

Training Water Committees in Bocas del Toro, Panama: A Case Study of Peace Corps Volunteers' Initiative to Improve Rural Water System Management

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The Seventh Millennium Development Goal of the World Health Organization aims to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015 (WHO, 2008). Currently in Panama, nearly one-fifth of the rural population lacks access to safe drinking water, and this number is even higher in indigenous areas like Bocas del Toro where the author lived and worked as a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer (WHO Core Indicators by Country, 2008).

In Panama, building rural water systems is under the direction of the Ministry of Health (MINSa) but after completion the management is left up to the citizens, usually in the form of a community water committee. Often times, rural water systems are built well initially but fail within a few years because these committees lack adequate skills, education, capital, understanding, or interest to keep their systems functioning properly.

It was obvious to PCVs working in Bocas del Toro that there was a divide between the implementation of water projects and the actual management, so they organized a series of seminars to train citizens the skills they needed to manage their water systems and provide reliable, potable water. Along with knowledge transfer, organizers especially sought behavioral change during and after the seminars. Basic indicators were devised to evaluate participants' educational progress and well as continually monitoring leadership, confidence, and empowerment changes. Between August 2007 and July 2008, 58 indigenous Ngäbe villagers attended these seminars and 20 completed the whole series.

This report first identifies the current obstacles rural water committees face and then outlines how each session was tailored to overcome those hurdles. Four main themes provided the backbone of the series: Accounting, Watershed Management, Infrastructure, and Community Management and Leadership. This report tracks each particular session and analyzes its effectiveness using the pre-established indicators. Some indicators were found to be unsuitable for measuring knowledge transfer and had to be abandoned. Likewise, improvements were made between the two rounds which specialized to the differing cultural learning styles.

The seminar series outcomes were positive based on the indicators, feedback from the attendees, and a follow-up surveys with Peace Corps Volunteers, but direct behavioral change was not obvious. Results were also more prevalent amongst immediate, quick solution activities rather than long-lasting changes of policy. Perhaps the most influential outcomes concerned the personal development of the participants – an area where organizers witnessed significant gains. Water education and instruction is a pressing need in rural, indigenous areas like Bocas del Toro and the water committee trainings examined in this report may have been the first step towards a future certification program. Therefore the effectiveness, short-falls, and lessons learned during these rounds may prove to be very valuable for future trainings.