

# what do YOU buy in a day?

COFFEE groceries RENT clothes  
LUNCH haircut bus fare  
new shoes medicine SODA

**\$2/DAY**  
**challenge**

## The Power of Creativity

### Overview of the Issue

The insecurity and hardship of living on \$2 a day takes a toll on more than just the physical human body. The inability to meet basic needs such as adequate food, water, shelter and healthcare, coupled with the lack of opportunity to improve one's condition through education or decent jobs diminishes the resiliency and creativity of the human mind. Such instability and uncertainty are often to blame for the low self-esteem and anger, which lead to risky choices and destructive behavior, such as crime, drug use, and gang violence.

While many conventional approaches to development succeed in creating opportunity for previously excluded individuals, they often fail to address the impact of extreme poverty on thought patterns and inter-personal relationships. Recently, however, a wave of community organizations, both in the developed and developing worlds, are starting to realize the power of creative expression in breaking the cycle of poverty and violence and are intervening through music, dance, theater and street arts, such as graffiti, break dancing, *capoeira* and spoken word poetry, even film.

### Creative Alternatives

There is something inherently attractive about these creative arts to marginalized youth. They provide space for positive movement and interaction, as well as introduce new languages for youth to express themselves and hardships they face on a day-to-day basis.

- MADRE in Bogotá, Colombia, facilitates arts education programs of acting, theater, writing and painting, which help youth displaced by ongoing violence and at risk of child trafficking to channel the trauma of their experience and envision a more peaceful world. A youth video project, "Esta guerra no es nuestra y la estamos perdiendo" (This War is Not Ours and We are Losing It), encourages youth to document their real life experiences of war and displacement. MADRE also supports a Drumbeats of Peace campaign, which empowers displaced women to make express their demands of justice to the national legislature and other local authorities.<sup>1</sup>
- Ivan Nogales' Teatro Trono ("Theatre of the Oppressed") in La Paz, Bolivia has customized theatre program for children in detention and rehabilitation centers. Teatro Trono reinforces positive expectations for children from the streets and gives them an outlet to let go of fear. The troupe writes collaboratively about their everyday experiences and hold regular performances to spark conversation about community issues, including globalization, social justice and water privatization.
- In Burundi, young Hutu and Tutsi ex-combatants jointly developed a program that reaches out to school children to talk about the personal costs of violence. The Youth Project of Search for Common Ground and a local youth association developed cartoon books that showed how elites recruit youths to engage in ethnically motivated violence. It is used by the Ministry of Education and is on national television.
- The Balkan Children and Youth Foundation works to improve the lives of young people throughout the region. Projects have focused on bringing young people together across ethnic divisions to participate in drama, music, and films.

Such initiatives open a space of stability, safety and community for youth to build self-confidence, self-awareness and a critical analysis about values in life and society, work, sexuality, race, class, religion and respect for self and others. For many, this may be the first opportunity they have had to recognize themselves as subjects of their own existence and as protagonists of their own lives. Where public schools and families maybe fail to provide much needed encouragement and positive reinforcement, community arts initiatives offer youth struggling with poverty an opportunity to be productive and caring, while building life and often vocational skills.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the respect and admiration we all seek in others, when received, translates into all other aspects of our lives. That's a pretty strong argument between creating safe spaces for self-expression and success in life. If people could become smarter, happier and ultimately more successful in life simply by being creative and interacting with art and others, why would they not take advantage of it?

### **An Unseen Opportunity**

The reality is that for nearly 1 billion people living on \$2 a day, such opportunities are not readily available, and many hurdles exist. The poorest community members often do not have the start-up capital or the credibility to initiate such a creative arts center. When the situation is dire, and families are scrambling to put food on the table, people don't have time to believe in the power of arts to make change anyway. Therefore, one of the most significant hurdles can be giving art a chance and finding someone to invest in those with creative dreams.

This type of approach is rarely considered when combating poverty. Yet, it can be a powerful tool in helping those living in extreme poverty to continue their struggle for a better life. In fact, many people continue to be creative (write, draw, act, etc.) despite extreme conditions, suggesting the vitality of creativity and self-expression to a person's self-development. Once discovered, artistic lessons and skills will be passed on to others, whether friends or family, which in turn creates a cycle of opportunity out of the cycle of poverty.

### **Solutions**

1. Support increased development assistance for cultural diplomacy and cultural development projects for youth.
2. Support the participation and integration of youth in shaping appropriate policies and programs for themselves.

For more information on working with AID on arts and social change, contact Arya at [arya@aidemocracy.org](mailto:arya@aidemocracy.org). Find out how AID can help you integrate arts and culture into your awareness-raising events or your campus campaigns.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.madre.org/programs/Colombia.html>