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Investing in El Salvador's Youth: MCC Funds Scholarship Program

For most young people in El Salvador's Northern Zone, one of the poorest regions in the country, pursuing an education beyond middle school or high school is not considered an option for their future. High tuition costs are not the only problem. Books, meals, transportation – and sometimes room and board for those who live farther from the classrooms – add up to a substantial bill well beyond their families' means.

In January, FOMILENIO, the organization responsible for implementing the Millennium Challenge Corporation's (MCC) compact with El Salvador, gave 110 students from the Northern Zone an opportunity of a lifetime by awarding them \$1,500 scholarships to study careers that will make a difference in their lives and their region's development. "This pilot scholarship program is a jump start leading to a wider competitive scholarship program for 3,600 deserving youth from low income families," explains MCC's Director of Education Van Crowder, who helps support FOMILENIO's efforts to implement educational programs planned under the compact.

Education not only benefits students and their families, but also the region as a whole. As Crowder explains, "Often, the focus is on education's private returns, but there are also important social returns, which are sometimes higher. Investing in scholarships for needy, deserving students enhances their earnings and employment opportunities while contributing to overall economic growth and poverty reduction."

The 110 scholarship recipients have many things in common – they come from poor families and they are all from the Northern Zone, a region of tremendous potential that has for years battled the problems of poverty and instability. These students all have outstanding academic records and applied to careers in agronomy, tourism and information technology – "areas which are crucial to the development of the Northern Zone and in which they stand better chances of finding a job upon graduation," says Sabinela Alfaro, FOMILENIO's Education and Training Coordinator, who is responsible for implementing the scholarship program.



Maria Magdalena Flores Miranda, 19, is the recipient of a pilot program scholarship and is enrolled at the Escuela Nacional de Agricultura Roberto Quinones (ENA), one of three participating schools. During recent conversations with students, MCC and FOMILENIO discovered that these students are already bringing the knowledge acquired at ENA back to their families and communities.



A group of scholarship recipients meets with MCC staff and Sabinela Alfaro. Alfaro is FOMILENIO's Education and Training Coordinator, responsible for implementing the pilot program as well as the competitive scholarship program.

According to Alfaro, the \$1,500 scholarship covers tuition, books, room and board as well as transportation over the course of a year. Scholarships, awarded to students attending three participating schools that offer two to three-year degrees, will be renewed for the duration of the students' studies as long as they demonstrate academic excellence and remain in the same program.

As part of the wider scholarship program, students will agree to participate in a six year evaluation and monitoring process. The program's evaluation will look at how scholarships affect student graduation rates, employment, and wages. This information will allow MCC to measure the effectiveness of its investment in this project and will help improve future education programs.

When asked what these students would have done had they not received the scholarships, Sabinela Alfaro is clear, "They would not have been able to continue their studies beyond high school. They would have stayed home to help their parents and join the ranks of those looking for a job." She explains that "through interviews with the students, FOMILENIO found that, for the most part, they had graduated high school two years earlier and had not been able to continue their studies. Winning the scholarships allowed them to go back to school."

These are not surprising findings for FOMILENIO. Students in the poorest regions fare the worst in the country. Not only are school enrollment levels in the Northern Zone low – 38% for primary school – but drop out rates for middle school and high school are among the highest in the nation. Enrollment drops to 17% in junior high school and sinks even farther to only 7% in high school.

These statistics created a sense of urgency and desire to get the scholarship program up and running as soon as possible. According to Sabinela Alfaro, "The need is so great and there is so much to be done in the Northern Zone that we wanted to give students the possibility to continue an education as soon as possible; that is why we chose to launch the pilot program in 2008." The pilot activity is not only generating enthusiasm among promising young students, but is creating valuable data that will be used throughout the scholarship program's planning process.



Van Crowder, Education Director, and Mark Bardini, Associate Director for Education, are members of the MCC team that supports Sabinela Alfaro's work in implementing the compact's \$27.71 million educational program. In addition to El Salvador, MCC supports education programs in Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mongolia, Morocco and Niger. For more information, visit www.mcc.gov