

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

THE DEVOLUTION OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL TO ALDEAS INFANTILES SOS COLOMBIA

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CONTEXT

SOS Children's Villages began operating in Colombia in 1971. The SOS model involves constructing villages that comprise of 6 to 15 houses, in which children without parental care can reside and access various support services. Over the years, SOS Children's Villages in Colombia has also implemented programs involving child protection, education, and vocational training. Currently, its activities in Colombia can be categorized into three broad areas:

- Family and community strengthening to prevent family separation.
- Providing support to children that have lost family care through a family-based care service, such as SOS families, foster families, or kinship care.

- Support to young adults in order to achieve an autonomous and self-sufficient life, through Youth Communities and Independent Living services.

In most countries where SOS Children's Villages operate, national associations are set up. These associations often have their own Board of Directors and are registered as a separate legal entity (e.g. foundation, trust, association, non-profit, or a civil society organization). Each member association is expected to adhere to the values and principles of the General Secretariat of SOS International, which is based in Austria. In Colombia, the main SOS office is based in Bogotá, with additional offices in ten states across the country. Over 15,400 children and youth in Colombia are enrolled in SOS programs.

STORY OF TRANSITION

Over recent years, SOS Colombia has experienced a gradual decrease in funds from SOS International. In late 2012, SOS International announced that by 2020 it would withdraw all financial support to SOS Colombia, on the basis that Colombia had attained middle-income status. Although the decision to transition came from SOS International, the national office in Colombia played a key role in designing and leading the transition process. It was widely felt among staff that the continued existence of SOS Colombia was dependent on it growing economically and programmatically. Currently, SOS Colombia is in the process of implementing a sustainability strategy incorporating operational, financial, and programmatic components.

As soon as SOS International announced its intention to withdraw funding, SOS Colombia made operational changes in order to prepare for the transition. It found a new office, restructured the national team, spoke to new donors, and built a new strategic relationship with the Colombian state. The fundraising and communications teams were expanded and a new strategy team was created to focus on building new partnerships. Additionally, strategic decisions were made to retain SOS' brand and identity, which had a long, half-century history in Colombia. By continuing to work under the SOS banner, SOS Colombia was not only able to preserve its

relationship with the government, but also retain all prior contracts agreed between the two.

Financial sustainability is at the core of SOS Colombia's long-term strategy. With the shrinking of international funds, SOS Colombia started to search for domestic sources of funding. This led to stronger relationships being formed with national and local government bodies, with SOS Colombia at present receiving direct funding for some of their projects, while working as implementing partners on others. SOS Colombia has a long history working with the government, receiving government funding as early as 2007 to provide support services to children. As such, the foundations for building strong relationships had already been established prior to the start of the transition in 2012. Currently, 60 percent of programs implemented by SOS Colombia have some form of government involvement.

SOS Colombia responded to the proposed reduction in funding announced by SOS International with a number of program shifts. Some programs, such as SOS day care services and a number of SOS villages, were closed down over the following three to four years. There was also a clear shift in priority, as SOS Colombia focused on providing more family development programs. As the transition led to SOS Colombia coordinating more closely with the government, they were pushed to identify areas not adequately served by the state, rather than provide services that duplicated existing government efforts.

KEY LESSONS

Although decisions to devolve may come from outside the country, the transition process can still be led by the local entity. SOS Colombia has designed and implemented its own sustainability strategy and made significant programmatic shifts to appeal to a more domestic audience.

Local entities are not just able to survive a transition, but can thrive. Faced with an "exit" scenario, SOS Colombia has been able to expand its programs, strengthen its finances, and grow its operation.

Association with the INGO can be beneficial to the local entity after a transition. By holding onto the SOS International brand, SOS Colombia has been able to retain all prior agreements and contracts made with the government.

A shift away from international funding toward domestic sources can lead to more contextually relevant programs. In SOS Colombia's case, this can be seen in a shift away from providing direct children's services toward focusing more on family development.