

Youth**Action**Net®

CASE STUDY SERIES

Semillas:

*IMPROVING COMMUNITY LIFE IN
COSTA RICA*

A partnership between:



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

School of Foreign Service
Global Human Development Program



Introduction

This is one of a series of case studies produced by students enrolled in the Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University through its partnership with the International Youth Foundation (IYF). Students enrolled in a course exploring the role of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs were paired with young leaders of social ventures identified through the IYF's YouthActionNet® program. The students were given the assignment of analyzing the venture's assets, successful methodologies, and opportunities for investment to increase impact. Through this experiential learning process, the student consultants gained hands-on experience and exposure to the needs of social enterprises. The ventures, too, benefited from student insights into their strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations for enhancing their impact and sustainability. The Georgetown practicum is part of YouthActionNet's larger efforts to partner with institutions of higher learning around the globe to integrate social change into the academic experience and career interests of students.

International Youth Foundation

The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. Founded in 1990, IYF builds and maintains a worldwide community of businesses, governments, and civil society organizations committed to empowering youth to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. IYF programs are catalysts of change that help young people obtain a quality education, gain employability skills, make healthy choices, and improve their communities.

www.iyfnet.org

YouthActionNet®

Since 2001, YouthActionNet, a program of the International Youth Foundation, has provided founders of social ventures, ages 18 to 29, with the training, networking, coaching, funding, and advocacy opportunities they need to strengthen and scale their impact. These young social entrepreneurs have pioneered innovative solutions to critical local and global challenges, resulting in increased civic engagement, improved health, education reform, economic opportunity, environmental protection, and more inclusive societies. Our work is carried out through a network of 23 national and regional youth leadership institutes that collectively support over 1,350 young social entrepreneurs globally.

www.youthactionnet.org

Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University

The Global Human Development Program of Georgetown University is home to one of the world's premier master's degree programs in international development. An innovative, academically rigorous skills-based graduate program, the Master of Global Human Development degree prepares the next generation of development professionals to work with public sector agencies, private businesses, and non-profit organizations that advance development. Through coursework, extracurricular activity, and practical fieldwork experiences, our graduates develop the insights, skills, and experiences necessary to become leaders in development and make a difference in our global community.

<https://ghd.georgetown.edu>

INTRODUCTION

Meet Daniela Calderon and Sofía Suárez, Co-founders of Semillas

In 2013, Daniela Calderon and Sofía Suárez took an architecture class in college where the main project was to transform a low-income community. During the first few months, Dani and Sofía worked with their colleagues and found a community that had low access to resources, was densely populated, in a non-natural risk zone, and was considered low-income.

They conducted workshops with community members and designed a masterplan to transform the communal living spaces. In the months that followed, they worked to raise the necessary money to realize the plans they had drawn. The model proved successful and after graduation, a group of the students went to other low-income communities and worked to transform shared communal spaces with the vision of bettering lives and building cooperative networks. In 2016, Dani, Sofía, and their other co-founders (namely, Professor Manuel Morales, Silvia Camacho, Soren Pessoa Piña, Karen Cubillo, Adriana Corrales, Carlos Núñez, and Brenda Zumbado) legally registered Asociación Semillas and have continued to replicate the model they learned in class to improve low-income communities in Costa Rica.



Semillas is improving community life in Costa Rica.



The Problem

Low-income communities in Costa Rica often lack well-functioning, smartly-designed communal spaces and linkages across the private and public sectors which spur collaboration and change. Communal spaces in these neighborhoods have either fallen into disrepair, are underdeveloped, or have non-inclusive architecture, and are therefore generally underused. Therefore, very few opportunities arise in these communities to come together to discuss issues and collaborate. This, in turn, has led to low levels of trust, cooperation, and collaboration across a wide array of concerns, such as crime and marginalization. Furthermore, many low-income communities lack the knowledge and the wherewithal to improve shared living spaces. Many of the individuals from these communities also have poor networks and connections among themselves and with academia, the public sector, the private sector, and civil society. The poor quality or even non-existence of networks and resources for community members, both internally and externally, has hampered the ability of community members and leaders to take charge of their own development.

Box 1: Overview of Impact to Date

1. ***TEOR/ética-Semillas Study Group, Barrio Amón, San José (2017-present):*** TEOR/ética, an arts and thought foundation, is working with Semillas to investigate the intersection of art, urbanism, and participation in the context of one of San José's oldest neighborhoods.
2. ***San José de Upala Project, Upala, Alajuela (2016-present):*** Semillas worked with a University of Costa Rica initiative and collaborated with sociologists, psychologists, and the rural community to co-design a multi-use space for community members, particularly women and children.
3. ***Limón Project, Cieneguita (2016-present):*** Semillas is currently working with the community to develop workshops and conversations to reinforce the community's identity through historic memory and reactivation of public spaces.
4. ***Los Geranios and Los Olivos Project, Paso Ancho (2016-present):*** Semillas is working with two neighboring communities to co-create and reactivate a communal park.
5. ***Volunteer Programs, Los Guido, Desamparados, San José (2016-present):*** With the INCAE Business School, Semillas is developing pilot sessions in "Árbol Nodal Urbano."
6. ***F5 Project, CTP Pococí, Limón (2015-2017):*** Semillas has completed a participatory design process for the creation of a common space in the largest professional technical school in the country, which aims at decreasing student desertion.
7. ***Cosa-Caño Negro Project, Los Chiles, Alajuela (2015-2016):*** Alongside the University of Costa Rica's COSA initiative, Semillas helped develop a communal space in which the informal community of Caño Negro could assemble and organize the community.
8. ***Urban Activation Workshop, San José (2015):*** Semillas promoted a workshop focused on integrating urban borders that was hosted by Pausa Urbana and the University of Costa Rica.

The Solution

Semillas has envisioned a solution to confront the two main challenges that low-income communities face through sustainable development. Semillas works with community members through a series of workshops aimed at building trust and a sense of cooperation, draws up a plan with community members to create a sense of ownership within the community, provides support through a team of professions, and helps the community implement the plan. Throughout the process, Semillas brings capacity-building skills, and the ability to provide access to resources. The connections and linkages between communities, the public sector, the private sector, and academia

help communities realize the initial project with Semillas and independently develop projects in the future. Semillas promotes social community architecture by reinforcing community relationships and their sense of identity through co-creation and improvement of their public shared spaces. Communities gain a sense of empowerment and network cooperation to achieve self-management of projects. Semillas works to foster community cohesion through workshops and a co-creation processes. This nurtured cohesion is fundamentally important to the realization of Semillas' other objective of building functional public spaces together.

Box 2: Spotlight on the Cosa-Caño Negro Project



Alongside COSA (Construcción Organizativa Socio Ambiental), a University of Costa Rica student initiative, the Cosa-Caño Negro project was implemented in 2015-2016. First, COSA volunteers worked with the Caño Negro community to develop strong community bonds and a tighter social network.

Caño Negro, a small, informal, mostly immigrant community in the northern area of the country, lies in a wetland near a protected nature area. COSA invited Semillas to join the work in Caño Negro by working with community members to build a space to have social activities and community meetings. The design challenges were significant given that materials and workforce had to be local due to the remote location, and moreover, the design of the center had to be quite innovative due to limited resources and geographic location. Community bonds grew even stronger through the development of participatory design workshops, collective brainstorming, group decision making, and visualization of the space community members wanted.

This project was an example of highly collaborative work among different organizations including COSA, Pausa Urbana, and Hivos. Through the generous support of Hivos, the community is also receiving trainings on how to produce clean energy with bicycle generators. The process was educational for Semillas because the process, design, and relationship building change with each project.

Operational Model

The organization and core group of volunteers have been experimenting with Semillas' model and approach since 2013, working to solidify the mission and core values. Realizing the potential of the organization, they decided to legally register as a non-profit organization in 2016 and develop a more sustainable model and operational framework. To date, Semillas has worked in 11 communities inside and outside the greater metropolitan area of the capital, San Jose. Projects have included working in mobility, accessibility, waste management, and public infrastructure issues. They have impacted more than 250 families directly and more than 5,000 people indirectly.



The organization's staff has produced a strategic three-year plan from 2017 to 2020, to set out plans to make the organization financially sustainable. Previously, Semillas went to low-income communities, spoke to community members about their goals, and then began collaborating. Soon after, and with increased media attention, communities began reaching out to the organization asking for assistance. Up until now, the financial model has been on a case-by-case basis where the project is drawn up then taken to local government officials and private sector actors in order to gauge interest and raise the money necessary to bring the project to fruition. Major partners include University of Costa Rica (UCR), Yomeuno (a bank that serves as a social innovation hub), Incae (an international business school), VAS (Vicerrectoria Accion Social, a UCR student group), Urban Pause (a social network aimed at reactivating urban spaces), and SEED (a nonprofit legal service).

Semillas operates in a similar way to the architecture class assignment. Once the organization connects with a community (either after the community reaches out to Semillas or a connection is made through staff members), the staff conducts a diagnosis to assess the community's assets, challenges, and priorities. The staff then hosts a series of workshops to design a plan for a shared community space. The workshops bring community members together and create a sense of collaboration and cooperation. The staff of Semillas review the plan, make any necessary adjustments, and work with community members to devise an appropriate budget. After the staff and community members have raised enough money, they begin working on the project together. Finally, once the project is complete, the staff follow up with community members and publicize the work that has been done.

KEY ASSETS AND SUCCESSFUL METHODOLOGIES



Inclusive Model

The Semillas model is built on community engagement and empowerment. Semillas has developed a general model, however since each community faces different challenges, the model can be adjusted for each circumstance.

The inclusive and sustainable process allows for two important developments for communities. First, community members gain the tools and skills

necessary to come together and devise plans for future communal spaces and are empowered to take hold of their own development. Second, because community members are involved in the design process as well as the fundraising process, they begin to build their own networks and expand their access to resources. This model promotes sustainability, since community members are the primary drivers of architectural development projects.

Figure 1: The Semillas process



Human Resource

The individuals who work with Semillas' projects are a dedicated and diverse group of young people who are looking to make a difference in communities. Currently there is a core staff of eleven individuals, plus an additional five people who work with Semillas on a case-by-case basis for specific projects. At first, only architects from the university class were involved in the project. However, through a variety of experiences, the staff realized that they lacked skills that would allow them to succeed, including the ability to create budgets and knowledge of socio-economic challenges. The volunteer staff grew to include architects, engineers, psychologists, and sociologists.

This diversity in skill sets allows for Semillas to operate on many different levels with communities and has become key to the success of the Semillas model. The current staff of young and mission-driven individuals are dedicated to the projects and the possibilities that can be brought about through their work. They are motivated by the large numbers of individuals impacted by the projects.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVESTMENT

The staff of Semillas have the experience, vision, and drive to take the organization to the next level and become a fully developed non-profit organization that is financially sustainable and growing in its scope of work. However, there are a few challenges that the organization needs to overcome, namely financial sustainability and bringing on a few more specialized staff members that could expand the organization's capacity.



Financial Sustainability

Currently, Semillas raises money on a per project basis. The staff are volunteers who must balance time spent doing Semillas-related work with regular day jobs. Funds are only raised for specific projects, so there isn't a way for the volunteers to be paid enough to work on Semillas full-time. Although the staff is passionate about the issues they are aiming to solve, they are unable to contribute full-time, and this in turn affects the amount of impact that Semillas can achieve.

Fundraising per project also poses operational challenges. Each time a plan is drawn up, Semillas staff must either build new relationships with local governments and businesses or return to previous donors asking to fund another community project. This time- and labor-intensive process does not always guarantee that Semillas can raise enough funds, or that the funds will be available in a timely manner, and hurts the organization as it tries to become far-reaching with linkages to a variety of public and private sector actors and to a larger number of low-income communities.

The staff has drawn up a strategic three-year plan, which includes a financial model that would be more sustainable compared to the current situation. The proposed budget requirements for each year are broken down into four main categories: remuneration of staff, capital for projects, documentation and publications, and representations and partnerships. Additionally, there are three possible forecasts, namely conservative, base, and optimistic. The budget breakdowns and forecasts were prepared in a thoughtful and analytic manner. It would be beneficial to add an annex to the document that further breaks down the numbers so that investors have a clear understanding of how the budget calculations were derived. For example, investors might want to know the number of staff and the rates they will be receiving per year, as well as the cost of the materials needed for the workshops and construction. Additionally, it might be useful to add a line item for miscellaneous or unexpected expenses.

The strategic three-year plan also proposes to set up a social impact fund to allow investors to contribute to Semillas. This portion of the plan is underdeveloped, especially if analyzing from the viewpoint of an investor. The ideas proposed can be further expanded by clarifying how the fund will be set up, how many donors at various levels are needed, how the fund will be managed (especially in terms of human resources), and what are the benefits that an investor would receive. Many

companies would be keen to know of specific benefits they could possibly receive, such as branding and marketing opportunities on publications and social media accounts or the organization's website. Semillas staff needs to develop a document that is thorough and specific in terms of their financial needs and plans, and one that is geared toward investors allowing them to understand the work of Semillas more holistically.

Human Resources and Marketing

To transform Semillas into a financially sustainable organization, there needs to be an expansion with staff who have specific knowledge in administration, finance, and marketing.

Currently, logistics management shifts and adjusts on a project-by-project basis, which is in line with the organization's horizontal structure. The General Assembly, the core staff of Semillas, have specific assigned roles, such as treasurer, finance, and public relations, in addition to being the leader of specific projects. The Con-missions are the staff that work on a project-by-project basis and are usually brought on for their specialized skills.



The current staff is doing well enough in the areas of finance, management, and marketing and communications to get by at the moment, but the structure does not allow for growth. First, administrative management can be better handled if there is a single person hired as a Chief Operating Officer. The job would entail taking care of any logistical management both of physical and human resources with the mission to ensure the efficiency and productivity of the organization.

Second, it is vital that Semillas, especially at this point given a non-profit status, devote a single staff member to handle all financial matters. This includes ensuring that financial transactions are done properly and executing the financial plan for the organization. As discussed above, the current financial proposal is underdeveloped to a certain extent and a dedicated staff person could help expand and realize the goals of the document. Following the strategic plan would also add to the productivity and efficiency of the organization.

Lastly, there needs to be a staff member responsible for marketing and communications. The organization has already received some press attention, and have a Facebook page, a YouTube channel, and a forthcoming website. However, there needs to be a unified, clear message and marketing plan so that Semillas' work can reach to new heights. A Marketing and Communication Director would be responsible for devising and executing a coherent communications plan so that the messaging is clear across all the various channels and the work receives a larger media platform through which they can further highlight the issues in place and the innovative solutions possible.

CONCLUSION

The core value of Semillas is to transform community life among individuals living in low income communities. This impact can have substantial ramifications as communities begin to take an increased sense of ownership of the community's development. This core value is what should continue to drive Semillas' work forward. Soon, Semillas aims to become a financially stable organization with a committed full-time staff that is continuously working on a variety of projects with communities all over Costa Rica with the goal of those communities achieving self-management and development with the knowledge and know-how to modify public spaces to suit the community's needs.

Semillas currently finds itself on the brink of becoming a nationally recognized organization that can alter the way people think about communal spaces and development in low-income communities. The clear presentation of the mission, vision, and motivation can help carry the organization forward. However, Semillas needs to overcome certain challenges to move forward, specifically in the areas of management and financial sustainability. If these issues are resolved, the organization can begin to impact lives in a more substantial way.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SEMILLAS

- [Semillas Facebook page](#)
- [Semillas YouTube page](#)
- [Semillas blog](#)
- [Semillas Website](#) (Will be completed Spring 2017)

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