



EXPLORING NEW APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE,
LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

THE ASITECHI EXPERIENCE IN EL SALVADOR

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade Lutheran World Relief (LWR) has worked with local partner organizations in the Departments of Usulután and San Miguel, El Salvador, a region marked by a devastated rural economy, increasing violence and the second highest rate of emigration in the country.

The economic, environmental and social challenges confronting the communities in this region led to the establishment of an innovative model of decentralized governance and inter-institutional coordination, the Inter-Municipal Association of the Sierra Tecapa-Chinameca, (ASITECHI).

The experience of ASITECHI (and LWR) offers insights into the potential for decentralized development, and the importance of effective local governance in the creation of economic opportunities, even in the context of El Salvador's current crisis. The ASITECHI territorial development approach strives for improved government responsiveness to community needs, inclusion of marginalized populations and expansion of income-generating opportunities. In addition, LWR's ongoing engagement with the ASITECHI experience, and its 14 constituent municipalities, is designed to strengthen its capacity, and promote its sustainability, including through supporting the Association's efforts to attract greater investment from within and outside of El Salvador.



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BACKGROUND

LWR initiated its work in the Sierra Tecapa-Chinameca region in 2004 in response to the dramatic decline in coffee prices at the time, which devastated small-scale farmers. Initially LWR worked with local institutions and communities to diversify agricultural production, renovate coffee production, strengthen producer organizations, and create new market opportunities. These efforts led to greater coordination with municipal governments by LWR and its local partner, which further benefited from technical support provided by the Salvadoran Institute for Municipal Government (ISDEM), and the National Commission for Micro and Small businesses (CONAMYPE). In this phase, a USAID-funded municipal competitiveness project provided resources for new initiatives and encouraged greater dialogue between municipalities and the private sector to stimulate small business creation and employment.

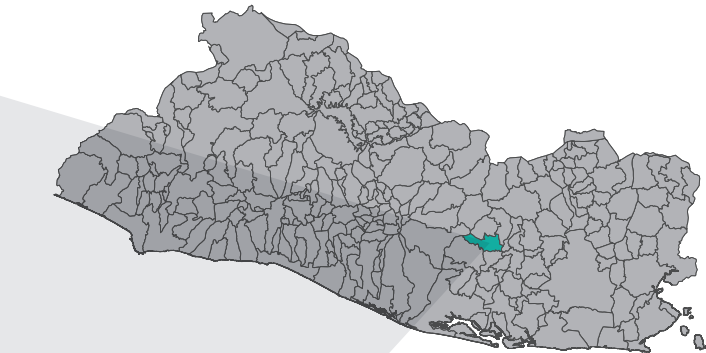
In 2011 these earlier efforts led to the institutionalization of ASITECHI as a territorial development actor, a real-world laboratory piloting an approach to development more responsive to local needs and aspirations.



WHAT IS ASITECHI?

ASITECHI is an association of 14 municipalities in the Departments of Usulután and San Miguel, El Salvador, implementing a decentralized governance approach “promoting comprehensive, inclusive, sustainable territorial development by the municipalities, supporting coordination at the departmental, regional and national levels.”

The ASITECHI structure includes specialized technical units focused on territorial economic development, (responsive to the high rates of poverty and out-migration); the environment (in a region heavily impacted by deforestation, degraded soil, and climate vulnerability) and Women and Youth (traditionally marginalized groups in terms of decision-making and economic opportunities).



KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE ASITECHI-LWR COLLABORATION

The 14 municipal governments and LWR co-finance the technical office of ASITECHI in their collective effort to confront the current crisis in the territory and develop common alternative development strategies.

The effort focuses on several core components which include:

- 1. Improved governance** within and between the 14 municipalities, including greater transparency and access to information and services, and development of citizen participation and oversight mechanisms.
- 2. Diversified economic activities**, particularly the promotion of agroforestry systems to protect the environment and ensure that producers diversify their products, generate greater income and implement climate-appropriate growth strategies in this unique agro-ecological rural zone.
- 3. Greater inclusion** of traditionally excluded groups through public policies, services and economic development initiatives targeting small farmers, youth, women, (and most recently, returned migrants).
- 4. Reduction of violence** through the establishment of Municipal Roundtables for Violence Prevention, improved institutional coordination on citizen security and expansion of economic and educational opportunities.

In addition, the Vice Ministry for Salvadorans Abroad (of the Foreign Ministry) has included ASITECHI in its initiative to promote diaspora investment in territorial development. This interest flows from a broader view of the linked problems of displacement, emigration and return which need to be addressed simultaneously. With a migrant returnee rate of 52,000 per year (largely from Mexico and the United States), the Salvadoran government is hard-pressed to provide the services, economic opportunities and citizen security needed for reintegration. The most critical elements of reintegration will ultimately need to occur at the municipal level. As articulated by the Vice Ministry, important components of the overall Government of El Salvador strategy include: reduction of irregular migration through effective decentralized territorial development, encouraging diaspora investment and facilitating return for older generation of Salvadorans abroad (retirement).

CHALLENGE OF TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT IN EL SALVADOR TODAY

ASITECHI’s work and territorial development in El Salvador hold much promise, but currently there are a number of serious challenges this initiative faces.

Municipal Governments continue to need improved capacity, transparency and citizen participation, as well as expanded resources, in order to respond effectively to local needs. Coffee production has been further devastated by coffee rust, a fungus which has destroyed 60 to 80 percent of harvests, in an area that is both environmentally degraded and highly sensitive to the impacts of climate change. More recently, the violence documented for years in San Salvador, has shifted to the Central Zones of the country. In 2015 the Departments of Cuscatlán, La Paz, Cabañas and Usulután were most severely affected, outpacing the homicide rates in the Capital, with forced internal displacement becoming a serious concern throughout the country.

The current multi-faceted crisis in the northern triangle of Central America has underlined and accelerated the need for new governance structures and approaches. Instead of emphasizing tightly controlled and centralized functions, the Government of El Salvador and international donors are turning increased attention and support to municipal and departmental government alternatives.



OPPORTUNITY TO “SCALE UP BY DRILLING DOWN”

The Salvadoran Government’s current five-year national development strategy prioritizes a model of territorial development committed to decentralization, greater inclusion of historically marginalized populations and expanded economic development. With this plan and other initiatives, such as the creation of the “Plan El Salvador Seguro”, (a set of recommendations developed by public, private, civil society and international organizations at the request of the Salvadoran Government), the Government of El Salvador has the elements for more sustained political commitment and funding to address violence and governance issues in or near the Sierra Tecapa-Chinameca zone.

However, such efforts need the social and institutional “glue” – the technical capacities, convening power and assistance to implement such initiatives at the municipal and departmental level. The ASITECHI experience indicates how these national commitments can build on a foundation of local, “territorial” --development. The results from this work, while only preliminary, show promise in a number of areas:

- **Participatory planning and capacity development:** ASITECHI has successfully established a platform for collective territorial planning between 14 municipalities, (likely to expand to 16 in the near future). In a country with significant political polarization, ASITECHI is convening municipal leadership representing multiple political affiliations, to promote shared goals and outcomes. The collective effort has incorporated analysis and diagnostic studies of the region’s social and natural resources, including agro-ecological/economic zones, poverty mapping and medium term growth opportunities.
- **Collaboration with national government and international donor programs:** ASITECHI is working with the Ministry of Environment and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Zero Hunger program to promote sustainable approaches to food security and agro-forestry alternatives, and partnered with the Ministry of Education and the private company LaGeo to open the Technological Institute of the Sierra Tecapa- Chinameca, an important new training opportunity for youth and contribution to technical capacity in the area. The Association is now engaging the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidency on current local needs and opportunities and the unique LWR-ASITECHI collaboration.

- **Modeling innovation for replication and learning:** ASITECHI is leading an initiative for the “Unification of Eastern El Salvador” with four departmental governments (Usulután, San Miguel, Morazán y La Unión), through the coordination and unification of municipal government associations and their respective development processes. Additionally, the Association’s technical unit on the environment has become a model for replication throughout the country.
- **Focus on youth and women:** ASITECHI is actively working to strengthen municipal networks of women and youth, and prioritize their access to resources, training and economic opportunity.
- **Going “Glocal”:** ASITECHI is learning from and expanding its global and local efforts to promote investment and expand markets, including through contact with Salvadorans in Sweden for exchange with Uppsala University and participation in diaspora investment fairs in US (April 2016) and more.

As ASITECHI moves forward over the next several years, the partnership with LWR has also prioritized expanding mechanisms for citizen participation at the local, regional and national level, catalyzing varied forms of local, national and international investment in the region, and institutionalization of services and opportunities for the reintegration of migrant returnees. This latter program will include local reception and assessment of returnees needs and skills, and where possible, connecting them with available services, training, and livelihood opportunities.



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