

# CARIBBEAN **YOUTH** EMPOWERMENT

A **YOUTH:WORK** PROJECT



## **CAREER GUIDANCE CASE STUDY**

Preparing Youth for the 21st Century Workplace



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# CAREER GUIDANCE CASE STUDY:

## PREPARING YOUTH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY WORKPLACE

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# CAREER GUIDANCE CASE STUDY: PREPARING YOUTH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY WORKPLACE

## Introduction: Career Guidance and the School-to-Work Transition

Much has been written about the difficulties young people face when transitioning from their role as a student in school to an adult in the workplace. Traditional educational systems often do not provide the knowledge and skills demanded by the modern labor market, leaving youth with a gap in terms of both hard and soft skills that reduces their opportunities for employment. Additional vocational and life skills training, in many cases provided by NGOs and other civil society organizations, is necessary to close this gap and allow youth to succeed.

One aspect of this difficult transition that is not often addressed, however, is the need for career guidance to assist youth in making informed educational and professional choices about their future, and facilitate their successful transition to the world of work. Career guidance services provide youth with the tools they need to understand their skills and interests, form a career plan, and get started on the steps to achieve this plan. Young people who benefit from these services will find themselves better equipped to undertake a structured and strategic job search, and ultimately pursue a meaningful, rewarding career.

Career guidance is particularly important for youth at risk who often do not receive this support through their schools, families, or personal networks and lack the information to make career choices. They may also struggle to overcome additional barriers, including incomplete educational qualifications, psychosocial issues, and poverty. Although these youth may feel forced to rush directly into looking for work to start earning money, benefitting from career guidance will in fact help them to be more successful in finding and holding onto a job that will allow them to support themselves and their families.

This document highlights one approach to meeting the youth employment challenge through the provision of an integrated package of career guidance trainings and services. It reviews a project implemented by the Centre for Adolescent Renewal and Education (C.A.R.E.), a community-based non-profit organization in Saint Lucia that has been serving vulnerable youth since its inception in 1993. As a partner in the *Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program* (CYEP), an initiative of the International Youth Foundation and the US Agency for International Development, C.A.R.E. established a Career Guidance Center, the first of its kind in the country. This past year, it provided life skills training, career assessment and advising, career plan development, guidance counseling, and career coaching services to more than 400 youth in 2013. This represents an innovative approach in Saint Lucia, as there was no governmental or non-governmental entity that provided career guidance services at a “one-stop shop” for youth at risk. While career guidance services were also provided in five rural communities, this case study focuses on the Career Guidance Center in the city of Castries. Best practices from this experience provide important learnings for any organization seeking to offer career guidance services to youth at risk in the Caribbean and beyond.

## Saint Lucia Program Overview

### Background

As described above, the transition from school to work is an extremely challenging period of life for many young people. In Saint Lucia, the public school system does not adequately equip youth with the skills needed in today's labor market, causing many of them to become disengaged and to drop out of school. But at the same time, many employers insist on a completed secondary education, including several Caribbean Secondary Education Certificates (CSECs) when hiring employees. Only 23 percent of students in Saint Lucia graduate from secondary school with five CSECs—a necessary requirement for attending college.

As a result of this situation, many youth fail to find decent jobs or pursue meaningful careers. Unemployment among young people aged 16-30 in Saint Lucia exceeds 34 percent according to the 2010 census<sup>1</sup>. This contributes to high rates of drug use, violence, and crime—particularly affecting young men, who are less likely to complete their education than young women. The social exclusion and disengagement caused by unemployment and low educational attainment is a major issue that must be addressed to ensure youth in Saint Lucia have the opportunity to reach their full potential. One way to do so is by allowing youth to explore their interests and strengths, develop a meaningful plan for the future, and equip them with the tools to pursue this.

The C.A.R.E. Career Guidance Training Program is one training stream within the broader Caribbean Youth Empowerment Program (CYEP) led by the International Youth Foundation. Launched in 2008 with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), CYEP equips vulnerable youth with the technical, vocational, entrepreneurship, career guidance, and life skills needed to develop sustainable livelihoods. It targets 2,200 youth, ages 17 to 25, with particular attention given to young males and school dropouts, who are unemployed, under-employed, lack the skills to participate in an increasingly service-oriented economy, or are unable to successfully launch and sustain small business enterprises. In addition, CYEP has sought to strengthen alliances with public and private stakeholders to improve opportunities for disadvantaged youth.

### Target Population

The C.A.R.E. Career Guidance program was designed to target youth from low-income households,<sup>2</sup> aged 17 to 25, who were unemployed or under-employed, and unsure about their next steps or options available for pursuing their education and/or securing employment. A minimum educational requirement of functional literacy and completion of primary school (Grade 6) was instituted to ensure youth would be able to participate in training activities. Youth from low socio-economic backgrounds with varying levels of educational attainment were included, but with priority given to those who had not completed secondary school or had four or fewer CSEC passes. In addition, priority was given to single parents and young people with moderate physical disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Lucia 2010 Population & Housing Census.

<sup>2</sup> Low-income was defined as an annual household income of EC\$10,000 (US\$3,846.15) or less, based on the 2010 Saint Lucia Social Safety Net Assessment.

An objective of reaching 60 percent male beneficiaries was set due to males' tendency to be under-represented in training programs, less successful than women academically, less likely to look for academic/training opportunities, and more likely to disengage from society and be in conflict with the law.

The program served six areas, including some of the poorest communities as identified by the Country Poverty Assessment Report of 2005: urban Castries and the rural communities of Dennery, Micoud, Marigot, Soufriere, and Vieux Fort.

## Partners

The project received support from a number of organizations that, along with C.A.R.E., established a consortium to carry out CYEP activities in Saint Lucia. In particular, RISE (Saint Lucia) Inc. provided training and office space for the Career Guidance Center and assisted with beneficiary recruitment and advocacy efforts. Two other consortium partners, the National Skills Development Centre (NSDC) and the James Belgrave Micro Enterprise Development Fund Inc. (BELfund) assisted with the identification of prospective participants. C.A.R.E. also worked with the Rotary Club of Saint Lucia and the Saint Lucia Planned Parenthood Association, which, in conjunction with NSDC, operate a mobile youth advising unit through which rural youth were recruited. Finally, the Ministry of Education's Guidance Counseling division was a crucial partner, providing guidance counselors to lead activities in the rural communities, as well as access to school facilities in those communities.

## Career Guidance Program Model

### Recruitment

An active and widespread publicity campaign was essential for recruiting interested youth. C.A.R.E. staff published newspaper articles about the Career Guidance Program, issued a press release to print and radio media, gave radio interviews, worked with several local supermarket chains to disseminate flyers in shopping bags, distributed leaflets through Town Council offices, and used the services of "town criers" who drive through town with a loudspeaker to spread the word. C.A.R.E. also networked with community activists and leaders, churches, and youth organizations. It also held community outreach meetings that allowed C.A.R.E. staff to inform youth about the program, its objectives, and how it could assist them in making informed educational and professional decisions.

Outreach, application, and selection of beneficiaries took place prior to the start of each training cycle. This allowed time for youth to learn about the program and apply, for applications to be reviewed by a selection committee, and for selected youth to be informed of their acceptance. A literacy test (in both Math and English) was included for those who had not completed secondary education to ensure that minimum standards for participation in the program were met.

### Training and Services

The training cycle provided under the Career Guidance Program covered a total of 145 hours over a six-week period. This included 49 hours of life skills training using the International Youth Foundation's *Passport to Success*® (PTS) life skills curriculum, which encompasses a variety of topics from personal competencies to healthy behaviors to employability skills, and was adapted to the Caribbean context. Particular emphasis was given to lessons on managing conflict, healthy lifestyles, and CV writing, as these were seen to be specific needs of the beneficiary population.

One day was devoted to career testing to match participants' personality, skills, and interests with various career tracks. Several career tests were used, most importantly The Career Key, a validated tool in use for over 15 years that has been adapted for the Caribbean and tested in schools in Jamaica. Through this tool, individuals assess their personality type—realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising or conventional—and identify what might be suitable career options, as well as the educational path needed to achieve these careers. Following completion of the test, the young person meets individually with a counselor or career coach to review and analyze the results. The Career Key, as well as several other career testing tools used during the program, received positive feedback from participants.

Upon completion of the PTS curriculum, youth participated in several workshops during the final two weeks of the program. These included a day for career plan development, a two-day educational development workshop, and a three-day job readiness workshop. It was originally planned that youth would be identified to pursue either an “education track” or a “job readiness track” and would only take part in one of the two corresponding workshops, but experience showed that all youth had needs in both areas, and it was best to pursue the two tracks in combination. Participants were also able to take part in one-on-one coaching sessions, in which they conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of their skills and received individualized support with the job search process, CV preparation, and mock interviews. A graduation ceremony allowed youth to be recognized for completing the program and celebrated for their achievements.

Throughout the six-week training period, participants also had access to computers to assist with their job search activities, such as developing their CVs, browsing online job listings, and applying to jobs. They also had access to a phone in order to make calls related to their job search. C.A.R.E. staff also coached youth on basic computer literacy skills, such as using email and Microsoft Word, as these skills were often found to be lacking.

The C.A.R.E. team was made up of six staff members in Castries: a Project Coordinator, an Administrative Assistant, a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, a Career Coach, and two full-time Counselors. The Career Coach led the overall program planning and design of the three-day job readiness workshop (including facilitating the workshop at the Center). The two Counselors led one-on-one counseling sessions, analyzed results of the career assessments with youth, and facilitated the career plan workshop. One of the Counselors also led the two-day educational development workshop, while the other was specialized in providing psychosocial support to youth (*see below*). These staff members were assisted by a cadre of eight PTS Life Skills Instructors who led all of the PTS sessions, and eight Career Guidance Counselors from the Ministry of Education, who led the entire program in the rural communities outside of Castries.

### Youth-friendly Space for Services

An important approach for employability programs of any kind is creating a “youth-friendly” environment that will allow youth people to feel comfortable, safe and welcomed to participate in the program and explore their abilities to their fullest potential. This approach is demonstrated by the Career Guidance Center established by C.A.R.E. in Castries to house program activities and services. The Center was located in a shopping mall, which was chosen because it was easily accessible by public transportation and was already frequented by youth. Also located in the same mall were the offices of partner organization RISE (Saint Lucia) Inc., which provided a Resource Room where trainings could be held, as well as access to their computer lab for participants' use. The provision of trainings and workshops, computers and phones for job searching, individualized career guidance and coaching, and psychosocial support all in the same location exemplifies the idea of a youth-friendly space, as well as a “one-stop shop” for youth seeking career guidance.



## Psychosocial Support

The psychosocial support provided to participants proved to be an absolutely critical component of the Career Guidance Program's success. Youth in Saint Lucia, particularly vulnerable and marginalized youth, face a number of major psychosocial needs, including anger management, coping with past abuse, low self-esteem, and dealing with depression and family conflict. These problems, especially when combined with incomplete formal education and a general lack of personal and professional skills, can create a major barrier for vulnerable youth to seek out, obtain and keep a job, or return to formal schooling to pursue their education.

One of the counselors on staff who had a background in therapy provided psychosocial support to participating youth. It was initially very difficult to convince participants to attend therapy sessions due to mistrust, poor communication skills, and the stigma attached to seeking help. Furthermore, many youth had family responsibilities or were working at the same time they attended training, and were not able to stay past training hours to attend therapy sessions. However, life skills facilitators referred youth needing therapy to the counselor, and every participant was encouraged to attend at least one individual session to reduce the stigma attached to therapy. The counselor established excellent rapport with participants, so word-of-mouth about the quality of the service also ultimately helped to increase acceptability.

## Program Outcomes

Over the course of the year-long project, a total of five training cycles were implemented, with each cycle lasting six weeks. A total of 436 youth enrolled in the program, and 372 of them accessed the full array of services. There was a 15 percent dropout rate, mostly due to the financial burden of attending training and/or family responsibilities (caring for elderly relatives, younger siblings, or their own children). Of the 436 youth enrolled, 122 were male and 314 female. The difficulty in recruiting male participants despite an explicit goal of preferential recruitment and targeted outreach efforts highlight the challenges training programs face in reaching young men in Saint Lucia.

A follow-up study of program participants, conducted by an external evaluator, found that a large number of the program's graduates were better equipped to make decisions about their career and future, and to take the steps necessary to achieve their goals. In particular, the study found that 74 percent of unemployed youth have actively engaged in a job search, taking the first step to finding meaningful and rewarding work. Moreover, 54 percent of youth reported that after completing the program, they have a clear idea of the schools and resources for continuing their education. This illustrates the program's success in instilling in beneficiaries the importance of education and a desire to continue their education during a relatively short period of time.

Another important measure for evaluating the success of the Career Guidance program is the level of participants' satisfaction—particularly given many young people's lack of understanding of the importance of a career guidance program at its outset. Ultimately, 96 percent of youth reported they were satisfied with the career guidance services provided. This was in no small part due to the passion and commitment of the C.A.R.E. staff, who truly went beyond the call of duty to engage with participants and ensure they benefitted from the training to the maximum extent possible. Fifty percent of youth felt that the most useful aspect of the project were the life skills lessons, followed by the educational plan, developing a career goal and plan, and the skills gained to conduct a job search.

The data and positive feedback of the project beneficiaries underscore the importance of career guidance services in ensuring that youth seeking jobs have a clear idea of what they need to do, and are equipped with the tools (such as CV writing and interview skills) necessary to succeed. Whether they choose to continue their

education or jump directly into a job search, trainees who have created a career plan and benefitted from individualized coaching and support are better placed to enter the labor market and find meaningful work.

Based on this successful experience, the International Youth Foundation is in discussions with the several Ministries of Education to incorporate career guidance into the country's public school curriculum in the future.

## Best Practices and Recommendations

C.A.R.E.'s experience in providing career guidance services and support to youth at risk highlights a number of best practices for this type of program. A committed staff, a holistic and integrated training package, and a youth-friendly space for accessing services all ensured the program's success. Most importantly, the feedback from the beneficiaries demonstrates the importance of the services offered and the value of investing in them.

Specific recommendations for high-quality career guidance programs include:

**Provide a youth-friendly environment for career guidance activities:** An accessible, safe and comfortable space for youth to take part in trainings and one-on-one coaching sessions is a crucial component for successful career guidance programs. Program staff must create an environment where young people feel free to express themselves in order to encourage participation and attendance. This space should also include computers and phones that youth can use to research information on educational and career opportunities or carry out a job search. To make full use of this resource, beneficiaries may need coaching or support in basic computer literacy skills such as using the internet, sending emails, and putting together a CV in Microsoft Word.

**Use creative and targeted recruitment methods:** A variety of approaches to raise awareness about the program should be used, including flyers and posters, media advertisements, outreach sessions with youth, and engagement with local leaders. Incorporation of "testimonials" from previous program beneficiaries into recruitment materials will allow youth to hear directly from their peers about the importance of the program and can serve as an extremely effective way to encourage others to apply.

**Set clear expectations:** Youth suffering from extreme financial hardship whose top priority is finding a job to support themselves and their family, or youth with low educational levels, may not fully appreciate the importance of career guidance. They must be persuaded that career guidance will allow them to better succeed in searching for and gaining employment, particularly by identifying the right training opportunities that will provide them with the necessary technical skills to be competitive in the job market. As a result, setting clear expectations from the outset about what the program will cover and what services will be provided, as well as expectations for participant attendance and conduct, will contribute to a more successful experience for the participants.

**Provide life skills adapted to specific program needs:** As with any employability program, a firm base of life skills is required to complement career guidance, educational development, and job readiness activities. A strong curriculum such as *Passport to Success*® can be tailored in a number of ways to meet the needs of a specific training program. Some lessons may need special emphasis and a longer allotted time period to meet the particular needs of the target group. Finally, external experts should be invited to deliver training on specialized topics such as CV development to showcase "real world" knowledge and experience.

**Focus on both education and career development:** Many youth aspire to continue their education in order to achieve career goals, but due to financial hardship may need to find work as quickly as possible to support themselves and their families, as well as to save money for pursuing an education or taking CSECs.



Hence, career guidance programs should incorporate both educational development and job readiness into the training package for all beneficiaries.

**Integrate psychosocial support into training:** Providing psychosocial support through group and individual therapy sessions is of the utmost importance to allow youth at risk to participate fully in the training. Although it may be challenging to overcome participants' initial resistance to therapy and manage constraints that prevent them from meeting with counselors, it is a crucial program component. Integrating a group therapy approach in addition to one-on-one sessions allows participants to process issues such as emotion/anger management in a collective setting. Many youth believe they are alone in having experienced certain situations such as abuse, when in fact some of their peers have experienced the same thing. Working through these issues in a safe group setting can help them to feel less alone.

**Establish a multi-disciplinary team:** Having a team of skilled and motivated program staff with complementary knowledge and experiences, including career coaching, educational development, psychosocial support, guidance counseling, and program management, is crucial to providing an integrated package of services to youth. Another key factor is to seek out staff who have a passion for working with vulnerable youth and are willing to go the extra mile to assist them. Whenever possible, staff members who are able to share their own life experiences and struggles attaining education and employment can provide inspiration to participants.

**Build alliances across sectors:** Organizations seeking to integrate career guidance services must build alliances with many stakeholders. The public sector, particularly ministries or government agencies related to education or workforce development, should be involved in program implementation. This may include provision of training spaces and staff by the government. Program planners must work from the start to obtain the buy-in of government leadership. They set the tone and provide an environment conducive to the work of counselors and staff directly involved in the program, as well as engage the private sector, another key stakeholder. Additionally, organizations must build linkages with other education and training entities to create opportunities for youth who have completed the career guidance program, so that they can take the necessary next steps to implement the career plans they have created.

## A Call to Action for Career Guidance

Almost everywhere today, youth are facing enormous difficulties in making career decisions and navigating the changing labor market. The experience of C.A.R.E. in Saint Lucia shows that providing career guidance services to youth in a friendly, accessible space is a model that deserves investment. An integrated package—including a comprehensive life skills curriculum oriented toward employability, career planning and coaching, and educational development and job readiness training—can allow vulnerable and marginalized youth to take concrete steps on the path to completing their education and finding meaningful work. With the support and participation of all stakeholders, career guidance services can be made available to the fullest extent possible to allow youth to set and achieve their career goals and successfully navigate the world of work.

As youth unemployment and underemployment continue to grow around the world, support for providing standalone career guidance services as well as integrating them into other youth training programs will only become more important. Stakeholders from all sectors have a role to play in this effort and also stand to reap the benefits of this investment in youth development.

In the private sector, businesses and employers can engage with career guidance programs to provide insight into the labor market and the qualifications prospective employees need. As a result of this engagement, they will benefit from receiving better prepared youth job applicants who have the ability to grow into highly productive employees.

Youth-serving institutions should seek to promote career guidance services, whether as a part of existing employability programming or as a standalone offering. Other civil society stakeholders who do not directly provide services for youth can advocate for the importance of career guidance at the local and national levels.

Most importantly, the public sector must take on a clear leadership role in promoting career guidance services, supporting the establishment of youth-friendly career guidance centers, as well as ensuring that these services are integrated into existing employability programs. Wherever possible, the integration of career guidance into the formal education system is a positive step, and government has an important role to play in making this possible. The public sector stands to benefit from successful career guidance programs as well. When students have a clear idea of their career goals and how their education will help them to achieve these goals, they will be more motivated to stay in school and graduate. Youth who benefit from increased opportunities to pursue their educational and career aspirations will ultimately grow to be engaged citizens within their communities and their country.

## ANNEX: SUCCESS STORIES



**Eddy Louis**, a 19-year-old from the community of Boguis, Babonneau, outside of Castries, quickly became a favorite of program staff for his friendly disposition and eagerness to help others. However, his smile and outgoing personality hid a darker truth. A week into the program, C.A.R.E. staff discovered that he was homeless, sleeping in cars or an abandoned banana shed.

Despite the significant challenges he faced, Eddy always showed up to training early, with a smile on his face and a willingness to help out in any way that was needed. He provided computer support to other participants who needed to prepare applications, search for jobs, or set up an email address.

With support from the C.A.R.E. staff members and completion of training, Eddy was able to gain the tools and resources necessary to make a positive change in his life. He reported that being a part of the Career Guidance Program taught him more about himself and what he wants to do as a career. One day, Eddy hopes to become a police officer, so he needs five CSEC passes to get into the training school. In April, he began training at Sandals Halcyon, a local resort. Once he becomes an employee, he plans to begin saving money right away to pay for the exams he needs to take.



**Bradley Poleon** is a gentle, soft-spoken 24-year-old from the community of Faux-A-Chaux, Castries. The highlight of the Career Guidance Program for Bradley was receiving his certificate at the graduation ceremony. In his words, “I never got a certificate for anything!” This is because Bradley was only able to attend school for one term in his entire life. He went to school for the first time at age 13 and was placed in grade 6, where the work proved too difficult and he left at the end of that term. Despite his lack of formal education, Bradley’s natural intelligence and drive are evident, as he scored 70 percent on the program’s mathematics and literacy exam!

Bradley said that his biggest challenge had always been getting a job without an education, and so he did whatever odd jobs he could find just to survive. He joined the C.A.R.E. program with the hopes of finding better work. By the second day of class, he realized that the program would not offer vocational skills or job placement and decided to drop out. The Career Guidance Center staff called to explain the importance of career guidance and encouraged him to remain in the program. He did so, and with great results. In April 2013, Bradley joined the staff of the Sandals Grande Saint Lucia Beach Spa and Resort as a Steward.

Now that he has a stable job and has taken the first step in developing his career, Bradley has a long-term vision for himself—he wishes to one day return to school and pass the CSEC exams.



**Petroline Joseph** applied to the Career Guidance Project because her friend was also applying and told her that it would be good for her. At the time, Petroline was baking with her father, making a small income to help support herself and her two sons. She was struggling financially and emotionally at home, having constant verbal confrontations with her mother. She came to the Career Guidance Project with no real plan for herself, but knowing that she needed to do something different, and that she needed to do it sooner rather than later.

At the completion of her six-week career guidance training, she joined the Sandals Hospitality Training Program. She successfully completed training in the housekeeping department, and is now equipped to work in any hotel environment.

Petroline feels that the Career Guidance Program has helped her to grow in many ways. She says that the individual coaching sessions had the biggest impact on her. She is now able to present herself confidently in a job search, something she was afraid to do before. The PTS life skills training helped her to manage her personal relationships. While her mother's attitude has not changed, Petroline feels that the PTS training taught her to manage her emotions effectively, so she is able to interact in a manner that often reduces conflict.

Petroline continues to bake, and is applying to jobs at hotels across Saint Lucia.