

Escape from Violence and Poverty

by Luca Beti

Switzerland has been supporting the «ProJoven» vocational training project in Honduras since 2013 to help integrate underprivileged young people in the workforce. The project continues to forge ahead, Covid-19 notwithstanding, and has proved surprisingly adaptable.

Growing up with engines, the smell of petrol and oil-stained hands, *Mirna Mendez* fell in love with cars. Every day she dons her smudged overalls for her job in a car workshop. *Francesco Chinchilla* lived on the streets until he was nine years old. But he was able to escape the fate of many young Hondurans, of ending up in one of the criminal youth gangs, or maras. Today he is self-employed and sells sandwiches, nachos and empanadas. Like *Mirna* and *Francesco*, thousands of young girls and boys have given themselves a chance by participating in ProJoven. The project is implemented by the NGO *Swisscontact* and funded by the *Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)*.

In Honduras, 64.5% of the population lives below the poverty line; 5.7% are unemployed and 50% are under-employed. It is the young who are largely affected, and it is alienating them from society and driving them towards organised crime. "Through ProJoven we want to help young people to break out of the vicious cycle of



Luz Nassar completed her training as a qualified motorcycle mechanic at the Comayagua Colonial vocational training school. (© ProJoven)

violence and poverty," explains *Olga Tinoco*, head of the project at *Swisscontact*.

Winning private sector confidence

The project is already in its second phase, which will conclude by the end of 2021. From 2013 to 2017, the project imparted training to 12 000 young people between the ages of 18 to 30. Of these, 4500 took up self-employment or found a job in labour-intensive industries such as food and catering, tourism, construction or the services sector. "The programme partners with governmental and private actors to improve both the quality and quantity of vocational training in Honduras. This is the only way we can respond adequately to the needs of the labour market," says *Angie Murillo Gough*. She works as a programme officer at the Swiss cooperation office in Honduras and is in charge of the project.

ProJoven's success is due to cooperation with numerous partners, including NGOs, foundations, church institutions, chambers of com-

Plagued by violence

Honduras has among the highest homicide rates in the world. In 2019, there were over 4000 murders – more than 10 per day – and 71.5% of these involved firearms. By comparison, 207 offences were committed in Switzerland during the same period. In Honduras the victims are mainly men aged between 15 and 44 years. The main motive is settling scores through contract killers. The high number of homicides in Central America is primarily due to organised crime and rival gangs fighting each other for territory in which they control cocaine smuggling to the United States. Violence and unsafe living conditions force thousands of people to leave their homes: it is estimated that there are over 250 000 internally displaced persons in Honduras. (Ib)

merce, the ministry of economic development and the ministry of labour and social security as well as the *National Institute of Vocational Training* (INFOP). "By winning the confidence of the private sector we were able to create job opportunities for young people," says Tinoco. This cooperation also helped to integrate the Swiss dual system of vocational education and training in the Hotel Escuela Madrid's training centre located in Tegucigalpa.

Pandemic necessitates new teaching methods

In the ongoing second phase of the project it was envisaged that 6000 young people from the central district and the Gulf of Fonseca, La Mosquitia and Atlántida regions would be integrated in the labour market. This objective now appears challenging in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is feared that 350 000 jobs will be lost and that unemployment will rise by another 9.5%. "Due to the government-imposed lockdown last March, we had to develop new teaching methods to be able to train those who had registered for the courses," says Tinoco.

Within a very short time the project team had to arrange for online platforms and online courses. This proved quite challenging because of patchy internet connectivity and participants not having access to the necessary electronic devices. Moreover, they were already feeling insecure, isolated and were struggling with the recession. "We realised that we would also need to offer psycho-social support to the course participants, so we set up a phone counselling helpline," says Tinoco.

Preventive and motivational

For the young course participants, the Covid-19 crisis has also offered an opportunity to develop new skills as ProJoven launched some of its own initiatives to support the community. It partnered with a private company to produce



*Practice makes perfect: 23-year-old Enixon Daney Bonilla Arias during his training to become a waiter.
(© ProJoven)*

spare parts for ventilators as well as protective masks and goggles using a 3D-printer.

Another initiative was launched for participants in food and catering courses. "They prepared meals in the training centres and distributed them to health facilities, to staff at the hospitals and other needy people," reports Tinoco. "This experience then motivated many of them to prepare meals at home and offer free home delivery. In this way they were able to generate some income for their families."

In four years, bilateral development cooperation with Latin America will be phased out. What will happen to the project then? "ProJoven has made a long-term contribution to modernising and strengthening vocational training. It has also created jobs for young people in cooperation with the private sector," replies Gough. "We have helped many young people to give their lives a new direction. And it has also been a project to prevent violence," notes Tonoco. Franceso Chinchilla can testify to that. Instead of turning into a juvenile delinquent, he has become a respectable entrepreneur and a role model for his daughter.

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