



## Making a Difference

A series of notes on the impact of IAF-funded projects  
[Office of Evaluation](#)

*Note No. 1*

# Improvements in the health of residents of nine communities in western Guatemala

## Background

San Cristobal, Totonicapán, in western Guatemala has a population of approximately 30,000 residents, of whom 90 percent are indigenous K'iché. The area has a 30 percent illiteracy rate; 80 percent of residents are considered poor or extremely poor. In 2000, the rate of infant mortality was 55 for every 1000 live births, compared to about 45 for Guatemala as a whole. Among indigenous women, the maternal mortality rate was three times higher than that of other women. Part of the problem was the lack of trained midwives, prenatal care and the practice of preventive measures.

Asociación Consejo de Mujeres Mayas de Desarrollo Integral (CMM), made up of indigenous women, applied to the IAF for funding to organize a network of volunteers to work with indigenous women in nine villages. In 2001, the IAF awarded \$190,025 to CMM to train 145 health workers, 30 midwives and 10 pharmacy managers in preventive health measures, nutrition and, for midwives, pre- and post-natal care. Approximately 19,000 residents of the nine communities were expected to benefit from their services.

*Courtesy CMM*



**Juana Acabal provides prenatal care.**

## Rationale for Funding

Guatemala has among the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality in the Western hemisphere and the statistics are even worse for indigenous Guatemalans. CMM proposed to address the stark reality of indigenous mothers and their children under five, primarily through training for midwives in pre-

and post-natal care, inoculating children, treating conditions that too often proved fatal during early childhood, offering classes in preventive measures and nutrition, and providing safe, reliable access to medications. Funding CMM and several other grassroots organizations confirmed the IAF as a pioneering donor to the struggle to improve health and well-being in Guatemala. Their combined efforts have resulted in dramatically better survival rates of women and children, making an important difference to indigenous Guatemalan families.

## Findings

In 2010, a team of evaluators from the IAF visited San Cristóbal, Totonicapán, to assess whether conditions had improved and services were maintained after IAF funding ceased in 2006. Among the most noteworthy findings are the following:

- Volunteer trainers increased from 45 in 2001 to 145 in 2006. In 2010, 155 volunteers conducted sessions on preventive health measures.
- Trained midwives increased from none in 2001 to 37 in 2006 to 39 in 2010.
- Midwives now charge the same fee for delivering boys and girls. Before CMM intervened, deliveries of boys cost more because parents valued them more.
- Health committees in each of the nine communities provided a vital link between the communities and government health authorities and health-care providers.
- The 1,222 home gardens planted to address chronic malnutrition in small

children and low nutritional levels in women represented a five-fold increase over the original goal set.

- CMM's improved ability to leverage resources is reflected in an increase in its annual budget from \$143,000 in 2001 to \$227,000 in 2010.

## Impact

Improvements in the health of residents of the nine communities can be attributed to CMM's work. Individual women and their families acquired practices conducive to good health through workshops held by CMM's volunteers. Local physicians who had previously ignored referrals by midwives, began to take such referrals seriously and admit the patients for treatment. Equally important, the IAF's funding helped CMM develop and earn credibility as an organization.

Examples of CMM's effectiveness:

- Maternal deaths decreased from 7 per 1,000 births in 2001 to none in 2006 and in 2010.
- Infant mortality decreased from 45 per 1,000 births in 2001 to 37 in 2006 and 27 in 2010.
- Midwives have gained professional recognition among physicians.
- Home gardens have become the source of a balanced diet conducive to the development and health of children.

## Sustainability

Midwives became knowledgeable in prenatal and postnatal care and learned when to refer difficult deliveries to the nearest hospital and when to dispense

iron supplements, folic acid and tetanus shots.

Rural pharmacies, or *botiquines*, are functioning where none existed before. They are managed by volunteers who dispense over-the-counter medications, provide first-aid and hold discussions on preventive health measures. Although the pharmacies provide a vital service, four of the 18 closed in 2006. These pharmacies provide medication at low costs and their profit margins are very low, resulting in a significant risk of losses.

*Comites Comunitarios de Desarrollo* (Cocodes), which include women and men, continue to meet regularly to



**In Herlinda Sitan own words:**  
*“I find satisfaction in serving others better. Although the profit [from the pharmacy] is not much, I know I’m helping poor families in Xesuj.*

discuss health issues affecting residents and coordinate activities with other health-care providers.

## Lessons

CMM’s ties to the communities contributed to its success. Everyone knows each other in these communities, which resulted in trust, collaboration and networking among CMM’s staff, health-care providers and community residents. The committees maintained relevant and effective participation in activities.

The pharmacies yielded many benefits, including easy access to medication in the communities served. CMM’s training allowed managers, all members of its volunteer network, to become well-versed in preventive measures. However, CMM’s policy of providing medication at low prices may undermine their economic viability.

The project’s focus on training and organizational development was crucial to the grantee’s success. Through the development of a sustainable infrastructure CMM continues to monitor conditions, offer education in nutrition and preventive measures, and train and organize volunteers. Financial sustainability depends on effective leadership, donated labor and time, and CMM’s ability to raise funds to cover costs and to form alliances.

**Contact:** To request the full text of this evaluation (*available only in Spanish*), email [inquiries@iaf.gov](mailto:inquiries@iaf.gov).



**CMM's board of directors**

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