



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



# EQUIP3 LESSONS LEARNED

Experiences in Livelihoods,  
Literacy, and Leadership  
in Youth Programs in  
26 Countries

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2003-2012





# INTRODUCTION

More than 1.5 billion 12–24 year olds worldwide are both an important national development asset and a pressing challenge for the international community. Many of these young people are out of school, with poorly developed cognitive skills, and little experience with work or access to livelihoods or jobs. Yet youth bring unique, fresh perspectives that transform communications, entrepreneurship, and civic engagement.

The USAID-funded Educational Quality Improvement Program 3 (EQUIP3) was designed to improve earning, learning, and skill development opportunities for out-of-school youth in developing countries. EQUIP3 was one of three USAID-funded EQUIP programs that promoted improved educational quality in countries around the world. EQUIP was a partnership with USAID, a consortium of international partner organizations, and host country public and private institutions. The EQUIP3 consortium of international partners included Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), as the prime and other organizations such as the International Youth Foundation (IYF) and FHI360 (formerly Academy for Educational Development).

EQUIP3 projects have spanned 25 projects in 26 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Among these countries, EQUIP3 has worked in some of the most challenging contexts, characterized by political instability, natural disaster, or ongoing conflict. In fact, most of the countries in which EQUIP3 projects have been implemented could be categorized as crisis- or conflict-affected. As of December 2011, the following had been accomplished:

- EQUIP3 has reached more than 200,000 youth, a number that will increase as 10 EQUIP3 projects are continuing, some projected until 2016.
- Projects have trained more than 50,000 youth in work readiness skills to prepare them for employment and livelihood opportunities. Nearly 60,000 youth have completed vocational training.
- While it has been a core focus of only a couple of EQUIP3 projects, more than 1,000 youth have completed civic leadership training, inspiring the creation of over 40 youth-led institutions.
- Projects have created more than 400 youth development partnerships or networks, including nearly 700 separate stakeholder institutions.<sup>1</sup> More than 500 youth-serving institutions<sup>2</sup> have benefited from training and capacity-building assistance.

## EQUIP3 Leader-with-Associates (LWA) Mechanism

EQUIP3 operated with USAID under a Leader-with-Associates (LWA) Cooperative Agreement, which meant there was a single lead cooperative agreement under which multiple associated awards could be made. There were two types of EQUIP3 activities:

**Leader Award** activities focused on project design, research and development, and dissemination of best practices and lessons learned.

**Associate Awards** were projects in the field funded by USAID missions that target at-risk youth.

EQUIP3 worked cooperatively with USAID missions, private and public organizations, and host country stakeholders to:

- *Improve* the effectiveness of programs and policies to assist out-of-school youth.
- *Identify* youth-related quality-of-life issues through action, research, and monitoring and evaluation.
- *Design* initiatives tailored to country and USAID strategies to help youth and their families improve their education, health, economic security, and civic participation.
- *Build* technical and management capacity among local organizations, government ministries, and private corporations.

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1 Youth development partnerships or networks are defined as groups of organizations (public or private) that are working together on youth development. Stakeholder institutions are defined as each of the “member” organizations that comprise the youth development partnership or network.

2 Youth-serving institutions are defined as non-government organizations or host country government entities that provide services for youth.

The EQUIP3 Lessons Learned report seeks to draw on the rich experiences of the EQUIP3 youth projects with the goal of informing future program directions. The report is organized around the major areas in which the program worked:

- EQUIP3's three primary technical areas: livelihoods and workforce development, literacy, and youth leadership
- Lessons learned in the cross-cutting areas of program design and management, evaluation, and program sustainability
- Youth programming in fragile states

Each section discusses the results, challenges, and tools or products that have been developed. From the findings in each key thematic area, the report draws conclusions about the field today and how EQUIP3's lessons learned can prove useful to youth programming in the future.

## HISTORY

When EQUIP3 was launched in 2003 by the Education Office of the Economic Growth and Trade (EGAT) Bureau in USAID, the projects focused primarily on the basic education needs of out-of-school youth. As projects were implemented, and EQUIP3 learned more about youths' diverse needs and priorities, the projects evolved to focus on youth civic participation and livelihoods as well. The program served as a valuable testing ground, both for adapting approaches from the United States and Europe and for developing whole new approaches tailored to country contexts. Over the past nine years, EQUIP3 programs have evolved, whereby the experiences and lessons from the first set of programs have influenced the design and been incorporated into the implementation of later EQUIP3 programs.

As EQUIP3 projects have included increasingly cross-sectoral skills, projects have also moved from single-sector USAID support (in education or economic growth) to cross-sectoral support, and projects more frequently provided information about HIV and AIDS, and adolescent and reproductive health. As the needs of youth are diverse, the service strategies that evolved to respond to those needs became equally diverse.

Finally, because youth programming in developing countries was a relatively new field in 2003, the evidence base for what worked was small and there were few tools for measuring what worked. Over the course of EQUIP3, a number of evaluation tools were piloted for the purpose of measuring outcomes from youth workforce programs that had not been captured or analyzed previously.

# FINDINGS

The experience of EQUIP3 confirms that it is essential to provide youth with access to work and livelihood opportunities, education and training, and health services, and to offer them opportunities for civic participation and leadership. Failure to do so will negate the opportunity to use their energy and vitality productively and contributes to the risks of crime, unrest, lifelong poverty, and disease. Moreover, EQUIP3's experience over nine years demonstrates that certain approaches to positively engaging and supporting youth work better than others.

## A. Programmatic Conclusions

Reduced to simple terms, what do young people need to be active and productive members of society? The 25 EQUIP3 projects provide a body of experience that reveals the following:

- Young people need practical, marketable skills, ranging from literacy and numeracy (the ability to process and use information) to hands-on vocational skills suited to very local circumstances and to labor demand.
- Young adults need money—to live, to save, and to invest in themselves and their families—and connections to ways to earn it.
- All need actionable information—about training and education, work opportunities, better health, full participation in citizenship, and how to be busy and productive.
- More than almost any group, young people crave affiliation, as well as useful connections that enable them to belong and have access to all of the above.

This experience suggests elements for future program choices, building upon earlier experience:

### Literacy

1. Out-of-school youth projects in developing countries should employ an integrated package of work readiness training, work experience, bridging services (including coaching and linkages to financing), and literacy and numeracy education.

An integrated continuum of education (most often starting with literacy and numeracy for early school leavers), supports, and experiences shows the greatest results. While this point is widely known, it is not always consistently applied in youth program designs.

## Livelihoods and workforce development

2. A more systematic and structured approach to bridging services for youth is needed.

Traditionally programs graduate young people and track them, but they do not continue to serve and support their future progress. Further analysis of bridging services is needed to understand which are necessary and which are optional in order to guide future program design and resource allocation.

3. Youth livelihood and employment programs need to add programmatic elements that support economic growth among enterprises with job and livelihood creation potential.

A balanced supply-demand approach is essential, one that builds in private sector perspectives, ownership, and support from the outset, and which is tailored to youth. Moreover, small- and medium-sized enterprises—the most likely to hire young people in most economies—themselves need supports and assistance to grow and create jobs. This could be addressed through closer collaboration and coordination among youth workforce programs, USAID-funded economic growth programs, and other donors supporting business-enabling environments.

## Youth leadership

4. Youth participation is an effective strategy for building program quality and sustainability and for generating positive perceptions of youth among adults in communities.

EQUIP3's experience suggests that investments of time and resources to include youth in assessment/design, management of project activities, and evaluation are well spent because of the positive results realized. But making this happen demands that projects be flexible, build relationships with youth, demonstrate patience and realistic expectations, and build capacity of implementers and stakeholders.

5. True youth engagement requires authentic adult engagement. Experience suggests that investment in both youth and adult engagement is an important element toward achieving youth participation and leadership.

Adult-youth partnerships are important for fostering community support for youth leadership and participation, contributing to the exchange of skills and experience, and ensuring the long-term success of youth-led initiatives. Projects should incorporate meaningful ways for adults to support the next generation of leaders without limiting youth participation.

## Youth in fragile states

6. In conflict-affected and crisis countries, programs need to represent a positive alternative—they require a positive pull on youth that meet each young person’s self-perceived needs and wants.

The pulls in the political and social environment that draw youth need to be offset by attractive alternatives. Research on the impact of using specific types of pulls to engage youth in youth programs would strengthen the understanding of effective strategies for working with vulnerable youth in fragile settings.

## Cross-cutting issues

7. “Youth” is not a gender-neutral demographic category.

Male and female youth have unique needs and priorities, which must be taken into account when seeking to achieve positive skill-building and livelihoods outcomes. Gender must be both a consistent and a stronger consideration than it has been in many countries in the design of future youth programs, and it will require particular care to adapt gender issues to varied country cultures and economies.

8. Technology has become an ever-increasing consideration for livelihood and employment strategies and a tool for program and content delivery.

Thanks to technological advances, low-cost, high-quality, technology-based delivery systems (e.g., mobile phones for job placement or financial literacy instruction) can provide access to skills and job information for hard-to-reach, informally organized populations. They can also enable more cost-effective monitoring and evaluation.

9. There are important U.S.-based youth development approaches that can be adapted to international contexts.

However, adapting U.S.-based approaches to international contexts requires that they be flexible. The most successful of these approaches focus on adherence to a set of principles, rather than fixed models and a prescribed curriculum. The blend of principles and standards with sensitive technical assistance and capacity building can allow for local creativity and innovation.

10. Networks and alliances can be a strong sustainability tool, but agreements, capacity development, and management structures need to be well-defined to maximize network benefits.

Working through local employers, NGOs and youth organizations can establish groundwork for long-term sustainability of an effective program. However, it requires that clear definitions, specific roles,



and investments in capacity building be part of a project from the beginning, not just as the project nears completion.

## B. Strategic Conclusions

USAID missions must sort through competing priorities and work to achieve ambitious aims in each sector with scarce resources. However, even within a context of tightening resources, there are several encouraging trends worth noting:

- USAID missions and implementers alike are coming to understand that youth do not neatly fit into one system or programming “stove pipe.” While this is certainly a positive development, the cross-sectoral nature of youth programming makes it more challenging to identify a “home,” and therefore an advocate and resource base, for youth programming within the U.S. government or host country governments.
- Budget pressures in some missions have resulted in more cross-sectoral funding for youth programs, even as single-sector resources diminish. Mission staff have managed to redefine their sectoral work to combine funding and outcome priorities and to pursue innovative agendas to serve young people. As a result, a certain momentum has been generated within USAID at both the mission and bureau levels. This can be seen not only in the increased rate of new Associate Awards under EQUIP3 in the last several years, but also in International Youth Foundation’s Youth: Work program and other USAID-funded youth programs. Going forward, growing consensus about the need for youth development programs may result in re-allocating USAID resources among multiple sectors in order to support future large-scale, cross-sectoral youth initiatives.
- In the beginning, most funding for EQUIP3 youth programs came from the education budgets of USAID missions. However, there has been a recent increase in support from other sectors—notably democracy and governance, economic growth, and health. As that has developed, the objectives for EQUIP3 programs have evolved to suit the sources of funding.

## C. Looking Ahead

With USAID's new education strategy and youth policy in mind, EQUIP3's experience is useful in thinking about how to implement them:

1. Youth are by definition a “cross-cutting” target, requiring a response from nearly every USAID sector. As missions look to implement the new USAID education strategy, youth constitute a particular challenge, yet they are not conclusively targeted. There is a risk of overlooking the assets and needs represented by out-of-school youth. Education programs should consider strategies noted in this report for engaging out-of-school youth, in addition to their in-school peers.
2. The new USAID youth policy encourages an expanded role for more bureaus, such as health, democracy and governance, and economic growth. Therefore, tools from multiple sectors are needed to build the capacity of bureaus to design programs that provide young people with complementary and reinforcing skills, connections, information, and resources. EQUIP3 products, such as the Guide to Cross-Sectoral Youth Assessments, Developing a Youth Development Framework, and others referenced in this report are resources upon which USAID can draw in this work.
3. EQUIP3's experience indicates that some missions and host countries are re-examining their approach to youth development and are interested in adopting a systems approach. EQUIP3's recent work suggests that a careful targeting of capacity building, tied to cross-ministry (and even cross-donor) activities, might result in large-scale, sustainable support for young people.
4. There is continued skepticism among budget planners and policy-makers that any intervention with youth really works. While nine years of EQUIP3 programs have contributed to a stronger evidence base for what works in youth programming, there is still a need for more rigorous evaluation of outcomes and impacts from youth livelihood and youth leadership programs. There is also a need for increased sharing among implementers of the tools developed and evaluation results obtained, in order to inform the broader community of youth practitioners. The recent USAID evaluation policy marks a new and promising direction for monitoring and evaluation. Capacity building among youth practitioners in monitoring and evaluation specifically for youth programs ought to be a priority as part of operationalizing this policy.





**EQUIP3**

### ABOUT EQUIP3

The USAID-funded Educational Quality Improvement Program 3 (EQUIP3) is designed to improve earning, learning, and skill development opportunities for out-of-school youth in developing countries. We work to help countries meet the needs and draw on the assets of young women and men by improving policies and programs that affect them across a variety of sectors. We also provide technical assistance to USAID and other organizations in order to build the capacity of youth and youth-serving organizations.

EQUIP3 is a consortium of 13 organizations with diverse areas of expertise. Together, these organizations work with out-of-school youth in more than 100 countries.

To learn more about EQUIP3 please see the website at [www.equip123.net/equip3/index\\_new.html](http://www.equip123.net/equip3/index_new.html).

### EQUIP3 CONSORTIUM

- Education Development Center, Inc.
- FHI360
- Catholic Relief Services
- International Council on National Youth Policy
- International Youth Foundation
- National Youth Employment Coalition
- National Youth Leadership Council
- Opportunities Industrialization Centers International
- Partners of the Americas
- Plan International Childreach
- Sesame Workshop
- Street Kids International
- World Learning