



Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience*

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Rebuilding Infrastructure by Popular Demand: *The Cabildos Abiertos Experience in El Salvador*¹

THE CHALLENGE

In 1986, the Government of El Salvador was searching for an effective way to promote political stability at the local level and rebuild small scale infrastructure destroyed during the country's civil war. After failed attempts at using the central government's sectoral ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Public Works, the Government of El Salvador developed the Municipalities in Action (MEA) program.

The MEA project began in 1987. With the assistance of USAID, the government began channeling funds through a Salvadoran institution to local government mayors for building small infrastructure projects.

PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE: Cabildos Abiertos

To promote popular support for the government and increased community involvement, USAID linked the disbursement of MEA funds for municipal-level infrastructure improvements to local resident participation in the identification of projects at open town meetings, called cabildos abiertos. While the existing municipal code of 1986 formally required mayors to hold cabildos four times a year, the potential of receiving MEA funds provided mayors with a real financial incentive to convene cabildos.

Once projects were identified by community members, projects were then prioritized and selected by the municipal council. Each municipal council in closed session determined project priorities

USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE is a case study series of participatory approaches in USAID programs. The case studies are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and share experiences. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information please e-mail Diane La Voy (dlavoy@usaid.gov) or Chanya Charles (ccharles@aed.org).

Wendy Kapustin and Chanya Charles drafted the following summary after extensive consultation with the USAID/ El Salvador and a thorough review of available documentation. August 1997.

based on availability of funds, project size, number of beneficiaries and equitable geographic distribution based on a three to one rural:urban ratio. (The municipal councils, established through the Municipal Code of 1986, have from two to ten members, depending on the population of the municipality, and are presided over by the mayor. Members are elected on the same party slate as the mayor and, once elected, divide themselves into committees that oversee the various municipal activities. According to the Municipal Code, the council is the ultimate authority with regard to municipal affairs.)

USAID channeled MEA funds through the Secretariat for National Reconstruction (SRN), a non-partisan, Salvadoran public institution under the Commission for Decentralization and Municipal Development. SRN had decentralized its operations in 1986, in conjunction with the development of the new MEA strategy, which relies exclusively on a bottom-up approach to the identification and implementation of basic infrastructure projects. The SRN distributed the funds to virtually all municipalities and assisted local governments with project implementation.

USAID provided technical assistance to the participating municipalities through the ISDEM, Instituto Salvadoreño de Desarrollo Municipal. The ISDEM provided training and technical advice to municipalities on issues ranging from revenue generation, financial management, and strategic planning, to voter registration.

OUTCOMES

The MEA program created a mechanism for selecting, designing, funding, building and accounting for funds for projects built by or under supervision of municipal government. The MEA became a vehicle for strengthening local democracy, enabling local governments to become more active, providing municipalities with the responsibility for reconstructing war-damaged infrastructure, and addressing some of the fundamental grievances which fueled insurgency--a lack of voice in local affairs and a lack of basic services.

Between 1987 and 1994, municipal governments implemented over 10,000 projects, primarily in schools, roads and bridges, potable water, and electrification, reaching into remote rural communities throughout the country. In 1992, SRN was responsible for the promotion of over 400 open town meetings, with an attendance of more than 80,000 community members. It disbursed \$33 million to 242 communities for the implementation of 2,000 projects. Overall, approximately 8,200 projects in basic infrastructure valued at \$10,000 to \$12,000 each have been implemented throughout El Salvador.

Using local material and labor, municipal projects conducted under MEA Programs cost less than centrally-funded projects. In general, municipalities were able to generate average savings of 44.8 percent when compared to centrally-funded infrastructure projects. Much of this savings was due to the fact that the municipalities were able to get construction crews to sites more rapidly; hence, their construction crews spent up to 40 percent more time on actual construction tasks.

The 1990 Special Programs Impact Evaluation of MEA found that there was a substantial increase in community participation, appreciation for the infrastructure built and its employment and income effects, an emerging sense of local control over the community's own affairs, and growing evidence that citizens believed they could hold local and national officials accountable for their actions and decisions. By 1993, MEA projects had been implemented in all 261 municipalities of the country (except the capital city) and MEA had become a cornerstone of the National Reconstruction Program.

In 1994, a new Municipal Development project was begun. This five year project is aimed at strengthening local democratic participation and increasing municipal institutional capacity. This project is built on the lessons learned in MEA for increasing institutional capacity building at the municipal level. The MEA program has also generated interest in Nicaragua, Peru, and Guatemala.

The MEA program contributed directly to two of USAID's strategic objectives: 1) to help the country make the transition from war to peace by building local level democratic institutions and increasing civic participation; and 2) to promote enduring democratic institutions by strengthening local government and responding to the basic infrastructure needs of the community.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 1) Though local development is multisectoral by nature, many development programs and projects try to force fit components of municipal development into a specific sector (eg. housing and urban development; water and sanitation; health; education). This results in funding traditional central government sectors and bypassing and/or under-utilizing local participation through local government leaders. The MEA program used a cross-sectoral approach which focuses on the municipality needs rather than sector needs.
- 2) Although not yet a perfect democratic mechanism, the cabildo abierto does provide a new voice to people who have been traditionally disenfranchised and stimulates their involvement in municipal activities. The issue of participation in decision-making and of citizen monitoring and evaluation has yet to be addressed.
- 3) The MEA program benefitted from connections with local businesses. Purchasing most of the materials and supplies locally saved money and time. USAID's New Partnerships Initiative Learning Team has emphasized value of collaboration at the local level between government and civil society (local business, NGOs, universities, etc) because this strengthens capacity to initiate and carry out development activities locally.

RESOURCES

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