



Prime the Pump and Great Things Will Happen



Photo: ARD, Inc

Workers make improvements to an aqueduct system for the municipality of Tello in Colombia.

“USAID projects such as improvements to municipal aqueducts show the world that the U.S. government is interested in strengthening democracy and local governance.”

- Jose Farid Gomez, former Mayor of Tello (Huila)

Over the past two decades, Colombia granted greater autonomy to local governments, including more control over public resources. With greater authority came increased responsibility, but few municipalities had the capacity to effectively carry them out. USAID's efforts to address these needs through its Democratic Local Governance Program have achieved widespread success -- and several awards.

Governor Juan Cardenas Chavez recognized the best public works projects in the Department of Huila during 2001-2003. Mayors from thirty-four municipalities entered 147 projects in the competition. An independent jury evaluated the projects for quality, technical innovation, social and economic impact, transparency, and public participation. USAID's social infrastructure projects in the municipalities of Tello, Teruel and Colombia earned recognition, and cash prizes to fund future activities.

Tello won first prize for improvements to its aqueduct system which increased water pressure and reduced waste, benefiting over 6,000 people. Second place went to Teruel for the construction of a waste-water treatment plant which benefited nearly 9,000 people and the environment by reducing waste-water dumped in the Pedernal River. The municipality of Colombia was awarded third place for improving its urban aqueduct which had unpredictable service, deteriorating pipes and undrinkable water.

In addition to better public health, there are several noteworthy results. First, having community organizations implement projects is an innovative approach in Colombia, where small municipalities normally contract outsiders. Second, mayors are now more willing to solicit citizen participation in selecting and developing other public works activities, strengthening communication and collaboration between the state and civil society. Finally, community involvement promotes the sense of local ownership and good democratic governance necessary for long-term sustainability.

First Person

