



SOS Children's Villages

- Digital Villages

ORGANISATION

SOS Children's Villages

LOCATION

Global

INNOVATION SPECTRUM

Digital equity

MATURITY LEVEL

Established

The organisation

[SOS Children's Villages](#) is the world's largest international civil society organisation (CSO) supporting children and young people who are lacking parental care or at risk of losing it. All over the world, children are neglected, abused and abandoned and families are at risk of separation. SOS works to enable children to grow up with the bonds they need to develop and become their strongest selves. Locally-led, SOS operates in more than 130 countries to strengthen families who face challenges to ensure they can stay together. When this is not in a child's best interests, the organisation provides quality care according to their unique needs.

The big idea

Accessible digital skills education widens the number of employability options available to youth, particularly those in alternative care. The Digital Villages programme aims to integrate technology into the everyday lives of children, youth and their families by providing the necessary information and communications technology (ICT) skills and resources to support and improve their education, employability, training and capacity.

The programme has been launched in 67 countries, already benefitting 25,600 children and 10,700 youth in alternative care, family strengthening programmes and the community, and also the 6,100 caregivers directly providing alternative care to children and young people in SOS Children's Villages.

Digital Villages has three major pillars:

- Providing access to technology and internet
- Building digital skills
- Training users on cyber safeguarding, to ensure that children's rights and security in the digital environment are respected, protected and fulfilled.

The challenge and the power dynamics of the system

According to UNICEF and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), globally, two thirds¹ of school-age children lack internet access at home, cutting them off from quality digital learning and other online opportunities. Lack of access to equipment and the skills to navigate the digital world safely affects the ability of vulnerable children and young people around the world to access information and other digital programmes and opportunities which advance their rights. Vulnerable children and young people with inadequate parental care are further lagging behind wider society, given their limited or lack of access to ICT tools and skills.

ICT skills are gaining amplified importance, both for education but also professional career aspects. Closing this digital equity divide is critical for young people to have the best chances to keep up with their education, join the job market, access social services and support networks, and become self-reliant. Technology can help bridge geographical barriers, bring learning materials to any location where children receive care, complementing formal education, building entrepreneurship skills, and strengthening online safeguarding.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed both the urgent need for digitalisation and the magnitude of the digital equity divide, but also increased inequalities due to a lack of access to, and awareness of, technology and connectivity. Children and young people who lack basic ICT skills are at great risk of falling behind, especially with enforced school closures. The UN has described the pandemic as '[the largest disruption of education systems in history](#)', affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries.² Closure of schools and learning spaces affected 95% of the world's student population, reaching 99% in low and lower-middle income countries.

All this means that the opportunities are enormous. Providing access to the digital world and developing the necessary skills opens up a plethora of career paths for children and young people. Digital inclusion also allows children and young people to engage relevant institutions to lead change as experts in their own lives.

¹ [UNICEF and International Telecommunication Union \(2020\) "How Many Children and Youth Have Internet Access at Home?"](#)

² [UN \(2020\) 'Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond'](#)

Intervening in the power dynamics

The Digital Villages programme ensures that children, young people, caregivers and care professionals have access to digital tools and the internet, greater awareness of online risks and how to navigate the internet safely, and the skills to access digital learning and vocational skills opportunities.

Infrastructure upgrades have been necessary for users across 67 countries. Computers, accessories and Microsoft Windows licences were installed in SOS family homes where possible. In many instances, this was the first time some users had direct access to computers in their homes.

The programme offers a module on ICT skills and cyber-safeguarding. Subsequently, each country implements additional modules depending on the local needs of programme participants. In the Philippines, for example, significant training has been provided to ensure that users have the ability to use ICTs in their daily lives. Two workshop modules have been offered:

- The first covered basic ICT skills such as typing, introduction to Microsoft Office, virtual communication, navigating the internet and cybersecurity. Basic computer hardware and software maintenance skills were taught to promote sustainability.
- The second, specialised module trained users on programming logic, how to weld physical computer components, design in Arduino, an open-source electronics platform with easy-to-use hardware and software, and sensors to build automation projects (basic robotics).

In Bangladesh, for example, more than 5,000 students in alternative care and family strengthening programmes have been supported in a total of 30,000 online classes, with no dropouts reported. In 2020-21, during the pandemic, 790 tablets were distributed to vulnerable youth, and an additional 81 family homes equipped with computers. With additional support from the Government of Bangladesh, eight computer labs were created and 118 teachers trained on digital facilitation skills.

The Digital Villages programme also teaches children and young people about the online risks they are likely to face – such as cyberbullying, online predators and exposure to inappropriate content – and provides them with knowledge of how to navigate the internet safely. Child and youth care staff also have access to an e-learning course to develop cybersecurity and safeguarding skills and cascade them to other users. They are also able to access guidelines and support resources, which can be contextualised to achieve greater scale.

Along with different community actors and government representatives, the Digital Villages programme has provided a pathway for vulnerable communities to continue with their education and skills development. Maintaining access to education in countries such as the Philippines was essential when schools were closed for a prolonged period at the height of the pandemic. Children participated in e-learning modules prior to the pandemic, and this facilitated their migration to online learning as part of the national public education schemes during school closures. Where feasibility of home access was limited, furnished computer labs were set up with state-of-the-art machines. SOS Philippines also worked with school districts to provide different options to maintain children's education.



Aspects underpinning innovation

Monitoring, evaluation and adaptation has been critical throughout the programme. Baseline surveys determined the initial level of knowledge and interest in technology of the programme users, and ongoing evaluation of workshop content meant methodologies could be adjusted to appropriately cater to the priorities of the young people participating in the programme. Inclusion of caregivers was crucial in fostering a conducive environment throughout SOS homes. Initially, convincing them to participate was challenging as an unwelcome addition to the existing strain of their regular duties. Addressing their concerns, demonstrating the usability of the internet in their daily lives and demystifying technology changed their minds.

A range of innovation partnerships and donors at global, regional and local levels have been critical to success - donors and partners have provided funding as well as equipment needed to bridge the digital divide. For instance:

- A partnership with the global social enterprise ICDL Foundation, which raises digital competency standards in the workforce, education and society, has been integral to providing ICT skills training and certification for young people in several countries. In 2021, SOS Children's Villages in Nepal and Bangladesh became ICDL Accredited Test Centres, enabling the participating children to undertake certification programmes in Computer and Online Essentials, Spreadsheets, and Digital Marketing.
- Locally, partners such as MudaLAB in Brazil have assisted the programme in implementing specialised training modules on sustainability, diversity and social mobilisation. In the Philippines, support from corporate partner Capitol One reduced the number of young people having to share a single laptop from nine down to six. And in Benin, SOS Children's Villages partnered with Learnio, a social enterprise providing accessible and affordable digital skills education along with online mentorship. 80% of participants completed the training and obtained a diploma.

Impact and influence

The implementation of Digital Villages has strengthened ICT infrastructure and empowered digitally literate users who can continue their education online, improve their employability and competitiveness in the global job market, and are safer from the threats of cyber abuse and technology misuse. The programme has led to 74% of children and youth in alternative care programmes achieving basic and intermediate level digital skills, and 7% gaining advanced skills. However, there is still much to be done at the community level through our family strengthening programmes. Only 46% of children and young people have a basic or intermediate level of digital skills.

Digital Villages has empowered young people to join the job market and develop skills on an immense variety of topics. Accessing educational courses online reduced dropout rates, especially through the transition to online learning due to the pandemic. There has also been a mindset shift of young people in the programme, in terms of the careers they envision for themselves. Youth in alternative care and in family strengthening have realised they have many more employment options through ICT training, such as creating their own businesses or working virtually. In many locations around the world, young people expressed keen interest in using the training they received to pursue new careers.

In several places, this influenced the programme curriculum to cater directly to the interests of the participants. For instance, in the Philippines a consultative process to determine the future career hopes and desires of the young people resulted in more targeted courses and trainings being added.

“One of the young people... said that after having access to better equipment and being able to explore the possibilities of ICT, he is committed to pursue a career in ICT to support his peers” Archie Florentino, ICT Manager, SOS Children’s Villages shares the experience of one of their programme participants.

And in Brazil, young people commented on how the access to technology had exposed them to a wider world they had previously known nothing about, and the

The Digital Villages programme has enabled the implementation of other digital activities and initiatives that require basic technology skills from users.

These include:

- The [YouthCan! global youth employability programme](#) which in 2021 reached 14,485 young people in 42 countries around the world. Young people aged 16-25 can connect virtually across geographical barriers using the [YouthLinks](#) platform to volunteer mentors and trainers from corporate partners and other institutions, for worldwide collaborative learning and online mentoring to help further their careers, and build networks that enable them to transition into independence.
- The artificially intelligent [Digital Care Assistant Rafiki](#) text-voice chatbot which has revolutionised learning opportunities for caregivers on parenting, education and mental health. They can access the chatbot through mobile devices, tablets and desktop computers, as a result of the digital skills gained through the Digital Villages programme.

“ Let’s make a lobby group together to talk to governments...corporates....local agents...to really push for this access to technology ”

MARIA BERENGUER, CO-TEAM LEADER,
YOUTH & ICT FOR DEVELOPMENT,
SOS CHILDREN’S VILLAGES INTERNATIONAL

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<https://icscentre.org/resources/innovation-report/>

Key takeaways

Whether it is tackling thematic areas such as children rights, advocacy or access to technology, international CSOs should design solutions with target users for maximum usability. Once the solution is established, consistent monitoring through user surveys and interviews allows for any necessary course correction.

Partnerships have been critical to success, especially in the public and private sectors, including DPDHL, Allianz and the Ferry Porsche Foundation, allowing SOS Children's Villages to provide devices, equip computer labs, structure trainings, hire trainers and enable a host of other programme activities. The organisation has seen major strides in the last five years towards forming stronger alliances with governments and private companies to provide basic infrastructure with large-scale impact. For instance, the partnership with the government in Kenya with the [Ajira programme](#) has provided digital access to trainings and mentors, to increase the employability and entrepreneurship opportunities available to young people. This is not an area for competition - CSOs can instead form lobby groups to approach governments, corporations and local agents to highlight the importance of providing proficient access to technology to all who need it, regardless of background, location and level of education.

There are also documented benefits for partners such as in the The [YouthCan! global youth employability programme](#): where employees who virtually mentor young people are highly motivated and loyal to a company after participating in this type of programme. Connecting to youth abroad, they can share their knowledge and further their mentorship and coaching skills on an individual level.

The next 5+ years...

The Digital Villages programme around the world has demonstrated the need to further scale up digital access and skills for vulnerable children and young people. Looking ahead, SOS Children's Villages is focusing on developing digital community centres through local partnerships and sustainable business models, whereby communities are actively involved in running the centres.

Currently, the programme is enabling the mapping of existing access levels of vulnerable populations to technology. This data allows SOS to analyse the qualitative advantage of providing children and young people with access to technology and assess the negative impacts of not receiving critical digital skills training. This will in turn provide a basis to approach other organisations which want to achieve the same outcomes, to nurture partnerships and investments at local and international levels.

Scalability is the next viable scenario for country offices to provide technology access not only to SOS Villages' families and youth, but also wider communities. Blended training (in-person and online), with material translated into several different languages, will expand access and reinforce cyber safeguarding training in all 130 countries where SOS operates. To further this, the organisation is looking to deepen multi-level partnerships with CSOs, private sector players and governments to provide access and infrastructure investments.

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