

**PALACKY UNIVERSITY IN OLOMOUC  
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**Analysis of Youth Leadership and Empowerment  
towards Sustainable Community Livelihoods:  
A case study in Guatemala and El Salvador**

**(Master's Thesis)**

**Author: Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera**

**Supervisor: Radovan Dluhý-Smith**

**Olomouc, Czech Republic 2016**

## **Declaration of Authorship**

I do solemnly declare that I have written the presented master's thesis *Analysis of Youth Leadership and Empowerment towards Sustainable Community Livelihoods: A case study in Guatemala and El Salvador* independently and that I have correctly acknowledged all bibliographical references and quotations.

In Olomouc, May 12, 2016

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## DISSERTATION ASSIGNMENT

(PROJECT, ART WORK, ART PERFORMANCE)

First name and surname: **Elizabeth PELLECCER RIVERA**  
Study program: **N1301 Geography**  
Identification number: **R141060**  
Specialization: **International Development Studies**  
Topic name: **Analysis of Youth Leadership and Empowerment towards Sustainable Community Livelihoods: A Case Study in Guatemala and El Salvador.**  
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### Rules for elaboration:

The objective of this study is to analyze the dynamics of youth as agents of change, building sustainable initiatives in their communities with the support of "SERES Association", in Guatemala and El Salvador. "SERES Association" mission is to foster the emergence of sustainable communities by engaging, educating and empowering people to become leaders of positive change. Therefore, this will be a case study to give an insight to this process and to analyze development constructed from the grassroots level initiatives, its impacts, challenges and successes. The data will be collected through a desktop review (reports and other literature) and a field visit and interviews or focus groups with the participants.

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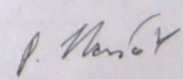
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Tutor for dissertation: **Mgr. Radovan Dluhý-smith**  
Department of International Development Studies

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prof. RNDr. Ivo Frébort, CSc., Ph.D.  
Dean

L.S.

  
doc. RNDr. Pavel Nováček, CSc.  
Head of Department

Olomouc, dated: 30 January 2015

## ABSTRACT

The main objective of this dissertation was to analyze the youth leadership and empowerment programs promoted by SERES Association, and how their participants are building, or not, sustainable community livelihoods. SERES is a non-profit institution working with youth from communities in Guatemala and El Salvador, mainly located in rural and vulnerable areas. They promote Education for Sustainable Development, offering non-formal education trainings where the interested youth can participate. The programs are focused in promoting leadership skills, empowerment and sustainability through different levels of trainings. In this case, the analysis focuses on the first-level of the trainings entitled “Youth leaders for the Pachamama” (or JLP, for the acronym in Spanish).

To make the analysis, a field visit was done on August 2015 to the offices of SERES Association and to four outstanding communities involved. During these visits, four focus groups (which included an activity of photo elicitation) and 14 interviews were conducted with different stakeholders. The aim was to get a better understanding of SERES’ history and way of working, and the motivations, action plans, and expectations of the youth leaders involved. The information gathered was described, including the experience of each of the visited communities, and the enablers, obstacles and challenges were identified. An analysis of the initiative was done in the framework of related themes within the development discourse.

In general, the action plans designed focus on tackling environmental issues responding to the problems the youth groups have prioritized. Some of the action plans address immediate problems, like trash collection campaigns, and others go further aiming to modify the root causes of these problems, like banning the use of plastic bags and non-recyclable bottles, for example. Besides the activities, the youth groups show commitment, will, hope and resilience to overcome the current situation. In fact many of them are involved in local authority’s groups or local organizations, sharing and multiplying their capacities as agents of change. The main focus of the initiative is environmental, which sometimes leaves aside the political, social and economic aspects also comprised in the holistic concept of sustainability. Nevertheless, it builds active citizens and strengths the social capital, at a local and regional level, which is necessary for development.

**KEYWORDS:** Leadership, Empowerment, Youth, Development, Sustainability, Environmental Issues, Central America, Guatemala, El Salvador.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADESCO	Association for Community Development (for the acronym in Spanish, <i>Asociación de Desarrollo Comunal</i> )
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna
COCODE	Community Development Council (for the acronym in Spanish, <i>Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo</i> )
ESD	Education for Sustainable Development
IISD	International Institute for Sustainable Development
IMAP	Meso-American Permaculture Institute
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
JLP	Youth Leaders for the Pachamama (for the acronym in Spanish, <i>Jóvenes Líderes por la Pachamama</i> )
UNE	Salvadorian Ecological Unit (for the acronym in Spanish, <i>Unidad Ecológica Salvadoreña</i> )
UNEP	United Nations Environment Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank



## I. INTRODUCTION

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought two legacies, which are somehow interwoven, that concern this dissertation: the post-development theories and the concept of sustainable development. The hegemony of the western colonial empires in the previous centuries built and spread out worldwide a concept of progress or development. The conventional theories equal development to economic growth, accepting the basic capitalist structure in societies as the best there could ever be. Mainstream economics and modernization theories see development as a uniform, unilinear process, led by the historical rise of the West as role model, where the rest of the world, that lag behind, is trying to attain. This process is claimed to be the natural, inevitable and unchangeable path of progress for the societies and nations; although environmental and social issues are often left aside (Peet & Hartwick, 2009).

On the other side, the non-conventional or critical theories find the modern development paradigm fundamentally inconsistent, morally wrong and dangerous to people and the planet. These theories emphasize more in a well-conceived development rather than only more economic growth. Post-development theories, as one of this non-conventional trend, emerged 1990s as a critique to the fact that the conventional approaches and efforts did not achieved the expected results. Therefore, some theorists, several from Third-World countries, began to highlight the “errors” or deficiencies in the conventional approach and the need to propose alternatives, rethinking development in a different way. Although there is not a single established concept, there are some characteristics that this post-development theorists share in their proposals. For example, they argue that to make a difference, actions should not be grandiosely global but local; that development should be able to happen in peace and harmony at an environmental level, but also at an spiritual level; and that the previous “non-developed” world may not be so bad after all, therefore lessons can be learnt from the traditional wisdom and way of life of the different cultures in the world (Peet & Hartwick, 2009; Rahnema & Bawtree, 1997).

These “non-conventional” theories arose together with “alternative” approaches to development. During the 80s the participatory approach flourished, as an alternative to face the failure of the development industry to reduce or alleviate poverty, social and economic inequity, and environmental degradation. Originally, this approach was conceived as counter-hegemonic and aimed to bring radical social transformation, challenging the *status quo*. It emerged as an attempt to challenge top-down development planning and to empower recipients in the process by providing a space to local knowledge to be assessed and rejecting the assumption that

“experts” know best. Nevertheless, some criticism has been made, with the argument that this approach has lost the original meaning and instead it became a buzzword for the development industry. Because when institutionalized, this approach was professionalized making a difference and hierarchy between the expert and the local knowledge; and used as a tool to maintain the *status quo* and the unequal relationships of power of the neoliberal system, instead of challenging them. For example, by having an expert leading the approach a hierarchy is created between his or her expertise and the local knowledge, or by having to first respond to the mandates and rules of the institution than to the local people and their demands. In addition, this institutionalization translates the power or political issues, into technical problems that can properly fit in the dominant development paradigm (Kothari, 2005; Leal, 2007; Peet & Hartwick 2009).

Some decades earlier, since the decade of 1960s, the concern and activities related to the degradation and misuse of natural resources have risen internationally and the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development entered into the political and environmental worldwide arena. These embrace the economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of progress and functioning of societies. In the following decades, events like the publication of the “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson (1962); the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the establishment of the UN Environment Programme –UNEP- (1972); the controversial publication of the Club of Rome “Limits to Growth” (1972); the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna –CITES- (1975); the World Conservation Strategy released by the International Union for Conservation of Nature –IUCN- (1980), are some of the milestones that have marked the path towards the concept of sustainable development. Respectively, they addressed on different issues concerning the environment: the use of toxic agricultural pesticides and its harmful effects; pollution and acid rain problems; the consequences of exponential population growth; the endangered species list; and poverty, population pressure, social inequality and trading regimes as agents of habitat destruction. All of these topics have led to rethink the conventional way of development, and propose something more holistic (IISD 2009; Nováček 2011).

In 1987, the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development “Our Common Future” –or “Brundtland Report”- comes out defining that “*Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*”. For the first time, the concept of sustainable development is defined, weaving together social, economic, cultural and environmental issues and global solutions, and taking this concept into the international arena. After this, the concept has been a pillar of major events like the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1992), the UN

Millennium Development Goals (2000) or the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002) to mention some. All of them had produced guidelines and had proposed actions that lead the nations worldwide to work toward sustainability. The concept has not been restricted to the ecological or political sector, but has also permeated into other fields like education, architecture and construction, profitable corporations and businesses, trade, agricultural production, etc., that have developed, for example, certifications, regulation standards or innovations more environmentally friendly (IISD, 2009; Nováček, 2011).

Currently, there are many initiatives happening worldwide that can be framed within these two broad concepts and that may have them as target or guideline. This dissertation aims to focus in one specific initiative that is taking place in Central America, specifically in Guatemala and El Salvador. This initiative is being carried out by an Association, named SERES, that implements leadership programs with young people, usually coming from vulnerable communities. In this case, the promotion of leadership goes hand in hand with the promotion of ecological sustainability. Throughout this document, the work and methods of SERES will be explained and analyzed in order to have an in-depth understanding of how these young leaders are building change in their communities.

## **A. Theoretical Framework**

### **1) Development issues in Central America**

Central America region has, slowly, shown social and economic improvement in the recent decades, but there are still many complex challenges to overcome and leave behind, after a long period of political turmoil and civil conflict. When compared to the other Latin American countries the majority of the region presents the lowest values in Human Development Index; Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua are in the bottom of the list, together with Haiti and Bolivia. Even though these countries are within the Medium Human Development category, it is important to highlight that some of the countries in this region also embraces very unequal societies. For example, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Nicaragua present low inequality, but Guatemala and Honduras are among the countries with the most unequal distributions of income in all of Latin America. Since 2000 the inequality situation has almost remained the same, since the Gini coefficient net change was almost zero; contrasting with the rest of Latin America, which started with higher levels of inequality but ended with lower ones (Gindling & Trejos 2014; UNDP 2016; WB 2012; WB 2014).

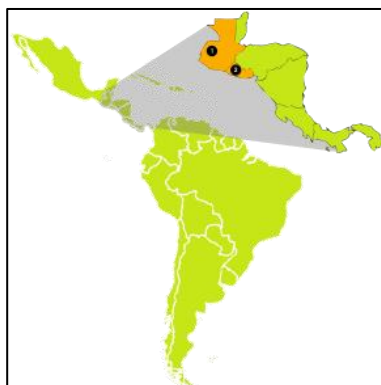
Some of the largest challenges to overcome in the region are the high crime and violence rates; limited jobs, unemployment and low wages, especially among young people; low coverage and

quality of education; high vulnerability to natural disasters –like hurricanes, floods and earthquakes; emigration; and poverty and inequality reduction -since 2000 poverty rates fell only by 9%, compared to a decline of 40% for Latin America- According to the Global Climate Risk Index 2016, three of the seven Central American countries (Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala) are in the top ten of countries most affected by extreme weather events between 1995 and 2014. This climate vulnerability has consequences on food security and life conditions of millions of people. For example, during the last decade more than 15 million people were affected by floods, more than 3 million by extreme droughts and more than 5 million by extreme temperatures (Centroamérica Vulnerable 2015; Kreft et al. 2015; WB 2014).

#### **a. Guatemala and El Salvador**

Guatemala and El Salvador are two of the most densely populated countries in Central America, where currently almost half or more of the population ages 24 or less years (around 11,000,000 people), and according to population growth projections this will only keep increasing. Both countries are located in the Mesoamerican biodiversity hotspot, the third largest in the world; but both are facing environmental degradation. Both countries deal with issues like inequality, poverty and undernourishment, lack of quality education, insecurity and violence, just to mention some. Both are two of the main sources of emigrants that go to the United States of America, due to the lack of opportunities within the countries. And both have recently overcome decades of civil war, which for long time repressed the leadership and voice of the civil society. Both (with the other Central American countries) have some of the lowest literacy rates in the Latin American region; Guatemala had 76% (2011) and El Salvador 85% (2010). All of these are some of the reasons why many organizations, SERES started working in there. SERES focus their work with the youth, as the generation having the potential, the hope, the energy and the will to transform the situation towards a more peaceful, just and sustainable future (CIA 2015; Indexmundi 2014; SERES, 2015b).

**Figure 1.** Guatemala and El Salvador highlighted in the map of Latin America.



Source: SERES Association official website.

## **2) Youth, leadership and development**

More than half of the population in the world is under the age of 30, and many live in poor, violent places, without all the options to develop and exploit their capacities. In 2012, USAID estimated that at least USD300 million are spent every year on youth programs, but the impact of these initiatives has rarely been evaluated. This target group is appealing for development and leadership programs because they represent a powerful source of hope, determination and resilience; when having the will and opportunities to drive lasting, positive change. The programs vary, focusing on vocational training, life skills development, civic engagement, non-formal education, etc. (MercyCorps, 2015)

In the case of SERES, the focus is on building and catalyzing empowerment and leadership skills connected with environmental issues. Leadership refers to an interpersonal process, which attempts to influence other individuals in order to accomplish certain objective or vision. According to some scholars, leadership is one of the driving forces for development and a path through which the skills and capacities of a community can be improved in order to achieve a better use of the resources available. Regarding to community leadership, there are two levels identified: (1) leadership for the community and (2) leadership of the community. The first one refers to the presence of leaders that represent the community and the second refers to the social capital accumulated that works towards a change in the community. Thus, leadership can be a collective and coordinated activity (consciously or unconsciously made), through which the knowledge and culture is being built and strengthened with the aim of achieving certain objectives. The community leaders represent the interests and demands of the community, they organize, express and participate on behalf of the community; since, when they stop representing the community interests, the community stops legitimating their position. Nevertheless, all of these processes need to be complemented with governmental actions and changes (Rojas Andrade, 2013).

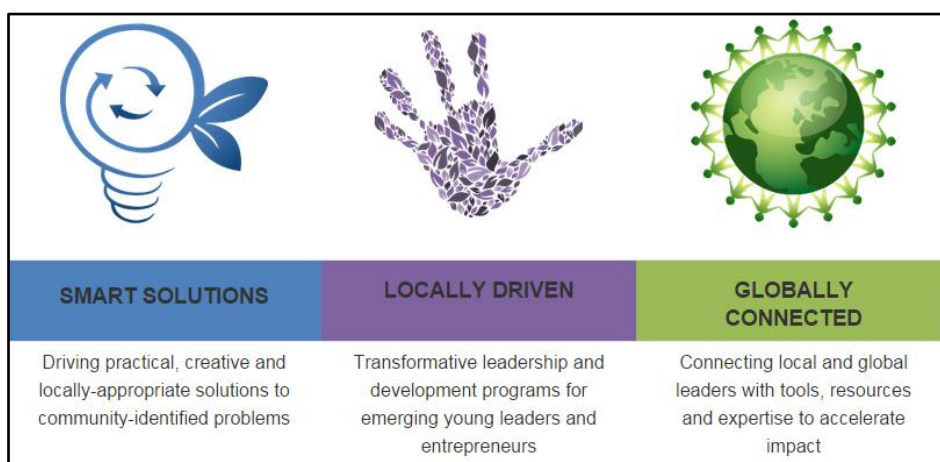
In countries like Guatemala and El Salvador, the recent civil war broke the social capital of many communities and disappeared or moved away most of their leaders, instituting a violent culture instead. Thus, approaches like SERES aims to surpass this burden. Social capital refers to the set of informal norms and/or institutions that promotes trust and cooperation among a group of people; therefore it is related to virtues like honesty, the keeping of commitments, reliable performance of duties, reciprocity, etc. It can vary from the reciprocity between two friends, to a complex and elaborately articulated doctrine like a religion. At the community level, the social capital is a form of social institutions, where the participants (explicitly or implicitly) want a common good or objective, even if it is not completely accomplished (Durston, 1999; Fukuyama, 1999; Urbina Gaitán, 2009).

Empowerment is a concept closely related to the two former ones. It refers to the process when a person assumes to be actors of his or her own life, based on the awareness of their interests and the recognition of their abilities. An empowered person can be an agent of change, acting as responsible citizens elaborating and proposing initiatives to interact and work with other people. In fact, empowerment is closely linked with the concept of participation, thus playing a key role in the citizens, by dignifying the persons, and by giving value and listening their opinions and proposals to build a common future and working as an engine and catalyzing the local development in the communities (Canal Acero et al., 2007; Rojas Andrade, 2013).

### 3) SERES Association

SERES is a for-benefit nonprofit association founded in 2009. SERES aims to facilitate empowering opportunities for young people, in order to engage them as agents of change, community organizers, innovators, problem-solvers and future makers, leading the transition towards a better tomorrow. The idea is to unleash the potential of the young people, by connecting their skills and passions with their most persistent community needs and by enhancing the skills that will permit them to create positive social change in their locations. To achieve this, SERES implements different dynamic trainings that provide sustainability education, skill-building for resilience and transformative leadership. Therefore, SERES role is to be the facilitator that catalyzes community-led projects and actions that aim to build stronger and more sustainable communities. The philosophy sustaining the processes is to empower local leaders, through global collaboration in order to accelerate actions towards a more sustainable future (Figure 2) (SERES, 2015).

**Figure 2.** Graphic representation of SERES Association’s philosophy and working model.



Source: SERES 2015.

As mentioned before, the main tool SERES uses to achieve the objectives are the trainings. With these trainings SERES provides Education for Sustainable Development, approach that, according to the UNESCO definition, “*aims to help people to develop the attitudes, skills, perspectives and knowledge to make informed decisions and act upon them for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future. ESD helps the citizens of the world to learn their way to a more sustainable future*” (UNESCO, 2014). With this focus, SERES has created a series of programs, a system of non-formal education centered on transformative leadership and sustainability. This system consists on various “levels”, where the young leaders can participate according to their interests in order to be improving, specializing and engaging more with the organization and their community. The implementation of these trainings is taking place in hundreds of communities, mainly marginalized, across Guatemala and El Salvador (SERES 2015).

Below a brief description of the programs and methods used by SERES. This information will be complemented in the Results section with information obtained from direct conversations with the personnel and youth involved with the organization.

#### **a. Leadership programmes and methods**

As SERES works with non-formal education, it offers a series of workshops and trainings that the youngster can attend. These trainings are organized in “levels”, meaning that after attending or fulfilling one, the participant can specialize more and start with the next one. The first training, or “level”, is named Youth Leaders for the Pachamama<sup>1</sup> (also called JLP, for its acronym in Spanish – *Jóvenes líderes por la Pachamama*), which comprises the main theory and information that SERES wants to diffuse, and is the one in which this dissertation is focused. All SERES members have to participate in one of these as the initial step to become part of SERES. Its duration is three days and it functions as the introduction of the youngsters to the work SERES is undertaking. During these days, the facilitators introduce the environmental issues to the participants, for them to identify and prioritize the issues that they are more concern about and to propose what they can do in order to improve the current situation. These, goes together with the promotion of critical thinking, collaboration and shared leadership, and project planning. The aim is not only to raise awareness and create proposals about possible solutions, but also to provide the empowerment and motivation, and the operational tools to be able to implement the proposals (SERES, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Pachamama is a word coming from the indigenous cultures in South America, which is usually translated and interpreted as Mother Earth.

After having attended the JLP, the youngsters that show more leadership, commitment and interest throughout time, can participate in the following levels. Along these levels, they can choose between two paths: (1) to become a sustainable livelihoods leader and practitioner or (2) to become an accredited facilitator. The first one, focused on sustainability participates in workshops or trainings about topics like permaculture, food sovereignty, waste reduction and management, water protection, etc.; always with the commitment of replicate the knowledge and skills gained in their community. The second one aims to become a facilitator of the SERES trainings, specially the one of Young Leaders for the Pachamama, which is the one more often implemented. The skills built in this series relates with social change, appreciative leadership, strategic questioning, community organization, social justice, emotional intelligence, etc. (SERES, 2015).

When fulfilling these levels, they can become Local Ambassadors and/or participate in a Fellowship. The Fellowship has a duration of 9 months, and includes for example, higher education, English, organizational management, civil rights training (SERES, 2015). The Local Ambassador is relatively new; one of the benefits is that they support the geographical expansion and the monitoring.

SERES roots and methods were enriched from a movement in Australia that began in 2009, named Youth leading the World. The methods used in programmes like this and in the JLP are based in a technic called **Strategic Questioning**, which was developed in the late 1980's by Fran Peavey. This technic is known for being effective in helping people that is "trapped or stuck" to move, facilitating them to look at a situation, think creatively about it and develop strategies, priorities and achievable action plans. One of the basic assumptions is that the solution to any situation comes from the person, place or society that has the problem. Thus, by using it the facilitator does not bring answers, but his/her job is only to help the solutions arise, recognise them and support them. The technic has four steps, which are the ones leading the process of the three-day JLP:

- 1) Focus questions – to identify and understand the situation.
- 2) Visioning questions – to identify dreams, ideals and values. To envisage how things could be.
- 3) Change questions – regarding how to get from the present situation towards a more ideal one.
- 4) Action questions – more specific questions that aim to answer what to do, and how and when do it. These are the ones where the action plan starts (Lennox & Lennox 2001).



### b. Organizational structure

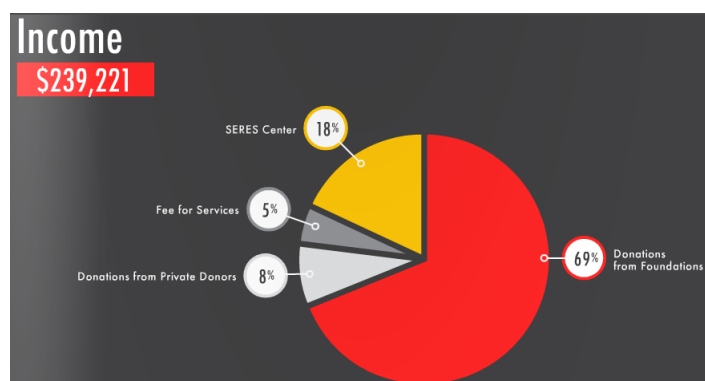
The intern structure of SERES aims to be as horizontal as possible. There is a Core Team, to take the administrative and functional key decisions for SERES strategies, like budgets, new programmes, etc. And there is a Board of Directors, elected every two years in a General Assembly. This assembly involves the youngsters that are Local Ambassadors, who can nominate, vote and be elected for the next Board of Directors. Usually, two Ambassadors get to be part of the Board of Directors, one from Guatemala and one from El Salvador, and gender equality is also preferred. In addition, there is a team in charge of executing the decisions taken, including the Executive Director, Coordinators, Facilitators, Manager, Accountant, Fellows, Culinary Director, etc. (With data collected from the interviews, 2015).

Currently, SERES has two offices, one in Guatemala and one in El Salvador. The one in Guatemala is also the SERES Embassy, which is a pedagogical space to conduct workshops and to experience and exemplify some of the ideas and methods taught on the workshops (With data collected from the interviews, 2015).

### c. Funding of SERES

The funding of SERES during 2015 came from different sources; the largest donations were obtained from Foundations (69%), followed by the funds raised in the SERES Center (18%), the donations from Private Donors (8%) and the rest is obtained from the Fees for Services (5%). The year 2015 was positive regarding this topic, because since June 2015 a 3-year program financed by the InterAmerican Foundation was secured. In October the UNESCO-Japan Prize for Education for Sustainable Development was awarded to SERES, representing \$50,000. Also, a 25-acres land was gifted to them, with the objective of building a new Sustainability Leadership and Learning Hub, which will be called “Communiversitry” (SERES 2016).

**Figure 3. Sources of funds of SERES Association.**



Source: SERES Annual Report 2015

## **B. Objectives of the Dissertation**

As mentioned before, SERES is a relatively small and new organization that has been evolving and growing through the years. With these characteristics, it is not rare that their focus has been mainly in the implementation of the programs, but the evaluation or feedback is still a weak point. As a response to this fact, this dissertation focuses on giving a qualitative insight on the work undertaken by the young leaders, after engaging through SERES first transformational leadership and sustainability programs, to get to know their opinions and experiences first-hand. Due to the time and the human and economic resources available, this document does not intend to be an exhaustive evaluation of the leadership programs, but a reference tool that offers some feedback to the institution.

### **General objective**

Analyze the impact that SERES leadership programs (Youth Leaders for the Pachamama) have had on the young leaders involved in the programs and their communities.

### **Specific objectives**

- Briefly describe and analyze SERES leadership programs and methods in order to understand how they work.
- Ascertain from stakeholders about the impact of SERES leadership programs in four selected communities in Guatemala and El Salvador.
- Discuss and compare the factors that have enabled and hindered the performance of the initiatives and action plans proposed by the young leaders in the four selected communities in Guatemala and El Salvador.
- Analysis of SERES Association's initiative and the leader's work within a framework of the development discourse.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

### **A. Research Questions**

In order to achieve the objectives, the research questions stated below were formulated to lead the research that will be undertaken.

#### **General:**

What impact is the leadership program implemented by SERES having on the communities where their participants are living and working?

#### **Specific:**

- How are young leaders promoting change in their communities?
- What kind of activities are the young leaders conducting?
- How has the experience of working as young leaders in their communities been?
- Had they participated in any other project aiming social change before participating with SERES?
- What were the motivations of the youth to join and participate with the SERES leadership programs?
- What factors have enabled and hindered the implementation of the action plans?
- What are your major perceived impacts of the young leaders so far?
- On what kind of action plans are the youth groups working in each community?

### **B. Research Sample & Data Collection**

The data was collected using qualitative methodologies during a field visit done on August 2015, to respond and complement the objectives, research questions and theoretical framework. The field visit provided an in-depth and focused understanding of the issues happening, after interacting directly with the stakeholders. The use of qualitative methods was preferred, because this approach allows generating first hand data, enhancing empowerment of individuals when sharing their stories and building closer relationship with the subjects participating (Creswell 2007).

The first part of the visit was in SERES office, with the aim to understand better the work they do and to make a more informed planning for the communities' visits. Semi-structured

interviews (Annex 1) were done with four of the persons working there, two via Skype and two in person due to their availability. This method was chosen because it enables to get to know the opinions, experiences and perceptions from the people; aiming to serve as a complement to the theoretical framework. Semi-structured interviewing is based on the use of a list of questions as a guide, in order to fulfill the concerning topics and collect reliable and comparable information, but it is flexible enough to include and follow new leads that emerge during the conversation (Bernard 1995 & Patton 2002).

SERES Association currently works with more than 276 communities; therefore a purposeful sample was selected to get an in-depth insight and understanding from few information-rich cases. The strategy to decide which communities were going to be visited was based on a combination of convenience and criterion sampling. Convenience sampling in the sense that the field visit had to be adapted to the availability of time, money and human resources. This constraint allowed the visit of only four communities. Taking this into account, a criterion was established based on geographical location, accessibility and performance of the leaders working there. To have an even distribution on geographical location, two communities were from Guatemala and two from El Salvador. Concerning accessibility, the condition of the roads and the security issues were the aspects taken into account. With regard to the performance, the focus was on four of the communities that SERES considered have had an outstanding and leading performance, with the idea of learning the lessons from their positive experience and the factors that have enhanced their achievements (Patton 2002). Their performance is attributed based on their action plans and how they have evolved and that the young leaders have continued through the different levels of trainings that SERES offers, even working together and co-facilitating workshops. The selection of the communities was done in collaboration with the personnel from SERES, as they have had a closer experience with the communities throughout the time.

**Table 1.** Selected communities for the field visit (in alphabetic order).

<b>Name and location</b>
Chirijquiac, Cantel, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala
El Papaturre, Suchitoto, Cuscatlán, El Salvador
Panchimalco, San Salvador, El Salvador
Saquiya, Patzún, Chimaltenango, Guatemala

**Figure 4.** Location of the four communities visited.



Source: Created in Google Maps.

In each community, two different target groups were approached, based on the following criteria (Patton 2002): (1) The young leaders' team: people from the communities who have participated in the SERES leadership workshops and are in charge of undertaking the activities of the action plans; and (2) "external informants": people who have witnessed the work and initiative of the young leaders' team, but is not involved directly with them nor had participated in the leadership programs.

- **Young leaders' team:** In order to get an insight on their experience in their process with SERES and as young leaders in their communities, a focus group (Annex 2) was undertaken in each of the four selected communities. Using focus groups allow to have a group inquiry about a specific topic, that constructs responses and meanings jointly, as a product of the interaction of the group. Usually, participants of focus groups have had a certain experience in common, and this method facilitates the discussion of the experience in a relatively unstructured way, enhancing the participants to share their motives, expectations, objectives, and stories (Bryman 2008).

The four focus groups were carried out with the young leaders, the attendance of the participants varied depending on their availability and the current situation of each group. The number and general profile of the participants is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Profile of the participants in the focus groups.

Focus Group <sup>2</sup>	Participants			Age Range (years)
	Total	F	M	
GT	2	2	0	16 – 17
GT	5	1	4	16 - 22
ES	8	2	6	16 – 26
ES	8	3	5	13 – 26

During the focus groups, an activity of photo elicitation was included. Photo elicitation is a technique used for research, which allows the use of images into interviews, or in this case, into the focus group. The technique can be used in different ways, depending on the aim of the research, but in general the idea is to include the use of images accompanied with guiding questions that help the participants to talk about their photos. In this case, the approach was to use participant-driven photo elicitation, thus the participants were asked to take some time, go out and take the pictures that display the impact that their group and SERES have had in the community. This approach was used to enhance more empowerment and self-reflexivity during the questions, since the participants themselves were the ones producing the photos. In addition, this method is recognized because of helping to bridge the gap between the researcher and the participants, making the participants feeling more comfortable during the process, providing tangible stimuli to have a more in-depth “interview” (Hatten et al., 2013; Van Auken et al., 2010)

- **“External informant”**: Semi-structured interviews (0) were conducted with this group, with the aim of getting to know the perception of “an outsider”, and not only evaluating the people involved directly with SERES. Semi-structured interviewing permits to have a guide of questions with the important issues, but is flexible enough to give space to the interviewees to share their opinions, perceptions and meanings. Also, it takes place as a conversation, enabling a comfortable environment for the participants (Bernard 2002; Punch 2005 & Patton 2002).

Ten interviews were done with external informants. The participants within this group varied, according to the context and experience of each community and the availability to approach them, including parents of the youth leaders, local authorities and former local authorities from the communities and people from local institutions that are collaborating with the group (Table 3). The identification of these persons was done by the young leaders and the SERES local

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<sup>2</sup> GT refers to Guatemala; ES to El Salvador.

collaborator since they are the ones that know the context better. It depended on the dynamic given in each community and on the availability of the target person.

**Table 3.** External interviewees information

	No. of interviews
Local authorities and former authorities (COCODE <sup>3</sup> & Municipality)	4
Parents	4
Personnel from the local school	1
Personnel from the Health Center (and collaborator)	1

Pilot testing of all the data collection instruments were done with colleagues and SERES personnel before the field visit, to obtain feedback, refine the questions and make them the most understandable and practical as possible. Regarding the ethical issues, informed consents (Annex 1, Annex 2, 0) were agreed with all the participants before starting the interviews and focus groups, to ensure the participant's rights - that their participation is voluntary and confidential -, and to clarify any doubts. Informed consent protocols covered the following aspects: the purpose of collecting the information, to whom is the information for, how it will be used, what the topics in the interview are, and how will responses be handled. It also included that their participation was confidential and voluntary, and who they can contact for further questions. After asking for permission to the participants, all the interviews and focus groups were recorded to be able be more attentive to the participants and to further consult and transcript the recordings. In qualitative methods, data interpretation and analysis relies in making sense of what people have said and looking for patterns, thus recording the verbatim is essential because nothing can substitute the things said by real people. Codes were created when saving and managing the files and information, to maintain the confidentiality of the data of the participants, in case any controversial issue emerged (Creswell 2007; Punch 2005; Patton 2002).

Even if the results below cannot be generalized, they provide a general insight of the situation, finding things in common despite the diversity. The results collected will be described and discussed in the next two sections, respectively (Results and Discussion).

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<sup>3</sup> COCODE and ADESCO refers to the local institutions/committees gathering representatives at the community level, serving as link between the community and the local government or external institutions. COCODE (*Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo*) means Community Development Council, and ADESCO (*Asociación de Desarrollo Comunal*) means Association for Community Development.

### C. Data analysis

After finishing all the field visits, transcriptions of all the recordings were done. The transcriptions were the first step of the analysis, being useful to immerse in the data and generate emergent insights. Based on the transcriptions the analysis was done, transforming the data into findings; interpreting it, bringing meaning and displaying the meaning through the written report (Patton 2002 & Marshall 2006).

Within this process the strategy of thematic analysis was used, by the identification of patterns of meanings, through the generation of categories, themes and codes in the collected data, finding responses to the research questions. This strategy was preferred because it is flexible, but it allows the researcher to get close to the data and uncover themes based on the intentions of the study (Braun & Clarke 2015). The software for qualitative analysis Nvivo 11© was the main tool used for this process. In addition, to achieve the last specific objective, the information collected was analyzed with related theories from the development discourse. SERES approach was analyzed as participatory post-development initiative that enhances sustainable community livelihoods.

Since qualitative research does not have standard statistical procedures to make its findings and results 'valid' and 'credible' for the audience, different authors have proposed different strategies to establish 'trustworthiness' and 'validity'. In this case three out of the eight validation strategies proposed by Creswell (2007) were used to satisfy this purpose: triangulation, member checking and peer review.

- **Triangulation** refers to the use of multiple and diverse sources of information and methods of data collection, in order to have different points of view, enabling to corroborate and enhance confidence in the findings. In this case, different methods (interviews and focus groups) were used, and different sources or target groups were approached (SERES personnel, members of the young leaders' teams in different communities, and external informants). This allowed to cross-check the findings.
- In **member checking** the researcher ask to the participants for feedback on the rough drafts of the researchers' work, so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the analyses, interpretations and conclusions. In this case, the draft of the results was sent to the personnel working in SERES to get their comments and suggestions; taking it into account for the preparation of the final document. Due to language constraints the young leaders could not



check the document. Further translations to Spanish will be done, to make the information generated also available for them.

- **Peer review** was requested from colleagues working in related field, including the thesis supervisor. Their feedback was taken into account to strengthen and enhance reliability on the findings and conclusions.

### III. RESULTS

This section describes the results collected during the interviews and focus groups, including some quotes from the participants so the reader can have a glimpse of the findings in their own words. Each of the quotes has: a reference number that correspond to the code assigned for confidentiality to each of the interviews and focus group; and general information of who said it, to understand better where the quote comes from.

The section is divided in three parts. The first part (A) is focused on SERES and its programs from the point of view of the participants, as a way to inquire in their experience as “users” of these programs. The second part (B) focuses on the stories of the young leaders with SERES, how were they involved, what motivated them, and specifically what activities have they conducted and what impacts or changes they perceived they have had in their communities. This part is separated by community, with the aim of being more specific, since each of the stories is different. Photos taken by the young leaders during the photo elicitation activities are presented with an explanation quote, as a way of displaying graphically the actions and impacts from the young leaders’ perspective. The third part (C) summarizes the major obstacles, challenges and enablers that the participants from the four communities identified they have found when conducting their processes.

#### A. SERES Association and its programmes

##### 1) Beginning and evolution

SERES was born in 2009, from the synergy of two main actors. An Australian woman worried about the environmental crisis and deficiencies in the education system in Central America, and a young man from El Salvador, who was organized in his community through a youth group working to address their ecological problems. They met at the Permaculture Institute in El Salvador and after sharing their concerns, ideas and dreams, decided to start working together to pursue them. They started to build the curriculum of the, now awarded, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) Programs ,with the aim of strengthening local youth knowledge regarding the environment, and awaking up their passion and initiative to start actions to improve their local situation. (Interviews; Quic, 2015).

*“We started to develop the first SERES Programme in 2009, we organised it together, and little by little the family has been growing, with this vision that has been being built along the way. Because is not like she brought an established idea, instead everything has*

*been emerging through the learning process, through the experiences, the sharing with others and together we have created what we are now. Thus, the idea is to link youth that have the same vision and the same passion for what we are doing (...) That is the aim of the first programmes we developed, the JLP, to wake up that passion in the youth, that sparkle that make them feel the connection with their community, with their country and with the environment (...) Thus, the network has been growing, youngsters participate in the programmes and discover truly that they can be the change, that they can see a different world, and that if we work together for it there is no doubt that we will accomplish it” (Code 104, Young Facilitator and Ambassador).*

With this as base, the first JLP (Young leaders for the Pachamama, for the acronym in Spanish *Jóvenes Líderes por la Pachamama*) was organized in November 2010. It took place in El Salvador and gathered around 70 youngsters from both countries. It was still not named JLP (Youth leading the Pachamama), but the structure was the same, and according to the participants, it was a very powerful tool that had a great impact in their lives. The organisation has been functioning since 2009 and is registered in Guatemala as a non-for-profit organisation. Nevertheless, in the recent years that it has taken a stronger push, doubling its size and aiming to expand more and involve more youngsters to the network; and gaining more international recognition. In 2015 SERES was one of the three initiatives that were awarded with the UNESCO-Japan prize on Education for Sustainable Development, which honours outstanding projects related to ESD (UNESCO, 2015). Within the future plans, a Communiversity will be built with the aim to bridge the gap between community and academic knowledge (Interviews; García-Ruano, 2016; Quic, 2015).

*“Since 2014, SERES has growth exponentially. From a team of five people last year, now it has doubled and it keeps on growing. More programmes are being implemented, always trying to maintain the flexibility to adapt to each of the contexts where they work and to the needs that emerge within the youngsters and the organization” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

## **2) Description and experiences in the JLP (for the acronym in Spanish – Youth Leaders for the Pachamama)**

The content of the JLP focuses on 5 main topics, five global crises that put at risk the systems that sustain our life: (1) Water, (2) Overpopulation, (3) (Unequal) Access to Food, (4) Global Warming and (5) loss of Biodiversity. The three days of the JLP correspond to the four steps of Strategic Questioning: Focus, Visioning, Change and Action. Within the fourth step, action plans are created. There is an action plan at a personal level, where they set goals of individual changes in their life, and another at a collective level. The number of collective action plans created in a JLP depends on the number of attendants and on the prioritized problems (three to five), since each action plan will address each problem. Each group of youngsters is organised,

assigning tasks and responsibilities to each of the members, setting objectives (short, medium and long term), means and possible partners. All of these activities are conducted between the facilitators and the young participants.

*“The JLP is a process that is well planned and well contextualized for the school level of the youngsters we work with. In general, they have attended Elementary school, only some have attended Secondary, and is very very rare that they have gone to University. (...) The process also manages the mood of the group. The facilitators are well trained to manage the collective moods that emerge. The first day is very hard, because we focus in all the uncomfortable truth of the planet we live in. Many youngsters experience unrest, hopelessness, guilt, sadness, anger... But in the next two days we come back to these emotions, to make proposals, changes, to dream and plan” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

*“We don’t give them a solution, we invite them to think, analyse, because they can create their own solutions. There is a space for brainstorming, where they say many many things. And it is exciting to see the amount of ideas that emerge in that space. I think that is what is valuable. The youngsters have so much power of change, so many ideas, that what they need is to be listened. And that is the space where they can be, they can be heard, freely, is a safe space where they can express their ideas without being judge, nobody will tell them that an idea is not good or does not work, because all the ideas have a reasoning behind, and if they are saying it is because they feel it and want to say it. And that is valuable” (Code 103, Local Ambassador and Facilitator).*

There is also an activity of community recognition, where the participants explore and make questions regarding their community and the five main topics of the JLP. For example, they identify where the water for the community comes from, or how the forests and its biodiversity were decades ago. Another activity to have more involvement from the rest of the community, a Forum is organised during the third day of the JLP. During this event, the youngsters can share what they have learnt and their proposals, with the aim that other members from the community and/or the local authorities take an active role in the implementation of the action plans. In many cases, this space is the first the youngsters have to express themselves, to have a voice that is heard. The attendance of community members to the Forum and the commitment and response they give varies according to the community.

*“In some cases we invite the elderly from the community to an activity called “Travelling through time”. Here we travel in time to 40 or 60 years ago, depending on how old the community is, then to the present and to the future. And this future that often seems hopeless and ugly, the youngsters start a collective envision of how they would like it to be. This dream, this vision, is taken as the base to propose what we can do to get there” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

The JLP are open to whoever wants to participate. The Local Ambassadors are the ones that establish the contact with the communities, based on former contact, invitations or interest from the communities. They are also the main organisers of the event. Usually they focus on the ones more convenient, meaning the ones where a counterpart from the community is obtained, whether the Municipality or some other institution supplies food for the participants, a space where the JLP can take place or lodging for the facilitator, for example. This has led that the presence of SERES is stronger in the Western and Central region of Guatemala and the Central and Eastern region of El Salvador.

The expected number of participants is between 20 and 30, led by two facilitators. The local counterpart and institutions are the one in charge of inviting, not SERES itself. The call is open to everyone, preferably from 15-30 years old and both girls and boys. The participants have to pay for a small fee to attend, which can be flexible according to their resources, but SERES never covers the 100% of the costs. The aim of this is to ensure that the youngsters have the will to be there. They also commit to attend to the three days of the event, and to continue with the implementation of the Action Plan afterwards.

*“In one occasion, 69 persons attended to the JLP. We were surprised, since we were only three facilitators, but we decided that we were ready for it, we were going to give the best from us. And I think the quantity was not the biggest challenge, but the biggest challenge was that we had participants from all ages, including children from the school and men members of the ADESCO” (Code 101, Local Ambassador and Facilitator).*

## **B. Young leaders**

### **1) Experiences and Action Plans per Community**

This part is divided corresponding to the experience from each of the communities visited, since they are diverse and have different stories and action plans, with the aim of understanding better each of the stories. The beginning of the relationship of each community with SERES will be described, followed by the action plans and activities they have been undertaking. Within this section, some pictures are included, product of the activity of photo elicitation included in the focus group (See Annex 2) where the participants had to go out and take pictures of what they considered to be their impact in the community, and then describe it.

The beginning includes not only the stories, but also the motivations and reasons that made the youngsters to participate in the JLP. The motivations vary, some did not know where they were going to, some wanted to know more about the environmental topics, some went because a

friend invited them, and some were curious because of the stories heard from others that have already attended. In general, most of them did not had a clear information about what were they involving with, but they were interested in gaining new knowledge, to improve themselves and to share it with others and benefit them. For the ones that continue working with SERES, the experience in the JLP was similar, in the sense that it had a big impact in their lives making them to be voluntarily committed through the years.

*“(They react to the JLP) with a strong commitment and will, with a lot of young energy willing to make changes, a lot of hope. A lot of conviction that the things can be different and that they can make the things to be different” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

The action plans and activities are also diverse, because each is formulated according to the local needs and context. Nevertheless, some of the topics that are repeated in most of the communities are, for example, the problem with garbage, deforestation, pollution and shortage of water resources. It is important to mention that sometimes the action plans are not accomplished totally, because they can find obstacles or challenges that make them to be changed or replaced. The main obstacles and challenges will be described below, as well as the enabling factors.

*“SERES set the cards on the table and some matches. Then, the youngsters are in charge of igniting the spark as they consider best, and SERES go along with them during the process. Many times, this process starts in a simple way, we could say, congruent to the way we have learnt, responding to the way usually education is in here, thus focusing more in surface issues and not thinking much in the roots (of the problems). (...) But eventually, through the learning and leadership processes, they start to ask themselves more in-depth questions, regarding for example to what products are being consumed, and why trash is being produce, instead of just cleaning the community each Sunday and getting tired of it after a month, because the (root) situation does not change.” (Code 102, SERES Personnel)*

*“What sometimes happens is that they change their Action Plans. It can be that in the JLP they are saying that they will make reforestation in a social area of the community, but in the end, when they are going to implement it they realize that maybe it was not reforestation what they had to do, but to provide education to avoid the forest fire. Or that maybe it would be more effective to make a vivarium and then give the small trees to the families, so each family can take care of a fruit tree” (Code 104, Local Ambassador and Facilitator).*

#### **a. Saquiyá, Patzún, Chimaltenango, Guatemala**

##### **▪ Beginning**

The young ladies here did not know about SERES, but they had been collaborating with another

organisation that was working in their community. This organisation knew SERES, and invited them to attend a JLP in a nearby community, and they decided to go in 2012, with the aim of learning more about the environmental topics, and benefit themselves and the community.

*“I was motivated to go because it was something that would benefit myself and the others” (Code 201, Young leader)*

*“(Attending to the JLP) and getting to know all what they talked, all the stories we heard, it made me react and think why am I doing things this way, if I must do them the other way. Since then, we said we have to do something (...) because it made me react; it took away the fear and made me believe that I can do the things” (Code 201, Young leader)*

#### ▪ **Action plans and activities**

The Group in this community started with 10 members, but currently there are only three women that keep working for the action plans. Two of them attended to the focus group, since the third one works in a neighbor town. The group used to gather once a week, but currently they manage to gather once a month. The presence of the NGO was useful since they were the ones organizing the meeting once a week, but now that the NGO has left it has been more difficult to the group to maintain the pace. The meetings usually last half day, but the time invested in the other activities has been varied.

Both attended the JLP in 2012, and since then had implemented some action plans with the help of other community members. One of the first actions was to implement trainings to the authorities and the community (adults and young) regarding the topics learnt in the JLP. They also conducted a training of environmental awareness with the youth of the neighbor Municipality. Two of the topics were reforestation and waste management, because those were going to be useful for further activities. In fact, after requesting and obtaining trees from the Municipality they invited the people from the community and organized a reforestation campaign in the area nearby to the local water spring to prevent a drought. They have also organized cleaning campaigns with the youngsters, where they have collected plastics and done recycling activities afterwards.

*“Thus, SERES taught us that if we do not plant trees on the riverside area or the water spring area the river can get dry. Besides, as group we did not know where our water spring was located. Thus, we decided to go with the authorities and ask them where the water spring was located, because we did not know it and we wanted to make reforestation. That was the time when we started our project, because we were motivated to plant the trees and to do the trainings with the parents and the youth, to share and teach what we have learned” (Code 201, Young leader)*

Currently, the action plan focuses in building a recreational space with recycled waste in the area nearby the school. The idea is to build the benches, tables, flower pots, etc. using materials that would be usually considered as waste. They have started and are working on it, but due to lack of support and time the process has been slow.

*“But we have not finished it yet, we will continue on searching for support”* (Code 201, Young leader).

In general, they have had some support from the municipality and the COCODE, since they have provided materials, trees and collaborators when needed. Also, an NGO working in the municipality has provided training and counseling in different topics. The participants argue that the presence of SERES after the JLP has not been that visible, and that this may have affected the commitment of the members to the group, since being supported by an institution gives the group more credibility in the society and may attract more people to join the group.

The perception from the external informants that know their work is positive, arguing that it is better that the youngsters continue on being busy and focusing with this kind of activities instead of having “free time” available to enroll in negative things (like gangs, etc.). Nevertheless, the girls mentioned that some people have a negative perception of what they do, in the sense that they think it brings no benefits and is a waste of time.

*“I always supported them, and from my point of view, what they do is good because sometimes the youngsters can be not busy, only doing nothing, and maybe that leads them to be related with the gangs, since the current situation is how it is”* (Code 303, External informant)

### **Photo elicitation:**

During the Focus Group the participants were asked to take pictures of the impact they think they have had, as a way to give them a voice to display actions and changes in the community. Below some of the pictures that were taken by the girls of Saquiyá and their description.



**Reforestation:**

*“Before of our work there are places without trees or just with a few. But after, there have been reforestation campaigns in some places” (Code 201, Young leader).*



**Waste management, cleaning campaigns and recycling**



*“We can recycle the junk-food package, to do things that can be useful for us. For example, from this package we can build eco-blocks or a small purse” (Code 201, Young leader).*

*“This picture showing the road represents how the streets on our community, that before where dirty, now are clean. In the trainings we talk about this topic, so now it seems the problem is being reduced” (Code 201, Young leader).*



*“This is an eco-block, created from the trash. We are currently working with this in our project, to make a little park, to build the benches or tables. And with tires that have already been discarded, we have built the flower pots and a small wall. We went to the mechanical workshops to ask for the discarded tires. Most of them gave the tires for free, and with that they built the wall. And that is all the impact we have had in the community” (Code 201, Young leader).*



## **b. Chirijquiac, Cantel, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala**

### **▪ Beginning**

This community has several groups that have attended to different JLP. The first one was in 2013. They had an organised group of breakdance, which in that time was linked with a local organisation. This other organisation was involved with SERES, so one of the persons in charge invited the breakdance group to attend “an event”. They thought the event was for dancing, and did not know it was a JLP. At first they got frustrated because it was not what they were expecting, but talks instead. But since the place was far from their homes, they could not go away and had to attend. Their perception changed later, when they got very impressed because of the dynamics of the JLP, the information, the emotions, the reactions. They got so impressed that they have been involved and committed with SERES since that day. Afterwards, they started their action plans in the community, using the breakdance group as a tool to attract and get other youngsters involved. Since then, new youngsters interested have attended to other JLPs nearby and have started working together with them, enlarging the group.

*“And that was how those three days (of the JLP), well two because the first one was not that interesting, but those two days were very interesting because it touched me, and something inside me was saying you have to change, it is time. They taught us many things, what I should do, what I should not do, how should I do it, and since then a change in my life emerged”* (Code 202, Young leader).

*“I started in 2014, before I did not know them, and I was like many other youngsters, that only threw away the trash, and did not care about recycling or anything. Then I met them, and got integrated to the breakdance group. I thought it was just to dance, but then I realized that they were in other group too. I asked and they told me what it was about. First I have not decided to join, I kept throwing away the trash and they scolded me and told me to don’t do that. Then I got interested, (...) after a while, they told me when a JLP was taking place, and I wanted to go and went with them”* (Code 202, Young leader).

#### ▪ **Action plans and activities**

In this community, new members and new action plans have emerged through the years after attending different JLPs. The first group attended in the year 2013, and proposed an action plan of recyclable crafts. They wanted to raise awareness in the youth about the garbage, promoting to stop throwing the garbage on the streets and giving the alternative of recyclable crafts and eco-blocks. They organized workshops, based on the ideas obtained in the JLP, with the objective of reducing the garbage thrown in the community. After that they attended the Sustainability Summit, where they strengthened the current action plan after winning an incentive in a contest that took place during that event. They implemented four additional workshops.

*“At the beginning it was hard for us, but then we accomplish it, little by little they understood and now is rare who throws away the garbage on the street. At least the people from our group (...) Because we are young, we have to make a difference. And that is what motivates me, that we can accomplish changes, even if they are little”* (Code 202, Young leader).

On 2014, three members of the original group participated in the Permaculture training. A new action plan was born, to promote family orchards in the community based on the knowledge and skills gained there. They started implementing it in their houses, and with some people that needed it. Unfortunately, due to weather conditions, disorganization and that the people did not care enough it has not worked properly. But, they have continued with the ones in their houses, and started a seedbed for further attempts. Other action plans that emerged during this year were regarding water care, because in the local distribution is very unequal, some places have abundant and others do not. They organized workshops in the schools, hikes and marches with the students of secondary school, to raise awareness and promote saving it. On 2015, the new members decided to jointly work with the older ones in permaculture. Thus, currently all the

group is working on the family orchards project.

The group currently is integrated by 8 members. Even if in the JLP there were around 25 youngsters, for some live far and it is difficult to meet and coordinate. But the ones currently committed argue they will continue and gather more members. This group has not had much support from institutions or local authorities. They have only been collaborating with the local school and *Rescate*, a youth organization that works at the municipality level promoting political participation. The presence of SERES has been rather discrete, and it is not well-known by the community members. External informants only admit to have seen the change in the attitudes of the young leaders, but do not have great knowledge about the processes behind. In addition, the parents and external informants close to the youngsters admit that it is appreciated that they are involved in positive projects, rather than dedicating their “free time” for negative activities.

*“SERES is still not known across the community. But for our group SERES has been the base, it has been our tool, and what has pushed us to keep going” (Code 202, Young leader).*

*“(After being involved with JLP and SERES) There are many things I have discovered, both personal and in the other people. In the personal level, it has helped me to find a great capacity in me, something I did not know I have; I began to discover that I am capable of many things. Thus, now I am president of my class in the school, and I am the president of the Students Association. Through the Students Association I am working on several projects, related to what SERES is doing. For example, we talk about environmental pollution, teach recyclable crags, and also things regarding personal leadership, values, and reforestation. I am also working on obtaining trees to plant. Thus, the youngsters can see that we can start with small actions in the school. Before knowing SERES, I could say I had low self-esteem, but now I am better, and it is thanks to that that I am accomplishing many things. (...) There are several things i have discovered, and teachers notice that and they tell me that I have good leadership skills and that reflects in everything you do. I am in the school band, and they also wanted me to be president but I told them I could not, not because I did not want but because I have enough commitments.(...) That is what I have discovered, thanks to the advices of SERES” (Code 202, Young leader).*

*“My son talks to me about what they do, and I am happy because he is getting to know new places, and I am happy because they are doing positive things with that group and they are not doing things that are not good”. (Code 304, External informant)*

### **Photo elicitation:**

Below some of the pictures taken by the young leaders from Chirijquiac, showing the activities and impacts they have had and its description.



*“This is the design of the orchards we are working in. It looks like a path, which is how we work, we do not work in straight boards as usual, but in this circular way to take more advantage of the space we have. (...) This is a lettuce, radish, onion, fava, we have a diversity of vegetables and plants in these orchards, and that is the way how families can grow their own food. The designs depend on the size of the field and on how the ground is. For example if the field is steep we make the design it according to it. Also, this way is more creative so it catches more the attention of others, and they ask and we explain to them. This way, we get more interest from the people” (Code 202, Young leader).*



*“Regarding the recycling initiative, there we see a tire that is used as a flowerpot, showing that we can reuse some things that were considered trash, but instead here we can give it some use. This shows that you can plant in cans, in pots, and we are recycling. (...) This way we show that we have plenty scape to plant and we are reusing and recycling things that is considered garbage by others. We are growing our own food in spaces that in theory are not enough large to do this, but by using this way we can do it” (Code 202, Young leader).*



### c. Panchimalco, San Salvador, El Salvador

#### ▪ **Beginning**

Several groups have attended to different JLP in this community too. Here there is a Youth Network (*Red Juvenil*) organized since 2010, that is autonomous but works in collaboration with the municipality. They gather each week and have different activities, for example, they collaborate with projects and NGOs, attend to trainings regarding different topics and make activities for fundraising to sustain the Network expenses. In 2012, they received an invitation to participate in the JLP, the first one for this community, and the ones interested or curious about the topic attended. Other JLPs have taken place afterwards, thus more youngsters are being added to the group.

*“(…) I received the invitation from the Youth Network, and it caught my attention. Because if we think about it, not even the school teaches us how to take care of the environment, they tell us some things but do not put it in practice. Thus, it caught my attention because it a way to change myself, the persons I live with and the society”* (Code 203, Young leader).

*“I did not want to participate because it was three days. I thought that it was going to be boring, and that I did not have time. And the day it started, I went out of my home, got curious about it, and decided to go. After being there, I decided to stay. I went just for curiosity and decided to attend the three days of the JLP. And I liked it since the first day, because of all the information they were giving and because of the dynamic that is very good. They do not give you only information, but also provide a space to play, to become aware in several ways, watching documentaries, talking by ourselves. Because is not only the story SERES brings, but also the one we have to tell, as municipality”* (Code 203, Young leader).

#### ▪ **Action plans and activities**

The focus group here included young people from different communities, located in the same municipality. One of the characteristics that make this community different is its strong link with the municipality and the Youth Network. This relation began because one of the participants to the JLP worked with the municipality. There was a project, financed by Sweden, to create an Association of Popular Education, where one of the topics planned to be included was environmental education, and SERES was taken into account to cover it. The cooperation has been of benefit for both parts, so currently there are plans of signing a formal agreement to formalize further joint work.

*“Every time he talked about SERES to me, my interest grew, because it is an institution that works with the youth, so the youth can bring the activities to their communities and contribute to the environment”* (Code 309, External informant).

The Youth Network is well organized, and often collaborates with institutions and projects in different fields. From entrepreneurship and microenterprises, to obtaining funds to cover the travelling expenses to assist to a JLP or training in Guatemala. The Network works towards its sustainability, so they are always looking after different trainings, to learn some occupation or profession, and opportunities that provide them extra incomes. Currently the network generates its own income by renting different goods and services for events.

*“As youth of Panchimalco, we see in SERES as an opportunity that we have found, because through them we can access several programmes, programmes that they have in collaboration with other organisations. It is like a link or a circle, that when they cannot provide something, they search how to help us, especially with technical knowledge”* (Code 309, Young leader).

Many of the participants of the focus group have recently attended the JLP, only one month ago. Therefore, most of the action plans have not been implemented yet. Former action plans included reforestation campaigns in different areas, including the area nearby the river to avoid its draught. This has not always been successful, since some of the trees have dried because nobody took care after planted. These actions have been complemented with environmental education workshops in schools. Some of the youngsters have started orchards in the homes, with compost created from the organic waste; and have further plans of creating an orchard but only with local seeds. In addition, the leaders affirm they share their knowledge and advice with their families, friends and co-workers, raising awareness and witnessing change in their daily actions. One of the youngsters, have gone further on the reforestation campaigns and has submitted a proposal to the municipality to create formally a protected area in the zone that provides water to the community, to avoid deforestation and draught.

*“What I proposed (to the Municipality) was to declare an area as protected zone, because there are some waterfalls, and lately too many trees have had been cut down. Thus, I have been working with Diego<sup>4</sup>, collecting information to work on the document, and I already gave it to him so he can submit it in the Municipality”* (Code 309, Young leader).

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<sup>4</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent.

*“Being a person of change, because if I want I can, and if I want I will be the change of the world, because others will follow my example. An example of what we do is that before, we always bought food to go, that meant five plates and five plastic bags to pack it, but now we make more time and eat in the place. It is a small action, but it is a way to contribute”* (Code 203, Young leader).

The new action plans, which emerged in the last JLP are very diverse. For example, one group will promote sexual education, topic that emerged after analyzing the problem of the overpopulation, and how it can be a threat to the environment and a cause of the limited access to food. The activities planned aim to provide workshops to other young people and students in local school. Other groups will work with environmental education, specifically with climate change and with environmental laws, disseminating information about the topic, which is usually ignored or unknown, with the aim that people can get to know their responsibilities and rights. Another group will work on creating spaces and events for recreation and sports, with the aim of improving the wellbeing of the community and reducing the levels of violence, and to raise awareness of the importance the youth has for the community.

The number of participants has changed. As usual some have abandoned the group for different reasons, but with the last JLP the number increased, including the participation of a councilor from the Municipality. Currently there are around 20 young leaders involved, who gather every week, as the Youth Network.

### **Photo elicitation:**

Below some pictures, taken during the activity of photo elicitation in the focus group, that represent the former work and future plans of the youth from Panchimalco.

### **Reforestation and community wellbeing:**



*“It represent the change, in our house we did not have flowers or anything, thus in my case it is a change because now even if I did not like them much, now I help my mom to take care of her plants”* (Code 203, Young leader).



*“It represents our commitment for changing the planet, because one of the things we commit to is to plant trees” (Code 203, Young leader).*



*“This one shows the sidewalk, because before it was not like this. Now it has these plants and garden-like look, and this helps to the air purification, and allows the absorption of the water in the ground. We want to expand it more, in all the streets, because now it covers only a small extent” (Code 203, Young leader).*



#### **Recycling and waste management:**

*“This shows how we can recycle, to change our habits of just throwing away the garbage. I bought this (wallet) to a friend, he makes them. He has around 14 years and one day he showed one to us, but since people are not used to see this kind of things, he was a little ashamed when he showed it. But I told him that it was nice, and I wanted to buy one. On one side, I thought that this is a way of gaining money, and on the other, he is collaborating to re-use the trash and not just throwing it away” (Code 203, Young leader).*

#### **d. El Papaturro, Suchitoto, Cuscatlán, El Salvador**

##### **▪ Beginning**

This is one of the communities that have collaborated with SERES since the beginning, and which is also considered as a role model. In 2009, an Ecological Committee was formed by the initiative of the youth of this community, responding to their concern about the local

environmental problems. One of the members of this Committee was the one who jointly worked with the Australian lady to organise the first JLP, in 2010. Members of this community attended to the first JLP in 2010, and through the years the interest of more youngsters have been awakened and they have decided to attend other JLPs and to be part of the Committee (they can be part of the Committee without attending the JLP, but many are part of both).

*“In 2009 we were a group of youngsters that took the initiative of forming that group in the community, with the aim of working to see changes, changes in the environment. Because before the Committee, there was a lot of plastic garbage in the community, deforestation, the rivers full of trash. Thus the group was conformed. (...) I wanted to do good things, to fill the void of the bad things, and that was what motivated me to be in the group. Then, in 2010 we were invited to the JLP with the idea of strengthen more ourselves, to learn more about the ecological footprint, to change our negative attitudes (...) Since then, I obtained more knowledge, and I am passionate about working for the environment, for the animals, and to keep on working. (The aim is) to gather more youngsters to be part of the group, so we can build an ecological community, and to go outside our municipality to share this philosophy, because there are still many that do not know about it” (Code 204, Young leader).*

*“I started this year, and what motivated me was that the others were avoiding deforestation, taking care of the rivers, and I saw that they have already cleaned up the river. Thus, I wanted to be part of the Ecological Committee, to help” (Code 204, Young leader).*

#### ▪ **Action plans and activities**

As mentioned before, El Papaturro is considered as a role model community, also one of the oldest communities in the network of SERES. The group organized here, the Ecological Committee, started before SERES. The Ecological Committee “El Papaturro” was created in 2009 as an initiative from 16 young in the community, and became strengthened since 2010 by the trainings implemented by SERES. During this years, there are several groups of this community attending JLP, thus several Action Plans have been created.

*“El Papaturro is a perfect example of the impact that SERES have had in the Municipality of Suchitoto, and in El Salvador” (Code 101, Facilitator and Ambassador)*

*“For example at the municipality level, this is like the role model in the communities regarding these topics (environmental). And even beyond that I think, because within the communities there are many social problems, and I believe this one is the one with less social problems, precisely because the youth here is busy working on their environmental projects instead of being idle in activities they should not (meaning, joining to the gangs or illicit activities)” (Code 310, External informant)*

There are plenty of activities the group has implemented. They started to work in reforestation campaigns, planting trees in empty areas, but also promoting environmental education. They have placed signs and paintings across the community with phrases or drawings to raise awareness about the environment. They made transmissions in a local radio to share the knowledge gained with the others, and to promote environmental education. They have started two organic orchards, one in the school and the other for the Committee. They have also promoted social activities to meet their objectives. They have organized recycling contest, “*lunadas*” (festivals during the evenings in the days of full moon), and “cultural / traditional afternoons”, events which allow them to reach both children and adults. These events besides providing a recreational space for the community (with dance, theatre, etc.), provides a space where the group can disseminate messages to raise awareness about the environment. For example, the theatre group share members with the ecological group, thus the plays often include an ecology-related message. In addition, during these events they sell food or other things, which helps them to raise some funds to cover their expenses.

One of the strongest activities they promote, with a medium-long term goal, is the implementation of environmental workshops in the local school. The aim is to begin the awareness attitude since the childhood, to address more the roots of the situation and shape a new generation that concerns for the environment and improvement of their community.

*“We keep working and paying attention to the work with the children, because we believe that if we neglect this part we will have another generation like the current one. Thus, we have to keep working with them so they become aware since they are little. That way is easier, because the kids are like sponges, everything you teach to them they start to put it in practice”* (Code 204, Young leader).

Another commitment taken since 2010 was to improve the management of solid waste. They started addressing the problem with cleaning campaigns, but now the activities have broadened. Usually, these communities do not have a Municipal service to deal with the waste. Thus, they decided to build a Collection Centre where them and the community can put the trash, both collected in the cleaning campaigns or the one produced in the houses. Some people have started to separate it, and they have manage to make an alliance with the municipality, who support them with the final part of the collecting process. To address the roots of this problem, they started questioning where most of the trash comes from, as a response they have been working to eliminate the use of plastic bottles, junk food and plastic bags in the community (since those are the major sources of trash). The aim is to reduce the amount of trash produced, instead of just collecting it with cleaning campaigns that will never end.

In a General Assembly and the ecological festivals, they have exposed their ideas to the community, collecting signatures and getting the support from many people. They have made alliances with other committees from the community and the ADESCO, and also with local restaurants and stores, to promote ban the use of plastic bags; instead the customers must bring their own cloth bags and recipients. As a counterpart of this initiative, they obtained some funds that were used to provide cloth bags to all the families of the community.

*“Also in the pupuserias<sup>5</sup>, we told them to avoid selling giving plastic bags, but instead that the people who buy had to bring the plate and tablecloth to pack it, and a recipient for the sauce and everything, with the aim to avoid plastics. And there are some people who take it in a positive way, and are complying with it, and there are others, but fewer, who do not agree with it. Because it is part of the culture the trash, junk food, etc. But we keep working on it, trying to raise awareness, and we hope that people can take it in a positive way because is something good and useful for the community”* (Code 204, Young leader).

Over the years, this group has accomplished to work jointly with several local and national institutions. The young leaders recognize that most of the institutions do not provide them economic support directly, but ideas or some kind of collaboration along the processes. They are part of the Inter-Institutional Board for the Environment, where they work together with the Municipal authority and 13 organizations and ecological groups from other communities. For example, to support the campaign against junk food, the Doctor of the local Health Center has come to the community and give talks regarding the damage junk food can cause to the health. Another example, which emerged from a JLP, is that they have organized Forums in the communities where they invite experts of environmental topics, to share their knowledge with the people and clarify doubts. To accomplish it, they have obtained the support of the Salvadorian Ecological Unit (Unidad Ecológica Salvadoreña – UNE).

Because of their constant effort and outstanding work, the Ecological Committee is respected and recognized not only inside the community, but also by other institutions and communities in the municipal level. They have been invited to other communities, to share their experiences and motivate others to work towards the improvement of their communities. There are young leaders from the Ecological Committee and that have participated in the JLP that are currently part of the group of the local authorities. One is president of the community and other is the responsible person for the environment in the ADESCO. In addition, during the Annual SERES Encounter, this community won an award as one of the more creative and innovative Action Plans.

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<sup>5</sup> *Pupusería* refers to the place where they sell *pupusas*, a traditional food, therefore *pupuserías* are widespread. It can be a dining room or a street stall.

*“I also discovered the leadership of my companions from the group. For example, Sergio<sup>6</sup> was the president of the community, whom has just finished his time there, and now is Rolando<sup>7</sup>. Practically, everybody exercise his or her leadership skills in some area, even outside de community. Thus, I have discovered that there are many capacities, and it is through that, through looking each process that you discover more things. And I have also discovered many things in me. Before, I was very shy, and one of the things I discovered is that I have the capacity to speak in front a public, or to lead processes, for example now I can facilitate JLP” (Code 204, Young leader).*

The commitment of the group is reflected in their organization. They gather every week, for four hours to work on what is planned and needed. Currently the group has 16 members, and the largest it has been was two years ago with 30 members. But they keep rotating because, for different reasons, some members have to stop working and some new members join.

*“We gather every two weeks, but it varies depending on if there is something urgent to do. But as group, we assigned Sunday to work, from 8 to 12, or all day long if it is needed. One of the reasons why we decided that day is because many of us study, so Sunday is the day we are mostly free. (...) And one of the requirements to join the Committee is that every youngster that wants to join has to attend and work with us each Sunday, because that is their contribution to the community. They have one month of trial, and during that month they have to work with the Committee for 8 hours approx., and if they don’t fulfill it, they would not be accepted” (Code 204, Young leader).*

As a role model community, their impact and work is also recognized externally; from collaborators, from other institutions that work in the municipality and from the parents. An important aspect mentioned was that it is assumed that the enrollment and commitment from the youngsters in the committee, helps or prevents them to be associated with negative things/ activities.

*“I think that what the youngsters do is really good, because through their forums, workshops, and different meetings they manage to empower other youngsters in these topics, and they even accomplish to transfer some passion for the topic, that people take it very seriously” (Code 310, External informant)*

*“I feel that (our parents) have provided great support to us, because they are glad that we are in a Committee that contributes with the community, and not being involved in bad things. And working for the community is something important” (Code 204, Young leader).*

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<sup>6</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent

<sup>7</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent



**Photo elicitation:**

As a visual reflection of the work the Ecological Committee has undertaken, below some of the pictures taken by the young leaders during the Focus Group and its description.

**Reinforcing identity:**



“This is a painting made by the Ecological Committee together with three volunteers that came from Kansas (USA), to the community in 2010. It represents the trapiche, the place to process the sugar cane and make sweet cane, because this is part of the identity of the community. When the community was founded what was in here was sugar cane, but later everything was abandoned during the (civil) war, and it became destroyed” (Code 204, Young leader).

“This is a painting created by the Youth Committee, here is the terrace that we built. Also a painting of a water source, that represents the place where the water we drink comes from, and it shows the trapiche. I mean, it shows important things from the community” (Code 204, Young leader).



**Environmental education:**

“This is sign made from wood; we recently did it, in the framework of a campaign for climate justice, at the same time we delivered the cloth bags. These are messages (regarding the environment), because we had others but were old and destroyed, so we had to change them and these are the new messages” (Code 204, Young leader).





*“In all the light poles of the street we made paintings related to the environment” (Code 204, Young leader).*

### **Garbage collection system & Campaign against violence:**

*“These are trash cans that we arrange with the Salvacola (national company of sodas). Well, we negotiated to get trash cans and they gave us barrels, thus we cut them in half and made the trash cans. During that time we were coordinating with the owners of the local stores, to see how to arrange that as they (companies) come to sell products in the stores, how they could help us so the trash produced does not stay in the community. One of the owners proposed us to write letters to the companies that bring the products, asking for trash cans and that is what we did and what we obtained. It was part of finding a strategy to minimize the garbage. In addition, as part of a campaign against violence, the trash cans have labels that say –We are all equal and Say no to gender violence” (Code 204, Young leader).*



*“This is the garbage collection center, where we leave the trash after collecting it when we clean up the rivers, the main street or the surrounding area. Soon we will undo it to make one new, because this one is kind of old. Also, people from the community go there to leave their trash, some have already separated it and some have not. Afterwards, we take it to the composting center in Suchitoto” (Code 204, Young leader).*





*“This shows that the community is now clean, with the cleaning campaigns and everything that they explained us. Thus, practically there is not much trash, people does not throw it on the streets that much” (Code 204, Young leader).*



### **Reforestation**

*“Here, we wanted to focus on the tree, because we have planted many trees (...) The tree that is there was planted by us, so we can see how much has it grown in the 6 years we have been working” (Code 204, Young leader).*



*“We made a nursery garden, and then all the youth collected the fruits that grew” (Code 204, Young leader).*

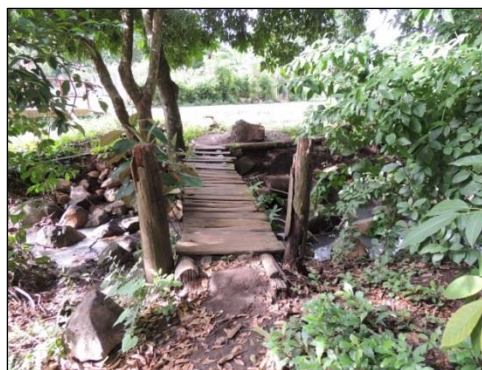
### **Community wellbeing**

*“This is the terrace we saw in the painting. Building this terrace was very interesting, because we had to go early in the morning to the river to extract sand and stones to build it. Thus, it was a nice experience for us, as Ecological Committee because it was a big work. The terrace was done to protect the tree, the conacaste. And it is also a place for recreation or meetings” (Code 204, Young leader)..*





*“When the upper bridge did not exist, we built this one temporarily, because the river flow increased during the rainy season and it was impossible to cross to the other side. Thus, we decided to build that small wood bridge” (Code 204, Young leader).*



*“This represents the street lighting we managed. We started to do it with the youth committee but finished it with the ecological committee. Before there was no lighting on the streets. From a brotherhood with a community in the United States, we presented this need last year, and we obtained around seven light poles. But the idea is to put around 40 in the whole community” (Code 204, Young leader).*

## **C. Obstacles, challenges and enablers**

### **1) Hindering factors and challenges**

All the groups that have been working and the external informants that have followed close the youth activities admit that the processes have not been easy; that the path has been full of obstacles and challenges. The most common limitations, obstacles and challenges mentioned in the interviews and focus groups were: limited resources (economic and human), lack of support, time availability, insecurity, monitoring by SERES, to convince people, fewer members and emigration.

#### **▪ Limited resources:**

One of the limitations that the different groups have found relates to resources, both economical and human, and both on the side of SERES and on the youngsters'. On the side of SERES, some facilitators agree that they do not have enough resources to provide complete coverage and monitoring to all the groups involved. For example, the number of facilitators is too little when compared to the communities involved, they do not have own vehicle to reach easy the farthest communities, and they do not have a specific budget to monitor properly all the communities. The network of Ambassadors is helping to strengthen this weakness, because they should be the

ones responsible of monitoring the implementation of the action plans and the personnel of SERES are in contact with them constantly. Nevertheless, there are still not Ambassadors in all the communities.

*“I would say that the youth groups do not always accomplish to get all the resources needed to develop their plans. And we, as facilitators, do not have enough time to cover all the communities we work in, it is a challenge for use to organize better and manage to cover them all”* (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).

On the side of the youth leaders, one limitation mentioned in all the communities by different actors referred to the economic resources. As group, they do not have a constant income, so in many cases the limitation have been that they cannot buy the materials they need to properly implement the action plans. Also, sometimes they lack money to cover the travel expenses or participation costs to attend a JLP or other training. Many of the external informants affirm that they have seen the will and enthusiasm the youngsters have, but sometimes they lack the economic resources to accomplish the plan.

*“Within the Youth Network they have been working with SERES, that has allowed the group to be well-known, but the institution also needs to find something like a job, so they can develop through a micro-enterprise so they can continue to forge ahead. Because you know, the youngster can have all the enthusiasm for the topics, but if they do not have how to sustain their lives they will be unbalanced”* (Code 309, External informant).

*“Another difficulty is the economic issue, because always for any action you want to do resources are needed, to go from one place to another, for the didactic material, transportation... In the end, you always need to have funds”* (Code 310, External informant).

*“(Regarding what else they would want to get from SERES) Maybe agricultural tools for the group (for the orchards), like a hoe, nylon, etc. Because sometimes we ask in the houses but they do not have”* (Code 202, Young leader).

A solution they have found to mitigate this problem, is the creation of alliances with different institutions. For example the Municipalities, which have provided trees or have covered the expenses for the trainings.

*“We have been working with the Youth Network since 2010, and this group was the responsible of managing to obtain the support with the Municipality so the youngsters could attend the JLPs, and by now they have attended three trainings in Guatemala. Because they only have limited economic resources, the place where they live is really far, there is nothing, thus practically the Municipality is the one that had paid for the training of the youngsters involved”*. (Code 309, External informant)

- **Lack of support**

Linked with the former one, another obstacle found has been the lack of support from the local authorities, especially in the communities in Guatemala, where it has been partial or none existent. On the contrary, in the communities visited in El Salvador it is a very strong component.

*“Because even if the youth groups submit the requests, fill with their needs and the projects they want to do, but if the authorities do not sign the requests they cannot implement or accomplish their project because of the authorities” (Code 303, External informant).*

Lack of support refers also to the parents, and reflects directly in the attendance of the youth to the trainings. Whether the parents do not give permission to their sons and daughters because the training is in a far place and/or they do not know what is it about; or because the youngsters are responsible to fulfill some tasks in their homes that does leaves them enough time to attend to the other activities.

*“And the parents sometimes do not collaborate. Most of the people here works in agriculture, thus the parents instead that the youngsters attend to a talk, they prefer to take them to help them and work” (Code 302, External informant).*

*“Here in the community we are the ones doing everything, we ask support from SERES, from Rescate, in fact most of the commissions we have are with Rescate, thus we get support from them. But the COCODE and the Municipality still doesn't know about it” (Code 202, Young leader).*

- **Time availability**

Many of the youngsters are studying in school and/or working, sometimes they do not have enough “free time” to dedicate to their action plans and volunteer activities.

*“But we will have to see (to organize activities) because some youngsters are studying and have a lot of homework, so they cannot attend. Or they have to work, in agriculture for example. Thus, we have to see about the availability of time of the youngsters and also ours, because maybe we can one day but the youngsters cannot” (Code 201, Young leader).*

*“(One of the limitations) Is the time. To find the time to plan and organize; and to plan our time, because supposedly if we have made a plan we have to implement it, but we have not organized our time properly to be able to execute the plan. (...) The time is affects us to make the orchards, because some study during the morning, some during the afternoon, thus we need to see when is the best moment to do it” (Code 202, Young leader).*

- **Insecurity issues**

In both countries the insecurity and violence are a problem; issues related to gangs, extortions, homicides, etc. are part of the daily life. Since many of the communities where SERES works are located in poor and vulnerable areas, the youngsters are prone to the issues that happen. Therefore, the free-movement of people between communities has been limited, affecting the meetings and monitoring activities, because to do that people need to go from one place to another. For the parents, this can be a concern for not giving permission to their sons and daughters to attend to training, if it is too far away or in a “dangerous” place.

*“But we have had a hard time trying to meet, for the current situation happening in the municipality, of security. That is outside of our hands, it is something we cannot control, but it has been a problem that is affecting us a lot, because the parents do not want to give permission to their sons and daughters to assist, to move from one place to another, because when we meet the attendants come from many communities”* (Code 309, Young leader).

*“Another challenge we face in both countries, but mostly in El Salvador, is the issue with insecurity and violence; since it is kind of focused in the youth”* (Code 102, SERES Personnel).

*“Thus, for me that is the major challenge, in the sense that we cannot risk ourselves (as facilitators) and go anywhere anytime we want, but we need to really coordinate everything previously”* (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).

*“Now, Santiago<sup>8</sup> always tells me where he goes, what activities he does, the meetings and everything. Thus, I already know where he is going and we agree on it. Because I remember the first time, when he started, we were worried because we did not know if he was going to do something good or where he was going”* (Code 307, External informant).

*“There are many challenges, but currently the main one would be the social problem we have, because they are young and currently being young is something complicated. Being young has become almost a synonym of being delinquent, and that has make things more difficult”* (Code 310, External informant).

- **Monitoring by SERES**

SERES have been more focused in implementing JLP and training programs, thus there is not yet a monitoring record or method established. The communities where the JLP took place are supposed to be visited periodically after the first time, but due to not having enough human resources in many occasions this is not met. The youngsters admit that is demotivating when SERES does not provide accompaniment, and worst if they say they will come but they do not. Besides, a closer monitoring and accompaniment process gives more credibility and

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<sup>8</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent.

trustworthiness to the group of young leaders within the community, and may motivate and attract more young people.

*“We talked about how to monitor better the action plans from the different communities, and it was suggested to publish photos of the actions being implemented by each of the groups. Because the personnel SERES have are limited, they cannot go personally and follow each plan, is hard, so that was one of the most viable proposals. But of course, the most convenient thing would be that they will go to see the changes personally, but anyway, if that is not possible” (Code 204, Young leader).*

*“Yes it was hard, because both, the youngsters did not attended and SERES did not show up to give us credibility. There was a certain point where we did not wanted to do anything else, we got demotivated, but in the end we decided that we had to continue and continued” (Code 201, Young leader).*

#### ▪ **To convince people**

Since the young groups propose innovative or different things, it has been a challenge to obtain the acceptance or to be understood by the entire population. The youngsters argue that some of the difficulties they have had is to convince the rest of the people, because they do not want to follow the advices given, or do not want to collaborate. In some occasions, people have made fun of them or have criticized them because they are volunteers or their impact is not enough when compared to the negative things happening. But they all admit that, little by little, they have gained the trust and more people cooperate with them. Another obstacle they have found is that some people may only accept to collaborate if receiving something, and since they do not offer any material good people are reluctant to cooperate.

*“Thus, is not easy to change the paradigms, it is a big challenge to manage to change the hard drive of the people and tell them, no sir, the problems are happening because we have not done the things properly and we must change” (Code 301, Young leader).*

*“In the beginning we did many garbage collection campaigns to do our Project, because there were many things to do. And we heard comments that other families and other people with the mind closed were saying that it seemed that we did not have anything to do, that we would not get benefited doing that, that we were only spending time without getting any payment for it. But the payment we have is that we are working for our future and the future from our children and other people, so they can have later the things that we have today” (Code 201, Young leader).*

*“There are always people that have seen us in a negative way, even if they know that what we do is good, they do not want that we accomplish something that really have a big impact. There are persons that may not like someone from our group and because of that think that all what we do is wrong. (...) But as we were commenting, maybe in the*

*beginning it was 50-50 the ones on favour and the ones against, but now maybe it is only 10% against” (Code 204, Young leader).*

▪ **Fewer members**

All the groups affirm they have fewer members now when they started, thus not the 100% of the participants of the JLP continue on working through the time. But the in the ones that have continued the commitment is perceived. The reasons why some members have quitted vary, for example: they lack of interest; they live far away; they have married and have other responsibilities; they have a new job so they do not have enough time left; or they have emigrated and left the community or the country. All the groups affirm that working with fewer members is a challenge, because it means more work per person, and that it would be easier if the group would be larger. All of them are working on trying to recruit more members.

*“(We have now) 15 members. But is the group rotates, meaning that we started with 14 youngsters, and in some point we were almost 30, but because of studies or migration, the group has currently 16 members. But we are always motivated that the group will not decline” (Code 204, Young leader).*

*“When we go to the first JLP we were seven, but they were not interested, they did not want to change (...) Unlike the three of us, who felt identified” (Code 202, Young leader)*

- **Emigration**

Emigration is a problem in both countries, which specially affect vulnerable communities, like the ones SERES work with. Many youngsters decide to leave their communities, with the aim of finding more alternatives to find a job and improve their livelihoods, following the “American dream”. This represents a loss of human resources and human talents for the communities. Nevertheless, a group admitted that even if some members had emigrated, they kept connected to the group by sending remittances to fund some of the group expenses.

On a personal conversation with one of the young leaders, he admitted that his former plan was to cross the borders and go to the US, many of his brothers are there and he could not see any future for himself in the community. But, after his participation in the JLP and with SERES this have change, now he does not want to go, rather he wants to stay and work for his community.

*“For me, the migration is a serious issue. For example, in the last JLP I went, I met one of the leaders, who have had a strong and bright performance in the JLP she participated. She was telling me that now she has plans to go to the U.S. I mean, she wants to work for her community, but she does not have a job and she does not know what to do. Some of her relatives and her brothers are in the US, thus she has plans to go, even if it is not what she wants. (...) And it is very sad to know that the youngsters have to*

*give up their dreams to leave the country, and we do not know how they will survive that, they will not be able to develop as leaders, but they will just go and work... hard” (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).*

*“(When the members have left) Yes, we miss them, they leave a void or something, because their contribution is unique and because when being in the group, we share, we build a great friendship, we build trust, we love each other as brothers. So when someone leaves, you can feel it” (Code 204, Young leader).*

## **2) Enabling factors**

Opposite to the obstacles, during the interviews and focus groups the factors that enabled and facilitated the processes were also identified. The ones more often mentioned are: collaboration and support with other institutions, the methods SERES uses and its accompaniment, and the young leaders’ commitment and will.

### **▪ Collaboration with other institutions**

Having the support of other institutions had made the processes a little easier to the groups, because the institutions fill some of the voids that only the youngsters or SERES do not. Both, the young groups and the external informants, highlighted as positive the strong support from the municipalities in the two visited communities in El Salvador. This link has also enhanced the youngster to get benefited with other projects or from other associations; with trainings, funds, materials needed, traveling expenses, for example. One of the communities in Guatemala has only received partial support from the Municipality, with materials and human collaboration. The partnership with the Municipality not only represent a complementarity to the work the youngsters do, but also it could enhance the sustainability factor, since it represents an institution staying indefinite in time, opposite to the position of the NGOs, where the length of their stay is temporary.

For example in El Papaturre, which is considered as a role model, many of the activities they have done is with the partial support from other institutions or persons: volunteers from the US to work in the community, trash cans from provided by a soda company, coordination with the ADESCO and local committees, talks with experts, etc.

*“In SERES we believe in collaboration, and the idea is that we can collaborate with the communities. (...) For the last JLP, one of the local ambassadors started to organize the event with me, search for support from the municipality and other organizations. And we manage to get the place where the JLP took place, lodging for the facilitators, transportation for the youngsters that came from the farthest communities, food for the participants for one day... and that are examples of collaboration. Also, that creates a connection and helps that the institutions also feel part of the action plans, and feel the*

*commitment to keep going forward and keep working together” (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).*

In the four communities, the schools have provided support when they have been asked, especially by providing them with space to implement trainings or other events. The organization within the community and its response has also been important. Where the community is more organized, the groups have received more support; and it is easier to coordinate with other community institutions than with individual persons.

*“Recently, José<sup>9</sup> organized a workshop with his classmates, to share topics about values, etc. And they came to ask for permission to do it, and since it is not a negative activity, how could we say no? Thus we authorized and they implemented the activity” (Code 308, External informant).*

*“I think that the coordination with other institutions has facilitated the work. Also economically speaking, because we can do more activities when we work jointly with other people. (...) I mean they have their activities, but (with the Inter-institutional Board for the Environment) we work jointly reforestation campaigns, cine-forum, and meetings with people from other municipalities to share our experience...” (Code 310, External informant).*

*“The support from different organizations to the community, because they have seen the work the committee does and that motivates them to support us. And also motivates us. That the community supports us, when we ask for something they collaborate. For example, to raise funds we sell things or organize activities. There was a time we sold shuco<sup>10</sup> near the terrace, our moms cooked and we sell and the people went to buy. (...) Also the youngsters that have left the community and were in the group provide economical support to us” (Code 204, Young leader).*

Also for SERES, having alliances with other institutions enriches and strengthens its capacities and services. For example, some of the dynamics used in the trainings come from the manuals of Play for Peace; and the Permaculture workshop are co-facilitated by the IMAP (Meso-American Permaculture Institute).

#### ▪ **The approach of SERES**

**Local Ambassadors:** The network of Local Ambassadors constitutes a level between SERES and the youngsters in the communities, represented by the young leaders with larger trajectory within the institution. The aim is that this network provides a better coverage of a larger area, by improving the communication between SERES and the leaders in the communities and by

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<sup>9</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent.

<sup>10</sup> Shuco refers to a traditional home-made beverage.



strengthening the capacities of the ones involved. On one side, this enables a closer accompaniment and monitoring process. On the other side, they take the role of being organizers for the further trainings. Since they are locals, they are the experts on the area, the ones that know each place better, the ones that help in the logistics of the training, and the ones that invite other youngsters to join. The facilitators agree that it is easier that other people young if they are invited by a familiar person, not an unknown.

*“Yes, they (the Local Ambassadors) are key youngsters to amplify the impact of SERES in their region (...) Currently we are working to promote that the Ambassadors organize themselves as ambassadors, to keep the network of information, of contacts, of communication, strong and widespread” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

**Accompaniment process:** The close presence of SERES motivates the youngsters to keep on working, and it is perceived as a positive and helpful that the facilitators are always open and available to support the young’s needs that may emerge. The company of SERES also gives more credibility, meaning that to see the external backup that the youth group has to enhance trustworthiness and support within the community.

*“The impact in our group has been great, because we did not expect it to be like that, that SERES takes us into account. Because after having participated in the JLP and in all the processes, we never imagined that they will follow up our process. And it has been really nice because SERES has always been aware of us” (Code 203, Young leader).*

**Others:** The possibility of getting to travel and getting to know new places because the trainings are organized in different locations, is also a motivation for the participants.

The dynamics and playfulness of the JLP was mentioned as positive by all the groups, and it was rare that they youngsters mention something negative about the JLP. Another aspect highlighted was that during the JLP they could express their ideas and proposals without being judged, because all what they said was valid. Thus, the JLP provided a safe space where they can feel free to express themselves.

Since SERES offers a progressive path in their non-formal education trainings, the youngsters interested have the opportunity to grow within the institution, to learn more and eventually, to get an income from their work within SERES because they also need to earn money to sustain themselves. This growing opportunity is also motivating for them.

▪ **The Young leaders commitment and will**

The commitment, will and initiative from the young leaders have been recognized, both within the groups and from the external informants. This is what enables that these processes continue happening, both at the local level in each community and within SERES.

*“We can see that with the first program SERES launched the youngsters can express their opinions, what they think, they start losing the fear of talking in public. Thus, we see they can take a protagonist role in their communities and change their living environment. (...) In this programs one learn to take away the fear, to talk, and everybody can see how they go and transform the activities, they thoughts, evolving” (Code 309, Young leader).*

*“For me the main motivation is my will and passion for a better world. That is the will I have, because through this processes I can make a change. The passion for a better world, for the Mother Nature and for taking care of the environment. That is the motor that maintain me working on these projects” (Code 202, Young leader).*

*“I feel that one of the factors that have facilitated the things is the unity in the group, and our persistency. Because we have always had difficulties, for example, when we want to implement a project but we do not have enough funds, we get discouraged. But we always encourage and motivate ourselves that we have to continue and to implement the project” (Code 204, Young leader).*

## IV. DISCUSSION

In this section the results gathered will be discussed. The first part summarizes the perceived changes and impacts, analyzing how the youth leadership programs are empowering the young people to build sustainable communities. To begin, the changes regarding knowledge and practices will be addressed, followed by the attitudinal and emotional changes identified. The second part discusses the project of SERES from a theoretical perspective within the development discourse framework.

### A. Perceived changes and impact

#### 1) Knowledge and Practices

The information transmitted in the JLP focus basically in environmental issues, it has scientific bases and refers to five topics, five global crises that put at risk the systems that currently sustain our life: (1) Water, (2) Overpopulation, (3) (Unequal) Access to Food, (4) Global Warming and (5) Loss of Biodiversity. Even if the JLP is a short time to go in depth in all of these topics, the participants affirm to have learned new useful things in the JLP and the other trainings. The accessibility and quality of education in Guatemala and El Salvador vary from place to place, given the limitation of it in the rural areas, the participants affirmed that the topics learned in the workshops have enriched their knowledge regarding environmental issues and that is something new or with a different focus to what they learn in school.

*“What I learned was about the ecological print, the three R’s for waste management, I knew how was our planet in the beginning and how it is now...”* (Code 204, Young leader).

*“In my family no one has done something like this, in fact my brothers did not even finished their studies. Thus, in my case, I am going to the trainings and my parents can notice the benefits they bring, not only to myself but to the family. They are happy because of this achievement I am reaching”* (Code 202, Young leader).

*“Unfortunately, in our communities we do not have proper environmental education, which is important. Thus, I think that there has been a big change, and the people even doing small or big actions, are aware that the environment is something we need to take care”* (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).

*“Before I did not know about what was happening in the surrounding, the pollution and everything. But since I participated with SERES I start to inquire, about development, but not one that comes easy, but one that could be sustainable”* (Code 202, Young leader).

The changes in practices were described in the Results section. Most of them have to do with environmental issues, including both personal and group changes. These young leaders believe that the change begins with them, by changing their own thoughts and their own actions, committing to having a multiplier effect within their families, friends, their community and eventually other communities, other municipalities, other regions, etc. They self-identify as agents of change, and through giving the example and spreading the word, others are motivated to get involved. In fact, all of the groups have noticed that some neighbor, friend or persons from other communities have seen their initiatives and want to reproduce similar actions.

*“I think that the first change is personal. The ones that have participated now have a different concept of what is happening; I think they start being responsible with their lifestyle, with what they eat, with what they spend, why they are going to spend it, etc. I think that the change has started in them, a personal change, and they are inviting other persons”* (Code 103, Facilitator and Ambassador).

*“We have a small orchard in the house and that inspire other persons to do it, they ask us how and everything. Currently there are two more people that have their mini orchard in their house, and sometimes we share seeds”* (Code 203, Young leader).

Most of the changes in practices respond to the most immediate priorities, for example, avoiding trash in the streets, promoting recycling, implementing reforestation campaigns, avoiding water pollution, starting orchards in their houses, etc. At first these actions have an approach of fixing the problem, but some of them have evolved to tackle the roots of the problem, making it more efficient since they will not need to fix it every time. Another examples are that they are advocating against the use of disposable packages at local stores, promoting the use of cloth bags instead of plastic, deciding to at home or, if eating out, or choosing not to buy take-away food to avoid the use of unnecessary packaging. They have prepared proposals to the municipality to create a protected area or improved the waste management system, started to work in campaigns of sexual education against overpopulation, contributing with campaigns against violence, etc.

*“We have seen how people have stopped using disposable things, and currently what is happening is that the local stores are stopping to sell water in disposable bottles (...) and that is a big change, they are only selling in returnable packages and aluminum cans. Which is still a problem for the health, but not regarding the trash generated”* (Code 104, Facilitator and Ambassador).

In addition, there have been actions that go beyond the environmental perspective and respond to the general wellbeing of the community. For example, the creation of a collecting center of trash where all the neighbors can dispose theirs, the project of acquirement of street lights for

the community, the creation of recreational spaces and the promotion of social meetings and events. Besides that, there have been people who participated with SERES and because of their leadership and recognition in the community have managed to participate in the local institutions (ADESCO, local committees, the Municipality, the Students' Association in the school, the church, etc.). This has enhanced their power as multiplier, by sharing their views and objectives within other institutions and by giving them the opportunity to influence and participate in decision-making processes within these institutions.

*“Some of the youth are now representatives at a local level. Because in El Papaturo there are several groups and committees, and now the president of the ADESCO is one of these young leaders, the president of the Environmental Groups is another. Others are participating in different groups, thus yes, for me there has been a transformation that can really be seen”* (Code 104, Young leader).

*“Santiago<sup>11</sup> likes to participate, he is a very enthusiastic young man, leader in his class because he likes to arrange many activities, and when he proposes things to his classmates they go. Recently, political elections were organized at the School level, and his group won. The students had to organize groups (parties) and explain their proposal. Thus, the students analyze the proposals and his group was the one that convinced to the majority of the students here, so they won. That is one of the positive things I have seen.”* (Code 308, External informant).

In general, the external informants also perceive that the participation of the youth in groups like the ones promoted by SERES can be a factor to prevent them to participate in negative activities or groups, like gangs, violence, etc.

*“Well I see that before the youth did not do well, with the danger, the gangs and everything. Now, there is no danger, the youngsters are going well”* (Code 307, External informant).

## **2) Attitudes and feelings**

Some of the strongest impacts that SERES programs have had are not material, but regard to the attitudes, thoughts and capacities they have awakened in the participants. All the interviewees and participants of the focus groups have recognized that the leadership programs have impacted and transformed the youth attitudes and behavior. In fact, this outcome responds to SERES approach: starting with personal change that evolves into promoting major changes and involving more people in youth lead projects. Even if not all participants commit to the implementation of their action plans right after completing the JLP, those who are committed affirm that they will not leave the group any time soon.

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<sup>11</sup> Fake name, to ensure the confidentiality agreed in the informed consent.

*“Because everything starts with oneself, with the family, the community, the municipality, the department, the country and then the world. Thus, we have this thought, that we start from there because we cannot expect a change in the world if we do not start the change in the house. And with the group mates we will accomplish it, because we started only three, now we are seven or eight, and we keep on growing. Each one has his or her motivations to be here, not obliged” (Code 202, Young leader).*

*“I think that is one of the accomplishments that happens during the processes, because we invite them to lead and they end up leading processes, that they want to do, because they chose and decide to do them” (Code 103, Facilitator and Ambassador).*

*“The role SERES have had is of raising awareness, because I do not see SERES as someone that executes, but someone that plants a seed. (...) And then, their impact is that if in the first place we were 20 persons in the workshop, and now there are still 5 of us working, we can see that it is possible. So the JLP SERES brought has not been in vain, because there are at least five of us working on it. And that is the impact that SERES is having” (Code 203, Young leader).*

*“I feel that the parents of the youth involved in this process, the ones that have participated with SERES or with a Committee, I feel they feel proud of their children, even if sometimes they do not express it because of how they are; because currently we can see the situation happening in the country with the youth. Even in other communities, people tell them “I have seen your son somewhere”, and they feel good, because they are leaders and are doing positive things” (Code 204, Young leader).*

Participants from all of the focus groups and external informants affirmed that their attitudes and behaviors have changed after participating in the JLP. They identify the JLP as a process that helps them to lose the fear or shyness, strengthens their self-esteem and/or helps to discover strengths and attributes in themselves. After the process they usually, self-identify as leaders and agents of change that are more empowered. They affirm to find more will and more courage to be more sociable, to speak in front of other people, to share their ideas, etc. Based on this empowerment and self-discovery, some affirm to have gained more hope over the future, since they become aware of the power they can have over themselves, their surroundings, their environment and their future.

*“I think is very important to enhance the youth leadership, so they can develop their real capacities, they discover all what they have to give. Because sometimes, no one provide an orientation or guide them, but through those workshops they discover their attributes and capacities, and that is very important (...) I believe that with their leadership they get an active role, because if they would not have that leadership vision they will get stagnated. So their role is that they lead, they boost processes for the benefit of their community” (Code 309, External informant)*

*“There are several things that I liked from the process, but the one that highlights is the meditation. To imagine the future, to imagine a quiet place, a place where one can feel good, and to find your inner peace. That was something I have not found until that process, and it is what I liked the most and I keep liking it”* (Code 202, Young leader).

*“Yes we have changed a lot, because now we are persons that are aware, with critical thinking, personas that act. We are always looking how we can help the others, telling them things when is needed, we do not have fear of talking when regarding these topics”* (Code 203, Young leader).

*“Regarding my leadership, I feel I have grown, because before I was super shy, I could not even say good afternoon or good day. But now I have surpassed it, even in the Church the people tell me I have changed a lot, they ask what I am doing. Also, some techniques I have learnt we use them for the coordination of the group in the church, and some activities we use in the JLP I use them in the church and they are working perfectly. Thus, I feel my level of self-esteem has improved, besides (the habits of) not throwing the garbage on the streets, generating less garbage, etc.”* (Code 202, Young leader).

## **B. SERES from a theoretical perspective**

### **1) SERES as a Participatory Development Approach**

When examining the aims and objective of SERES, it can be seen that their approach fits with the concept of participatory development. In broad terms, the aim of participatory development *“is to increase the involvement of socially and economically marginalized people in decision-making over their own lives. The assumption is that participatory approaches empower local people with the skills and confidence to analyze their situation, reach consensus, make decisions and take action, so as to improve their circumstances. The ultimate goal is more equitable and sustainable development”*<sup>12</sup>. Participatory approaches emerged as an attempt to challenge the *status quo* promoted by top-down development planning, and to empower the recipients of aid. But since the *status quo* was at risk, the largest actors in the development industry institutionalized it thus failing to accomplish its original objective.

Based on the results obtained, SERES does focus on and promote the involvement of socially and economically marginalized people in decision-making over their own lives. Even if it is not the only requirement, they mainly focus on communities with limited resources; and many of the youth involved affirms that their attitude has changed after participating in the JLP and they are more motivated, confident and willing to work for their community. Their approach is bottom-up, given that the trainings focus on the transfer of knowledge about environmental

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<sup>12</sup> Guijt and Shah 1998, in Kothari 2005

issues and leadership skills; but the young leaders are free to choose their path and propose what they want, according to what they identify and prioritize as problem. The youth are in charge of conducting their own processes. They also have the opportunity to become facilitators and to be part of the governing board of the institution, increasing the ownership of the processes, and having the opportunity of having an influence on the institution activities and decisions, to some extent. In addition, having different levels for the trainings provide the opportunity to the participants to grow within the leadership programs, reducing the gap between “experts” and locals. Even if technical knowledge is managed and taught, the local knowledge is also valued. The dichotomy of “us” and “them”, “outsider” and “local” is reduced because other young men and women are facilitating trainings and conducting processes, and they can recognize themselves as equal. The topics with which they deal are mainly environmental, minimizing the dichotomy of “traditional” and “modern”.

Nevertheless, the influence the leadership programs can have on building more equitable and sustainable development can be limited due to the fact that the action plans are mainly focus in environmental issues. Meaning that they address mainly the environmental side of sustainable development, but other issues regarding equity and the social side of sustainability are left aside. On one side, the JLPs focus on five topics addressing environmental issues, which are clearly important and fundamental to sustain human life. But on the other side, people from rural communities are not the major threats to the environmental means that sustain life, they are neither the major polluters nor consumers, and certainly they are not the ones with the largest ecological footprint. The approach of starting change at small scale, at the personal, family or community level is important; but until the largest polluters and the largest consumers do not change their practices, there will be polluted rivers, deforestation, etc. In these countries, many of the major polluters are represented by mining companies, monocultures and industries (sugar cane, palm for oil, etc.), managed by foreign companies or the oligarchy of the countries, which are distant from the influence of the youth groups. An approach that deals with the stakeholders at this level is outside the apolitical aim of SERES, but information about the complex socio-political context of these countries could be included in the trainings. This would help the participants to have a more clear perspective on the context and rules they have to deal with, because they are not detached of this reality.

Power (or politics), in the current global contexts involves significant degrees of social confrontation and contradiction, inherent and imminent characteristics in a process of social change and transformation, especially in the context of Third World societies, like this case. This is not a comfortable situation for the development industry, but some authors argue that when participatory actions are “depoliticized” they serve to justify, legitimize, and perpetuate



the current neo-liberal hegemony; instead of facing and transforming it (Kothari 2005). In this case, SERES is an apolitical institution and so are their programs; which could be a constraint in their long-term performance. Given that they are working in societies like Guatemala and El Salvador, countries characterized for being very unjust and unequal, to have a real change a structural transformation is needed which allows building a fair society where everyone can fulfill their basic needs. Therefore, changing the *status quo* and the structural problems of these countries should embrace a holistic approach, and the will to change from stakeholders at all levels.

However, there are many young men and women that participate with the leadership programs and are involved in politics at a local level, but this cannot be addressed directly or exclusively to the activities of SERES. In fact, many of the youngsters affirm that the JLP has helped them to find or to strengthen their voice, their will and their leadership skills; it has made them to be interested in the environment; and it has enhanced them to be more active within their community, their municipality and their country. Some affirm that this process has made them question themselves about the current socio-economic situation; that it has made them want to get positions in the local or municipal government to be able to make decisions and have more impact in their community; and/or that it has made them changing their vision about the future. Currently, some of the young men and women are also participating in local politics: local committees, civil society organizations, in the COCODEs or ADESCOs, in the Municipalities. Besides, since their main concern is the environment, some have been lead to be involved in other political movements or activities. For example: resistance against mining companies, demonstrations to raise water rights and awareness, or proposals to enhance municipal actions towards the forest conservation. These are not necessarily a direct outcome from SERES programs, but are the kind of actions that at a medium and long try to challenge the *status quo*. Many of this young men and women carry with the burden shaped throughout centuries of injustice and repression, and with the “rebellion” seed<sup>13</sup> and will to challenge the *status quo*. Therefore, SERES trainings provide the tools that support them and catalyze their processes (whether with other organizations or not). But the challenge that remains, as Kothari (2005) describes, is to find long-term answers to the question: how can critical voices be effective within a neoliberal development agenda?

Another aspect that can be highlighted is that in the two communities visited in El Salvador, both groups are integrated and coordinating with other institutions and other groups. These have

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<sup>13</sup> An example can be read here: <http://www.serescentroamerica.org/llegue-seres-sin-haber-invitado/> The story of a young men (21 years), interested in local politics, who has been accepted as the youth representative in the Council of the People (*Consejo de los Pueblos*), which usually is not for young people since in the Mayan culture the only ones with authority are the elders.

allowed them to enlarge their impact, and since both are related to the local municipalities it opens the possibility, to some extent, to have an influence in the official institutions. For example, the fact that El Papaturre is a member of the Inter-Institutional Board for the Environment, shows the possibility that they can have as community leaders, to have a bigger influence, propose and negotiate at the same level than other Environmental Committees, NGO's and some Governmental institutions. For the case of Panchimalco, an interesting aspect is that some of the young leaders with SERES are also workers of the Municipality. The strong coordination with the Municipal Authority (even negotiating a further official agreement) is also an important action that may bring the youngsters closer to the decision-making spaces. In addition, the Youth Network is well established and has experience co-working with other institutions, opening more opportunities for the youngsters.

As institution, SERES should enhance and dedicate more effort to build these types of partnerships, which, as seen on the results section, have clearly facilitated the processes for the youngsters. A positive example of coordination among stakeholders is the experience of El Papaturre. Here the first action plans focused on immediate actions like garbage campaigns, but through the years it evolved and went more in-depth to tackle some of the root causes of the problem. They managed to reach consensus with most of the community and address the root cause of the production of the amount of trash, by banning to sell products in disposable non-recyclable packages in their community. This has changed the offer of the local market and the consumer habits; building an innovative solution for the problem identified and tackling into the root cause of the problem. Nevertheless, not all the communities visited have had the same accompaniment and support by SERES, indicating that more time, effort and resources should be invested to provide the services more equally, because the isolated implementation of a JLP is clearly not enough. The results showed that the ones having less monitoring from SERES have found more obstacles along their processes. The quality of the monitoring and accompaniment process should be equally or more important than the number of JLP implemented. Especially because if the medium term support is neglected, the JLP will only raise the expectations without creating opportunities to execute these expectations which could be counterproductive, creating instead frustration and hopelessness in the youth participants because of their inability to change the situation (MercyCorps 2015).

The groups and networks being built by the youth involved in SERES are additional positive aspects, because it is a way of building social capital among the youth at both, local and regional level. Within these groups and networks, the young leaders can share their experiences, cooperate, learn and support each other. The youth participating with SERES recognized shared characteristics among themselves, even if they come from different countries; they share a

similar history and similar contexts, which are aspects that usually help to build social capital. For example, they are promoting themselves in the social networks as “Young Leaders from Latin America”, which shows the shared roots and contexts. By strengthening the community social capital, its capacity to build and conduct transformative processes is strengthened as well. When the social interventions promote active participation and enhance ownership, the outcomes will be more effective, productive, long-lasting and democratic, and these are some aspects that could be positively-influenced by the leadership programs at mid- and long-term. Especially, because the social capital and leadership models of many of these communities was broken in the recent decades, during the civil wars; initiatives like SERES that aim to build these aspects are fundamental and complementary for other initiatives for development (Canal et al., 2007; Rojas Andrade, 2013; Urbina Gaitán, 2009).

## 2) SERES as a Post-Development Initiative

As mentioned in the introduction, in the 80's and 90's critics to the legitimacy of the paradigm of development were done by many scholars. Thus, different ideas of alternatives to development started to emerge, and the scholars agreed in some of the characteristics; this tendency is known as post-developmentalism (Peet and Hartwick, 2009; Rhanema and Bawtree 1997). In this section, an analysis of the approach of SERES will be done within the framework of the post-development theory.

One of the characteristics the scholars agree is that post-development focus on radical pluralism, which summarized would be “**Think and act locally**”. SERES aim has been to facilitate and connect global science, initiatives, theories, etc. with the youth at the local level, which otherwise would not be able to have easy access to it. However, most of their activities take place at the grassroots level, where they are strengthening leaders that are choosing their priorities and their activities. The world is globalized enough, and the Western categories, forms of thought, behavior and practices are widespread; the local models (in this context) do not exist in a pure state, but in a complex hybridization with the dominant models. Logically, many of the solutions, priorities, and proposals that the young leaders work with, fall into these Western or hybrid categories. It takes longer time to “learn” and dare to think outside these categories and framework of thinking. Nevertheless the actions of the youth groups do focus on thinking and acting locally, with their community as priority (including some collective or communal actions) and some with a future vision of expansion.

Other characteristic is that when people are thinking and acting locally, they found others who share their position, joining in *coalitions of thinkers and activists*. In this case SERES network has open the possibility of getting to know people with similar interests that face similar

challenges. But the topics of the trainings and the information transferred do not necessarily trigger the creation of coalitions of thinkers and activists. As mentioned before, some of the youngsters do become activists and get involved in politics, but that cannot be exclusively attributed to the leadership programs.

Another characteristic is the search for **simple living** on the ecological and spiritual level, instead of the modern, urban, capitalist way of living. The main driver of SERES is ecological sustainability, which matches with the idea of simple living at the ecological level. Even if sustainability is a utopic concept, it is the final aim of the youngsters' activities. From the name of the workshop, "Young Leaders for the Pachamama" the connection with the concept of Mother Earth can be seen, thus the approach is that we all (human and nature) are part of the same system that we should respect and take care, and try to live in harmony and peace with it. The spiritual level can be more complicated, especially for all the situations that happen in the communities. During the JLP there is a section of exercises of meditation, in order that they can find their inner peace and their inner power. Thus, the tool is taught but each situation varies.

An additional characteristic is the **reappraising of non-capitalist societies**, meaning that the previous "non-developed" world may have not been so bad after all. SERES is more involved with environmental issues, than with economic or social/political ones. Within the environmental framework, they do promote and valorize some of the "previous non-capitalist society" assets. For example, in one of the activities of the JLP, the participants "travel through time", inquiring in the past of their community, analyzing the present and visualizing a future. When possible, an elder person of the community is invited so he or she can share their experience and knowledge with the youngsters. This vary because there can be relatively new communities and communities with long history, indigenous, non-indigenous, etc. Another example is the permaculture, promoting to grow their own food, to use native seeds, etc.

Respect for the **diversity** and meaningful **consultations** with those directly affected. SERES is flexible for adapting to the different contexts and needs of the participants and willing to hear their opinions, ideas and proposals. In the end, they are the ones conducting their plans. The facilitators are from the locality, enabling a safe space without prejudices and preconceptions that "outsiders" may have. In addition, the participation of the youngsters with this program is **voluntarily, not imposed**, and they even have to make a symbolic investment that standby their interests.

*“An important and peculiar aspect of the philosophy and acting of SERES is that in the (JLP) processes, actions are never imposed. Instead, updated information with scientific and social base is provided, so the youngsters can make their conclusions, relating them to their local contexts y proposing solutions coming from them” (Code 102, SERES Personnel).*

*“What impacted me the most regards the sustainability of our country. Because without knowing, we are collaborating to excel of other countries, when there are ways to make our country to excel. We can buy products produced in our country, thus the money stays here instead of going to other countries. Also we could cooperate, so we do not have to depend from other countries” (Code 202, Young leader).*

The main driver of the post-development theories is to search “alternatives to development” as a reaction to the failure of the traditional paradigm of development. These initiatives have been mainly undertaken by grassroots movements, urban and rural local communities and the informal sector, which would be the approach of SERES. Therefore their actions of building social capital and local leaders would be in line with the post-development theories’ discourse. Nevertheless, these theories also claim that new social structures, built on different conceptions of economy, politics, and knowledge, fall short because they do not directly influence the structure of the concerned issues. Depending on the evolution of each group, some can go more in-depth by being involved or building stronger grassroots movements and try to tackle the structure of the problems, and some can focus only on the surface issues.

A study done by Mercy Corps (2015) shows that when empowering and training youth programs are not paired with meaningful governance reforms, they can have counter-productive results because instead of giving hope, they create frustration, anger and hopelessness when the youth faces with the unjust system that is not changing. Empowered and confident young people are not the types that will sit quietly by when the surrounding system is disappointing and unjust. The job of development is to offer the tools for a better future, therefore empowering local reformers and youth to build more fair and inclusive societies is an important bet; but for success, this action should be coordinated with the commitment of stakeholders at the different levels. Given that SERES has only been in the field since 2009, the time span is too short be able to evaluate the mid- and long-term impact. Nevertheless, is clear that the coordination with other stakeholders and decision-making partners should be enhanced to support having a larger and more sustained impact.

In addition, since the aim is to build sustainable communities, it is important to remember that the concept of sustainable development intertwines three different aspects: environmental, socio-cultural and economic. In the case of SERES and the youth leaders the environmental aspect has been really strong; but the other two have been partially or totally left aside. This

aspect is fundamental, but the challenge of this utopic concept is to actually balance, with further actions, these three complementary aspects. Given the complex reality and problems of both countries, to build sustainable livelihoods must also involve a change in the political and economic structure; specially, because on the recent decades the civil wars eliminated or displaced the community leaders and organizations. But these leadership models need to be connected with social, political and economic framework of both countries, because the environmental problems are not isolated from these, nor the action plans, livelihoods and opportunities of the youth. Because currently, plenty of hope, will and determination can be witnessed in the youth from the communities visited; but long-lasting changes are not built on hope and will isolated. A whole understanding of the context is needed to have a holistic perspective of the situations the youth leaders are dealing with to avoid rising expectations in vain, which could be counterproductive in a longer term.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The information collected showed the perceptions of the impact that SERES' programs have had in the lives of the youth participating and committed with them and on the people around. These impacts are not only represented by tangible products and actions, like reforestation or cleaning campaigns; but also on identified changes in attitudes and behaviors, like self-esteem, leadership, will, resilience, empowerment, etc. Thus, the young leaders involved with SERES are not only changing their habits and leading actions to tackle the environmental problems in their communities; but they are also spreading their knowledge and attitudes to others, and using their leadership capacities and knowledge gained in the different institutions they are participating with.

Usually, the action plans that the young leaders conduct begin by addressing immediate environmental problems. But there are some groups, which, throughout time, have started questioning about the causes of the problems and start dealing with it and getting involved with other institutions. The performance that the different communities have had does not depend only on the young leaders team itself, but is also influenced by external factors, both positively and negatively. In general, each of the groups has people that have the will and commitment to work for the wellbeing of their communities, but clearly having better collaborative relations and more support from other institutions ease the process very much, because these institutions can fill the void that SERES or the groups cannot do by themselves. This void is represented, for example, by the limitation in human or economic resources which ends up hindering their performance, or by lacking credibility or support from the rest of the people in the communities, which can be improved by being backed by an institution. Other hindering factors identified relate to contextual issues, like the security situation, the loss of members due to different reasons including emigration, or time availability constraints. On the positive side, SERES methods and approach obtained really good feedback, being identified as a positive factor that has facilitated the process. The monitoring and accompaniment by SERES was both identified as positive and negative depending of the community, which is an aspect to highlight since SERES should provide its services equally to all of the communities.

Clearly, the youth groups have the objective to achieve sustainability in their minds. But the concept is too complex, even considered as utopic, and can be influenced by many external factors. Given that SERES has only been working for six years, it is too early to determine if these communities will manage to achieve sustainable livelihoods. The action plans of the youth groups focus mainly on environmental issues, for example reducing their ecological footprint or conducting different activities with the aim of reaching sustainability. Nevertheless, the concept

of sustainable development involves other aspects that are partially left aside by this approach. In addition, the largest impact to the environment in these countries is usually not caused directly by people from the communities, but by big enterprises, mining companies, etc.; which are outside from the scope of SERES. However, it is important to highlight that many of the youth participating in the leadership programs, has managed to get involved also in the local committees, local government, local organizations and initiatives, etc.; multiplying their impact as agents of change. Given that the main struggle is to focus on the environment, it can easily lead to the ones involved to confront “larger forces” and get focused on changing some power relations, since the situation of many of the natural resources in these countries is contested. For example, the right to access quality water, the pollution that mining companies can have, monoculture, etc.

The participatory approach of SERES is empowering local people with the skills and confidence to analyze their situation, organize themselves and take action to tackle the problems they prioritize and the activities they propose. The trainings are providing new knowledge through an innovative approach that is appealing for many people. Even when not all the people attending to the JLPs stay with SERES, the ones engaged do not plan to leave anytime soon. The JLP enhance that people from different communities and neighbor countries establish a network, to share experiences, knowledge, ideas, etc. Given the short existence of SERES, it is too early to know the impact this network can have, but definitely it has the potential to strengthen further social changes. Both countries suffered in the recent decades a harsh civil war, characterized for repression and elimination of almost any kind of organizations and leaders. Initiatives like SERES are needed to catalyze the reconstruction of the community leadership, the social capital locally and regionally, and the individual loss of shyness and fear. And all of these help to develop an active participation of the society.

This initiative has some characteristics of post-developmentalism. For example, it is focused on thinking and acting locally; it is not focused on economic growth and on promoting the modernization of the society, like it is usually done within the dominant paradigm. It mainly focuses on promoting a simple way of living, in harmony with the Pachamama, and it provides a safe space where the young leaders can express themselves and propose how they think they should act, as response of the problems they identify they are having. The young leaders participate voluntarily; building a bottom-up approach where they are chose their own processes.

Due to limited economic and human resources and time availability this dissertation by no means pretends to be an exhaustive evaluation of the JLPs. But it aims to provide an insight to



the youth leaders' experiences and a brief qualitative evaluation, mainly based on understanding the participants' stories, opinions and feelings. As any other development-related initiative SERES is not perfect, having some weaknesses and some strengths. What is important is that they are willing to learn and constantly improved. Given the great diversity of the world, I believe that a tailor-made approach has many positive outcomes since it tries to adapt to each of the contexts. I believe it has large potential to build social change, but in medium and longer term and not isolated, but connected to a proper understanding of the environmental, social, political and economic context. Changes in the government and power structures must be modified as well, to be able to tackle the problems from its structure and roots. Certainly, these empowered young men and women with their commitment and actions are agents of change willing to work for a better world.

*"Utopia is on the horizon: When I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps, and it is ten steps further away. What is Utopia for? It is for this, for walking."*

- Eduardo Galeano

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* -Margaret Mead

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## VII. ANNEXES

### Annex 1. Protocol of the interview with the personnel of SERES, translated to English (The original one is in Spanish)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Interview code: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Interview Protocol (Part 1 context)

**Informed Consent:** My name is Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera and I am currently a student at the Masters in Development Studies at the Palacky University in the Czech Republic. I'm working on my thesis in collaboration with SERES Association, with the aim of analyzing the impact of the leadership programs (JLP) in the young people and communities SERES Association work with.

These interviews have the **purpose** to learn more in depth about the process, history and motivations of SERES Association, in order to have a more comprehensive idea of the context and situation and thus complement the information collected during the field visits.

I would appreciate your cooperation by answering the following questions, based on your knowledge and experience. Everything we talk is confidential and the personal data and information you share with me will be saved with codes in order to keep the anonymity. If you allow me, I would like to record the audio to avoid losing any detail and make it easier for me transcription. No one else will have access to this recording. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if you do not want to answer any questions or wish to end the interview at any time, you can. Do you agree to the interview? Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

-----

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

#### Context and overview of SERES

- 1) For how long have you been working/ collaborating with SERES?
  - a. How was SERES born? Could you please tell the story briefly?
- 2) What was your motivation to work on this? How did you get involved with the institution? Please describe briefly your personal story with SERES.
- 3) What is your position or job description? What is your role within the institution?
- 4) What is the (organizational) structure of SERES?

#### About the leadership program (JLP/YLP = Young leaders for the pachamama)

- 5) Could you briefly describe the leadership program (JLP) you work with?
  - a. What is the main purpose of the program?
- 6) What expectations SERES have before implementing these workshops?
- 7) Have you participated / implement a JLP workshop?  
How was that experience for you? How have the participants reacted or responded?
- 8) According to your opinion, which have been the biggest challenges faced with the JLP? (when planning or implementing them)
- 9) What factors have enabled the process of the JLP?
- 10) Could you tell me how the action plans are formulated and what is included? Who is responsible for formulating them?

- 11) About the workshop itself,
  - a. How it is decided where the workshops take place?
  - b. How it is decided who participates?
  - c. How many people can participate?
  - d. Is there any requirement that the participants must meet?
  - e. Have you noticed any trends in the characteristics of the participants attending (age, gender, education, etc.)
- 12) Is someone monitoring or evaluating the workshops and/or action plans? Could you describe the monitoring process given?
  - a. Do you have any suggestion on how the monitoring and evaluation could be improved?
- 13) Are there any institution that supports the formulation and/or implementation of the JLP workshops? What institutions? How do they support?
- 14) According to your opinion, What factors would indicate that the process have been successful in the communities
- 15) Is there any community that has dropped or has been pull outside of the SERES' processes for some reason?

**About the target communities**

- 16) Do you know the work that is being carried out in these four communities? Could you describe what projects /activities are taking place here?
  - a. Chuirijquiac, Cantel, Quetzaltenango, GT
  - b. Saquiyá, Patzún, Chimaltenango, GT
  - c. Panchimalquito, San Salvador, ES
  - d. El Papaturro, Suchitoto, ES

\* Do you have a copy of the action plans of these communities? Could you share them with me?
- 17) How did you chose or involved with these communities? What expectations did you have when you started working there?
- 18) Who are working or are in charge of the projects / activities taking place? (Young leader, group, etc.)
  - a. How was this group formed?
- 19) What changes have you seen in these communities?
  - a. So far, how are the results being measured? How is the monitoring and evaluation carried out?
  - b. Who carry out the monitoring in these communities? SERES, the community, some other institution?
  - c. Are there any records of the monitoring to these communities that you can share with me?
- 20) What challenges or difficulties have you found to carry out the processes in these fore communities?
- 21) What factors do you think have enabled the processes in these communities?
- 22) Would you consider the process in these communities has been successful so far? Why?
- 23) Are there other institutions that support or cooperate with the work the young leaders are and their work? If so, what institutions and how do they support?

**Reflection / Comments**

- 24) What are your expectations for the future of SERES and this leadership program?
- 25) Are there any other documents that you could share with me to complement these information?

Do you have anything else to add that was not asked or included?  
Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you for the time and the information provided.

**Annex 2. Protocol of the Focus Groups with the young leaders, translated to English (The original one is in Spanish)**

**FOCUS GROUP WITH YOUNG LEADERS**

**Informed Consent:** My name is Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera and I am currently a student at the Masters in Development Studies at the Palacky University in the Czech Republic. I'm working on my thesis in collaboration with SERES Association, with the aim of analyzing the impact that the leadership programs (JLP) is having in the young people and communities SERES Association work with.

As I understand SERES works in many communities, therefore four have been picked, two in El Salvador and two in Guatemala, because they have been outstanding somehow. Yours is one of the four chosen because we want to learn from your stories and experiences. Today I would like to talk to you (make a focus group) with the **purpose** to learn more about your motivations, goals and stories related to your work in the JLP and SERES. I would appreciate if you can help me by answering the following questions, based on experience and knowledge. The questions will be about your involvement with SERES, how it started, what projects and activities have you worked and are you working with (derived from the Plan of Action), etc. ; so there is no right or wrong answer, any opinion or idea you want to share is welcome. This activity will last about half a day (4 - 5 hours).

Everything we talk is confidential and the personal data, photographs and information you share with me will be saved with codes in order to keep the anonymity. If you allow me, I would like to record the audio of the activity to avoid losing any detail and make it easier for me transcription. No one else will have access to this recording. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if you do not want to answer any questions or wish to finish your participation at any time, you can.

All the information collected will be analyzed and the final results will be provided to SERES Association, for them to use in the best way. If you want I can also send a copy through the local ambassadors or SERES Association. Is it ok for you? Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

Do you agree to participate in this focus group? I would appreciate if you can sign beside your name on the list of participants filled in the entrance. This is only a record that you are voluntarily participating and collaborating with me.

For questions or queries you can contact:  
Isabel Pérez - Asociación SERES (502) 4580-XXXX  
Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera – [e.pellecer.rivera@gmail.com](mailto:e.pellecer.rivera@gmail.com)

.....

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Code: \_\_\_\_\_

**ACTIVITY GUIDE**

- **INTRODUCTION: Introduction of the participants.**

**Activity:** Each participant introduces himself or herself: name, age, since when he or she is involved with SERES and the expectations of the activity.

- **ACTIVITY # 1: “Telling our story with SERES”**

**Dynamic:** First they will be asked to remember and tell their experience when they first participated in the leadership workshop. In case the group is large, first they will discuss in groups, and then they will turn to tell to the entire group.



- 1) Why did you decide to attend / participate? What were your motivations? Did they have to meet certain requirements to attend?
- 2) What expectations did you have at the beginning? What did you expect from the JLP?
- 3) How was that experience?
- 4) What did you feel and think when participating in this activity?
- 5) What was what you liked the most or impressed you more in the JLP? 6) Was there anything negative, that you did not like or bother you? What?
- 7) What was the most important thing you learned there? What do you think was the most important result of this workshop?
- 8) What have you found after being involved in the JLP and with SERES Association?

▪ **ACTIVITY # 2: Photo elicitation**

**Dynamic:** (a) Make a summary of the issues and objectives prioritized in the action plan developed in the JLP initial workshop. (b) After giving the instructions of the activity, the participants will be organized in groups (depending on the availability of the cameras and number of participants) and continue to go out and take pictures of what they think has been the impact of the work of SERES and the leadership programs in the community. (c) Each group will select their favorite pictures and explain the meaning they have for them and why they were chosen. The participants of the other groups can ask questions and discuss these photos too.

**(a)**

1. Can you describe in general what projects and activities have been carried out in your community?
2. Did the projects in your community started after the JLP took place or as it any organized group or Project being implemented before?
3. Who is/are in charge of the projects / activities?
  - a. How was this group formed? Have additional members being included or have original members abandoned the group?

(b) Pictures taken by the participants.

**(c)**

4. What changes have you seen in the community (ex. Projects or in the persons)? Describe based in the pictures.
5. What factors have enabled or helped make the processes easier to the community? Have you found new opportunities on your way?
6. What challenges or difficulties have you faced when carrying out the activities or projects?
  - a. Has there been any initiative that has not been possible to take place?
7. According with your opinión, what successes have you had so far?
8. Are there other institutions that support or collaborate with your work? How?
9. How are you monitoring or following up your action plans? How are the results being measured so far?
  - a. Who carry out the monitoring and evaluation in your communities? SERES, the community, another institution?
  - b. Do you have any record of the monitoring that you can share with me?
10. Do you have any suggestion on how to improve the monitoring and evaluation system? How could we all have a better control of the actions being implemented?
11. Are there any other situations or experiences that you would like to share? That shows the impact the Project is having.

12. Conclusion – Brainstorm: What are the greatest achievements of this working team? Make a list, with two columns: one with the qualities and skills gained and the second with actions and activities.

▪ **ACTIVITY # 3: Reflection / Comments**

**Dynamic:** Hot potato – Sitting all participants in a circle, we will start playing hot potato. The person that stays with the object chooses a random question from a bag and answers it. We keep repeating this until all the questions are answered. The other participants can add their views and opinions to each question as well.

- 1) In your opinion, what role has SERES and the leadership programs here in your community? What impact has it had on the youth and the community in general?
- 2) What do you expect or how do you see the future of your community?
  - a. How your involvement in this work may have changed your outlook in regards to how you see your future in your community?
- 3) From your point of view, what impact this Project has had in your life and that of your colleagues?
- 4) What do you expect from SERES and their programs for the future?
- 5) Do you have any suggestions or extra comments for SERES? Is there anything you think could be improved? What?

Do you have anything to add that I did not ask or included? Do you have any questions or comments?

- **CLOSURE AND FAREWELL:** Thank for your time and information provided.

**Annex 3. Interview protocol for the external informants, translated to English (The original one is in Spanish)**

**INTERVIEW WITH EXTERNAL INFORMANTS**

**Informed Consent:** My name is Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera and I am currently a student at the Masters in Development Studies at the Palacky University in the Czech Republic. I'm working on my thesis in collaboration with SERES Association, with the aim of analyzing the impact of the leadership programs (JLP) in the young people and communities SERES Association work with. All the information collected here will be analyzed and given back to SERES, in order to learn about it and take into account the recommendations into their activities.

These interviews have the **purpose** to get to know the opinion and perception of an "external informant" (ie, people from outside the young leaders group and SERES Association), on the processes and activities that young leaders are executing in your community from an external perspective. In this way we want to contrast and complement the information obtained from those involved directly in the JLP and activities.

I would appreciate your cooperation by answering the following questions, based on your knowledge and experience. The interview should last less than 30 minutes. Everything we talk is confidential and the personal data and information you share with me will be saved with codes in order to keep the anonymity. If you allow me, I would like to record the audio to avoid losing any detail and make it easier for me transcription. No one else will have access to this recording. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if you do not want to answer any questions or wish to end the interview at any time, you can. Do you agree to the interview? Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?

For questions or queries you can contact:  
Isabel Pérez - Asociación SERES (502) 4580-XXXX  
Elizabeth Pellecer Rivera – [e.pellecer.rivera@gmail.com](mailto:e.pellecer.rivera@gmail.com)

Are you willing to participate in this interview? If so, I would appreciate if you could sign this paper as a record that you are participating and collaborating with me voluntarily.

I have read and I have read the informed consent, I have been informed what my participation in this interview is about. I had the opportunity to ask questions and received the answers. I understand that my participation is voluntary.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I give permission for the interview to be recorded with a voice recorder  
 Yes  No

I confirm that the individual has given voluntary consent.  
Researcher name: \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

A copy of this consent has been given to the participant:  Yes  No

.....

Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: \_\_\_\_\_  
Institution / Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_  
Relation with SERES: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) What is your relationship with the leaders / projects / SERES? For how long have you known them?
- 2) Do you know the work that the Young team (name or identification of the specific group) Do you know the projects they are working in?
  - a. Which ones do you know? Make a list.
- 3) What do you think about the activities of the young group? What is your opinion on them?
- 4) Do you know what difficulties or challenges have they faced to implement or develop their activities or projects?
- 5) What factors do you think would have facilitated their work? Who or what has helped them?
- 6) Do you consider that these Young leaders have made a change in your community?
  - a. What changes would you say have been achieved by these Young leaders / projects in the community?
- 7) What role do these Young leaders / projects have in the development of your community?
- 8) Do you know if there is some other institution or person supporting or working together with them? Which one(s)?
  - a. If that is the case, what is the relationship of the institution with the Young people / projects / SERES? If they are related, could you briefly share the story between them?
- 9) What do you expect of how do you see the future of this group of young projects and the community? What are your expectations?
- 10) What are your hopes for the future in your community? How do you see the community in 5 or 10 years?

Do you have anything else to add that was not asked or included? Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank for your time and information provided.