

USAID/OTI Colombia Field Report

January - March 2008

Program Description

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) Initial Governance Response Program (IGRP) assists the Government of Colombia (GOC) to stabilize areas recently retaken from insurgent forces by promoting government presence and responsiveness to local needs. OTI's main government partner is the Center for Coordination of 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 12 prioritized parts of the country recently retaken from insurgents. All OTI project activities are carried out in the name of Acción Social, the partner organization for CCAI. Through the promotion of Acción Social's presence, the program strengthens the credibility and legitimacy of the GOC in post-conflict areas; increases the willingness and capacity of communities to cooperate and interact with the GOC; and improves the GOC's capacity to respond to community-prioritized necessities, including efforts to increase economic opportunities, in a timely and credible manner. Total obligations to OTI's implementing partner to date amount to \$13,515,935.

Country Situation

Armed Groups Remain Active - OTI is currently operational in 6 of the 64 municipalities under CCAI's area of responsibility. These municipalities have historically been marginalized due to geographic inaccessibility; are only partially, but increasingly, freed from the influence of illegally armed groups, both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and newly armed groups connected to narcotics trafficking; and are important coca-producing areas transitioning to the cultivation of legal crops. Military operations are ongoing in these areas due to the continued presence of guerrillas and other illegally armed groups. Although the security situation is improving, it continues to complicate staff travel and program logistics.

While security concerns will undoubtedly be a consideration for the life of the program, it is encouraging to see the rapid pace of transition in recently recovered areas. The ongoing presence of security forces—including the police—is reducing FARC control and coca production activities, spurring voluntary eradication efforts, and allowing civilian governmental entities to establish themselves. These changes, in large part, are due to the sustained work of the Colombian military over the past several years. And certainly the increasing, if still limited, presence of the civilian government is convincing communities that the situation is truly changing. One unfortunate symptom of the change, however, is the emergence of criminal groups seeking to capitalize on the FARC's loss of control over coca production and marketing.

Regional Tensions - In late February, the Colombian military bombed a FARC camp just across the Colombian border in northern Ecuador. The attack killed Raul Reyes, second in command of the seven-member FARC secretariat. The action generated the most significant diplomatic crisis Colombia has experienced in decades. In response to the attack, Ecuador and Venezuela broke off diplomatic relations with Colombia, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez ordered 10 military battalions to Venezuela's western border. In a show of solidarity with Venezuela and Ecuador, Nicaragua also broke off diplomatic relations with Colombia. (The Nicaraguan break was also connected to an ongoing dispute with Colombia over maritime boundaries.) The potential for war was diffused at a meeting of the Rio Group, which ended with the heads of the involved states shaking hands. The Organization of American States subsequently admonished Colombia for its breach of Ecuadorian sovereignty. Ecuador has yet to officially reestablish diplomatic relations with Colombia.

An unresolved issue stemming from this incident concerns information found on three computers recovered by the Colombian military from the FARC camp. Reportedly, the GOC has turned over the computer hard drives to Interpol so the international police organization can independently verify that the files have not been altered. The GOC asserts that information found on the computers reveals closer relations between the FARC and the Governments of Ecuador and Venezuela than has previously been documented. Both Ecuador and Venezuela have repeatedly and strongly denied the allegations.

FARC Setbacks - The FARC secretariat was dealt a second blow during this reporting period—in addition to the death of Raul Reyes in Ecuador—when Ivan Rios was killed by the head of his security detail. Following the slaying, the security chief cut off Rios' hand and delivered it to nearby military authorities. The FARC has also seen a growing number of mid-level commanders and foot soldiers deserting and entering the GOC's demobilization program.

During the quarter, 281 FARC fighters deserted in the program area, an increase of 24 percent over the same period in 2007.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

During the quarter, OTI facilitated three municipal assemblies. These assemblies were coupled with the public delivery of projects approved during previous assemblies. Community turn-out and participation continues to grow at these events as credibility and expectations for the program increase. Sixty-eight projects were proposed by various community groups, and 27 projects were selected by the assemblies as their top priorities and subsequently approved by OTI.

The economic development component of the program, which started in late November 2007, is fully underway, although staff members continue to wrestle with the conundrum of how to implement a program of short-term productive projects while maintaining a vision for the long term. To date, 31 economic development projects have been approved.

The effort to develop a unified strategic plan for the region, which is being facilitated by an OTI-supported consulting firm, saw significant progress during the reporting period. The first three components of the plan—governance, territorial issues, and infrastructure—have been fully conceptualized at the macro-project level. The following planning elements have yet to be completed: operational plans for the first three components (the process began in late March) and the conceptualization and development of operational plans for the final two components—economic development and health and education.

B. Grants Activity Summary

During the reporting period, the program as a whole approved 61 new projects worth \$2,042,048. Total activity spending to date is \$4.13 million over 192 grants and breaks down as follows:

- Technical assistance to CCAI (including TA for the unified plan): \$806,000.
- Activities: \$3.32 million (e.g., assistance to schools, sports programs, and health posts, and water, electricity, roads, and income-generating projects).



OTI is working with fruit farmers in small communities to improve production and create new marketing channels.

OTI is also providing technical assistance to local governments. This activity supports the linkage of municipal development plans (MDMs by their Spanish acronym) to the region's unified plan in an effort to ensure that local governments play an active part in the regional plan's implementation. While all of the mayors connected with the project have committed to coordinating their MDMs with the unified plan, some have expressed concerns that the limited planning capacity of their small, inexperienced teams could make this difficult. (Frequently, a deficit of technical capacity or human resources will lead a new mayor to opt for expedience and simply cut and paste from

Security in the region remains a serious constraint; however, as official safe areas continue to expand, the program is managing to work with communities that lie beyond the tiny, but relatively secure, urban areas to which it has been confined. Two such projects are seeking to create connections between agricultural producers and previously inaccessible markets in Bogota. The first project provided support to 40 small yucca growers, arranging for technical training in improved production methodologies. The second project supported a group of watermelon growers, providing technical assistance and equipment to improve irrigation systems that will allow the growers to produce 128 hectares of watermelon in four annual cycles. These projects are helping producers increase the quantity and improve the quality of their products. Furthermore, the marketing component of the projects will give the growers an opportunity to improve profit margins and incomes by connecting them to untapped markets.

previous MDMs.)

To address these concerns, OTI, working with CCAI and the Ministry of Justice, has designed a program of technical assistance that provides both international and national consultants to the mayors' teams to ensure that their MDMs, which are due in early June, will reflect the priorities of their constituents and align with the unified plan. Recognizing that this planning activity is only the first step in ensuring responsive and transparent local governance and a break with the conflict- and coca-plagued past, and in response to strong requests from the mayors, OTI is working with CCAI and the mayors to design a follow-up technical assistance program that will rely heavily on the participation of staff from the Ministry of Justice.

C. Indicators of Success

In 2005, paramilitaries massacred 55 people in a small Colombian community located several hours from the nearest town. Many of the community's families fled to the departmental (state) capital or to other areas for safety. In 2007, when project contractors first visited the community to explain the program, they were met with open hostility. Residents refused to speak with them. Memories of the massacre were still fresh, and the community believed that the government had abandoned it. Eventually, a municipal assembly was arranged and, in December, a project to build a playground, secure sporting equipment for children and adults, and acquire chairs for community meetings was adopted. The playground was inaugurated in late March at a ceremony attended by people from surrounding communities. At the ceremony, residents expressed their thanks to the GOC for including them in the program. Moreover, some residents spoke of families who—having seen the government's ongoing presence and commitment in the area—are returning to the community.

The increasing roll that the Colombian military is playing in the implementation of community projects is also indicative of success. Many Colombians have avoided involvement with the military when it enters an area because they could not be sure how long it would stay. If the military's tenure in an area is short-lived, as it has been in the past, any collaboration could put individuals and their families at risk. However, in program areas where time has convinced people that the military will be around for the longer term, there has been a gradual shift in attitude. In these areas, residents are more willing to report security incidents, and in general, they are beginning to see the military as a potential ally rather than a threat.

All OTI projects require a contribution from the recipient community and the local government, but at times, one (or both) of the parties is unable to fully comply with a commitment. Since the last reporting period, target communities increasingly have been willing to accept assistance with their commitments from the military. This growing willingness demonstrates an increasing level of confidence in the military, and the cooperation this confidence generates is making these relationships even stronger. The following example further illustrates the point.

Late in 2007, a municipal assembly prioritized a community park project that entailed installing benches, sidewalks, trees, lighting, and a playground. The community agreed to provide all the manual labor for the project, but soon after work began, community leaders realized that they did not have the personnel or volunteer resources needed to complete the project. The mayor's office hired laborers to keep the project moving forward, but this course drained fiscal resources. Hearing of the dilemma, a local military unit offered to contribute labor to the project, which the community gratefully accepted.

Only a year ago, such a joint effort would have been unthinkable. At that time, the military was viewed as an occupying force, and any association with it carried the risk of retaliation from paramilitaries. Clearly, perceptions have changed in this community; indeed, the whole environment is changing as Colombians begin to have faith in their government's ongoing commitment and presence.

Program Appraisal

The GOC remains committed to quickly establishing a presence in areas recently recovered by the military and recognizes the value of using small, quick-impact projects as part of a larger framework of medium- to long-term initiatives.

Lessons learned during this reporting period include the following:

- When the tipping point is reached in a community—the point at which a collective decision is made to align with the government—things happen quickly. Such realignments also spread quickly to neighboring communities. Programs must be ready to take advantage of new opportunities to maintain momentum.
- Local officials, in general, are strongly interested in aligning themselves with a program that is already

showing great potential for success. Involvement of GOC officials at all levels, to the extent possible, adds legitimacy to the program and increases the potential for sustainability. It is also necessary to consider that municipal authorities manage few resources and have a tiny staff in relation to the responsibilities of the municipal team. OTI has learned that it is very easy to stretch the commitments of the municipal authorities beyond their ability to respond. Therefore, the process needs to be carefully managed so as to not damage the credibility of the local authorities.

- Prioritizing work with existing producer groups, even ones that are not officially recognized, greatly facilitated the rapid identification of productive activities projects. The approach provided practical opportunities for continuing the development of the methodology and also helped establish the credibility of the program as one that quickly responds to community priorities. However, given the history of the area, there are few existing producer groups, so the program is casting a wider net in terms of what constitutes a group. Possibilities include PTAs, local councils, and church, sporting, and cultural groups.
- It is possible to carry out a credible market survey in less than 3 weeks if the focus is on gathering information that is useful rather than trying to document every aspect of the market. It is also possible to carry out useful local surveys to identify key actors and opportunities in less than a week.
- Technical assistance (TA) is essential to the success of every productive project. Given the nature of the program (i.e., quick, high-impact projects), the question becomes how to break TA into key components that can be administered over the short time-horizon of each individual project, while keeping an eye on the need for long-term TA. Numerous government programs that provide different types of TA and resources have expressed interest in becoming operational in the target municipalities. Program staff is working to organize the various government (national and departmental) proposals in a logical framework that will help identify the best match between government programs and the needs of individual organizations and projects.
- Organizing productive projects along value chains, thus strengthening municipal and departmental linkages, is an incipient approach that is showing promise. Such connections are being developed with small-scale plantain and yucca growers who have formed informal producer associations that are headed by larger local producers who have proven access to markets. Similar groups are being considered for dairy and passion fruit producers.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities for the next 3 months include the following:

- Work with partners to finalized the unified plan;
- Begin implementation of the communication strategy for the unified plan;
- Continue to expand the program area as official safe zones continue to expand; and
- Continue to refine the methodology for productive activities and generate lessons learned.