

CASE STUDY: Suchitoto

The town of Suchitoto, just ninety minute drive from San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, has been a sleepy tourist stop-over in the Central American countryside. It is a town not unlike Stratford, Canada -- close to a capital, scenic, culturally-inclined—and like Stratford was 50 years ago, it is economically depressed.

Canadian-based volunteers with Cuso International, a Canadian development organization, first identified the similarities between the two towns in the mid-2000s. They brought together Antonio Cimolino, now the Stratford Festival's artistic director, and local Suchitoto arts and municipal leaders to discuss the potential for local arts-based economic development.

The result was EsArtes, a municipal theatre training program for the arts that creates a theatre. EsArtes is a technical trade school for youth from which students are recruited to produce theatre productions. EsArtes teaches transferable skills like carpentry to prop construction and event management in performing and technical programs.

The teachers at the schools are predominantly Canadian volunteers, local business owners and faculty from the Department of Economy at the National University in El Salvador. Technicians, costume designers, lighting designers all come from Stratford, Ontario to teach sessions.

Scotiabank El Salvador currently plays a supporting role to EsArtes. Along with their corporate donation, the Bank provides resources for promotional material and public relations.

In 2011, EsArtes was invited to Washington, DC for a week of showcasing events to the Organization of American States. The purpose of the week long series of performances, interviews and workshops was to demonstrate the use of theatre as a driver of local economic development—as well as a way to engage at-risk youth.

The event was supported by partners: the Stratford Festival, Cuso International, the Municipality of Suchitoto, Heritage Canada, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Canada as well as Scotiabank. The highlight of the week was the performance in the Hall of the Americas in front of an audience of 400 people.

“Now that the first group of students has graduated,” says Janira Walton de Mejia, Scotiabank's Senior Manager of Marketing in El Salvador, “We have seen the incredibly positive impact this program has on the students and their families, by giving them hope and opportunities for the future.”