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GUATEMALA

SUCCESS STORY

Building Institutions to Foster Citizen Participation in Jocotán

USAID is helping rural community leaders interact with their local government officials.



The Municipality of Jocotán is located in the tropical lowlands near Guatemala's border with Honduras. Largely rural, its population is 39,943, of which 80 percent is indigenous and 79 percent live below the poverty line. It passed an Act to establish its COMUDE in 2003, although the COMUDE had not met until PDGL began working with the municipality.

Municipal Development Councils (COMUDEs) provide an organized and regular opportunity for community leaders and municipal officials to deliberate on the merits of projects to address gender and indigenous issues, or whatever issues are important to citizens.

In 2002, the Government of Guatemala passed historic legislation to decentralize authority and strengthen citizen participation. Included in these laws was the framework for the establishment of Municipal Development Councils (COMUDEs). Although the law defined self-governing principles for these institutions, most Guatemalan municipalities have failed to fully implement COMUDEs. A general roadblock has been a lack of understanding of how these institutions are established and can function.

In 2005, USAID's Decentralization and Local Governance Program (PDGL, acronym in Spanish) began working with four municipalities in the Copán Chortí region of the Chiquimula Department on the border with Honduras. These municipalities had already demonstrated a significant commitment to participatory governance. However, even with the political will of the municipal officials and community leaders, the COMUDEs were not operating effectively. For example, it was unclear that committees could be formed to address issues important to citizens, such as economic development, women's and indigenous' equity, or municipal services.

To foster the development and institutionalization of the COMUDE in Jocotán, PDGL provided technical assistance on how to organize a participatory decision-making process that included community leaders and municipal officials representing the various sub-regions in the municipality. The Program provided ideas about the possibilities, but did not prescribe the outcome. Instead, the final rules and regulations represented the ideal of self-government. For example, it was decided that 25 percent of the social funds would be directed towards projects to reduce gender inequity and that a committee would be established to address indigenous issues.

Citizens who serve on the COMUDE are elected by their peers from the sub-regions. Regular 'town hall' meetings are also being held at least once per month. The committee that organized the drafting of the rules and regulations will continue to monitor the performance and effectiveness of the COMUDE. In the future, PDGL will be providing technical assistance to the committees.