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**Position:** Assistant Program Manager

**Name of Innovation:** SANDBOX Program

**Name of organization:** Fundación Espacio Creativo

**Location:** Panama City, Panama

**Statement addressing topic of “promoting inclusion to accelerate innovation”:**

When we talk about promoting inclusion to accelerate innovation, the creative & cultural industries (CCIs) deserve a greater place in that conversation. The creative sector is an historically under-explored area for innovative applications of technology, especially in developing nations, despite its great potential to advance progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. At SANDBOX (a program produced in collaboration with IDB Lab and the Fundación Espacio Creativo), we’ve seen how integrating technology with the CCIs can increase opportunities for academic and economic inclusion for young people at social risk in Central America.

SANDBOX is based in Panama, where the youth unemployment rate is on the rise, going from 6.95% in 2014 to 10.02% in 2019. Young people at social risk (like refugees, recent migrants, young women, and those living in situations of urban poverty) face more severe academic and economic exclusion and are more likely to be pushed to work in the informal sector. This is especially true for the one-third of SANDBOX’s target population who do not have access to a computer or internet connection at home. This technological gap reduces their chances of entering a labor market that has increased its demand for digital literacy. There is a clear need for opportunities for vulnerable young people to develop the soft and technical skills required for success in higher education and professional work in the 21st century.

The lack of a skilled workforce negatively impacts many sectors of the Panamanian economy, and the CCIs are no exception. A study commissioned by SANDBOX’s parent organization, Fundación Espacio Creativo, in 2017 on the state of performing arts in Panama suggests that the low competitiveness of the sector is due to the lack of public educational programs, few opportunities for practical training, and limited availability/accessibility of spaces with the necessary technology for innovative creation. At the same time, it is a priority for the Panamanian Ministry of Culture to market Panama City as a “Center for Cultural Innovation.”

SANDBOX seeks to address these gaps by providing opportunities for young people at social risk to develop 21st century skills through theoretical and practical experience integrating technology with the CCIs. This is achieved through 1) a series of training courses with a STEAM focus; 2) artistic collaboration and experimentation with technology in the Sandbox makerspace; 3) internships with professionals from the creative sector.

The methodology of SANDBOX itself is innovative and inclusive because it was designed to be accessible during the COVID-19 quarantine. The training courses can either be facilitated virtually or in-person, and the internship program was designed with the possibility of virtual mentorships. The cycle of training, co-creating, and then applying skills in a professional setting is also innovative in the sense that it provides an integral experience for young people that opens their minds to the opportunities afforded by the CCIs.

In our first year of operation, we are proud to have implemented 7 virtual “21st Century Skills” introductory courses, benefitting a total of 122 youth. We have also implemented 5 “Technological Integration” courses; 3 virtual (Creative Programming, Web Design, and Sound Design) and 2 in-person (Photography), benefitting 69 distinct youth. We have organized 10 individual month-long internships with local organizations and businesses in the creative industries. Finally, this month, we are excited to complete the construction of a physical makerspace for free & guided experimentation integrating technology with the arts.

At SANDBOX, we see every day how inclusion accelerates innovation because we provide tools to a population that otherwise would not have access to them and watch how they invent creative solutions to meet their needs. By providing training and a space for technological advancement in the CCIs, we hope that SANDBOX will generate opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship for more marginalized youth in Panama. In the longer term, by using the arts and technology to prepare marginalized youth with the skills required for college and career readiness in the 21st century, we hope to diversify and democratize the future of the creative industries in Central America.