



# Increasing social and economic inclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean

## The Trust for the Americas scales by franchising its technology and employability model

The Trust for the Americas partners with local organizations, the private sector, and governments throughout Latin America and the Caribbean to run POETA centers. POETA (which stands for Partnerships for Economic Opportunities Through Technology in the Americas) trains underserved groups in technology, life skills, employability, and entrepreneurship in more than 200 centers across 19 countries. Simultaneously, it builds local organizations' capacity to expand their efforts, creating a ripple effect of training higher skilled job seekers.

### The challenge

Latin America and the Caribbean continue to have the widest skills gap in the world, according to the World Economic Forum<sup>1</sup>. In fact, four in ten companies struggle to find enough skilled workers, especially for cybersecurity experts, network technicians, technical support, and other tech-enabled positions<sup>2</sup>. And nearly a third of companies point to a lack of hard and soft skills as the reason they can't fill openings<sup>3</sup>.

This gap stems from a lack of training, not a lack of people seeking work. One in two women in this region aren't in the labor pool, and youth unemployment exceeded 17 percent in 2018<sup>4</sup>.

Further, 55 percent of workers in this region work in the informal sector in jobs such as street vendors, craftspeople, and unregulated manufacturing positions. These jobs are insecure, don't offer official benefits, and are vulnerable to manipulation such as bribery, human trafficking, and labor violations<sup>5</sup>.

### The fix

POETA addresses this fundamental mismatch of employer needs and unemployment by training vulnerable groups in the skills they need to land jobs, start businesses, or continue their education. This program trains participants in technical skills such as programming, app development, and entry-level data science. It also teaches the skills needed to secure a job (e.g. writing resumes and how to effectively telecommute) as well as personal development (such as goal-setting and financial literacy).

**"This project was a gateway to my professional life. Without it, I wouldn't be where I am today."**

*-Tainara, 19, POETA participant in Brazil who now works in the engineering department of an auto company*

<sup>1</sup>World Economic Forum on Latin America

<sup>2</sup>2018 Talent Shortage Survey, Manpower Group

<sup>3</sup>2018 Talent Shortage Survey, Manpower Group

<sup>4</sup>World Bank World Development Indicators

<sup>5</sup>"Informal economy: A hazardous activity," International Labour Organization

The Washington DC-based program focuses especially on upskilling people with disabilities, at-risk youth, and other vulnerable groups, including women and migrants. Connecting these groups to economic and educational opportunities not only benefits individuals and their communities; it also expands the skilled labor pool so employers can fill vacancies.

POETA has created a social franchise model, in which it partners with existing organizations and governmental centers already established in their communities. POETA provides its own curriculum on topics including entrepreneurship and leadership, trainings from Microsoft, and access to a network of roughly 60 like-minded organizations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

There are **138** cities hosting POETA centers

"It would be impossible to reach the number of countries and variety of populations by ourselves. We need a network of partners to deploy strategies that work in their communities," says Maria Liliana Mor, Director of Programs for The Trust.

To that end, individual POETA centers customize trainings to the populations they serve. A center that primarily works with young men at risk of joining gangs, for example, might offer a wide range of activities to keep learners at the center longer, while a location that serves people with visual disabilities might focus on adaptive technologies.

POETA has directly served **210,000+** people in its technology centers

A common factor across all POETA centers: "Our trainings are a bridge to an end, and the end is clear: Are participants getting an economic opportunity?" says Mor. With that guiding light, POETA centers have directly impacted more than 210,000 people in the region.

**"I am setting an example in my community that no matter where you come from, you can do it. If you want, you can progress."**

*-Martha Paola, 25, POETA participant in Mexico who is working on a prototype to connect rural homes to electricity and clean water.*

## Promising practices for deeper impact

**Adapt existing content.** "We offer content through a democratic, open approach," says Pierina Nepote Rangel, Project Manager at The Trust. These materials are created by The Trust, Microsoft, consultants, and organizations themselves. Individual centers modify the materials by adding examples, location-specific details, and accommodations for those with disabilities.

**Work with companies.** POETA meets with private companies to break down barriers people with disabilities face when looking for work. Part of this effort includes understanding the specific skills employers require and then adapting curriculum to meet those needs; it also entails educating employers "that everyone has abilities," Mor says.

**Partner with mature organizations.** "The franchise model gathers organizations that can contribute and see our resources as complementary to their own offerings—not just expect to be provided with financial or technical resources," Nepote says. A committee reviews applications from new organizations that want to open or strengthen a POETA center and, in turn, be affiliated with Microsoft, The Trust, and the Organization of American States.

**Nurture a network.** POETA organizes monthly virtual training sessions for member centers on topics as varied as identifying victims of domestic abuse to recruiting volunteers. These trainings always include at least 20 minutes for questions and for organizations to share what has worked for them. Organizations frequently continue the conversations after the training ends: working together on a joint event, for example, or troubleshooting problems.

**Offer trainings beyond technology.** POETA learned that teaching technology for its own sake wasn't sufficient to close the inequality gap in Latin America and the Caribbean. Programming now builds life skills such as budgeting, goal-setting, and confidence. Mor explains that this comprehensive approach keeps participants engaged in the centers—and out of environments where they're at risk.

Microsoft is working with nonprofits to ensure every person has the skills, knowledge, and opportunity they need to succeed in the digital economy. Learn more [aka.ms/skills-employability](https://aka.ms/skills-employability)