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Millennials and Human Rights: The Next Greatest Generation

January 29, 2014
10:45 am – 12:15 pm

Session Organizer:

- Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director, International Development Exchange (IDEX)

Facilitator:

- Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director, International Development Exchange (IDEX)

Panelists:

- Marta Liseth Coloc Chicop, Youth Coordinator and Accountant, Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez (AFEDES)
- Jee Kim, Program Officer, Ford Foundation
- Lizbeth Mateo, Activist and Organizer, National Immigrant Youth Alliance

Sponsors:

- International Development Exchange (IDEX)
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Rajasvini Bhansali, Executive Director of International Development Exchange (IDEX), began by introducing the panelists as individuals at the forefront of some of the most important social movements for social, cultural, economic, political and ecological rights. These leaders are engaged in activism, research, media, and philanthropy. Some of the key objectives of this session were:

- Share case studies and lessons from these youth organizers and leaders in building cross-sector alliances for advancing human rights.
- Reflect on some of the obstacles and challenges.
- Learn about innovative strategies that grassroots youth groups are developing and employing.
- Increase capacity as funders and donors to better engage with youth groups – funders tend to act upon youth rather than act alongside youth.

After bringing participants into mutual conversation, Vini introduced each speaker:

The first panelist, Martha Liseth Coloc Chipoc, is a 27-year-old indigenous Mayan Kaqchikel youth leader, currently studying Accounting at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala and working with IDEX partner AFEDES in Sacatepéquez. Katherine Zavala was her interpreter.

The second panelist, Lizbeth Mateo, is a 29-year-old undocumented first year law student at University of Santa Clara. She is the funder of the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, a network of undocumented youth, and she is part of the DREAM Activists of California.

Lastly, Jee Kim works on civic and political participation in the United States. As a program officer at the Ford Foundation, his grantmaking focuses on increasing the participation of poor and marginalized groups by strengthening organizations and networks that build and mobilize the grassroots base for social change. Prior to this, he helped launch 18MillionRising, a national civic engagement project.

The panel began with Martha Liseth, who shared her experience and personal journey by explaining that she began her activism and leadership first by accompanying her mother to meeting at the Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez, AFEDES. There, she learned about women's rights, which was eye-opening in a society where discrimination against women and youth is prevalent. At the time, she obtained an educational loan from AFEDES, which allowed her to begin college. She began working at AFEDES as part of the Credits and Savings Program, and soon after, she was promoted to General Accountant. She began bringing young people into AFEDES' work after seeing a lack of youth participation within the organization. Her approach to mobilizing this youth was to engage young community members through activities and conversations about their human rights, the need for a shift away from machismo, and the need to advocate for themselves. As a result, today she is seen as an example in her community.

Next, Lizbeth began by sharing her story. She is originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, and is of Zapotec descent. She migrated to the U.S. with her family at age 14 with the purpose of going to school to become a lawyer. As an undocumented student, she realized the challenges to go to college were greater for immigrant students. After six years of working and studying, and because the state of California allowed in-state tuition for undocumented students, she became the first member of her family to graduate college. While in college, Lizbeth initiated a support group with other undocumented students and began educating peers, professors and the public about immigration and immigrants' rights. Over time this group became an advocacy group for the rights of undocumented students. In 2007, she came out about her status as an undocumented student. Through social media, the network grew countrywide, and connected other undocumented youth from around the country to find support and to organize around immigrant human rights. In 2011 they began the National Immigrant Youth Alliance, NIYA.

Lastly, Jee explained that his journey as a youth leader stemmed from his experience as an immigrant growing up in poverty in the U.S. At a young age he understood how unevenly opportunities are distributed in this country. He grew up in Philadelphia and went to an Ivy League school, where he began his political activism. In terms of philanthropy, he had worked on different issues, including juvenile justice and education reform.

Continuing with the session, Vini asked panelists to share specific organizing strategies or collaborative work that support leadership of young people.

Lizbeth explained that the National Youth Alliance (NIYA) is a network of young volunteers with three core values: educating, empowering, and escalating. The Network believes that those who are most affected need to be at the forefront of the movement making the decisions that will affect their lives. In 2009, this group of young leaders began "Education and Deportation" campaigns to stop deportation of undocumented students, also known as "Dreamers." With this purpose, they began working with

legislators, churches, the media and the community. As a result of this public approach, parents often reached out to them asking for support to prevent the deportation of their children. To showcase the scope of their work, Lizbeth shared a short video about an immigrant father whose deportation was stopped before, but was again facing the possibility of being deported. In addition, some other strategies they use to accomplish their work include working with legislators, with the media, with the community and even infiltrating detention centers to find those unjustly detained. Last year 3 members of NIYA self-deported to bring back 6 other Dreamers who had been sent back to Mexico. They spent 7 days in detention upon their return.

Martha Liseth also shared her experience with the issues undocumented immigrants face in the U.S. Her father was an undocumented immigrant and was deported twice in seven years. She explained that the effort her father made to stay in this country and continue working to allow his children to go to school, also gave her the inspiration and strength to do more for her community and to create opportunities for young people like her. Going back to the initial question, Martha Liseth's shared some of the strategies AFEDES utilizes to accomplish their work. Some of these strategies include organizing family gatherings, where adults and youth come together to learn about their rights and how to become agents of social change. Also, with youth circles they create a space to discuss reproductive rights, racism and discrimination. Moreover, through exchanges, young people get together to talk about their challenges and experience. They also had formed self help groups where young women can share about the issues they confront with gender violence. These are processes through which young people attest that their experiences will not stop them from moving forward.

One of the main strategies of AFEDES is the School for Political Education for Young Women. In this school they talk about the real story of their country, of their indigenous community. In the school, the idea of hosting family gatherings was born. It is in these family gatherings where young women share their stories about their learnings. Fathers, brothers and children are invited to participate in these gatherings to learn about AFEDES' values and about women's rights, and many men are surprised and even feel guilty about the experiences women go through. Another strategy they use is education about sexual and reproductive rights at schools. In Guatemala, with a population of more than 14 million people, 70% are young. This is because women have always been in the role of mothers, a reproductive role, and women have not received the appropriate reproductive education.

As part of the strategies he had used, Jee shared his experience with a campaign he supported 10 years earlier. Working with youth organizers in Los Angeles, Jee had the opportunity to support work on improving school curriculum. Youth in these schools had to confront the reality that even after graduation, their possibility of getting into college was very low because of the curriculum their school used. Because of this, students and community began organizing. Eight years after they began organizing, these students forged an alliance with organized labor groups, teachers, community leaders, and others, causing the new curriculum to be passed. This curriculum is the "8 through G" curriculum. This raised awareness about young people's capability to lead. This translated to moving from a rights framework to a movement framework, moving from merely including young people to actually having them lead these campaigns to create social change.

Next, the speakers shared the challenges they have faced as part of their work.

Currently, Jee said, the role of young people in social movements in the US has to do with the debt they face. This debt creates limits to what youth can do. Another challenge is organizing funders to do this

kind of work. One of the challenges he has confronted is to convince funders about the power of youth in social change.

Discussing challenges and opportunities NIYA has faced, Lizbeth mentioned the lack of funding. Not having resources available largely limits the type of work and the extent of work they can do. Another challenge they face is in forming coalitions. Because the immigrant rights movement has existed for some time, there are some organizations that have been in place for a long time. At the beginning, youth organizers followed in the footsteps of these older organizations, but at some point youth leaders developed their own ideas and strategies, causing some tension between them and the established organizations. However, there are some incredibly diverse groups who have begun participating in this movement, and have become important allies. Another big challenge is being scattered around the country, making it difficult to strategize. However, current communication technology helps bridge this gap. Although the lack of money is a challenge, it hasn't stopped their work and it has actually given them an opportunity to engage more deeply with the community.

A member of the audience asked Lizbeth: Are you positioned to respond to legislation that is about to happen [DREAM Act]?

Lizbeth explained their position: if immigration reform cannot happen as a whole, they want to create legislation changes by steps (i.e. expanding visas).

Vini asked Martha Liseth to share structural challenges and community level challenges that her work faces.

From a youth framework, Liseth explained that they don't count on any state programs to address the demands of young people in Guatemala. There isn't any support for young people to participate in public and political spaces and to fight for their rights. Also, there is more and more criminalization of young people who are fighting for their rights.

Questions and Answers:

Q: Lizbeth was asked to explain the Dream 9 Campaign further.

A: Lizbeth explained that asylum was not the main goal of this campaign. After deportation, many young dreamers were contacting NIYA to request guidance on how to return to the U.S., so youth leaders decided to seek out legal pathways for young Dreamers and their parents to return to this country. When this group of 9 immigrants returned to the U.S. they requested humanitarian parole, and didn't receive it. Consequently they had to apply for asylum. Because of the violent fight against crime in Mexico, asylum could be a better tactic to allow people to return.

Q: Martha Liseth and Lizbeth were asked about the particular challenges young women have faced while organizing?

A: Martha Liseth replied that barriers and challenges young women face in Guatemala include the degree of awareness that is needed among adults to accept young women as decision makers. Adults tend not to listen to young people, and much less to young women. There is also a large need of bringing more youth into these processes, men and women alike. Changing the prevailing mindset against women is difficult. Adults see young people as a problem, but in reality young people are the present and the future.

Similarly, Lizbeth states that coming from a traditional family, the clash of values, dreams and actions is always present between her and her parents. In terms of gender, when she began organizing, her parents didn't allow it because she is a girl, and there are many more risks for women than men. Currently, women outnumber men at the National Immigrant Youth Alliance. Nevertheless, the reality is that women are not being recognized by their work. Women don't ask for recognition when they should. When decisions are being made, men are portrayed as leaders even though women have been the ones doing much of the work. Moreover, without a formal immigration status women lack the access to even more spaces and opportunities than men do.

Q: A question for Lizbeth was: From your perspective, as women engage, how is it helpful for funders to come in and help deal with these dynamics that you mentioned?

A: Lizbeth: we don't have a lot of experience with funders. Our funding comes mostly from the community. Our movement is really led by women and LGTBW folks. Lack of funding has been a real challenge.

Q: Thinking about the cross border lessons of this work, have you tried to connect with youth movements in Mexico, or maybe actually sharing your experience in less organized movements?

A: We have connected with "Los Otros Dreamers" said Lizbeth. They work with returning immigrants, helping them adapt to their home country again. We were invited to speak at a panel last year, but we couldn't go because we are undocumented. It is a challenge to connect with these groups who share the same goals.

Martha Liseth: We haven't been able to do much. However, as a women's group, we have been able to get involved in other spaces like Agroecology, and helping create access to markets.

Q: For youth that have been in jail, do you have special work towards them? Do you have special social funds to help children who have experienced jail?

A: Martha Liseth: We don't have a program to work with young people who have been imprisoned. However we connect with the National Political Alliance of the Women's Sector and through them we connect with people who are jailed and advocate for them. They are placed in prison because authorities presume them to be gang members, but in reality they are only publically advocating for their rights.