

Poverty and long-standing internal conflict threaten the well-being of Colombian children and youth.

Photo: Edwin Huffman/World Bank

Open your eyes

Empowering Colombian street youth through informal education

by Robyn Jeffrey

Friendly and inquisitive. That's Chelsea Jalloh's overriding impression of the street youth she met in Medellín, Colombia. "There were lots of questions about the country I come from. My family. The weather. Did I like the same kind of music as them?"

A recent MEd graduate from the University of Manitoba, Ms. Jalloh was

part of a unique partnership between researchers from the U of M and the University of Antioquia (UDEA) in Medellín. Between June 2010 and July 2011, they teamed up with the municipal government of Medellín to create *Abre los Ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*), a Spanish-language educational resource for the city's estimated 10,000 street youth.

Despite their openness and curiosity, street youth in Medellín face a number of challenges: inadequate shelter; hunger; drug abuse, and little or no contact with family. Many are displaced due to internal conflict in Colombia. Others find themselves on the street for economic reasons.

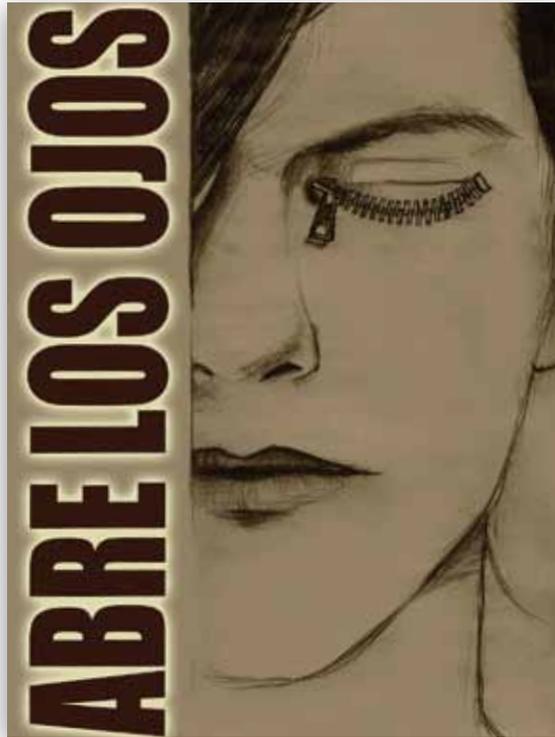
"Some of these youths have to go out and earn money, so that they can survive,"

says Ms. Jalloh. They often work in the sex trade as a result, thereby putting them at higher risk of HIV infection," notes Carlos Rojas, director of research at UDEA's faculty of public health.

The creation of *Abre los Ojos* was designed to empower street youth by educating them about HIV/AIDS and other health risks – a first step in reducing the social equity gap between these youth and mainstream society. It was modeled after a similar sexual health resource created by and for street youth in Winnipeg, explains John Wylie, associate professor with the U of M's faculty of medicine. That Canadian resource was created out of the U of M, and evaluated by Ms. Jalloh as part of her MEd thesis, making her an ideal candidate to carry out field work in Medellín.

Support from the Canada-Latin American and the Caribbean Research Exchange Grants (LACREG) program enabled Ms. Jalloh to travel to Medellín. Managed by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada on behalf of the International Development Research Centre, LACREG strengthens partnerships and networks among Canadian, Latin American and Caribbean academic researchers. It provides up to \$15,000 to support small collaborative research activities that help create, disseminate and apply knowledge related to IDRC's priorities. Funding for *Abre los Ojos* totalled \$8,000.

But how exactly did researchers ensure this resource would appeal to street youth in Medellín? Under the supervision of faculty from the U of M and UDEA, Ms. Jalloh and Queeling Gómez, a Colombian outreach worker, first conducted focus group interviews with street youths aged 14 to 24 to find out what health-related information they needed, and how they wanted it presented. To help clarify their preferences, youths were shown similar educational resources and asked what they thought.



On the pamphlet's cover, Colombian artist Oliver Suaza incites street youth to open their eyes.

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"They could say, I like this. I don't like that. This has too much text. I don't understand what these pictures mean," explains Ms. Jalloh. "I think that was really valuable, instead of us just deciding in their absence what they would like or what they should know." Medellín's Secretariat of Social

Welfare facilitated contact with the street youths, and most focus groups took place in municipal youth-serving institutions, including group homes and a drop-in centre.

Feedback from those interviews shaped both the content and design of the resulting educational resource, *Abre los Ojos*. It features street-inspired artwork by a Colombian artist and information about four topics: HIV/AIDS, *sacol* (a shoe glue sniffed by many street youth), the risks of sharing skin-piercing instruments, and good and bad things about life on the street, as recounted by the youths themselves. In February 2011, municipal social welfare staff distributed 700 copies of the pamphlet directly to street youth.

As Ms. Jalloh notes, *Abre los Ojos* is unique because street youth collaborated on every aspect of its development. The pamphlet is "physical proof" that their voice and perspective matters. She

consequently hopes the resource will enable them to make informed decisions that will impact their lives for the better.

Subsequent evaluations of *Abre los Ojos* have been very positive. Street youths said they liked the use of art, and seeing their own words in print alongside accessible, factual information. In this regard, their responses were similar to those of street youths in Winnipeg, suggesting that elements of this type of educational resource, and the collaborative process of creating it, could be transferred to other countries. Indeed, Dr. Wylie says that steps are now under way to explore electronic means of delivering educational materials to street youths in Canada, Colombia and Kenya.

As for Ms. Jalloh, she is presently working as a research associate under Dr. Wylie, and exploring the possibility of undertaking a joint PhD program between UDEA and the U of M. It's just another way she hopes to continue bridging education and public health, and making a difference in peoples' lives. 