

STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

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

October 2018

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STOPPING AS SUCCESS

This case study was developed as part of Stopping As Success (SAS), implemented by a consortium consisting of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). SAS is a collaborative learning project that aims to study the dynamics at play when ending a development program, and provide guidelines on how to ensure locally led development. In doing this, SAS looks beyond the technical aspects of an exit strategy to identify examples that demonstrate a transition toward locally led development. The case studies produced by the project highlight the past and present realities faced by international non-government organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations (CSOs), and local NGOs, focusing in particular on how partnerships evolve during transitions or devolvement to local entities.



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ACRONYMS

CBO	community based organizations
CSO	civil society organizations
CSR	corporate social responsibility
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GoC	Government of Colombia
IDP	internally displaced people
INGO	international non-government organizations
NGO	non-governmental organization
PSA	promoting and supporting associations
UN	United Nations

I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This report examines the devolution of responsibility from SOS Children's Villages International, an INGO, to its country office in Colombia – a process that it is anticipated will be completed by 2020. By making a number of changes to its operational, fundraising, and programmatic strategies, SOS Colombia has managed to grow significantly since the transition was announced in 2012. In particular, it has established and maintained key relationships with private companies and continued to work with the Colombian government at different levels.

This report draws on ten semi-structured key informant interviews, which took place in-country during November–December 2017. Those interviewed include representatives from academia, government, INGOs, and civil society organizations, all of whom were connected to SOS Colombia and/or had valuable insights as a result of working in the civil society and aid sector in Colombia.

TYPE OF TRANSITION

The case of SOS Colombia is an example of a devolution from an INGO central body to its local country office. The transition has involved shifting financial responsibility onto primarily domestic rather than international sources.



2. CONTEXT

With a population of 48 million, Colombia is the third most populous country in Latin America.¹ For almost 50

years, Colombia experienced a conflict involving guerrilla insurgents, paramilitary groups, drug traffickers, and the Government of Colombia (GoC). In 2016, a historic peace agreement was signed between the GoC and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the longest-standing and largest left-wing rebel group in the country. The peace deal brought fresh opportunities for foreign donors, aid agencies, and NGOs, many of whom increased their activity in order to support the GoC during the post-conflict reconstruction phase.

Despite the political, social, and economic progress made in the peace process, Colombia continues to face a number of humanitarian and development challenges. It has one of the largest populations of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the world, estimated at approximately 7.7 million.² The needs of IDPs and other conflict-impacted communities include physical protection, food assistance, as well as access to healthcare, education, and safe water.³ In many areas in Colombia where there is a lack of state presence, non-state actors have taken on the role of delivering such services. Regaining control over the various regions remain a priority for the GoC, which has accepted the support of foreign donors.⁴ As explained by a member of the government, this includes capacity strengthening programs aimed at "... increasing connectivity and access [of the state] with other parts of the country by improving roads, electricity, infrastructure and business."

The international community has been involved in Colombia's development and peace initiatives since the early 2000s.⁵ Official development assistance to Colombia increased from US\$269 million in 2000 to over US\$1 billion in 2016.⁶ The US alone pledged \$450 million in aid to Colombia in 2017, which represented an increase on 2016. Various UN agencies and humanitarian organizations operate in Colombia, and have a long history of working with local and national organizations, as well as government bodies. Outside of traditional foreign donors and aid actors, Colombian CSOs also receive funding from private foundations and businesses. According to one national CSO director, funding from private foundations offer a greater level of flexibility than bilateral aid, particularly in terms of access to FARC strongholds that have pressing humanitarian needs.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN COLOMBIA

Civil society in Colombia has a long and rich history. The first CSOs had strong historical ties to the

Church and were established to address gaps in public welfare services. These were later supported by the Colombian government and came to be known as community based organizations (CBOs). Even so, civil society in Colombia remains largely independent, comprising a diverse range of organizations working in the social, political, economic, and humanitarian spheres. In doing so, they interact and form partnerships with national government bodies, INGOs, UN agencies, and private institutions.

According to a Colombian academic, a large number of INGOs came to Colombia in the 1980s to deliver programs aimed at strengthening civil society, against a backdrop of a "... social cleansing campaign and police violence in Bogotá, as well as a series of civic strikes and protests across the country." As people began to demand better services from the state, the role of INGOs was also debated among a more politically active, largely young, population. As the academic explained: "Local staff [of INGOs] were critical and young. They clashed with the approaches of INGOs and considered models to be too patronizing. People were homeless not brainless. They wanted INGOs to empower them rather than be paternalistic."

CURRENT TRENDS

The interviews conducted for this case study revealed mixed views of the policies and practices current employed by foreign aid actors in Colombia. Some interviewees expressed concerns about shrinking civic and political space, with human rights defenders and social leaders facing significant risks. According to one INGO actor, continued international support is particularly important for human rights accompaniment programs. However, funding for such work is often limited, as it does not directly align with the priorities outlined in the peace process, toward which much of the international and national funding is geared. These views were echoed by a former director of a national NGO, who felt that currently "... political support is more important than financial support."

Nonetheless, most interviewees spoke of the high levels of local and national capacity in Colombia, which is particularly visible within CSOs. With regard to what role INGOs should play in Colombia, one government representative stated: "INGOs should be the yeast, and not the flour."



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Given that foreign aid actors are currently increasing their presence in Colombia, and that an "exit" may refer to the complete closure of a country office or project, the term "transition" is more appropriate in terms of engaging local and national partners in substantive conversations. Moreover, given this increased presence, now is a timely moment for INGOs to start thinking about how their "entrances" may eventually influence their "exits."

3. MAPPING THE TRANSITION: DEVOLUTION OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGES

SOS Children's Villages began operating in Colombia in 1971. The SOS model involves constructing villages that comprise of 6 and 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 (for instance as a foundation, trust, association, non-profit, or a CSO). Each member association is expected to adhere to the values and principles of the General Secretariat of SOS International, which is based in Austria.⁷ Some members, such as those in Spain, Norway, and the US, are known

as Promoting and Supporting Associations (PSAs). PSAs hold reserves equal to one year of their running costs, and from that provide funding for international projects to national associations across the globe.⁸ National associations receive different levels of funding and support from the SOS federation, with some currently in the process of becoming financially independent. In Colombia, the main SOS office is based in Bogotá, with additional offices in ten states across the country. According to SOS staff, over 15,400 children and youth in the country are enrolled in SOS programs.

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. As a result, SOS Colombia has been implementing a sustainability strategy, which includes both financial and programmatic components. Driven by a commitment to not only sustain itself but also grow, SOS Colombia significantly expanded its fundraising and communications teams, changing its programmatic focus in order to appeal to more domestic funders. By 2016, they were able to secure 65% of their funds from the public and private sector within Colombia. In 2018, this increased to 92%.

Drawing on interviews conducted with SOS staff members and local CSOs in Bogotá, this report outlines the different perspectives of and steps taken during the transition, with a particular focus on its financial, operational, and programmatic aspects. Although this case study offers valuable insights into the role local entities play during a transition process, it should be noted that at the time of writing it is too early to fully assess the outcome, given that complete withdrawal of funds from SOS International is planned for 2020.

THE DECISION TO TRANSITION

The decision to transition came from SOS International's HQ in Austria. With an economic crisis at the global level, the SOS federation felt that some associations, particularly those in middle-income countries (as defined by World Bank income categories), should raise their own funds locally. Similar reasons for local transition were cited by other INGOs. For example, Plan International felt that Colombia's development into a middle-income country meant that it was best positioned to be one of their "transition countries," along with India, Thailand and Brazil. The greater likelihood of mobilizing local resources in such contexts was seen as a key contributor to a successful transition.⁹

SOS Colombia was given three options for funding withdrawal: 1) wind down steadily between 2013 and 2020; 2) wait and wind down quickly by 2020; or 3) wind down quickly now then slowly taper out the rest of the remaining funds by 2020. As one staff member put it: "They [SOS International] basically told us: we're reducing funds. The question was: 'how do you want us to do it?'"

Despite the fact that the decision to transition came from SOS International, the national office in Colombia played a key role in designing and leading the transition process. Although the official announcement regarding withdrawing funds by 2020 came in late 2012, funding had already been slowly decreasing since 2005. This had encouraged the directors at SOS Colombia to consider a sustainability plan early on: "We decided to prepare ourselves for a day of no funding. We saw funds were slowly decreasing over the years, which is why we made that choice [to develop a sustainability strategy] on our own."

As part of this preparation, early on in the transition process the national office invited program directors from the ten states of Colombia to participate in conversations on sustainability. According to National Director Angela Rosales: "It was necessary for a 'holistic' sustainability. The federation is sustainable if countries are sustainable. Countries are sustainable if all programs are sustainable."

During interviews, SOS staff members expressed their continued support for the sustainability strategy. Firstly, it was widely felt among staff that SOS Colombia's existence was dependent on the successful delivery of the strategy, in which sustainability was tied to economic

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and programmatic growth. As one staff member said: “... in order to survive we had to grow.”

Secondly, despite Colombia’s middle-income status, staff felt that pressing development needs continued to exist throughout the country. There was a genuine motivation to continue implementing SOS development programs in areas that were affected by the conflict and that received limited services. This was echoed by other Colombian actors who felt that branding the country as “middle-income” was not entirely accurate, and that the decentralized nature of the state manifested in regional economic and social disparities. According to a government actor this has had an impact on INGOs exits: “... [INGOs] don’t know when to exit because work at national level isn’t getting to local areas. There is no feedback channel between local civil society and government and INGOs.”

OPERATIONAL CHANGES

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. The strategy team was put in charge of advising other teams on the overall organizational strategy, as well as ensuring that legal processes, ICT systems, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms all supported the transition. The phase-out of SOS International did not lead to a reduction of staff or activities within SOS Colombia, but rather pushed SOS Colombia to grow their teams and programs. As one staff member reported: “We are growing every day. In 2012 we had 400 staff members working for the National Association across the country. Now we have near 1,000.”

Additionally, strategic decisions were made to retain SOS’ brand and identity, which had a long, half-century history in Colombia. If SOS Colombia had decided to dissociate itself entirely from SOS International and instead register itself as a new legal entity, this would likely have caused a legal backlash with the Colombian government. 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. This demonstrates that even in the absence of financial support, the international office can continue to support local offices politically by allowing them to continue

using the SOS branding and identity. Similar sentiments were expressed by several other local organizations interviewed in Bogotá, who felt that political support from international agencies was needed even more than financial support, particularly during transitions.

FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Financial sustainability is at the core of SOS Colombia's long-term strategy. With the shrinking of international funds, SOS Colombia started to look at 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 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 sort of government involvement. According to one staff

member: "To be sustainable we need funds from the government. At the same time the government does not have services according to needs and for that reason they need our support to fulfill their responsibility."

The private sector has not typically been the dominant source of non-profit income in Colombia. However, given the country is now becoming middle-income, many companies have shown an interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR). While some companies have their own foundations to handle CSR, many are looking to national NGOs, such as SOS Colombia, to work through and with. Since the start of the transition, SOS Colombia have sought partnerships with various corporations, and this has also influenced the types of programs it has taken on.

Moreover, as part of the financial sustainability strategy, greater focus has been placed on public awareness campaigns, which have both fundraising and advocacy strands. These campaigns aim to bring attention to children impacted by conflict, abuse, poverty, and deinstitutionalization, while at the same time soliciting



donations from the public. The communications team are responsible for reaching out to the public via digital platforms, while volunteers are taken on to collect donations at supermarkets, shopping centers, and other public spaces. Money generated through these campaigns is SOS Colombia's main source of unrestricted funding.

SOS Colombia's vision goes beyond just financial sustainability, with one of the longer-term aims being that it become a PSA for SOS International. This would enable SOS Colombia to provide services and financial support to national associations around the world, and in fact it already does provide technical support to other country offices in Latin America. However, SOS Colombia's key focus at present is to provide quality services to children in its target group. Once its own sustainability has been guaranteed, it can then move to support other national associations.

PROGRAMMATIC SHIFTS

SOS Colombia made a number of programmatic shifts in response to the funding cuts proposed by SOS International. In some cases they closed down programs, while in others they shifted their focus to appeal to a more domestic audience of funders.

In the three to four years following the announcement of the transition a number of programs, such as SOS day care services and a number of SOS villages, were closed down. During this period of phasing out, care shifted to providing for children living in SOS families, and moving young adults into other services, such as youth communities and independent living. According to one staff member, SOS Colombia "... closed services where other NGOs and the government were serving the population already". 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. As one SOS staff member said: "The idea was to focus on the family. That was the shift. The decision was made to strengthen the family because that was an area we could do work on that the government was not currently doing."

However, SOS Colombia's increased emphasis on providing family services can also be attributed to the fact that maintaining SOS villages was becoming

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both financially unsustainable and unpopular among Colombian civil society and private funders. As such, the transition may have triggered programmatic changes that were already conceived of as far back as the 1970s.

By depending less on international funds and more on domestic funding sources, SOS Colombia is able to focus on projects that are more relevant to the local context. For example, a partnership with a private retail company prompted SOS to consider programs tackling child malnourishment, as this was one of the main interests of the company. As a result, SOS Colombia designed and implemented a program supporting families to improve their socio-economic situation. The partnership underwent further change when Colombia experienced large-scale floods, with the private company supporting SOS Colombia when it proposed a program to deliver counseling services to children and families affected by the natural disaster. According to one staff member: "International support is oriented toward financing their own agendas, not consolidating organizational structures of NGOs here. We now have a very well-defined structure. We get lots of money from the state. This has helped make us strong."

The narrative around child and family welfare within SOS Colombia has changed since the transition, and this has influenced the types of programs implemented by the organization. Less effort is put into building and maintaining SOS villages in Bogotá, with more focus put on designing programs relevant to the Colombian context. This in turn has meant such programs are more likely to be funded by domestic funders.

4. 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.

ENDNOTES

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