

# Fundación Soymás



## Principle 7



The main guidelines and motivations of the Soymás Research Department are that all social intervention generates knowledge that should not be lost; to be inquisitive, curious, systematic and proactive, towards the well-being of the Soymás students.

Dr. Rodrigo Aguirre

Psychiatrist and Founder of the Soymás  
Research Department



# About **Fundación Soymás**

**Fundación Soymás** (Soymás), founded in 2017, is a non-profit organisation located in Santiago, Chile. It runs a programme for teenage mothers living in the commune of La Pintana, which offers vocational training as well as psychological and social support. Through this ten-month programme, Soymás aims to support students living autonomously and becoming committed change agents within their families and broader environments. Soymás works to address the many inequalities that adolescent mothers and their children face by helping them to reimagine often-stagnated life projections, building a solid base for job success or further study, and training them in parenting. The Soymás programme is adapted from the successful model by the **Juanfe Foundation**, which has been running in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, since 2001.

## What was the challenge?

Soymás' work is based in La Pintana, a commune with the highest poverty rate in the Santiago Metropolitan Region, with particularly high statistics of teenage pregnancy. The adolescent mothers that Soymás works with not only live in economic poverty but also experience 'multidimensional poverty'; they are negatively impacted by poverty on multiple intersecting levels, including having limited access to education, work, healthcare, social security, housing and decent standards of living. Adolescent mothers often drop out of high school, desert jobs, and take on domestic roles, which ends up reproducing gender inequalities. Their situation also has a profound social and psychological impact, creating vulnerability to mental illness and a higher likelihood of problematic drug use, amongst a host of other potential issues. Their children are also more vulnerable to numerous health, developmental, social and educational issues as a result of their environmental precarity. These challenges, in addition to a scarcity of promising career opportunities, make it difficult for adolescent mothers to project into the future and limit the possibilities of optimal development for them and their families.

Soymás' ten-month programme was implemented in response to these challenges and is based on three fundamental pillars: first, the development of a 'life project' through educational levelling, vocational training, and job placement; second, a focus on the children's neurocognition and emotional development; and third, the provision of 'biopsychosocial' support (health, psychological, and social support).

As Soymás continued to run the programme in its earlier years (2017–2019), they noticed that some students were not performing well, that many were often absent, and that they were dealing with a consistently high dropout rate (around 40%). Soymás found that while they operated with an understanding of the consequences of becoming a young mother, they lacked knowledge of the root causes of this challenge. To understand these root causes, they realised they would need to be more intentional and systematic in their data collection and analysis processes. The foundation had always seen the importance of collecting psychosocial data from their beneficiaries (in the earlier years, this primarily entailed surveys regarding experiences of mental illness, for instance, the filling out of a depression scale test). However, Soymás still needed to formalise channels to effectively research and understand the data, using it to draw conclusions about root causes and implement changes in their programme based on the findings.

## What was the response?

In 2019, Dr. Rodrigo Aguirre, a psychiatrist working with the young mothers participating in Soymás' programme, proposed the creation of a research department within the foundation. The Research Department's role would be to strengthen and diversify the use of data to better understand the programme's beneficiaries and the root causes of their situations. With these findings, Soymás could improve its intervention, adjusting the programme to create more impact in the lives of its beneficiaries.

At this stage, Soymás already had teams within various focus areas, including psychosocial, administration, and academic work, as well as a team focused on the employability of Soymás' beneficiaries and the running of a daycare for some of their children. With the support of the board and in consultation with Dr. Aguirre, the Research Department was established in 2020 with him and a paediatric neurologist/ ADHD expert making the team. Later, a psychologist with academic research and publishing experience joined the team part-time to specialise in data analysis.

The creation of the Department meant that Soymás as a whole needed to learn to prioritise the collection and organisation of data using more consistent principles than they did in the earlier years. Although the psychosocial team responsible for collecting data experiences challenges (for example, they must sometimes 'chase down' beneficiaries for their data), the data streamlining process, which started with establishing the Research Department, has ultimately created more order. This has allowed the foundation to gain a broader, more 'zoomed out' perspective of their work, which indirectly helps with selection and admission processes.

The Research Department's time is in high demand as they are involved in multiple projects. With the foundation's decision to prioritise research, the team needs to make adjustments in their programming as they get to spend less time on clinical work, which was Dr. Aguirre's original focus. Such adjustments have capacity effects on the foundation's day-to-day work, translating into the necessity to be more selective when prioritising clinical cases that demand urgent attention.

With the establishment of the Research Department, the foundation had to identify effective ways to integrate research findings into its programme to ensure it addressed the root causes of its beneficiaries' situations. This was a complex challenge, relating to coordinating timelines between research and operations teams, translating data into practical plans that can be tracked and measured, and ensuring responsibility for implementation is clearly designated. In 2023, Soymás researchers developed a multi-element forecast model to determine the causes of student dropout, hoping to identify at-risk beneficiaries. While the model is operational, it requires further attention to be compatible with implementation on the ground. Its first results emerged only one to two months ahead of the year's programme, meaning that the dialogues and work sessions required to produce implementation plans were initially pressed for time. Secondly, the model's complexity and its results make the research challenging to apply to day-to-day operations in the programme, slowing down the implementation process.

Given the significant investment required to sustain the Research Department, a central pressure has always been in ensuring that it produces tangible outcomes that evidence the importance of its work at a rapid enough pace. As one outcome, in 2022, the Department published the [first academic article](#) on Soymás's work in the Chilean Journal of Childhood and Adolescent Psychiatry and Neurology. It engages with the multi-faceted consequences of poverty and childhood trauma, or 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs), including forms of abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction. The article uses the data of a sample group of 2021–2022 Soymás students and makes some key findings, which articulate the root causes of the situations of many of the beneficiaries. The following are some of the findings:

- ✓ Most Soymás beneficiaries have suffered significant trauma, much greater than the general population,
- ✓ Beneficiaries have a much higher prevalence of ADHD than the general population (40% vs 4.5%), and
- ✓ The connection between dropout and ADHD, emotional dysregulation, and experiences of childhood trauma is significant.

As a result of these findings, Soymás has transformed how it runs its programme and collaborative work. For instance:

- ✓ Teachers have been expertly trained in educational strategies more conducive to the ways that people with ADHD learn;
- ✓ One of the research department's experts ran a workshop on ADHD for the beneficiaries of the programme;

- ✓ The programme has begun to include sports as well as mindfulness practices, both of which are proven beneficial to people with trauma;
- ✓ Soymás now shares psychosocial data on its students with teachers as part of the onboarding process to increase their trauma awareness and understanding of the students.

Further research by the Department has resulted in an alliance with the [Pontifical Catholic University of Chile](#). With the support of public funds, the partnership is developing a research project investigating the neurobiological root of 'resilience'. The research uses a sample of sixty Soymás students and engages a non-invasive study to identify brain function circuits, linking these with students' experiences of trauma. The research team hopes their growing understanding of the relationship between trauma, brain function and resilience will shed light on the root causes of their study subjects' key life experiences. This will allow the programme to strengthen the resilience of Soymás students.

The establishment of the Research Department has thus ushered in transformation at Soymás, both externally and internally, producing numerous opportunities for improvement and streamlining of the programme. Numerous challenges have also been encountered, which continue to be addressed and learned from.

## What have they learned?

- ✓ **Use data and research to develop a deeper understanding of the root causes:** The Research Department's work has greatly assisted Soymás in understanding the root causes of the problems their beneficiaries encounter, as well as their psychological profiles. In turn, this has helped them to adapt their workshops and teaching strategies in order to respond effectively to prevalent trauma, ADHD, and other issues. Insights from the research have also allowed Soymás to provide more complete information to potential employers of Soymás graduates towards better job placement and support at work.
- ✓ **Partnerships can be key in accessing more knowledge and resources:** Establishing partnerships with researchers and universities has been key to strengthening the capacity of the Soymás Research Department. The partnership with the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and the planned seminar will bring academia and civil society organisations together to discuss the root causes and allow for exchanges between the two groups. On this basis, it becomes possible to work collectively to understand the root causes of teenage pregnancy and investigate ways to break the cycle.
- ✓ **Ensure that the researchers and field teams find alignment in their work:** It has been difficult for Soymás to coordinate between researchers and field teams as they work on different timelines and use different logic. The foundation's team realised that implementing research findings is often complicated and not always applicable to an organisation's day-to-day work. Internal tensions can occur when changes to the programme are proposed, even when these are backed by data and research. However, it is crucial to translate research results into practice, in order to improve programmatic work, staying aware that things on the ground sometimes look different than they do 'in theory' or when modelled using data. Managing these tensions through periodic meetings and monitoring between the research and field teams has proven to be crucial. Meetings operate as places for joint planning and identifying those responsible for implementation. Figuring out and workshopping effective workflows between the Research Department and field team is an ongoing process for the foundation.
- ✓ **Research models should be developed with their implementation in mind:** As in the case of Soymás's drop-out forecast model, modelling data results can become very complex. Researchers should collaborate closely with the programme teams to consider the practicality and use of the models from the beginning, producing usable results related to a narrower set of variables. Such an approach may allow research to find quicker and more feasible applications to the work on the ground.

# Key outcomes and impact indicators

314 students have so far graduated from the Soymás programme.

73% of the Soymás programme graduates are either in the workforce or continue with their studies.

In 2023, Soymás and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile began a research collaboration supported by public funds via The National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development with a 200 million USD grant for 4 years.

Around ten teachers have been expertly trained in educational strategies that are more conducive to the ways that people with ADHD learn.

A workshop on ADHD was organised for the beneficiaries of the programme and attended by 15 participants.

The programme is working on the implementation of 4.5 hours of sports weekly, as well as 10 minutes of mindfulness practices daily, both of which have proven beneficial to people with trauma.

The onboarding process for teachers was revised to include data and insights on the students as well as trauma awareness.

New areas of improvement linked to dropout rates are identified and will be used to further transform the Soymás program.