Insights from our Colombia enterprises

IDEAS WITHOUT BORDERS: A scalable model for global impact

TRANSFORM is a unique model that unites the strengths of the public and private sectors in support of new market-based solutions to today's most complex global development challenges. It is a model that has been tried and tested over the past decade, with Unilever, the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY at the helm.

We are guided by a handful of core principles. Chief among them is our desire to lead with openness, sharing our insights freely to spark new ideas, drive innovation and grow the wider development ecosystem. This includes making the TRANSFORM model itself readily available for others to build on, adapt and scale.

It's a principle that has moved beyond theory, as the model has recently been replicated. Between 2022 and 2024, Unilever partnered with the Global Solidarity Forum (GSF) and EY to expand the TRANSFORM programme into Colombia. The collaboration provided US$1 million cash and in-kind business support to scale visionary impact enterprises that support marginalised populations including migrants, women and young people in the country.

Meet the three enterprises we supported. All of them using innovative solutions to solve challenges in their local contexts.

BOLSIYO is strengthening the market position of micro-merchants through digitalisation

Bolsiyo is a cash register app that helps micro-merchants digitalise their operations in order to become more competitive. The app offers a suite of offerings, with solutions for payments, price positioning, expense management and maintaining customer loyalty. With the use of AI technology, users can also customise the app to their own needs.

THE CHALLENGE

Micro-merchants in Colombia provide local, low-income communities with access to essential goods and services. They are also a critical source of employment. Haowever, many lack the right resources and education to scale their businesses and increase profitability.

THE INNOVATION

TRANSFORM's support has enabled Bolsiyo to develop an educational service, the Bolsiyo Academy, to go alongside their cash register app. The Academy trains and empowers micro-merchants on how to effectively use its finance solutions. The collaboration has also helped the enterprise integrate several additional tools into its app, including client engagement, operations, money transactions and supply management.

THE IMPACT

Bolsiyo currently supports

7,800 micro-merchants

and aspires to **support one in every five micro-merchants** in Latin America.

CONCEPTOS PLÁSTICOS is repurposing plastic waste to plug the infrastructure gap

Conceptos Plásticos has developed a construction system, "Bricks and Blocks", which recovers plastic waste and repurposes it into homes, schools and healthcare centres for low-income communities.

THE CHALLENGE

Of the 700,000 tonnes of plastic containers and packaging introduced into Colombia's domestic market each year, only 3% is recycled. Moreover, around 3.7 million households – over a quarter of the country's total – face a housing deficit.

THE INNOVATION

TRANSFORM's resources and expertise supported the enterprise to build a business that democratises access to knowledge and technology for recycling – ensuring that communities and informal waste workers can not only participate in, but lead circular economy processes themselves. With the support of TRANSFORM:

- The WaY (Women & Young) project was created, an empowerment programme aimed at women heads of households and young waste collectors in the most vulnerable communities. Through interactive workshops on effective waste segregation, gender inclusion, labour rights and leadership, the enterprise dignifies the work of recyclers, while encouraging community entrepreneurship and important behaviour change towards better recycling practices.
- Conceptos Plásticos set up and tested its modular recycling machinery, From Zero to House, in Bogotá, turning plastic waste into valuable building materials. It enables local communities to close the loop on plastic waste at the source, without relying on large-scale industrial plants.
- Rolled out The WaY digital platform that supports the real-time tracking of waste materials, their routes and weight. More than just a traceability tool, it is also used for educational purposes and recycling management. It gamifies the process through trivia, challenges and rewards for separating waste at the source.

THE IMPACT

Through the TRANSFORM project, Conceptos Plásticos has **trained 158 community leaders to become 'Heroes of Change'** or advocates mobilising their communities towards better recycling practices.

Together, they have reached

more than

7,900 people

through workshops, cultural events and digital campaigns.

Among the 'Heroes of Change', **58 informal waste workers received in-depth training** on recycling processes and access to new technologies.

This has helped the enterprise to manage

over

2,600 tonnes of plastic,

diverting this from the landfills of Bogotá.

INSIGHTS:

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AS THE ENGINE OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

1. Involve communities from the outset to deepen the social impact of circular economy projects

Conceptos Plásticos had a vision for its work to be wider than just recycling plastic and about reimagining the entire system, placing informal waste workers — traditionally invisible — at the centre of design, technological development, and decision-making.

It has done this through the integration of women, migrants and young recyclers, offering educational workshops on gender issues, labour rights and leadership development. By ensuring their representation, the enterprise was able to strengthen community ownership, participation and ultimately, the resilience of its model.

Conceptos Plasticos' model is now enabling communities to transform its plastic waste into useful products within their own areas. Solutions are truly addressing local needs.

2. Test solutions in an accessible and engaging way throughout the process to truly address local needs

Solutions are most effective when shaped by the people who will use them, fostering ownership, securing buy-in and ensuring long-term relevance.

Conceptos Plásticos' ambition is to drive the adoption of recycling practices, by democratising access to knowledge and technology. To achieve this, it actively involved local recycler associations in the development of its digital traceability platform, The WaY.

The platform had already been designed and with TRANSFORM's support it was adapted to the local context in Bogotá. An iterative testing process with waste worker associations ensured its relevance, usability and real adoption. This resulted in:

- Real-time registration and traceability of materials, routes, and weights.
- Gamified education for households: trivia, challenges, and rewards to promote waste separation at the source.
- Implementation using accessible tools: tablets, QR code scanners, and thermal printers.

3. Partner with existing recycler associations to expand community reach and improve support for informal waste workers

Training recyclers and local leaders to be 'Heroes of Change' is a vital first step, but they also need to be given meaningful platforms to share their knowledge and influence others.

By collaborating with recycler associations such as Amodevi and Aire Urbano, Conceptos Plásticos was able to transform over 748 locations into waste collection sites and educational centres on recycling and environmental awareness.

The enterprise also shared its digital tools, machinery and recycling strategies with these associations, enabling greater efficiency, and a reported 5% increase in income and / or better working conditions for informal waste workers.

POWERED BY PEOPLE is empowering talented, independent artisans to thrive in the global economy

Powered by People is a technology platform that provides retailers access to responsibly made products from a global community of independent brands and artisans. It also provides artisans with the financial resources and education needed to scale their businesses in a meaningful way.

THE CHALLENGE

The informal economy accounts for 60% of Colombia's workforce. Within this is a vast network of talented artisans – including women and young people – who create beautiful handmade products using sustainable fibres and techniques passed down through generations. However, their lack of funding and digital tools means they are unable to scale up their productions and maintain a stable living.

THE INNOVATION

TRANSFORM has supported Powered by People to develop a free-to-access digital learning platform for artisans in the informal economy to improve their business knowledge. The curriculum covers marketing and storytelling, photography, strategic costing and pricing, export, and logistics. Through a digestible self-paced video curriculum devised in Spanish, Powered by People enables these artisans to become an established brand that can then sell their products on Powered by People's wholesale platform.

THE IMPACT

Through the initiative with TRANSFORM, Powered by People is ensuring that artisans in the informal economy have the digital skills and business knowledge to develop their business and generate a sustainable income.

Over the course of the project, the enterprise **launched 7 learning modules** and reached

over

2,000 artisans.

INSIGHTS:

EQUIPPING ARTISANS TO SCALE THEIR CRAFT INTO VIABLE AND RESILIENT BUSINESSES

1. Recognise that different artisans require different levels of support

Market-readiness can range quite substantially from one artisan to the next, making a blanket approach to support, unproductive.

Powered by People recognised that certain artisans were running informally, selling only a limited number of goods on the local market and without a sustainable income; while others were more advanced, with early business systems and digital tools in place. To kick off the project, Powered by People conducted a research and discovery phase, using surveys and roundtables to better understand the artisans' respective needs and challenges, and tailored solutions accordingly. This meant the former were invited to workshops to set up their first digital profile or to improve production. The latter were offered a more comprehensive curriculum and peer learning sessions with established artisans.

2. Empower artisans with insight into market trends

Artisan sales can sometimes stall when the products are not aligned with the demands of the international market.

In the Colombian town of San Jacinto, older makers are teaching younger generations traditional weaving techniques such as 'lampazo' – some of which are at risk of being lost. Through workshops, the makers are taught about the trends and design elements such as popular colours, that would help them to create strategic products for international markets. This creates a financial incentive to keep the traditional techniques alive.

3. Use a multi-pronged approach to expand the reach of digital learning platforms

When Powered by People launched its digital learning platform, it aimed to have 450 registered users, but this required an integrated marketing strategy.

To deliver on its goal, Powered by People first invested in social media advertising campaigns and SEO. Alongside this, the enterprise created a pipeline of artisans through networking at events such as Expoartesanias, the biggest Colombian trade show for makers, craftsmen and designers. Partnerships were also key. The enterprise collaborated with the Santo Domingo school of craftsmanship to register their students – the next generation of makers. As a result of this comprehensive approach, Powered by People was able to reach over 2,000 makers.

The potential of corporate gift programmes

During the TRANSFORM project, Unilever commissioned 100 handmade fans from Powered by People's network of artisans to hand out at a company event celebrating the opening of a new manufacturing facility in Palmira, Colombia. It showcased a new route to market for makers and a way of supporting corporates with more thoughtful gifting options.

We are proud of our three-year collaboration with Global Solidarity Forum in Colombia. It sets the precedent for how TRANSFORM's model can be reproduced in other countries and drive progress for people and planet on a global scale.

"At the Global Solidarity Forum, we are proud to have partnered with TRANSFORM and Unilever to support inclusive enterprises like Bolsiyo, Conceptos Plásticos, and Powered by People.

These businesses demonstrate the power of local innovation – from digitalising micro-merchants to turning plastic into housing, to connecting artisans with global markets.

This partnership reflects our shared belief in multistakeholder collaboration to empower marginalised communities, including women, migrants, and youth."

Jini Sebakunzi
Partnerships Manager, GSF

About the Global Solidarity Forum

The Global Solidarity Forum is an international organisation that is building bridges and making innovative connections. Inspired by Pope Francis and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, it works with the Catholic Church's global network and its historic understanding and closeness with marginalised communities, including migrants, women, and children. It aligns those vast resources with the transformative expertise of diverse global actors, many with a growing sense of purpose and a desire to contribute to systemic change.

It combines the local and global reach of these new alliances to achieve a just and critical goal: a society that embraces the world's most vulnerable.

www.globalsolidarityforum.org

About TRANSFORM

TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa and Asia. Together, we test and scale new market-based solutions that build inclusive, sustainable economies, empower marginalised communities, and drive climate-resilient growth.

Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.

www.TRANSFORM.global

Find out more

Collaboration is key to scaling impact enterprises. Learn more about the successful projects that TRANSFORM has delivered alongside other enterprises. Read more stories here.

www.TRANSFORM.global

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