

Nicaragua

Costa Rica

Bocas del
Toro

Panama

Panama

Colombia

Project data

Project area	Bocas del Toro
Total project cost	USD 14 million
IFAD loan	USD 7.8 million
Government contribution	USD 3.6 million
Co-financiers	United Nations Development Project, World Food Programme, Japan International Cooperation Agency
Main partner	Government of Panama
Loan effectiveness	April 1993
Closing date	December 2001
Evaluation field work	April 2001

This land is our land

Rural Development Project for Ngöbe-Buglé Communities, Panama

IFAD's innovative rural development project in Panama was instrumental in achieving full legal recognition of Ngöbe-Buglé land (Comarca) in 1997. The Ngöbe-Buglé people can now establish their own forms of government and protect their traditions and way of life. Highly successful community participation includes Ngöbe-Buglé leaders on the project's steering committee, Ngöbe-Buglé representatives on the regional credit committees, and training to enable tribal leaders to manage Ngöbe-Buglé territory.

The project was successful on several fronts: intensive training provided crucial support for social organisation; beneficiaries got involved in project planning and management; development centres facilitated decentralisation; approaches to agriculture were appropriate, practical and realistic. Two project components posed a significant challenge to the project, however: the improvement of family income through agricultural production and the establishment of a credit fund to finance productive activities. Administered by community groups lacking organisational know-how, the credit fund suffered weak administrative and managerial capacity.

With a view to ensuring success of the project's second phase, key challenges include:

- **An assessment of training** needs will help improve activities. In-service training and follow-up are essential. Training goals must be crystal clear regarding content and participants' needs and circumstances.
- **To ensure funds** are directly accessible to Ngöbe-Buglé community organisations, an institution specialising in micro-finance should take responsibility for the remaining funds (approximately USD 1m). Loan conditions should be decided by Ngöbe-Buglé community organisations.
- **Environmental and forestry activities** should be integral to environmental management. Economic activities compatible with sensible use of natural resources need identifying.

Main achievements

The status of Ngöbe-Buglé women was greatly enhanced signifying a positive break with tradition. Over 300 women were members of community organisations, 47 as leaders. The Vice President of the Ngöbe-Buglé General Congress was female. Within the project 30 percent of staff were women, as were the Project Director and Director of the Monitoring and Evaluation Unit. Over 1,800 training and organisation-building events took place for 10,254 producers, 1,176 technical staff, and 869 Ngöbe-Buglé leaders, with women comprising 33 percent of the total. Twenty community organisations attracted almost 1,000 members. Agricultural training focused on traditional and new farming technologies, such as rice-fish farming, giving families better access to food. Transport is more efficient and cheaper: 11 development centres and 7 foot bridges were built and 83 km of road and 93.5 km footpaths upgraded. New latrines, for 820 families and 2 schools, will help reduce contamination of water and the spread of disease.

► Lifelong learning

Training activities aimed to strengthen social organisation, promote gender sensitivity, strengthen institutional organisation, improve production, and promote conservationist practices. Given that Ngöbe-Buglé tradition emphasises family rather than group work, the creation of 20 community organisations is a huge success, beneficiaries agree. Short-term training with broad coverage is fine for disseminating new technologies, but in-depth training with fewer trainees would be more effective in the long term. Events were too brief with no planned curriculum or follow-up activities. The Sustainable Agro-Forestry School is the only exception, offering eight week-long modules on theoretical and practical topics such as soil conservation, pest control, and fertilisers. Only those producers likely to remain in the community and willing to communicate their knowledge can enrol: 64 percent have graduated as promoters – an excellent source of expertise for future IFAD-supported projects in the area.

Food for thought

Assistance with traditional crops or newer activities such as flood rice and rice-fish farming have given indigenous families access to technical advice and training for the first time ever, and have improved food availability. However, the ten Ministry of Agriculture (MIDA) extension agents who had no means of transport and limited knowledge of group extension methodologies were woefully inadequate. Plus, the Agricultural Research Institute of Panama (IDIAP) researchers had little experience of the current production techniques and farming conditions of the Ngöbe-Buglé people. The fact that inputs, materials and tools were provided free of charge and purchased by technical experts smacks of paternalism and was not conducive to sustainability.

Development centres contributed enormously to the decentralisation of project activities and served as a useful meeting place for project stakeholders. Yet, to improve the extension system and ensure its sustainability,

development centres (including related equipment, materials, and means of transport) would be more effectively managed by the producer councils. Stronger training in conservation and marketing processes would help consolidate the productive activities fostered by the project.



IFAD photo by David Chiriqui

Broad Learning Partnership meeting: beneficiary representatives share their opinions and observations on the project and evaluation report, Los Planes – Hornito, Gualaca

Credit where it's due

Credit was aimed at agricultural (56 percent), commercial (37 percent), and livestock activities (1 percent) but payments were delayed until 1997. Lengthy authorisation and disbursement procedures meant that funds only reached 30 percent of targeted beneficiaries. Given that the interest rates did not cover administration costs, currency devaluation, potential default, or capitalisation, the fund's institutional and financial sustainability is doubtful. Capacity to administer the credit fund was limited. Loans were paid in kind which was

costly for the project and unsustainable, and undermined borrowers' financial management skills. No provision was made for a savings component even though experience shows that mobilising users' own resources is crucial.

Environmental concern

Environmental training and study opportunities helped foster pro-environmental attitudes amongst local people: hunting, fishing, and indiscriminate felling of trees dropped significantly. Hunting for subsistence only is permitted and trees are now felled purely for construction purposes. Progress was also made on an agreement to protect waters sources in Cerro Iglesias for some 200 families. Lack of information at the outset, however, hindered the development of indicators to guide decision-making during implementation. The National Environmental Authority should develop a plan for environmental management in collaboration with Ngöbe-Buglé people and identify productive activities compatible with conservation objectives ■

Further information

República de Panamá: Proyecto de Desarrollo Rural de las Comunidades Ngöbe-Buglé, Evaluación Pre-terminal, Office of Evaluation and Studies, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Via del Serafico 107, 00142 Rome, Italy. The full report is online at www.ifad.org/evaluation.htm; Email M.Keating@ifad.org; Telephone +39 06 5459 2048.