

NEED FOR GIRLS GROUNDSWELL PROGRAM GREATER NOW THAN EVER BEFORE

STORIES FROM THE FIELD: ADAPTING A YOUTH MENTORSHIP PROGRAM DURING COVID-19



Canadian SMO “Canada SOS” was selected as one of nine Fund for Innovation and Transformation (FIT) recipients to test an innovative approach to improving educational performance and retention among rural Mayan youth, especially girls, in Guatemala, using student-driven “learning circles” supported by e-learning technologies. The goal is to facilitate youth mentorship to increase rates of secondary school participation and achievement, especially among Mayan girls.

The program was launched at the beginning of March 2020 with a multi-day Kickoff Planning & Training Retreat. But within days of the Program Officers returning to their own communities to launch the Call for Applications for Youth Mentors, the pandemic was declared.

“The impacts of the social distancing measures were significant for our program, as they were for many peoples’ lives,” said James Arron, Executive Director of Students Offering Support. “No longer could students meet together in their classrooms for our interactive, large group ‘Learning Circle’ mentorship sessions; one of travel restrictions; the international shipment of tablets to be used in the program was severely delayed; no longer could we host large community events to support dialogue with parents and other local stakeholders.”



Example of SOS Tablet being used.



Community launch event in Ojo de Agua, beginning of March 2020.

Unanimously local stakeholders expressed they wanted Canada SOS to try to find alternative ways to proceed rather than delaying the program altogether. They expressed deep concern for what would be the impact on youth if school closures continued.

As a result, the program curriculums were adapted to allow individual study, “one on one” and small group formats instead of large group sessions. The organization had to purchase and deploy personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and program participants, and ensure they had the required training to use the equipment. They even proceeded in collecting their baseline data through “one on one” meetings with 157 survey respondents, all while respecting social distancing requirements.

Yet, as this was all undertaken, it became ever more apparent the need for the program was greater now than ever before - especially for girls and women. As shown by the [research of UNESCO](#), girls face disproportionate risks and impacts as a result of school closures and

health pandemics, which can lead to long-term inequities. Fueled by a desire to support the youth of their communities, the local Program Officers and their Community Steering Committees worked incredibly hard and together, they’ve been able to navigate this transition.

As of today, there 45 girls and 30 boys, ages 13-20, who were selected by their local steering committees to be the youth mentors driving the program. In the coming weeks, they will be undertaking their training as mentors, will be receiving tablets that come preloaded with educational resources and will begin meeting the younger students within their local neighborhoods.

“While the pandemic has been a challenging time for many people, in Guatemala, Canada, and around the world, those who were already the most vulnerable face the greatest potential effects,” concludes Arron. “With this in mind, we are proud to be able to continue the Guate Groundswell initiative in its new form and would be pleased to share our experience with any organizations working to adapt their programs similarly.”