

USAID/OTI Colombia Annual Summary Report

Oct 2006 – Sept 2007

Program Description

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives' (OTI) Initial Governance Response Program (IGRP) assists the Government of Colombia (GoC) to stabilize areas recently retaken from insurgent forces by promoting government presence and responsiveness to local needs. The program strengthens the credibility and legitimacy of the GoC in post-conflict areas, increases the willingness and capacity of communities to cooperate and interact with the GoC, and improves the GoC's capacity to respond to community-prioritized necessities in a timely and credible manner. OTI's government partner is the Center for Coordination of Integrated Action (CCAI by its Spanish acronym), which is part of the Office of the President and is responsible for coordinating the establishment of government services in 11 prioritized parts of the country recently taken back from insurgents. The total budget for FY 2007 was \$8 million.

Country Situation

Armed Groups Remain Active - OTI is currently operational in 4 of the 57 municipalities under CCAI's area of responsibility. These municipalities are historically marginalized due to geographic inaccessibility; are only partially freed from the influence of illegally armed groups, both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and paramilitaries; and are important coca-producing areas transitioning to the cultivation of legal crops. Military operations are ongoing in the area due to the continued presence of guerrillas and paramilitaries. Security concerns complicate staff travel and program logistics.

Legislators Linked to Armed Groups - A political scandal continues to dominate the national news, as numerous members of the Colombian Congress have been – and continue to be – indicted for association with illegally armed groups. The scandal has also played a part in the currently stalled negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which has also been a major issue.

Electoral Environment - A report released in late September by the Electoral Observation Mission, a local nongovernmental organization, observed that OTI's four target municipalities are at great risk of electoral manipulation by way of fraud, vote-buying, intimidation, and violence. While the report was immediately characterized by the Ministry of Justice as an overstatement, recent election history, as well as the challenging security environment, suggests that electoral manipulation by armed groups is a strong possibility. However, there is optimism in the communities, as residents believe the armed groups' power to exercise political influence is waning. In addition, more voting centers have been established in the newly secured areas than in previous elections.

OTI Highlights

A. Narrative Summary

The program officially began in March, and significant amounts of time and energy during the first months of implementation have been dedicated to program start-up, including building relationships with stakeholders (CCAI, local government, the Colombian military, and the U.S. Embassy's MilGroup); developing an understanding of local dynamics, especially as they relate to security; hiring staff; opening an office in Bogota and a field office; and implementing projects in the target municipalities.

The security situation necessitated a slower roll-out of the program, and implementation continues to remain confined to four small urban centers, pending military consolidation of the rural areas. Hiring of staff in the target municipalities was slower than anticipated due to the small pool of potential candidates, as the combined population of the four municipalities is less than 100,000. The GoC views these areas as critical to the effort to defeat the insurgents and reduce coca cultivation.

Since its March inception, the program has realized the following accomplishments:

- Initiative embraced by Colombian counterparts. The OTI program is widely perceived by CCAI and the Colombian military as highly valuable. The leadership of Accion Social (CCAI's parent organization) and CCAI staff increasingly speak of the project and implementation strategy as their own. The Colombian military regularly expresses a strong appreciation for the program.
- Coordination with other offices. The USAID Mission and the MilGroup are strong supporters of the program, recognizing the additional value that OTI's flexibility confers and backing up their support with significant funding. In addition to the \$1.7 million in Transition Initiatives funds that OTI provided, USAID/Colombia contributed \$6.3 million in FY 2007. An additional \$4 million, which will be received in FY 2008, was approved through 1207 Transfer Authority.
- Community buy-in. Project-affiliated municipal assemblies are providing a forum for dialogue and engagement between citizens and the GoC. Mayors are participating, providing both legitimacy and accountability.

In addition, OTI is providing technical assistance to CCAI through the following activities:

- At CCAI's request, OTI arranged for a U.S. consultant to provide training in rapid assessments – including a field exercise that focused on carrying out assessments in one of CCAI's two new target areas. CCAI is working to incorporate the methodology into its normal procedures.
- A local firm completed a baseline survey of community perceptions regarding the GoC and life in general. This survey is the first step in the process of assessing future changes in perception. The results showed high levels of trust in the government – including the military – along with a generalized optimism for the future. However, it is unclear how reflective of general sentiment the results are, given that the survey team could not travel to rural areas for security reasons but could only reach the small urban centers that have been under government control for some time. Even in these relatively secure urban areas, survey team members reported that they had “never felt at such risk” and that many people who responded to their questions demonstrated signs of fear while others refused to respond.
- A local firm carried out an assessment of CCAI's organizational strengths and weaknesses, providing an institution strengthening plan, including technical assistance requirements, for the organization. Technical assistance will initially be focused on planning at a regional level, given the critical role that CCAI will be expected to play in the joint military-civilian effort to consolidate security and establish a long-term civilian government presence in OTI's current geographic area of operation.
- A local firm was contracted to develop a communication strategy for Accion Social/CCAI. Unfortunately, despite coming highly recommended, the firm proposed an unusable strategy. Follow-up options are being considered.

B. Grants Activity Summary

Implementation of small grants continues to be hindered by issues related to security. The program is constrained, for the most part, within a three-mile radius around each of the four small urban areas where it operates. The logistics of transporting project supplies through insecure areas are highly complicated: one of the targeted municipalities is accessible to staff only by military helicopter; another, only by small airplane. Two of the municipalities are accessible by road.

Total activity spending to date is \$808,665 and breaks down as follows:

- Technical assistance to CCAI: \$92,465.
- Activities: \$716,200 (primarily assistance to schools, sports programs, health posts, and water and lighting systems).

C. Indicators of Success

A key strategy of the program is to create opportunities for dialogue between community members and the GoC. Historically, the municipalities where OTI is operational have had little contact with the GoC – and what little contact there has been has generally focused on the eradication of coca, the primary source of local income. To promote this dialogue, OTI is working with project-affiliated municipal councils, entities through which communities propose and prioritize small projects. The councils are made up of representatives of local government; CCAI; the Colombian military; Accion Social, which is the national organization responsible for social programs; leaders of Juntas de Accion Comunal, which are groups that are legally constituted to represent the citizens of defined geographic areas; and other local leaders such as priests and teachers.

Projects are prioritized according to a number of criteria, including the level of commitment that local government is willing to make for inputs such as technical assistance, oversight, transportation, etc. A firm commitment gives the communities a guideline by which they can hold local government officials accountable, a recourse which these communities have not historically had.

The OTI/Colombia program facilitated 3 municipal assemblies during August and September, and these meetings generated 35 community projects that are now underway. Initial feedback from participants has been very positive. They have expressed appreciation for the opportunity to make decisions in partnership with local leadership. In the words of one participant, “This is the first time that we’ve participated in decision making regarding issues in our communities. These decisions are normally made by the traditional sources of power. We think this process is better for all of us.” These words capture the nascent sense of empowerment in the community.

Program Appraisal

All involved government entities recognize the importance and benefit of quickly establishing a State presence in areas recently recovered by the military – even if the presence is fundamentally symbolic. There is also an appreciation of the importance of folding small, quick-impact projects into a larger framework of medium- to long-term initiatives.

Lessons learned include the following:

- Each municipality must be evaluated for implementation as a completely distinct entity. While security is an issue in all target municipalities, each municipality has varying levels of government forces, the FARC, and/or paramilitaries, as well as an uneven presence of local government and organized civil society. These factors affect everything from travel by staff and community members within a given area to logistics and work alliances. The situation is fluid, which complicates matters further. Activities by the armed groups are ongoing, affect all operations, and require constant monitoring and analysis in close collaboration with the Colombian military.
- The strategy of presenting this program as a response by the GoC is proving its effectiveness, tapping into a strong desire on the part of campesinos – people living in remote parts of the country – to feel connected to their government and to the rest of their country. This strategy has been grounded in the substantial role the GoC has played at all levels in coordinating and delivering to the communities their chosen projects.
- Community and government input is essential to the success of this program and is something that can be prompted but not rushed. In the words of one GoC colleague, “Permanent success will result from prudence, a positive attitude, and persistence.”
- The program needs to be constantly explained and discussed with project partners, including the GoC and local partners, to ensure joint understanding and a common language – especially regarding the importance of community participation and what community participation means as a basis for dialogue and partnership.
- The program needs, for security reasons, to maintain a credible space between program field staff and the military – while at the same time publicly including the military in the process as a representative of the State at events ranging from municipal assemblies to public inaugurations.

Next Steps/Immediate Priorities

Priorities for the next three months include the following:

- Protect the project from political manipulation during the period leading up to the October 28 regional elections.
- Continue to provide CCAI with capacity-building support, using the joint military-civilian planning process for the permanent consolidation of OTI's operational area to provide the organization with the practical experience that will allow it to replicate the process in other zones.
- Expand OTI's operational area to include two additional municipalities in the areas specified by the military-civilian consolidation plan currently under development.
- Incorporate an 18-month pilot productive activity into the OTI program. The objective is to develop lessons learned for future USAID/Colombia programming regarding the implementation of productive projects soon after the military has recovered an area. This is a natural complement to IGRP, given that these productive activities will enable OTI to support agricultural and livelihoods projects for longer than the typical OTI activity cycle.
- Explore the possibility of setting up operations in a second part of the country.

An ongoing priority is, and will continue to be, the development of a hand-over strategy. OTI's initially stated exit strategy was to turn the program over to CCAI; however, representatives from CCAI have repeatedly made it clear that they do not envision having – nor do they desire to have – the operational capabilities that would make this possible. They see CCAI strictly as a coordinating body and want it to remain as such. In the meantime, OTI is working with the GoC to align IGRP with national, state, and municipal development planning priorities while also continuing to hold informal discussions with USAID/Colombia's Regional Governance Consolidation Program on possible future linkages. OTI will continue to work with CCAI to increase its institutional capacity for planning and implementing a more integrated approach in its 11 prioritized zones. This approach promises to lessen the future need for an OTI-type capacity for developing small projects.