Strengthening Youth Integrity: a few lessons from experience

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November the 1st, 2008.
13th International Anti-Corruption Conference.
Youth Integrity: Ethical Infrastructure for a Sustainable Future.

This short paper aims at highlighting a few lessons from the experience of a Colombian youth group in strengthening youth integrity since 2003. The purpose is to provide some elements that could be useful to foster youth integrity initiatives in other countries and at the international level. This youth group was created after the Youth Forum that was held in parallel to the 11th International Anti-Corruption Conference in South Korea in 2003, and is based on the conviction that corruption has a strong impact in the daily lives of youth but also that young people have the responsibility to help building the democratic and transparent system they want to live in. Since then, the main goals of this group of young people has been strengthening youth integrity and promoting youth participation to prevent corruption. They have faced obstacles such as high corruption levels and hesitations about what could youth achieve in this field, however so far they have reached around 1,000 young activist now committed to use youth integrity as a mean to overcome the most serious problems of the country.

1. Context for promoting Youth Integrity in Colombia: high corruption levels in the country and reactions from society

As the most of Latin Americans countries, Colombia's democracy is strongly affected by corruption. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index 2008 ranked Colombia 70 among 180 with a score of 3,8. Besides perception, the Anti-corruption Office of the Executive branch estimates that Colombia loses between USD 1,2 and 1,5 billion on corruption, resources that could be spent in providing basic education for more than 2,7 million Colombian children. Furthermore, a recent report[1] shows that 72 % of Colombians accept there is corruption in the country. However, only about 3% of the people surveyed consider the fight against corruption as a priority to be addressed. The situation for young people is alarming: 80% of youth in Latin America consider they should mistrust everybody and even if 58% prefers democracy to another type of government, 42% don't care about the type of regime or would approve an authoritarian regime under specific circumstances[2].

Even if there is not much data available regarding this topic in Colombia, we could establish some trends based on Ocasa's experience. For Colombian young people corruption is a major problem and in most of the cases, they are willing to take actions against it within their communities. However sometimes corruption is seen as a

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[1] Carlos J. MURCIA, "La Corrupción no cede", *El Espectador*, 12 September 2008, in http://www.elespectador.com.co/impreso/politica/articuloimpreso-corrupcion-no-cede

[2] "Estudio de la Cepal revela que los jóvenes latinoamericanos se sienten discriminados", *El Tiempo*, September 21, 2008, in http://www.eltiempo.com/mundo/latinoamerica/home/estudio-de-la-cepal-revela-que-los-jovenes-latinoamericanos-se-sienten-discrimados_4504867-1 Article regarding the rapport of the youth situation in Latin America developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Iberoamerican Organization for Youth.

practical solution for day-to-day problems and in some cases corrupted behaviors are seen as more useful in practice than actions based on integrity and honesty. Besides, youth active participation on fighting corruption is deterred by the feelings that their actions have no results or fear to retaliation especially in high violence rates zones.

2. OCASA's approach to strengthening youth integrity

In this context a group of youth decided to come into action and created an organization called "Ocasa"[3] in July 2003 with the conviction that youth are not as indifferent as some people could find. They are social actors who can take care of public affairs and be agents of change. Ocasa's mission is to create innovating spaces of participation involving Colombian young people in the construction of a transparent democracy. Graphic 1 shows the type of approach followed by Ocasa in strengthening youth integrity and promoting youth active participation:

Graphic 1: Type of Approach
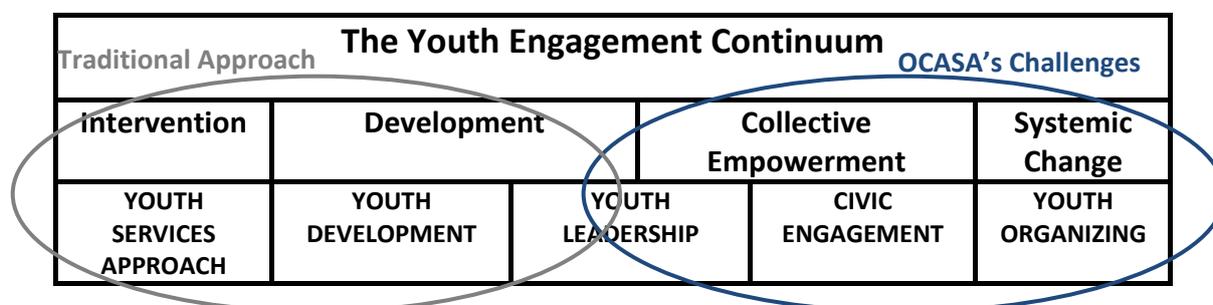
Source: Based on Pittman, K., Martin, S., Williams, A. (2007, July). *Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change.* Washington, D.C.: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc, p.9.

Traditional approaches usually perceived youth as a vulnerable population. Public policies design and implement activities to provide services in order to change their vulnerability, sometimes aiming at avoiding violent behaviors as young people are seen in some cases as a source of potential danger for society. While the provision of basic services by the State is highly necessary[4], Ocasa's engagement is to go beyond those approaches, demolish the myths about youth, discover new means through which youth are able to participate in the public sphere, and to channel that participation into concrete activities to reinforce transparency, integrity and democracy. This approach allows Ocasa to move progressively from traditional interventions based on services provision to systematic change activities.

To achieve the progressive involvement of youth, Ocasa follows three strategic lines: i) Awareness raising about the role of young Colombians in their democracy, ii)

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[3] The name "Ocasa" comes from an ancestral indigenous word that means "Truth". Truth as opposed to the "dishonesty" we reject. We are a non partisan and independent non profit organization composed by young people with a strong social conscience, coming from different provinces of the country and with different academic and job backgrounds. For more information see www.ocasa.avanza.org.co

[4] 23 % of colombian youth live under poverty contidions and 11.2% in extreme poverty (Sistema Nacional de indicadores de juventud - SIJU).

Strengthening of democratic values, and iii) Promoting citizen participation through concrete tools. These strategic lines are implemented as shown in graphic 2.

Graphic 2: Strategic lines and type of Projects
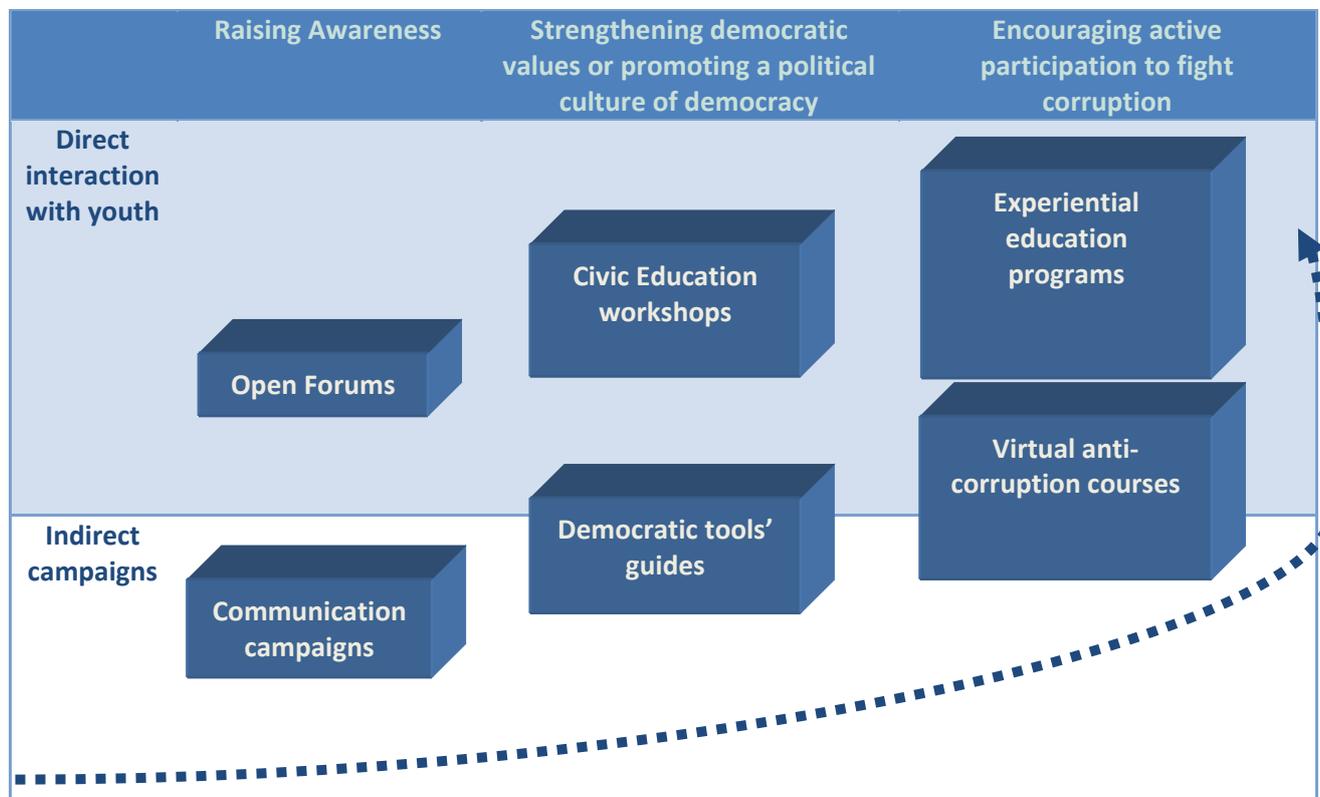
The first step on our experience has been to raise awareness which starts usually by promoting individual responsibility concerning daily ethical dilemmas. Within this framework, a key element to call youth attention has been to go beyond teaching normative behaviors and therefore to integrate specific and real cases of ethical dilemmas that these young people are facing. The biggest challenge for awareness raising has been to understand and endorse the idea that youth contribution can be more than individual behavior and it includes the possibility of collective action. In doing so, it has been essential to count with an open minded approach that could understand the current trends on youth participation and engagement (i.e. new sports and cultural expressions). Indeed, one of the main strategies of our organization has been linked to the use of new technologies to which youth are particularly sensible. Virtual courses where young people can discuss about corruption problems in their regions as well as about the tools they have to fight it, have been held since 2005.

On the other hand, the most common reference to youth is that they are the leaders of the future. Ocasa seeks to position youth as key actors of the present time. That's why Ocasa understands that strengthening democratic values is just one element of our job. Ocasa's experience shows that there is a need to foster attitudes that do not tolerate corruption, and also that we need to encourage young citizens to actively demand accountability from their governments and institutions. Therefore, one of the

most important issues is to build capacity to resist and fight corruption and providing concrete tools for action.

Some examples of the capacity building projects and tools provided by Ocasa to its young activists in most of Colombia's provinces are:

- Open forums (Youth and The Fight against Corruption -Bogotá-, Media and The Fight against Corruption –Bogotá-, Environment and The Fight against Corruption, Social accountability experiences in Colombia –Bogotá-)
- Communication campaigns (Electing representatives based on their political programs –Bogotá-, "Vital Vote" –national-, Electing local representatives 2007 – Bogotá-)
- Democratic tools guides (Social accountability guides -national-)
- Civic education workshops (Elections 2007: an opportunity to understand and act in politics –Montelíbano, Córdoba)
- Virtual anti-corruption courses (Taking care of public goods: democratic tools for youth -national-, Taking care of the environment: democratic tools for youth -national-)
- Experiential education programs ("Transparent institutions: a proposal to youth" –Cundinamarca-; "New citizens, Transparent Institutions" –Arauca-)

3. Need of a partnership model for youth integrity

Ocasa's experience and the lessons learned from the field show that a partnership model is one of the key building blocks of a global Youth Integrity Promotion Program.

Graphic 3: Building partnerships for implementing strategic lines for youth integrity
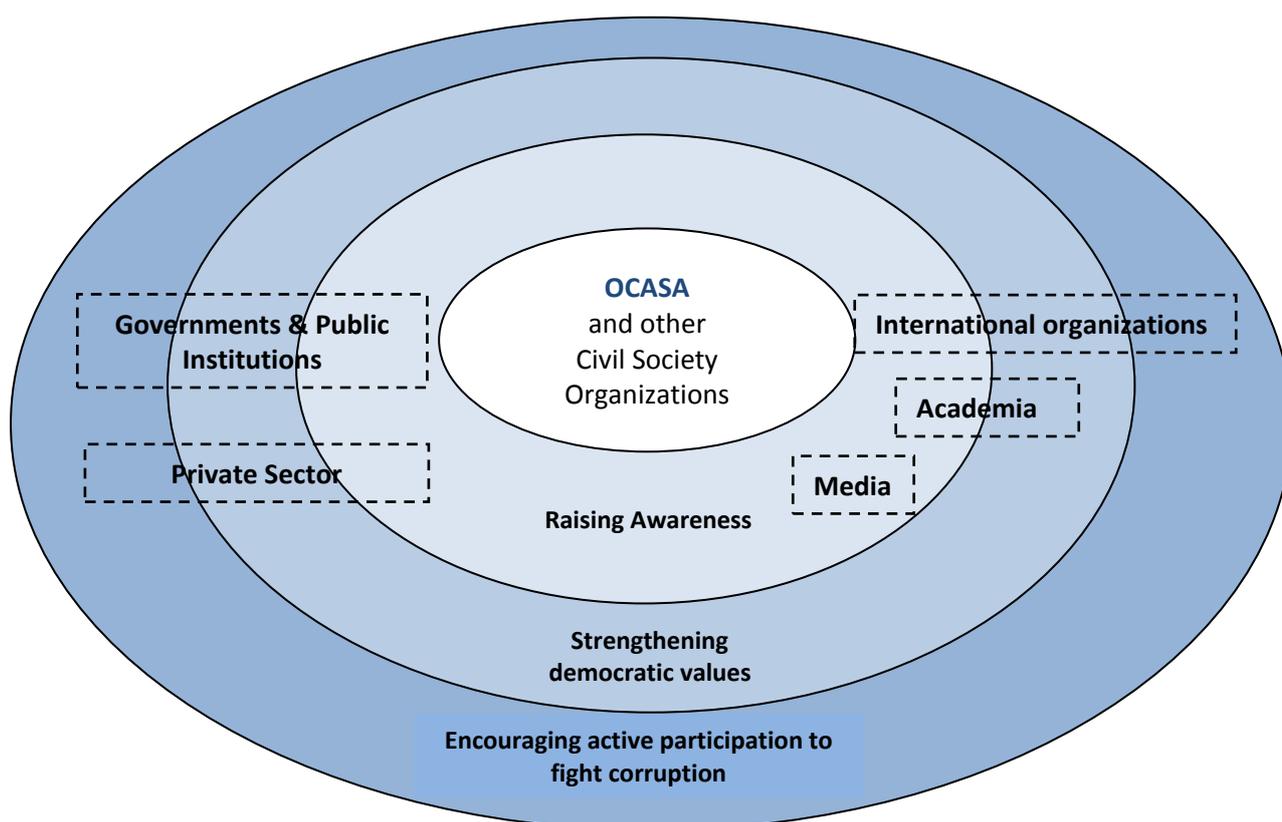
Partnerships should include other social organizations, international organizations and cooperation agencies, governments, universities and the private sector (see Graphic 3).

At the center of the partnerships model we locate **civil society organization's coalitions**. Partnerships with other civic associations have been one of the most important elements of success in OCASA's strategy. In our experience, it is very important to develop pair to pair partnerships in order to give projects a wider scope, as well as to share experiences and lessons learned. These coalitions can be also useful for inviting other organizations to include youth integrity on their programs and strategies, to help them associate their actions with youth as beneficiaries, and to encourage youth participation in their projects.

For instance, the Colombian TI Chapter (Transparencia por Colombia) was from the beginning a key partner. Their support in terms of sharing expertise and lessons learned, introducing Ocasa to other organizations and cooperation agencies and also basic logistic support was crucial to start our project. Also, our alliance with Avanza, an NGO specialized on IT, allows us to design and implement one of our strategic projects: the virtual courses. At the national level, we should also highlight our participation at the NGO for Transparency network (*ONG por la Transparencia*). As members of the Technical Committee of this network, OCASA has contributed to the development and methodological design of NGO accountability standards and its implementation for more than 50 member organizations in the country.

On the other hand, Ocasa has seek to establish partnerships with similar civil society organizations at the international level. Among others, Ocasa had approached *Probidad* Network in Nicaragua; *Acción Ciudadana* in Guatemala and the Venezuela's chapter of Transparency International. Besides, the Executive Director of Ocasa is part of Ashoka's global network of entrepreneurs and the organization is a member of the Youth Network against Corruption and the Young Leaders Integrity Alliance (YNAC and YLIA). In this regard, it is relevant to mention that OCASA participated in the last International Anti-Corruption Conference (12th IACC) and contributed to draft the "Guatemala Declaration on Young People's Engagement" endorse by the IACC participants which we have tried to implement at national level. Youth participation was also encouraged in the last General Assembly of the Organization of American States –OAS- held in Colombia this year.

Regarding other actors, as shown in Graphic 3 we consider that their roles in promoting youth integrity could be defined based on the type of project that will be promote. Indeed, Media and Universities could help to reach a wider audience of youth through mass communication or open events, as well as to identify other experiences and leaders that could partner with Ocasa. But **Media** could play a most significant role organizing campaigns to <u>raise awareness</u>. Our partnerships with media are still under construction because reaching national level media is not an easy task. But they've been key for instance in our electoral campaigns initiatives for instance by helping distributing 25.000 bulletins regarding local elections through a local newspaper. Concerning **Universities**, which could also participate in communication campaigns, they can be key players on <u>strengthening democratic values</u>. Establishing

formal partnerships with Universities is some difficult for small organizations but OCASA has had the opportunity to count on the Academia (public schools and universities) in particular for the organization of students' seminars, conferences and forums. Nevertheless, we consider they could contribute even more by i) incorporating integrity discussions in their curricula, ii) reinforcing democratic procedures in their institutions, iii) developing indicators that could measure the impact of integrity education, iv) carrying out research and surveys concerning for example youth perceptions on corruption and democracy such as the Youth Integrity Index developed by Transparency International South Korea.

On the other hand, **governments, international organizations and private sector** could especially promote youth active participation by including youth issues and participation within the framework of their programs or providing funding and technical assistance. Ocasa is now recognized by **state institutions** responsible for preventing corruption and has maintained direct communication with them (*National Planning Department, General Comptroller Office, Anti-corruption Presidential Programme*). We consider that much more should be done by these institutions to increase youth participation in institutionalized participatory committees (such as regional planning councils) and public debates (inviting youth to give their opinion not just about the youth public policy implementation but about health, education and other sectors). They could also encourage youth political expressions by promoting new cultural activities (concerts, theatre, etc.). However it is not always easy to work with public sector institutions. One of the most important challenges is the lack of a consistent state policy on youth participation that includes wider approaches beyond service provision and could provide concrete tools to support youth activism (such as forums, technical and financial support). The difficulties of operating in regions where the presence of the state is weak, as well as periodic changes in the staff and heads of state entities are also challenging.

Ocasa has also worked with and counted on the support of important i**nternational organizations and cooperation agencies**: The Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the National Endowment for Democracy, USAID, and the British Council, among others. Their financial and technical support has reinforced our organization sustainability. Nonetheless, we are sure that they can do more to integrate youth integrity considerations into their cooperation priorities and to the country development strategies, as the "Guatemala Declaration on Young People's Engagement" states. Certainly, maintaining a permanent meeting and discussion space for youth integrity at the IACC series would strongly contribute to position the topic between international organizations and cooperation agencies.

Finally, we believe that **private sector** has a great potential for contributing to youth integrity. Recently, OCASA has establish an agreement with OXY de Colombia, one of the most important foreign oil companies in the country, that has decided to support one of our experimental education projects within the framework of an already established corporate social responsibility program. The objective of the agreement is to raise awareness among youth population in OXY's operation areas and to provide

them with the necessary tools to monitor public investments done through the royalties coming from oil exploitation. Private sector can support and promote communication campaigns, democratic debates, participation tools and youth projects. But the most important is to anchor such strategies in the private sector long term vision. It would be then crucial to integrate the youth as one of their stakeholders and to promote discussions with youth populations about their activities and social impact as part of the corporate social responsibility strategies.

4. A few conclusions: Lessons learned & Challenges to face

Ocasa's experience shows that sustainable and successful youth integrity programs require the following efforts, among other elements:

- To move from traditional approaches to youth, towards engagements that involve collective actions.
- To demolish the myths about youth by opening further spaces for youth participation and actions in their fields of interest.
- To use experiential education programs like real cases of ethical dilemmas that these young people are facing, as well as new technologies such as internet based tools.
- To take a position of youth as key actors of the present time and not only as future leaders.
- To continue building capacity in youth by making them aware of corruption and providing concrete tools so they can carry out specific actions.
- To establish a wide range of partnerships to increase possibilities of success, taking into account the advantages and limitations of each partnership that is established.

However, difficulties and challenges still remain and there is a need to broaden the discussion on youth integrity and to share them with other anti-corruption and youth activist to jointly identify possible solutions or means to face them. The most important barriers we have encountered are on:

- Measuring impact. In addition to the number of workshops that are held or the number of beneficiaries of our projects, it is necessary to assess what happens with youth once the programmes are finished: for example if and how their perception about public affairs and corruption has changed or which activities they are carrying out. Due to lack of resources, this sort of assessments and follow up has not been done.
- Building a national youth network. A national network could help multiplying our impact and extend it to other regions and youth with a long term vision. However, setting up this network requires further discussion to identify means of operation and added value for participants. It also requires resources and, in our experience, coalitions with local media.
- Gathering information on youth perceptions regarding democracy and/or corruption. Information available for Colombia is quite poor. The implementation of tools such as the Youth Integrity Index would be very useful to asses at a larger

scale youth perception and attitudes towards corruption and democracy, and use this data as the basis for more comprehensive strategies.

- Setting a clear division of task when building coalitions and partnerships. It's is especially difficult to follow up on different actors' responsibilities. Efforts on effective communication need to be made.
- Incorporating Media as partners. Until now, OCASA's projects aren't being covered enough by the press. But besides this, further discussions need to be made in our country –and probably in other countries and regions- about the role of media in preventing corruption and promoting integrity, and the incentives for this aim.
- Working in conflict zones. We need identify how to ensure security for OCASA's team and the youth participating in our activities in conflict zones or insecure areas.
- Teaching youth how to formulate feasible projects. As many young people trained by Ocasa do not have previous experience in formulating projects to solve situations they want to address, it's difficult for them to design feasible projects. For Ocasa's team it has been also difficult to understand which kind of projects could be proposed by youth and find sponsorship.

Finally, through this paper/presentation Ocasa wishes to encourage young people in other countries and regions to move forward on youth integrity initiatives and programs. Ocasa is willing to share its experiences and methodologies and will be pleased to contribute with our lessons learned to build integrity in other regions and at a global level.