

DECO-Darién Project

Strengthens Communities in Rural Panama

By Thelonius Trimmell

The geographically remote Darién region of Panama is undergoing rapid changes in roads, increased traffic and migration, and land use. It is important to ensure that Darién communities are strong enough to deal with the resulting challenges. ACDI/VOCA launched the \$6.25 million USAID-funded Darién Community Development Program (DECO-Darién) to strengthen Darién communities by improving their social and productive infrastructures and boosting the organizational capacities of local governments.

The DECO-Darién program's emphasis is on community and organizational strengthening in the spirit of fostering sustainability through participatory and democratic ideals. Strengthened communities and organizations are more capable of confronting and recovering from economic crisis, be it from political neglect or upheaval or natural disaster. Community development strategic

plans are an essential element. These plans bring together the whole community through organized structures such as school parents' associations, water boards, road committees, farmers' associations and others. These plans treat community problems comprehensively across a broad spectrum of social-economic issues.

Community issues are analyzed with particular emphasis on how they are interrelated, and priorities are established. Then the community develops its action plan to address the various priorities. DECO-Darién facilitates the planning process and provides technical assistance to the community to implement its plan. Community plans are publicly displayed to serve as focal points of community thinking and as a tools for community leaders to use in building awareness and support.

To measure a community's strength, DECO-Darién uses indicators of the social capital of beneficiary institutions. It defines social capital as a community's ability to acquire joint benefits from working relationships within the community and between other communities and institutions. In other words, communities with strong internal and external working relationships are expected to accomplish more on behalf of the community than those that are unorganized or in conflict.

The DECO-Darién program has responded to the priorities identified by community strategic planning sessions by financing subprojects. However, true community strategic planning is obviously much broader than establishing priorities for projects funded by an individual program like DECO-Darién. Rather, the

community must plan activities with regard to how it uses its social capital to garner resources from a broad spectrum of sources. Strategic planning represents a commitment of resources, in this case community effort. In addition, the program offers innovative alternatives to solve priority needs. These alternatives may be of a technical, commercial or organizational nature and in many cases come from outside the region. ACDI/VOCA volunteers are one source but there are many others.

One essential lesson is that those projects that deliver community services that require long-term management, maintenance and planning provide an important foundation for community strengthening; in addition it is crucial to offer communities and organizations alternative management and policy models that assure sustainability.

Strengthened communities can better confront all manner of obstacles from political unrest to natural disasters. It is the intent of this program to establish and leave behind sustainable, self-reliant, participatory communities and local organizations that are able to independently seek out the necessary funding for their development, transparently and effectively manage those funds, and protect natural resources.



A Darién community leader shows her community's plan to U.S. Ambassador to Panama Linda Ellen Watt



The DECO-Darién Program allows communities to drive the development process. One chose to improve its schoolroom from the dilapidated structure shown at top to the bright, well-ventilated permanent building shown below.



Thelonius Trimmell is program specialist for ACDI/VOCA in Panama.