



USAID | GUATEMALA

FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

SUCCESS STORY

The Seeds of Citizen Participation

USAID supports local initiatives to invest in people and meet basic needs.



[Photo Credit: PDGL de USAID]

For the four municipalities (Camotán, Jocotán, Olopa, and San Juan Ermita) receiving direct technical assistance from USAID in Copán Chortí meeting basic needs is a challenge given the underlying socioeconomic statistics, which are much less than the national average: 2.9 years of education; 41.4 percent literacy; 54.2 percent child survival; and annual per capita income of only 2,701 quetzales (US\$355).

USAID's technical assistance to help the citizen groups of four municipalities organize so they could effectively participate in municipal planning has led to not only to the completion of new plans, but also has increased the level and forms of participation of women and citizens in other aspects of municipal governance.

An economic and social crisis in the Copan Chortí region of Guatemala precipitated by drought, low coffee prices, and El Niño threatened food insecurity of its citizens in 2002. The municipalities recognized that they must act, but that they could not do it alone. Therefore, four municipalities joined together to form the *Mancomunidad* of Copán Chortí for the purpose of finding solutions to the endemic poverty of their citizens.

USAID and other donors have been working through "Development Tables" held at the department level to support local initiatives such as this one. Since 2005, USAID Guatemala's Decentralization and Local Governance Program (PDGL, acronym in Spanish) has provided direct technical assistance to strengthen the organizational capacity of the *mancomunidad* and each of the municipal development councils (COMUDEs, acronym in Spanish) in Copán Chortí.

USAID's assistance has been critical in strengthening the technical content of the plans, but even more importantly citizen engagement with elected and local government officials. This increased level of citizen participation has enhanced transparency and accountability at the local level. In February 2007, for the **first** time, in San Juan Ermita, local government and citizens, **together**, completed a municipal development action plans that recognizes the importance of investing in people.

Both citizens and local governments in the region have learned that active participation can improve the results. A year ago citizens and governments were not working together. However, they now are. For example, in Olopa, due to active participation and action of the COMUDE, the Municipal Women's Affairs is participating in an integrated municipal development planning process. Rather than fragmented action, the community is working together.

Participation is breaking down barriers and fostering vertical and horizontal linkages among citizen groups and government entities. The seeds of change are being recognized at the local level, and are transforming citizen and government action daily.