

Ideathon!



How to Help At-Risk Youth

Pitch, Pilot and

Promote Solutions



IRI International
Republican
Institute

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What is an Ideathon?

Inspired by the concept of a “hackathon,” the International Republican Institute developed the “Ideathon” concept to help young people generate innovative solutions to problems they face in their communities. The Ideathon uses a project-based competition model to help young people realize their innate capacity to serve as agents of positive change. Youth gain soft skills—personal qualities and characteristics that enable someone to interact effectively with other people and organizations—and project management training to help them design an innovative and feasible project that tackles a local community challenge. Soft skills trainings include time management, working collaboratively, and how to communicate your message effectively. With support from local government and civil society partners, youth form teams, design programs and compete for seed funding. Youth who compete successfully get to implement their projects under the mentorship of sponsors in their own communities.

WHY AN IDEATHON?

- ✓ **Creates** a platform to share new ideas created by youth for their communities;
- ✓ **Provides** an opportunity for those most affected by social issues to be a part of the solution;
- ✓ **Presents** a competitive model to boost creative thinking and uncover innovative solutions;
- ✓ **Offers** a fun and exciting way for youth to get involved in their communities; and
- ✓ **Links** governance into workforce development programming.

“The Ideathon changed my mindset and I learned a lot that I have applied to my life. I plan to start a business with what I learned from the Ideathon.” - Humberto, age 18

In Panama, IRI has piloted the Ideathon in **three municipalities**—Panama City, San Miguelito and Colon—and sponsored **six youth-led projects over the last three years**. Through the Ideathon, IRI has **trained more than 200 youth and provided 35 individuals with the opportunity to lead** the design and implementation of a community-based pilot project. Those projects have **reached more than 1,300 youth and community members**. The local governments in each of these cities have since **integrated the Ideathon model into their youth outreach programming** and installed it as a permanent activity, in collaboration with local CSO, academic and private sector partners.



**Piloted the
Ideathon in 3
municipalities**



**Sponsored 6
youth-led projects
over 3 years**



**Trained 200
youth and 35
leaders**



**Reached 1,300
community
members**

The Origin of the Ideathon

Youth—especially from marginalized communities or underserved neighborhoods—often feel excluded from local decision-making processes. Governments that lack the resources, contacts or knowledge to help develop more inclusive programming often do not hear or consider young people’s voices. In contrast, civil society organizations with community outreach missions have close contact with these youth and understand their needs, but may also lack the resources and the right approach to connect with local government bodies.



SUCCESS STORIES

The *Vale Estudiar* (“It’s Worth Studying”) project—an after-school center created by an Ideathon-winning team—provided tutoring and support to 79 students over the course of seven months. The initiative went on to receive funding from the Ministry of Security to continue operating sustainably after their Ideathon project ended. Thanks to his role in the *Vale Estudiar* project, team leader Aldayr Ortega went to work for the municipal government in San Miguelito, Panama as the new youth secretary.

“ In this program, I learned things I didn’t know, things I didn’t even think I would try to know. From the others, I learned more stories about lives and difficulties in my district. Before I wasn’t very proactive, I wasn’t very aware of things. But now I am more responsible, more attentive, and more confident. It helped me make goals for my life.” – Angel, age 19

In Panama, the youth unemployment rate is three times that of the general population, despite the country’s robust economy. The combination of a limited job pool and weak public safety resulting from local governance gaps is leaving young people frustrated and vulnerable to recruitment by gangs and other criminal actors.

In 2015, IRI heard from young adults in several Panamanian communities facing scarce employment opportunities and high levels of crime and violence. They were disillusioned with existing government prevention initiatives that treated youth as potential criminals in need of intervention—usually short-term sports programs.

In response, IRI’s Latin America and Caribbean team integrated social entrepreneurship-based workforce development into a program that focused on connecting local government with at-risk youth through Ideathons. While the initial goal of this program was to advance youth civic engagement and increase local government responsiveness to citizen ideas, IRI found that the most astounding outcome was the commitment from municipal governments to invest in youth-centered and youth-managed projects such as community centers and pocket parks.

A Guide to Hosting an Ideathon

This guide contains the necessary elements to implement an Ideathon that will help young people design solutions and serve as agents of change.

The Ideathon process and the resulting projects promote **social entrepreneurship** as an approach to improving quality of life and building **social capital** in underserved communities.

An Ideathon reinforces the core democratic principles of freedom of association and information. It creates a safe space for youth to debate and identify key challenges and possible solutions to help strengthen their communities.

Participants design and implement projects in teams and in coordination with multiple community stakeholders to help youth build social capital. Youth form critical connections and partnerships to help build greater **shared value**.

Through a competitive process, an Ideathon not only ensures that the strongest project ideas will

be implemented, but also that each participant is motivated to maximize their creative and innovative thinking. Youth are motivated not only to have their ideas proven to be the best, but also to win access to seed funding, which will allow them to bring their ideas to life in their community.

Social entrepreneurship takes business strategies and applies them to projects that meet a social need.

Social capital comprises the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular space to function effectively.

Shared value is a management strategy in which organizations or people find business opportunities in social problems.

PANAMA IDEATHONS - BY THE NUMBERS (2016-2018)



3 IRI Ideathon project competitions hosted in Panama



19 Local partner organizations and governments engaged



7 Ideathon projects sponsored by IRI and local partners



3 municipalities committed to hosting future Ideathons



201 Youth engaged as direct IRI Ideathon participants



1300 Youth engaged as indirect beneficiaries of Ideathon projects

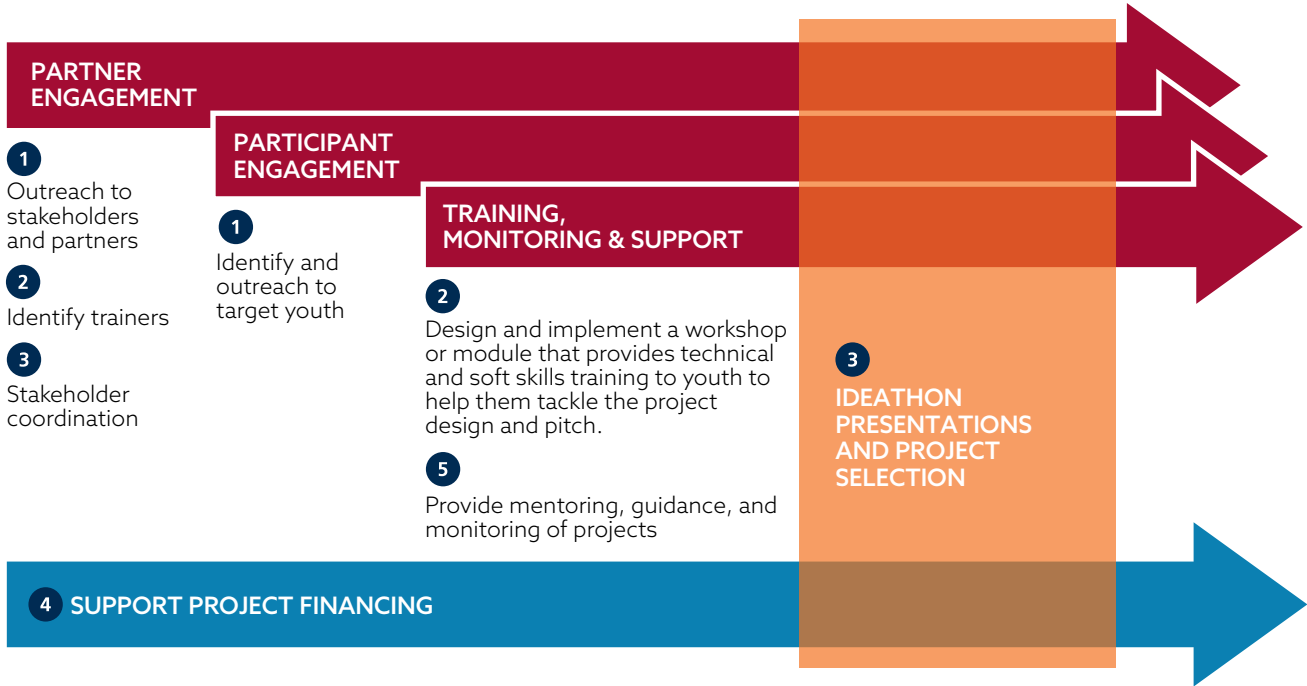


\$60,000 Distributed by IRI as Ideathon project seed funds



\$59,660+ Total value of support to projects pledged by local partners

The Process



Part 1: Outreach – Call for Partners and Participants

Identify the Target Community: What is the community you want to engage? This will depend on your objectives. For example, the Ideathon series in Panama focused on youth from economically marginalized communities who were at higher risk of becoming involved in gangs.

Identify Key Community Stakeholders and Partners: Depending on the local context, stakeholders might include community leaders, civil society organizations, local and international foundations, local or national government, private sector associations or enterprises, media, and schools and universities. These partners will help at different stages, from recruiting participants, to training, to hosting the competition, to funding and supporting the winning project. The Ideathon model works best when it draws from a diverse array of stakeholder capacity and resources, and engages with government bodies for sustainable outcomes.

Define Participant Criteria: Based on your objectives and target community, work with local partners to define criteria for participant selection. Criteria could include age, geographic location, gender, certain risk factors, etc. Selections can be made through an open call to target communities, by invitation, or through an application process. Participants should not only fit demographic criteria based on your targets, but should also be youth with the potential or motivation to help in their communities and take on a leadership role. Also, think about what you want the participants to commit to completing. Will they be required to attend trainings or follow-up sessions? How long of a project should winning teams plan to implement? Make sure youth are aware of this commitment and of how you will ensure their buy-in throughout the process. This might include identifying a local staff member or partner to mentor, manage and motivate youth throughout the process.

Enroll Participants: Using your chosen selection process, finalize program participants and host an official enrollment or kick-off event to boost commitment.

This is also an opportunity for participants to become more comfortable with each other and with implementers, and to gather baseline data.

“Before, I thought my options were very limited. Now, I am thinking bigger about what I can do, and I have more personal motivation. I plan get a full college degree so that I can get better work opportunities and one day be my own boss.” – Alvaro, age 19

Part 2: Preparation – Training and Project Design

Identify Trainers: Training to prepare Ideathon participants will ideally draw on local and international expert trainers, including instructors from school or university partners. Think about trainers who will be able to present information in an accessible way to the target community. Often local incubators or co-working spaces can help lead dynamic trainings.

Define a Training Timeline and Schedule: Work with local trainers and partners to define a training timeline and schedule suitable for your program.

Past Ideathons have included training programs ranging from six to ten weeks, with trainings held on Saturdays to accommodate the schedules of young people. This could be condensed or expanded based on program needs, local preferences and logistical concerns. Think about a timeline and schedule that will work for your target community.

Focus on Technical Project Design and Soft Skills:

The core of the Ideathon curriculum is focused on providing youth with technical knowledge and skills in basic project design and implementation as well as a range of personal development soft skills. To see the curriculum and other materials/templates, visit www.iri.org/IdeathonToolkit. Project design and implementation modules include identifying problems and solutions, articulating objectives, creating a budget and basic monitoring and evaluation concepts.

Soft skills modules help prepare youth with the leadership, cognitive and behavioral skills needed to present and implement their projects, but also to develop broader workforce skills. The depth of these trainings will depend on the baseline capacity of youth, program priorities and the training timeline. In addition to these core skills, adjust the training curriculum to correspond to relevant local and programmatic themes, such as citizen security, economic development, environmental issues, etc. Youth should be actively engaged in analyzing how these challenges manifest in their community and in brainstorming for possible solutions.



SUCCESS STORIES

In the Santa Ana neighborhood of Panama City, youth from the project *Cultura por my Barrio* “Culture for My Neighborhood” rehabilitated three abandoned public spaces into community “pocket parks,” gaining support from the mayor and engaging 577 members of their community in revitalization of the spaces and cultural activities.

Incorporate Hands-on Learning: Training modules should be varied and incorporate different learning and participation techniques to keep participants engaged. These can include acting out skits, drawing problem trees, writing letters to your future self, etc.

Reduce Barriers to Participation: Assess potential barriers to participation for your target community. These might include family and childcare commitments, transportation needs or cultural barriers. Plan ahead for how your program can reduce or remove these barriers, such as providing transportation to the training site.

Support Teams to Design Projects: Following or as part of the training curriculum, divide participants into teams of three to five to develop responsive project concepts. Provide teams with project design guidance packets and criteria against which their projects will be judged. Complete projects will include an identification of the problem to be addressed, basic theory of change, an objective, activities and timeline, monitoring and evaluation indicators, and a simple budget.

Part 3: The Ideathon Competition

Stakeholder Coordination: The competition activity is another opportunity to engage multiple local public and private partners and stakeholders. Depending on the topic and local context, local media can help publicize and cover the event, or provide a master of ceremonies (MC). A school or university partner could host the activity, and government, civil society and private sector firms may participate as guest judges or provide in-kind contributions such as personnel support, donated prizes or materials.

Finalizing the Project Proposals: The half- or full-day Ideathon competition begins with a motivational speech from an organizer or high-level invitee, such as a local mayor. The youth teams are then given time to finalize their projects

SUCCESS STORIES

Another Ideathon project—*El Onceavo Arte* (“The Eleventh Art”)—provided music workshops and motivational activities for more than 70 youth in marginalized neighborhoods in Panama City. Their work will live on at the new Youth House, created by the municipal government, where the project team donated their instruments and will provide lessons to local youth.



and presentations according to guidelines appropriate to the local and program context. For example, depending on the schedule, teams might each have five or ten minutes to present, they may be allowed to use only provided materials to produce visual aids, or may be allowed to create multimedia presentations in advance.

Project Presentations: Each team is given a set amount of time and relevant guidelines for their presentation. The presentation component should generate excitement among participants and their communities. Having a professional MC, such as a local TV or radio personality, is ideal if conditions permit. The presentations are also an opportunity to engage broader members of the community, such as family members, and generate additional buy-in for the projects.

Evaluating the Projects and Selecting a Winner:

Judges can be adjusted based on project priorities and who will be evaluating the projects. Including local government, academic, civil society, and business leaders as guest judges (three is an ideal number) provides an opportunity to increase local buy-in, expose leaders to new ideas, and can instill greater confidence in young participants. The highest scoring project (or projects) are announced

and teams awarded prizes and/or seed funding. All participants should receive a certificate or some other form of recognition for their participation. In Panama, the project team scored the written proposal packets and vetted projects to ensure they were responsive to overall programmatic priorities, while guest judges focused on evaluating the quality of the presentation itself to contribute to the final score.

Part 4: Project Financing

Identify Potential Funding Sources: Starting with stakeholder identification, the program team should consider potential local and international funding sources. In addition to seed funds within the implementer’s budget, these might include other international funders or foundations, local foundations, private sector firms, and local or national government funds allocated for youth programming or specific types of projects (e.g. projects to reduce drug abuse). Potential funders should be cultivated throughout the process to develop buy-in, and should be included as judges if possible. Even where seed funds for one or more projects are included in the implementer’s budget, additional funds or in-kind resources can amplify or sustain winning projects or increase the number of projects that receive seed funding.

Ensure Seed Funding: Before launching the Ideathon competition, ensure that seed funds for one or more projects are pledged or allocated. This will keep up momentum and motivation among participants and help to make sure that youth project ideas go from proposal to project reality.

Promoting Accountability: During the training, youth will learn not only about how to create a budget but also about principles of accountability. Requirements for financial reporting may vary according to the source and structure of seed funding, but participants



SUCCESS STORIES

Thanks in part to the skills and motivation developed during the Ideathon process, two youth from the *Onceavo Arte* project were accepted by international programs—an English study fellowship in the United States and a cultural delegation to South Korea.

should be encouraged to be as accountable as possible with project resources.

Planning for Sustainability: Projects should be designed, presented, and funded with sustainability and/or replicability in mind. In order to promote sustainability, engage diverse stakeholders early and often throughout the process, and connect topics for projects (such as citizen security or local economic development) with stakeholder priorities.

“ This experience has helped me communicate better and have more confidence to share my opinions in class. I feel like I can talk with my professors about social issues and violence on a higher level than my peers—they have not had the experience I have. Participating in this project has made me more mature and responsible.” – Lurys, age 19

Part 5: Project Implementation and Monitoring

Team Guidance and Mentoring: The implementer, ideally in cooperation with a local civil society organization, should provide ongoing guidance and mentorship support to youth teams as they implement their projects. Teams will need additional technical assistance and hands-on training as they put what they learned about project implementation into practice. Mentor organizations will also provide teams with key local and international contacts to help them scale and sustain projects. In the case of Panama, mentorship included weekly check-ins with the project teams and support for everything from creating template sign-in sheets to facilitating meetings with the mayor’s office.

Project Monitoring and Reporting: Building on training on monitoring and evaluation concepts, teams will gather data during their activities and present reports that include information on activities, reporting to indicators, analysis about progress toward objectives, success stories and lessons learned. While reporting requirements may vary depending on the source of funds, implementers should provide accessible templates and detailed guidance to help teams create high quality reports. As applicable, implementers should provide relevant guidance on compliance requirements and participant data security.

Examples and Options for Adapting and Scaling the Ideathon Model

The Ideathon is a versatile approach that can be scaled and adapted based on program needs or local context. In addition to the one-day competition among project teams, the Ideathon can include brief or extensive preparatory training, depending on the baseline capacity of participants, program resources, and project timeline. An Ideathon can be centered on any theme relevant to the local community, and project parameters can be as specific or open-ended as appropriate to the program.

In Panama, IRI has implemented two different Ideathon variations: the original Ideathon model and a longer variation called the Youth Project Incubator. Both of these brought together three, four or five-person groups of youth from at-risk communities in Panama to design projects related to citizen security and local development concerns.



SUCCESS STORIES

The EMPRO project team in Colón developed buy-in from their local government to help them build a permanent youth outreach center in their underserved neighborhood.

Original Ideathon

Youth Project Incubator

Timeline	Four sessions of preparatory training plus one-day competition.	Ten-week training program, proposal design support and final one-day competition.
Youth Engagement	IRI worked with six neighborhood outreach centers to recruit youth from marginalized communities.	IRI worked with local outreach centers to help identify youth participants based on set of risk and motivational criteria and included an application process to ensure commitment.
Partner Engagement	IRI engaged municipal governments, private sector partners (including a major media network), multiple civil society organizations and a major university.	IRI provided local government partners with additional training to make the most of this youth engagement opportunity. Trainings involved local and international trainers, including IRI’s university partner.
Project Financing and Support	IRI provided each winning team with seed funds (through subgrants to local organizations), encouraging teams to seek additional funding or in-kind contributions from local stakeholders.	In addition to providing seed funds and encouraging additional stakeholder contributions, IRI worked directly with municipal governments to plan for sustainability of the model in Panama City and San Miguelito.
Monitoring and Evaluation	IRI local staff worked closely with youth teams and their civil society mentors to monitor project implementation and support youth to track, analyze and report on their activities, lessons learned and success stories.	

SUCCESS STORIES

Youth from the Ideathon winning teams found new opportunities through their projects to engage with civic and government leaders including mayors, national officials and even President Juan Carlos Varela of Panama.



Impact

IRI’s local partners in Panama who have taken on the Ideathon model as a sustainable youth engagement tool have made further adaptations to suit their needs.

In June and July 2017, IRI worked with local civil society, government and private-sector partners to launch the Ideathon model in the municipality of Colón with 36 youth. By October 2017, the mayor’s office adopted and began to replicate the Ideathon, carrying out the second iteration of the competition in April 2018. The mayor’s office committed municipal funds and partnered with civil society and local foundations to replicate the event, based on IRI’s Ideathon model, but adding new elements, such as taking video project submissions from youth to expand the level of engagement across the city.

The Ideathon concept can be adapted to almost all contexts and environments and is a great way to foster civic participation among marginalized populations or in communities without an established culture of civic engagement. By tailoring the scope of the projects, topics, and voting processes and evaluation criteria, the Ideathon model can be made accessible to youth and civic actors worldwide.



SUCCESS STORIES

After implementing Ideathon projects, several youth are leading the development of a new youth network in coordination with IRI—the Panama Youth Connection—which aims to involve more Panamanian youth in community development projects.

EVIDENCE FOR THE IDEATHON: Decreasing Risk and Increasing Motivation in Panamanian Youth

IRI's Ideathons in Panama targeted youth with profiles that put them at greater risk of gang involvement. Many of these youth came from high-crime, low-income communities with limited educational and employment opportunities. For its most recent iteration, IRI tracked participants before, during and after participating in an extended Ideathon process – measuring their risk level based on a customized scorecard before starting trainings, after the project competition and after implementing their winning projects.

IRI's data demonstrated that all of the tracked youth demonstrated a decrease in risk of gang involvement, an increase in motivation and a more positive outlook for their future prospects after participating in Ideathon activities. Youth improved by an average of 60 percent. Risk reductions were universal, even among youth who did not go on to implement projects after completing the training and project design phases of the program.

“After this project, I have changed for the better. During the project presentation, I was scared to speak in public. Now, I feel more confident when it comes to making decisions, and I feel like I take more initiative.” - José, age 18



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