ghettos of the capital, Kingston, have been described as '... a chessboard of war zones with human pieces'.

These are the same ghettos in which Reggae was born and Jamaica's music is '...probably the only music not of European or American origin which can be heard in every country on Earth, and is arguably the first example in modern times of a third world country exporting its culture to such a diverse audience'.<sup>1</sup>

Music has the potential to magnetise the youth, and especially young men. For every marginalised youth in a crime-riddled ghetto, becoming a successful performing artist appears to be an achievable way out of poverty.

### **Activity**

Over the years, because of intermittent, inter-community violence along Mountain View Avenue, the main artery linking Kingston to its international airport, the district had become a pariah zone

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<sup>1</sup>*Reggae Routes: The Story of Jamaican Music.* Kevin O'Brien Chang and Wayne Chen. Ian Randle Publishers. Jamaica, 1998.

and motorists would endure long detours to avoid it. Pedestrians were scant, businesses had moved away and residents, once their address was known, found it difficult to get jobs.

In 2003, an incident at the time of the local government elections led to a new outbreak of violence. In the space of two weeks 13 people (all non-combatants) had been killed. Residents were pinned down in their homes, unable to go to work or even cross the street for fear of being gunned down in a random act of reprisal.

The Peace Management Initiative, an agency of the Ministry of National Security, intervened and managed to bring the leadership of the combat zones to the table to secure a cease-fire. They then enlisted the aid of the Area Youth Foundation to develop a strategy for consolidating and deepening the peace process in the communities.

The AYF team joined the peace meetings, outlined its plan and got the leaders to commit themselves to encouraging and facilitating participation from their respective communities.

The next step was to visit each community, speak to some of the residents and get a sense of their readiness to co-operate in a peace process.

A few days later the team returned to each community, set up keyboards, microphones and speakers in the street and began to perform. When a crowd had gathered, the team explained its purpose and invited volunteers to take part in a leadership training course at a college in a neutral area outside of the community.

Thirty people from five communities committed to a course in 'Community Cultural Animation'. Initially, there was euphoria as old friends were able to see and speak to each other without fear after years of separation. Tensions inevitably surfaced, but, through games, creative activities and opportunities to perform, the group melded into a unity as fierce as the previous hostility had been. They began travelling home together and visiting each other across the borderlines.

AYF then had to get the involvement of the rest of the community, especially the men. The strategy for this was to challenge each group to organise a talent competition and cook-out in their respective communities. In popular practice in poor areas or in situations such as building sites, people 'run-a-boat', that is, pool their resources to make a meal. The course participants embraced the challenge with alacrity and each group hosted the other communities for a moveable feast to which was attached a stage show and talent competition. These events became called the 'Peace Boat' and as the feast and the competition moved from community to community, the crowds and enthusiasm swelled. People ventured into formerly forbidden territory for the first time and were warmly received.

So successful was the programme at this stage that another state agency stepped in and provided the resources for the grand finale, dubbed 'Mountain View Harmony Splash'. This was a day-long celebration of sports and entertainment attended by tens of thousands of residents of the various communities.

## **Impact**

The most significant outcome of this intervention has been the creation of the United Mountain View Community Development Council in which the former factional leaders now serve as the Executive. They meet weekly and collaborate to mediate and intervene whenever trouble flares up in any of the communities.

Through a collective creation process and as a permanent reminder of their achievement, a mural portraying the citizens' vision and aspirations for their community was painted along a wall on Mountain View Avenue.

The success of this project influenced policy-makers to recognise that to transform the culture of violence into a culture of peace, it is the sensibilities and consciousness of the people that must be transformed, and to adopt new strategies for addressing crime and violence.

Many thousands of people have shared the Area Youth experience, either as direct beneficiaries, or through association, or as audience.

'Alumni' of the programme are presently making a living and a meaningful contribution in a wide range of areas, for example as actors on stage and in film, stage managers, lighting and sound technicians, as well as in other fields not related to the entertainment industry - the army, the police force, as teachers and in business.

AYF stage productions have been appreciated and acclaimed throughout Jamaica and internationally. AYF's programmes have been able to attract young men who would likely become (or have been) perpetrators of some of the violence which is part of the daily experience of their existence.

### **Lessons**

- The weakness in the whole enterprise is that the underlying issues of lack of jobs and opportunity have not been addressed. The guns used in the conflicts have not been recovered, and illegal trafficking continues to offer the best hope of reward.
- Violence prevention needs to be bolstered with income-generating projects, skills training and opportunities for educational advancement.
- It is counter-productive to intervene in community life, hold out a vision of hope and not put in place the resources to make the programme sustainable.