

Lessons learned from Rapid Impact Livelihoods activities in the PCIM

Working in consolidation zones, the USAID rapid impact livelihoods activities had two programmatic objectives:

- **To increase the income level and improve the quality of life** of small and medium producers, by means of supporting the development of licit, short-term activities.
- **To increase the legitimacy and credibility** of public institutions, gaining the confidence of local communities.

Operational Context

- Operational in areas historically controlled by illegally-armed groups. Communities hesitant to participate in government programs due to threats of reprisals from illegal actors.
- There was no shared strategic vision among relevant actors and government institutions to promote livelihoods activities.
- Local governments with limited resources to support livelihoods projects.
- Target municipalities have traditionally had limited access to social services and infrastructure (roads, banks, communications, electricity and water).
- Without the necessary infrastructure, there is limited market access.
- Private sector presence is weak.
- Low social capital in the region, with an established culture of income generation through illicit activities and an environment marked by illegality.
- Few producer associations with whom to work.

Elements of the Approach

- Project activities are implemented in the name of the Government of Colombia.
- Each intervention looks for **political impact** with the objective of increasing the credibility of the State and community confidence in and relationships with State entities.
- Projects are short-term in nature with a view to the long term to ensure sustainability.
- Farmers and the program's staff in the field collaborate closely—with the farmers acting as the foundation of the local strategy.
- Only partial support for producer initiatives. Activities must have buy-in from local farmers which includes an in-kind contribution to each productive project.
- Productive projects are permanently supported by field staff and are provided with specialized technical assistance.
- Local strategies **work with products that farmers already have experience** with and with which farmers have worked in the past. Through a participatory process, the beneficiaries help to design the activities.
- Risk taking is an important aspect, but must be supported by sound analysis and all available information – while not letting analysis prevent a rapid response.
- The program works with already **existing groups in the community**, whether formal or informal. The creation of new groups is an exception.

- The program carries out an important role in the attracting private sector interest and investment.
- **Market demand:** the buyers and the private sector investors should already exist before deciding on possible options for rural businesses.

Lessons Learned

1. Livelihoods Activities are Integral to Consolidation Efforts

Livelihoods activities are not merely income-generating activities, but rather, they are **an integral part of the broader consolidation plan** for the region, creating the potential for a larger impact. These livelihoods activities have a **political rationale** as well and should be considered as part of the larger GOC effort to establish state presence in consolidation zones and credibility of government institutions with the local community.

By linking livelihoods activities to the broader consolidation plan for the region, the program has created synergies with national, departmental, and municipal governments. Existing activities and relationships also help to facilitate the entry into the communities for livelihoods activities—building on credibility gained through other activities already under way.

Rapid impact livelihoods activities can serve as a **catalyst** to attract the interest of State entities and/or the private sector by demonstrating to them that successful productive activities can be implemented in these areas and to identify groups with whom the GOC can work.

2. Work with Existing Groups and with Existing Productive Activities

By working with **established associations and groups and with existing productive activities**, the program is able to more easily identify and formulate livelihoods activities. Because these projects are formulated in consultation with local associations and groups, it is possible to develop long-term, high-impact activities in the short-term and implement projects rapidly without having to carry out costly and lengthy studies.

It is necessary to promote and maintain the motivation of the communities and participating organizations in regards to their active participation in the program and its general objectives. Program activities are planned and programmed as a team and beneficiary associations and groups must provide a counterpart contribution to pair with in-kind support from the program.

3. Supporting Productive Value Chains

Since the activities work with existing associations and existing production, the program has focused on a group of established productive value chains. Associations receiving support from the program can therefore focus on a **productive line** that helps to generate a greater feeling of association and a common goal. By working with multiple activities that share a **productive value chain**, the provision of technical assistance and entrepreneurial strengthening is made easier—as opposed to working with associations and groups that manage their production independently.

The program has built a network of productive activities into value chains from the **ground up**. While these activities are short-term in nature, the potential linkages to existing value chains provide a longer term vision for program beneficiaries to build off of initial rapid impact activities. This longer term vision helps program staff to identify new opportunities to connect initial rapid impact livelihoods projects to the value chain and therefore promote sustainability.

4. Rapid Delivery of Livelihoods Activities

Rapid Response through delivery of grant materials to the livelihoods activities is critical in terms of generating community confidence. Livelihoods activities in the program area of operation take a maximum three months from community identification of an activity until grant materials are delivered in order to begin productive activities. Technical assistance and guidance begin prior the delivery of grant materials through the identification of the activity, development of the livelihoods activity, and design of a close-out plan for the activity. This technical assistance is local—either from local program staff or from the Regional Coordination Center as well as municipal and departmental institutions.

5. Flexibility

It is important to adapt the productive activities to the situation and needs of the community—**accounting for differences in the security situation and physical access**. In the implementation zone, two models of intervention developed based on different areas of operations: 1. A model working in geographically-isolated communities with a focus on supplying the local market demand (municipal capital and surrounding veredas), and 2. A model working with communities with better infrastructure and access, linking production to departmental and national markets.

A rapid response is important, but it should also be a potentially sustainable response that involves the various supporting actors and incorporates the daily lessons learned into the process. These projects require flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

6. Intense Technical Assistance

Technical assistance will intensify throughout the productive activity. Technical assistance is a key element to building social capital in local associations and groups to continue livelihoods activities after they graduate from the program.

Constant technical assistance on the part of local staff in the field is important in order to maintain the quality and the rhythm of the production process and the motivation of the beneficiaries (in terms of monitoring and site visits). **Specialized technical assistance** to provide the entrepreneurial and organizational training and the creation of rotary funds has been an important element in the success of project activities.

7. Program Identity

The livelihoods activities are implemented through a **program without ego** that acts and operates in the name of the Government of Colombia. Program activities are marked as GOC activities without the standard USAID graphical identity.

The livelihoods activities elevate project activities and other State entities (PFGB, Acción Social, Parques Nacionales Naturales, Departmental and Municipal Governments). The program identity facilitates the flow of information and rapprochement among the different State entities and stimulates regional ownership on the part of government actors. The program has promoted the presence and linkages among the various entities from the municipal and departmental government with associations and groups in rural areas by identifying program activities as from the GOC.

8. Decentralized Program Implementation

A high level of coordination guarantees that the decentralized program is **led from the region**. Direct implementation of the livelihoods activities by staff in the region allows for permanent project oversight, the successful completion of projects, and direct access to information on the implementation of projects. This direct, decentralized implementation allows the project to make adjustments based on lessons learned, identify opportunities for new activities, and create linkages with municipal and departmental actors.

Program Results

- Coordination roundtables in each municipality and at the departmental level that bring together local associations with various public entities (Ministry of Agriculture, SENA, ICA, CPGAs, National Parks, Universities, Corpoica, etc.) to work to respond to the needs of local producers.
- Mayors lead the municipal-level coordination roundtables and the Dirección of Agriculture leads the Departmental-level roundtable.
- Municipal administrations are committed to the program and to supporting local productive projects.
- Public sector agricultural entities have adopted this model as their own.
- Producer associations, with the technical assistance from the program, have successfully accessed state programs (Oportunidades Rurales, Alianzas Productivas, Jóvenes Rurales, help for displaced persons, etc.) in nationwide *convocatorias* with producer organizations across the country.
- Producer associations have joined together at the departmental level and have begun to collectively negotiate with buyers and exporters.
- Private investors are linked to livelihoods activities and value chains through the program.
- Producer associations are using group-provided rotating funds and their own community savings have successfully initiated new production cycles without requiring additional external inputs.
- Sectoral organizations, producers, wholesalers and investors agree to work on value chains in the region.