

## Change Starts with Youth! : Victoria Peer Learning Circle

BC Council for International Cooperation (BCCIC) members and young people gathered on February 1, 2012 at the University of Victoria to participate in a 17-person peer learning circle focused on the power and potential of youth to contribute to effective development. This circle, the first of a three-part series called “Leading Development with Children,” was hosted by the [International Institute for Child Rights and Development](#) (IICRD) in collaboration with Vancouver Island BCCIC members.

“Young people are showing us – both in Canada and around the world – that they are active agents of social change,” says Elaina Mack, IICRD host. “As BCCIC members, we need to think about how to create supported opportunities for young people to be ‘shaped’ (build capacity and experience) and to become ‘shapers’ (create projects and policies). Mack shared IICRD project examples of diverse rights-based strategies for involving young people in development initiatives ranging from the use of smart phones, hip hop, youth-elder gatherings, and youth-driven grants.

### Learning through Local Experience: YouthCore

To share a Victoria perspective on youth engagement, Katie Shaw from [BC Healthy Community's YouthCore program](#) introduced the peer circle to programs such as the City of Victoria Youth Council, the Student Connections Partners Program and the Spark initiative. Through these programs, youth are exploring their own personal desires and finding links to collective action in their communities.



“We are trying to prevent ‘tokenizing’ youth engagement where youth are not actually being involved in real change (i.e. part of a photo op),” Shaw explains. “There are certain conditions that need to be met for actual youth engagement.”

Key conditions include: organizational transparency, identifying adult allies and support, linking engagement to big picture goals, adults and youth as co-learners, and adapting to the communities’ needs. For example, asset maps were created by youth for youth on resources available at night (e.g. bus schedules, cafes) and places and programs of interest to teen parents.

### VIDEA Interns Go Global



Rohan Stritch believes that the International Aboriginal Youth Internship program is the most important component of [VIDEA's](#) youth engagement strategy. Youth are given the opportunity to engage in international development by going overseas to work with VIDEA’s partners on specific projects. After three hours, it became clear that the Aboriginal interns from VIDEA– soon to depart on their four month internships in Zambia and Uganda– are not only leaders of *tomorrow*,

but need to be recognized as leaders of *today*.

“I would like to create a co-op in my community, almost like a rehabilitation centre because my community right now is broken,” stated one intern. There was a shared commitment from the interns to apply their experiences to their own communities. To start, VIDEA interns will present their work to their home communities upon their return. “By walking the path, we make it visible,” explains one intern, referring to this opportunity to become strong, positive youth leaders at home.



There are, however, barriers to youth involvement in development. For example, one intern specifically drew our attention to the \$50.00 criminal record check that is required to volunteer in many communities throughout BC. We also need to find a way to formally acknowledge some of the volunteer work youth are doing in their communities.

BCCIC members were inspired by the excitement and commitment of the VIDEA youth interns and enjoyed learning about the youth programs that are being run in Victoria. “I’m going to use these ideas in my community,” said one youth intern. “We wish only more BCCIC members were present,” added one BCCIC member, speaking on the importance of having every organization involved in youth engagement. By the end of the day the sentiment in the room can be captured by Kate from Results Canada’s closing remark: “Nobody can stay resigned and cynical in a room like this, I just want to bottle your humanity.”

### **Learning Forward**

Over the coming months, IICRD/VIDEA will explore opportunities for the returning interns to share their experiences with BCCIC members. In particular, it will be important to discuss how interns applied what they learned about youth engagement in Africa and how BCCIC organizations/networks might support them.

The next Victoria peer learning circle on “Children, Communities and Complexity” will be held on Wednesday, February 22<sup>nd</sup> from 10:30-1:30 at the University of Victoria. For more information and to register, please contact Elaina Mack ([emiicrd@uvic.ca](mailto:emiicrd@uvic.ca)).

*Story written by Jenn Farquarsen, IICRD Volunteer*