

USAID/OTI Colombia Field Report

Mar - Jun 2007

Program Description

The Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) Initial Governance Response Program (IGRP) assists the Government of Colombia (GoC) to maintain stability in areas formerly under the control of insurgent forces by promoting government presence and responsiveness to local needs. The program objectives are to strengthen the credibility and legitimacy of the GoC in post-conflict areas, to increase the willingness and capacity of communities to cooperate and interact with the GoC, and to increase the GoC's capacity to respond to community-prioritized necessities in a timely and credible manner. OTI's government partner is the Center for Coordination and Integrated Action (CCAI by its Spanish acronym), which is part of the Office of the President and is responsible for coordinating the establishment of government services in recently liberated parts of the country. The budget for FY 2007 is \$5.7 million.

Country Situation

Armed Groups Remain Active - OTI is currently operating in 4 of the 53 municipalities under CCAI's area of responsibility. These four adjacent municipalities share the following characteristics: they are historically marginalized due to geographic inaccessibility; are only partially freed from the influence of illegally armed groups, both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and paramilitaries; and are important coca-producing areas transitioning to the cultivation of legal crops. Military operations are ongoing in the area due to the continued presence of guerrillas and paramilitaries. Staff travel and program logistics are complicated by the security situation.

Legislators Linked to Armed Groups - A political scandal dominated the national news during the quarter, as numerous members of the Colombian Congress were indicted for association with paramilitary groups. The scandal has played a part in the currently stalled negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which has also been a major issue.

Context for Operations May Worsen - Upcoming regional elections in October could impact program implementation as candidates vie to politically benefit from community-based projects. Such attempts will necessitate strategies to ensure that projects remain separate from electoral events. It is also likely that the security environment will deteriorate in the lead-up to the elections. This possibility was highlighted in a recent report by an electoral observation group indicating that OTI's four target municipalities are at high risk of electoral violence. Recently, for example, a candidate for the city council of the provincial capital where OTI is operational was assassinated in broad daylight. Such events are also being reported in other parts of the country.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

The program officially got underway in March, and much time and energy during this reporting period was dedicated to program start-up. OTI's implementing partner is Creative Associates, which has offices in Bogotá and Meta. The program has successfully accomplished several key tasks, described below.

- Staffing for the Creative team, including staff for one field office, is complete. The Bogotá office is still in temporary accommodations but should be in a permanent space by the end of July.
- The program completed the first group of seven small projects for communities in and around the town of La Julia, the symbolic former capital of the FARC. An additional five projects have been approved and are underway.
- Excellent relations have been established with the USAID Mission, CCAI, the U.S. and Colombian militaries,

and local governments in the four municipalities.

- OTI is providing technical assistance to CCAI to develop a communication strategy to ensure that program beneficiaries understand that it is the GoC providing assistance, not the FARC, and to train CCAI staff to make rapid appraisals of community conditions and needs.
- A baseline survey is being developed to measure community perception regarding the credibility and legitimacy of the GoC in recently recovered areas. The survey will be repeated within a year in target municipalities to measure changes in perception.

B. Grants Activity Summary

Grants spending to date has been limited due to complications in the start-up phase, primarily related to security logistics, which encompass learning to operate within security constraints and arranging travel in insecure areas. Other challenges include recruiting field staff in rural areas with low populations and developing operational procedures with a government partner unfamiliar with OTI requirements, such as the need to obtain partner signatures for each grant, and unaccustomed to the practice of meeting regularly to discuss program activities.

Total activity spending of \$115,251 breaks down as follows:

- Technical assistance to CCAI: \$22,889.
- Activities: \$92,362 (primarily assistance to schools and sports and recreation programs and improvements to water and lighting systems).

C. Indicators of Success

Although the program has been in operation for only four months, there have been noteworthy successes, as illustrated by the following example:

In the community of La Julia, approximately 30 residents (out of a population of 780) attended a meeting to formally inaugurate an initial group of small projects. The mayor and representatives of CCAI (who had flown in with OTI and Creative on a military helicopter) spoke about their satisfaction with being part of a program that responds rapidly to community-prioritized projects. During the ceremony, however, the community members sat stone-faced. When it was time to ask members of the community to sign for receipt of each project, there was a reasonable concern that the residents, who live in an area with a strong FARC presence, would be reluctant to publicly acknowledge collaboration with the government. Instead, most of the 30 attendees were enthusiastic about signing and having their pictures taken with the items provided to the community through in-kind grants.

This public acknowledgement is an indication that - at least with this group - a level of trust and confidence has developed regarding the government's ability to protect its citizens. It also demonstrates a willingness by some members of the community to align with their government and be counted as citizens of Colombia.

Two weeks following the event, CCAI and Creative visited to solicit a second group of small projects. More than 30 hand-written "proposals" were tendered, indicating a growing interest in the program and, again, confidence in the government's ability to provide security. The most encouraging request came from a remote school that wanted a Colombian flag. The request prompted a decision to provide flags to all schools requesting assistance.

Program Appraisal

There is growing appreciation by all involved of the importance and benefit of quickly establishing a State presence in areas recently recovered by the military - even if the presence is fundamentally symbolic. Lessons learned include the following:

- Each municipality must be evaluated as a completely distinct entity. While security is an issue in all four municipalities, each municipality has varying levels of government forces, the FARC, and/or paramilitaries, as well as an uneven presence of local government and organized civil society. These factors affect everything from travel by staff and community members within a given area to logistics to work alliances. The situation is

not static, which complicates matters further. Activities by the three armed groups are ongoing, affect all operations, and require constant monitoring and analysis.

- The strategy of presenting this program as a response by the GoC is already proving its effectiveness, tapping into a strong desire on the part of campesinos - people living in remote parts of the country - to feel connected to their government and to the rest of their country. This strategy has been grounded in the substantial role the GoC has played at all levels in coordinating and delivering to the communities their chosen projects.
- Community input is essential to the success of this program and is something that can be prompted but not rushed.
- The program needs to be constantly explained and discussed with project partners, including the GoC and local partners, to ensure joint understanding and a common language - especially regarding the importance of community participation and what community participation means as a basis for dialogue and partnership.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities for the next three months include:

- Expanding the program in the first four target municipalities by developing new projects with the communities in coordination with the government.
- Emphasizing capacity building of CCAI and focusing on several areas highlighted by CCAI staff as priority areas.
- Exploring the possibility of setting up operations in a second area. (Montes de Maria, in the northern part of the country, has been prioritized by both CCAI and the Colombian military.)

An ongoing priority will be the development of a hand-over strategy. OTI's stated exit strategy was to turn the program over to CCAI; however, representatives from CCAI have repeatedly made it clear that they do not envision having - nor do they desire to have - OTI's operational capabilities. They see CCAI strictly as a coordinating body and want it to remain as such. OTI plans to work with the GoC to align the IGRP with national, departmental, and local development planning priorities and to coordinate with USAID/Colombia's new Regional Governance Consolidation Program, also working in CCAI municipalities, on possible future linkages.