REDESS-JÓVENES, Peru

Building a Coalition to Support Youth

By Maria Raguz

During a sexual and reproductive health meeting held in Mexico in 1989, a dream began amongst a group of Peruvian professionals of creating a network to promote sexual and reproductive health among youth in their country. The professionals recognized that in Peru, organizations were not openly communicating their efforts, successes and failures, and, least of all, their products. We felt all should be working toward a common goal – the sexual and reproductive health of youth. The dream lingered until a 1993 national workshop renewed our passion, and the six dreamers began to meet informally. We worked to build personal relationships with key people in the field, inviting them to meetings where common problems were discussed. By the time REDESS Jóvenes—National Network of Education, Sexual Health and Development for Youth—formally elected a Directive Board and legally registered as an NGO a year later, the network had enlarged to 33 members.

REDESS-Jóvenes’ mission is "to promote policies, strategies and actions in institutions and among professionals and, mainly, youth in order to foster better levels of access, quality and equity in the education, health (emphasizing sexual health) and development of youth." Rather than working directly with youth, REDESS works for youth, through professionals and institutions that work directly with youth. This network currently consists of 19 professionals with vast experience in public, private and cooperating sectors volunteering part-time at REDESS. They represent a variety of high quality human resources: academics, policymakers, rights advocates, researchers, health care workers, social scientists, program directors, and members from various NGOs. The diversity of backgrounds of REDESS’ staff gives us richness and originality, and positions us as a unique networking organization.

REDESS focuses on fostering networking and cooperation among professionals and organizations in the field, including policymakers; national program directors; curriculum designers; program evaluators; information, education and communication (IE&C) developers; social scientists; researchers; medical staff; educators; NGO directors; youth organizations; women’s and human rights activists; and members of the media. REDESS stresses what we call "tripartite" cooperation, sensitizing the private, public and cooperating institutions to the need for integrated solutions and intersectoral action. We then develop proposals in which all three sectors have a role in implementing youth sexual health programs that: are needs-based and involve youth in design, monitoring and evaluation, as well as have high impact and broad coverage. As a coalition, we are now able to respond to much larger demands and have a stronger impact than we would have as individual organizations. We save time and energy, enhance creativeness, and have greater credibility from policy makers and funding agencies than we would as one isolated small NGO.

REDESS has accomplished a number of activities since its inception, including holding courses, workshops and youth fairs, conducting research, advocacy work, and dissemination of IE&C products such as posters and informational packets. In 1995, REDESS received funds to conduct
an evaluation of the quality of actions in youth sexual and reproductive health through two years of workshops with the participation of public and private sectors and cooperating institutions. This process involved 180 representatives from 70 private and public organizations, resulting in the design of a five-year collaborative workplan. We are now seeking funding for components of the workplan which include youth services, training, IE&C, research and advocacy.

Our NGO is regularly invited to international meetings where links are strengthened, and REDESS has been designated as a model for Latin America and is one of the selected members of UNFPA Tripartite Table Cairo Plus Five. We have contributed to policymaking and program design at national and regional levels, and our work has been mentioned in international publications.

What lessons have we learned?

- Building trust within the private sector, among private and public sectors, and with cooperating institutions required time, transparency and accountability. Yet building trust was key to enabling sharing of products, strategies, successes and failures.
- Strategic planning and seeking legal advice enabled the network to adapt to change, act proactively and develop a fluid and democratic structure. Strategic planning sessions help us re-focus our needs, strengths and opportunities.
- Reducing or enlarging the group, making new alliances, and changing direction allows us to be responsive without forgetting our mission, whatever the situation may be.

Now, our goal is to live up to our own and to others’ standards and to gain stronger support and sustainability, for we have envisioned, together, a very large dream. We urge others to dream like us.

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