

# Costa Rica



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## Executive summary

On the occasion of the programme's 10<sup>th</sup> year, SOS Children's Villages decided to validate YouthCan! success by commissioning an independent evaluation of its outcomes in four countries, considered valid case studies: Madagascar, Nigeria, Costa Rica and Brazil. The evaluation study took place between September and December 2020, with the data collection process involving four Member Associations (MA), current and former participants, corporate volunteers and other informed stakeholders. This country report presents the main evaluation findings for SOS Children Villages Costa Rica only, and it is part of a larger Global Evaluation Report.

### SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES IN COSTA RICA

SOS Children's Villages Costa Rica aims to prevent the loss of parental care for young people who are at risk of losing it, and, at the same time, it aims to provide alternative care to children who have already lost it. Particular attention is paid to the reintegration of children into families and communities of origin, whenever this is possible. The organisation applies the family model method, which seeks to ensure that children, adolescents and young people develop within a familial environment. At present, the MA is active in the provinces of San José, Limón and Cartago, offering three main services: Alternative Care, Youth Services and YouthCan!.

### YOUTHCAN! IN COSTA RICA

In 2013, the YouthCan! programme began in Costa Rica under the name of **Aldeas Infantiles San José (Employability Programme)** and was supported by an alliance of SOS Children's Villages, the Youth Career Initiative (YCI) and Deutsche Post DHL Group (DHL). In time, many new trainings in soft skills and employability skills were added to the original format, and the programme evolved, first into GoTeach (in 2013), and then into YouthCan! (in 2017). Structured as **three compulsory modules**, the core **mission** of YouthCan! Costa Rica is to enhance the **employability (hard and soft) skills** of its participants, as well as to break the inequality cycle by providing vulnerable young people with the **equal opportunities as their non-vulnerable peers**.

#### • Management structure and alliances:

The implementation of activities is facilitated by the YouthCan! **management team**, supported by a global and local **corporate partners alliance**, as well as by the **civil society alliance**. The former includes around 20 companies and provides theoretical and practical trainings, as well as internship opportunities; the latter includes around 20 governmental and non-governmental organisations. These alliances help SOS Children's Villages to identify youth in need of support and, then, to follow-up on them. It should be noted that YouthCan! does not have its own internal educators, as participants are monitored by the educators of the sending external organisations that comprise the civil society alliance.

#### • Characteristics of participants

**YouthCan! participants** are usually vulnerable young people aged 15–24 who have lost family care and/or come from very fragile backgrounds (e.g. educational poverty, mild disabling conditions, adolescent parents). Only a limited number of them come via SOS's Alternative Care services (approximately 30%), while the vast majority (70%) are referred to the programme by governmental or civil society organisations (e.g. Red Cross, PANI). Participants **participate intensively** in the programme's activities, and they remain enrolled **for 1.5 years on average**.

## SUMMARY OF THE MAIN EVALUATION FINDINGS

### • Main outcomes achieved by current and former participants

Participation in YouthCan! allows young people to develop the **skills and competencies** necessary to enter the job market. In fact, the evaluation study confirmed that both current and former participants improved their **professional, ICT and soft skills** due to the programme. However, only 26% of the former beneficiaries interviewed during the evaluation were employed, perhaps due to their young age.

YouthCan! also provides opportunities for young people to develop **self-esteem** by addressing their **shyness** and **low sense of self-worth**. Social workers and educators from the external organisations, as well as corporate volunteers, perceived this dimension as the most impacted by the programme; they described visible changes in the attitudes of young beneficiaries. As a result, young people were able to evolve from a situation of fragility to a situation of **empowerment**, showed more **self-confidence** and **leadership**, attained **better performances** and regained **control over their lives**.

In addition, YouthCan! expanded the participants' **peer networks** and gave them, through access to the programme's volunteers and mentors, an additional **adult figure to act as a reference point in their lives**.

Finally, thanks to the programme, participants were able to start on their path towards **self-reliance**, even though the majority of them still rely on the financial support of their family of origin.

### • FOCUS: The online platform YouthLinks

The web app, YouthLinks, plays a crucial role in promoting networking and exchange among current beneficiaries and with mentors. In **Costa Rica, its implementation is quite advanced**, with 80% of current participants having used it at least once.

### • FOCUS: The effects of COVID-19 on the programme

**The restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic strongly affected the career choices and/or current employment status of participants.** Many are now unemployed, others had their internships suspended, and all of them saw their employment opportunities shrink as enterprises stopped hiring. Similar issues affected their parents, which had a negative effect on the financial stability of entire families.

### • Main outcomes achieved by corporate volunteers

Corporate volunteers usually have a set number of working hours to dedicate (annually) to the programme. Their contribution is crucial to the Costa Rican YouthCan! model, as they are the ones who conduct all trainings and formative activities. Overall, volunteers confirmed that participation in YouthCan! increased their **awareness** of the additional struggles faced by vulnerable youth transitioning from education to employment, and their **attitudes** towards their mentees gradually **changed**. Nevertheless, when it comes to the companies involved, **only a few corporate partners actually hired one of the participants**. This is partly a consequence of the **mismatch between the candidate profiles desired by the corporate partners, which are often very sector-specific, and the competencies of participants**. The YouthCan! management team is aware of this problem and is already working to overcome it by broadening the number and type of companies included in its alliances, and by re-designing the programme's content based on the skills most frequently required by recruiters.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, YouthCan! Costa Rica has a well-structured model and methodology of intervention. Thanks to its strong alliances with civil society organisations and corporate partners, the programme is able to achieve its objectives, while also positioning itself as a valid interlocutor for the national government in regard to youth employability.

## LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Further develop YouthCan!'s methodology, in particular by introducing tools for case management.

The active involvement of participants can be improved by introducing some case-management tools in the *three-module framework* applied by YouthCan! in Costa Rica.

### 2. Ensure that YouthCan! remains relevant to the needs of youth and responds to the changing demands of the fast-paced job market.

The programme should develop a procedure to annually evaluate the relevance of the service offered to young people and, when necessary, redesign its approach according to the changing needs of participants and the demands of the labour market.

### 3. Expand sources of funding to increase the financial sustainability of the programme.

Diversify funding sources by seeking additional donors, exploring other funding opportunities (e.g. national and international funding, private foundations, new financing corporate partners) and establishing formal agreements with the government.

### 4. Increase the integration of YouthCan! with other services offered by SOS Children's Villages Costa Rica.

The MA should improve coherence and integration between YouthCan! and other services offered by SOS Children's Villages Costa Rica, with the aim to develop common internal strategies.