

Midterm evaluation of YouthCan!

Executive summary

Upon reaching the 10th year of activity of the YouthCan! programme, SOS Children's Villages decided to validate its success. Young people who have lost or are at risk of losing parental care often find the transition from school to employment particularly challenging, as they cannot count on the networks, resources or guidance that their peers may have access to. The goal of SOS Children's Villages is to equip such young people with the skills and confidence they need to realise their potential and stand on their own two feet. **YouthCan! provides individualised support to prepare them for higher education, the job market or self-employment.**

It all started in Madagascar, 10 years ago, as a partnership between SOS CV and Deutsche Post DHL Group (DHL) that aimed to strengthen youth employability. The programme was named *GoTeach*. Following its success, the programme was launched globally as a **multi-stakeholder partnership** involving five additional global corporate partners (AkzoNobel, Allianz, Johnson & Johnson, Siegwirk and TK Elevator) and hundreds of regional and local partners. After years of continued improvement, in 2017, *GoTeach* evolved into the current **YouthCan! platform**. **In 2020, the programme was active in 37 countries across the world, reaching 6,500 young people and involving more than 1,400 volunteers.**

On the occasion of the programme's 10th 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, and the data collection process involved four Member Associations (MAs), current and former participants, corporate volunteers, and other informed stakeholders.

This report offers an overview of the main findings of the midterm evaluation of the YouthCan! programme, which was conducted by the Action Research for CO-development (ARCO) research centre. Its main objectives are to **assess the outcomes of the programme on the employability and livelihoods of current and former programme participants, and to study the effects of participating in the programme on corporate partner volunteers**. Moreover, the multi-country setting provided an opportunity to compare four national case studies, in order to identify relevant recommendations and good practices. Indeed, this report represents an important learning opportunity for SOS Children's Villages and its MAs, as well as a useful advocacy tool to spread SOS CV's vision and share its extensive experience with relevant partners.

The evaluation included **extensive data collection based on a mixed-methods approach** that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative tools. As the assessment was planned in the midst of the first wave of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, all tools were designed to be used remotely. The analysis focused on the following three aspects:

- 1) **the outcomes and impact of the programme on current and former participants**, specifically on four dimensions of interest: *employability skills, self-esteem, support networks and livelihood*.
- 2) **the outcomes on corporate partner volunteers** who supported young participants, specifically in regard to their *awareness of social injustice, sense of self-worth, job satisfaction and skills and work environment*.
- 3) the **quality of the programme in terms of four OECD-DAC criteria** (OECD, 2019)¹: relevance, coherence, efficiency and sustainability.

¹ The Effectiveness and Impact criteria are covered in the previous two streams of analysis.

The overall results of this midterm evaluation are both interesting and promising, as they demonstrate that the support provided by YouthCan! to vulnerable youth is effective in promoting their personal and professional development, facilitating their entry into the labour market and supporting their journey to independence. Although they differ considerably, the YouthCan! programmes implemented in the four countries considered in this evaluation have demonstrated overall good effectiveness and several strengths. Their experience is highly valuable, as many lessons can be derived from it, and the comparative analysis of these four case studies provides further insight into the programme from a global perspective.

However, it should be considered that this midterm evaluation focused primarily on the short-to-medium-term outcomes of YouthCan!, as it proved particularly difficult for both the MAs and the evaluator to trace former participants who had left the programme more than four years earlier, to involve them in the study. This impacted the scope of the evaluation, as the survey results suffered from a significant selection bias, which resulted in an over-representation of current or very recent participants in the four national survey samples. As a result, the long-term outcomes of YouthCan! (particularly with regard to participants' livelihoods and self-sufficiency) should be re-assessed and revalidated in a few years' time. In the meantime, all MAs should make sure to establish a follow-up system that allows them to contact former participants more easily. In addition, the response rate of participants and volunteers to the two dedicated surveys administered by the evaluator was lower than expected. In some cases, this limited the depth of the analysis, as disaggregation of data was not always possible. However, the survey results proved strongly consistent with the qualitative information collected by the evaluator by means of focus groups and key informant interviews, which confirms the relevance of the findings.

The introductory section of this report is followed by four individual country reports, each of which presents the findings of the evaluation as they relate to each of the countries under analysis, as well as a list of recommendations for each MA, to inform their continued improvement. These are followed by a comparative analysis of the outcomes of the four country programmes, also observed through the lens of the OECD-DAC criteria. Drawing upon the many insights that emerged from the analysis, the closing section presents a list of recommendations aimed at supporting SOS Children's Villages in further developing YouthCan! at the global level.

Below is a synthetic summary of the findings presented in this report.

THE OUTCOMES OF THE PROGRAMME IN THE FOUR COUNTRIES UNDER ANALYSIS

While all national YouthCan! programmes have the same long-term goal of supporting vulnerable young people on their difficult journey towards employment and independence, it is important to consider that in the four countries under analysis, YouthCan! differs in many aspects, such as its practical implementation, educational approach, type of beneficiaries, number and type of corporate partners and degree of integration with other MA services. Moreover, in all four countries, the programme has undergone several improvements since its inception ten years ago, when it was known as GoTeach and involved only one global corporate partner (DHL). Since 2017, the programme has evolved into the multi-stakeholder platform it is today, offering a wider range of opportunities to its beneficiaries.

These variations between and within national programmes are important to bear in mind in order to correctly interpret the results of this study, for which it was necessary to maintain a certain level of aggregation. The results presented below refer to the results of the programme as a whole, on participants who benefited from either GoTeach or YouthCan!. When sample size allowed, survey results were disaggregated to distinguish between these groups.

• MADAGASCAR

Thanks to their participation in the Alternative Care (AC) service of SOS Children's Villages, **YouthCan! beneficiaries attained an education level much higher than the average Malagasy youth**, which gives them an important advantage in the labour market. In addition, they confirmed the **effectiveness of YouthCan! in improving their employability skills**, particularly professional skills and soft skills, which proved to be highly relevant during the job search and in the workplace. However, many pointed out that ICT skills are not sufficiently addressed by the programme.

According to both the staff of the MA and corporate volunteers, **the most significant impact of YouthCan!** (specifically of the one-to-one mentoring) **is on the self-esteem of the participants**. In fact, the majority of respondents demonstrated good self-confidence and felt positive about their futures, their skills and their ability to find an adequate job in the near future. However, for this last aspect only, women proved on average to be less confident than men.

YouthCan!'s contribution to widening the networks of young beneficiaries is not particularly relevant. While most participants are still in contact with other young people who participated in YouthCan!, their interactions are infrequent. However, the majority of current and former beneficiaries seem to have access to the necessary social and emotional support to make informed choices for their studies and their careers, although the mentor they met through YouthCan! remained a reference figure for only a few of them.

Finally, **the employment situation of those who had already exited education is quite satisfactory**. Most are in full-time employment with long-term contracts, and the few who are still unemployed have been looking for a job for less than a year. Moreover, none of the participants who exited before 2018 (therefore participating in GoTeach) are unemployed. None are self-employed. **Quite importantly, the survey does not identify significant differences between men and women**.

• NIGERIA

The evaluation assessment found that **YouthCan! in Nigeria effectively contributes to improving participants' employability skills**. Overall, 65% of surveyed participants attributed to YouthCan! a positive impact on their professional skills, 58% on their soft skills, but only 37% on their computer skills.

The program was particularly effective in improving participants' self-esteem: 90% reported feeling positive about the future and confident in their ability to find a job, even though their confidence was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the downside, **YouthCan! Nigeria does not appear to be having an impact in terms of strengthening participants' social networks**. In fact, 30% of current and former participants said they do not have a reference person in their lives with whom they regularly talk about their studies or careers.

In addition, the study found that there is still room for improvement in the work experience opportunities offered by the program, particularly as this appears to be critical to improving participants' employment chances. Indeed, **unemployment was found to be relatively prevalent among participants who completed the survey**. However, because a significant proportion of both current and former participants were still engaged in formal education at the time of the evaluation, the survey results are not particularly informative in terms of the long-term outcomes of the program on participants' livelihoods and self-sufficiency. **These issues should be reevaluated in a few years to get a more accurate estimate of YouthCan!'s effectiveness in this area**. However, it must be considered that YouthCan! alone struggles to offset the structural lack of demand in the Nigerian labour market. In fact, even among participants who have already left the program, 29% were unemployed at the time of the survey.

• COSTA RICA

Participation in YouthCan! allows young people to develop the **skills and competencies** necessary to enter the job market. In fact, the evaluation confirmed that both current and former participants improved their **professional, ICT and soft skills** thanks to the programme. However, YouthCan! does not sufficiently help its participants to acquire the basic work experience that can help them convince employers to offer them a job. As a consequence, only 26% of former beneficiaries interviewed during the evaluation were employed.

YouthCan! also provides the opportunity for young people to build **self-esteem** by addressing their **timidity** and **low sense of self-worth**. This is the dimension in which social workers and educators from external organisations, as well as corporate volunteers, perceived the greatest impact of the programme, and they described visible change in the attitudes of young beneficiaries. As a result, young people were able to move from a situation of fragility to a situation of **empowerment**, showed more **self-confidence** and **leadership**, demonstrated **better performance** and regained **control over their lives**.

In addition, YouthCan! expanded participants' **peer networks** and allowed them, through access to volunteers and mentors, to have an additional **adult figure in their life to act as a reference point**.

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

• BRAZIL

YouthCan! Brazil is focused on **empowering vulnerable young people and on improving their soft skills** by providing the necessary tools to boost their self-confidence and to help them overcome the feelings of inadequacy and inferiority that they often experience. According to YouthCan! educators and corporate volunteers, these dimensions are also those in which participants achieve the greatest improvement, thus creating positive spill-overs into other aspects of participants' lives.

Moreover, YouthCan! attained positive results in **enhancing young people's professional skills**, as reported by both current and former participants of the Brazilian programme. However, the programme is not able to offer on-the-job experiences to all participants, which negatively affects its capacity to ease their entry into the labour market. Also, for this reason, it takes a few years for former participants to become self-sufficient.

Finally, it is important to underline that YouthCan! helps to **strengthen the social and professional support networks of its participants**, by connecting them with positive educational role models and adults with whom they can discuss their studies and careers, as well as with peers with whom they can share their experiences and build lasting friendships.

THE EFFECTS OF YOUTHCAN! ON CORPORATE VOLUNTEERS

Corporate volunteers are critical to the success of YouthCan!, as their contribution is the most innovative and effective tool the programme has to support young people. Although only a small number of corporate volunteers agreed to participate in the evaluation survey, it was still possible to appreciate how they too were positively impacted by the decision to devote their time to YouthCan!

Indeed, corporate volunteers in all four countries reported that **participation in the programme increased their awareness** of the additional difficulties faced by young people without parental care and by disadvantaged youth in general. Overall, YouthCan! was perceived as an opportunity to better understand the inequalities that affected their communities. At the same time, mentoring young people also helped the volunteers to develop their listening skills, empathy skills and communication skills. The majority of them feel that YouthCan! allowed them to make a positive contribution to individuals and communities in need, which increased their sense of self-worth and made them more satisfied with themselves and with their work, as well as proud to be part of a socially-committed company.

However, this change in attitude has not yet facilitated the recruitment of beneficiaries by the corporate partners themselves. In fact, until now, it has been rare for corporate partners to employ YouthCan! participants on a long-term basis. There are several reasons for this: first, corporate partners currently offer only a limited number of internships or job-shadowing opportunities to YouthCan! participants, even though these have proven to be the most effective tool for helping beneficiaries to gain work experience and the trust of employers (this is particularly the case in Brazil and Nigeria); second, MA staff do not always have the time or resources to maintain constant coordination and follow-up between educators and volunteers, to ensure that participants make the most of their internship or job-shadowing time (as is the case in Madagascar); and finally, there can be a mismatch between the candidate profiles sought after by corporate partners (often white-collar with very sector-specific skills) and the skills of the participants.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE COUNTRY-LEVEL RESULTS

A comparative analysis of the four case studies allows us to identify some aspects that can influence the achievement of the programme's expected outcomes. The first is the **education level of the participants**, which deeply influences the methods YouthCan! can apply, as well as the objectives it sets. The second is **the intensity of the support provided to a participant**, not only in terms of the frequency of activities, but rather in terms of the *type* of activities. While each MA focuses on a slightly different set of activities, the opportunity to benefit from volunteer mentoring and/or work experience (e.g. internships or job shadowing) were confirmed by all as essential for the success of YouthCan!. Finally, in all four case studies, the **limited capacity of MA staff to follow-up on former participants** (due to the limited human resources available or lack of suitable monitoring/follow-up tools) negatively impacted their capacity to maintain the support networks built during their participation in the programme.

Furthermore, looking at YouthCan! across the four countries, through the framework of the OECD-DAC criteria, allowed for a better understanding of the variety of complex and changing needs that YouthCan! seeks to address, as well as the reasons behind the different choices made by the four MAs, to make their actions as impactful as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the evaluator proposed the following global-level recommendations.

1. Ensure that the mentoring tool remains central to the YouthCan! methodology.

Ensure that the implementation of YouthCan! at the country level, while being flexible to the specificities of the context, maintains the mentoring tool (and when possible one-to-one mentoring) at the core of its action.

2. Maintain the flexibility of YouthCan!, to ensure that country-specific needs of young people are met, while aligning all national programmes towards the same goals.

Maintain the flexibility of the YouthCan! model, to ensure that all country-specific needs of young beneficiaries are met, while providing standard methodological support and tools to ensure that all national programmes are aligned towards the same goals.

3. Improve the financial sustainability of national programmes by increasing and diversifying funding sources.

Improve the financial sustainability of YouthCan! by increasing the number and diversity of funding sources, including more local companies among corporate partners, and exploring opportunities with international organisations.

4. Ensure that the selection of new corporate partners takes into consideration the interests of beneficiaries and the demands of the labour market.

When searching for new corporate partners (local or global) to join the YouthCan! platform, ensure a focus on companies whose expertise and sector are of interest to beneficiaries.

5. Define a structured monitoring strategy to follow-up on beneficiaries both during their participation in YouthCan! and after they have left the programme.

Define a YouthCan! monitoring strategy at the global level, with standardised tools, in order to ensure a constant follow-up on current and former beneficiaries and to collect data that can be aggregated and compared across countries.

6. Further address gender inequalities through YouthCan!.

Ensure that the gender gap in education and employment is specifically addressed by YouthCan!, by means of dedicated activities and opportunities.

7. Improve the long-term impact of YouthCan! on the social support network of beneficiaries.

Enhance the effectiveness of YouthCan! in expanding and strengthening the social support network of its beneficiaries, and even more so in facilitating its long-term maintenance, even after the young person has left the programme.

8. Improve YouthCan!'s focus on developing participants' ICT skills and access to technological devices, while harnessing the opportunity offered by YouthLinks.

Ensure that all national programmes provide sufficient computer skills training to participants and access to the necessary devices and infrastructure to exercise and assimilate them.

9. Increase the programme's focus on youth entrepreneurship.

Increase the number of trainings, activities and opportunities to promote youth entrepreneurship.

10. Ensure the appropriate training of all corporate volunteers.

Ensure that all corporate employees are properly trained and sensitised before becoming volunteers and mentors.