Social innovation is an instrument to improve equality. Since 2007 the *Innovation Lab* (I-Lab) of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) uses a social innovation methodology that generates platforms where citizens define and prioritize their problems and are connected with actors that have the capacity, interest and resources to address them: governments, companies, universities and NGOs at regional and international level. Citizens possess unique knowledge about their problems and needs, which is why we believe they have to move from the periphery to the center of the innovation process aiming to find solutions to their most pressing needs. To achieve this, a space of intersection is needed that connects communities who share a common problem with those who have the resources – in the form of knowledge, capital and networks – to solve it. This brochure describes various initiatives in which the I-Lab has generated and helped others to generate such kind of intersections.
A WORLD OF SOLUTIONS

REGIONAL INITIATIVE

Start of the project: 2009

SITUATION

In Latin America and the Caribbean 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed and face considerable obstacles to their social inclusion. Many of them are represented by associations safeguarding their interests and advocating for them online. This provided the opportunity to use an interactive website as a platform for the I-Lab methodology and reach a significant number of regional and international communities of people with disabilities, their advocates and people without disabilities.

INTENTION

This project aimed at achieving greater economic and social inclusion of people with disabilities while empowering them to be the ones formulating and prioritizing their problems on a large scale. In order to achieve this, our approach was to incentivize companies and universities to work on solutions to these problems by offering financial support for the implementation of those solutions with the greatest potential.

What are the challenges to the social and economic inclusion of people with disabilities in the region?

Start of the project: 2009
ACTION

The first phase of this initiative consisted of a call for problems via an interactive website where people with disabilities, their families and associated institutions expressed the problems that hinder their economic and social inclusion and, through online votes, could rank these problems according to their relevance for them. The call for problems was active for six weeks and the five most voted problems received a total of more than 200,000 votes from nearly every country in the region. For the five most voted problems a call for solutions was organized and more than 200 proposals were received from companies and universities across the region. Finally, a jury of experts selected ten solutions that were implemented in 15 countries. The projects that were financed ranged from a low-cost cross-country wheelchair to a software teaching people with hearing disabilities to read and write, accessible videogames, a device allowing blind people to perceive colors and images and an open source software facilitating the employment of people with disabilities in call centers. The majority of these innovations have received important regional and international acknowledgements.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

VIDEO presenting the initiative and the winners of the call for solution.
SITUATION

In Ecuador, according to a 2003 poll from the Ministry of Education, only 23.8% of children with disabilities go to school. Those that do go regularly receive a second-class education that does not allow them to reach their whole potential. Often, this situation is worsened by the fact that many of these children grow up in an environment of poverty, stigmatization and lacking education. Those children consequently neither have the resources nor the access to technologies (which actually do exist!) that could assist them in achieving high academic performance, and their own community lowers their self-esteem and expectations for the future. In one of the poorest neighborhoods of Ecuador, Santo Domingo de los Tsáchilas, the Jesuit NGO Fe y Alegría runs a school and a college where nearly 200 children with (mostly hearing and visual) disabilities receive education. This organization became the key local actor facilitating the execution of the project.

INTENTION

The aim of this project was to identify the most adequate technology for the education of children with disabilities and to train their teachers in the use of it, while addressing the topic of stigmatization of the community towards the children and their low self-esteem and low expectations for the future. Due to the high grade of exclusion of the children, it was decided to start the process with a phase of awareness raising and community outreach that was focused on giving the children, their parents and the community a prominent role in the project.
ACTION

The first assumption was that the main problem for the education of these children with special needs was the lack of access to existing, specialized technologies. However, reaching out to the community and different actors revealed that in reality the most pressing problems were social stigmatization, the lack of adequate training for the teachers and the lack of an inclusive educational concept. Thus, the intention of the initiative had to focus first on addressing the paradigm of social exclusion and once cultural change was achieved, to provide a suitable technology for the improvement of educational achievement. With a multidisciplinary team that included economists, psychologists, interviewers, interpreters, educators, programmers, designers etc., a comprehensive study was concluded in which socioeconomic and educational data as well as aspects related to the emotional state and the expectations held by the children, their teachers and families were included. The solutions to the needs identified by the children and their community were captured in an inclusive education strategy that was designed by educators from the center of Fe y Alegria together with international experts. On that basis, the Salesian Polytechnic University of Quito designed and provided a training program for the teachers of Fe y Alegria in communication skills and in teaching children with disabilities. In the next step, also based on the needs initially identified by the children, international experts defined the most suitable technologies for improving their educational achievement. The technological devices and teaching equipment were purchased and today the reality of the center and the community has changed: In 2016, the first class of young people with hearing disabilities graduated from high school and several of them will continue with a university education, and this is just the beginning. Evidence of the impact of this initiative on the community and the families can be read in the publication of Carlos Guaipatín and Maria Olivia Humphreys (2014) Social Innovation in Practice. The Case of the Fe y Alegria Project for Educational Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Ecuador. To download a copy please follow this link (English and Spanish versions available).
SITUATION

In Colombia, access to drinking water has significantly increased over the last decade; yet, there remains insufficient service coverage particularly in rural and poor areas such as the municipalities located in the departments of La Guajira, Risaralda and Putumayo. In these rural areas access rates show drinking water coverage of around 70%, which is much lower than in the rest of the country. How can we involve citizens in isolated communities and without Internet access in the design of innovative and cost-effective solutions to improve their access to drinking water? Colciencias, the Columbian Government Agency for Fundamental and Applied Research, together with the I-Lab designed the Ideas para el Cambio (Ideas for Change) program as an answer to this question.

INTENTION

The aim of this program was to improve the access to clean water of the communities of La Guajira, Risaralda and Putumayo while ensuring the participation of these isolated and poorly
connected communities in the process of innovation. This required active and extensive fieldwork in order to make the initiative known among the communities and to involve them. They were asked to identify their needs regarding the access to water and to identify the problems in finding workable and cost-effective solutions. It was important not to raise too high expectations with the communities since it was not realistic to be able to address all their needs.

**ACTION**

In an intensive fieldwork, 166 needs were identified by the communities. A departmental committee, which also included the communities, prioritized 15 problems for which Colciencias organized a call for solutions aimed primarily at national companies and universities. Solutions were asked to include a community engagement strategy in order to assure their continued inclusion in the process. Of 61 solutions presented, Colciencias financed 11 which benefited 585 families with access to potable water. Beyond improving the quality of life for many people, Ideas para el Cambio led to an important process of social appropriation of the scientific-technological solutions thanks to the active participation of communities throughout the process and served as an experience to be replicated in other sectors.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Website of Ideas para el Cambio (in Spanish only)
SITUATION

In Colombia, electricity coverage is at 93% in urban areas and 55% in rural areas, while the Pacific region has the highest number of communities without access to electricity. In 2013, Colciencias, the Colombian government agency for fundamental and applied research, decided to implement for a second time the I-Lab methodology through its Ideas para el Cambio (Ideas for Change) program on the topic of energy in the departments of Chocó, Valle, Cauca and Nariño.

INTENTION

The aim was to help improve the access to sources of clean and renewable electric energy for the communities in the departments of Chocó, Valle, Cauca and Nariño through a participatory process, and thus to increase the quality of life of the inhabitants of these regions. This required active fieldwork in order to promote the initiative and involve the communities of mostly African descent in identifying their problems to access electric power and find viable and cost-effective solutions.

ENERGY

What are the main challenges related to the access to clean and renewable energy in the pacific region of Colombia?

Start of the project: 2013
ACTION

Having identified the need and having defined the role and input of the communities, the call for problems was initiated through an online platform. A total of 140 problems were received, of which the community itself prioritized 20 together with a local evaluation committee. These needs were presented at the call for solutions and 65 ideas were submitted by mainly national companies and universities that had to include a community engagement strategy. Following the same logic of the prioritization of needs and counting on the input from experts and a final vote by the communities, 16 solutions were identified and then implemented in the form of pilot projects. The solutions generated included among others a photovoltaic system supplying energy for the ICT access of schools, the electrification of cold chains and the lighting of homes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Video that presents the Ideas para el Cambio program. Video of the call for solutions for Pacifico Pura Energía.
What are the main challenges for the region of Aysén, which is geographically dispersed and far from the centers of political and economic power of Chile?

SITUATION

The region of Aysén is a remote area in southern Chile which in terms of area is the third largest region of the country, while its population is the smallest in numbers. Due to this, its citizens are geographically dispersed and far away from the centers of political and economic power. The National Innovation Council for the Development of Chile (CNID) and the Production Development Corporation of Chile (CORFO) decided to use the I-Lab approach to generate a process in which the community itself defined its main problems and through which they would also participate in the development of the solutions.

INTENTION

The aim of this project was to create a platform where a variety of actors of Aysen - public officials, companies, social organizations, traders, owners of cafes and restaurants, student leaders, trade associations, neighborhood associations, doctors, teachers, taxi drivers, priests of different churches and others – were given the opportunity to express and prioritize problems of the region that could be addressed by the science, technology and innovation sector.
ACTION

At first, several public officials were trained in the methodology to generate social innovation, turning them into facilitators of the rapprochement process with citizen and whose ultimate goal was to improve the designing of public policies. For four months, these public officials and trained consultants conducted several rounds of interviews with individual agents and a variety of local organizations. Then, a series of workshops with regional public actors were held in order to introduce the topic of social innovation, followed by a meeting with more than 50 government officials and members of social organizations where they jointly analyzed the problems identified. In this way, the regional actors prioritized two central concerns of the community: youth (problems such as the lack of education, employment opportunities and entertainment, youth violence and early pregnancy among others) and environment (Aysén is Chile's most polluted region). From there, the CORFO organized a call for solutions through a website mainly aimed at companies and universities. Participants entered their ideas for addressing these two main challenges and were supported by mentors to strengthen their proposals. In total 40 proposals were received of which the Subcommittee on Broadcasting Technology and Innovation Environment of CORFO approved 13 for funding. These are now being implemented with the support of InnovaChile.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

VIDEO presenting the initiative (in Spanish only)
WEBSITE of the initiative (in Spanish only)
**MOBILE CITIZEN**

**REGIONAL INITIATIVE**

*Start of the project: 2010*

How can we use mobile services to address the most pressing social and economic problems of low-income people in Latin America?

**SITUATION**

Many of the problems that affect low-income populations, especially those living in rural areas, are due to lack of timely access to relevant information and basic services. One service that these communities however do have increasingly access to is mobile telephony; in Latin America and the Caribbean it is about 86% of the population.

**INTENTION**

Based on the evidence that mobile telephony can reduce the cost of access to information while generating innovations to promote and facilitate the invention and production of new services, products or processes, the I-Lab launched the Mobile Citizen regional initiative. The intention was to incentivize innovative people in the region to develop solutions based on the use of mobile phones that address problems of low-income and particularly rural communities.
**ACTION**

This initiative was launched on a website and was directed at the entire region. In the course of a couple of months we received 122 proposals from 22 countries. Given the variety of the sectors involved, such as education, health, labor market, etc., specialists from different areas were invited to review and evaluate the proposals. They were analyzed according to the following criteria: relevance, technical feasibility and their potential to make alliances with other organizations. Based on this, five winning projects were selected: (i) an early detection and monitoring system for people infected with Dengue and Chagas; (ii) a remote assistance system to increase the effectiveness of the monitoring and tracking of prenatal care in Peru; (iii) a marketplace platform to lower the cost of access to information on job opportunities in Chile; (iv) a monitoring and medical aid system for people with type 2 diabetes; and (v) a digital vaccination registration system for Mesoamerica allowing greater vaccination coverage and more effective epidemiological monitoring.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

[WEBSITE of the initiative](#)
SITUATION

Latin America and the Caribbean have the highest crime rates in the world. Crime poses a great challenge with high economic costs for the governments and societies of the region. For a person that acts illegally - may it be as minor as stealing food out of need - and is sent to prison, a vicious circle begins as the social and economic outlook deteriorates almost immediately: the person is stigmatized for a long time after being released, has limited or no access to public services, acquired education and training might be lost, job opportunities are reduced and social networks become limited to those people met in prison. Without human, social and financial capital it is very difficult to break that circle.

INTENTION

This initiative aims to identify challenges related to youth in conflict with the law in Latin America and the Caribbean and to improve the economic and social reintegration of persons deprived of liberty after being released. The initiative is designed based on the idea that detainees have a unique understanding of the phenomenon of crime. The hypothesis is that their knowledge could be very useful if only it could be shared in a way which can be used to generate innovative ideas. The objective is to involve young people (between 16 and 24 years old) deprived of liberty in a social innovation process through which they can express their ideas, and create opportunities for them to work with other actors of society.
(young academics, NGOs, experts in crime, companies, etc.) in the development of innovative proposals to improve their opportunities for economic and social reintegration once they have served their sentence.

**ACTION**

At the moment we have shortlisted three detention centers for young people between the age of 14 and 24 years, two in Bolivia and one in Chile. These centers present several advantages for the proposed task. First, they already have a reintegration approach rather than a punitive approach. Second, some of them are already working with NGOs and universities, which is expected to facilitate the creation of new networks as aimed for in the I-Lab methodology. The aim is to turn their problems into ideas which then - with the support of a network of educators, academics, specialists and entrepreneurs, among others - can be developed into projects to improve the economic and social reintegration of persons deprived of liberty. The project has only started recently, so it is premature to draw conclusions on the intervention. However, the expected benefits of inviting new actors to the discussion table on the phenomenon of criminality, such as people working in the field of science, technology and innovation, employment program managers and the same young inmates, can already be observed.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Contact us by innovation@iadb.org
Based on its experience, the I-Lab has developed a concept of what social innovations are and defines them as follows: “Social innovations are new solutions to challenges faced by people whose needs the market does not meet, and that have a positive impact on society. They must be carried out through an inclusive process, incorporating the beneficiaries (people) to adequately define the problem, and employing public–private–people partnerships towards the development of the solution.”

The IDB is the main source of multilateral financing in Latin America and the Caribbean and one of its main objectives is to reduce inequality and exclusion. The Competitiveness and Innovation Division promotes the strengthening of innovation systems that favor the creation and growth of dynamic enterprises, strengthening their capacities to innovate and compete in world markets. The Innovation Lab is a platform that provides a space of intersection where communities are formed according to their problems and are connected with those who have the resources to address them. Through the methodology of the I-Lab, problems can become innovations of high social impact.