



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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## Success Stories

# Guatemala: Being the change they want to see

*By Karina García-Ruano*



SERES planning office © K. Garcia-Ruano

**Poverty, war and shortages have put limits on resources for many young people in Central America but not on dreams. Dreams of a better future inspired the birth of Asociación SERES, which since 2009 has been working with youth from Guatemala and El Salvador to give them the tools needed to bring about positive change through sustainable development.**

And in November 2015, the organization was awarded the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for its outstanding work.

"Despite the natural wealth of these territories, a lot of the people here live in poverty and are very vulnerable to everything, including climate change. Young people are left aside, with no social fabric, and forced to migrate looking for better opportunities and a system that imposes solutions without asking what they really want or need. That is why I thought the best thing to do was to start listening to them," says Corrina Grace, founder and executive director of SERES.

"I grew up in a community where sustainable development is a natural way of life, so my first instinct was to share it with these young people full of dreams and eager for tools to achieve them," says Grace who was born and raised in Australia.

### The "machete" for change

"SERES provides us with a 'machete' [big knife used in rural areas for agriculture and domestic tasks] to work, they help us to apply knowledge to our own realities and develop action plans in our groups, our communities and even farther," says Antonio Sánchez, 28,



Action Plan Waste © K. Garcia-Ruano

a former participant who is now founder and facilitator of SERES in El Salvador. Sánchez points out that part of their philosophy is that participants have to discover who they are and what change they want to bring about.

Through a series of workshops forming “ESD Youth Ambassadors”, participants grow to understand themselves, identify what they want in order to improve their lives, their strengths and leadership, and their potential to work on their goals. In parallel, the programmes include technical information related to sustainable development which is locally relevant, such as food sovereignty, permaculture, climate change and biodiversity.

### From their reality, their solutions, in their own words

One of the core values of SERES is the promotion of “deep listening”, not only as part of training programmes, but as a way of working and living. “Instead of the institution talking about youth, we want youth to speak about themselves... we do not believe that our impact is represented only by numbers because the most valuable results are the stories... the life stories,” says Andrés Quezada, the ‘communications genius’, as he has been dubbed by peers.

“I think one of the reasons why SERES works so well is because we are listening to all these young people, which is not common in our countries... traditional education is about following directions, it does not promote or believe in what youth wants to say. Here in SERES we do,” emphasizes Isabel Pérez, strategies coordinator.

“Our participants have very diverse backgrounds, there are indigenous, mestizos, farmers, university students... and must find their own path to change

what they want to change, there are no recipes,” adds Pérez.

As part of the Youth Ambassadors programme, participants have to design action plans to implement in their communities, from promotion of local food consumption, recycling and waste management, to local environmental committees.



Abigail Quic ©SERES

The pace at which each participant progresses depends on their particular circumstances. “I would like to participate more often and faster in the programme but I work in agriculture. I still try to continue because I like to apply what I learn... for instance, I learned better reforestation practices that I applied not only with my family fields but also with my community,” says Cristian Pintín, 22, workshop participant in Suchitoto, El Salvador.

### Winding roads

During the six years since its foundation SERES has faced obstacles, particularly with regard to its credibility. “When we are with other young people or even with children, we see that it is easier for them to understand us and to join our work, but some adults do not see the relevance of sustainable development... they say that they have other more important problems to solve, such as food or improving their crops. Sadly, they do not realize that all this is connected and working with sustainable development would solve all the other problems at once,” says Ismael Acosta, 19, another workshop participant.

Limited resources affect the implementation of action plans, transportation and timing. SERES is already working on strategies to overcome these limitations. “We started working in a multiscale strategy, we want to expand from our current 1,500 young people to 7 thousand in 2020, without neglecting the quality of our work at the grassroots level, and build alliances with other actors at local, national and even international level, such as educators, universities and organizations with whom we have common philosophy and objectives,” says Grace.



Youth Summit 2016 ©SERES





Tree-planting girls ©SERES



Youth summit participants © SERES

places for our workshops so it is important to have an established meeting point because our plans and dreams and work never stop," says Grace.

Indeed, SERES' planning office in Guatemala never stops. From a small house in a village in Guatemala, all the dreams machinery keeps working, making real the change that each of these young dreamers wanted to be, and surely they will see.

### Paving the path, targeting the goal

This approach has already brought positive results and success, including the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD. The award ceremony at UNESCO in Paris in November 2015 was attended by founder and director Grace, accompanied by Abigail Quic, 26, a young Maya leader from the Guatemalan highlands, living evidence of SERES' work.

"When I saw all the people who were in the audience I could not believe how a young Maya woman was there talking to all these representatives of the entire planet ... then I said what I would say to everybody on this planet: we have a lot to do for a better world, so please, join our work no matter who you are," recalls Quic.

SERES is extending its range to other latitudes. In 2015 Global SERES was created to involve more partners around the world. SERES also received a donation of land in Guatemala, where they plan to build their Comuniversidad. "Our project is to build a centre that works as a bridge between community knowledge and academic knowledge, it will be a place for youth, built by them, with their ideas, their plans, their enthusiasm, their dreams. Up until now we have rented different



Workshop participants Suchitoto ©K. Garcia-Ruano

## Multiplier effect

SERES has identified one of its major success factors as the multiplier effect. Participants who finish the programme become facilitators and ambassadors of new cohorts. The inspiration they see in others, peer collaboration and belonging to a group are repeatedly cited as important in their life stories.

## Testimonials

*"I feel inspired when I see facilitators and ambassadors... I say 'I want to be like that... I was already a leader in my community but I needed something else and I found it here" - Susana Ruiz, 23*

*"We share a lot and work a lot together to achieve our plans in the community ... SERES is not a group, it is like a family to me" - Evelyn Ruiz, 21*



Evelyn Ruiz

*"I saw what they were doing in the community and said 'I want to be part of them' and looked for them until I found them... and I know this is what I love to do" Fátima Landaverte, 26*

*"The programmes are not just workshops... they help us to find our power" César Recinos, 22*

*"Many former participants of SERES are now members of committees and community councils, we note that SERES participants directly impact decision-making processes in their communities, it means that we are generating real changes," Daniel Rivas, 19*



Daniel Rivas

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