

# Siyazama Social Circus Program in Philippi Final report

September 2021 to August 2023



**SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES**  
CANADA

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## Message from our President and CEO

South Africa is home to over 20 million children and more than half of these children are living below the poverty line. 3 million children are either abandoned or orphaned as the nation faces ongoing challenges such as economic inequality, high unemployment rates, racial disparities, and lack of access to quality education and healthcare.

SOS Children's Villages has been providing critical care for vulnerable children in South Africa since 1982 and in 1996 Nelson Mandela officially opened the first SOS Village in the Philippi community in the capital city, Cape Town. 86 children are supported with loving homes and families in the SOS Village and over 200 children are given access to opportunities to thrive through the SOS Family Strengthening Program in Philippi each year. This is thanks to supporters like you.

Through funding from the Varico Foundation, together with SOS Children's Villages South Africa and Zip Zap, we delivered a unique program enabling children and youth in Philippi to gain essential life skills that will uplift their futures. We are pleased to share this final report which showcases how the Siyazama Social Circus Program was a success in supporting young people in building their self-confidence, enhancing their social skills, and improving their mental and physical wellbeing.

SOS Children's Villages Canada extends our deepest gratitude to everyone at the Varico Foundation for your support of the Siyazama Social Circus Program. Because of you, the children and youth who participated are now flourishing and excited to create brighter futures for themselves and their communities.

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas Bauer".

Thomas Bauer  
President and CEO  
SOS Children's Villages Canada





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*I enjoyed watching the training and the rehearsals where one can see the small steps each child takes in daring to try, in helping another, in dealing with failure and persevering, in having good clean fun playing games. It takes a village to raise a child and we are grateful for the funding received that allowed us to play a small part in these children's lives. I am convinced that this experience with Zip Zap will have sparked a belief in themselves, a different way to live and behave, and hope for the future. The fact that 100% of the kids had fun and felt safe and welcome during the circus workshops at Zip Zap is evidence of a positive outcome.*

Laurence Esteve Van Rensburg  
Zip Zap co-founder and CEO

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*Zip Zap social circus has allowed our participants to do something that was beyond their imagination. It fuelled the sense of belonging that many were looking for. The Siyazama Social Circus Program shaped and refined our children's characters and resilience. Most of our children that attended Zip-Zap are now able to express themselves very well. Their level of confidence and self-esteem is much better. We have seen some of them coming out of their shells to embrace who they are in the moment and to learn ways to deal with their past experiences and trauma by channeling their pain through performing acts. Most of them are also able to channel their anger and disappointments by performing acts allowing them to heal.*

Zama Mbele, Program Director  
SOS Children's Villages South Africa



## Program summary

The Siyazama Social Circus Program was a transformative two-year project initiated by SOS Children's Villages South Africa and Zip Zap in partnership with the Varico Foundation and SOS Children's Villages Canada. The program was offered to vulnerable children and youth so they could develop life skills such as self-confidence, discipline, trust, interpersonal skills and teamwork which are vital for healthy relationships, academic success and adulthood.

Funded by the Varico Foundation, the Siyazama Social Circus Program was launched in September 2021 to benefit children and youth from the SOS Children's Villages Family Strengthening Program in Philippi in Cape Town, South Africa. Many young people in the Philippi community have limited access to recreational activities and opportunities for personal growth, while also being exposed to violence, crime and neglect.

The two-year program ended in August 2023 with the final Show and Tell performance featuring 21 participants. The program's primary objective was to empower vulnerable children and youth in Philippi with essential life skills, foster their growth as engaged citizens, help them overcome their past traumas and nurture self-confidence. The program was successful in supporting the participants to gain these essential skills and enhance their physical abilities through their participation in social circus workshops provided by Zip Zap. Professional circus trainers, together with the SOS Children's Villages program team in Cape Town, facilitated this training, ensuring the safety and security of the participants and providing a secure and supportive environment where they could learn and grow together.

**36** children (18 girls and 18 boys) participated in the program.

**140** hours of social circus training were completed by the participants.





The program was open to children aged 8 to 17 whose families were enrolled in the SOS Family Strengthening Program in Philippi. Up to 30 children each year could participate in the program and were selected to join based on their level of interest in circus art and commitment to the program. The social circus workshops were facilitated by four coaches at the Zip Zap Academy in Cape Town.



Over the course of two years, 36 children participated in the program including 18 girls and 18 boys. Participants completed over 148 hours of social circus training and demonstrated significant improvements in their overall physical and mental health. Each participant had the opportunity to showcase their social circus skills in front of family and friends during four end of semester show and tell performances.

By hosting the social circus workshops at the Zip Zap Circus dome in downtown Cape Town, the project gave participants the ability to leave the Philippi community and experience other parts of their city. For many this was their first experience leaving Philippi.

In a community that struggles with high levels of gang violence the Siyazama program offered children and youth from impoverished households a safe and supportive place to go after school. In addition to the direct benefits participants gained from taking part in the social circus workshops it also reduced their risk and exposure to gang violence, recruitment, and exploitation. Many participants reported that the program gave them a sense of belonging and connection, which reduced their vulnerability to recruitment by community gangs.

Since 2015, Zip Zap has been partnering with SOS Children's Villages in Cape Town, to provide social circus workshops to vulnerable children in a safe, unique and fun environment. Zip Zap has been the ideal partner for this initiative as their approach to working with children and youth utilizes methodologies to address their needs for growth and self-development, while promoting overall physical and mental wellbeing, strengthening their minds and bodies, and giving them critical life skills (including communication, empathy, confidence and self-esteem).

Transportation to Zip Zap Academy was arranged by SOS Children's Villages in Cape Town where SOS community development workers chaperoned participants from their school to the training location and then to their homes in the evening.

Children who participated in the program became more engaged and have shown significant growth in their self-confidence and social skills, including the ability to work on a team. Additionally, parents and caregivers have shared positive feedback of improvement in participants' social behaviours and abilities to understand and control their emotions (such as anger), as well as their decreased feelings of depression and anxiety.



## Activities completed

Throughout the program, the participants engaged in games and various social circus training activities to improve their balance, strength, and stamina. The coaches supported the returning participants in developing their skills further while teaching the new participants the foundational skills of circus arts. Participants worked individually and in teams with their coaches to learn and practice their routines for the Show and Tell year-end performance. This semester, Zip Zap Academy focused on:

- Stations for developing skills to perform various circus activities, including building a human pyramid.
- Techniques for maintaining proper form in executing movements.
- Partner activities for promoting the importance of teamwork.
- Techniques for mentally preparing to confidently perform in front of a crowd.

Zip Zap and SOS Children's Villages coordinated an outing to the Zip Zap VOOMA! show in June. SOS Children's Villages provided financial assistance and transportation for all the participants to experience their first professional circus show. It was a full-circle experience for the participants to see the potential of circus training and some of their favourite coaches perform.

In preparation for the Show and Tell, the participants refined their acts, learned and rehearsed group performances and practiced their routines with music. At the end of August, they performed for an audience, with staff from SOS Children's Villages and Kathryn Higdon from the Varico Foundation in attendance.





## Award recipients

After the performance on August 26, 2023, the participants completed a final training assessment, and they all received a certificate to acknowledge their commitment to the program. Two exceptional participants were recognized with an award.



Inako Sigonyela received the Fellowship Award for consistently embodying Zip Zap values during the program year.



Emihle Simanga, whose photo is also on the back cover, received the Shining Star Award for her outstanding performance, progress, technique and creativity during the year.





## Program results

The workshops facilitated by Zip Zap complemented the efforts of SOS Children's Villages in creating a network of support that encouraged the children and youth to be their authentic selves. The program improved their physical and mental wellbeing and enabled personal growth.

The improvement in confidence was unmistakable. Participants initiated activities and those who were previously shy and withdrawn found their voices. In the final survey, 20/21 participants reported feeling more confident and excited to be in the Siyazama Social Circus Program.

There were also signs that the children had matured in how they presented themselves.

They exercised care during all sessions for themselves, each other, the facilities and the equipment and communicated respectfully with their peers.

In the final survey completed by the participants, 100% of the children reported the following:

- Felt comfortable working with the instructors
- Felt physically stronger
- Felt they belonged on the team
- Felt safe and welcomed
- Felt excited and happy to be in the program

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*The children have made remarkable progress in physical and technical abilities, resulting in improved confidence, self-esteem, and initiative. The program also instills perseverance, with children consistently attending for the full two-year Siyazama Social Circus Program duration. They manage various responsibilities, including academics, extracurricular activities, and family commitments, all while displaying a strong motivation to learn and seize opportunities for personal growth.*

Xolani Sikunana, Zip Zap instructor  
Siyazama Social Circus program





Program participants also had changes in their perspectives:

- More boys and girls challenged traditional gender norms (ie. boys felt more comfortable expressing emotions)
- They felt more comfortable to communicate when they felt scared or angry
- Instructors and parents observed participant's improve in the following ways:
  - Level of confidence and self-esteem
  - Level of teamwork
- 75% of caregivers reported that the program had a significant positive impact on the overall behaviour of their child.
- 79% noticed an improvement in their child's school performance.
- Take responsibility of their own schedule and lives

## Fueling their bodies for success

The participants were grateful for the snacks provided by the Siyazama Social Circus program. In a short interview with Zip Zap staff, they shared that some participants arrived at the workshop with low energy because they did not feel comfortable eating at school (fear of peer pressure and body image) or came from a home where food was limited. They were provided a safe place to eat and learned about the importance of good nutrition. The instructors saw improvement in the participants' energy levels as the semester progressed.

## Waves4Change

To better meet the needs of the Siyazama program participants, Zip Zap partnered with Waves4Change to pilot a mental wellbeing project. This allowed the team to understand and address any challenges the participants may face related to their mental wellbeing. The older group of participants were selected as most suited for this pilot.

Through check-in exercises, our instructors created a caring culture where they could encourage interaction, participation, and



maximum engagement from all the participants. The participants also played a part in creating a safe space by honestly sharing what they needed to feel safe in the workshop, promoting respect for each other's needs.

Instructors emphasized the importance of each child's unique qualities and talents. Simple exercises, like the Power Hand, helped the participants identify their strengths and encouraged them to use these as coping mechanisms. These lessons have helped the participants feel secure both physically and mentally, and we hope that they will continue to apply these skills in their families and community.

## After Siyazama

Since the conclusion of the Siyazama Social Circus Program in August, we are happy to share that the commitment to the children and youth in Philippi continues. Coaches Portia and Bob from Zip Zap are running an independent club in Philippi, where they visit the community every Sunday and offer practice sessions to any children and youth who are interested in learning circus skills. This has allowed children and youth who were previously in the program to continue practising their skills and opened up an opportunity for other children and youth in the community to join.

SOS Children's Villages in Cape Town continues their work in the Philippi, dropping off food packages and checking-in with families and the program participants.



## Conclusion

The Siyazama Social Circus Program was dedicated to better-equipping participants to cope with their challenges through creative avenues and instilling tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation for their peers. Maintaining a safe space where participants can engage freely, care for each other and appreciate their unique value has created an environment where they could explore their talents, unlock their potential, and grow their confidence. As a result of the program, there is a drastic change in the participant's views on life. They have been exposed to a life beyond Philippi and their current circumstances and have more open minds to what they can achieve. Program participants have shown immense growth in their self-confidence and communication while meeting inspiring mentors along the way.

## Participant stories

Siyamthanda, a 15-year-old participant of the Siyazama Social Circus Program since 2022, appreciated that the program provided an alternative to hanging out with friends, as he did not have many hobbies and had limited opportunities for extracurricular activities in his community. He formed valuable friendships, highlighting two program participants as his closest friends.

Siyamthanda was introduced to the mini trampoline, his favourite of all the circus arts, by Zip Zap instructor Siyabonga Swelindawo, his role model and mentor. He aspires to explore this discipline further and, over time, hopes to make a positive difference in his home and improve his family's quality of life utilizing the essential life skills and confidence he gained.

Inako joined the Siyazama Social Circus program in September 2021. He was most excited about exploring partner acrobatics. The aerial scarf presented a significant challenge, but his unwavering determination led to a remarkable performance at the final Show and Tell.



Inako has created cherished memories since he first arrived at Zip Zap Circus School. He wholeheartedly enjoys the program's activities and would not change a thing about it. Forming strong friendships within the group, he also looks up to Zip Zap instructor Siyabonga as his role model.

Initially reserved, Inako stands out among his peers, consistently delivering his best. His dream at Zip Zap is simple yet inspiring, *"To be able to do all the things we are learning here."*

A supportive and respected presence, Inako frequently lends a helping hand and provides words of encouragement to fellow participants. Zip Zap instructor Xolani Sikunana describes him as *"caring, lovable, and a pleasure to work with."* Inako's dedication and ever-present smile amplify our belief in the program's mission.





**Thank you for your support!**



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