Community Development in Colombia

At its completion the Bank’s $25 million first urban development project in Colombia was judged a dismal failure. It supported the building of community centers in slum areas, to channel and coordinate the delivery of services to poor households. Sophisticated coordination mechanisms proved unworkable in Colombia’s highly centralized government structure. When project funds ran out, no one was available to run or fund the centers.

A decade later, an OED audit finds that the project has had a substantial impact.* The community buildings provided a focus for community activities. Once project funds were used up, coordination among services started to take place naturally, a byproduct of their proximity within the buildings. Colombia’s attempts to decentralize government services facilitated and validated this development. Not all arrangements succeeded but the facilities provided and the associated training helped to create small businesses and a bustling local economy. A variety of social activities got going. And the forward and backward linkages of project investments led to very valuable benefits.

Problems addressed

The project, approved in 1978, responded to a long period of urban growth and migration that changed Colombia from a largely rural nation into one that was 70 percent urban. The urban poor lacked basic amenities and were not receiving their fair shares of health, schooling, child care, and other services. Services they did receive were far poorer than their high costs seemed to justify.

Project goals

Through a loan of $25 million, the Bank supported the Programa de Integracion de Servicios y Participacion Comunitaria (IPC) in its efforts to improve living standards for slum dwellers. Designed to increase local capacity to solve local problems, the project provided services for 200,000 low-income and squatter families in 23 mid-size cities. It was hoped that community groups, to be nurtured by the project, would eventually take over the provision of services and fund the centers’ operating costs.

The project was ambitious and perhaps uniquely comprehensive. It included a job bank, worker training, credit and technical assistance to small businesses, childcare, preschool and primary school programs, literacy promotion, health and nutrition services, adult education, cultural events, recreation/creation of parks, legal assistance clinics, installation of water and sewerage facilities, creation of community groups, and housing credit.

Organization

The project provided for large multi-purpose community centers to funnel and coordinate the assistance of nine ministries and agencies, eliminating gaps and overlaps. Previously these agencies had provided services independently, from dispersed and hard-to-find offices in city centers.

To implement the project the Secretaria de Integracion Popular (SIP) was established in the President’s office. A national council of government agency representatives handled inter-agency coordination. Local issues were handled by local councils consisting of regional staff from all the national agencies plus municipal officials. In each urban zone a local board was established to coordinate the work. Representation on these boards was intended to give marginal households an influence in urban affairs that matched their numbers.

The community center buildings, at $430,000 apiece, went against the prevailing wisdom, which was to promote the use of low-cost technologies in urban development. Yet it was the buildings which ultimately provided the foundation for a relatively successful community development program.

Dismal outcome

At the close of the investment phase, in 1984, the Bank judged the project to have failed. It was not clear

* "Performance Audit Report, Colombia: First Urban Development Project”. Report No. 1558, June 30, 1994. OED reports are available to Bank executive directors and staff from the Internal Documents Unit and from Regional Information Services Centers.
which entity would cover the centers’ operating costs.

The coordinating mechanisms had proved nearly useless, because most of the organizations involved were centralized bureaucracies that prepared their budgets and work plans at least a year in advance. Though the national and local committees met, and discussed what needed to be done, the representatives could not change decisions that their agencies had already made.

Because the project was so complex, managers had focused on the activities that were easiest to implement—especially physical works—to the detriment of service coordination, development of community organizations, and regularization of land tenure.

The goals of delivering services through beneficiaries’ own organizations and involving squatters more fully in urban decision making proved elusive. Viable community organizations did not materialize. To a large extent this was because the target communities had not participated in project planning. Project designers had limited their consultations to mayors, politicians, and other high-ranking spokespersons. Communities never knew that community development centers were coming until the buildings began to be constructed.

Ten years on, a success

Today, all but one of the 23 centers are in active operation. Between 1986 and 1994 the centers shifted through five institutional frameworks and several periods of limbo without budgets or staff salaries. But the program survived and its recurrent costs have proven modest.

With less solid and visible community buildings, the program would almost certainly have been abandoned. The buildings provided suitable platforms for delivering services in dangerous neighborhoods. They symbolized the government’s concern with the problems of the urban poor. Their high-quality construction kept repairs to a minimum.

Notwithstanding its long gestation period the project eventually increased the capacity of the various agencies to deliver services to the urban poor. It achieved its housing and infrastructure aims and today it successfully delivers educational, nutritional, health, and childcare services. The surrounding neighborhoods are filled with small businesses specializing in the activities taught in the centers. Centers have begun delivering new services including senior citizen activities and municipal recycling.

Living conditions around many of the centers have greatly improved, helped by home improvement loans (to 7,400 families) and the regularization of property titles. Shacks have been replaced by paved streets and attractive brick houses connected to municipal services.

Within the centers, coordination between agencies is now routine. For example, IPC uses SENA (the national apprenticeship service) buses to take senior citizen groups on field trips, IPC recruits trainees for SENA, the health clinics tend sick children from the schools and day-care centers, and the school children use the IPC libraries. But whether the project has strengthened the government’s capability to coordinate activities of the various executing agencies beyond these local activities is questionable.

The centers have never been handed over to community control. However, community participation is apparent in sports, and cultural and commercial activities subsidized or paid for by the centers—far from what the project hoped to achieve but not an insignificant accomplishment.

Conclusions

Participation. The project did not achieve the form or quality of participation anticipated. This was partly because it bypassed existing community organizations; several center directors believe that the project still pays a high price for not involving the community in planning.

“All-out attack” vs gradualism. The project tried to do too much at once. In projects with a plethora of components, implementers concentrate on the goals that are easiest to achieve. Projects that approach problems incrementally or sequentially allow development agencies to “declare victory” more often.

Decentralization. The project’s pioneering attempt at decentralization was severely constrained by its highly centralized political milieu. But once loan disbursements were finished and the national and local coordinating bodies stopped meeting, coordination and shared decision making began to take place spontaneously between the local staff of the various agencies. Colombia’s official attempts to decentralize government services facilitated and validated this development.

Leadership. Leadership is vital to provide the political leverage, knowledge, and diplomacy necessary for prodding competing agencies, obtaining funds and policy changes, and directing complex programs. Not enough allowances were made for the limited implementation capacity and lack of experience of the newly created SIP. Efforts to develop SIP had a limited impact because it was a presidential agency, and indeed was subsequently disbanded by a later chief executive. Most of the activities of the community centers today are owed to the personal attributes and initiatives of the center directors and their staff.