

Learning to Plant What the Market Needs: Results in Poverty Reduction in Honduras

Desperately looking to start a different life beyond poverty and gangs, Edras Mateo left Guatemala in 2006 to return home to Honduras. Edras had limited education, no money and was unsure what to do next. Family members encouraged him to go into agriculture; he borrowed money to rent land and fertilizer, and received 1,000 lettuce seeds as a gift from a friend who believed in his determination to change. He had no knowledge of horticulture production and learned from reading informational pamphlets and by watching his neighbors. Edras managed to sell his first lettuce harvest for just enough money to pay his debts, support his family and buy seeds for the next crop. However, he was just getting by.



Edras Mateo and his family in Belen Gualcho, Ocotepeque

The \$30.4 million Rural Development Project funded by the U.S. Government's Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) and implemented by MCA Honduras is focusing its efforts to support small farmers such as Edras. Through the Farmer Training and Development Activity (FTDA), which is part of the Rural Development Project, farmers are receiving technical assistance and training in crop management, business skills, marketing, and post-harvest handling. They are also receiving basic farm inputs such as on-farm drip irrigation equipment, sand filters, seedling trays, and post-harvest materials to assist in transitioning to the adoption of farming technology required to improve farm productivity.

In May 2007, Edras found out from his neighbors about the technical assistance provided to farmers through this MCC-funded project. He contacted the Project's field agronomist working in his area to explore ways to maximize his production and reduce the risk of pests and post-harvest loss. The agronomist identified weeds, pests and

diseases in his crop and provided basic practices and technical recommendations to increase the output of Edras' harvests. Since then, Edras has implemented the Project's best agricultural practices, including plantlet selection, starter solutions, and monitoring and control of weeds, pests and disease through an integrated pest management strategy. He now uses a drip irrigation system and a tailor-made fertilizer program to provide proper nutrition, along with seedling trays and plastic crates for harvesting. Edras' farm is now yielding larger volumes and high quality produce. He is also participating in a calendarized production program where planting is scheduled to allow a continuous volume of harvests throughout the year linked to market demand and to provide a steady supply to the market.

A year after first contacting MCA Honduras, Edras has diversified his farm with production based on market demand. The technical assistance provided by the MCC grant has taught Edras the value of diversifying his crops; he not only grows lettuce but also broccoli, cauliflower and carrots. With the increase in his income, Edras has purchased a house for his family and 5.6 hectares to expand his farm production.

Edras is a shining example of MCC's commitment to sustainably increase the profitability of men and women involved in agribusinesses. This in turn increases overall rural incomes, employment opportunities and leads to food security. For many client farmers, this is their first time participating in an agricultural program with such integrated support. Regular technical assistance and training has helped them improve traditional practices that used to limit their productivity and profitability. As Edras notes, "The assistance provided by this program brings us security and new changes in our lives. We have learned to plant what the market needs."

Key results of the MCC-funded Rural Development Project in Honduras

Number of Farmers Assisted: As of December 2008, approximately 3,662 program farmers, such as Edras, are receiving technical assistance from the Farmer Training and Development Activity (FTDA) program, learning how to transition to high-value horticulture crops, respond to market demand through calendarized production and link up to planting programs for specific buyers. Some farmers have also transitioned to long term high value crops such as avocado, plantain and rambutan.

The 3,662 program farmers assisted under FTDA received 56,199 farm extension visits by field agronomists as of December 2008, providing them with direct training in best agricultural practices, drip irrigation system installation and management, integrated pest management, transplanting, and plant nutrition.