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Alternatives to Apathy: Equipping Youth to Help Themselves by Helping Their Community

"It is always good to give young people opportunities to do things by themselves. They need to learn by doing." Mariam Kobalia, youth integration program manager at Europe Foundation, said one of the foundation's most wildly successful programs in Georgia is YouthBank.



YOUTHBANK CHAPTERS
OPERATE IN
25
OF THE MOST
MARGINALIZED AND DIVERSE
COMMUNITIES IN THE
REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA.

YouthBank is a program that supports a youth-led grantmaking process for peer-proposed projects within a defined community. YouthBank chapters are required to be youth-led and inclusive, and each locale adapts various aspects of the model to work for them. The Georgian YouthBank administrators have embarked on a self-described "difficult and complex but rewarding journey" to equip and empower overlooked youth in 25 marginalized communities. YouthBank enables youth to realize their full potential by strengthening their communities, the country, the region, and the international community in an authentic and sustainable way.

The Europe Foundation—an operating foundation with funds from multiple stakeholders—brought YouthBank to Georgia in 2007, initially creating programs in four municipalities. The YouthBanks were designed for seven to 10 volunteers between the ages of 16-21.

The foundation focuses on recruiting "passive youth," which includes those not currently active in school-sponsored or community activities or those who have never participated in any type of activity but are deemed to have potential. Interviewers focus on assessing motivation and past experiences to determine which youth will benefit the most from this experience. Giorgi Mosiashvili, a participant in the Dream Camp for underprivileged kids funded by the Dedoplistskaro YouthBank and considered to be a "passive youth", said, "Before [Dream Camp] I spent all of my free time roaming about the streets. Now I spend most of my free time here enjoying my friends and having fun." He continues, "At Dream Camp we exercise, conduct performances and even have meals. I am looking forward to going to school even on the weekends."



In their pitch to encourage students to join YouthBank, recruiters tell students, “Even if you don’t do well in school, maybe this is the space you need to discover yourself and uncover your dreams.” Mariam said she and other foundation staff go to the students directly because adult recommendations are not what they are looking for. “They always recommend the excellent students and perceive the others to be ineligible.” YouthBank conducts the interviews in person with a list of questions to assess potential. Mariam shared, “The resources we invest in those with potential, rather than those students who are already active participants, are the most productive because the youth become so motivated and try so hard to be active and involved leaders in the community, even after their YouthBank service is done.” She explained that “endowing the youth with full grantmaking responsibility, even though it feels risky to let them do the work without adults, is the only way to build their confidence and create lasting change.” The realization of what they accomplished as grantmakers turns borderline apathetic youth into active citizens.

The foundation cooperates with the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia in disseminating information and recruiting YouthBank volunteers. The program has been so successful in Georgia that funding for it was expanded to support 25 YouthBanks throughout Georgia’s most vulnerable, marginalized, diverse, and isolated communities. Mariam said, “We choose places where civil society isn’t well developed, which are usually underserved or isolated regions often populated by ethnic and religious minorities. There are no YouthBanks in the cities where there are already many opportunities for youth self-

actualization.” Adding YouthBanks to these areas, often far removed from the decision-making processes in the capital, lets youth self-actualize in two ways, both as grantmakers making important decisions about how to bring resources into their community, and as idea movers who submit proposals for creative solutions to community problems. Speaking about the impact of the Dedoplistskaro YouthBank Dream Camp, Tea Lekashvilk, a local resident of Dedoplistskaro said, “I do not recall this many community-wide activities in our small town. When one observes these children one feels the need to go out there and assist others without any reward. What is even more important is the realization that one can do good deeds with a very small amount of money. These children are a total surprise to me. They expect neither material or financial benefit, nor any privileges. They simply seek ways of self-actualization to try to make their dreams come true.”

Each year, the foundation brings the approximately 150 youth volunteers from the 25 Georgian chapters together to equip them with the skills they will need to assess and address the issues facing their communities as a YouthBank team. YouthBank graduates come back and attend these convenings to impart their lessons learned and help train the new recruits. The youth volunteers participate in



grantmaking training and learn qualitative research skills through a sociological lens. They then put these to the test as they collaborate in developing a community needs assessment and request for proposals themselves without adult oversight. Environmental degradation, access to education, unhealthy lifestyles, gender equality, discrimination, and human rights violations are recurring themes across chapters uncovered by YouthBank needs assessments.



Tip: Create opportunities for experienced youth grantmakers to train their peers.

In addition, the foundation has added three capacity-building, “train the trainer”-style in-person workshops during the yearlong grant cycle to train the YouthBank teams to teach their peers about how local issues connect to larger ones. For example, Mariam shared that many Georgians no matter their age think cleaning a park or planting trees will fix the environment. The foundation’s training on environmental degradation teaches youth how to connect the issues in their community to the larger issues of waste management systems and global warming. The youth then bring the information back to their communities, educating and inspiring their peers and adults to become part of the solution.

The youth volunteers are independently responsible for all aspects of the grantmaking process. Mariam said, “Although it is a difficult and risky model to work

directly with volunteers instead of host organizations, we have found that when the youth are responsible for the grantmaking, they become more confident and involved. Our experience shows that after the program, they maintain or increase their involvement, often becoming leaders in the community.”

The YouthBank teams make presentations to schools and villages about the problems they want to solve in their communities, inviting their peers to submit their ideas in teams of three or more. Mariam shared, “The schools are always surprised when the youth show up with no adults. They think young people can’t accomplish anything on their own, but after they see what the youth are doing, they are very supportive.” Each YouthBank is charged with selecting five projects up to US \$500 each. Once the projects are complete, the 25 teams convene again to evaluate, share lessons learned, and celebrate their accomplishments.

The effects of this program go beyond individual project successes, and one of the most significant for the Georgian YouthBank network is building cross-cultural awareness. The Georgian YouthBank brings ethnic and minority groups together who would never meet otherwise. In late 2015, YouthBank added a team from Pankisi, an isolated, primarily Muslim, region ISIS is targeting for young recruits. Mariam shared that it was the first time that there were girls at the training wearing head scarves. She explained, “There was tremendous hostility towards these young people because they were not ethnic Georgians and were not orthodox, so no one wanted to be placed in a group with them. However, by the end of the trainings, youth in attendance had all changed their attitudes,

writing comments on their evaluations like, 'I didn't know they were just like us.'"

The diversity and inclusion capacity-building activities are actively translated into the grantmaking process. YouthBank members reflect on how their communities manage differences in ethnicity, opinions, and practices, and learn to analyze community problems from multiple perspectives. The youth ensure they are using inclusive language in their public communications and are funding projects with diverse group members.

YouthBank is one of the few alternatives to apathy in Georgia where most of nonprofits and social agencies operate exclusively in the big cities. According to the 2013 data from the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRRC), only 20% of the country's youth (aged 18-25) has volunteered in the past six months, more than 50% have no personal income, and more than 70% report leading unhealthy lifestyles.¹ Although the data paints a gloomy picture, YouthBank is providing practical youth empowerment activities designed to promote civic participation and integration. Youth are taught that they can do anything they want, become

community problem solvers and create their own future.

They can act now and do not need to wait for outside help.

They can start a Dream Camp for

underprivileged kids, run

a book drive for an orphanage,

or even create a radio station to teach their peers and adults about voting rights and responsibilities in a democracy. Mariam is proud to have had the opportunity to work with and equip 9,000+ volunteers with the skills they need to reach their full potential as engaged active citizens. She said, "YouthBank is all about communication. When young people communicate, you see change in them and in their communities."



¹The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2013) "Caucasus Barometer Georgia". Retrieved through ODA caucasusbarometer.org on April 6, 2016.



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This case study was written by Lauren Hasey Maher and developed for Foundation Center's Youth Giving project. Photos provided courtesy of the Europe Foundation. Visit youthgiving.org to view other free resources related to engaging young people in grantmaking.
