

Case study of the Human Development Park in Alajuelita, San Jose, Costa Rica

UNOPS impact for vulnerable people |
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In the restated strategic plan, UNOPS commits to deliver impact for the most vulnerable people. We present this case study to the Executive Board to illustrate the UNOPS contributions.

Executive Summary

1. The Human Development Park in Alajuelita Project (the Project) aims to foster social inclusion and human development for the 89,000 people living in the Alajuelita canton, San José, Costa Rica. This is achieved by establishing a park that offers opportunities to improve health and quality of life in a community characterized by social housing, informal settlements, elevated crime rates, and a significant migrant population. The implementation of a Park Management Plan will further encourage community involvement in the long-term sustainability of the park. Scheduled to run until August 2024, the project makes primary contributions to Goal 11 'sustainable cities and communities', and secondary contributions to Goal 3 'good health and well-being' and Goal 5 'gender equality'.

Funded by Costa Rica
US\$ 3 million

Main service line
Infrastructure



Context and project outline

2. The Alajuelita canton in the Province of San José faces significant challenges, including intrafamily violence, drug addiction, and criminal activities, linked to issues such as limited access to education, employment, and housing (Loría and Salazar, 2015). With only 0.39 square meters per person of green space compared to the recommended nine square meters by the Pan American Health Organisation (OPS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), there is a pressing need for improved recreational areas.
3. The Human Development Park in Alajuelita project, aligned with the programme of the Ministry of Culture and Youth of Costa Rica, aims to contribute to addressing these challenges. The Mission of the Ministry's programme is to advance social inclusion and human development, foster social coexistence and capacity development through comprehensive offerings in **five integral areas of development**: culture, economic development, sports, recreation, and environment. The park's focus on infrastructure, equipment, green spaces, sports-recreational areas, human resources, and inclusivity contributes significantly to enhancing the well-being of the impoverished population in the canton.

Project Objective

Building a multipurpose Human Development Park of the canton of Alajuelita to promote social coexistence and the development of capabilities through a programmatic offer and high quality services.

Theory of change

4. The theory of change outlines a tailored set of activities designed to address root causes and needs, with the expectation that these activities will drive outcomes and impact. Developed retrospectively, **Figure 1** illustrates how various components of the problem converge into the central issue of a deficiency in recreational and personal development spaces for the community.
5. The main problem in Alajuelita stems from three root causes: the consequences of lack of access to housing and employment for migrants (national and international), which lead to overpopulation and informal settlements in San José's southern neighbourhoods. Consequently, there is an increase in inequality and poverty, primarily affecting the employment of women and young people. Additionally, there is inadequate provision of green and recreational spaces. This leads to Alajuelita lacking crucial recreational and personal development spaces, **adversely impacting its people in vulnerable conditions**. The effects include heightened violence, socio-economic discrimination, and restricted public space access, particularly for migrants, women and youth. Additionally, there is a shortage of spaces for local economic and human development activities, significantly impacting the well-being of the population.
6. The project is actively addressing its main challenge through **three key areas**. It involves designing infrastructure, constructing exterior components like trails, bike paths, a multi-use court, urban furniture, and a

skatepark, ensuring quality and compliance, and managing Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion (GDI) activities, including community engagement, safety measures, protocols addressing harassment, sensitization workshops, GDI-focused communications, and sharing experiences on GDI in public spaces.

- The Project operates on certain assumptions to ensure its success. It relies on the necessary resources for timely park construction, active community participation in the Comprehensive Management Plan design, and a clear park management structure implemented by the municipality. To achieve positive outcomes, it is assumed that the municipality effectively implements the Comprehensive Management Plan with community involvement. For long-term impact, it is vital to ensure sustained implementation of the management plan, secure adequate resources for ongoing park maintenance, and effectively address and control issues related to the security of the park's area.

Figure 1.

	CAUSE 1	CAUSE 2	CAUSE 3
PROBLEM STATEMENT, ROOT CAUSE AND ITS EFFECT ON COMMUNITIES	Alajuelita: 0.39 sqm/person of green and recreational space (9 sqm recommended)	Migration caused overpopulation and informal settlements in San Jose's southern neighbourhood.	Rise in inequality and poverty, impacting women and youth employment.
	MAIN PROBLEM/OPPORTUNITY		
	Alajuelita lacks recreational and personal development spaces, depriving its vulnerable population of potential positive impacts.		
	EFFECT 1	EFFECT 2	EFFECT 3
	Violence, socio-economic discrimination, and limited public space access, particularly for migrants.	Lack of spaces for local economic and human development activities.	Lack of public spaces impacts the well-being of vulnerable populations.
	ACTIVITY 1	ACTIVITY 2	ACTIVITY 3
ACTIVITIES	Design of infrastructure works - analysis, feasibility studies, detailed engineering, regulations and standards, cost analysis and budgeting, construction planning, and final review and design approval.	Construction and supervision of infrastructure works - exterior components in the initial phase (trails, bike paths, a multi-use court, urban furniture, and a skatepark). Verifying and controlling the quality of materials, validating laboratory tests to ensure compliance with standards, monitoring measurements and quantities to guarantee accuracy and proper construction elements, and overseeing project supervision throughout the construction phase.	Development and management of GDI (Gender, Diversity and Inclusion) and social inclusion activities - community engagement through guided tours for feedback, ensuring well-lit and signposted park spaces. A protocol addressing street harassment, sexual harassment, and discrimination was established, aligned with relevant laws. Sensitization workshops for project personnel, and a GDI perspective adopted in project communications. Life stories of community members highlighted, and experiences on GDI in public spaces shared through organized exchanges.
OUTPUTS	Human Development Park constructed; Green and recreational spaces expanded; Comprehensive Management Plan developed.		
OUTCOMES	Community health and quality of life enhanced; Opportunities for economic development created.		
IMPACT	Enhancing the well-being and raising the standard of living for the 89+ thousand residents of Alajuelita		

Contributions

Outputs

8. As a result of implemented activities, the Project successfully built the **Human Development Park in Alajuelita** and delivered the infrastructure output to the Ministry of Culture and Youth of Costa Rica; this allowed to **increase by +0.089 sqm of green and recreational space per person, provide adapted infrastructure for people with reduced mobility and provide urban furniture for the youth and elder people**. Additionally, various workshops were organized to collect inputs crucial for the development of the **Comprehensive Management Plan**; this information is being systematized to be delivered to the Ministry of Culture and Youth. The plan emphasizes inclusion and diversity, enabling participation of diverse social groups in park management to ensure accessibility for all, including vulnerable populations. Efforts will also prioritize fostering business development, particularly women-led enterprises, with a focus on promoting gender equality.

Contributions to outcomes

9. Regarding the first outcome, four months after the park was opened for use, Alajuelita's **more than 89 thousand residents** actively participate in recreational and economic activities within the park, benefiting from enhanced community health and quality of life. By offering green areas and public spaces, the Project enhances community health and quality of life, with the potential for **economic opportunities through entrepreneurship programmes**.
10. For the second outcome, a **Comprehensive Management Plan** is anticipated to foster **inclusive community engagement** in managing the **Human Development Park of Alajuelita**. This involvement is expected to strengthen communities and transform neighbourhoods into more appealing living spaces. Residents, institutions, and private sector companies have already taken part in reforestation activities in the ravines around the park.

Likely contributions to impact

11. While it is early to quantify the Project impact, participants of all ages, in discussions related to the Comprehensive Management Plan, expressed satisfaction with how **the park fulfills recreational needs and fosters community engagement**. Therefore, it is expected that in the long-term the Project will play a role in **enhancing the well-being and raising the standard of living for the 89+ thousand residents of Alajuelita**. Its direct contributions are in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, specifically addressing **Goal 11** 'sustainable cities and communities', and striving to achieve Target 11.7 by ensuring access to safe and inclusive green and public spaces.

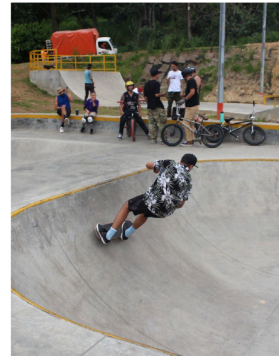
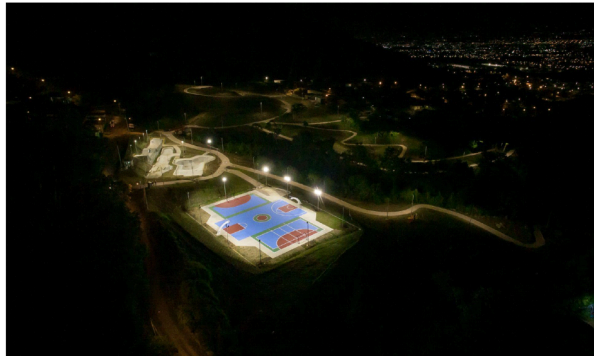
Sustainability considerations

12. **The Comprehensive Management Plan stands as the primary tool for ensuring the park's sustainability**. In its preparation, emphasis has been made on incorporating a human rights perspective, achieved through the community workshops that equip participants with tools for **human rights-based park management**. Actively encouraging female community leaders in the plan creation has been a key aspect of workshops. The training sessions underscore the significance of harmonious coexistence with nature, promoting health, exercising human rights, and cultivating the culture of peace improvement.

Lessons learnt

13. Throughout the design and implementation phase, we identified and replicated the following best practices:
 - a. **Studies in the design phase:** It is imperative to conduct essential studies during the Project's design phase to establish a baseline for expected impact. This ensures a basis for comparison at the Project's closure, enabling a thorough evaluation of its potential impact.
 - b. **Community knowledge and mapping:** Success in community activities relies on a profound understanding and mapping of community dynamics. Effective inter-institutional management involving various entities (central government, local government, public institutions, NGOs, etc.) is crucial to achieve this understanding.
 - c. **Expertise in social management:** Recognising the importance of human resources in social management throughout the design, implementation, and closure phases of the Project is crucial. Neglecting these factors can lead to negative consequences such as diminished community trust, missed opportunities for greater positive social impacts, and waning interest from key Project stakeholders.
 - d. **Timely delivery of social products:** In Projects with high community impact, social products should be delivered during the implementation stage. For example, the delivery of the Park Management Plan was initially planned after the construction phase, rather than the implementation phase. Furthermore, planning a social closure plan encompassing impact studies beyond the Project closure date is essential.
 - e. **Incorporating human rights, GDI and PSEAH perspectives effectively:** The success criteria developed by the UNOPS Social Inclusion and GDI regional network were incorporated from the Project's outset. Various meetings between the Project team and other regional teams informed the implementation of the GDI Plan. This networking approach contributes to continuous improvement, yielding positive results and sustainability.

Snapshots



Newly built Human Development Park in Alajuelita offers green areas and public spaces for recreational activities, enhancing community health and quality of life of 89+ thousand of its residents © UNOPS/